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# **Patriarchal Capitalism with Chinese Characteristics: Gendered Discourse of ‘Double Eleven’ Shopping Festival**

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**Abstract:** In this article we consider the Double Eleven shopping festival as a major discursive site where the hegemony of what we call patriarchal capitalism with Chinese characteristics is articulated. The state, the market, the corporations, and the media, both mainstream and social media, all played an important role in building up a national spending spree that is deeply embedded in the current class and gender structure of China. The phenomenon of Double Eleven emerged at a time when state capitalism has been overwriting socialist institutions, while patriarchal ideology being further intensified through consumerism. As a consequence, the intersectionality of class and gender become increasingly manifest in the Chinese society. We start with a brief overview of the trajectory of gender politics in China since 1949, with specific focus on how the socialist project of seeking gender equality was gradually replaced by the quest for ‘womanhood’ and ‘femininity’. We then discuss, using both secondary sources and our own analysis of news coverage of Double Eleven, why maintaining a high level of consumer demand is of crucial importance for the Chinese state and what the state’s role has been in configuring the hegemonic gender order. A brief section on ideology and discourse lays out the conceptual framework of our analysis. It is at the intersection of a dissipating socialist ethos, emerging economic stagnation and ascending consumerism that the sexist discourse in relation to Double Eleven proliferates, and this is the analytical focus of our empirical section. We elaborate on the theoretical implications of the empirical analysis before concluding.

## **Introduction**

On November 11, 2015, the arena inside the Beijing National Aquatics Centre was packed. The stage looked spectacular, with a huge screen erected in front of the audience and beaming live updates from all over China. All the performers were A-list celebrities, including Hollywood superstars like Kevin Spacey and Daniel Craig. The atmosphere was jubilant and reached a climax with the countdown to midnight. One might have mistaken this for the Chinese Spring Festival Gala that CCTV produces every year, attracting both domestic and overseas Chinese audiences for the celebration of the Lunar New Year. But this event, organized by the e-commerce company Alibaba, sought to bring together another type of imagined community, not so much a nationalist, but more of a consumerist one.

Initially 11.11 or Double Eleven had been an event aimed only at Chinese college students and known as ‘Singleton’s Day’ playing on the four ‘1’s that form the date. From 2009, several major online retailers decided to offer significant discounts on their websites on 11.11, in an attempt to boost the sales between the October National Day holiday and the Christmas season. In 2012, Alibaba registered the trademark of ‘11.11 Carnival,’ and within the short span of the following four years, the e-commerce giant has successfully turned a self-mocking joke among youngsters into a national shopping festival.

Rather than focusing on the Double Eleven Gala itself, this article will explore the heavily gendered, often misogynist discourse produced at both institutional and popular levels that promote shopping and consumption during the annual festival. Not only are female bodies used in advertisements to sell commodities, but women are targeted by an assemblage of marketing campaigns, news coverage, and online spoofs as the most important consumers. This emphasis on female consumer was clear in 2014, when, after another record breaking Double Eleven sale,

the CEO of Alibaba Jack Ma thanked all Chinese women for always thinking about others, observing that ‘they are certainly making the purchase not just for themselves but also for their parents, their husband and their children’ (Ifeng tech 2014a).

We consider the Double Eleven shopping festival as a major discursive site where the hegemony of patriarchal capitalism with Chinese characteristics is articulated. More importantly, this case provides an impetus for engagement with the theoretical debate on radical feminism. Feminist scholars in the West have argued the inherently patriarchal nature of capitalist accumulation (Mitchell 1971, Zaretsky 1976, Eisenstein 1978, Mies 1986, Fraser 1997), but have done little to theorize the relationship between women and socialism, and said even less about the shifting gender order in a society moving away from state socialism and toward capitalism. While Fraser (1997, Fraser and Honneth 2003) has made a strong case for reintegrating ‘politics of recognition’ with ‘politics of redistribution’ in seeking women’s emancipation, she has not focused on the ideological work underpinning the erosion of distributive politics on the gender front. It is the aim of this article to demonstrate how this historically contingent ideological work is accomplished via certain discursive strategies.

