A New Dynamic of Gender Discourses? A Textual Analysis of the Representation of Shengnü in Television Dramas and Women's Magazines' Websites

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In recent years, Shengnü has become one of the most hyper-visible and anxiety-provoking issues in society. Shengnü refers to women who have attained a high level of education, earn a high salary, and are living in big cities, but remain unmarried at an age older than Chinese society expects. Though the public seem to reach consent with regard to the meaning of Shengnü, media formats addressing this heated issue tend to redefine Shengnü in different ways.

This study primarily examined two types of Shengnü in mainstream television dramas and Shengnü discourse in commercial women magazines' websites. The "ordinary" Shengnü in television was discursively moderated to attain a safe position that denied market-quality and market-tradition gender discourses and embraced socialist-Confucius gender notions, while the "golden" Shengnü celebrated the new found autonomy of women enabled by market-quality gender discourse, The latter contained feminist ideas but had been discounted by modern romance underpinned by "strong men, weak women" notion. The construction of Shengnü in commercial women's magazines' websites, however, showed a postfeminist sensibility that is absent in mainstream television due to different production mechanics. This study argued that market-oriented gender discourse, collaborating with socialist and traditional gender discourses respectively, to re-define ideal Shengnü. Such dynamic of gender discourses is prominent constituent of gender ideological environment for contemporary urban women in China.

Keywords: Shengnü, gender discourses, marketization, postfeminism

摘　要

性別話語的新動態？
電視劇及女性雜誌網站中剩女再現的文本分析

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　　近年來，剩女已經成為了最常見、最容易產生社會焦慮的議題之一。剩女指的是有著高學歷、高收入的適齡未婚都市女性。儘管公眾對剩女的含義有一定共識，不同媒介對於剩女進行重新定義的方式是不同的。

　　本研究主要分析了主流電視劇中的兩類剩女形象，以及商業女性雜誌網站中的剩女話語。電視劇中的"平凡"剩女被話語性地中和，以獲得一個安全的性別話語位置，這個形象拒絕市場-素質和市場-傳統性別話語，而傾向於社會主義-孔家文化的性別理念。"黃金"剩女則突出現代女性身上新的自主性，這種自主性來源於市場-素質性別話語。此話語包含女性主義思想，但是被基於"男強女弱"的現代愛情故事包裝後有所折扣。由於生產機制不同，商業女性雜誌網站中的剩女則表現出一種主流電視所缺乏的後女性主義特性。本研究認為，市場導向的性別話語與社會主義和傳統性別話語分別合作，重新定義著剩女，而這是當代中國都市女性所處的性別意識形態環境的重要成份。

關鍵詞：剩女　性別話語　市場化　後女性主義

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1   INTRODUCTION

In recent years, Shengnü has become one of the most hyper-visible and anxiety-provoking issues in society. Shengnü refers to women who have attained a high level of education, earn a high salary, and are living in big cities, but remain unmarried at an age older than Chinese society expects. This new term even entered the official language of the Chinese government in 2007,[1] and has been in prevalent use in the media in recent years. This female sub-population is also given other names, for example, 3S women - Single, Seventies (born in the 1970s), and Stuck (be stuck). In Japan and Taiwan, this type of woman is labeled as Baiquan (defeated dog).

The term Shengnü indicates that these women are leftover in the marital market. However, the population data show a different story. According to the data of the sixth population census[2], men actually outnumber women in the age group of those born in China after the 1970s and 1980s. Demographers have warned that the sex ratio at birth in China has now exceeded the international normal level for over 20 years[3].

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[1] In 2007, Shengnü (leftover women) was announced as a new official Chinese word by the Ministry of Education.

[2] http://news.xinhuanet.com/photo/2013-03/18/c_124470350.htm (retrieved on July 4th, 2013)

[3] http://www.chinanews.com/gn/2012/05-27/3918408.shtml (retrieved on July 2nd, 2013). Sex ratio refers to the number of males for every 100 females at birth. The normal sex ratio recognized by international society is between 103 and 107. However, the sex ratio in the latest population consensus conducted in China was 118.

Despite such population statistics, single women in China still face greater pressure than single men and their Western counterparts. The main reasons for the single status of Shengnü are usually regarded as being their high financial achievement, high position in society, and high level of education. They are stigmatized as being highly demanding when it comes to choosing male partners, or as being materialistic. However, there are also voices that justify Shengnü as "high quality" modern women, who are independent and capable. Their high standard appears to pose challenges to the traditional gender hierarchy that prioritizes men (Liu, 2010). A great variety of media have rushed to capture this social debate around Shengnü. The newspapers constantly alarm the public by describing the size of the Shengnü population in big cities; television shows invite Shengnü to share their tragic, or fortunate, life stories; and television drama producers are also keen to cover such a heated debate, in order to maintain commercial viability.

The emergence of 30-something, single, professional, women in urban China is not a unique phenomenon. The trend of being single has spread in many developed countries and districts, posing challenges to the structure of marriage and family (Hymowitz, 2007; Budgeon, 2008). The figure of the single woman in Western popular culture has been examined in different historical periods by feminist scholars, through the theoretical lens of feminism and postfeminism (Atkin, 1991; Taylor, 2012).

In China, there are few systematic studies on the media representation of Shengnü, which are important to consider when observing the ideological environment of contemporary women. Shengnü should be situated in the historical development of gender discourses in the context of China. Since the reform and opening of China, gender discourses have been situated against the backdrop of marketization. Wu (2009) theorized that different forces shaping gender discourses, including the state, the market, and tradition, coexisted, competed, or cooperated with each other. It is expected that the examination of Shengnü in the media, as conducted in the present study, can provide an insight into the new dynamic of gender discourses.

Television drama is the major constituent in the cultural landscape of contemporary mainstream China, and manifests various social tensions, while also effecting changes (Zhong, 2010:1). As the platform for mainstream ideas, television dramas often claim to "redefine" Shengnü, presenting these women in various ways, and offering discursive resolutions to the plight of being single. This study explored the ways in which Shengnü figures in mainstream television dramas embody the transforming female identity and gender relations in modern China. To be more specific: what gender discourses contribute to the representation of Shengnü? How do Shengnü figures mobilize and moderate feminist ideas in mainstream television dramas? To supplement the television studies, the websites of women's magazines were also investigated to ascertain whether, and if so, how Shengnü embody postfeminist sensibilities.

Although Shengnü are heatedly debated, both in public and scholastic articles, there have been few serious examinations of the Shengnü image in television dramas. By answering the above questions, this study firstly hopes to provide an original textual analysis of Shengnü, both in television dramas and in articles in women's magazines. The examination of Shengnü further provides insight into the gender discourses regulating contemporary women. In addition, this study will contribute to the theoretical discussion of postfeminism in two ways. First, it attempts to bridge the discussion of gender discourses in China and postfeminist sensibility to observe their interactions. Second, it attempts to operationalize postfeminist sensibility in concrete media text, so as to enrich our understanding, especially in the Chinese context.

The next chapter will provide a broader and more detailed picture of the Shengnü phenomenon, and will review studies of single women in the Western and Chinese media. In the same chapter, I will also try to situate Shengnü in the historical development of gender discourses in China, and introduce the postfeminist sensibility that is found in the image of single women in the Western media. Chapter Three will report the methods used to analyze both television dramas and women's magazines.

After conducting an overview of most of the television dramas, this study abstracted two types of Shengnü. Chapter Four will analyze the first type, "ordinary" Shengnü,

to ascertain how Shengnü are moderated and restrain from any "radical" gender notions, therefore attracting an audience of the elder generation. The representative television drama assessed is *Da'nü Dangjia* (《大女當嫁》). Chapter Five will turn to the second type, "golden" Shengnü, featuring more accomplished and beautiful single women living in metropolitan cities. These television dramas usually address both the career and romance of Shengnü. Different from the first type, they underscore the new found autonomy of Shengnü, demonstrated in market-quality gender discourse. The representative television dramas include *Shengnü's Golden Era, Duoduo's Marriage*, and *The Single Queen* (《盛女的黃金時代》,《錢多多嫁人記》,《單身女王》). To facilitate the understanding of the Shengnü images and the ideological environment of contemporary urban women, Chapter Six investigates approximately 150 articles regarding Shengnü, chosen from five leading commercial women's magazines' websites, to ascertain whether, and how, postfeminist sensibility, which is not salient in mainstream television dramas, is embodied in Shengnü figures.

CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Definition

In a broad sense, single women encompass groups, such as widows, divorcees, single mothers, lesbians, or other women who are not in a romantic relationship (Chasteen, 1994; Lehman, 2011). In this study, single women are strategically narrowly defined; they are women who have never married, who are in their late 20s or are over 30, who have no children, and are not in a stable co-habiting relationship (Stolk, 1981). This group of single women is the most visible and most anxiety-provoking type (Byrne, 2000).

Before the wide use of Shengnü in the mass media, single women who possessed similar characteristics were already in existence. This study strategically chooses media texts that obviously claim that they are telling Shengnü stories, or are

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interpreted by the secondary media as Shengnü television dramas. The reason for this is that, as an innovative label, Shengnü invokes a focused social discussion that dramatizes the substantial social phenomenon of single women.

In a similar manner to single women in Western popular culture, Shengnü are an indication of the notable improvement of the social and economic status of females, which poses a threat to the male-dominated power system. A related issue is that Shengnü are a "classed" discourse; women who are labeled as Shengnü usually occupy a middle-class position in society.

Unlike Western culture, which has greater tolerance of single women, in China, Shengnü instinctively implies negativity: such women are excluded from the marital market and are thus worthless. It confines women's value to the affiliated identity of male's wife in a stricter manner.

2.2 Stigmatization and marginalization of the single

The status of being single, especially being a single woman, is marginalized in a cultural environment that privileges coupledom. Heterosexual couples are bestowed a range of social, economic, and symbolic rewards, while singles are problematized in a number of ways. Unlike coupledom, which is normalized, single is a status that requires particular explanation. Such bias against singles, guided by the "ideology of

marriage and family", not only privileges heterosexual partnerships in everyday life, but also extends to the creation of social institutions, such as the legal, medical, and commercial systems (Gordon, 1994; Macvarish, 2006). It also permeates social science research, by influencing the problematic consciousness, the way of drawing conclusions, etc. (Budgeon, 2008; DePaulo & Morris, 2005:57).

Due to the hetero-patriarchal culture, single women are more easily marginalized and stigmatized than single men, as the identity of single women challenges our understanding of the taken-for-granted female identity of being mothers or wives (Reynold, 2004, 2008). Such hegemony of heterosexuality has been challenged by feminist and queer theories. In feminist critiques, institutionalized heterosexuality is criticized as a kind of socially constructed practice that sustains patriarchal dominance, in that it "closes down women's choice and precludes alternative ways of organizing sexual partnerships and intimate affiliations". Similarly, in queer theory the "centrality yet invisibility" of heterosexuality is questioned (Budgeon, 2008). The institutions, structures of understanding, and practical orientations that privilege heterosexuality are challenged (Berlant & Warner, 2000:312).

2.3 Single women: An emerging population

A global trend

The increasing proportion of single women at marriageable age is a global phenomenon. Since the middle of the 1990s, Western society has witnessed an increase in the average age at which people marry and the transformation of household forms (Hymowitz, 2007; Budgeon, 2008)[4]. According to the UN's *World Fertility Report*, the worldwide median age of marriage for women has increased by 2 years, from 21.2 in the 1970s to 23.2 today. In developed countries, with the exception of Africa and the Middle East, the rise has been considerably steeper; from 22.0 to 26.1[5].

The improvement in women's education has contributed to such significant societal transition to a great extent. The school enrollment rate among women aged 20, 25, and 30 years doubled in the U.S. from 1960 to 2000, and enrollment in higher education courses doubled in Europe (Hymowitz, 2007). Higher education is usually associated with late marriage, so there appear to be a greater number of single women within a certain age group.

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[4] *The New Weekly* (《新週刊》) reported that 51% of American women live alone; a third of young German women decide not to marry; 59% of Japanese women aged between 25 and 29 have not yet married; only 39.3 women in every 1000 women of marriageable age in Singapore are married.

[5] (http://www.city-journal.org/html/17_4_new_girl_order.html). Accessed on 20, Feb, 2013.

Shengnü in the context of China

While it took a generation to go through the transformation of marriage and household ecology in developed countries, it has been more abrupt in developing countries, such as China. In China, the phenomenon of single women is a new problem for people sticking to traditional marital norms.

In recent years in China, the divorce rate has increased, the marriage rate has decreased, and the average age for a first marriage has increased. A comprehensive survey of Chinese society[6] conducted in 2005 revealed that the rate of unmarried women aged between 30 and 34 increased rapidly between 1997 and 2005. The rate of unmarried women aged 30 years has increased from 1.2% to 3.4%. This trend is particularly palpable in metropolitan cities. Reported statistics show that there are 0.8 million Shengnü in Beijing, and 0.5 million in Shanghai, and that 30% of females aged between 25 and 32 and residing in Shenzhen remain single (Zhou, 2011). More direct data supporting the emergence of single women show that the proportion of single women relative to men is increasing, especially in urban areas (Cao, 2007).

However, another aspect of the statistical report complicates the phenomenon of single women. The fifth national population census demonstrated that the birth gender ratio in China is 117[7], indicating that there is actually a surfeit of bachelors,

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6 http://www.cssod.org/show_survey.php?SurveyId=26 . 《2005 年中國社會綜合調查》.
7 This means that there are 117 males for every 100 females at birth. Such unbalance is more serious in rural areas. http://news.163.com/12/0308/04/7S2280FC0001124J.html

due to the one-child policy and son-preference tradition (Jiang et al., 2005). Experts have warned that the ratio has deviated from the norm for over 20 years, since the 1980s[8]. It is predicted that there will be 30,000,000 more males than females aged between 20 and 45 by 2020[9].

Admittedly, both the terms of Sheng nan (leftover men) and Shengnü (leftover women) are transmitted in the media, but the figure of Shengnü overshadows sheng nan in terms of frequency, influence, and the anxiety caused in society, as well as in visibility in academic research. Then why does the discourse of Shengnü in the media gain greater popularity, even though the demographic facts reveal a contradictory story?

This is related to some social, historical, and cultural factors, all of which point to the traditional patriarchal idea of female identity and marriage. For example, the assumed marriageable age for women is lower than for males, and the routine is to pair younger women with older men, who possess higher social capital than their female partners (Gaetano, 2009; Wang, 2011).

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8 http://www.china.com.cn/city/txt/2007-01/15/content_7657066.htm (retrieved on March 3rd, 2013)
9 Ibid.

2.4 Media representation of single women: Western and Chinese media

2.4.1 Single women and feminism in Western culture

Social and industrial background

The emergence of single women in U.S. television in the 1960s had its roots in socio-cultural factors and the industrial background. The time when single women began to appear on television was exactly when the second-wave feminist movement spread and proliferated, during which women's work roles, marriage trends, and sexual behavior underwent dramatic changes. Single women appearing in U.S. television dramas between1966 and 1990 reflected the transformation of gender relations, as well as the anxiety around the female identity at a time when increasing numbers of women were entering the public working area (Atkin, 1991). The construction of single women during this period was produced within the discourse of liberalism in the U.S.

In addition to the social context, another force that shaped the representation of feminism was the mass media. In the television industry, single women became commercially viable figures. The increased rivalry among networks, and competition from cable television, between the 1960s and 1990s facilitated greater diversity in television formats, thus opening the possibilities of representing more single females with a widening range of occupations (Atkin, 1991; Taylor, 2012). However, televised feminism moderated the radical nature of feminist activism, such that it was

more acceptable, and thus profitable. A more specific influencing force is television textual strategies, especially the factor of genre within which the series' are situated (Atkin, 1991).

Single women in second-wave feminism

In response to the feminists' claim for women's working rights and the social reality of women's mass entry into the public work force, the early representation of single women emphasized the working ability of unmarried women. During this period (1996-1990), single women encompassed not only single professional women, but also widows and divorcees, although they accounted for a minor proportion. Despite the progress made in increasing the proportion of single women on television, the representation of ethnicity and class remained homogenized (Atkin, 1991; Lehman, 2011).

Engendered in the second-wave feminist movement, single women were often associated with gender equality, sexual freedom, and female independence in television dramas. Thus they were, to some extent, regarded as the heroines of feminism. The working context of women was emphasized, but they were simultaneously problematized as singles that were concerned about not having partners and families. Single women were also believed to be more likely to encounter dangers. However, some women were constructed as exemplary married

superwomen, having no trouble in balancing work and family (Lotz, 2006).

The emblematic figure is Mary in *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*; Mary is an independent, never-married, working woman. For the first time, this television drama portrayed women as individuals who can live without men. The figure of Mary opened broader representational space, which was especially appealing to audiences of single women. Similar characters that followed were mostly young, single, heterosexual, white, middle-class, and attractive "new women". They were single by choice, and the patriarchal family or marriage was no longer the shelter (Atkin, 1991; Lotz, 2006).

Politically progressive though it was, Dow (1996) commented that what Mary offered was a compromised and contradictory feminism, in that it was a historically situated sitcom that "combined the marketability of single womanhood with the timeliness of feminism" that avoided "most fundamental change in norms of thought and action". Lehman (2011) also refused to define mainstream television texts as entirely feminist or anti-feminist.

