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## Is Marriage a Must? Hegemonic Femininity and the Portrayal of “Leftover Women” in Chinese Television Drama

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## Abstract

This study focuses on the representation of “leftover women” in a Chinese television drama. “Leftover women” is a Chinese expression referring to unmarried women over 30 who have high education and income levels. Through a textual analysis of the “leftover women” images in the television drama *We Get Married*, this study explores how the femininity of “leftover women” is constructed and how these images reinforce or/and challenge hegemonic notions of femininity.

*Keywords:* Hegemonic femininity, “leftover women,” women representation, television dramas

Is Marriage a Must? Hegemonic Femininity and the Portrayal  
of “Leftover Women” in Chinese Television Drama

by

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Thesis

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## CHAPTER I

### Introduction

In 2013, a short video went viral on Chinese social media in which a journalist conducted random street interviews to see people's attitudes towards the newly issued Elderly Rights Law, which regulated that it was against the law for citizens to not visit their parents frequently. At the end of the interview, an old man with a worried face said to the camera: "Nowadays, the laws are all nonsense! How come it was illegal if my kids do not visit me frequently? You know what should be illegal? People don't get married when they are thirty! They should be sentenced!"

People online found the old man really funny with his absurd remarks and sincerely worried facial expression. Some people replied under the video, joking that they would be sentenced to life imprisonment according to the old man. The old man and his worries were not hard to understand for most Chinese people. Family played an important role in traditional Chinese culture and the idea of late marriage was unacceptable especially for women (Qu & Liu, 2009).

In recent years, unmarried women generally in their 30s, labeled as "leftover women" ("Shengnv 剩女"), have become a noteworthy social phenomenon in Chinese society (To, 2013). A variety of Chinese TV dramas have focused on this group of people and demonstrated how modern Chinese women have struggled between social pressure and personal identities (Jiang, 2012).

This thesis is interested in the television representation of “leftover women.” Using the method of textual analysis, the researcher explores how the femininity of “leftover women” characters has been constructed in television drama.

In 2007, the Chinese Ministry of Education issued the *Language Situations in China* and included “leftover woman” as one of the 171 new Chinese words of the year 2006. Although there is no standard definition of this term, generally, leftover woman refers to an unmarried female over 30 years old who has received high education, enjoyed a high income and has a high IQ (Wang, 2011).

Gao (2011) further summarized five characteristics of these women. Firstly, they are single without a steady boyfriend and have never been married. Secondly, most of them are over 30 years old. Thirdly, they have a bachelor degree or above, have a nice income, are professionally successful, enjoy a relatively high economic condition, and have good manners and qualities. Moreover, they might be either passively single and unable to find a partner, or actively choose to be single. Lastly, their single status might be temporary or permanent.

According to the three national censuses from 1990 to 2010, the number of unmarried females between the age of 25 and 40 had increased four times in twenty years (Zou & Chen, 2014), with most of the unmarried females from the urban area (Zhang, 2013). In big cities such as Beijing, the number of leftover women exceeded 500,000 (Zou & Chen, 2014).

As a matter of fact, the tendency of late marriage is not a unique social phenomenon to China. As a consequence of social development and industrialization, it has been witnessed in most developed countries such as the United States and Australia (Jiao & Du, 2013; To, 2013;

Zhang, 2013). However, women's late marriage is interpreted very different in western and Chinese society. The more positive interpretations in the western countries largely take references from "individualization" (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Giddens, 1992; To, 2013), which empowers women with freedom to make their own choices in relationships. Under this discourse, unmarried professional women are not "stigmatized, but are perceived as independent and liberated" (To, 2013, p. 2).

However, in Chinese society, where the traditional patriarchal culture is still exerting great influence (Yang, 2010), the growing number of unmarried women is considered as a "social problem" that urgently needs solutions (Gao, 2011; Yang, 2010). The term "leftover women" itself has derogatory connotations, implying that the unmarried women are the leftovers in the marriage market (To, 2013). Moreover, the choice of word also reflects a male-dominant gender discourse, assuming that these women are passively left out by the men and ignoring the fact that women could proactively choose to stay single (Yang, 2014).

In Chinese patriarchal culture, women's femininity is defined by their identities in family relationships such as good mothers and docile wives (Yang, 2010) and independent professional women do not fit into those "traditional domestic roles" (To, 2013, p.2). This definition echoes with the western concept of hegemonic femininity, which according to Hughes (2002), emphasizes the inferiority of females in relation to males. Hegemonic femininity includes female characteristics such as "physical weakness, incapability to be aggressive and low authorities" (Wu, 2014, p.11) and defines women in service of maintaining the male dominance in the society (Schippers, 2007). In the Chinese context,

hegemonic femininity is influenced by Chinese patriarchal culture and family plays a significant role in maintaining the women's inferior and weaker status (Ng, 1995).

Nevertheless, despite the relatively negative social interpretations of leftover women, the growing number of unmarried women reflects the dramatic change in their social status as well as their attitudes towards marriage. On one hand, the promotion of gender equality in political and economic spheres considerably increases females' socioeconomic status. Economic independence reduces women's reliance on marriage (Gao, 2011). On the other hand, the introduction of western ideas such as feminism collides with the traditional patriarchal culture and renders a more diversified culture environment (Chen & Zou, 2014). According to Zuo and Xia (2008), the crux of the leftover women phenomenon in China lies in the fact that the social construction of women's femininity lags behind their self-construction. In other words, while some women are already trying to break the constraints of traditional marriage values, the overall society still embraces the past patriarchal ideology (Gao, 2011).

Compared to the considerable academic attention of the leftover women phenomenon in Chinese society (i.e., Chen & Zhou, 2014; Gao, 2011; Jiang, 2012; To, 2013), few studies have focused on the representations of the leftover women on Chinese media. As a matter of fact, since 2010, "leftover women" have become a hot topic on Chinese television. Dramas such as *Every Woman should Be Married* (大女当嫁; 2010), *Li Chuntian's Spring* (李春天的春天; 2011), and *We Get Married* (咱们结婚吧; 2013) achieved wide popularity among

audiences. All of these dramas focused on the lives of “leftover women” and how they struggled to find their love and marriage.

In discussions of the relationship between media and gender, previous studies (e.g. Hirschman & Stern, 1994; Zayel et al., 2012) show that media is an important arena to look into the social constructions of gender because certain notions of gender are legitimized through repetition. By analyzing media content, researchers identify emerging themes relevant to gender (Gill 2007). In fact, to study media representation of women is an important aspect in feminist study (Luo & Hao, 2007). Women have usually been found to be stereotypically or under represented in television dramas (Luo & Hao, 2007). However, a more recent study of today’s American TV dramas, specifically focusing on two HBO dramas, *Entourage* and *Sex and the City*, showed that multiple gender discourses were displayed in the dramas and female characters were provided with gender fluidity (Zayel et al., 2012).

In exploration of “leftover women” images in Chinese TV dramas, this thesis intends to address the following questions:

**RQ:** How does the Chinese TV drama *We Get Married* construct the femininity of leftover women?

**RQa:** How do the femininity constructions in the drama reinforce hegemonic Chinese femininity?

**RQb:** How do the femininity constructions in the drama challenge hegemonic Chinese femininity?

The next chapter is the literature review, which further looks into the concept of

hegemonic femininity, the development of Chinese femininity, the leftover women phenomenon in China, and the media representation of femininity. Chapter Three introduces the methodology applied in this research, the sampling strategies, the analysis process and the role of the researcher. The fourth chapter demonstrates the results and the last chapter serves as a conclusion of the entire study.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **Literature Review**

In this chapter, the concepts of femininity and hegemonic femininity are first explained. Next, the development of Chinese femininity and the “leftover women” phenomenon in contemporary China are discussed. Last, this chapter explores the relationship between social reality and media, and reviews how women have been portrayed on both western and Chinese media.

### **Femininity**

The definitions of femininity in second wave of feminism are quite different from the third one. Primarily, the two waves hold different assumptions about the role that femininity plays in gender and power relations (Schippers & Sapp, 2012). Femininity is a core concept in this study and by differentiating the definitions in two waves, femininity as defined by third wave of feminism is applied in later analysis.

Second wave feminism defines femininity as “a set of characteristics and practices that are imposed on women and result from or signify their subordinate status in relation to men” (Schippers & Sapp, 2012, p. 28). In other words, the concept of femininity is developed in a male-dominant culture in order to control woman for the interests of men. Femininity is considered as an embodiment of women’s subordination and powerlessness. In this sense, in

the second wave feminist perspective, the idea of femininity is something that should be criticized and rejected because it hinders the enforcement and liberation of women.

By contrast, third wave feminism discusses femininity in a less radical way. According to Butler (1999), femininity and masculinity are the embodiments of the social discourse concerning what a woman or a man should be. Not necessarily a result of oppression from men, femininity is a set of characteristics that can be embodied by anyone and its meaning may vary under different contexts. However, in line with second wave feminism, third wave feminism acknowledges that, in male dominant culture, there are “widespread pressures on girls and women to embody hegemonic forms of femininity” (Schippers & Sapp, 2012, p. 30). But different from the second wave feminism, in third wave feminist perspective, although recognizing that hegemonic femininity situated in male dominant culture may reinforce the gender inequality, a reworking of femininity can be a source of power to resist male dominance (Baumgardner & Richards, 2010).

In a nutshell, in the third wave feminist perspective, femininity is a neutral word with a broader definition. Without being constrained to the male dominant culture, it simply refers to a set of characteristics a woman can have. These characteristics are not necessarily an embodiment of male dominance and oppression but might be a reflection of any social discourse. To especially address the condition where femininity is situated in a male dominant discourse, the idea of hegemonic femininity is introduced, which will be further explicated in the following section.

## **Hegemonic Femininity**

The idea of hegemonic femininity originated from hegemonic masculinity. According to Connell (1995), generally speaking, hegemonic masculinity guarantees the dominance of men and the subordination of women. The central notion was adapted from Gramsci's (1971) hegemony, which refers to the governance of ruling class to control other groups through winning consent instead of coercion. The gender hegemony occurs when a form of masculinity obtains dominance over other masculinities and femininities (Charlebois, 2010). Although hegemonic masculinity may vary based on different cultural contexts, in western society, it usually refers to "well-educated, white, middle-class, heterosexual breadwinner" (Charlebois, 2010, p. 22).

In reflection of hegemonic masculinity and the hierarchical gender relations, Connell (1987) developed a corresponding concept of "emphasized femininity" and defined it as "compliance with this subordination" and "oriented to accommodating the interests and desires of men" (p. 183). However, emphasized femininity focused on the compliance to patriarchy and failed to address women's role in resisting gender hegemony (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

In response to the new configurations of women's identity and practice, Schipper (2007) developed the model of hegemonic femininity that included the power relations within femininities as well as the patriarchal relations between femininity and masculinity. Although borrowed from the term hegemonic masculinity, Schipper (2007) does not suggest that hegemonic masculinity and hegemonic femininity are equal. Instead, hegemonic femininity is

always in subordination to hegemonic masculinity. This hierarchical relation further influences the social practices in real life. In discussion of the unequal division of labor, Charlebois (2010) argues that because of the subordinate status, a woman is considered as unsuitable for powerful positions within social institutions. As a result, while hegemonic masculinity is associated with paid labor and prestigious work, hegemonic femininity is always related to unpaid domestic labor and caregiving.