The phenomenon of Double Eleven has emerged at a time in China when state capitalism has been overriding socialist institutions, gender inequality intersect with class inequality, with patriarchal ideology being further intensified through consumerism. All these historical conditions contribute to the hegemony of patriarchal capitalism with Chinese characteristics, which is being sustained via the reproduction of *common senses* such as those articulated by the Double Eleven discourse. Ironically, as the intersectionality of class and gender become increasingly manifested in Chinese society (Song and Hird 2014, p. 26), the state, the corporations and the consumers are converging on multi-layered discursive practices that

denounce socialist feminism for its gender blindness while celebrating consumption-based femininity. We argue that the patriarchal capitalist ideology articulated through Double Eleven and the current political economy of China are mutually constitutive. Given the recent history of Chinese socialism, this ideology gains potency particularly by positioning itself as the liberal counterpoint to a state feminism that subsumes women's liberation under class struggle. The socialist feminist project of emancipation *from* feudalist and capitalist patriarchy has been usurped by the consumerist project of emancipation *through* capitalist patriarchy. Our empirical analysis therefore has significant theoretical implications for understanding how the hegemonic gender order in any given society is closely linked to its history, and why revisiting history is paramount for imagining a progressive future.

We start with a brief overview of the trajectory of gender politics in China since 1949, with specific focus on how the socialist project of seeking gender equality was gradually replaced by the quest for 'womanhood' and 'femininity'. We then discuss, using both secondary sources and our own analysis of news coverage of Double Eleven, why maintaining a high level of consumer demand is of crucial importance for the Chinese state and what the state's role has been in configuring the hegemonic gender order. A brief section on ideology and discourse lays out the conceptual framework of our analysis. It is at the intersection of a dissipating socialist ethos, emerging economic stagnation and ascending consumerism that the sexist discourse in relation to Double Eleven proliferates, and this is the analytical focus of our empirical section. We elaborate on the theoretical implications of the empirical analysis before concluding.

### **Retrieving Femininity through Consumerism**

Two of the top five product types recording the highest sales in the 2015 Double Eleven, cosmetics and baby/maternity products, specifically target women. Purchasing decision in the

other three categories, namely home appliance, smart phones and apparel, also rests predominantly with women. A 2007 Ernst & Young China report claimed that 78% of married women were in charge of making decisions about everyday expenditure and apparel purchasing for the family (Zhang and Liu 2007). Expressing his gratitude for the purchasing power of female consumers, Jack Ma observed that women accounted for 70% of the buyers on Alibaba and that ‘without them, Alibaba would never have been able to launch its IPO on NYSE’ (Ifeng tech 2014b).

Women, in their roles as wives and mothers, have always been charged with managing daily household functioning, hence acting as ‘consumer-in-chief’ in the dominant gendered division of labour. Feminist scholars writing in Western contexts have critiqued ‘the gendered character of the consumer role in classical capitalism’ (Fraser 2013, p. 36). Friedan notes in *The Feminine Mystique* published in 1963 that advertisers encouraged women to think that they needed specialised products in order to do their housework better, and discouraged housewives from pursuing actual careers. Mies (1986) traces the history of ‘housewifization,’ and extends the concept to address the highly gendered, contemporary international division of labour. On the one hand, women in the paid workplace were more likely to be present as feminised ‘service’ workers or low-waged, low-status workers. On the other hand, women are assigned the unpaid domestic labour, including ‘purchasing and preparing goods and services for domestic consumption’ (Fraser 2013, p. 35). When women are targeted as consumers, the structural inequalities between male and female earning power go unnoticed and unchallenged (see, e.g. Riordan 2002). In her critique of the neoliberal backlash against second-wave feminism, McRobbie (2009, p. 158) points out that the ‘pro-capitalist femininity focused repertoire’, which celebrates ‘girl power’ through the consumption of feminine products, ‘plays directly into the

hands of corporate consumer culture eager to tap into this market on the basis of young women's rising incomes'.

While patriarchy has always been one of the fundamental structural conditions that enabled capitalist accumulation (Mies 1986), sexist discourses of consumerism in contemporary China need to be understood in relation to the state feminism during the socialist era. The household saying of the Mao-era that 'women hold up half the sky (*funv nengding banbiantian*)' was the state's call on women to seek liberation and gender equality by entering the workforce for 'socialist construction' (*shehui zhuyi jianshe*). This is in sharp contrast with today's ethos that celebrates consumption as the most visible way for Chinese women of different social classes to specify and valorise their femininity (Pun 2003). Yet the retreat from the public to the domestic, the shift from equality to femininity, has been perceived by many women — both intellectuals and common people — as liberating and progressive. Such a perception provides the optimal condition for the triumph of consumer capitalism, which returned with a vengeance after three decades of socialist experimentation in China.