Single women in the postfeminist representational environment

More recent studies on the media image of the single woman have situated this figure in the current postfeminist representational environment, which is closely associated

with consumer society. As an identifiable, political, inclination, postfeminism comes after the second-wave feminist movement in the West. It basically assumes that gender equality has been achieved, and that traditional feminist ideas are outdated. The mediascape has accordingly been influenced by such political transition, and has made changes in its representation of women.

A core part of postfeminism is to re-embrace, to naturalize heterosexual coupledom (Gill, 2007a; McRobbie, 2004). Genz (2009) commented that postfeminist subjectivity "embraces men (and their gaze) as politically reasonable", which leaves little room for women who do not put men as a central priority. The frequently cited postfeminist celibatariants, *Bridget Jones*, and the female leads in *Sex and the City*, all concentrate on couple culture. Taylor (2012) commented that *Bridget Jones* "embodies the contradictions of being a feminine subject in late modernity".

An embrace of women's sexual agency and pleasures is another distinctive characteristic of postfeminism that differentiates it from traditional feminism. In this respect, the single women in *Sex and the City* have been recognized as the representatives of third-wave feminist politics. In addition, postfeminist logic adopts the "makeover paradigm" that constantly puts women in a pathologized position; their life is lacking and also amendable, so they should constantly revise themselves via self-labor (Gill, 2007b). This discourse is most evidently operational in dating reality television shows that aim at making women no longer single.

Feminist scholars have thoroughly examined how the figure of the single woman in popular culture incorporates and troubles feminism under the operation of postfeminist logic. In Taylor's updated study of single women in media texts, she traced back to spinster, referring to an unmarried, lonely old woman, being the predecessor of celibatariant; a more empowering term for single women that has been used more recently. The most famous female celibatariant in the western media is *Bridget Jones*. The fictional figure of Bridget, the central character in Helen Fielding's novel, which appeared in the 1990s, has come to signify modern single women in urban cities, and this image has become popularized in subsequent cultural conversations, and also observed in films and journalists' reports, etc. This demographic group of 30-something women is made possible by the benefits that women obtain in the contemporary education and employment system (although, admittedly, the inequality still exists).

Taylor argued that Bridget, as well as other popular single female figures, such as Ally in *Ally McBeal* and Carrie in *Sex and the City*, exemplifies the dilemma of single women, and the ambivalence of feminism within fictional text or in public discussion. On the one hand, there is the celebration of the celibatariant with the feminist idea of autonomy and self-sufficiency, which poses challenges to the patriarchal-heterosexual norm, while on the other, the single status is constantly being problematized as a deficit in identity that can only be rectified by heterosexual

romance. Taylor situated the single woman in the postfeminist, discursive environment, in that the aforementioned ambivalence embodies the internal "double entanglement" of postfeminist politics.

It is generally found that the "postfeminist celibatariant" must negotiate between traditional femininity and the feminist rhetoric of "choice, agency and autonomy" (Gill, 2008:443; Genz, 2009:115; Taylor, 2012:14). Here, the ideas of having the "choice, agency and autonomy" to rectify oneself via self-labor can be said to resonate with the regulatory work on neoliberal subjectivity (Gill, 2008; Taylor, 2012). Taylor (2012) concluded that the postfeminization of media culture in fact limits the construction of the single status (Taylor, 2012). Postfeminist politics have also been criticized by some feminist critiques (McRobbie, 2004a) as being troublesome feminism. Gill (2011) concluded that it is the "double entanglement" of feminist and antifeminist ideas that characterizes the distinctive postfeminist media culture.

2.4.2 Shengnü in Chinese media

The predecessor: pink drama

Going back to the 1990s, pink drama, as a subgenre of domestic drama (which also includes urban family drama and Republican-era family saga drama), initially featured urban single women who were professional, financially secure, and

modern-looking, most of whom were aged in their 30s. The most heated pink dramas were *Pink Ladies* (fenhong nulang《粉紅女郎》) and *Falling in Love* (haoxiang haoxiang tan lianai《好想好想談戀愛》). This group of female characters, reflecting social empowerment and the changing lifestyle of urban single women, signaled a turning point in the image of females on Chinese television. Before the 1990s, "virtuous wives and good mothers" (xianqi liangmu) were the mainstream expectation of femininity, the example being the self-sacrificing character of Liu Huifang in *Yearnings,* which appealed to middle-aged audiences. Single, childless, urban women with successful careers subsequently began to gain popularity, especially among the targeted niche audiences of female professionals (Zhu, 2008:90). When pink dramas featuring urban singles became popular, the Shengnü label had not been invented. However, single women in pink dramas share similar characteristics with Shengnü in terms of age and socio-economic position.

According to Zhu (2008), pink drama is a hybridized cultural product of Western and Confucian culture in terms of gender roles and sexuality. Zhu pointed out that "pink dramas" directly modeled on U.S. dramas featuring single women, such as *Sex and The City* and *Ally McBeal,* carry the post-feminist sensibility of "high achieving women in search of satisfying relationships" (2008:94). Huang (2008:114) also agreed that the single women in pink dramas are structured by the Western-influenced commercialization of gender. An obvious example is *Falling in Love*, a Chinese version of *Sex and the City*. In *Falling in Love*, the unmarried female

leads are all in their 30s, Tan Ailing, Li Minglang, Mao Na, and Tao Chun, respectively, and their roles are imitations of the protagonists in *Sex and the City*. Similarly, these Chinese characters are an intelligent columnist who writes about men, an aggressive and tough television producer who does not believe in marriage, a stylist who works in a PR company, and a traditional Chinese woman who wants marriage and a family.

However, the Western conception of femininity and sexuality must be adjusted to Confucian culture, and the state regulation policy executed by the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television, thus the idea of single women in Western culture must be repatriated and domesticated. The Confucian ethos is embodied in domestic dramas, via reverence for the elderly, pursuit of marriage, restraint from sexuality, and family responsibility, as well as traditional womanhood, which treasures kindness, sincerity, and sacrifice, etc., while Western ideas of new single women emphasize "women's individuality, gender power-reversal, and sexual liberation". In *Falling in Love*, explicit erotic physical acts are avoided; rather, the spiritual connection and compassion between men and women is emphasized. In other domestic dramas, the characters must learn to reconcile conformation to the traditions of family and community, and expression of their own desires (Zhu, 2008).

Several scholars have identified the political and socio-economic forces of the emergence of pink dramas. A political science view of pink drama would usually

recognize the commercial force and the waning, but still powerful, state control of the production process. A more cultural perspective claimed that the consumerism aroused after the 1980s became the discursive resource of female empowerment. In addition, the above analyses of the representation of single women in Chinese pink dramas are situated in a broader context of globalized cultural identities, in which Chinese women must negotiate between Westernized modernity and the Chinese cultural identity in terms of constructing gender identity. Huang stated that pink dramas demonstrate such tension and offer "preferred" femininity, which is constantly incorporated or challenged by the audience. Indeed, these television dramas provide symbolic resources for the audiences to negotiate real-life tensions, but no study has investigated audience reception.

Pink dramas featuring single women have already begun to invoke anxiety regarding the single status. For example, in *Pink Ladies* Fang Xiaoping enthusiastically seeks her Mr. Right, and is thus nicknamed 'marriage crazy'. The "strong woman" (nu qiangren), called Runan, is so ambitious in her career that she hardly has the time to cultivate romantic relationships with men.

Shengnü in contemporary media

The worry around Shengnü inspires a variety of media products, in addition to their regular appearance in newspaper and magazines. Films such as 《桃花運》《我願意》 feature different types of Shengnü; dating television programs (e.g., *If You Are The*

One《非誠勿擾》, *Let's Have A Date*《我們約會吧》), and websites stand out, claiming to solve problems by creating romantic platforms for disconnected singles; some television shows emphasize the remaking of Shengnü from the perspectives of beauty, personality, and mentality (e.g., *Shopping Fashion*《購時尚》, *Bride Wannabes*《盛女愛作戰》); netizens also produce their own videos about "sheng nan Shengnü" (剩男剩女) that are widespread on the internet; websites aimed at women would not miss such heated topics, and produce a huge variety of articles telling stories of shengnü, examining the reasons for why they have been "left" in the marital market, and proposing ways to resolve their problems. In the meantime, some television dramas have begun to portray stories of Shengnü to the masses.

Several small-scale studies have been conducted to map out the image of Shengnü in the mass media in China, including in newspapers, films, and television dramas. The majority of the studies have adopted the social constructivist paradigm to criticize, in that the stereotype of Shengnü framed by the media distorts the reality of the living conditions and psychological situation of Shengnü. Content analyses of the newspaper reports on Shengnü have briefly analyzed the page distribution, themes, and attitudes displayed (Liu, 2010; Rong, 2011; Wei, 2012a). These studies have generally concluded that Shengnü are portrayed problematically; they are capable, professional women with a high level of education and high economic status, but are no longer young; they are fussy when choosing partners; their mentality is constructed as pathological. In addition, the proportion of negative reports outweighs

those which are positive (Li, 2011). Under the critical framework of gender constructivism, the media is criticized as being occupied with male-centered bias, resulting in a biased representation of Shengnü. However, all these analyses provide a picture of the media representation of Shengnü that do not go beyond our daily perception. Theorization of Shengnü, or single women, is inadequate (Wei, 2010; Rong, 2011; Liu, 2010).

Early film works addressing the issue of Shengnü, such as *Desire of Heart* (《桃花運》) and *If You Are The One* (《非誠勿擾》), also inspired scholars to discuss the love and marriage crisis, gender power relationship, and female perspective of the Shengnü identity (Duan et al., 2009).

Some scholars have also attempted to study Shengnü television dramas (Jiang, 2012; Li, 2012; Ma, 2008; Ma, 2011). They found that the rough referential frames regarding Shengnü are similar to those found in the newspapers; Shengnü primarily have a beautiful appearance (although there are some exceptions), and possess a decent job in an urban city; teacher, actress, designer, editor, etc. These fictional characters acknowledge that these new women have more space for self-development in modern society. They are independent individuals who have positive attitudes toward career and are highly competent, but also face formidable work issues and fierce competition in an industrialized society. They do not rely on others to sustain themselves, so they would not compromise in love/marriage and

make themselves subservient to a male "bread winner", or any other males who are not mentally their equal, in order to rid themselves of their Shengnü plight. They are also portrayed as being filial because they would compromise, or even make a sacrifice, when their parents pleaded with them to find a partner as soon as possible. In addition, analyses of television dramas acknowledge that Shengnü are stigmatized in terms of personality or emotional quotient.

Not surprisingly, these analyses start from the feminist perspective of revealing the operation of patriarchal ideology in televised narratives. However, these articles are not comprehensive and systematic studies, and do not observe strict method, which weakens the validity of the argument. More importantly, these analyses have been conducted within the theoretical tradition of liberal feminism criticism. However, this paradigm may not be capable of helping us better understand the new womanhood invoked in contemporary society.

2.5 Theorization

2.5.1 Modernization and the wave of single women

The modernity thesis and the single status

The trend of single women has emerged in countries and districts that have undergone, or are undergoing, a modernization process. It has also been accompanied by the emergence of the middle class. For example, when industrialization prospered

in the United Kingdom in the 18th and 19th centuries, a significant increase in the population of single women was witnessed. In Asia, such a phenomenon first emerged in Japan, the country that first caught up with the West in the 1970s and 1980s (Wei, 2012b). The discourse of Shengnü has become salient, as China is also undergoing a rapid modernization process. It is reasonable to say that the Shengnü "problem" is an unavoidable process that is associated with the enhancement of women's education and economic status in the modernization project, which also brings about the transformation of marriage and family. Moreover, the increasing mobility of the population, the decline of community, and the individualized lifestyle, etc., all contribute to the waves of single women. Sociological theorists Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) even conceptualized the single status as the prototype of the modern labor market. Therefore, the emergence of the Shengnü "problem" is a result of the changes in social structure, as well as in gender relations, rather than the personal problems that various media have blamed on single women.

This study tries to situate Shengnü in the theoretical background of modernization. Sociological theorists, such as Giddens (1992, 1995), and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995), have adequately addressed the issue of modern identity. The "reflexive modernity" thesis theorizes that there is the trend of detraditionalization of relationships and individualization of contemporary identities. In traditional society, the identity of the self is pre-given. In the first modernity, social institutions, such as nation, ethnicity, gender, class, etc., are used to define and categorize individuals.

However, as Beck and Beck-Gernsheim argue, the mainstream ethic in late modernity is individual self-fulfillment and achievement (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002:22). In modern society, the self is not pre-ascribed, but should be self-constructed through a reflexive identity project (Giddens, 1991). The freedom of self is limited in traditional patterns, such as kinships; however, modernity liberates the self from fixed patterns and opens up spaces for flexible identities that people can choose and work on. The identity is now a matter of individual decisions, rather than social determination, such as class, gender, and sexuality (Beck& Beck-Gernsheim 1996:29).

One basic theme with regard to individualization is a woman's independence from the family. As women enter into the modern education and labor systems, economic independence enables them to participate in the public sphere, where they may have more life choices. Women are thereby liberated from the traditional gender role routine. The traditional family pattern consisting of a nuclear family, in which men work outside as the breadwinner, while women work inside the domestic environment is accordingly deconstructed (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995).

Moreover, the transformation of gender relations and women's identity also facilitates the democratization of intimate relationships (Bauman, 2003; Beck, 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2001; Giddens, 1991, 1992). As women obtain independent social positions, they have an increased requirement for a "pure

relationship" (Giddens, 1992), rather than having to rely on husband or family as economic resources.

Shengnü: The anxiety surrounding modern gender identity

On the basis of the aforementioned social reality and the modernization thesis, this study situates Shengnü against the background of the social transformation of China. Social anxiety toward the discourse of Shengnü can be observed as the anxiety of gender identity transformation. The Shengnü phenomenon is the product of the modernization project confronted with patriarchal constraints (To, 2013). Sandy To ascertained that Chinese single women in fact wanted to get married, but were precluded from doing so by the "patriarchal constraints" of Chinese society.

The uneasy attention given to Shengnü by the media and the public reflects the anxiety toward the deconstruction of the traditional social structure, based on family, and confusion about the future (Li, 2010). Jia (2011) also believes that Shengnü is related to the modernization of Chinese society. The structural changes, as well as the cultural changes, that have taken place, contribute to the emergence of the Shengnü phenomenon. Urban professional women must adjust their identity in the drastic social transformation and disruption. The distrust that has emerged among marriageable men and women toward marriage and family creates the space for economically independent women to imagine and practice alternative life projects.

2.5.2 Gender discourses in China

When Chinese women are no longer embedded in the traditional routine, what forces come into play to recreate femininity? After the reform and opening of China, traditional femininity was revived and collaborated with the market to act on women, positioning them as sexual commodities, housewives, etc. The economic reforms of the 1980s forced some women to return to the family by asserting a market-quality oriented discourse – that women were less capable than men, so, according to the market logic, they were reasonably excluded from the labor market. At the same time, the commercial force tended to embrace the feminization and sexualization of women.

The transformation of gender discourse in China does not identically repeat the transformation to a postfeminist media culture that has been observed in Western countries, although they resonate with one other. Gender discourse in China has transformed from state feminism to market-oriented feminism. This resembles postfeminism developed on the basis of a consumerist society. The following will review the transformation of gender discourse in China and attempts to assess the way in which historical and contemporary gender discourses have come to shape the femininity of Shengnü in the mass media.

Chinese scholar Wu (2009) conducted a clear examination of the transformation of gender discourse in the context of marketization in China. She stated that there were three gender discourses that collaborated, overlapped, and counterbalanced since the reform and opening of China in the 1980s. These were traditional gender discourse, socialist-state gender discourse, and market-oriented gender discourse.

Traditional gender discourse

Traditional gender discourse is generated by patriarchal gender culture. It emphasizes the difference of gender roles based on the biological difference of female and male. It holds that women should undertake the traditional gender roles of mother and wife; that women should remain within the domestic sphere, and that public affairs outside of the home are men's business; that it is virtuous for women to be innocent; and that the ideal woman should be a virtuous wife and a good mother.

The socialist-state gender discourse

The socialist-state gender discourse was engendered during the socialist period (1949-1978) in China. Advocated by government officials, it carries strong state will and deploys the equity discourse to liberate women. Women are encouraged to receive education, to participate in the public sphere, and to produce as men do in order to better serve the socialist state. It stresses collectivism and sharing, while opposing materialism and individualism. Sexual desire, physical appeal, and economic attributes are downplayed.

The socialist-state gender thesis does not particularly focus on the domestic sphere of heterosexual relationships, but merely simply illustrates moral issues, such as mutual respect, generosity, and sharing. In fact, socialist-state gender discourse continues the regulation of traditional gender culture in the domestic sphere to a great extent (Croll, 1995; Jin, 2006). The representative slogans of this gender discourse are: "Half the sky" （半邊天）; "Same work, same pay" （同工同酬）; "Women go outside" （婦女走出家門）; etc.