Notably, according to Charlebois (2010), a significant difference between masculinity and femininity is that while men are empowered through the embodiment of hegemonic masculinity, an embracement of hegemonic femininity will result in the further subordination and ultimate disempowerment of women. Thus, in order to resist unequal gender relations, non-hegemonic forms of femininity may become a source of power.

Messerschmidt (2011) coined the term oppositional femininity, referring to the alternative forms of femininity that are not compliant with hegemonic femininity. Compared to Schippers' (2007) idea of pariah femininity, which refers to women who embody aspects of hegemonic masculinity to subvert the subordinate status of women, Messerschmidt's idea has a broader meaning. Oppositional femininity not only addresses the situation identified by Schippers, but also includes women who do not necessarily embody hegemonic masculinity, however resist aspects of hegemonic femininity. Examples of the latter include nuns, celibate women and single women (Charlebois, 2010).

As a result, there are two types of oppositional femininity. The first one resists hegemonic femininity by embracing aspects of hegemonic masculinities such as being aggressive or sexually promiscuous (Charlebois, 2010). Although this type contributes to

subvert the hegemonic femininity, it also supports the masculine practices and sustains the hierarchical relationships between masculinity and femininity. The second type of oppositional femininity subverts the hegemonic femininity but does not reaffirm aspects of hegemonic masculinities. This type of femininity may contribute to dismantling the hierarchical gender relations and become a source of power for gender equality (Charlebois, 2010). The unmarried women discussed in this study apparently is a version of the alternative femininity. Their representations on TV could provide a window for us to discern the mainstream social discourses concerning this group and whether any potential power is conveyed in opposing the hegemony.

### **The Development of Chinese Femininity**

The traditional Chinese femininity in feudal society was largely influenced by Chinese traditional culture and the patriarchal social system. For thousands of years, Confucianism had served as an ideological and cultural foundation for Chinese society. In Confucians perspective, women were considered as inferior and subordinate to men. Following the creed that men should take charge of the external affairs while women should handle the domestic ones, the highest value for a woman in that time was to be a “filial woman, a dutiful wife and a good mother” (Lin, 2010).

In the book *Lessons for Women*, which was written 3000 years ago, the Confucians intellectual Ban Zhao summarized “Three Obedience and Four Virtues” as the doctrines for women’s behaviors. The “three obedience” means “obeying her father as a daughter, obeying her husband as a wife and obeying her son in widowhood” (Chan & Ng, 2013, p. 51). The

four virtues refer to morality, proper language, decent appearance and manner, and diligent housework; morality is the most important one. A woman with morals should always be loyal and obedient towards her husband. It was a woman's duty to serve her husband as well as the parents-in-law. As the wife, she should get rid of envy and help her husband to take concubines. As the mother, she should nurture and teach the children.

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the society began to advocate equal education for woman and monogamy (Chan, 2004). After the establishment of People's Republic of China in 1949, the communist party took various means to increase women's status. Relevant laws were enacted to legitimize the freedom of marriage and gender equality. Under the principle of equal pay for equal job, women began to enter the work place and the number of employed women in 1958 reached 7 million, which was ten times compared to that in 1949 (Luo & Hao, 2007).

Mao Zedong described women as "holding up the half of the sky" and during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) era, Chinese femininity went through a process of de-feminization (Zhang, 2003). During this time, the Confucianism was ruthlessly criticized and the traditional docile and tender images of women were subverted. The gender differences had been erased and both men and women were politicalized as comrades. Women were in the same army style clothes as men, cut short hair and wore no make-ups. In the meantime, the government promoted official role models for people to follow. Those female models were called as "Iron Girls" and become the idols of the time with their "masculine strength, inexhaustible energy and surging revolutionary spirit" (Zhang, 2003, p. 212).

After the death of Mao Zedong and the reform and opening up led by Deng Xiaoping in 1978, Chinese society entered a new era. A re-evaluation of Chinese traditional cultures and Confucianism as well as the introduction of western culture enabled a process of re-feminization of Chinese women. In contrast to the perceptions that women in fancy dresses were frivolous, the gender differences were naturalized and even essentialized (Yang, 2011), and women began to dress and act in a womanly way (Zhang, 2003).

On one hand, the criteria of “dutiful wife and good mother” were again used as reference for modern Chinese femininity. However, in adapting the traditional notion towards the changing situations, the new version of femininity demonstrates dual demands on Chinese women (Zhang, 2013). An ideal woman should be capable at work. In the meantime, she should fulfill her traditional roles as a good wife and mother. In addition, along with the introduction of western culture, more and more western models appeared on Chinese media and the sexy and young images became a part of Chinese femininity (Johansson, 2001; Yang, 2011). These two femininity ideals represent the mixed characteristics of Chinese modern femininity by showing the “Western modernity” and “Confucian tradition” in juxtaposition (Notar, 1994, p. 29-30).

### **The “Leftover Women” Phenomenon in Today’s China**

The introduction of western cultures not only contributes to the emergence of new Chinese femininity, but also brings new problems. The growing number of unmarried women, labeled as “leftover women,” has become a notable social phenomenon in today’s Chinese society.

In examination of the reasons of the formation of “leftover women,” Zou & Chen (2014) summarized four aspects. First, more and more women go to college and receive high education. Some of them will continue pursuing higher degrees after graduation. Thus, most of their time is devoted to study and after they finish their education, they are already in their late 20s or 30s. Women with a higher degree such as a Ph.D. in China are assumed to be unattractive and are even mocked as a “sexless ‘third gender’” (Kuo, 2014). Moreover, fierce competition in the workplace forces women to spend most of their times on work, especially in the first several years of their professional life.

In addition, the traditional Chinese “spouse choosing hierarchy” (择偶梯度) plays a significant role in the formation of “leftover women” phenomenon. According to Zou & Chen (2014), in order to guarantee their superior status in the family, Chinese men incline to find women with lower socioeconomic status as their wives. Correspondently, Chinese women preferred men who have relatively higher economic conditions. In this sense, it was more difficult for highly educated women with good economic conditions to find their spouses because they are already standing at a relatively high position of the pyramid.

Last but not least, the introduction of western feminist ideals not only encourages women to pursue political and economic equality, but also raises their awareness of their own identity. Women begin to consider themselves as independent individuals with full agency. Moreover, because of their economic independence, marriage is no longer a necessity of their life. They have a higher standard for their spouse and the quality of their marriage life (Zou & Chen, 2014).

Although the reasons summarized by Zou and Chen (2014) contribute to a better

understanding of the leftover women phenomenon, most of their analyses were from a macro social level by considering the “leftover women” as an undifferentiated group. To further understand “leftover women” and their views of marriage, To (2013) conducted a qualitative study of the unmarried professional women in Shanghai and classified them into four categories. The first two categories were named as “Traditionalist” and “Maximizer.” Women from these two groups want to pursue their marriage following the traditional path, accept the patriarchal gender roles in the family and look for men with higher economic status as the chief breadwinner of the family. Ironically, while they are searching for men with higher status, men shun them because of their high education and economic conditions. The difference between “Traditionalist” and “Maximizer” is that the latter will apply various strategies to get rid of the dilemma caused by a “spouse choosing hierarchy.” For example, the “Maximizers” are more willing to find western men who do not mind their high education and economic conditions. Or they choose to conceal their own accomplishments first so that men will not reject them in the first place.

The third type is “Satisficer” and women from this group refuse to comply with the traditional “male superior norms” (To, 2013, p.17). In order to realize their marriage goals, they will seek men with lower economic status who are less controlling in their marriage. The last type is “Innovator”. Different from the other three, women from this group do not consider marriage as an ultimate goal. They also don’t consider themselves as “leftover women” because they proactively choose other forms of relationships over marriage.

## **The Representation of Women in Media**

In discussion of the relationship between media and society, previous studies (Glasser, 1997; Luo & Hao, 2007) have shown that media content could reflect the social changes and ideological shifts of a society. And by selective emphasizing a certain groups of people in a certain way, the media played its role in reinforcing the hegemonic ideology.

Concerning the relationship between the media representation of women and social reality, previous studies (Covert, 2003; Covert & Dixon, 2008; Milmer & Higgs, 2004;) have shown that on western media, women were usually stereotypically or under presented. In examining the news framing of women in Britain, South Africa and Australia, Ross (2002) found out that women were usually constrained to a domestic and private environment. However, the representation of women on media is a dynamic process and is influenced by the changing social realities. In recent years, western societies have witnessed a more and more diversified representation of women on the screen and there are studies focusing on professional women (White, 2011), queers girls (Zeller-Jacques, 2011), and butch lesbians (Fenwick, 2011), and so on.

In the Chinese context, according to Zhou (2010), generally speaking, Chinese women are still under represented in various media such as newspaper and advertisements and the female images presented on media are likely to be constrained to traditional gender roles. However, in the field of television dramas, diverse women images had been presented along with the social development.

To understand the modern women images in Chinese television dramas, many scholars

lay their focus on a special genre of television series named “family ethics drama” (Che, 2013; Li & Yang, 2010; Lou, 2012; Liu, 2014a; Xiong, 2014). According to Liu (2014a), in family ethics dramas, family is a primary narrative space where most of the stories happen and the interpersonal relationships and conflicts between characters make up the main content. Zeng & Hao (1997) defined family ethics drama as melodrama that focuses on family ethical and moral issues. It takes place in a contemporary setting and reveals the stories within a family regarding love, marriage, affairs, divorce, women’s independence, generation conflicts etc.

Family always plays an indispensable role in Chinese culture and family ethics to some extent reflect the overall morals and ethics in the society. The analysis of women images in family ethics dramas could have profound culture implications regarding the social consensus over gender issues (Liu, 2014a).

At the very beginning of the 1990s, the popularity of a drama called *Desire* (渴望) stood out as a milestone event in Chinese television history. This drama shed lights on the everydayness of an ordinary family and how it went through ups and downs from the 1970s to 1980s. Because of the huge success the drama enjoyed, family ethics dramas have become a mainstream genre in the Chinese television market (Liu, 2014a). The female character Liu Huifang was rendered as a perfect exemplification as a woman with all traditional Chinese virtues. She was a kind mother, a tolerant wife and an obedient daughter-in-law; she never fought for her own good but always sacrificed without complaints; she was an altruistic figure who put others interests in front of her own. According to Li (2015), Liu Huifang represented an idealistic image that lived up to male-dominant expectations of a perfect

woman. Many dramas created after *Desire* were greatly influenced by it and a “good mother and docile wife” had become a stereotypical representation of Chinese woman (Li, 2015).