Scholars have considered the limitations of state feminism implemented during China's socialist era, pointing to how class struggles tended to encompass gender issues (Croll 1978, Andors 1983, Chow 1991, Gilmartin 1994, Evans 2008a, 2008b). The orthodox Marxist position on female subordination perceived gender equality as 'a component of a broad program of social transformation oriented toward the eradication of class and socio-economic differentials' (Evans 2008b, p. 12). To a large extent, the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) project of 'women's liberation' (*funv jiefang*) addressed gender hierarchy as an economic and class issue, but failed to tackle the cultural aspects of inequality. Given the high priority assigned to both men and women in serving the collective interest, there was very limited discussion of gender discrimination or

oppression in the domestic sphere. Zaretsky(1976) observes that in the Soviet Union and socialist China, due to the emphasis on defeating capitalism via the re-modelling of production, the dichotomy that arose with capitalism between the ‘public’ social production and the ‘private’ or domestic sphere of family was preserved, leaving intact the gendered labour division within the family. Consequently, little effort was made to forge a linkage between women’s struggles in the public and the private realms. The call for women to ‘hold up half the sky’ by joining the collective project of building socialism was hardly accompanied by a call for men to share household work or child rearing responsibility. While women’s increasingly active role in public life subverted male dominance in many respects, the gendered division of labour within families went unchallenged. ‘Women’s work’ (*funv gongzuo*) had to be conducted under the rubric of the CCP’s statist projects, since otherwise it would risk the accusation of ‘bourgeois feminism’ for insisting on the primacy of gender issues (Wang 2005). As a result, gender equality was predicated on systematic blindness toward gender differences. Female cadres focusing on ‘women’s work’ were unable to articulate a feminist subjectivity that is autonomous from the masculine project of modernisation and economic development (Zaretsky 1976, p. 77), still less to pursue a distinctively feminist agenda.

Acknowledging these limitations of state feminism does not equate with dismissing the huge progress made on women’s rights during the socialist era. Rather, this is the key step in unpacking the transition of gender norms from state feminism to patriarchal capitalism. In Mao’s China, class subjectivity was ‘the defining mark not just of one’s humanity but of one’s role in historical progress’ (Rofel 2007, p. 22, see also Lin 2014, Wu 2014). After the Cultural Revolution, as the Party-state’s priority shifted from class struggles oriented toward egalitarianism to economic growth aimed at prosperity, the political passion of Chinese people



gave way to other sentiments such as the material, the sexual and the affective longings (Rofel, 2007; Ong, 2006). Shortly after the Cultural Revolution, Chinese intellectuals engaged in a lively debate about ‘humanity’ (*renxing*) and ‘humanism’ (*rendao zhuyi*), notions which had been deemed ‘bourgeois’ during the Maoist China (Wang 1996). An important component of this debate was the attempt of female writers and scholars to retrieve ‘femininity’ and ‘womanhood’ after the era of so-called ‘socialist androgyny’ (Young 1989). Propelled by the desire to embark on a new route toward China’s modernization and the subjectivity of modern women, in these discussions of femininity and womanhood, the diverse and complicated experiences of women in socialist China<sup>1</sup> were often condensed, in these discussions of femininity and womanhood, into the stereotypical image of the ‘iron girl’ who behaved in the same way as men and bore no trace of femininity. This image was largely rejected by the younger generation of Chinese women for its lack of ‘female essence’ (*nvxing qizhi*). For those born after the Cultural Revolution, women’s liberation meant something very different as compared with how their mother’s generation understood it (Evans 2008b), starting now to be understood as freedom from state control and over-politicized daily life rather than being emancipation from the oppression of feudalist and capitalist patriarchy. From the Western liberal feminist perspective, the quest for a ‘female essence’ harbours a dangerously essentialist view of gender difference. Yet for many Chinese women, rediscovering their femininity is now perceived as the crucial step in reasserting their individuality and towards redefining their gendered subjectivity.

On the basis of a comparison of interviews with mothers and daughters in urban China, Evans (2008b, p. 13) notes that in post-Mao China:

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<sup>1</sup> Such simplification or even distortion is what propelled a group of women scholars teaching and studying in the U.S. during the 1990s to put together a collection of personal memoir titled *Some of Us* (Zhong *et al.* 2001) to tell a different story about Chinese women growing up in the Mao era.

a new discourse of an essential gender difference progressively eclipsed public attention given to ‘male-female equality’; the idea that women could ‘do the same as men’ effectively disappeared from its privileged place in dominant discourse, replaced by a new equation between women’s emancipation and the individual capacity to capitalize on the individual benefits of participating in the private market.

Women’s emancipation, once a collective project premised upon participation in socialist production in China, is now broken down into dispersed individual efforts channelled through consumption.