Market-oriented gender discourse

Gender discourse has undergone transformation since the reform and opening of China in the 1980s. Scholars generally agreed that the force of market supplanted, or changed, the narrative of the socialist state in the constitution of gender discourse (Croll, 1995; Rofel, 1999; Wu, 2009). However, the gender discourses that took place before and after the reform are not binary opposites. The old and new forces, including socialist-state ideology, traditional gender norms, and market-oriented gender discourse, have never retreated, but collide and merge into two remarkably distinctive, but related, gender discourse: market-quality and market-tradition gender discourse.

Market-quality gender discourse

Socialist-state discourse and market discourse resonate in their emphasis on women's

quality (Lin, 1998; Tong, 2005; Wu, 2009). This is particularly true when the state is gradually marketized. Market-quality discourse is based on rationality, efficiency, and individualism, in accordance with the pursuit of modernization. It assumes that the market is a fair competing area that can eliminate any prescribed factors and judges only on the basis of individual quality. The relevant terms or slogans are "women's quality"（婦女素質）, and "women go back home" （婦女回家）etc.

The hierarchal difference between men and women had accordingly been explained as resulting from the essential difference in capability, that is, men were thought to be naturally more capable and productive than women. Such discourse was prevalent in the narrative of factory girls (Dagongmei), or female workers that had been laid-off (Xiagang Nügong) (ibid) .

However, from another point of view, market-quality gender discourse was thought to provide greater development space for women. It contains gender equality consciousness in that it encourages women's self-development. Women are enfranchised the right to participate, compete, and ascend in the labor market. Their quality is the only standard by which to judge their competence, that is, they can participate in the public area without being impeded by gender identity. This agrees with the modern aspiration that the individual must be competitive in order to survive in society (ibid). In this gender discourse, women's gender identity is blurred, while their working identity in the labor market is highlighted. Such "asexualization" of

women is similar to state-oriented gender discourse (Wu, 2009).

Market-tradition gender discourse

Market discourse also allies with the traditional patriarchal gender culture, making the latter, a backward, regressive culture, appear with a mask of consumerist culture and the fashion industry. New women retain certain gender norms, so as to make themselves marketable in a heterosexual relationship.

Rofel (1999) claimed that the naturalization of gender is the motif of the metaphor of post-Mao modernity. According to her, women instinctively desired the natural femininity of being a mother and wife. Croll (1995) pointed out that after reform and opening in China, there was a new interest in women's femininity, initially shown in an interest in women's bodily appearance and make-up. This was a re-emphasis on the sexual difference between women/femininity and men/masculinity, which was regarded as reactionary against the male-modeled femininity that was seen during the Maoist period (Barlow, 1994). The gender discourse oriented by consumerism in this period not only permeated into domestic gender role division, but was also brought to the public stage by the mass media to disseminate new beauty and fashion standards. Such combination of market and traditional gender culture engendered a market-tradition gender discourse that captured modern women. In short, market-tradition gender discourse refers to the consumption of women's bodies and the emphasis on the traditional gender roles of wife and mother.

Wu (2009) stated that the emergence of such market-tradition gender discourse engendered an unprecedented identity crisis for the modern woman. Modern women not only must develop their quality to participate in the labor market, but there exists an ambivalent attitude toward the notion of "superwomen", who were positioned as being career-centric at the cost of losing their femininity. In her interviews with urban women, Wu (2009) found that the emphasis on femininity and bodily appearance took the place of "traditional" patriarchy to regulate women. Moreover, the traditional gender role of women is now embraced with empowering vocabulary such as "free" and "choice". Women are not forced to be housewives, but may choose to marry a rich and good man (Wu, 2009). The above literature suggests that market-tradition gender discourse emphasizes feminine attributes and the traditional gender role of women, both of which are regarded as being outside of women's own free will.

Wu also pointed out that China is undergoing a period of gender discourse transformation. The understanding of such transformation can not only be used to explain the changes in the living conditions of contemporary women, but also to investigate how the state, market, and traditional culture play their parts in modernization projects, as well as in the inter-relationship between them.

2.5.3 Postfeminism

The academy in Britain and the U.S. has theoretically engaged in the discussion of the postfeminist media environment, and has conducted some empirical studies on the various types of "new women" connected by postfeminist politics. They exemplify "new femininity" (Gill, 2011), which is both celebrated and regulated. The figure of an urban single woman is one of the postfeminist subjectivities addressed by this strand of studies that are situated within the theoretical discussion of neoliberalism/postfeminism. Shengnü resemble their Western counterparts in some ways, in that they share a similar urban living environment, level of education, employment status, social and economic status, and the single status. Therefore, this study will try to understand how, and to what extent, Shengnü embody postfeminist politics. However, the Western theoretical framework is not completely identical to the particularities of Shengnü; a cultural discourse emerges in China. Therefore, this study will also try to clarify the particular effect of the local culture, generated in a different political, economic, and cultural background.

The core idea of postfeminism is influenced by the post-structuralist conception of power. Under this theoretical framework, male power does not operate in a top-down approach to impose male domination of ideas upon females, but internalizes within the concept of females' subjectivity, and acts in a productive manner, thus making the females' agency a salient spectacle in postfeminist discourse; problematic, and complicated.

Three key ways to understand postfeminism

According to Gill (2007b), postfeminism has been understood in three key ways: an epistemological shift, a historical transformation, and a backlash against feminism.

Some scholars have conceptualized postfeminism as an epistemological shift in the view of feminist politics that is influenced by other anti-foundationalist movements, including post-modernism, post structuralism, and post-colonialism (Brooks, 1997:4). It symbolizes the adjustment from a core notion of equality, key to conventional feminism, to a philosophy of difference in the "post" era. It is a challenge to the "hegemonic" Anglo-American feminism that primarily speaks for white middle-class women (Brooks, 1997; Lotz, 2001). To quote Brooks' definitions:

Postfeminism as understood from this perspective is about the conceptual shift within feminism from debates around equality to a focus on debates around difference. It is fundamentally about not a depoliticalization of feminism, but a political shift in feminism's conceptual and theoretical agenda.

Influenced by Brooks, Lotz identified the following postfeminist attributes: postfeminism explores women's diverse relationships with power (not only gender, but also class, ethnicity, etc.); depictions of varied feminist solutions; attempts to

deconstruct the binaries of gender and sexuality; and illustrations of contemporary struggles (Lotz, 2001).

Some other scholars have considered postfeminism as more of a historical shift after second-wave feminism; usually referred to as third-wave feminism in the U.S. It attempts to negotiate the conflicts between conventional feminism (second-wave feminism in the 1970s) and femininity, and claims that women can "have it all" (Hollows, 2000; Moseley& Read, 2002; Whelehan, 2000). *Ally McBeal* was considered to be the postfeminist heroine, as she not only wore short skirts that men like, but also succeeded in her profession (Moseley& Read, 2002).

Another way of interpreting postfeminism is to consider it as a backlash against feminist activism. The idea is that the victory of second-wave feminism in the 1970s has already been won, and that certain feminist ideologies are now outdated. People begin to lament on the feminist notions that encouraged women to pursue independence and autonomy at the cost of men and family. It is now said that women can choose to be whatever kind of person they want to be. However, postfeminist ideology is not completely hostile toward feminist projects, but "incorporates, revises, and depoliticizes many of the fundamental issues advanced by second-wave feminism", or attempts to do so (Stacey, 1987).

Postfeminism as a sensibility

Although adequately discussed at the theoretical level, it appears that media textual analysis requires more concrete guidance to operate the concept of postfeminism, that is, to identify the textual features that can be called postfeminist. On the basis of the above background understanding of postfeminism, Gill (2007b) argued that this is best conceived of as a sensibility, which is more attentive to empirical operation.

In her opinion, when investigating postfeminist discourse in media, we do not need to assume an authentic notion of feminism to be compared with. Rather, it is more important to find out the recurring and stable "themes, tropes and constructions that characterize gender representations in the media". She summarized the following notions constituting a postfeminist discourse. These notions are not clearly separated, but are interrelated, patterned, articulations that constitute a postfeminist sensibility.

First, femininity is a bodily property, rather than one that is social, structural, or psychological. It is the "sexy body" that is at the center of femininity, not the nurturing, caring, sacrificing motherhood or wifehood. The body is subjected to surveillance and monitoring of the "ever-narrower judgments of female attractiveness". A woman's body is constantly scrutinized, evaluated, controlled, or reshaped to avoid becoming plain, fat, or old. The physical body is also related to the interior psychological world of women. The performance of the body is said to indicate the psychological activity of women. For example, in *Bridget Jones's Diary*,

Bridget's behavior of intensively smoking cigarettes is read as an indication of her emotional breakdown. Sometimes, a woman's body can also function as the source of her power. Women are constructed as the master of their own body that they have the right to make more perfect and sexy, not for anyone else, but just for themselves (Gill, 2007b).

Second, the postfeminist discourse emphasizes individualism, choice, and empowerment. The grammar of individualism is used to personify or privatize any issues that could have been political as merely the individual's responsibility, thus making criticism of the social/historical/cultural force difficult (McNay, 1992). The notions of "being oneself" or "pleasing oneself" can often be observed in discourse. For example, a woman's pursuit of a perfect face, slim figure, plump breasts, etc., is depicted as her individual choice to just make herself feel good, thus the pressure from the beauty industry that is exerted upon women is exempted from accusation.

The notion of free choice is also vital to postfeminist discourse. Women are presented as autonomous agents who can make decisions according to their own free will, rather than being constrained by any inequalities or power imbalances (Walkerdine, et al., 2001). For example, women are constructed as actively choosing to reshape their own bodies out of their own desire. However, if they are that autonomous, why is there a homogeneous beauty standard that prevails?

The autonomous postfeminist subject resonates powerfully with the neoliberal subject that requires one to make life meaningful through "a narrative of free choice and autonomy, however constrained one actually might be" (ibid).

Third, the makeover paradigm is a salient issue in postfeminist discourse. Women are believed to be flawed or lacking, such that they need to make changes in areas such as romantic relationships, appearance, clothing, sex, etc. The upgraded selfhood is a gendered, classed, and racialized modern self, according to McRobbie (2004b). However, the power relationships behind such female selfhood are rarely disclosed.

Fourth, postfeminist discourse emphasizes self-surveillance and discipline, which are related to the notion of autonomy and the makeover project. Women are encouraged to constantly monitor their bodies, as well as other aspects of life, to avoid failing to be a qualified modern woman. Gill (2007b) marks out three distinctive features that characterize this discursive strategy: the increased intensity of the regulation of women; the extensiveness of surveillance over almost their entire life, including, but not limited to, body, career, intimate relationships, home, behavior, etc.; and the focus on the psychological transformation of interior life.

Fifth, as part of the project guided by the philosophy of "difference", postfeminist discourse tends to reassert sexual difference. The conventional feminism guided by the idea of equality was criticized as not being fit for most women; instead, it was

advocated that men and women were fundamentally different, and that it would be better to retain a feminine culture for women. Underpinned by such a notion, some feminine attributes, which were supported by unequal gender relations in the past, regain legitimacy. Such difference is also used to support the discourse of sex appeal of both men and women. It is women not men who are more likely to be required to reflect, monitor, and transform the self.

Last, but not least, the complicated dialogue between feminism and anti-feminism is also an important element of postfeminist sensibility. It is admitted that feminist discourse has been "incorporated" into the mass media (Stacey, 1987; Taylor, 2012). However, McRobbie (2004a) radically pointed out that feminist ideas in the media were always "entangled" with anti-feminist ideas, which characterized so-called postfeminist politics. "Entanglement" means that the liberal feminist ideas are both "granted and repudiated". The liberal feminist appeals are believed to have already been met, but at the cost of the "feminine pleasure" that women desire (Sonnet, 2002). It is admitted that conventional feminism has empowered women, but it is repressed, which is harsh for women as a whole, since it violates their "true" desire. The postfeminist politic articulates such feminist and anti-feminist ideas, and is "effected through a grammar of individualism that fits perfectly with neoliberalism" (Gill, 2007b, 2011).

The above elaboration on postfeminism as a sensibility is filled with internal tensions.

Women appear to be trapped in the dilemma, or sway between an empowering stance and a ubiquitous power control. These tensions in fact center on female subjectivity in the contemporary representation environment that complicates the investigation of power and ideology (Gill, 2008).

Single women and postfeminism

Why study Shengnü from the perspective of postfeminism? First, the single status of women has long been a critical issue involving feminist politics. The single woman is a key figure that has located a seismic shift in the relationship between feminism and popular culture. The stigmatization of single women is entrenched in our culture, largely due to the hetero-patriarchal culture that expects women to be affiliated to men. Being single, like the term spinster, used to be regarded as a political status that was working to disrupt circumscribed femininities in the 19th century (Taylor, 2012). Single women then became iconic figures in the mass media, influenced by liberal feminist, and now postfeminist, politics (See Chapter Two).

Second, Shengnü share similar characteristics to the single women in the Western media, who are "postfeminized". Due to the specific context of Chinese politics and economy, the theoretical approach of current Western literature may not perfectly capture the Chinese Shengnü phenomenon. However, objectively speaking, the new generation of young single women is a prevailing demographic trend in both Western countries and in the developed districts of Asia. They are all urban, middle-class,

professional, single women aged 30-something.

In addition, the internal tensions of postfeminist politics are expected to exist in the figure of Shengnü. As women move upward in society, and the neoliberal economy requires women to play a role in economic construction, the discourse of Shengnü itself mobilizes some feminist ideas, such as women's autonomy and independence. In the meantime, the discussion of Shengnü also engenders an ambivalent attitude towards feminism. As McRobbie (2004a) stated, the feminist and anti-feminist ideas "entangle" with one other, thus mitigating the radical nature of Shengnü, via a series of discursive strategies. Behind such entanglement is the competition between market-quality, market-tradition, and traditional gender discourses, which are the subjective resources that contemporary middle class women in China can choose from.

Moreover, the gender discourses that exist in contemporary China are largely market-oriented, which provides the ground for postfeminist politics. Although contemporary Shengnü vary from the women of the 1980s, they are not isolated from each other. The gender discourse in which Shengnü are situated should be investigated against the backdrop of the marketization process. Therefore, I hypothesize that the representation of Shengnü embodies postfeminist sensibilities, as do their counterparts in the Western media.

CHAPTER THREE   METHODS

This study was carried out through close readings of selected media texts, with an emphasis on discursive formations. It was true that the representation of Shengnü was not a homogeneous picture, but there remained some recurrent themes, tropes, and narrative patterns that were prominently used in different media in the cultural conversation around Shengnü.

Admittedly, textual analysis is limited in that the voices of the readers and audiences are unheard. In her study of single women in the media, Taylor (2012) argued that textual analysis enabled us to discover the commonalities across the different cultural sites and to locate the figure of a single woman (here such figures are labeled as Shengnü) in a wider intertextual network. She further argued that even the analysis of the most resistant interpretation of media text would find that some ways of narrating single women were prioritized over others within postfeminist media culture, that is, certain feminine subjectivity would be more culturally legitimized over others

(Taylor, 2012: 9-10).

3.1 Research Questions

By investigating Shengnü television dramas and women's magazines' websites, this study seeks to understand the following questions: What are the gender discourses that contribute to the representation of Shengnü? Do Shengnü embody the postfeminist sensibility, and, if so, how?

To answer these questions, several representative Shengnü television dramas and around 150 articles, selected from five leading women's magazines' websites, were chosen for textual analysis.

The reasons of choosing both television dramas and commercial women magazines' websites have to do with the different material and discursive forces conditioning these two media formats and thus different representations of Shengnü Television dramas on mainstream screen tend to subject more to state control in that these works have to be examined and approved by SARFT (The State Administration of Radio Film and Television) Only those that accord with the "mainstream melody" can be broadcasted. It had been reported that, SARFT was strict with Shengnü television serials and the pass rate of script was low – only one tenth of scripts addressing this topic had been broadcasted and almost 20 serials could not be shown on screen last

year (2012)[10]. Such selecting process conducted by SARFT filtered out ideologies that did not resonate state interests and at the same time centralize ideologies that the state wants to promote. Commercial women magazines' websites, on the other hand, are subjected to looser state control and are more likely to be driven by commercial benefits. I assume that such different production mechanisms lead to different discursive constitution of Shengnü.

In addition, television dramas and commercial women magazines' websites appeal to varied , though not necessarily distinct audience landscape, which in turn influence the ways of constructing Shengnü. Television dramas are usually watched by the general public of greater age range, while commercial women magazines' websites are usually accessed by netizens of younger age who live in cities, have higher Internet literacy and are more financially capable for a urban lifestyle promoted in magazines.

The complexities of production process and audience landscape, driven by different social categories, I assume, will be crystallized and embodied in the pattern of Shengnü images, making the media text an arena for different gender discursive forces such as state, market, traditional Confucian culture to struggle. In order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the kinds of gender ideologies are shaping Shengnü discourse, I insist that both television dramas and commercial women

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[10] http://dailynews.sina.com/bg/ent/hktwstar/phoenixtv/20110131/17002200309.html

magazines' websites should be included in that they are driven by different social forces – state and commerce - that are both vital in construction of gender in contemporary Chinese society.

3.2 Analysis of Shengnü television dramas

First, I conducted a narrative analysis of several representative television dramas featuring "Shengnü". These series' were all broadcast from 2010 to 2013.

(1) The first type: "Ordinary" Shengnü

Da'nü Should Marry (Da'nü Dangjia,《大女當嫁》), produced by Guangdong Huaxia

   Television Communication Ltd., directed by Sun Hao, first broadcast on CCTV8,

   during primetime on April 3rd, 2010[11].