However, along with the economic development of the society and the introduction of western feminist ideas in the 1990s, woman images with mixed qualities began to appear on screen. For instances, the drama *Migrant Girls*(外来妹) in the 1990s depicted a self-made country girl and how she struggled to survive in the big city. In this setting, women are no longer confined to domestic environments but step into the job market to compete with men and to earn their own livings. Since then and especially after the millennium, representations of professional women are prevalent in Chinese dramas. In addition, many female characters were endowed with strong self-awareness. The conflicts between family life and profession become a prominent theme in many dramas (Li, 2013). For instances, in the drama *Chinese Style Divorce* (中国式离婚, 2004), Lin Xiaofeng was such a contradictory character. Because of the ingrained influence of Chinese traditional male-dominant culture, on one hand she believed that her husband, as the man in the family, must have a successful career and she was willing to sacrifice her own job to support him. Whereas on the other hand, as a woman who had received high education, she was energetic and passionate toward her job and not willing to just be a housewife (Wang, 2012).

Stepping into the new century, Chinese society has witnessed drastic changes along with the prevailing ideas of consumerism, individualism and materialism. In juxtaposition with the increasing awareness of freedom and gender equality, diversified woman images began to sprout out on screen (Wang, 2012). In dramas such as *Marriage Battle* (婚姻保卫战, 2010) and *Beautiful Daughter-in-law* (媳妇的美好时代, 2009), the female characters boldly

pursued their love, espoused gender equality in marriage and stood up for themselves instead of unconditionally sacrificing for others. Meanwhile, a special type of woman image—the mistress become prevailing in many dramas. As the other woman in someone else’s marriage, they were all presented as beautiful, sexy and alluring women. Compared to the wives who were immersed in trivial everydayness and gradually lost their appealing, these women are attractive and romantic, always able to provide the just-right comfort to the men. According to Wang (2012), such comparison made excuses for the infidelity of the husbands. Moreover, the repentance of the husbands and the tragic endings of these women implied that it was always females who bore the moral backlash.

In exploration of the changing women images from the 1990s to 2010, Li & Yang (2010) analyzed three typical women images in television dramas—Liu Huifang in *Desire* (渴望, 1990), Xia Xiaoxue in  *Holding Hands* (牵手, 1999) and Guo Haizao in *Dwelling Narrowness* (蜗居, 2010).  *Holding Hands* depicted a woman with strong self-awareness and how she wandered between family and work, and ultimately broke the domestic constraint and pursued her career. *Dwelling Narrowness* presented a controversial image of a young woman who graduated from a well-known university, however ended up being the mistress of a corrupted official. According to Li & Yang (2010), although these images reflected the changing characteristics of Chinese femininity, they were still constructed in a male-dominant discourse of being mentally or/and economically dependent on men. This echoes with Liu’s opinion (2014a) that the construction of many women images in Chinese family ethics dramas are still constrained to the male-oriented framework where women are always in a position of being looked at and consumed. For instance, those pretty and sexy

metropolitan women images on the screen to a large extent cater to the men's esthetic demands.

Similarly, in an examination of the television dramas written by a famous Chinese playwright Liu Liu (六六), Lou (2012) found out that the women images in these dramas were all situated in a conflicting gender discourse. On one hand, these characters demonstrated some modern women characteristics such as being self-aware and economically independent. While on the other hand, their mental dependence on marriage and husband revealed the ingrained influence of traditional patriarchal culture. Lou (2012) concluded that although these dramas reflected women's appeal for gender equality, their struggles were within the male-dominant discourse and were doomed to be powerless.

In terms of the representation of "leftover women" in television dramas, Wang & Zang (2014) analyzed three television series about "leftover women" — *We Get Married* (2013), *Qian Duoduo's Marriage* (2011), *Every Woman Should Be Married* (2010), and found four types of "leftover women" images. The first type was hurt-by-love, referring to the unmarried women who used to be deeply hurt in relationships and missed the best time for marriage. The second type represented the professional women who did not have time for a relationship. The third type of "leftover women" was the perfectionist who held a far too idealist expectation for marriage and husband. The last type was the materialist who was in search of a wealthy husband. By summarizing these four types, Wang & Zang (2014) found out that although women from these four types had different personalities, they were all situated in a similar story structure where they suffered from being single and after going through all the difficulties, they finally found someone and got happily married.

Although “leftover women” is a hot topic in television dramas, few solid studies have been conducted to analyze the representation of this group. Wang & Zang’s (2014) study provided a broad picture of the stereotypical types of “leftover women” on the screen without delving deeper into the discourse analysis of these representations. Thus, situated in the feminist framework, this thesis serves as an endeavor to fill the gap in this area and contributes to a deeper understanding of the underlying gender discourses of how these images were constructed on television.

## CHAPTER III

### Methodology

This chapter explains the methodology of the thesis. It discusses the specific method of data collection, sampling strategy, description of the drama, analysis procedures, and researcher's role.

#### Method of Data Collection

To analyze the images of “leftover women” in Chinese TV dramas, the method of textual analysis is used in the thesis. According to McKee (2003), textual analysis is one approach to understanding how people, in different cultures at particular times, make sense of their own identities and the world around them. Texts may be in a variety of forms such as articles, pictures, films, television programs, clothes, and so on. Specifically, in the field of television, textual analysis helps to understand humans by examining what they produced on television (Berger, 1998). It assumes that “behavioral patterns, values, and attitudes found in this material reflect and affect the behaviors, attitudes and values of the people who create the material” (Berger, 1998, p. 23).

This thesis is interested in how the femininity of the “leftover women” was constructed in television drama and textual analysis seems to be an appropriate approach to achieve this aim. As a qualitative research method, textual analysis enables the researcher to reach the “latent meaning, but also implicit patterns, assumptions and omissions of the text” (Fursich,

2009, p. 241). In this thesis, beyond manifest content, textual analysis helps the researcher to delve into how “leftover women” were portrayed in television and what cultural assumptions and implications were made in creating those images.

However, as a method heavily reliant on the researcher’s own interpretation, a criticism of textual analysis questions its validity, arguing that the reading of the text is influenced by the researcher’s perspective and is “as ideological as the text itself” (Lockyer, 2008, p. 867). Recognizing this, Saukko (2003) highlighted that in textual analysis, a text can never be fully understood because every reading of a text is socially situated. Moreover, in qualitative studies, the subjectivity of the researcher is admitted and the researcher is considered as a key instrument for collecting and analyzing data (Creswell, 2013).

Another criticism argues that the meaning of a text can’t be discussed only based on the text without examining the context of production and audience’s reception (Philo, 2007). Although it could be a limitation of this method, Fursich (2009) contends that texts as a “distinctive discursive moment between encoding and decoding” (p. 238) deserve special scholarly attention.

### **Sampling Strategy**

The Chinese television drama *We Get Married* (咱们结婚吧) is chosen to be the analytical sample in this thesis. Since 2010, the “leftover woman” has become a popular topic in Chinese television dramas, and when *We Get Married* came out in 2013, it pushed the wave to a new height. This drama was broadcasted simultaneously on Chinese Central Television Channel 1 (CCTV1) and Hunan TV. It received an average rating point over 3%

on CCTV1 and over 2% on Hunan TV. During the final episode, the rating point was 4.01% on CCTV1, which broke the rating record set 14 years previous. The program began airing on November 6, with two episodes per day, five days per week. And by December 10 when the final episode was broadcast, the cumulative viewership on television exceeded 670 million people while the online viewership was over 400 million hits (China News, 2013). With no doubt, *We Get Married* became the rating champion among all the television dramas in 2013. Although it has been two years since the drama was first broadcasted, the fever went on and the leftover woman phenomenon is still a hot social issue in Chinese society.

Basically, the drama told a story of a 32-year-old beautiful professional women and how she had gone through all “trials and tribulations” and finally happily had gotten married, which is a typical story structure shared by all Chinese “leftover women” dramas. The wide popularity this drama enjoyed and its typical feature makes it a representative example of the “leftover women” dramas in China. The drama has 50 episodes and all of the episodes will be analyzed.

### **Description of the Drama**

The heroine of the drama, Yang Tao, was a beautiful professional woman. After finishing a five-year relationship, she remained single at the age of 32. Her mother worried about her marriage issues a lot and used all of her networks to try to find a husband for her. Under great pressure from her mother and social surroundings, the anxiety of finding a husband caused many troubles for her job and life. Nevertheless, at the bottom of Yang Tao’s heart, she still longed for a happy marriage and family life.

Different from Yang Tao, the hero of the drama, Guo Shi was afraid of getting married after witnessing the unhappy marriage of his parents. Being introduced by a friend, he and Yang Tao's first meeting was not pleasant. However, after going through all kinds of misunderstandings and obstacles, the two people gradually got to know each other and fell in love.

However, when they were preparing for their weddings, new problems emerged. Both sides of parents urged the couple to have a baby because Yang Tao was in her 30s and had almost missed the best time for pregnancy. Meanwhile Yang Tao was provided a chance at work to study in France for a year. After some struggles, Yang Tao decided to give up the chance because she believed that she could not be happy without her husband and her family. At the end of the drama, the couple finally held their wedding and Yang Tao announced that she was pregnant.

### **Analysis Procedures**

The complete drama is available online and the analysis relied on multiple viewings of each episode. The researcher took descriptive and reflective notes while watching the episodes, and relevant narratives and conversations in the dramas are transcribed. The qualitative software Nvivo was used in this thesis to help organize the notes and transcriptions into different categories and themes.

This thesis adopted the postmodern feminist epistemology to analyze the drama. Different from feminist empiricism perspective, which studies women based on the

assumption that gender differences are “essential, universal, and ahistorical” (Cosgrove, 2003, p. 91), postmodern feminism believes that both the dichotomy of gender and the notions of femininity/masculinity are socially constructed. In reverse to the positivist concept of objective reality, postmodern feminism proposes study of the relationship between power and knowledge to understand how certain knowledge or notions are socially constructed for the interests of the dominant group (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2007). Through this theoretical lens, this study focuses on the portrayal of the “leftover woman” character in *We Get Married* in terms of how the femininity of the character was constructed and in what ways it reinforced and/or challenged the hegemonic notion of Chinese femininity.

Different from the written texts, the textual analysis of audiovisual materials involves multiple aspects such as dialogue, visual images and sound (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2007). Specifically, in analysis of this drama, elements including the general storyline, episodic plot, dialogues and narratives, appearance and personality of the main characters, relationships and interaction between the main characters and secondary characters, settings and props are examined. When analyzing the dialogues and narratives in the drama, special attention was paid to the words, phrases and sentences being used to interpret the underlying discourse, assumptions and implications.

### **Role of Researcher**

As a master’s student majoring in media studies, the researcher has a great interest in television, gender and culture studies. Previous education has equipped the researcher with good knowledge and academic ability to carry out this qualitative study. Moreover, as a

woman born and raised in China, the researcher is very familiar with Chinese cultural perceptions of gender and marriage, as well as the general social expectations of women. Meanwhile, the experience of studying abroad and the exposure to western feminist ideas have helped the researcher to possess a detached and sensible perspective in discussion of Chinese gender issues.