### **The patriarchal state and the reconfiguration of the gender order**

In her book on consumer culture in contemporary China, Yu (2014, p. 137) points to ‘dramatically commoditized’ expressions of gender and sexuality, and especially to how ‘women’s increased sense of autonomy from both the state and traditional expectations is frequently articulated in terms of their choices as consumers’. For many urban Chinese women who relish the apparent freedom bought through consumption, from the ‘the fervour and enthusiasm [with which] women beautify themselves’ in the 1980s (Honig and Hershatter 1988, p. 29) to the 21-year-old Jeep Wrangler fan exclaiming that ‘my Jeep will drive me to freedom’ (Yu 2014, p. xi), there are two important historical reference points. One is the lack of consumer choice and indeed the general condemnation of consumerism during the socialist era. The other is the gender sameness promoted through the socialist model workers. Yet this perceived resistance to state control of private life quickly dissolves, once we start looking into the continuing role of the patriarchal state in constructing the gender order of contemporary Chinese society.

When it comes to configuring the gender hierarchy, the power of the state manifests on two levels, and in both positive and negative ways. In the production realm, the Chinese state has been reluctant to intervene with discriminatory practices in the workplace, or through policies that specifically promote gender equality in work and employment. Writing about Chinese women in the 1980s, Honig and Hershatter (1988) highlight how ‘the most disturbing effect’ of economic reform on women’s employment was due to the state’s retreat from planning and regulating economic activities. On the one hand, with the work unit taking over the hiring process, women were blatantly discriminated against as ‘physically ill-suited’ to doing a job, on grounds of carrying too great a burden of housework and childrearing responsibilities, etc. On the other hand, women were encouraged to pursue the conventional work that was deemed to be ‘more suitable’ for them such as cooking, sewing or childcare. As a result, economic reforms strengthened and in some cases reconstructed a sexual division of labour which succeeded in ‘keeping urban women in a transient, lower-paid, and subordinate position in the workforce’ (Honig and Hershatter 1988, p. 321).

What further exacerbated gendered employment inequality was the radical urban reform in the late 1990s and early 2000s, after Deng Xiaoping’s Southern Tour (*Nanxun*) in 1992. In 1994, a labour law was passed sanctioning the right of employers to dismiss workers. In 1997, Premier Zhu Rongji announced a large-scale labour retrenchment program in an attempt to revitalize the ailing State Owned Enterprise (SOE) sector. This public-sector restructuring fundamentally changed the urban labour market, the share of SOEs and urban collectives declined from 75.7% in 1995 to 33.4 % in 2002. This had unintended yet significant consequences for gender equality. Women were more likely than men to be laid off and had difficulty re-entering the labour market. Further, as the pressure for profit intensified, many urban enterprises stopped providing

subsidized child care service, creating new obstacles to women's participation in paid labour (Ding *et al.* 2009, pp. 167–168). These policy shifts occurring during the 1980s and the 1990s significantly undermined the socialist provision for equal participation by men and women in the work force. Since the socialist revolution had not eliminated 'male chauvinism in its power structure and consciousness'(Lin 2001), marketization and privatization reforms opened up new space for the return of a traditional sexual division of labour and patriarchal values. In fact, women's withdrawal from the workforce was endorsed by some analysts as a solution to urban unemployment (Ding *et al.* 2009).

As the economic reform deepens, the Chinese state's retreat from the provision of equal employment opportunities and social care has been coupled with a reorientation of the economy away from the production of heavy industrial goods and toward consumer goods. The ascendance of consumer capitalism resulting from the aggressive marketization mandated by the Party-state has had a profound impact on the intersectionality of gender and class inequality. The transformation of class structure in China from the Maoist to the Post-Mao era is not discussed in detail here(for such discussion see e.g. Goodman 2014, Lin 2014), but there is an intimate connection between consumerism discourse and middle-class imagination. The prevalence of the former ties in with the Party-state's political agenda of expanding the middle class population and prioritizing individualized consumerist solution to social problems over collective efforts. In a 2012 report prepared with the World Bank, for example, the State Council's Development Research Centre stated that the explicit goal was to emulate the experience of other industrial countries in ensuring 'a large middle class that acts as a force for stability, good governance, and economic progress'(cited Goodman 2014, p. 92). In this and similar policy documents, being middle class is presented as an aspiration rather than an economic category within the social

structure (Anagnost 2008, Tomba 2011, Goodman 2014). While contemporary China has undoubtedly witnessed the rise of a middle class whose scale remains a matter of great debate (cf. Li 2010a), what is crucial here is the huge ideological shift that the middle-class-oriented discourse indicates. The political significance once attached to the working class as the foundation of the regime has been transferred to the middle class, even though the latter represents a small proportion of the population<sup>2</sup>. Anagnost (2008, p. 499) characterises this category as the ‘new normative figure of citizenship...endowed with high cultural capital and the power to consume’. In the wake of these changes, she argues that ‘consumption is important both as a domain of subject construction and as the production of demand in a national economy plagued by overproduction and deflationary tendencies’(Anagnost 2008, p. 508).