Da'nü Should Marry topped primetime television in the same period, and raised a social debate about Shengnü. It was also broadcast on other local television stations, making it one of the most heated television dramas of 2010.

(2) The second type: "Golden" Shengnü

a) *Duoduo's Marriage (《錢多多嫁人記》),* co-produced by Wenzhou Zhengxu Film

   and TV Production Ltd., Hefei Broadcasting and Television Investment, and

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Zhejiang Life Show Corp., directed by Wang Xiaokang, first broadcast on Hunan TV Station on Dec 2nd, 2011[12].

b) *Shengnü's Golden Era（《剩女的黃金時代》）*, produced by Junguang Film and Television Corp., directed by Lan Zhiwei, first broadcast on the Shanghai Television Station on May 3rd, 2011[13].

c) *The Single Queen,* produced by Lafeng Entertainment, directed by Cai Jingsheng[14].

Figure 1　Online requests and online grade of each television dramas

Name of television dramas	Online requests		Online grade
Da'nu Should Marry	30 million　(Leshi Network)		8.5
Duoduo's Marriage	350 million (Leshi Network)		9.8
The Single Queen	32 million (Leshi Network)		7.1
Golde Shengnu's Era	15 million (Tudou)	10 million(Youku)	56 million (Fengxing)

Narratives are "the kinds of stories we choose to tell each other, and in particular the kinds of things that we seem to agree are the kind of issues that make stories 'non-pointless' and tellable, reflect and disclose our cultural presuppositions and values" (Polanyi, 1978; 1981). Well-formed narratives can create a sense of reality in one's account of self, generate a sense of coherence and directionality in one's life,

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[12] 《多多嫁人記》：溫州正栩影視製作有限公司、合肥廣電投資、浙江生活秀集團出品，王小康導演，2011 年 12 月 2 日在湖南衛視首播。
[13] 《剩女的黃金時代》：君光影視傳媒出品，2011 年 5 月 3 日在上海電視臺藝術人文頻道首播，藍志偉導演。
[14] 《單身女王》：拉風娛樂出品，蔡晶盛導演。

and create a sense of self/identity. Berger (1997:4) briefly summarized a narrative as being a story that contains a sequence of events.

Berger (1997:45) also summarized several devices and techniques that the author of a text may use to convey information directly or indirectly. Among these, I paid attention to narrative devices, including *descriptions, thoughts of characters, dialogue, characterization, stereotypes*, as those that were applicable to analyze television dramas. In the analysis, I addressed elements such as *action, characterization, characters, climax or crisis, complication, event, formula, fabula, jeopardy, motivation, place, plot, resolution, stock characters, story, subplot, summary, theme etc.,* in the narratives, in order to ascertain the ideological direction in which the mainstream image of Shengnü pointed.

The conceptions of market-quality and market-tradition discourses were operationalized via certain characters and the stories that happened to them. The conflicts/unbalance/resolutions between competing characters were thus regarded as the conflicts/unbalance/resolutions between different gender discourses.

The textual analysis investigated the common narrative elements contributing to the image of Shengnü. Narrative elements are similar to the concept of interpretive repertoire, which was introduced into social psychology by Wetherell and Potter (1988). It is basically a coherent lexicon, or set of terms or metaphors, that is drawn

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upon to characterize and evaluate actions and events (Edley, 2001). Interpretive repertoires are like building blocks of language texts that can be utilized to talk in certain ways.

After several years of fermentation of the discourse on Shengnü, there exist certain stable narrative elements that are used to discuss these women. The Shengnü television dramas also draw a lot from these narrative elements to tell their stories, for example, the female leads' femininity, individual fulfillment, and romance pattern, as well as the function of the family, sisterhood/female supporting role, the way of stigmatization, age anxiety, the reason for being 'left' (sheng), methods of resolution, etc.

Admittedly, the definition of interpretive repertoire remains abstract to some extent, since it can be somewhat equivocal in, for example, the concrete level of repertoires, or the distinction between each repertoire, so abstract that it appears that the study must rely on the "craft skill" of the researcher. However, as scholars such as Edley have suggested, the most effective and appropriate way of exacting the interpretive repertoires was to become familiar with the texts.

The current study was conducted through careful and repetitive analysis of each television drama. While watching these dramas, recurring themes/patterns were noted. In a similar manner to coding, this process enables the researcher to gain a

general understanding of the pattern of different types of Shengnü television dramas, as well as to connect concepts across texts.

In addition, the analysis was not limited to the television drama itself, but was extended to media interviews with the producers and the official posts of the television dramas. Many of the media interviews assembled on the official website of the television drama were actually self-promotion. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that these texts reflected the producers' positioning of Shengnü. As to the official post, it is not a casual work, but has been deliberately created to best convey the ideas of the television drama. The symbolic analysis of the posts resonated and emphasized the dominant ideas that the television dramas wanted to deliver.

3.3 Analysis of women's magazines' websites

The articles sampled in this analysis are selected from five websites aimed at women, supported by the corresponding women's magazines. The five women's magazines were *Marie Claire*[15], *Cosmopolitan*[16], *Rayli*[17], *Elle*[18], and Nü *You*[19]. The content of the online websites of these magazines is not necessarily identical to that of their printed versions, but usually, the content of online websites are based on their printed versions, so they share similar values and styles. Further, since these magazines are

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[15] http://www.marieclairechina.com/
[16] http://www.trends.com.cn/
[17] http://search.rayli.com.cn/
[18] http://www.ellechina.com/
[19] http://www.ny1988.com/

all market-driven commercial media, I assumed that there was no significant difference in gender values. These women websites mostly target on urban white-collar women who are financially competent to consume the lifestyles that the magazines tend to promote. Moreover, they are all freely accessible.

The magazines were chosen by screening for the key word "Shengnü" in the article titles. By entering this word (剩女 or 盛女) in the inserted search engines in the websites, a number of qualified articles were listed. For *Marie Claire*, *Cosmopolitan*, and *Rayli*, all articles that contained the term Shengnü in the titles were selected. For *Elle* and *Nu You*, since the number of qualified articles was much larger than that found in the other selected magazines, both contained around 800-1000 articles, I chose articles every five pages, with 40 articles per page. After deleting duplicated articles, a total of 150 articles were entered in the sample for further analysis.

The current study was carried out through careful and repetitive reading of each article or excerpt. While reading, recurring themes, terms, syntax, and meanings were noted on each text. After reading each article, a brief summary and analysis was written. This process enabled me to have a general understanding of the pattern of articles relating to Shengnü, as well as to connect commonalities across texts. The analysis unit was not an article in this study for the following reasons. First, different issues or values frequently coexist within an article; second, sometimes, the title of an article does not conform to the meaning or value judgment of the content. After

summary and categorization of the primary analysis, I further abstracted several

themes that appeared to talk repetitively about Shengnü.

CHAPTER FOUR "ORDINARY" SHENGNU

As the microphone of the mainstream voice, television has broadcast a variety of

Shengnü dramas and entertainment shows. The present study primarily investigated

two types of Shengnü that have been shown on the television screen[20].

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[20] At the early stage of this study, after conducting an overview of most of the shengnü television dramas on the Chinese screen, I categorized four types of Shengnü, but one type, represented by Nuren Bang (《女人幫》) that was deemed to be the Chinese version of *Sex and the City,* failed to be broadcast for unknown reasons, so it was not adequately analyzed and discussed in this study. Another type of Shengnü characterized as professional 'Cinderellas', such as Zhang Xiaowu in 《張小五的春天》 and Zhou Yiyi in 《一一向前沖》, are also not an

The first type of Shengnü are constructed as "ordinary" females, as is represented by Jiang Dayan in *Da'nü Dangjia* (Da'nü Should Marry,《大女當嫁》). Dayan is a 34-year-old woman teaching in a vocational college in Beijing. She is honest, kind, straightforward, usually plainly dressed, and has a comely appearance. This television drama addresses many aspects of the life of Shengnü: pressure from family, match-making experiences, age anxiety, etc., among which the most highlighted issue is family pressure. The character structure of this television drama is "the heroine + several heroes + family + several female supporting roles". The heroine, Dayan, attempted to date different men under pressure from members of her family, and she finally found the one with whom she was most well-matched. Her female friends include various types of Shengnü who support her and offer suggestions regarding romance and relationships.

The following will analyze the way in which the television drama redefines Shengnü as a moderated version of femininity that denies market-quality and market-tradition gender discourses. The analysis will then turn to examine the ideal romance pattern designed for "ordinary" Shengnü, and the Shengnü struggle between fulfilling familial expectations and their individual pursuit of love. Last, but not least, I will analyze how the single status and couple culture are presented.

important analyzed target here in that they do not resonate powerfully with the most dominant discourse of Shengnü in society. I briefly addressed this type of Shengnü in Chapter Five, since it had dialogues with the representation of "golden" Shengnü.

4.1 Moderated femininity

The producers of the television dramas featuring Shengnü usually claimed that they were "redefining" Shengnü. By "redefinition" they meant that they were trying to eliminate the negative attributes of Shengnü, as perceived by the public, and constructing a more positive image.[21]

In *Da'nü Should Marry*, the textual strategy to "redefine" Shengnü was to banalize these women into "ordinary" women. In a media interview, the director Sun Hao said that:

Da'nü here is different from Shengnü on the internet that refers to "3S" women who are single, seventies and are stuck. They usually have high education degree and high salary ...... these women are the so-called "Bai, Gu, Jing" (White collar-leaders-elite women). This kind of Shengnü will distance our audiences who are of elder generation…our protagonist is intended to let the audience accept her, love her, or even call for understanding for her…we want to evoke sympathy, understanding, and help for Shengnü （Director, Sun Hao）[22]

The producer deliberately tried to avoid the most controversial figure of elite women, considering the target audience, who were, according to the producers themselves, of

the elder generation. In the producers' imaginations, the typical Shengnü were those elite single women, Bai Gu Jing（"白、骨、精", *White collar-leaders-elite women*）, who were not welcomed by the audience because they were too sharp, aggressive, or somewhat materialistic. Therefore, they thought that the construction of a banal single woman would be safe, since it matched the elder generation's expectation of women.

To banalize Shengnü, the ordinary Shengnü were set against the elite women who were perceived to be figures that evoked unease. Overall, Dayan was characterized as a woman with nothing prominent in terms of her education, career, economic status, and feminine attributes.

Rather than an elite woman with excellent career prospects, Dayan was created as a normal teacher in a vocational college in Beijing. She is not ambitious and aggressive in her career, but she works with an earnest and responsible attitude. Colleagues in the school trust her and the students respect her. After several years' work experience, Dayan becomes the director of the teaching office. Being a teacher conforms to the social expectation of a woman, in that the job of teacher is regarded as a stable one. It is also a job that is not necessarily linked to the metropolitan environment. Although the context of the story is located in Beijing, the working environment is by no means a glamorous place; it has fashionably designed offices, but an antiquated quadrangle. In terms of education, Dayan's educational

performance and level of degree are not emphasized. The only thing we know is that she used to be an artistic soldier in the army when she was young.

Dayan's appearance remains plain, with no indication of sexiness or glamorousness. She is not an eye-catching woman at first sight. She usually wears loose clothes, rather than tight ones, which show women's curves. She even felt uncomfortable when she put on her sister's short skirt. Most of her clothes are dark, not bright or colorful. She also wears old-school, black-rimmed glasses, rather than contact lenses in the first half of the television drama before she meets a potential lover. She is not fond of complicated make-up, either. In E02, Dayan's father forced her to participate in a dating show on television, but she refused to put on heavy make-up, which shocked the makeup artist and disappointed the family members in front of the television.

However，the male characters who date Dayan rarely accuse her of lacking in feminine charms, nor is she subjected to a makeover project. Instead, they appreciate her easygoing personality. One of the male characters, Peng Tan, comments that Dayan is an "honest, generous, plain girl…I feel very relaxing when being with her." Another male character, Su Rushi, comments that "You (Dayan) is a very charming girl…it is very relaxing when being with you…I am so attracted by your straightforwardness." Zhang Yaoyang also praised Dayan for her maturity, modesty, and generosity.

Dayan is constructed as a moderate woman in the above respects, including in terms of her appearance, education, career, and personality. This resonates with the traditional expectation of a woman, in that she abides by the law and behaves herself, while it simultaneously overlaps with the socialist gender discourse that disavows sexualization or feminization of women. This is related to the prospective target audience, as intended by the producers. For the older generation, who grew up in a socialist state that had not undergone the process of marketization and had been cultivated by traditional gender teachings, a woman like Dayan is more acceptable than those urban, elite single women.

While underscoring the heroine as merely a "kind-hearted girl seeking for true love", negative attributes were assigned to other females in supporting roles. To improve understanding of the kind of expectations of a woman that are central to the text, we may refer to some women in such roles, speaking for varied gender values, who interact with the heroine, Dayan. By examining the comparison, conflict, and assistance between Dayan and the females in supporting roles, the type of femininity that is endowed with the most positive opinions becomes clearer.

Jiang Xiaoyun, Dayan's younger sister, can be seen to dramatize the market-tradition gender discourse, as is observed in her market-oriented belief and her gender role. This character can be compared with Dayan in two ways: first, Xiaoyun marries

much earlier than her elder sister; second, Xiaoyun tends to be individualist, feminine, and materialistic, while Dayan tends to be collectivist, plain, and ethical. The comparison, while it does not necessarily create rivalry, serves to prioritize Dayan and her values over and above Xiaoyun.

The first event in E01 was Xiaoyun's marriage, which functioned primarily to contrast with Dayan's single status. At the wedding, the guests urged Dayan to marry as soon as possible, as her younger sister had done. Dayan's grandmother gave an unpleasant speech at the wedding, saying that Dayan, as the elder sister, should have married earlier than Xiaoyun.

Xiaoyun's individualism was initially demonstrated in the wedding. The entire family was busily engaged in its organization, especially Dayan, who was the core director of the entire occasion and was required to take care of her family members. However, Xiaoyun was depicted as being self-centered in the scenario, as she wanted to cancel the marriage regardless of the family's endeavor and the guests' expectations, after she carelessly lost her diamond ring. She was also depicted as being a materialistic woman. She explicitly claimed that, for her, marriage was a meal ticket for the rest of her life (E03). Her worship of money can also be ascertained from her attitude toward the diamond wedding ring - she exploded to divorce when she found out that the diamond ring sent by her husband was fake.

Xiaoyun's choice to be a housewife also indicates that the traditional gender role obtains a legitimate position within market-tradition gender discourse narrated in an empowering tone. Xiaoyun is not forced, but actively chooses, to marry a man for financial support. Her husband independently owns a restaurant and a house, which makes it possible for her to quit her job and return to the family. After resigning from work, Xiaoyun happily embraces her life as a housewife and a full-time carer of her husband. Although she does not have a decent financial status, she appears to occupy a dominant position, as is seen in her arrogant attitude towards her husband. Here, choice and empowerment underlie the depiction of Xiaoyun,

However, the inclination to be a powerful housewife is devalued in the story when Xiaoyun returns to the family, the conflict with her husband having never been resolved because of his meanness toward her. Although Xiaoyun seems to be in command of Hao Tong, such a dominant stance for a woman is never sufficiently sustained. The weakness of Xiaoyun's "power" is shown later, in that after she divorced Hao Tong, she still wished that he would come back to her, but in fact he did not. Therefore, we can see that extreme individualism, materialism, and the traditional gender role, connected by the market-tradition gender discourse represented by Xiaoyun, are negated in this television drama.

Another important female character, Lv Wei, one of Dayan's three close female friends, stands for postfeminist subjectivity. Although she is not a villainess in the

story, her relationship with Dayan is one of competitiveness in the final few episodes.

Lv Wei embodies postfemininst sensibility. She has undergone plastic surgery, as she thinks it is a way to improve her personal appeal and make herself feel good. She said to her girlfriends: *"I know that you would laugh at me. I just want to make myself look younger and prettier. I just want to look good, to please myself"*. She wears clothes in a sexy manner, showing her bodily curves. When talking about men, she is quite confident about her own sex appeal.

In the narrative, Lv Wei posed a threat to Dayan with regard to men, but she failed in the competition. Lv Wei fell in love with Cheng Chuang at first sight, and she actively chased him, even though she knew that her friend Dayan also had feelings for him. The plot line in which Cheng Chuang finally chooses Dayan thus serves to credit the femininity that Dayan represents.

In summary, the construction of Shengnü into an ordinary version of women is to moderate the protruding market-quality and market-tradition gender discourses that are thought to be worrying.

4.2 Safe romance

The tendency to revert to an uncontroversial position not only appears in the

construction of the image of Shengnü, but also in the portrayal of their romantic relationships. Through the heroine's choice of men, we can see the type of masculinity and gender values that are affirmed or denied in heterosexual romance, so as to remain in the comfort zone, without being too radical or too conservative. In this television drama, the male chauvinism embraced by traditional male-dominated culture (Peng Tan), a man of lower socio-economic status (Geng Dazhi), a man of declining masculinity (Su Rushi), etc., are all denied, while traditionally welcomed masculinity and authority (Cheng Chuang) is recognized.