In additional, as an unmarried Chinese female pursuing higher education, although not in the age of the so-called “leftover woman” yet, the researcher held a sympathetic and empathetic attitude towards this group of people for the huge social pressure on them. This may have assisted the researcher to better discern the hegemonic ideologies implied in the portrayal of the “leftover women.”

However, in another sense, the researcher’s sympathy and empathy towards “leftover women” could influence the interpretations of the text. The researcher may have made assertions in favor of this group of people or raise judgmental opinions against the conflicting people or perceptions. Thus, during the analysis, the researcher was reflective of her perspectives and tried to avoid making hasty assertions.

## CHAPTER IV

### Results

Through detailed analysis of the “leftover” woman image in *We Get Married*, this chapter examines the construction of the character’s femininity and the social and cultural implications of it. First of all, an introduction of the primary storyline is provided. Next, two themes are summarized concerning the femininity in the drama. Finally, a conclusion is drawn based on the analysis.

### Storyline of the Drama

The heroine of the drama was a 32-year-old professional woman who worked as a lobby manager of a five-star hotel. Beautiful, intelligent and talented, Yang Tao was depicted as an enviable type for all city girls if not for the fact that she stayed unmarried in her 30s.

Growing up in a single-parent family, she had always held the hopes and dreams of her mother. It was hard for Sumei to bring up Tao alone and she was proud of having such a pretty and capable daughter. However, witnessing her “masterpiece” unmarried in her 30s, Sumei became extremely worried and was anxious to find a man who deserved Tao’s beauty and talent. Thus, without Tao’s permission, she tried to match up Tao with various men she found through a love matching company. Although feeling worn out by all the blind dates set up by her mother, deeply in her heart, Tao was afraid that she would end up as an old maid and longed for a happy marriage more than any one else.

The hero of the drama, Guo Ran worked as a nine-to-five civil servant at the marriage/divorce office. Witnessing his parents fighting with each other for their whole life as well as seeing numerous divorced couples at work, he did not think about getting married at the age of 35.

Introduced by one of his college friends, who happened to be Tao's brother-in-law, Guo's first meeting with Tao was not pleasant. They fought over a parking spot outside the restaurant where they were going to meet. Following the convention of many love stories, these two people disliked each other at first sight but gradually fell in love by recognizing the hidden sides of one another.

However, their love was not easy. Learning that Guo was afraid of marriage, Tao's mother was outraged and made a big scene at Guo's workplace calling him a liar for "seducing" her daughter but not marrying her. Guo was angry at Sumei's crazy behaviors and not willing to further explain, which made Tao believe that Guo never thought about marrying her. The couple broke up and Tao began to date other people. After the misunderstandings were cleared up and they were together again, Guo's mother strongly opposed their relationship because she thought Tao was too old and she preferred Guo to find girls in their 20s. The bad relationship between the couple's mothers was a big obstacle as well. The two mothers fought in public and hated each other. Squeezed in the feud between the two mothers, the poor couple bent themselves to persuading their parents to permit their marriage.

Finally, the couple got married, and a new problem emerged. Both parents wanted Tao to get pregnant as soon as possible but Tao got a chance to study in France and would be away

for at least one year. The couple was caught in a dilemma again. After some struggles, Tao decided to give up the chance believing that it was selfish of her to just care about her career and dreams regardless of the hopes of the parents. During their wedding ceremony, Tao found herself pregnant and the drama ended with a scene of a family of three playing on the beach.

### **The Traditional “Leftover” Woman**

In traditional patriarchal gender discourse, women and their femininity were contextualized and defined in domestic relationships (Yang, 2010). In other words, women were labeled as daughters, daughters-in-law, wives, or mothers but not independent and autonomous selves. In contrast, as a group of single women who are deviant from the traditional marriage system, independence seems to be a salient trait shared by all “leftover women.” However, although from a modern standard, being independent by no means has any negative connotation, in traditional Chinese gender discourse, women were to be submissive, docile, tender, or considerate (Lin, 2000)—these were the right adjectives used to describe a woman instead of “independent,” “strong” or “competitive.” These old ideas have been entrenched for thousands of years and are still exerting great influence on people’s understanding of women and femininity; at least that was the case demonstrated in the drama.

Tao’s first meeting with Guo was a disaster. Tao’s brother-in-law, Xifeng, tried to match them up. Although both of them refused immediately for different reasons— Tao hated blind dating, and Guo had no interests in having a relationship, Xifeng made them meet anyway. It turned out that they fought over a parking spot outside the cafeteria. Tao thought Guo was a rude man who stole her spot and Guo considered Tao as a bad-tempered and unreasonable

woman who refused to listen.

Knowing that the date didn't go well, Xifeng tried to mediate between Tao and Guo. He first went to Sumei's place, lying that Guo had a very good impression on Guo and wanted to invite her to dinner for apology: (X: Xifeng, T: Tao, S: Sumei)

T: Well, apology accepted. But I don't think dinner is necessary.

S: No wait! I think you must go. I appreciate very much one thing of the guy you just talked about: his generosity. He wanted to invite Tao to dinner even after the first unpleasant meeting. Isn't that great of him? Usually, men were reluctant to let go their pride but look at him! I think that's a very good point. Tao, you must go to dinner...Although the financial condition is important for a guy and I am totally right emphasizing on it, his personality is more important. What was the word Xifeng just mentioned?

X: Reliable!

S: That's right! Reliable! That's the best quality a man could ever have (Episode 1).

Successfully buttoning one side, Xifeng went for Guo and told the same lie. In a condescending tone, Guo finally said yes to a second date. But he told Xifeng:

You know that your sister has an eccentric personality. An unmarried woman at her age is prone to have some mental issues. I can go and meet her again. But I do it only for you, my friend. And you have to promise that you will be there too (Episode 2).

The attitudes from both sides are quite interesting. Tao's mother believed that Guo was willing to make a concession first, which showed that he was a generous man, and Tao should definitely have a second date with him. In contrast, knowing that Tao so "eagerly" wanted a

second date, which affirmed his assumption that Tao was an unmarried woman who pathetically wanted to find a man, Guo reluctantly agreed to meet her again, just to do his friend a favor.

The difference in the attitudes has subtle yet profound meanings if we delve into the underlying gender assumptions. The script assumed that men could take the initiative in a romantic relationship, but women should never drop their reserve; it assumed that women become pathetic and even mentally distorted if men were absent from their lives; more importantly, it assumed an unequal power relation between men and women. Just as Leung (2003) had noted, in a traditional Confucius society, family harmony was contingent on the maintenance of the patriarchal hierarchy as well as “on whether the superior members can uphold their duty to be benevolent and caring” (p. 362). When a contradiction appeared, it was “generous” for a man to make the first concession because actually he does not have to do so since he already has gained the upper hand in the relationship. Nevertheless, for a woman, making a step back would only reveal her desperation to please a man and highlight her inferior status.

Such assumptions were blatantly demonstrated through Guo’s mindset. In episode 2, Guo stood Tao up for their dinner date because of his parents who had a big fight with each other. On one side, Xifeng lied to Tao again saying that Guo had a small car accident on the way to the restaurant and he arranged to meet with Tao at a karaoke place instead. On the other side, Xifeng came and persuaded Guo to go to karaoke. Guo went and met with Tao; they talked, sang and drank. Both of them are pretty drunk and became quite emotional. They talked about their previous failed relationship and began to cry: (G: Guo, T: Tao, X: Xifeng)

T: The lyrics said the flower will wither without love. I grew old really fast these two years. That's because I have been single.

G: You are also touched by the song? Have you also been dumped by your ex? I was dumped by my ex-girlfriend. We were getting married and I bought the ring. She said she would go home to get everything prepared and I waited like a fool. And then she went abroad and I was still waiting.

T: You should hear my story. My ex-boyfriend disappeared without telling me. I opened the door only to find the bare walls.

G: This was the song we used to sing when we were dating.

T: The song mentioned roses. He always sent me roses.

G: Don't cry Tao [Guo wiped the tears for Tao].

It seems that these two people were getting close to each other by sharing the past heartbroken experiences. But things became out of control after that.

T: I know I have difficulties to get married. You have no idea how lonely my mom is. My father passed away early and all my mother wants to see is me finding a husband. My mother was embarrassed in front of the neighbors because of me.

G: Tao, your brother Xifeng had told me. To be honest, I feel so sorry for you. You have been through so much and you definitely need care and love.

T: yes, I do. You don't know how much I want marriage. I really want a right person by my side.

G: [Guo stopped crying and became serious] I know, I know you desire marriage. That's good. However, what I mean is that you must face up the fact that you are already 32!

And in a couple of years you will be 40. An unmarried woman in her 40 is just like leftovers. No matter how much make-up you put on, people can still tell your age. [Tao stopped crying and glared at Guo unbelievably.] When I stepped into the room today, you started to look at me in a flirting way. Why on earth would you do that? Technically you are in a dangerous phase right now, which will lead you to become a nympho someday, you know? The result is that countless men could take advantages of you!

T: what are you saying?

G: Nympho is very likely to be used by some bad guys you know? Tao, you can not let yourself be like this anymore!

T: You know nothing you...[Tao didn't even have chance to speak].

G: I have to tell you the truth. I know you had a crush on me. But I don't. [Xifeng tried to stop Guo by covering his mouth].

T: Brother! Let him say! Don't stop him! [Tao began screaming].

G: You will develop into a nympho.

T: [crying] I am not a nympho! It's my brother who said..."

G: If you are not, why you are flirting with me.

T: I didn't! Brother, why he accused me like that!

G: Tao, I know you desperately want a man.

T: I don't! Brother, why he talked like that!

G: Don't be embarrassed. I know you want me so much.

T: Why on hell will I want you!

G: You beg me to have dinner with you. Do you want to take me home so badly? Sorry, I have no feelings for you.

T: What are you talking about. You are so detestable! [Tao was so angry and began to drag Guo].

G: You want to undress me? You can't be that shameless.

T: I am a decent girl. I...

G: You shouldn't degrade yourself like this. You get such a big karaoke room just to hit on me and the whole night you kept winking at me...

X: You shut up!

T: [Tao covered Guo's mouth] You let me speak! I am not a nympho! It was my brother said that you are, you are...brother what did you say to me? How can he call me a nympho?