As trade and export have slumped following the 2008 global financial crisis, the Chinese government has placed greater emphasis on increasing domestic demand as a means of sustaining economic growth (Li 2010a, p. 11). On the very day that millions of Chinese were searching for better deals online, the State Council held a meeting on November 11<sup>th</sup> 2015, to discuss the importance of ‘new consumption’ in the nation’s economy (Chen 2015). At the end of the day, the official Weibo account of Alibaba announced that Premier Li Keqiang had just called and congratulated the company on its ‘pioneering work and achievement.’ The Premier also ‘sent greeting to e-commerce corporations and the masses of consumers’(广大消费者). The tone of these statements is reminiscent of the paternalistic greetings that were often sent by the socialist state to the people on festive occasions during the Mao era, yet the substance could not

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<sup>2</sup>Su Hainan, vice president of the China Association for Labour Studies, recently drew on the data provided by National Bureau of Statistics and claimed that the middle class had so far accounted for only 18% of the overall population (Wang 2016). Some earlier academic reports revealed an even lower proportion (e.g. Li 2010b, Goodman 2014).

be more different. Instead of endorsing the achievement of workers and peasants, the Chinese Premier now praises ‘corporations and consumers’.

This is the context in which the highly sexualized consumerist discourse of Double Eleven emerged. Urban Chinese women in post-Socialist China have rejected Maoist aspirations to gender sameness through their re-articulation of a female subjectivity that foregrounds personal choice and an essentialist understanding of femininity. This coincided with the state’s retreat from the provision of equal employment opportunities for women and the growing dominance of a patriarchal capitalist logic in configuring gender roles both at home and in the workplace. In her discussion of the feminist movement in the post-socialist era, Fraser (1997, p. 19) argues that gender and race injustices are ‘bivalent’ in the sense that redressing them requires changing both political economy and culture. State feminism in socialist China achieved significant progress toward gender equality via redistribution, yet it did not sufficiently recognize the gendered experience of female subjectivity. In contemporary China, by contrast, the statist effort to tackle the economic foundation of patriarchy has diminished, as evidenced by the changing labour policy and employment conditions discussed above. Meanwhile, the remaking of the Mao era ‘over-politicized’ desire into ‘sexual, material, and affective self-interest’ has been coupled with the ascendance of consumer capitalism (Rofel 2007, p. 3). This dual process of a decline in the politics of redistribution on the one hand, and a consumption-based recognition of essentialised gender difference on the other, have given rise to a celebration of women as consumers-in-chief in their designated roles of wife and mother. As Fraser (1995, p. 79) points out, gender disparagement can also take the form of ‘conservative stereotypes that appear to celebrate, rather than demean “femininity”’. There is also a clear distinction along the class lines. While middle-class urban women embody the ‘normative figure’ of the sophisticated and affluent consumers,

the female migrant workers are depicted as an ‘abject figure’ of low quality (*suzhi*) and limited purchasing power (Anagnost, 2004). While the former are exalted and celebrated in popular discourse, the latter are to be regulated and improved via what Pun calls the ‘imagineering’ of neo-liberal consumer subjects (Pun 2003, Yan 2003, Anagnost 2004, Sun 2009, 2014). The word imagineering was coined by Pun Ngai (2003) from two terms: imagination and engineering, which draws attention to this process as an active technocratic fantasy. In the next section we explain the conceptual framework that informs our analysis.