As a modern woman with high self-esteem, Dayan negotiates with, and ultimately, resists the male chauvinism represented by Peng Tan, a man who holds sexist ideas. Peng Tan and his family require Dayan to be a traditional woman who performs a secondary role in the family; she cooks in the kitchen, without being given a seat at the table, follows her husband's orders, and remains polite, even when rudely treated by her elders. These all make Dayan uncomfortable and result in her dissatisfaction with Peng Tan.

Another male character who Dayan dates is Geng Dazhi, an ordinary, honest, humble, taxi driver. In fact, Dayan never dated Geng Dazhi of her own free will, but only to please her grandmother. Dayan is of a higher social-economic status and has greater cultural capital than Dazhi, which is unconventional in the traditional match-making pattern that prefers male superiority. Such a romantic pairing did not produce a

satisfactory result.

Zhang Yaoyang, a young teacher in Dayan's school, although having ascending masculinity and a strong affection for Dayan, is much younger than her, which is not acceptable in the traditional expectations of heterosexual marriage. Dayan also once fell in love with Su Rushi, a middle-aged man with a successful career, but his old age and marriage history prevented the development of their relationship.

After the "screening", the final credit is given to Cheng Chuang, a masculine and authoritative man who wins both Dayan's affection and the family's recognition. Cheng is a veteran and a deputy county head. He is appointed as the vice-principle in Dayan's school. In Cheng's debut in the television drama, he is shaped as a masculine man. He expelled several young boys, who bullied the students in the school, with his robust physical power. During his tenure at the school, as a vice-principle, he fairly dealt with the dispute on Dayan. On the basis of the above narrative regarding Dayan's choice of men, we can see that it is a masculine and authoritative man who is given full recognition, while some unconventional romantic relationship patterns are rejected.

4.3 Familial ethic *vs*. individuality

The relationship between the individual and the family is the most prominent issue in

this Shengnü television drama. As a modern woman, who is aware of her will, and as a woman with a strong sense of familial responsibility, Dayan is frequently trapped in the dilemma of her individual pursuit of love and her family's expectation of marriage for her.

Dayan's personal pursuit of true love is in stark contrast with the family's expectation of a contractual marriage, so they frequently engage in arguments regarding Dayan's marriage problem. The family entirely blame Dayan for not already being married now that she is in her 30s.. They even rudely intervene by secretly registering her information with online match-making sites, thus creating many troublesome situations.

On the other hand, Dayan is empowered as a woman who is self-conscious with regard to her own pursuit of love, such that she would not easily yield to the pressure of marriage ideology imposed on her by the family. Her free choice of men is an expression of the individualist attributes that constitute the new womanhood. Most of the time, she insists on choosing men that she has feelings for. For example, in the case of Su Rushi, a well-known radio host, she never refrained from expressing her feelings to him, despite the fact that the family did not agree with her dating a man of such an advanced age. In the case of Geng Dazhi, a taxi driver who admires Dayan, she did not give way to her grandmother's expectation that she date him. In short, she is somewhat uncompromising with regard to contractual marriage, regardless of her

30-something age.

Paradoxically, she is also a person with a strong sense of familial responsibility, which sometimes makes her sacrifice herself to fulfill the family's expectations with regard to her marriage. Throughout the television drama, the internal conflicts within the large family are usually blamed on Dayan's unmarried status. Dayan always takes on the responsibility of dealing with familial disputes. She almost marries men whom she does not actually love, just to appease the older members of the family – her grandmother, father, and mother. In order to urge Dayan to marry Fang Quan, her mother deceives her by telling her that she has got cancer and that she does not have long left to live. When Dayan dates Peng Tan, her family are so satisfied with this man that Dayan could hardly resist their pressure. In these cases, Dayan almost gives in to marrying men she does not love, merely to fulfil her family responsibility.

In Confucian culture, the familial role has a distinct moral advantage over the individualist person[23]. In this television drama, Dayan's responsibility for the family is highlighted as being correlated with her marriage. When her younger brother's wife Lele wants to abort her baby, Dayan blames her, saying: "why don't you have some sense of responsibility?" Lele responds with: "How dare you talk about responsibility with me? If you have some sense of responsibility, why don't you marry a man?!" Here we can see that the sense of moral superiority of family

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[23] The conception of family is of great importance in the Confucian culture, in which the family refers to the traditional big family, rather than the nuclear family of the industrial society. It is the cultural conception of family that umbrellas a series of values and orders, including filial piety to elders.

responsibility articulated within marriage outmatches a woman's individual willingness.

Individuality has gradually been revealed since the market reforms in China, posing challenges to the legitimacy of familial value, although such a challenge is not without hesitation. The criticism of the imposing familial ethic is seen in the representation of the family's unreasonable intervention into a woman's personal relationship, while the conservative tendency to retain the traditional ethic is seen in a woman's familial responsibility with regard to marriage.

4.4 The single status, challenges, and reaffirmation of couple culture

The single identity of women is made problematic in this television series, whilst couple culture is both challenged and reaffirmed through the portrayal of the heroine and other supporting female characters.

The single identity of Dayan is mildly pathologized, both physically and psychologically. In E01, Dayan is found to have "intermittent menopause and autonomic nerve disorder", which is a fault in her female identity, and her disease is unreasonably attributed by the family to her unmarried status. In addition to her physical disease, Dayan's personality is also presented as problematic to some extent. One of Dayan's female friends complains to her: "You are so mean, no wonder you

cannot find a boyfriend!"

The single status of women is also constructed as a deficit in the sense that without men or marriage, a woman appears to have no social value at all. When the family held a birthday party for Dayan, she said: *"Every time I have a birthday, I get older for one year. It's like reminding me that I have nothing at hand when I am already thirty-four years old."* In the dominant narrative, marriage is a necessity, leading to happiness and self-fulfillment, especially for women. Every time Dayan becomes frustrated because of setbacks in love, the ending song is played: "*Find a man to love me, I am afraid of loneliness…*" The lonely Dayan appears against the backdrop of grey and dark scenes, conveying a message that without men, a woman's life would go into darkness.

In addition, the single status of women is constructed as an identity that should be grieved over. Dayan's father grumbled: "I have no happy days unless you marry!" He also said to his other daughter, Xiaoyun, and her husband: "You two happy married couple should not leave your elder sister alone!" Dayan's grandmother, who loves Dayan the most, said to Xiaoyun: "You all have married and you all have someone to talk to heart-to-heart, leaving you elder sister alone. What a poor girl!" Similar narrations time and again emphasize the disadvantages of the unmarried status and the happiness promised by marriage.

The problemization of the single status is accompanied by the reinforcement of couple culture. Xiaoyuan, one of Dayan's girlfriends, does not have it as good as the other three female characters in terms of appearance, education, and economic status. She is humble when getting together with the other girls. However, she was the first to get married and after she married, she seemed in turn to gain the confidence to "teach" Dayan: "Dayan, lower down your standard then you will have whatever kinds of happiness. Marriage makes you feel safe."

However, marital ideology, and, of relevance, the legitimacy of reproduction, is not unshakable in the story. Both crisis and reaffirmation of marriage and reproduction are devised in the lives of supporting characters. In the case of Xiaoyun, Dayan's younger sister, she never thought that, as the wife of a wealthy business man, her privileged lifestyle would end in divorce, due to unhappiness with her husband's meanness with regard to property. In this case, a woman's voice is expressed in consumerist grammar. In this marital relationship, Xiaoyun's individuality is absent in that she does not have her own financial resources and centers her life around her husband. When she wanted to divorce with him, she rejoiced that it was fortunate that she did not have a baby, enabling her to divorce without any hesitation.

With regard to Lele's marriage with Dayan's younger brother Xiaojun, the marital relationship appeared to be fairly stable in its early stages, but it was almost ruined when they had arguments over whether or not to have a child. As a young, modern woman, Lele did not want to have baby, or at least not at such a young age, but her

husband, knowing that Lele is an attractive, individualist, and economically independent new woman, wanted her to have a baby so as to ensure that Lele stayed. The modernized femininity that Lele epitomizes becomes an unstable element for men, and such instability is dramatized in Lele's abortion of the baby. When Lele found out that she had been deceived by her husband and became pregnant, she went to the hospital to abort the baby. Of interest is that the family never blamed Lele for her behavior, but instead wholeheartedly took care of her after the abortion. The above examples show that the narratives had left some space for a woman of the new generation to express her consciousness of control of her own body and resistance to the idea of women as reproductive tools.

Despite the fact that marriage is questioned to some extent, as is seen in the instability of the marriages of Xiaoyun and Lele, the ending of the story returns to embrace marriage and reproduction. The driving force of such change is the Shengnü, Dayan. When Dayan was mistakenly diagnosed as having cancer, in order to make her happier, Xiaoyun pursuaded her husband back to her and Lele proposed to her husband that they have a baby.

Another typical case that discusses marriage is that of Xiaowen (the closest girlfriend of Dayan). Xiaowen is an economically independent, wise, unmarried woman. She is also the closest to the gender discourse position of Dayan. Before the end of the television drama, Xiaowen holds the attitude of a single person, such that Dayan

sometimes admires her lifestyle: "Sometimes I think you are living a good life, no marriage, single, kind of good." However, albeit that she was so in favor of being single, Xiaowen still finally got married and became pregnant at the end of the story.

All these narrative devices have left discursive space for certain radical ideas, nevertheless they have come to re-establish the importance of marriage and reproduction, without exception. The anxiety toward marriage and reproduction is resolved by the women's compromises. In competing gender discourse, as is analyzed in the final section, the traditional expectation of a woman's gender role, marriage, and reproduction, is thus guaranteed. This is the bottom line to which any progressive gender discourse in the mainstream media can retreat.

The reflection upon the dominant narrative around Shengnü can also be found in the self-complication [24] of Dayan in this television drama. She sways between internalization of dominant Shengnü discourse and resistance against it. She would ask herself: "Am I really that old?" or "Isn't it a luxury to find a beloved one at my age? I don't want to be sold out as cheap cabbage!" However, sometimes, she is also sufficiently aware to counter such age and marriage anxiety. When Peng Tan's (one of the male leads) mother showed disapproval toward Dayan's age (E07), she retorted: "What's wrong with a 34-year-old?!"

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[24] Complication: The introduction of opposition and conflict into a story after the exposition. Sometimes a complication is internal and involves a character who is torn between two choices, each of which is problematic. (Berger, 1997:64)

4.5 Conclusion

In conclusion, the construction of ordinary Shengnü positions them in a safe, if not conservative, discursive place. This is first achieved through the moderation of the market-quality and market-tradition gender discourses that refer to the controversial image of Shengnü, thus making the heroine more acceptable for the mainstream screen.

In the depiction of Dayan's male choice in romance, the television drama refrains from any interventions in heterosexual match-making, and expresses Shengnü's resistance to traditional marriage ideology through the pursuit of true love with a masculine and authoritative man. Dayan's struggle between familial responsibility and her individual pursuit of love attempts to pay heed to both traditional values and the individuality of modern women. In addition, in order to mitigate the anxiety of male dominance and the transforming gender relationship produced by women's ascendance in society, marriage and reproduction are guaranteed in the televisual narratives.

CHAPTER FIVE   "GOLDEN" SHENGNU

Compared to the ordinary version of Shengnü that moderates the capability and femininity of women, in contrast, the second type of Shengnü in the television drama underscore these characteristics. The type of television drama that features "golden" Shengnü has a very similar character creation and narrative structure. The stories are set in developed metropolitan cities, and the work places are all fashionably decorated. The structure of characters is usually "heroine + hero + supporting female/male roles + parents". The most prominent issues are the romance between the heroine and the hero, as well as the heroine's career progression.

The heroines usually have favorable attributes; they are good-looking, professional high fliers, who are financially secure, and spiritually vigorous. This type of "golden" Shengnü obtains a comparable, or even superior, social status to men, via the modern education and employment system. Society is ambivalent toward this type of Shengnü. On the one hand, it is celebrated, while on the other, it causes anxiety in gender culture in that the hailing of "her century" shakes the long-existing gender order.

The producers of "golden" Shengnü television dramas also claimed that they were redefining Shengnü, as did the producers of dramas featuring "ordinary" Shengnü. They consciously used "盛女" (robust Shengnü), a more empowering term, to

replace the negative term "剩女"[25]. "盛", or "robust", means excellence, beauty, and well-being, rather than being left. Here I choose three typical television dramas portraying "golden" Shengnü in order to conduct the textual analysis: *Duoduo's Marriage, The Single Queen, and The "Golden"Shengnü's Era.*

The following will analyze how "golden" Shengnü are constructed into a modern version of femininity, primarily defined by market-quality gender discourse. The analysis will then turn to the narrative of Shengnü romance to show how heterosexual romance is rewritten for these modern, independent, women. In addition, I will analyze the way in which the single status is addressed as mildly varied from "ordinary" Shengnü.

5.1 Modern femininity：Market-quality discourse

Career centrality

In the series featuring "golden" Shengnü, the roles of women are mainly played out through the heroines' professional capability, which is exactly what market-quality discourse promotes. The heroines in these three television dramas - Qian Duoduo, Gu Feifei, and Liang Shuang, are the representatives of "golden" Shengnü, informed by feminist ideas, such as independence, autonomy, and self-fulfillment. They occupy a decent position in the companies at which they work, and are appreciated

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[25]   Since the two terms have the same pronunciation and Chinese pinyin spelling, I clarify here that, as used in this section, "Shengnü" always refers to "盛女" (robust Shengnü).

by colleagues and leaders. Their jobs, fashion designer, architect, and fashion magazine editor, are very particular to the knowledge economy that provides women with a greater number of opportunities in contemporary cities.

In the television dramas, the success of Shengnü in both education and employment, which supports their independence, is emphasized. In *The Single Queen,* Gu Feifei was a top student when she was in university, and she later became the leading figure in the department of the company at which she works. In *Duoduo's Marriage*, Duoduo excels both at school and in the company where she works, and she is aware of her independence from men. In E08, she talked to Yuanyuan, a girl who came from the countryside, and who was greatly encouraged by Duoduo's aspiration:

"I am a top student at school, and now I am an excellent employee in the company. You should learn from me. I never rely on men. We should earn respect from others. We should earn money for ourselves, to sustain ourselves. No matter how expensive things are, we should use our own credit card…not necessarily marry and rely on men…"

In the stories, career is central to the heroines' lives. A high proportion of time is given to telling the story of their adventures in the working environment. They do not involve themselves in romantic struggles, nor do they moan about being single (with the exception of one or two scenes); instead, they remain vigorous and passionate in

their work, as is shown in the voiceover narration at the beginning of *Duoduo's Marriage*:

"Qian Duoduo, the senior white collars in a transnational corporate, strives without knowing tiredness as other aspiring young people do. The only problem she faces is that her parents want her marry someone. But being a housewife is not her ideal ."

Qian's pursuit is also directly, or indirectly, supported by the narratives of other characters. Her father explicitly expresses his recognition by saying that:

"I think my daughter's current state is quite good…look at other children around us, who can be comparable with her? She is at her time to give full play to her talent and we cannot trap her like stones on the road. "

Qian's female identity is not emphasized, but her professional identity is highlighted; she works hard, as do other young people, and can be compared with such people, regardless of whether they are men or women. The narrative is also conscientious in rejecting the traditional gender role in order to recognize the heroine's capacity to realize her self-value.

The feminist ideas of a modernized version of femininity are thought to protect a woman in a dangerous society. Its concrete meaning encompasses independent

economic status and an independent spirit. Excellent professional capability, and possession of properties, such as a house and cars, as well as the ability to consume and to please oneself, are all presented as empowering single women who are not sheltered by male power.

Such modernized femininity is mainly embodied in female career paths; however, this is subject to risks in the working arena. One key narrative clue found in all three chosen series' is the dangers in the working place that the heroines must face in order to achieve victory in both career and romance. All heroines have experienced ostracism from the working organization and the perpetrators are usually females who also fall in love with the heroes of the series'. The competition between women around men is used as the force to threaten the heroines' "safety" in career progression.

Have it all

The promising single women's dilemma between their female identity and their working identity is also presented, and is resolved by the idea of "have it all". In E08, Duoduo has a short discussion with her teacher in the university Mr. Ye. Ye asks her whether family or career is more important. Without hesitation, Duoduo answers that she would prioritize career. Ye responds by asserting the dominant gender idea that men usually do not wish women to excel to a greater extent than themselves, and that

it is probably not good for women to be over competitive. Duoduo states that it will be fine if one can deal with both properly. The final scene provides testimony to such a "have it all" idea; Duoduo has a successful career and simultaneously has a beloved husband, as well as a baby on the way, without any conflict.

However, such a "have it all" idea remains a privilege for a certain group of women only. The beauty of the heroines is usually emphasized in the stories. Duoduo and Gu both had many admirers when they were in university. Liang is also a graceful woman, such that the male supporting character has a crush on her at first sight. In these series, these women have slim figures, and good looks, and they dress in the current fashion, or in an elegant way, in order to demonstrate their feminine charms. They are so "perfect" at meeting the traditional beauty standard that they easily attract either the leading or the supporting male characters.

The anxious market-tradition gender discourse

The market-quality gender discourse primarily carried out by the main female characters is accompanied by the market-tradition gender discourse that materializes in other supporting female roles, serving to justify the political correctness of the main characters.