G: You shouldn't try to seduce me...[mouth being covered by Xifeng]

T: Brother, I didn't. Jiaoyang [a male friend of Tao] pick the dress for me...(Episode 2)

The whole karaoke scene was packaged as a farce to achieve a sort of comical effect. The comical design of the plot reduced the whole thing into a “funny misunderstanding” and covered up the offensive essence of the content. Or more accurately, it was funny precisely because it was so offensive. Xifeng played a critical role in the story and the narrative made what Guo said forgivable to some extent. It was Xifeng who misled Guo to have such prejudice against Tao and it was alcohol that made him speak out that prejudice. However, regardless of all these excuses, the prejudice itself implied a discriminatory and oppressive view that Guo consciously or unconsciously held towards women—it was pathetic for a

woman to be single in her 30s or 40s and it was shameless of her if she proactively attempted to attract men by demonstrating her beauty at such an “old” age. These conservative ideas concerning the sexuality of a woman were deeply rooted in the traditional Confucius doctrines emphasizing women’s chastity (Luo, 2013). Later in the drama, confronted with his mother's firm opposition, Guo lied to her saying that he already had sex with Tao, which successfully compelled his mother to agree to their marriage (Episode 30). According to Theiss (2002), in feudal China, “chastity lay at the heart of the paradigm of virtue that informed notions of gender difference and norms of proper behavior” (p.47); such discourse was still evidenced in the drama.

When Guo apologized to Tao the next day, he apologized for saying those words in a harsh way, rather than for the words themselves. Hearing Guo’s apology, Tao was speechless and decided to take revenge in action. She lured Guo to stand beneath a fountain outside the hotel which she knew that it would automatically play at a particular time: (T: Tao, G: Guo)

T: Let’s talk here.

G: Well, Tao. I have to tell you again that I was really drunk last night. What I said were all drunken talks. But these words had hurt you and I sincerely hope that you don’t take these words seriously.

[Pretending to listen carefully, Tao began to step back and Guo tried to follow.]

T: Well, it will be better for us to keep a distance. Could you just stand there and say your words?

G: No problem.

T: The lobby was so noisy just now and I didn't clearly get what you said. You

mentioned I should be mature and you are giving me advice. Could you say those again?

G: Well, Tao, let me put it in a more straight-forward way.

T: That will be great.

G: I think you are too anxious in finding a man. There are a lot of eligible men in the world and I shouldn't be your only choice. I sincerely hope in the future when you are dating other men, as a woman, you could always keep a sober mind...

[The water began to fall and Guo got drenched completely.]

T: Yes! [Tao cheered.] Are you sober now? And I like to say it again that I am not a nympho! I also have no interest in you, at all [Tao walked away, pumping her arms in the air as a winner.] (Episode 3).

Tao retaliated against Guo through a mischievous prank. Ostensibly, it seems to be a strong response— Guo went back to his office looking terribly and resentfully with clothes soaking wet. However, from another perspective, Tao's response revealed her powerlessness when she was confronted with discriminatory judgments. She was extremely offended and insulted but was unable to defend herself eloquently with reasons and thoughts. She resorted to physical revenge, which only further reinforced Guo's prejudice that she was a fractious and obstinate unmarried woman. The crux of the problem remained untouched.

Guo's attitudes towards Tao did not change until episode 7. The hotel fired Tao because of her age and her friend Jiaoyang helped her become the temporary host of a TV shopping program. Coincidentally, Guo was the photographer. As the person in charge of the program, Jiangyang had no other choice but to persuade them separately to work together: (J: Jiangyang, G: Guo)

J: Dude, I am sorry. Please listen to me. I can understand your feeling, really. Although it is just the second time we met [the first time was in the karaoke place], I have to ask for a favor, a big one. If I can't get it finished today, I'll lose my job. Can you please understand my situation? I am begging you, please. ...I know you don't like her. I have been friend with her for so many years. I know your feelings. We grew up together and I've tolerated her for over thirty years! You think that's easy? You know why she acts like that? She is over thirty and still single. As a leftover woman, she is somehow psychologically distorted.

G: You also think so?

J: Yes.

G: I knew it!

J: So could you just do it for me this time? I'll appreciate it for my whole life.

G: Well, dude. You live a hard life. I'll do it today, and for tomorrow, you need to find someone else.

After the unpleasant shooting was over, Jiangyang came to Guo.

J: Brother. Don't get angry with someone like her.

G: Do you think I want to? I tolerated her for a whole day!

J: I know. Just please don't be mad at her. I know she has been a pain recently. But there is a reason for that. She is losing her job.

G: Why do I care at all?

J: I just want you not to be mad. Please calm down. She is losing her job and will official leave the hotel tomorrow. She has worked there for six years and did not dare to

ask for a leave for a single day. Now just because some young girl came and took her job, she was kicked out with nothing left. But she was a woman and now she can't afford the rent and the auto loan. That's why she is doing the part-time job here to make some money.

G: Is she that miserable?

J: I know what you are thinking. A woman at her age must have some savings.

G: right.

J: Well, she really doesn't. She lost all her money to her ex-boyfriend. She was just a credulous silly girl. She paid several hundred-thousand debts for that man [sign].

G: Really?

J: Why would I lie to you? I don't want to say this but she suffered a lot since she was little. Her father passed away when she was small. He was a great father and Tao was so sad after he died. She lives with her mother since then. There is no man for her to rely on in the family and that's why she always behaved so strong. So brother, this is an especially hard time for her. Could you just show some mercy on her? Don't be mad at her, as if you are pitying her (Episode 7).

Jiaoyang's words aroused Guo's sympathy and he began to see Tao in a different way.

Ironically, Guo started to treat Tao as a "normal" woman after he had peeked the soft and weak side of Tao. Tao and her strong and independent femininity did not really make sense to him until he conceived her as a "silly and delicate girl who pretended to be strong." Again, a male dominant ideology is implied, which places women in a dependent and accessory status and assumes that they live a miserable life without the presence of men. Later in his

relationship with Tao, Guo was depicted as a protector and rescuer. For instance, he accompanied Tao when she lost her job; he beat up Tao's ex-boyfriend; he punished the boss who wanted to take advantage of Tao; he secretly used his connection to find Tao a new job; he prevented Tao from falling for an unreliable man.

However, such male dominant ideology was not limited to the male character. It was noticed that Tao also internalized these ideas. Although ostensibly she deviated from traditional Chinese femininity, Tao did not have real and irreconcilable ideological conflicts with her mother and Guo. In fact, the reason that she found Guo's words in the karaoke scene so offensive was precisely because she held the same gender assumption—it was shameful for a woman to explicitly express her desire for a man and she was not that kind of woman. Her anxiety for marriage also revealed her strong identification with traditional Chinese femininity which situated women in the role of wife and mother (Lin, 2000).

In episode 4, after a fight with her mother because she refused all the guys from the blind dates, Tao sincerely apologized to Sumei:

T: Mom, I am sorry. It is my fault to make you angry. Honestly, I am surprised that it had been three years since I broke up with my ex while I just couldn't let it go. I always feel insecure. So for those guys you introduced for me, their any little defect looks like a big deal to me. I know you did all these for my own good. I know you worry about me getting older without finding the one who want to marry me. Actually, I am worried too. I am really longing for marriage. However, the one just haven't shown up yet. I was upset every time I saw you worry about me. I want to fulfill the task quickly to make you satisfied and save you the worries. But mom...

S: [hugged Tao with tears] Don't say it anymore my dear. Don't be afraid. I will always be there for you. If you can't find someone, then just don't. You always have me.

T: No, mom. I want to get married. I will be happy and I will change my attitudes.

S: Good girl. Good girl. I have fault too. I am too anxious.

T: No, it's my fault to make you angry.

S: Tao, you have gone through so much and sometimes I fell so sorry for you. So dear, you promise you will be happy. I can't let my eyes closed without seeing you find a good man.

T: I definitely will marry to a great man and live happily. And I will let you happy every day without worry about my issues (Episode 7).

Although Tao stuck to her own standards of marriage, she and her mother had the common goal of her getting married. The marriage had been a long time dream since she was little. She used to dream of being a wedding dress designer and after she had lost her job in the hotel, Guo helped her to find a job as a store manager at a bridal boutique. She completely agreed with her friend's words that "the biggest happiness for a woman is having a good marriage" (episode 14) and was afraid that she would end up being alone. From the beginning to the end, Tao was a traditional Chinese woman with a modern appearance.

Apart from her longing for marriage, Tao and her submissive personality was another manifestation of her traditionalism. She had worked for the same hotel for six years and the manager wanted to fire her because of her age. She accepted it without any resistance: (M: manager, T: Tao)

M: Your working contract will end in next month. Do you have any plan on that?

T: Of course I want to stay in our hotel. I have been here for six years and am familiar with my job. I am very attached to our hotel so I don't want to leave. And also I am confident that I can do my job well in the future.

M: I trust you in that. But today I have some private questions for you...Are you still single?

[Tao nodded embarrassingly.]

M: How come a girl like you are still single at such an age?

T: I...um...I wasted several years on my ex and these years, I'm all heart for working. So here I am.

M: And your family is ok with that?

T: Of course not. My mom is nagging me everyday and trying to get me blind dates. Are you trying to introduce someone to me?

M: [laugh] No, you are so pretty. Men should be getting in lines for you. However, things like blind dates and relationship could really be troublesome, right?

T: Yes.

M: Besides, you are not young and I bet you'll have a child as soon as you get married. Then, in the coming years, there are so many private issues for you to deal with.

T: You don't have to worry about that. I guarantee that I will not let my private life affect my job.

M: I trust you. You have been a hardworking and trustworthy employee for our hotel. But marriage life could be very distracting and the influence sometimes is unavoidable. I

think you know better than me on how important a lobby manager is to a hotel. If you walk into a five-star hotel and see a pregnant lobby manager staggering around, how will you feel? Not good, right? As a pregnant woman, she should be protected but not be required to work overtime, having long meetings or staying up late. But I can't ask my employees to remain single and give up the chance to become a mother. Right?

T: Frankly speaking, I do want to be married and have children someday. But you know it is hard to find someone suitable and no one knows when he will appear. So now I have plenty of time and energy for work. I am single now and because of that, I can be 100% devoted to my job, which I think is an advantage.

M: Yes, I agree. However, I think it is an advantage that will gradually fade away. As you said, now you are single because you haven't found the right one. But he could show up at any time, maybe next year, maybe tomorrow. Or maybe he is already there while you haven't realized yet. What would you do? This unpredictability is risky to a hotel. If I can't avoid this risk for the hotel, it will be a dereliction.

T: So you mean...Are you going to fire me?

M: Well I won't use the word "fire" but I don't think we can renew your contract, unless you don't want a marriage or have a child, which of course is unreasonable. I can't ask you for that, nor can I put it into the contract. That will be illegal.

T: So even I guarantee not to get married or have a child in the coming three years, you will not renew my contract?

[The manager answered in silence.] (Episode 5)

Tao lost her job because of such outrageous reason and she left the hotel without any resistance. Even worse, she tended to internalize the unfair treatments as her own fault and submissively accepted the status quo. During her conversation with her friend Jiaoyang, she said:

I've worked so hard for the hotel and didn't consider about my personal life. Now my personal life took my job away. Do you know who will take my position? A 26-year-old woman who already had a four-year-old child and doesn't need the marriage leave and maternity leave. How about me? I lagged behind in every aspect. I haven't got married and had a child when I should be. Now, one false move led to another and my life became a mistake, a giant one (Episode 6).