### **Ideology and discursive practices**

We treat ‘Double Eleven’ as a discursive site where the state and companies, including the media, all contribute to maintaining the hegemony of patriarchal capitalism with Chinese characteristics. Hegemony, the ‘contingent and conditional construction of popular consent to the project and programme’ of the ruling bloc (Clarke, 2015) is largely generated and maintained by means of ideology (Fairclough 2001, p. 1) and appears as common senses. Ideology is multi-layered and is not necessarily produced by institutions, or what Louis Althusser (1971) calls the Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA). For Althusser (1971, pp. 162, 180), the ruling ideology stems from the ISAs, that is, it ‘interpellates around it the infinity of individuals into subjects’ by giving each individual an imaginary relationship to his/her real conditions of existence. Ideology is hence the kind of ‘discursive terrain’ that people take for granted when mapping their life and making sense of social relations (Hall 1986). Or, as Michael Billig (1995, p. 15) puts it, ideologies constitute ‘those patterns of belief and practice, which make existing social arrangements appear “natural” or inevitable’. Although the ISAs, including mass media, still play important roles in generating and circulating dominant ideologies, with the rise of interactive digital platforms individuals have greater opportunities to create, adopt and

disseminate their own ‘interpellations’, which may then be strategically co-opted by institutions. This constant top-down and the bottom-up mutual appropriation in relation to ideology informs our choice to include in our analysis both the institutional discourse (e.g., news coverage, advertisements) and popular discourse (e.g. online spoofs, digital memes).

As an approach guiding most qualitative studies, purposive sampling strategy was used to exemplify the key features of multiple layers of discursive practices related to the Double Eleven Shopping Festival in 2014 and 2015. The texts that we selected for critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 2001) were ‘illustrative’ rather than ‘definitive’ (Lindlof and Taylor 2002, p. 128, see also Deacon *et al.* 2010). But their articulation with a patriarchal ideology was typical and particularly under controversy around Double Eleven in 2015. Our data corpus includes a text authored by a neoclassical economist, Alibaba advertisements, online song lyrics and online parodies. Two distinctive but related themes emerge from our analysis: the first concerning ‘spendthrift chicks’ (败家娘们) and secondly the ideological shift from socialism to consumerism. The history of socialist state feminism has been invoked in a particular way in order to provide the ideological justification for patriarchal capitalism. We demonstrate how Double Eleven has been discursively constructed as a national, but gendered spending spree, and how this exemplifies the complicity of patriarchal ideology, a rhetoric of nationalism and development, and consumer capitalism—the three key dimensions of what we call patriarchal capitalism with Chinese characteristics. This hegemony is shaped by a technocratic and depoliticized imagination of national development that downplays class stratifications as well as gender inequality, both of which are concealed, and indeed justified, by hailing urban young and *middle-class* women as the consumer-in-chief within family and the saviour of the stagnant national economy.



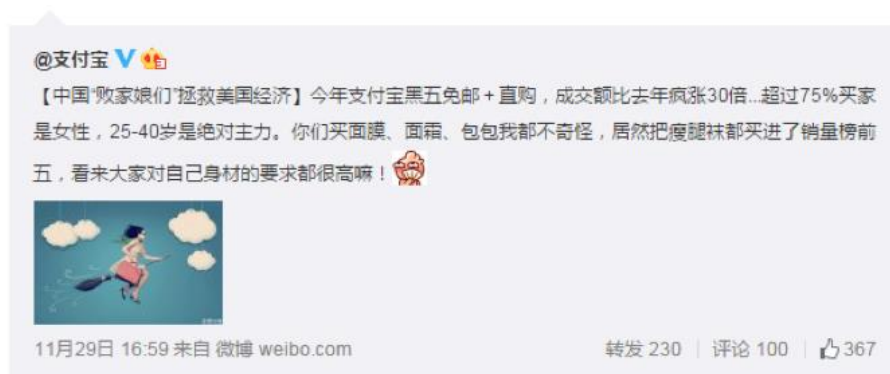
### **Calling all ‘spendthrift chicks’**

Originating from a song by Daqing and Xiaofang (大庆小芳), an online singing duo known for their unassuming style and down-to-earth lyrics, the term ‘spendthrift chicks’ (败家娘们) has become a catchphrase for Double Eleven and online shopping. The song depicts a quarrel between a hardworking husband and a housewife. The husband reproaches his wife for her endless material demands, such as constant upgrading to the latest model of the iPhone. She is portrayed in the song as ‘spending all day doing her make-up and humming around in her little red dress.’ The wife taunts the husband, emphasizing that she spends all day taking care of the children, cooking and doing laundry without much compensation and implying that the husband should reflect on his own incompetence in earning money rather than questioning her spending habits: ‘I didn’t ask you for a new car or a bigger house, look at Bill Gates and Steve Jobs.’ In the end the couple reach an agreement that a husband should always take good care of his wife because she is the one who does all the housework and makes him happy. The lyrics of the song unabashedly promote a conventional gendered division of labour that fixes women’s role as the ‘consumer-in-chief’ who support and motivate men as breadwinners. They depict the ‘housewifization’ (Mies, 1986) of urban Chinese women whose subjectivity is defined by feminine beauty and motherhood, both heavily mediated via consumption.