In *Duoduo's Marriage*, Duoduo's good friend Han Yiyi, can be regarded as being

representative of market-tradition gender discourse, as is seen in the conception of her "free choice" in living her life. In a similar manner to Duoduo, Yiyi also received a higher education, but her female power is exerted in her choice to marry a rich man who gives her a seemingly luxurious life. Being a full-time housewife, she spends her husband's money lavishly, buying branded fashion suits. Unlike traditional women, Yiyi enjoys a relatively free living space.

However, the "autonomy" that Yiyi achieves after marriage does not appear to be that perfect. Although Yiyi stresses to Duoduo that striving for career success is not an appropriate approach to life for women (E02), she herself is not at all satisfied with her life as a housewife. Her husband really wants a child, but she has infertility problems, meaning that she cannot conceive a child, resulting in her being miserable in the very traditional marriage relationship. She not only feels lonely, but also suffers from her husband's domestic violence. Without her own job and life, all of Yiyi's life is oriented toward her husband. In such a marital relationship, reproduction is the only thing that defines her value, which, however does not exist. The tragic life of Yiyi functions as a reverse comparison to the central narrative delivered by Duoduo, which stands for the independence of women.

Another female supporting role in the same television drama, which is that of Chen Qingyan, represents the transformation from an unfulfilled traditional role to a market-tradition-oriented role. In a similar manner to Yiyi, Chen also fails to have

children, which results in conflict with her mother-in-law. Meanwhile, to some extent, Chen expresses female independence. She is aware that having a child can resolve the conflict with her mother-in-law, but she has mild resistance to her underprivileged position resulting from being childless. In E12, Chen asserts that "women should live for herself…it is meaningless to live for men".

Tragically, the route she chooses after she leaves the family is designed to be morally dangerous. She acquires a large sum of money, via the seduction of a business man and deceives him with her sex appeal. This gives her an economically independent life, for example, she owns a large house, but deep in her heart she still longs for the love of her ex-husband. However, this storyline does not have a happy ending. In short, the narrative of this character negates the morally controversial worship of money, and the misuse of sexual power, both of which are underpinned by a market-oriented gender discourse. In another television drama featuring "golden" Shengnü, *Shengnü's Golden Era*, a similarly devised character is Ai Xiaofang, who is also a sexually expressive and financially sound, but morally deficient, woman.

Compared to female supporting characters, such as Chen in *Duoduo's marriage* and Ai in *Shengnü's Golden Era*, the female leads, such as Duoduo and Liang, are morally correct, financially secure and sexually restrained. For example, when Duoduo escapes from home and lives with her boyfriend, their restraint from sex is deliberately mentioned (E22). In the other two series', no content indicative of sexual

activity is shown with regard to the female leads, with the exception of kisses.

The diminishing traditional gender discourse

Although it is put at the center of the narrative of the television dramas, feminist ideology is constantly challenged by traditional gender ideology. For example, in E01 of *Duoduo's Marriage*, the expectation of traditional gender roles is given a voice through the older generation; Duoduo's mother and her good friend, Qinghua, also a middle-aged mother.

Qinghua: Duoduo's mother is frustrated these years! Her daughter is going to be thirty years old but is still unmarried... Dear daughter, remember, the most important thing for women is to have a good husband. Other things are not important at all.

In the eyes of the middle-aged women, Duoduo's achievements are something that they can be proud of before she is of marriageable age. However, now that she has reached her thirties without marrying a man, her value is decreased in the eyes of her mother's generation, regardless of the fact that she obtains promotions in her career. In contrast, Yuanyuan, the girl from the countryside, who is going to marry, now has something to be proud of.

However, as the story develops, such traditional gender discourse, which defines

women by heterosexual marriage, is challenged and beaten by Duoduo's feminism-informed ideas. Yuanyuan initially thought that her wedding ring could win Duoduo over, but as she has more communication with Duoduo, an independent and autonomous urban woman with a glamorous and promising lifestyle, she is highly attracted to her and wants to be as capable and to achieve as much. Yuanyuan even returns the wedding ring to her fiancé and settles down in the city to pursue her career:

Yuanyuan: Duoduo, please take me to Beijing. I want to go to Beijing. I want to be a white collar, too. I want to dress like you, too. You are so beautiful!

Duoduo: If you go to Beijing, you will lose marriage.

Yuanyuan: I don't mind. Man struggles upwards; water flows downwards. If the worst comes to the worst, I can give up marriage!

In summary, the market-quality gender discourse represented by "golden" Shengnü competes with traditional and market-tradition gender discourses. The traditional gender discourse is presented, but is shown to be diminishing in contemporary society. The market-tradition gender discourse is anxiously battling for a position, but is discursively depreciated in terms of sex and morality.   The market-tradition-oriented idea of "good marriage is better than good career" is substituted with the "have it all" idea of "have both good marriage and good career".

5.2 Rewriting romance：The reciprocity of romance and career

Men and women's careers

In "golden" Shengnü television dramas, career is used as a feminist tool to tell a story of women's self-fulfillment. Male characters are closely involved in this process, so it is interesting to carefully examine the role that men play.

In the television dramas, both the heroines and the heroes are society elite and the heroines' talents are comparable to those of the heroes'. Usually, the capability and achievements of the heroines is much appreciated by the male characters, such that it even becomes a primary characteristic of interest to the heroes. Therefore, the television dramas recognize women's individual value from the male perspective. In *The Single Queen*, the hero (Xue Can) accidentally saw the housing blueprints drafted by the heroine, Gu Feifei. He was a little bit surprised by her work and thus became more interested in her (E01). In *Shengnü's Gold Era*, the hero, Li Hao, could not help falling in love with Liang Shuang, the heroine, when he saw that Liang worked hard for her enterprise. Similarly, in *Duoduo's Marriage*, the voiceover explicitly narrated that "When Xu Fei (the hero) saw Duoduo skillfully threaded the model's clothes with a needle, he got a crush on her" (E03).

The fictional narrative with regard to women's professional talents is somewhat different from the repeated idea that women who achieve too highly can scarcely find

a male partner. This popular idea was also found in To's (2013) sociological study of Shengnü. She found that single professional women were faced with gendered constraint, that is, women's preeminence became an obstacle in match-making while men's preeminence was never questioned in the marital market. However, television provides an idealist resolution, in that the professional aptitude of "golden" Shengnü is not only unproblematic, but also adds personal charms in the marital market.

In women's career progression, male characters usually play the role of rescuers when the heroines are threatened in the workplace. Most heroes usually possess a higher social-economic status than the heroines, which provides the basis on which men can offer rescue. Coincidentally, in *Duoduo's Marriage*, the hero, Xu Fei, is the heroine's boss, the chief director of the design department of a fashion clothing company. He also has a rich family, since his mother owns a familial corporate. In comparison, Duoduo is merely common urban elite. When Duoduo was framed by her rival in the company, Xu Fei supported her in trying to prove her innocence in a business conspiracy. He also attempted to help Duoduo build her own clothing design brand. The supporting male character in this television drama, Ma Wen, also coincidently later became Duoduo's boss and used his position to assist Duoduo.

Similarly, in *The Single Queen*, the hero, Xue Can, has a wealthy family business run by her mother, and becomes the boss of the heroine by accident. Another male character, Zhou Huiming, is also in a higher position than the heroine, Feifei. Both

helped Feifei when she was stuck in plight. Xue Can even used his power as a general manager to get Feifei into the company and assigned her promising architecture projects.

Although there are some exceptions in the creation of the male characters' economic status, they usually turn out to have an unexpected noble family background. One exception is *Shengnü's Golden Era*, in which the hero, Li Hao, is not obviously superior to the heroine, Liang Shuang, but in the latter part of this television drama, it is found that he is the son of a notable doctor, thus making him more likely to meet the social standard of a reliable male partner. When the heroine suffered setbacks in career and romance (with another man), Li Hao gave support whenever she needed it. In a heated Shengnü television series produced in Taiwan, named *Baiquan Queen (《败犬女王》)*, the hero, Lu, does not have as high an economic status as the heroine, since he is a young man who has just entered society. However, in the end, the hero turned out to be the son of a well-known doctor in Taiwan.

As can be seen in these "exceptional" television dramas, even though the heroes are only comparable, or even inferior to, the heroines in terms of social-economic power in the beginning, they are ultimately guaranteed to have a higher social position than the heroines by virtue of being "assigned" noble family backgrounds.

The above shows that career is used to demonstrate women's roles in Shengnü

television dramas. The individual value of single professional women is recognized, as they can freely pursue progression in personal development. This by no means conflicts with their romantic relationship with men, but is instead fascinating to men. They are not those "virtuous wife and good mother" women who center their lives around men and the family without self-fulfillment, nor those "super women" who sacrifice romance/marriage and family for career, but are enterprising women who are appealing to men. In the meantime, men play the role of rescuer, so as to retain a superior position. By doing this, the narrative can both present a positive story of single professional women and reasonably re-affirm the stereotype of a strong man with a weak woman in romance.

Fight for love

The emphasis on women's career capability resonates with the feminist discourse on American television during the second wave of feminism, such as *The Mary Tyler-Moore Show,* which represented women's power in stories of their careers. However, Shengnü television dramas in China differ in that they pay more heed to romance as a crucial narrative element.

Compared to Dayan in *Da'nü Dangjia*, these three series featuring "golden" Shengnü also pay more heed to romance. This can be ascertained from the official posters of these series that convey various messages about the television dramas. The poster

featuring *Duoduo's Marriage* has a pink heart shape on the upper part, while the poster of *The Single Queen* is surrounded by many roses. The latter poster also writes: '都市職場的潛伏暗戰，大女情感的糾葛碰撞'. All these indicate that heterosexual romance is a necessity for single professional women. When the dominant discourse around Shengnü points to the difficulty in finding a beloved partner, television dramas depict romance as accidental luck. The cliché is that the encounter between the hero and the heroine is a dramatic coincidence, thus concealing and romanticizing the plight articulated in Shengnü discourse.

The term "盛女" itself has an empowering meaning, as it signifies women who are professionally talented, beautiful, confident, and independent; more importantly, the term predicts that these professional single women will ultimately be rewarded with romance, due to the above characteristics. It implies that the highest accolade for these women is their achievement in romance. One poster of *Shengnü's Golden Era* writes: "你選擇剩下的剩，你就是剩下的剩；你選擇盛開的盛，你就是盛開的盛"; on the same poster "2011 愛情盛放" is also written. Such resonance shows that the term "盛" not only signifies a positive image of single women, but also gives implications with regard to heterosexual romance.

In the romance narrative, the sense of power attached to Shengnü is embodied in the fight for men. In media reports on *Shengnü's Golden Era*, the heroine, Liang Shuang, is promoted as a Shengnü woman actively seeking love. In order to catch the

audiences' eyes, the promotion tends to use aggressive words, as follows:

(Wang Likun is the actress who plays the role of Liang Shuang)

王麗坤《盛女》為真愛掀愛情保衛戰

王麗坤鄭希怡《盛女》情敵碰面火藥味十足

王麗坤《盛女的黃金時代》不懼情敵狠狠愛

王麗坤《盛女》完勝鄭希怡稱敗犬不愁嫁

《盛女》大結局 王麗坤收穫愛情成敗犬女王

Reports on *Duoduo's Marriage* write that :

"*《錢多多》以大齡剩女為主題，講述了一位元年近三十的'白骨精'在各種命運的糾纏下尋獲真愛並成功將自己嫁掉的溫情故事。*"

Women's desire for heterosexual romance, being constantly expressed, is constructed as an agentic action, and such action is discursively used to eradicate the negative meaning of Shengnü. The sentence pattern of "**is not typically Shengnü, she in fact yearns for love" is frequently seen in media reports when the producers are trying to explain how the television series' "redefine" Shengnü. Shengnü do not make sacrifices or concessions in romantic relationships, but actively strive for love. In the battle of romance, they must fight as soldiers against obstacles from family or female competitors so as to win in love.

In this type of Shengnü television drama, as well as others, there is always a malicious woman who attempts to come between the hero and the heroine. This narrative device is particularly salient in this type of Shengnü television drama. These women pose a threat to the heroine in terms of both career and romance, and in all three selected television dramas, Tian Huizi in *Duoduo's Marriage,* Guan Yaqin in *The Single Queen*, and Ai Xiaofang in *The Golden Shengnü's Era,* they possess greater capital than the heroines. They can then put the heroines into a dangerous situation by manipulating these resources in order to fight for their desired men. After the competition, the true love of the hero is the ultimate reward for the heroines.

It should be noted here that although in the promotion, Shengnü actively fight for men, as do their western counterparts, they are less aggressive in pursuing them. In addition, in *Duoduo's Marriage*, we can see that the heroine withdraws from the battle when the family functions as a hindrance to her romantic relationship, which is connected with particular Confucian familial ethics.

The above shows that the empowering discourse around women connects with traditional heterosexual patterns, making the representation of single professional women more acceptable to the conservativeness of the mass culture.

5.3 Single identity and couple culture

Despite the producers claiming that they were trying to "redefine" Shengnü into more positive figures, their single identity means that they cannot avoid being made into problematic individuals. The single status is presented as abject and in need of escape. The glamorous heroine in the workplace would have low moods when humiliated by the couple culture that overrides the dignity of the single person. They feel inferior to those married female friends, no matter how accomplished they are in their career, as if marriage is the only vital standard by which to assess the value of women.

In *The Single Queen*, Gu Feifei, the most exceptional girl during school days, got drunk after participating in a class reunion at which she found out that she was the only one of her ex classmates left unmarried (E01). At the gathering, all her female classmates were married and proud of it. When they heard that Gu Feifei, the school beauty, was still single, they showed surprise and sympathy toward her, without mentioning her outstanding achievements.

In *Shengnü's Golden Era*, Liang Shuang has a nightmare about her 30th birthday party (E01), in which she was unhappy and worried when she saw the candle in the shape of the number 30. When she woke up, she told herself: *"I am not worried about getting married until I am getting thirty…Look at the classmates, they either*

become fathers or mothers, only me is left alone." In the match-making corner[26],

when other parents found out that Liang Shuang was already 29 years old, they

immediately refused to talk to her parents (E01).

In addition to the depression and age anxiety associated with being Shengnü, these

women are also surrounded by the unpredictable risks inherent in work and

relationships in modern society. Each television drama is a story about how a single

woman faces and overcomes the schemes devised by the malicious woman in the

workplace. They are usually exiled from the companies they are working in.

However, the lament on the single status of Shengnü does not run through the entire

stories as it does in those of the "ordinary" Shengnü, in which the issue of being

single is often raised in the characters' conversations. In "golden" Shengnü television

dramas, the scenes addressing the abject single status appear only at the beginning of

the television dramas as a routine of the Shengnü story. In the following narrative

development, the focus immediately turns to Shengnü career and romance.

Even though "golden" Shengnü are polished to be professionally high achieving

individuals, who do not rely on men, they are rewarded with a man of higher, or at

least comparable, social and economic status at the end of the story. The ending of

television dramas gives the final judgments on the values that the narrative intends to

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[26] A place where single men and women's parents gather to search for partners for their single son or daughter.

promote, and, as can be seen, heterosexual romance and marriage is a necessity for Shengnü on mainstream television. The chosen television dramas all end with the happy wedding of the heroine and the hero with the good wishes of family and friends. Such an ending is closed, rather than open, making the expectation of Shengnü homogenized and consolidated.

5.4 Conclusion

"Golden" Shengnü embody a modernized version of femininity that underscores market-quality gender discourse in its competition with traditional and market-tradition-oriented gender discourses. The "golden" Shengnü are constructed as career-centered women and they are privileged over domestic women, as well as male-centered city girls. Interestingly, the narrative of career centrality reciprocates the narrative of heterosexual romance, another major narrative element in all "golden" Shengnü television dramas. Male characters usually play the role of supporters, and dominators, as well as rescuers, in the Shengnü pursuit of career. The conflict between the professional single women's working identity and the gender identity mentioned in the Shengnü discourse is thus eliminated. In addition, although the autonomy of the "golden" Shengnü is highlighted, the single status is still constructed as abject and something to be rid of.

CHAPTER SIX   SHENGNU IN WOMEN'S MAGAZINES' WEBSTIES

After examining these two types of Shengnü in television dramas, I further looked into the websites of women's magazines for the following reasons. First, television drama as mainstream popular culture (Zhong, 2010) tends to "mainstreamize" the image of Shengnü in a simplistic way, while the ideological project in women's magazines operates in a more radical and explicit manner than televisual storylines. Second, some important and frequently discussed issues regarding Shengnü are not sufficiently narrated in television dramas, for example, the reasons for being left, and the ways to go about shedding the single status. These issues are ideologically loaded and thus can hopefully provide greater insight with regard to the mediated Shengnü discourse. Third, the woman's magazine is a supplementary genre to television drama in creating and disseminating Shengnü discourse. As a "feminine genre" women's magazines will not miss such a heated female, profit-making issue, and play a vital role in regulating women (Ballaster, et al., 1991; McRobbie, 1997). Therefore, several leading women's magazines' websites have been chosen to analyze, so as to provide a more sufficient understanding of the gendered ideological

operation on Shengnü, in which this social phenomenon is extensively reported, commented, and discussed.