Similarly, when Guo's mother disliked her because of her age and interfered with their marriage, Tao's first reaction was how to please her to win her consent instead of standing up for herself. Just as what she had encountered at work, whenever Tao was unfairly treated because of her identity, she never thought about reacting to it but to compromise.

In episode 32, Guo took Tao to her parents' home for the first time. Unhappy to see them getting married, Guo's mother was being difficult to Tao. (G: Guo, L: Lanzhi, Guo's mother, T: Tao, C: Changshan, Guo's father)

G: Mom, Tao bought you a duvet as a gift. It is a famous brand with good quality. It's thin and light, but very warm too.

L: Right! It must be warm, especially in such hot weather.

C: Well you don't have to use it now. You always feel cold during the winter night. I guess we don't have to worry about that now with this duvet.

G: Mom, Tao bought it for the winter. She likes to think further ahead.

L: You guys are too young to choose the right gift. Who would send a duvet as a gift?

You are sending me a bad luck (duvet and bad luck have similar pronunciations in Chinese).

T: I am so sorry auntie. I really have no knowledge on these things. Please don't be upset because of this.

During the conversation, Guo's mother suddenly fetched a cloth and began to wipe the floors.

C: Why are you cleaning the floor out of sudden?

L: I saw some dirt on the floor. I feel uncomfortable.

C: I have already cleaned it this morning.

L: Whenever did you clean up a floor?

[Tao suddenly stood up and kneeled down on the floor]

T: Well, let me do it, auntie.

G: No, no, no. Tao, you don't have to do that. [Guo's mother stopped Guo, sat on the sofa and let Tao do the job.] (Episode 32)

This is a typical way of how a Chinese mother-in-law tried to play rough and declare her authority in front of her son's future wife. Just as Luk-Fong (2010) has noted, the traditional Chinese characters of daughter-in-law “媳婦” are composed of 女(female)+息(submissive) and 女(female)+帚(housework); while mother-in-law “家姑” (Cantonese) are composed of 家(family) and 女(female)+古(tradition). The configuration of the traditional characters to some extent demonstrated the traditional culture meanings of femininity in a Chinese family:

the daughter-in-law should be submissive and take care of the housework and the mother-in-law is the one who passes the traditions. According to Shen (2007), in the traditional Chinese family, the “mother of a married son may in practice be the most powerful person in a multigenerational household” (p.243) except for her husband. Guo’s mother was deliberately testing Tao, reminding her of the obligation as the future wife in the family. Tao got the message and instantly played the role of a submissive daughter-in-law.

Tao and her submissive nature were best manifested in the child issue after she got married. Noticing Tao’s talents in designing wedding dresses, the company offered Tao a chance to study in France for fashion design. Thus, the couple intended to postpone having a child for two years. Nevertheless, the parents from both sides wanted them to have a child as soon as possible and firmly opposed Tao going abroad. Guo’s mother even threatened to have a fast if they were unwilling to have a child right now. Unsurprisingly, Tao compromised again:

What your mom said is right. Maybe I was really old and I don’t have a right to pursue my dreams now... You don’t have to blame yourself. It is all because of my age. If both of our parents are so upset just because of me insisting on my pursuit, I am indeed selfish somehow... This is just my fate. I accept it.” (Episode 35&36)

At the beginning of the drama, Tao was a confident and independent working woman who had a strong personality and would recklessly fight with a stranger for a parking spot. But along with the development of her relationship with Guo, she became a soft, considerate and submissive wife who would sacrifice her dreams for the happiness of the family. If the former image was who Tao pretended to be, then the latter one was whom she truly was.

Although Tao was first presented as a deviant “leftover” woman, she was not estranged from the traditional gender expectations. Instead, the construction of her image was contextualized in a male-dominant gender discourse where she embodied the hegemonic femininity and ultimately got rid of her deviant identity.

This finding echoes with Evan’s (2002) observation that despite the diverse possible identities women enjoyed in the post-socialist era, a “homogeneous ideal” is noticed in China that situates women in the good-wife discourse and requires them to be “obedient” (tinghua) and “gentle and soft” (wenrou) towards their husbands. In addition, the “reserve and shy” (hanxu) female image promoted by the nation reflects the significance of the “gentle and soft” characteristic in defining a Chinese woman and serves as “a gender affirmation of masculine authority” (p.340). Dai (2006) even argued that the progress of women’s liberation and the promotion of gender equality in China shrunk along with the so-called “modernization” process launched after 1978 which led to a re-establishment of the male-dominant system.

Undeniably, Tao had some progressive and modern characteristics which will be further discussed in the next theme, but her regression towards the traditional and hegemonic ideology failed to defend the group of unmarried women against the social prejudice and discrimination and even reinforced the assumption that marriage was an ultimate destiny for all women.

### **The Independent but Unaggressive Femininity**

Since the implementation of the reform and opening up policy in 1978, Chinese society had undergone drastic changes. Apart from the notable economic development, the

introduction of western capitalism and ideology have altered the landscape of contemporary Chinese gender discourse. With the rampant growth of the market economy and consumerism, the post-socialist gender ideology “celebrates femininity as increasingly associated with beauty, young and sexuality” (Yang, 2011, p.336). As Notar (1994) has noted, the characteristics of “Western modernity” and “Confucius tradition” in juxtaposition had constituted Chinese modern femininity.

According to Charlebois (2010), youth is a prominent characteristic constituting dominant femininity in many contexts, particularly in media representations. He further clarified that “dominant femininities embody the most common, celebrated, or widespread elements of hegemonic femininity, yet do not instantiate a hierarchical relationship between women and men, femininity and masculinity” (p.36). In other words, whether dominant femininities are hegemonic ones depends on the specific situation. Although Tao as an unmarried woman in her 30s was an oppositional image of the patriarchal gender discourse, her fashionable and young appearance catered to the dominant femininity standards and increased the acceptability of her deviant image among viewers. In response to the question whether Tao’s youth and beauty fell in the range of hegemonic femininities, the answer is no and yes.

The leading actress Gao Yuanyuan is a famous movie star in China who enjoys wide popularity for her pretty appearance. The diverse and stylish outfits she wore in the drama even became fashion guides for female viewers. Tao’s young and attractive appearance to some extent broke the plain and unattractive stereotype of unmarried women and demonstrated that women can be beautiful and glamorous in their 30s. It contested the

hegemonic assumption that men are the center of women's lives, and that the latter would wither without the presence of the former.

Nevertheless, the emphasis on Tao's beauty was also a compromise towards the male-dominant standards, implying that only young-looking and charming "leftover" women deserved the attention. Gao Yuangyuan's portrayal of a "leftover" woman only represented a small proportion of a large group. Long hair, big eyes, sweet smile and slender figure—Tao's appearance conformed to every standard of the idealized femininity in Chinese mainstream culture. If there was a hierarchy among the leftover women, Tao was on top of the pyramid.

Additionally, portraying such a young and charming woman image and how she suffered from being unmarried exemplified the sharpness of the "leftover woman" issue and also the magnitude of the social pressure. Even for a woman like Tao, no matter how attractive she appeared, her age was a fact she couldn't hide and change. Lines such as "not young any more..." and "unmarried at such an old age..." were constantly used to describe Tao. An equation between young age and the desirability of a woman in the marriage market implied a hierarchical relationship between man and woman. A myriad of examples can be cited from the drama, showing how Tao was suffocated by the anxiety of getting married.

In episode 2, knowing that Tao had refused all the men she carefully selected for her, Tao's mother, Sumei, became very angry and had a big fight with Tao: (S: Sumei, T: Tao)

S: How come dating and finding a husband is such a tough call for you? You are not young any more, when will you be settled down? When? People in this neighborhood keep asking me when you will get married every time they see me. How can I answer them? I have no face to answer them! Do you know how anxious I am because of you?

Sometimes I just want to jump off the building! So do me a favor, please hurry up!

T: I am anxious too. The point is I can't stand your way of pushing me. All those men were talking about background, salary and fortune. And they looked at me as if they are selecting a pet, which made me so offended. Love should be a consensual relationship and feelings are important.

S: Enough! Don't talk about feelings! ... Leftovers can be reheated for a meal but leftover women are doomed. How old are you now? Your prime time is fading away. Once you get older, no eligible man will marry you. If you truly become an old spinster someday, don't blame me for not pushing you! (Episode 2)

For Sumei, her daughter getting married was closely related to her image in front of the neighbors. It was shameful to have an old "leftover" woman at home, which hurt her pride and intensified the conflicts between her and Tao. Her worries over Tao's fading youth gave her a legitimate stand for pushing her daughter in a ruthless way.

The youth or prime time was considered as an extremely precious yet fleeting thing for a woman. As Weiwei, one of Tao's friend in the drama and who was also a "leftover" woman, once said, women of their age were "depreciating" everyday (episode 30). The longer they waited, the harder for them to find good men. Subconsciously, Weiwei was self-objectifying by putting a price tag on herself. Men had the power to assess and choose while women were commodities available for a good price. In this deal, youth is the most important assessment criterion.

In contrast with Tao, although Guo was 35 and unmarried, as a man, he never suffered from the anxiety of seeing his youth fading away without getting a wife. Admittedly, his

parents wished he could get married soon and give them a grandson, but they never worried Guo could not find a wife. It was Guo's attitude of not being willing to get married that bothered them more. At least for men in their 30s, age is not shameful but rather is a sign of maturity.

At a matchmaking event (episode 4), Tao's mother was wandering around hoping to find an eligible man for Tao and met a woman who was looking for girls for her son. An interesting conversation ensued: (W: the woman, S: Sumei)

W: Daughter or son?

S: A daughter

W: Look at you. You are so pretty. Like mother like daughter! I have a son. How old is your daughter?

[Sumei was happy about the compliments but looked uneasy when heard the woman asking about age.]

S: Er...about 28, 29. [She lied.]

W: Oh...that's a little bit old. [said in a pitiful tone]

S: How old is your son?

W: My son? 36! A man's prime year. Do you have a younger daughter? (Episode 4)

Contrast was deliberately arranged to achieve a comic effect but a double standard was blatantly demonstrated. Unlike a woman who was likely to be stigmatized because of her "elderly" unmarried identity, for a man, his age, at least to a large degree, does not diminish his value in the marriage market. Men tend to have a longer prime time compared to women and even if they have passed it, they can compensate through things such as wealth and

personality.

Regarding this point, in a study of another Chinese television drama *Dwelling Narrowness* (*Woju*), Zurndorfer (2016) unraveled the concept of the sexual economy in China, which is defined by the idea that women trade their sexuality and attractiveness for wealth. The exchanges between femininity and material possessions are epitomized in the choice of marriage where “men consume femininity and sexuality” while “women receive material comfort and financial security” (p. 5).