The term spendthrift chicks is pejorative, yet playful, and has quickly seeped into institutional and popular discourses. Liang Haiming, an economist and columnist for Sina Finance, emphasized after Double Eleven in 2014 the importance of boosting Chinese women’s consumption, noting that ‘from the traditional women who raise children and assist their husbands...to those “spendthrift chicks” who could not refrain from splurging...It is not exaggerating to say that women hold up half, if not more than half, of the sky for the Chinese

economy.’ (Liang 2014) While the Maoist rhetoric of women holding up half the sky emphasized women’s equal participation in public affairs and social production, by contrast Liang focuses on encouraging women’s consumption in order to bring the economy out of stagnation.

Chinese ‘spendthrift chicks’ were also hailed in the Weibo post below (figure 1) as saviours of the U.S. economy. Alipay, which is the online payment division of Alibaba, claimed that, thanks to the division’s free postage and direct purchase from overseas retailers on Black Friday 2015, the sales volume increased 30 times compared with the previous year. More than 75% of online shoppers were reported to be Chinese women aged between 25 and 40. The Weibo post also detailed the top-selling products such as face mask, face cream, handbags and ‘shapewear’ leggings, praising the ‘high standard that young Chinese young women hold for their own figures’.



(Figure 1)

Although the interpellation of ‘spendthrift chicks’ seems invariably to call on all women, not everyone in an increasingly stratified post-socialist China is able to join in conspicuous consumption. The thinly-veiled classism of the term is made crystal clear in two pictures below (figure 2 and figure 3), which contrast ‘spendthrift chicks’ with ‘thrifty wives’ (省钱媳妇). The

origin of this juxtaposition is hard to trace, but the pair of photos appeared on online forums and social media, particularly around the time of Double Eleven in 2015. The images we analyse here were retrieved from a popular parenting forum *Mama Bang* (Motherhood Gang, <http://www.mmbang.com/bang/451/15455641>). The joke starts by asking women ‘what kind of wife do you aspire to be? Spendthrift or thrifty?’ and the text points to the photos, saying ‘this is what they look like in the eyes of men.’ The first picture, captioned ‘thrifty wives’, shows a group of middle-aged women from rural China with modest clothing and no make-up. They appear to be singing, but only one of them seems, somewhat sheepishly, to be looking at the camera. The second picture is captioned ‘spendthrift chicks.’ It features the same number of younger and slender women, all dressed in perfectly colour-coordinated fashionable outfits. They have long wavy hair, are wearing heavy make-up and are looking confidently at camera, which imitates a male gaze (Mulvey 1975). The two pictures metaphorically constitute a historical juxtaposition between the kind of ‘iron woman’ from the Mao era who bears no trace of femininity and the ‘modernized’ woman who liberates her true nature and beauty. What is more, the ‘make-over’ paradigm that underlines the appeal of personal transformation (Sender 2006) is articulated with consumption. Hence the answer to the question is obvious: one’s femininity is defined by one’s capability to consume, which in turn sculpts female bodies into objects of male desire.



Figures 2 & 3

This message is driven home by a neon box (figure 4) advertisement from Tmall.com which appeared in the Shanghai subway at the beginning of 2016. Tmall is an online retail platform operated by Alibaba that sells brand name goods to middle-class Chinese consumers and has been a major beneficiary of the Double Eleven shopping frenzy. The advert features a curvy female figure wearing a red *Qipao*, the traditional Chinese dress that is now usually seen at wedding or other festive occasions. The woman's face is largely cut off with only the bright red lips left visible. The advertisement incorporates signs that connote conventional Chinese beauty, while using the strategy of close cropping that objectifies part of the female body (Schroeder and Borgerson 1998). Corresponding to such objectification, the large font text on the right says 'to call a woman a savvy shopper is a far better compliment than to say she is a capable earner. Visiting Tmall is the right choice'.