Themes of the discussion of Shengnü in these women's magazines' websites are relatively stable across different magazines and different publication time periods. Topics range from listing out reasons why women are left single, to offering solutions for shedding the single status. There are also reports and expert advice discussing the Shengnü phenomenon, commentaries about female artists who are identified as "golden" Shengnü, and criticisms of TV dramas and films that feature a Shengnü theme.

The following will analyze how commercial women's magazines (online version), represent Shengnü and how Shengnü embody postfeminist sensibility in such magazines.

6.1 Reclaim sexual difference

In the discussion of Shengnü it is found that nostalgia for the traditional gender norm is often invoked, together with an emphasis on heterosexual desire and appeal on the part of Shengnü.

The traditional gender norm, as is mentioned in the literature review, is supported by

a patriarchal gender culture that privileges men, while depreciating women on the basis of biological sexual differences. Women are assigned a domestic role subordinate to men, who are the strong, powerful, productive, individuals.

Shengnü is positioned as being the outlier of the traditional gender norm. Often described as "modern women", Shengnü are associated with intelligence, accomplishment, rationality, and similar characteristics. However, these characteristics are constructed as being not quite acceptable in a relationship with men. By making Shengnü problematic, the traditional gender role of women is drawn upon to give lessons to Shengnü. The good wives who play subordinate roles to their husbands, virtuous mothers who focus on their children, rather than on their own careers, and good-looking, compliant, innocent, effeminate, women are drawn on to set examples for "unmarriageable" Shengnü.

You need to learn to perform loveliness and innocence. Performing as a lovely girl can easily arouse male's protection. Men all want to be heroes to protect women.

They want to have women who are sacrificing, simple and innocent. They have no physiological desire for Shengnü already, not to mention any affection for an over-shrewd Shengnü.

When men are looking for wives, they prioritize beauty and temper, while women's

capability and economic status are the secondary. True that you have high education

degree and salary, but you have no beauty and tenderness, therefore men will surely

turn away to other women.

No men wish their wives to be an aggressive superwoman.

Men do not like women who do little housework and hate children.

Elite men do not want accomplished women but wives who assist husbands and teach

children whole heartedly (xiang fu jiao zi).

In the above excerpts, men are the key speakers on Shengnü relationship problems. Suggestions proposed via the male voice revert to male-dominated gender culture that encourages the notion of "strong men, weak women" (nan qiang nv ruo) and women's domestic role. Women are expected to be "lovely", "innocent", "simple", "tender" persons who need male protection. Women's domestic role of caregiver to husbands and children is re-emphasized when the magazine tries to solve Shengnü marital problems.

However, in some other articles, the traditional gender norm is resisted as old-fashioned, politically incorrect ideology that damages women's individuality. Contradictions of gender values such as this are frequently seen in women's

magazines. In the case of Shengnü, the consciousness of gender equality exists when the articles try to empower the new single women. The actions of a traditional woman, such as doing the housework or focusing on men, are deemed as completely "un-fashionable" for contemporary women, who, according to the magazines, should substitute the attributes of sacrificing, subordinated, and plain for individualist, confident, and glamorous.

Women living with male partners thought that cohabitation could consolidate love and be paid by marriage, which is deadly wrong. Single living women have their own jobs, pursuits, sweet friends… Try to imagine, a woman without the guarantee of marriage, doing all the trivial household chores, how beautiful she could be?

However, the resistance to the traditional gender roles, as mentioned above, does not directly guarantee that women are unquestionably liberated. The advocated version of femininity then directs to the assertion of maintaining empowering, nonetheless feminine, characteristics, through which the sexual difference is reasserted. This will be further analyzed later.

In a similar manner to television dramas, women's magazines have also attempted to destigmatize Shengnü. The discursive strategy deployed to eliminate negative meanings of Shengnü tends to reclaim their heterosexual appeal, on the basis of sexual difference.

Indeed, the market-quality discourse that is primarily defined by economic status

operates to construct a more positive image of Shengnü. Shengnü are found to have much better overall conditions than sheng nan, especially in terms of economic attributes. Quoting the match-making pattern, Shengnü are recognized to be those A level women, while sheng nan are of a lower level, according to the social standard.

Most of the Shengnü have outstanding outward appearance, kind and graceful inward world. They have superior conditions. They are smart, capable, noble, educated, wealthy.

However, although the market-quality discourse embodied by Shengnü is recognized, it is rarely used independently to destigmatize Shengnü, but is usually entangled with heterosexual narration. Credit given to Shengnü's quality is always accompanied by an emphasis on Shengnü's heterosexual desire, so as to affirm that they are normal women who long for love, safely fitting within the heterosexual norm. Their longing for men legitimates them as welcomed female figures. Similar narrations provide testimony to this.

Shengnü have glamorous appearance, aspirant in work, live in their own apartment, drive their own car and believe that love is right at the next corner.

Shengnü actually do not reject marriage, they are just waiting for true love.

Dear sisters! Never give up your ideal of love! It is better to live an exciting single

life than to be trapped in a dull marriage…If I get a man, it is my fortune, if no, my

fate.

A relevant strategy is to celebrate Shengnü by narrating how qualified they in fact are for the traditional gender roles required by marriage. In this strategy, Shengnü do not choose, or are forced, to be traditionally qualified female partners, but just coincidently fulfill this role. Magazine articles attempt to discover whatever possible "goodness" exists in choosing Shengnü for wives. Dating a Shengnü is said to earn men a quicker and easier marriage than chasing after a young girl. It is also claimed that Shengnü would not easily divorce their husbands and would have babies to continue the family line (chuan zong jie dai) within only a few years because they would not wait as younger women do. In short, the ways to destigmatize Shengnü is to reclaim their heterosexual desire/appeal based on sexual difference, rather than call on society to recognize their progress in self-development.

6.2 Feminine feminism

In the negotiation with the traditional gender norm, an updated version of femininity is invoked to incorporate both feminine attributes and feminist ideas produced by Shengnü.

However, the feminist ideas, mainly spoken in recognition of Shengnü achievement

in economy, education, and career, which support their independence, are always presented in an ironic way. The magazines hold ambivalent attitudes toward the capabilities of Shengnü, which, although they are visible, are not embraced by the media text without dissent. Women's experience in education and work is constructed as hurting male-embraced femininity, as well as male dignity.

When accounting for why women become Shengnü, or describing the characteristics of Shengnü, the high level of education and high salary are frequently blamed. Single women are constructed as having problematic personalities, due to their "over achievement" in education and work. Paranoid, hypercritical, perfectionist, arrogant, too clear-headed, calculative, aspiring, fussy, etc., are all constructed as unwelcome characteristics of Shengnü, cultivated in their glorious performance in school and the workplace. An article entitled *"How to sell Shengnü with a good price"* offered several explanations for why women become Shengnü:

One, education degree is too high…Three, personality is too paranoid…Four, IQ is too high.

…'3 high' (high education degree, high position, high salary) women are usually highly demanding on both career and partner that when they want to marry they will find that comparable men are already married.

Scoring high when in school, she is strict with herself, as well as with others, so she is hypercritical, unsociable, timid but also aggressive. Usually, no matter men satisfy with her or not, she rejects them, leaving no opportunities for the men and herself.

Further, the high achievement of Shengnü in education and work poses challenges to male superiority. The anxiety caused among men is then expressed through the heterosexual norm by the rejection of "top" professional single women as unqualified to be desirable female partners.

Those ambitious women want to strive for success in study and work when they are young. But they go upward and upward that when they become successful persons, they are so intimidatory for men's heart as well as kidney.

Your over-independence will hurt your man's confidence and self-dignity.

Don't men want an educated and wealthy woman? No! They want! But to own such a perfect thing one needs to be accomplished, brave and cultured. But this is too difficult for men. That's why most men are daunted to stop approaching elitist women.

The feudal traditional idea impedes Chinese men from rejecting the notion of "strong men weak women". But contemporary society advocates gender equality and women's status indeed has been improved…But for the men in China, these women

are too aggressive…Thus, the female elites become a rose that can only be looked at from far away but cannot be occupied.

Men are all male-chauvinist, how could they be oppressed? Aggressive women would be abandoned in the end.

The traditional heterosexual norm, based on the notion of "dominating men and weak women" (nan qiang nu ruo) is advanced to solve the problem of Shengnü, thus their progression is suppressed. It is single women who have to make a compromise to restrain their progression in order to trade it for a romantic relationship or marriage, while men do not need to make any such changes. Although the notion of "dominating men and weak women" (nan qiang nu ruo) in match-making is admitted to be an old-fashioned, traditional, and sexist idea in some articles, women's magazines have never tried to challenge it, but instead encourage women to accept such a historically-loaded culture as an unchangeable truth in intimate relationships.

In addition to such an ambivalent attitude toward feminist ideas, the literal term "feminism" in Shengnü discourse is used in a depreciating way. Shengnü are characterized as possessing a "feminist" tendency in some ways, which results in their single status. The conception of feminism is borrowed to signify bad personalities, such as being self-centered, arrogant, and demanding. "Feminist" Shengnü are thought to be those who want to control men and cannot withstand any

opposition from them. Troubles in intimate relationships are blamed on the Shengnü persistence with feminist ideas. Thus, the Shengnü discourse works as a backlash against feminism. It argues that it is feminism, manifest in professional single women, rather than women's inferior social status, which makes them unhappy and unwelcomed.

Many self-centered women are usually feminists. Once the male partner has different opinions, or has some habits that she cannot accept, she will immediately show her dislike.

She will try to change her partner, force her partner, and thus makes things complicated and troublesome.

Such negative use of the literal word "feminism" is also seen in other Shengnü media texts. "*Women in the World*" (*Tianxia Nuren*)[27], a famous women's television show, hosted by Yang Lan, once addressed the issue of Shengnü (*"Shengnü Marrying Out2*). It also attributed the unmarried status of Shengnü to their "feminist" beliefs that men had to follow women's orders.

The definition of feminism in these popular culture texts cannot be seriously analyzed and criticized, as it is by no means an academic definition. However, it should be noticed that, by borrowing the term and using it in a shallow way, any

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[27] Tianxia Nuren, hosted by Yang Lan, broadcast on the Hunan television station, is a heated women's television program in mainland China.

political significance of feminism is trivialized as apolitical attributes to describe an unpleasant personality.

While feminist ideas are visible in an ambivalent way, feminine characteristics are retained as a necessary "companion" to feminism. This is usually expressed in an empowering, rather than repressive, tone, in accordance with feminist grammar. Such a "combination" of feminist and feminine ideas is promoted as a new version of femininity that not only empowers women, but also coincidentally satisfies men.

In an article entitled *Learn how to date from ten Shengnü television dramas,* the author suggested that women should have their own independent career, maintain a positive attitude and be confident, while retaining feminine charms. Other excerpts from articles have similar assertions:

You must be very proud of being a woman. It is exactly your confidence that makes you a charming flower…this is fantastic for those male chauvinists...beautiful women are good, confident women are marvelous.

Men expect women to be feminine, independent, confident and brainy but not arrogant.

As a woman, the first thing in life is to have something to do. Women do nothing

would only create troublesome things. Get a little bit busy is another kind of sexiness for women. At least in men's heart you will earn enough respect.

Women who have engaged in long term of education turn to internal development. They think that internal beauty is important, and women who like to make up are not good students. However, women's slovenliness and plain leaves people the impression that she does not love life at all and her room is probably a mess.

Here, feminine attributes and feminist ideas are not mutually exclusive, but are inter-related. Women's "independence", "confidence", "braininess" etc., are expected to coordinate with "beauty", "femininity", and "sexiness". The expectation of women's beauty or sexiness is not a top-down imposing pressure, but is constructed to resonate with women's self-well-being. For example, the sentence "Get a little bit busy is another kind of sexiness" entangles women's self-fulfillment with her sexiness. Moreover, in the last quotation, women's external beauty is not a male-dominated standard, but is said to connect with her life attitude and the ability to manage her life well.

In the above quotations, we can also see that feminine attributes are discussed in an empowering way. The identity of woman is essentialized; by "essentialize" here I refer to specialization and generalization of female particulars. The identity of a woman is not a starting point to seek the cause of any inequality in judging Shengnü,

but a resource to empower a feminine self. For example, in the above quotations, "You must be very proud of being a woman", "Men expect women to be feminine, independent, confident and brainy", "As a woman, the first thing in life is to have something to do", the identity of women is something to be "proud of", and the ideal woman is one who is "independent, confident and brainy" or who is spiritually rich.

In addition, the perfect combination of feminine attributes and feminist ideas in Shengnü is discursively directed to male satisfaction as an ultimate goal. The confidence of single women is "fantastic for those male chauvinists"; being "feminine, independent confident and brainy" is to fulfill men's expectations; "get a little bit busy" serves to be "sexiness"; wearing make-up to be beautiful is implied as something done to attract men. It is those who possess modernized ideas, as well as feminine charms, who are believed to be appealing to men, rather than those who are subordinate, weak, and innocent or those who are autonomous, but non-feminine.

To sum up, Shengnü discourse produces feminist ideas, but they are treated in an ironic manner. Feminine attributes are narrated in an empowering tone and thus resonate with feminist ideas. The entanglement of feminist ideas and feminine attributes threads all the way through Shengnü discourse, contributing to a new version of femininity that is desired by men. "Postfeminist" observers define that entanglement of feminism and anti-feminism as a constituent of postfeminist

sensibility. In conventional feminism, feminine attributes are usually deemed as subordinate to male-dominated gender culture and are thus "anti-feminism". However, in postfeminist discourse, the entanglement of feminist ideas and feminine attributes, narrated in empowering way, is used to justify acts of women that would be regarded by feminist as problematic.

6.3 Makeover project

The makeover paradigm as a constituent of postfeminist sensibility is also embodied in Shengnü discourse. Gill (2007b) explains the makeover paradigm, starting from two points. First, it assumes that Shengnü are lacking or flawed in some ways; second, women should amend themselves by following advice given by experts on areas, such as relationships, consumption, lifestyle, beauty, etc.

In Shengnü discourse, Shengnü are presumably problematic in some ways, in that they must do something to change into a woman that is more desirable to men.
First of all, Shengnü are flawed in terms of personality. In an article titled *Shengnü's dating: How to promote yourself quickly?*, Shengnü are accused of being too individualistic, in that they do not care about others, or are too fussy in choosing men, or are so work-centered that they leave no time for men, etc.

Shengnü are also flawed in terms of bodily appearance, in that they must do

something to change into good-looking women, with the assistance of the beauty and fashion industry. According to McRobbie (2007), it appears that the fashion and beauty system has displaced traditional modes of patriarchal authority to regulate women in the "post-feminist masquerade". Women are encouraged to learn manipulative techniques, strategies, and skills of beautification to enhance their desirability. This is obvious in the titles of many articles found in beauty columns.

Shengnü should accept their own appearance, but cannot remain unchanged. We are not born to be the lotus in the crystal-clean water, and we need to be sculptured. Single women do not need to make up themselves to please others, but we have the right to make ourselves more delicate, and we have the right to dress suitably to make ourselves more elegant.

Shengnü have to take a look! Five rules of dress-up to attract men!

Shengnü's compulsory courses: The make-up skills that earn you romance.

Magic facial cream, let the Shengnü regain new romance!

The perfect hair styles that will marry you a man immediately!

Secretes of Shengnü who can marry a man: Let's witness together with AQUALABEL (a make-up brand)

The bodily makeover project is usually told in an empowering tone, in that women are positioned as entrepreneurs with regard to their bodies, and that they are doing this to benefit themselves.

Women are constructed as an active controller of every inch of their body; face, hair, skin, etc., should all be subject to refinement and women have the right to act on this. Moreover, the unspoken message is that Shengnü have the economic capability to freely purchase those beauty products and fashionable dresses to upgrade themselves. This implies that the upgraded selfhood is a gendered and class-based modern self (McRobbie, 2004b).

In addition, in the above quotations, the project to polish herself is directed at capturing men in an active sense, rather than passively satisfying male desire. Verbs such as "attract", "earn", and "regain" position women in an active male-seeker stance, and imply their heterosexual charms. A more "radical" way to empower women under the beautification project uses individualist vocabulary. As stated in the first quotation, "*Single women do not need to make up themselves to please others, but we have the right to make ourselves more delicate, and we have the right to dress suitably to make ourselves more elegant.*" This way to shed the Shengnü label is very typical on women's magazines' websites. At first sight it seems to enfranchise the autonomy of single women by saying that what they must do is not forced on them, but is done totally out of their own will and will be beneficial. However, such a conception of free will is incorporated into the beauty economy, and is subject to the traditional beauty standard.

6.4 Sexy, but sexually safe

The above analysis shows that Shengnü discourse in women's magazines embodies the postfeminist sensibility that is found in the Western media's representation of urban women. However, such sensibility cannot apply to some specific aspects of Shengnü, for example, sexuality, due to the specificity of local culture in China. Sexuality is not as prevalent as other issues in Shengnü discourse. However, as an important arena of gender politics, one can observe society's regulation of the liberated women's sexuality by conducting an analysis of it.

The sex appeal of women is used as an empowering discursive resource in Shengnü discourse by articulating it with women's confidence, and such confidence just coincidentally appeals to men. This strategy blurs the politically incorrect "male gaze at female as sexual object" thesis, leaving little space to combat any sexist ideas. In addition, the suggestion that women's sex appeal is a necessity to shed the single status is often explicitly or implicitly spoken through the male voice, while sexual frigidity is rejected.