The emergence of the sexual economy is contextualized in a wider discourse of China’s market economy. As Zurndorfer (2016) has noted, “by the 1990s, the consumption and consumerism had become essential to economic prosperity” (p.6) and Yan (2000) even argued that consumerism had taken the place of the communist doctrines to become the primary cultural ideology in contemporary China. The commodification of women’s sexuality and femininity in exchange for a higher life quality indicates a penetration of the consumerist ideology in people’s lives.

Beauty economy is another idea integrated into the broader sexual economy concept that directly associates beautiful women with the economy (Xu & Feiner, 2007). In China, the practice is increasingly prevalent where young and attractive women are hired to promote commercial products and refers to “everything from beauty pageants, modeling competitions, advertisement, cosmetics, and cosmetic surgery to tourism, TV, and cinema” (307).

A similar situation was also apparent in the drama. When Tao was shortly hired as a real-estate agent, her manager was dissatisfied with her performance and complaint to another agent:

I hired her primarily because she is pretty. But apparently she didn't know how to use her beauty. Then why should I hire her in the first place? It has been a week and she still doesn't know how to please the customers. You go talk to her. If she doesn't want the job, she can leave right now. (Episode 16)

Accordingly, Zhang's (2010) study affirmed that most real-estate salespeople she observed were young females while the majority of their customers were middle-aged men with "purchasing power." As she had put it, "the underlying assumption of employing mostly young women is that male buyers not only come to buy housing but that they also expect to enjoy a special, pleasurable service that boosts their ego and legitimates their status" (p. 70).

However, in constructing the image of Tao and her pursuit of marriage, an opposition towards this consumerism and materialism was witnessed in the drama. Although she was anxiously watching her youth fading away while still not finding her Mr. Right, Tao refused to consider marriage as a commoditized exchange. During her conversation with her cousin Suqin, she explicitly expressed her disagreement:

You guys are all talking about finding an eligible man. What is eligible? Does that mean if the man had a luxury car, then I need to have a sexy body; if I have such a pretty face, then the man must have a villa; and if it seems to be an equivalent deal, then we get married? But it is not the marriage I want. I want to marry someone I have feelings for. (Episode 3)

Tao and her firm belief in marriage as a spiritual union of two independent souls rather than a mundane beneficial relationship reflected her progressive awareness as a modern woman. Her financial independence was the paramount factor that enabled her pursuit of

such a marriage. But there were other women such as Weiwei and Niuzi in the drama, who were also professional women but still envisioned marriage as a ladder that could elevate them to a higher class with wealth and luxury. In contrast, Tao felt secured and confident for her identity as a professional woman and was unwilling to trade her beauty for a better life.

In the drama, Guo was just an ordinary man with average appearance and salary. But Tao ultimately chose him as her husband because she believed that he was a reliable and faithful man who really cared about her. Their marriage was established on an equal basis where both of them were the breadwinners of the family and they took turns in doing the housework. In contrast with the mothers who pushed Tao to have a baby, Guo supported Tao to pursue her dreams when she was given the chance to study in France. When ultimately Tao decided to give up the chance and prioritize family life, Guo also refused the offer of being an outdoor photographer of a geographic magazine. He realized that it could be a dangerous job and he was unwilling to put his family at risk of losing him. Both of them made sacrifices for the stability of their family.

In the exploration of the femininity constructed in the drama, it is unlikely to obtain a comprehensive understanding without the discussion of masculinity. These two concepts are just like two sides of a coin and can only make sense in relation to each other. Just as Zurndorfer (2016) has noted, when the sexual economy encouraged women to trade their femininity, simultaneously it accentuated the "hyper-masculinity" that celebrates maleness through high incomes, professional status and power (Farrer, 2002, p.16). Just as what was shown in the matchmaking exemplar, age was not the most important thing for a man and wealth tended to make up his other deficiencies. Several ethnography studies affirmed the

phenomenon that urban Chinese men experienced difficulties in finding a spouse without material resources such as a house, a car and a high salary (Osburg, 2013; Zhang, 2010).

According to Hinsch (2013), since the 1990s, the idealized Chinese masculinity has been the glitzy and confident businessmen who enjoyed material success— “the higher his income, the more superior his manliness” (p. 163).

However, in the drama, the portrait of Guo, to some extent, demonstrated a negation of material-oriented manhood in the sexual economy. Guo was just an ordinary public servant and who later quit his job and became a free-lance photographer. Each of these jobs by no means would make him a rich man of the upper class. In contrast with his best college friends who either had their own companies or married the daughter of an important official (episode 34), who represented "hyper-masculinity," Guo and his manhood were mainly constructed from being a reliable man and considerate husband.

Instead of using money and possessions as leverages in their marriage, Guo voluntarily ceded his power over the purse strings in the first place. After they were married, Tao was the one in charge of all their properties and Guo had to discuss with Tao if he wanted to spend extra money. In episode 34, Guo intended to use 6000 yuan to treat his friends for dinner and Tao only agreed with 2000 yuan.

T: Listen, Guo. We only have these two bank cards. There are over 10,000 in this card and 20,000 in this one.

G: That's not right. Where are my cards?

T: What your cards?

G: The two cards I have given you.

T: Yours are mine. Mines are still mine. Am I right?

G: Right.

T: Great. The money in your cards was used to invest in some financial products. These two cards cover all our expenses for the next six months. You do the math. Anyway, this money is all we have now. Think about what kind of life you want me to live for the next six months and decide how you are going to spend the money.

G: We only have this 30,000 before spring festival? [thinking] Then 3000! It can't be less.

T: [reluctantly] Well, 3000. Deal. (Episode 34)

In this discussion, Tao held a dominant position over the issue of money expenditures and Guo accepted it as it should be. Different from the traditional dichotomous division where men are the masters of external affairs while women are in charge of the domestic chores (Shen, 2007), Tao's power in the family was no longer confined to trivial housework but expanded to all kinds of issues including her husband's social activities. Correspondingly, Guo's image did not conform to the traditional masculinity that only celebrated professional success but centered around his relationship with Tao and his identity in the family. New male images of good sons, good husbands and good fathers have begun to be constructed in recent Chinese television dramas, which implies a shift in gender discourse (Chen and Wang, 2015). Men who put family and relationships as priorities are depicted in a positive light; domestic affairs are no longer "inferior matters" for women but social responsibilities shared by both sexes. In contrast with the "hyper-masculinity" celebrated in the sexual economy, a

family-oriented masculinity is encouraged.

However, one thing noteworthy is that although Guo and his professional ability were downplayed in the drama, he was not a man without any economic capability. When he proposed to Tao, he gave all his property documents to Tao and said:

This is the license of my car. It is parked outside. I spent 300,000 yuan for it. It's been two years, running less than 25,000 miles. It still worth of some 200,000. This card is my salary card when I was working at the civil affair bureau. I resigned the job and took 60,000 to invest Qixing's pet store. Now the balance is 50,000. This card saved the money I won for photography contests and also the money of the photos I sold. The balance is 54,000 and password is 131420, which means I love you with all my life [the pronunciation of 131420 in Chinese is similar to the sentence]. You can change the password anytime if you want. This is my house property certificate... The price was 4000 per square meter and it is 123 square meters in total. I have paid the down payment and also the mortgage for several years. There are still 202,000 loans. Now the price for the house is 35,000 per square meter. I am willing to write your name on it... These are all I have and now they are yours. Tao, since the first day I know you, my problem of afraid of marriage has been gradually cured. But now I get a new problem. I dream every night and you are always there, smiling at me, talking to me. I feel like I am incurable and you are my medicine... Tao, I beg you to be my wife. I beg you to let me be the father of our future children. Let's get married." (Episode 31)

In reality, the skyrocketing real-estate price in Chinese big cities have become

unaffordable even to the middle class, which rendered house ownership a symbol of wealth (Zurndorfer, 2016). In this sense, Guo was a well-off man who had already possessed essential assets such as a house and a car. Even though it was clearly manifested in the drama that marriage should not be a monetary trade, money and materials were still integral elements in this marriage.

Regarding this point, an interesting comparison was deliberately displayed between Guo and a penniless painter. Before Tao and Guo were together, a painter pursued Tao, telling her that although he was a poor and unrecognized painter, he was longing for a family and envisioned to have one with her. Touched by his “sincere and loving” words, Tao intended to give a try with this painter. In episode 22, her conversation with her male friend Jiaoyang revealed divergent opinions regarding the painter’s masculinity.

J: He is so poor and he still wants to marry you? Does he know that it takes responsibilities for marriage? Does he intend to be a kept man?

T: A kept man? [laugh] Do I look like a female millionaire to you? I just got a job and I can only support myself. I’ll starve if I lose the job, which he definitely knows.

J: No matter what you said, I still look down on him. A man of his age, with no house, no money, and still need to sleep at his friend’s place? The only reason is he is lazy! It’s impossible for a hard-working man to live such a poor life. He is a total loser.

T: He can paint! Isn’t that something? Besides, he lives at his friend’s place because he just came back from abroad. On what basis can you call him ‘lazy’? He works hard but he needs some time to get used to the domestic art industry. Not many chances are given to him. You can’t require him with the standards of a successful businessman! He is an

artist. Do you understand?

J: An artist should at least have his own house and studio. He is nothing compared to Guo... You are committing chronic suicide if you are with the painter.

T: Don't you think he is very honest? Today everyone is talking about money and boosting their superior economic conditions. However, he frankly revealed his economic predicament. Doesn't that manifest his sincerity? Isn't sincerity the most valuable thing in a human? Just for that, shouldn't I give it a try?

J: You call it sincerity? I thought it was just self-abandonment. (Episode 22)

Jiaoyang's opinion was shared by all other people around Tao except for herself.

Learning that Tao intended to rent a house for the painter using her money, Tao's friend Weiwei said: "Are you out of your mind? As an independent woman, you may choose not to rely on men, but definitely not the other way around of letting the man rely on you" (episode 23). Similarly, Tao's cousin Suqing told her:

You can support him now because you are still young. But what are you going to do when you are old or when you have kids? You can't save money on kids. Money is needed everywhere. Admittedly, it is vulgar to talk about money in front of love. But money is essential in a real world. Without money you can't do anything. It is very realistic and very true. (episode 23)

Tao's mother Sumei reacted in a more intense way:

Even if I assume that you can support the whole family by yourself, isn't it shameful of him to wait at home and be fed by his wife? Don't you feel embarrassed? Will you respect a husband like that?... You will embarrass me and our whole family if you are

with him. Shame on you! People thought you stayed single because you are picky. Now I know that it is because you got a damaged brain and wanted to bring home a piece of trash. He has nothing and achieves nothing. He is a total loser and also a liar. He means no good in pursuing you! (episode 23)

Although the painter later proved to be a real liar who intended to play with Tao's emotion and exploit her money, the unanimous negation of him solely based on his economic conditions reveals an ingrained notion that associates masculinity with the ability as a breadwinner of the family (Gao, 2005). Although women step into the professional fields and begin to share the responsibility of supporting the family financially with their husbands, by moving one step further, "house husbands" are still not acceptable to most people, at least as shown in the drama.