I like confident women who show their feminine tenderness. Petty moves like casually fiddle with her hair or exchange her legs when sitting are charming for me, said a 28-year-old estate business man Pitt.

If women show their sexiness, everything will be very nice, said a 26-year-old law student Cheng.

However, although sex appeal is encouraged in the discourse, aggressive sexiness is constructed as unstable force for men, such that it should be restrained within a safe zone. In an article discussing what kind of women would have greater chances of being left, women who hate a sex life and those who have too much of sex life are highlighted to warn the readers. In the same article comes a warning that women who have ever dated foreigners or have had a sexual relationship with them are more likely to be left. The unspoken message is that sexually aggressive women are too difficult for men to control. Such refrainment from sex resonates with the analysis of television drama, which found that the heroines are usually distanced from sex.

6.5 Conclusion

The textual analysis in this chapter found that the representation of Shengnü in commercial women's magazines' websites embodied a postfeminist logic that is absent in television dramas. Shengnü are believed to have achieved gender equality, although this is not welcomed by society without dissent. The textual analysis showed that the discussion on Shengnü evoked an embrace of sexual difference. The notion of sexual difference supports the traditional gender norm that prefers the notion of "strong men weak women" (nan qiang nv ruo) and a domestic role for women. However, the magazines are in the meantime aware that the traditional notion of women is somewhat outdated and should be replaced by an updated version

of femininity that incorporates both feminine attributes and feminist ideas. The magazines hold an ambivalent attitude toward the achievement of Shengnü in education and work, while trying to discuss the feminine attributes of Shengnü in an empowering manner. In addition, the beauty and fashion standard is imposed upon the Shengnü woman, making her both a problematic figure that needs constant modification, as well as simultaneously the manager of her own body. Last but not least, the expectation of Shengnü sexuality is that these women should be sexy enough, but not sexually aggressive.

CHAPTER SEVEN   CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

7.1 Mainstreaming Shengnü in television: Market-quality taking over

The textual analyses of the representation of Shengnü in both mainstream television dramas and commercial women's magazines' websites share commonalities and supplement each other in the representation of Shengnü in areas, such as feminine attributes, professional capability, heterosexual romance, beauty standards, sexuality, and single status, etc.

The discourse of Shengnü carries an updated version of femininity engendered in the social transformation, in that it involves conflict and negotiation between the old and

the new power forces shaping the adjusted gender order. The purpose of analyzing Shengnü is not only to find out the general picture of the media portrayal of this stereotype, but also to situate Shengnü in the historical development of gender discourses, and to theorize the ideological environment of contemporary middle-class, professional, single women in urban cities.

This study primarily examined two types of Shengnü images in television serials and further assessed a feminine genre; women's magazines' websites. The first type of Shengnü on television is "ordinary", intended to target the audience of the elder generation. This type of Shengnü is oriented mainly by socialist-state gender ideology that embraces sharing, collectivist responsibility, sacrifice, and refraining from consumption. Confucius idea also plays a part, not in the sense of reinforcing patriarchal notions, but in retrieving familial responsibility, notion of moderation (Zhong Yong) and restraint. The basic strategy to beautify Shengnü here is to moderate the most salient and worrying gender discourses – the market-quality and market-tradition gender discourses that are popularly disseminated when discussing Shengnü. The construction of the female character does not choose to simply revert to the traditional gender norm to build up a welcome image of Shengnü, but tries to find a "safe" discursive position.The representative of "ordinary" Shengnü is Dayan in *Da'nü Should Marry*. In order to avoid the controversy that elite single women would evoke, Dayan is constructed as an ordinary woman without any great career ambition, and a plain woman who does not embrace the consumerism found in other

female characters. She is not an individualist who opposes the family, but is trapped between individual pursuits and the "collectivist" action of the family. She is not a radical celibatarian either, but a normal woman longing for a male partner, just as the director of this television drama claimed: "Our heroine is merely a kind-hearted girl longing for true love!"[28] In addition, this television drama leaves limited space for the acceptance of the single status. Although some female characters in the drama have tried to distance themselves from marriage and reproduction for various reasons, all of them, without exception, ultimately return to a marital relationship.

The second type, the "golden" Shengnü, highlights market-quality gender discourse, although in a discounted way. Marketized logic, rather than socialist or traditional Confucius ideologies, is central to this type of Shengnü. In "golden" Shengnü television dramas, Shengnü are constructed as being not only beautiful, but also professionally competent, ladies and they reject being traditional women. It is interesting to observe that the career of Shengnü reciprocates their romance, that is, their romance does not contradict their career at all, but in turn serves to facilitate the latter[29]. Their career is appreciated, as well as rescued, by the heroes, thus the Shengnü capability is recognized, while male superiority is retained. The single status is made into a problem and the ideology of marriage and reproduction is privileged.

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[28] http://ent.sina.com.cn/v/2010-04-02/23562918300.shtml (retrieved on July 2nd, 2013)
[29] In the online discussion, Shengnü engagement in work is said to be one of the reasons for being left.

7.2 Postfeminist sensibility: Entangling market-quality and market-tradition gender discourses

Compared to mainstream television dramas, Shengnü discourse in commercial women magazines' websites subject to much looser state ideological control and resonate more powerfully with the consumerist lifestyle associated with a female figure governed by postfeminist sensibility, which is often found in Western media.

The constituents of the gender discourses and the competition/cooperation between them in the representation of Shengnü resonate with Western postfeminist politics, while retaining certain local characteristics. In Chapter Six I tried to examine the postfeminist sensibility in Shengnü discourse in commercial women's magazines. It is exactly the entanglement of market-quality and market-tradition that shapes the postfeminist tendency because of the following two reasons. First, the prosperity of market is an important factor contributing to postfeminist sensibility; second, market-quality discourse contains conventional feminist ideas, while market-tradition discourse provides condiments to a "feminine feminist" figure. Feminist notions produced by Shengnü are both recognized and discursively moderated, while feminine attributes are incorporated into this modernized version of femininity with an empowering grammar.

The postfeminist sensibility found in the idea of Shengnü in commercial women's magazines' websites is not salient in mainstream television dramas. This is first

because mainstream television is not as commercialized as women's magazines, which are largely supported by the beauty and fashion industry, so we can find relatively fewer contents regarding beautification in television dramas. Therefore, in television dramas Shengnü are not urged to give themselves a makeover with the assistance of beautification products, unlike in women's magazines. Second, sexualization is an important characteristic of postfeminist culture, but mainstream television in China has a strict regulation on sexual content, while the online environment is far less restricted. Therefore, there is a greater possibility of discussing Shengnü sexuality on the women's magazines' websites. Third, it is found that women's magazines hold an ambivalent attitude toward the achievements of Shengnü, while their professional capability is given more credit on television. The marketized state requires women to participate in the economic system, such that market-quality gender discourse is underscored in the mainstream television dramas featuring "golden" Shengnü, while the commercial women's magazines tend to require women to be consumers, rather than producers (Wei, 2010; Zhou, 2011). Moreover, in televisual narratives, the heroines are usually beautified to be a positive character, so that they would not be discouraged in education and work, as they are in women's magazines, where there is less of a necessity to build up a perfect central character.

7.3 New dynamic of gender discourses

After analysis and detailed comparison among "ordinary" Shengnü, "golden" Shengnü in television dramas, and Shengnü in women magazines' websites, an immediate question is that – why there exist varied construction of Shengnü when it seems to be a singular social phenomenon (though a pseudo one) or a singular discursive construct? What are the relations among these varied images? Are they located within certain gender spectrum? How do they complement or contrast with each other? What do such complementation and contradiction implicate about the gender discourse dynamic in contemporary China against the backdrop of marketization?

According to Wu (2009), in the pre-marketization period, gender discourse structure is like a yoyo ball – the state-oriented gender discourse at the top dominates the traditional gender discourse at the bottom. Most of the time, the former plays a major role in constructing the ideal femininity of women – the "iron lady" who can perform like a man in a construction project and in battle. However, when the state needs women to perform a domestic role, the traditional gender discourse at the bottom will be immediately withdrawn to serve the state's need.

Shengnü, however, engender in a transforming social and economic background that contributes to the construction of gender ideologies. The investigation into Shengnü shows that a new dynamic of gender discourses is playing out in the media and our

society. As the socialist state is being marketized and the traditional gender routine diminishes, market-quality and market-tradition gender discourses take their place to shape the ideal femininity of Shengnü. If we retain the yoyo ball structure to understand the dynamic, market-quality discourse replaces state-oriented gender discourse, while market-tradition discourse replaces traditional gender discourse.

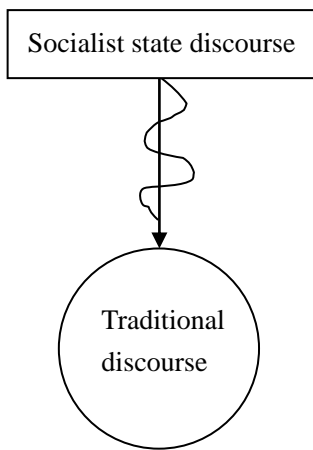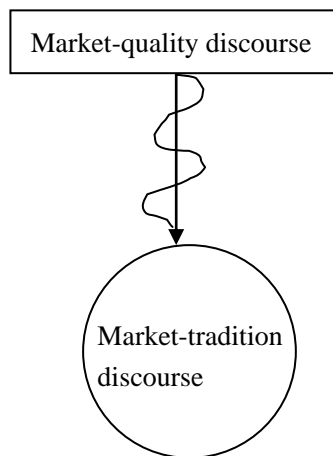Figure 2   Yoyo-ball model of gender discourses before marketization (Wu, 2009)

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┌─────────────────────────┐
│ Socialist state discourse │
└─────────────────────────┘

        Traditional
        discourse
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Figure 3   Yoyo-ball model of gender discourses after marketization

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┌─────────────────────────┐
│ Market-quality discourse │
└─────────────────────────┘

        Market-tradition
        discourse
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To   explain,   market-quality   gender   discourse   takes   the   dominant   role,   with

market-tradition gender discourse handing below. Most of the time, market-quality gender discourse can define contemporary femininity, and it repels market-tradition discourse consisting of consumerist and traditional values. For example, the "golden" Shengnü refuse to be housewives, and instead choose to pursue their own enterprises. However, the credit given to Shengnü's quality is not endowed without comprise. For example, in the "golden" Shengnü television series, although Shengnü are presented as capable in the work environment, they have to suffer setbacks and then be rescued by men. Moreover, on the women's magazines' websites, Shengnü achievement in education and work is reluctantly voiced and is immediately accused of being an impediment to marriage.

Market-quality discourse is strategically underscored, while market-tradition gender discourse, hanging lower in the yoyo ball structure, constantly rebounds when touching the issue of heterosexual norm and reproduction. The television narratives specify this by constructing an embraced femininity that requires the single professional women to be beautiful, and guarantees them a male partner or a baby. Although the traditional domestic role of women is rejected as a retrogressive notion, some feminine attributes are retrieved to make Shengnü more desirable, in order to fit the heterosexual norm. The beauty and fashion standard is vital ground for these women to retain their feminine characteristics. The textual analysis showed that, in televisual narratives, "golden" Shengnü were natural born beauties, who had attracted many male admirers. In such narrative, the beauty standard is not coercively

exerted on women, but is a power resource that privileges them.

Now I would like to give more detailed explanation of how such gender discourses dynamic operates in Shengnü discourse in both television dramas and women magazines' websites. As is analyzed before, "ordinary" Shengnü is mainly shaped by socialist-state gender discourse and Confucius notions while repressing marketized logic. Though such construction won popularity among audience of elder generation to certain extent, it tends to repress the most vibrant discursive repertoire – the more marketized and individualist one - that the younger generation of women are cultivated in. Compared to "ordinary" Shengnü, "Golden" Shengnü, following marketzied logic by constructing them as active economic producer and an ideal beauty, resonates more powerfully with the "Shengnü" in realities since they have been raised up around or after the introduction of market economy.

As the state is being marketized, the resonant parts in socialist-state and market-oriented gender discourses come to collaborate in "golden" Shengnü in the market-quality discourse. The socialist gender discourse encourages women to receive education and participate in the public sphere as men do. The market-oriented discourse urges individuals to improve their competitiveness in job market so as to earn a decent social status that mainly depends on their individual capability while not constrained by prescribed factors such as gender identity. The resonance between these two strands of gender discourses is embodied in the

market-quality discourse in "golden" Shengnü. Thus we can see that the construction of gender – specifically, "golden" Shengnü – is embedded in the historical social transformation process in China.

One underlying narrative in both of these Shengnü images is a rejection of traditional sexist idea that confines women agency, with the "golden" Shengnü opening more space for the display of autonomy. Though Dayan has been moderated in her self advancement, she retains the autonomy to pursue romance following her own will, and she is resistant to male chauvinism. For "golden" Shengnü, they are all independent, self-determinate women in career and romance – so-called "modern women". Traditional sexist ideas that define women as compliant, affiliated and secondary are devalorized as backward consciousness.

While the traditional sexist idea have been denied to empower mainstream Shengnü images, it has been strategically incorporated into market-tradition gender discourse, which contributes to the Shengnü discourse in commercial women magazines' websites that positions women as empowering consumers.

Postfeminist sensibility is generated from Western scholarship and we rarely bridge it with domestic scholarship due to different use of constructs even though they are referring to similar meanings. In my opinion, postfeminist sensibility and market-tradition gender discourse are bridgeable in that they both denote the "double

entanglement" (McRobbie, 2007) of empowering feminist gesture and a return of traditional feminine ideal. Though some traditional gender ideologies are retrieved, such as re-embracement of sexual difference, it is not the same as the old version. Marketized logic envisions individuals to be active, self-fulfilling ones and underpinned by such logic, the traditional gender ideologies are rewritten with an empowering grammar.

In sum, different social forces constitutive to gender discourses contest or collaborate with each other to construct an ideal expectation of Shengnü. In the new gender discourse dynamic, traditional gender discourse is denied but it has been incorporated into market-tradition discourse to envision a female figure that is both powerful and marketable within traditional heterosexual norm. The socialist-state gender discourse though gain certain ground in the struggle to define Shengnü, it only appeals to an elder generation. It is the market that functions as the main driven force in envisioning a positive Shengnü image. As is analyzed and discussed, market can be discursively articulated with tradition and quality discourse, forming into market-tradition and market-quality gender discourses respectively. Among these two, it is the latter- market-quality that is mainstreamized by the state television.

7.4 Limitation of the study

The chosen television dramas in this study may not exhaust all Shengnü serials

shown in recent years, for example, *Zhang Xiaowu's Spring* and *Yiyi Run Forward*, which have been telling stories of single career Cinderellas who are not the most eye-catching beauties, but who have good personalities and professional aspirations. The reason for not analyzing these serials is two-fold. First, their audience ratings are much lower than those that were chosen for study, rendering their social influence limited. For example, *Zhang Xiaowu's Spring* has an average of only approximately 2 million online requests in the Leshi Network, and *Yiyi Run Forward* has no more than 0.25 million online requests in the Tudou Network for E01, which is already the most requested episode. Second, the textual analysis of these two serials would not add much in the way of new theoretical insights to those gained from the two types of Shengnü that were studied, in that the narrative devices, such as Shengnü's romance and career, are similar to those used in the "golden" Shengnü serials, although the heroines of the former are positioned in a lower social and economic status.

As for the women's magazines' websites, the magazines chosen were mainly those that are commercial and target urban middle-class women. It is possible that the government-sponsored women magazines discuss Shengnü in a far different way, and this was not addressed in this study. However, the chosen magazines are the most influential in the women's magazines market, thus they can reasonably represent the major ideological environment of Shengnü.

The articles selected from the women's magazines' websites may not have been sampled randomly in the strictest sense. As mentioned in the methods section, articles were selected by searching those containing the literal word "Shengnü" and were then selected randomly. Thus, articles that do not contain "Shengnü" in the title, but which may have addressed the issue of Shengnü, were not included. However, I think articles selected by this method generally reflect the pattern of Shengnü articles.

7.5 More than Shengnü

Although the entire study focused on Shengnü, the dynamic of gender discourses in which Shengnü are situated provides a starting point for understanding other popular female characters in contemporary popular culture. Recent years have witnessed a boom in female-centric television dramas, telling inspiring stories of capable, intellectual, and beautiful women in different historical settings; for example, *The Beauty's Empire, The Legend of Zhen Huan,* and *The Legend of Lu Zhen*[30], all of which center on women's upward movement in societal hierarchy. It can be said that women's individual power is being brought to the front of stage if one compares the current images of women to those in the much earlier female-centric serials, such as *Yearnings (Ke Wang),* which featured traditional women.

Shengnü can be regarded as constituents of a much broader representational

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[30] Referring to《美人天下》《甄嬛傳》《陸貞傳奇》respectively.

landscape of new women, which reflects the uprising in women's status and transforming gender power relationship. Shengnü are said to be devoid of the traditional virtues that a good wife and a mother should possess, and they challenge the traditional gender norms (Li, 2010; Zhou, 2011). This study of Shengnü has implications for the understanding of other female characters in that the referential gender discourses shaping Shengnü will also be applicable in examining the construction of other heroines.

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