In contrast with the painter, Guo represented an ideal masculinity coined by the Chinese media as "economically affordable man" (Jingji shiyong nan). Developed from the term "economically affordable house," which refers to the welfare house provided by the government that is relatively cheap, "economically affordable man" represents those family-centered men with stable and average salaries (Xie, 2010). Ordinarity is the paramount trait shared by all "economically affordable men"—with an average look and a stable income that could afford the down payment for an apartment, no bad habits such as smoking and drinking, modest, reliable and down-to-earth personalities, as well as a strong sense of responsibility and loyalty towards family.

Apparently, the notion of "economically affordable man" is created in relation to Chinese women and reflects their standards of ideal husbands. Rich and professionally successful men

normally could spare little time to spend with their family, however men who could devote all their time to families are usually in poor economic condition. Family love and financial security are like forces on two oppositional sides and “economically affordable men” become a compromising choice for women to have it both ways. The preference for “economically affordable men” indicates an alteration in contemporary Chinese women’s perceptions of ideal masculinity (Chen & Wang, 2015) and reflects their higher demands in marriage. Instead of being accessories to their husbands, these women require an equal relationship to a broader spectrum—both emotionally and financially.

In the meantime, corresponding with the idea of “economically affordable men,” an independent but unaggressive femininity was advocated in the drama. Women could be independent but not overwhelmingly strong. The low acceptance of “house husbands” is an embodiment of this perception. Paradoxically, when women are trying to break the hierarchical gender roles by proving their professional ability and justifying the social responsibility of housework, they assume a hierarchy that associates housework with inferiority and internalized the male-dominant ideology deeming that it is shameful of a man be centered around family chores. Although Tao personally did not mind the painter and his poverty, the storyline of her being “awakened” by people around her and finally realizing that Guo was the right person to some extent manifested this assumption.

In her relationship with Guo, a subtle balance was checked where Tao behaved in an assertive but not overly aggressive way. She was an independent professional woman, who meanwhile knew how to be a considerate wife and docile daughter-in-law. Admittedly, there is nothing to be criticized for an equal and mutually respectful marriage. However, in the

drama such a marriage was largely established on the premise of roughly equivalent financial conditions from both sides. The power relation within a family is directly associated with the earning abilities of the family members. If a woman is the main breadwinner of a family, it means that she would hold a dominant role in the family, which is not acceptable as it was demonstrated in the drama.

As Yan (2002) had noted, in China, the more career success a woman enjoyed, the less chance she had in finding a suitable marriage partner. This finding conforms with the "spouse choosing hierarchy" (zeou tidu) witnessed in Chinese society where men tend to find wives with lower socioeconomic status to ensure their superiority in the family (Zou & Chen, 2014). As it was manifested in the drama, a fine line was carefully drawn that allowed women to pursue their social values but not to overpower their husbands in the family.

Moreover, a double pressure is pressed on women which on one hand encourages them to have their career, but on the other hand urges them to get married and bear children. In other words, the independent femininity is only contextualized in a heteronormative discourse within the marriage system. Tao was a perfect embodiment of this standard who successfully got rid of her "leftover" identity and earned a "complete" life by having both family and career.

To sum up, in the analysis of the construction of Tao's femininity, it was witnessed that the introduction of western capitalism and the development of the Chinese market economy have had a very complicated impact on Chinese gender discourse that was reflected in *We Get Married*. On one hand, the sexual economy indulges the consumerism and materialism, and reduces femininity into a commodity in exchange for wealth. The drama took a clear-cut

stand against this wanton lifestyle and celebrated an autonomous femininity that was empowered with financial independence. On the other hand, the drama did not intend to subvert the male-dominant hierarchy but to stabilize it by advocating an unaggressive femininity—women enjoyed more equality in marriage but they were also confined to the hegemonic idea of not overpowering their husbands.

In either aspect, money or capital is the crux of the issue and women seem to be trapped in a narrow standard. If they are financially independent and stay single, they are derogatorily labeled as "leftover women"; if they exchange their femininity for a better life, they are considered as immoral; and if they devote themselves to their professions and financially surpass their husbands, they are condemned for their aggressiveness. In a nutshell, the independent but unaggressive femininity celebrated in the drama situated women in the family, to some extent assuaged their needs for equal marriage and in a way strengthened the male-dominant gender discourse.

## CHAPTER V

### Conclusions

In analysis of the construction of the “leftover woman” image in the drama *We Get Married*, it was noticed how tradition and modernity wrestled and merged with one another, exerting a profound impact towards the landscape of Chinese gender discourse. Since the reform and opening-up policies implemented in China, in contrast with the singular woman image promoted in Confucius or Maoist era, a new range of femininities and identities have emerged (Huang, 2006). Moreover, just as Liu (2014) had noted, the negotiation of modern womanhood was contextualized in “multiple and often contradictory” cultural discourses (p.18).

As demonstrated in the drama, seemingly paradoxical femininities were projected in the image of the “leftover women” where on one hand they were urged to be attached to marriage while on the other hand they were encouraged to be independent and autonomous. The drama centered around an unmarried woman but did not justify her identity as one proper representation of modern womanhood. The narrative of Tao finally getting married and having a baby as the only way for a woman to harvest happiness consolidated the deviant image of an unmarried woman and perpetuated the derogatory connotation of her identity. Myriads of details have shown that the Confucius ideology and the traditional patriarchal gender discourse still had an ingrained influence on people’s understanding of the unmarried women. Simultaneously, from a modern perspective, the drama shed a positive light on the

professional woman and how she enjoyed her financial independence and refused to use marriage as a ladder to upgrade her social status.

However, under the ostensible paradox, a unified male-dominant ideology was implied and a hegemonic femininity was reinforced. On one hand, the Confucius ideology continued to confine women within the role of a docile wife and good mother. On the other hand, women and their independence were encouraged only under the condition that their professional ambition did not hamper their roles in the family and threaten their husbands' dominant authority. Admittedly, women seemed to enjoy more gender equality than in the past—Tao was able to pursue the job she loved; even though suffering from the social pressure, she could remain single until she found the right one; she enjoyed a mutually respectful marriage relation with Guo. Nevertheless, such equality sugarcoated the reinforcement of a male-dominant structure and served as a soft way to disintegrate the subverting force. For instance, when Guo proposed to Tao with all his savings and property documents, people were touched by his commitment towards their marriage. But from another aspect, such behavior indicated a patriarchal ideology where men were supposed to provide material resources and assumed that women were in a position of taking materials from men rather than equally competing with them for the resources. In other words, the “equality” that women enjoyed was endowed by men instead of being a natural right of women, which in no way will lead to the real gender equality.

One thing noteworthy is that the drama held an oppositional stand towards the exchange between femininity and material possessions that cultivated in the consumerism culture. Undeniably, the emphasis on women's financial independence contributes to the

empowerment of women and the destabilization of patriarchal hierarchy. However, as has been already mentioned, women's professional ambitions were only allowed in a limited condition. In addition, the negation towards women trading their physical appearance and sexuality for elevating their social status through marriage does not necessarily indicate a resistance towards the patriarchal subjugation but could be derived from a broader conservative culture which stigmatizes women's expressions of their sexuality. Just as it was demonstrated in the drama, Tao believed that it was shameful for a woman to explicitly express her desire for a man and similarly she was unwilling to employ her beauty in finding a rich husband. Post-feminist theories believe that sexual freedom is an important element to women's emancipation and women could consciously use their femininity and sexuality to achieve their objectives (Genz & Brabon, 2009). However, apparently the drama perpetuated a traditional point of view which accentuated women's sexual passivity.

In her book about the "leftover" women in China, Fincher (2014) argued that they did not exist but were a notion deliberately promoted by the state media to achieve "its demographic goals of promoting marriage, planning population and maintaining social stability" (p.6). It is an acute insight and echoes with what has been noted in the drama, which accentuated that marriage should be an ultimate destiny for all women. However, it seems that she overemphasized the role the government played in the emergence of "leftover" women and failed to notice its social and cultural factors. The increasing number of late unmarried women is an inevitable result in the progress of the liberation of Chinese women and social modernization; and the controversial and even derogatory social evaluations towards this group of women are deeply rooted in the traditional Chinese culture which

defines women in the role of wives and mothers. Admittedly, the homogenized media representation of the unmarried women largely reinforced the social prejudices but the emergence of the “leftover” women phenomenon is contextualized in a broader social and cultural environment.

In a study of “leftover women” in Shanghai, interestingly, very similar results were noticed when compared with the present study. Among the 30 “leftover women” she interviewed, Ji (2015) found that these single, educated and professional women were caught in the conflicts of a “tradition-modern mosaic” (p.1070). Interviewees mentioned great social pressure, especially from the parents; their insistence in finding the romantic ideal of “Mr. Right” resulted in their daughters’ singleness. In addition, these women also stressed the importance of their financial independence while in the meantime they identified with the traditional expectations of being good mothers and wives, willing to sacrifice in support of their husbands if necessary. None of her interviewees totally rejected the traditional patriarchal framework. Instead, while complaining about the social pressures and the unequal gender expectations, they affirmed marriage as an ultimate end that they want to achieve.

Unfortunately, few studies on “leftover women” demonstrated a disrupting power from these women towards the patriarchal gender ideology. To’s (2013) study mapped out four categories of “leftover women,” indicating that these women are not a monolithic group and their reasons of and strategies towards their singleness may be diverse. Different from the other three categories which all considered marriage as their ultimate goal, the fourth group which To named “Innovator” didn’t consider marriage as a must and looked towards nontraditional relationship forms. However, these “Innovators” only accounted for a small

proportion. Just as what this study has observed, most “leftover women” were likely to be caught in the anxiety of getting married to get rid of their unwanted singleness.

Hopefully, the analysis of the representation of “leftover women” in this study could provide the unmarried women in real life with some alternative thoughts, reminding them that the way the “leftover women” were portrayed on Chinese television is a form of gender hegemony which should be critically discerned and rejected. More importantly, this study calls for more diverse representations of unmarried women on media, demonstrating alternative modern womanhood and gender ideologies to disrupt the patriarchal gender discourse.

As Dai (2006) has noted, although up to the present all Chinese presses, newspapers, television stations and radio stations have been state-owned, the introduction of international and nongovernmental capitals has transformed these cultural institutions from merely government mouthpieces into a rampantly expanding cultural and media industry. Apart from the top-down manipulation and censorship, the market plays an important role in deciding media content. Under this circumstance, regarding the hot-button social issue of the “leftover” women, the study of their images in the television drama becomes a significant way to explore the mainstream social and cultural values concerning this group of women. The present study focused on a top-rated drama from 2013. Considering the fact that “leftover” women continues to be a frequently mentioned topic, future studies could focus on the “leftover” women in reality and how they conceive their identity as “leftover” women in relation to the wide representation of this group on television.

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