Figure 4

The discourse around spendthrift chicks is exemplary in articulating state patriarchy and consumer capitalism—the two key components of patriarchal capitalism. Young, affluent and shopaholic women are hailed as the driving force behind the national, and even the global, economy, and the discourse projects them as the norm of female subjectivity. The bourgeois reference to spendthrift chicks is reminiscent of the ‘post-feminist masquerade’ that feminist scholars in the West have critiqued (Gill 2007, McRobbie 2007, 2009, Ringrose and Walkerdine 2008, Banet-Weiser 2012). McRobbie (2007) argues, for example, that the fashion and beauty system in the ‘advanced democracies’ of the West has displaced the traditional mode of patriarchal authority in order to reinstate young women into the repertoire of femininity. Two analogies illustrate how the gender order is always an integral part of an overall political economic structure. Post-feminist discourse ascended in the 1990s concurrently with the neoliberal turn in the UK and the U.S. when the welfare state had been in retreat since the 1980s and women were incessantly being reminded to improve their competitiveness through the right kind of consumption. The call for Chinese women to take great pride in being savvy shoppers emerged at a time when the state was withdrawing from its aspirations to employment equity. In addition, this discursive construction of bourgeois femininity is contingent upon the designation

of an 'abject.' (Tyler 2013) In the UK, for instance, working class women are the 'identificatory sites of desire, disgust, and fear of failure in the constitution of rational, reflexive subjectivity' (Ringrose and Walkerdine 2008, p. 242). In China, it is the population of rural migrant women that is deemed to be in need of transformation (Pun 2003, Anagnost 2004, Sun 2009). The 'thrifty wives' in the above picture are located in the uneducated, 'low quality' (*suzhi di*) group that is yet to become via consumption a sophisticated and attractive group.

Nonetheless, compared with the post-feminist notion of 'girl power' (McRobbie 2007) that simultaneously addresses young women's capacity and rising income in the Western context, the 'spendthrift chicks' interpellated by the Double Eleven discourse appear to be fixed in the conventional gender role and as being financially dependent.

McRobbie (2007) argues that the new visibility of young women in the cultural realm is an occasion for the undoing of liberal feminism, but, by contrast, the celebration of 'spendthrift chicks' is a crucial site for the undoing of socialist feminism. In the next section we turn to spoofs of socialist posters to illustrate this point. These online parodies are very popular, indicating the extent to which the state-patriarchal ideology articulated with consumer capitalism has naturalized into the 'common sense' of Internet users.

### **From Socialism to Consumer Capitalism**

A Google search for images and texts in Mandarin depicting 'spendthrift chicks' yields a kaleidoscope of online parodies that appropriate socialist propaganda posters to celebrate and mobilize online consumption, many of which are heavily gendered. Figure 5 and figure 6 contrast an anti-America poster from the Korean War period with a spoof that appeared on social media before the 2016 Double Eleven shopping festival. Two male soldiers, one wearing the People's Liberation Army uniform and the other in civilian clothes with a Mao badge pinned to his coat,

occupy most of the picture. They both appear to express outrage and vigilance, and to be staring down at the enemies in front of them. The man at the back is holding a grenade, while the one at the front has his right hand on the trigger of a rifle and his left hand is forming a stop sign toward the enemy. They are standing on snow-covered ground with the silhouettes of pine trees as a backdrop — clear references to the setting in which the Korean War took place. In the original poster, there are more soldiers at the background and a large bulletin board saying ‘no invasion would be allowed into the sacred land of China.’ These are removed in the parody. At the bottom of the picture, the original caption says: ‘we will not attack unless we are attacked, if we are attacked, we will certainly counterattack.’ This is changed in the new version to ‘Double Eleven, stay vigilant against fire, theft and spendthrifts.’ While the masculine figures in the original poster are poised to protect the motherland from imperialist intruders, in the spoof the men take on the task of defending their savings and property against shopaholic women. A patriarchal tone underpins the juxtaposition. While the original socialist poster features the heroic sons protecting the motherland from imperialist intruders, in the spoof, the men take on the task of defending their hard earned assets against shopaholic women.



Figures 5 & 6

The second pair of posters in Figures 7 and 8 feature a young woman in militia uniform standing in front of a stage photo from *The Legend of the Red Lantern*, one of the eight model plays that constituted the official repertoire during the Cultural Revolution. This modernized Peking Opera tells the story of how Li Tiemei, whose parents sacrificed their lives in the underground struggle against Japanese invasion, became a revolutionary following in the footsteps of her parents. On the original poster, the caption on the left says ‘I shall aspire to become someone like that’, which was Tiemei’s line in the play after she heard the stories of her parents. At the bottom it says ‘carrying out the revolution until the very end.’ The parody eliminates the message at the bottom of the picture and changed the caption to ‘I shall aspire to become an extravagant woman.’ A reconstruction of desire (Rofel 2007) is manifest in this pair of posters.



Figures 7 & 8

The third Double Eleven parody (figures 9 & 10) is based on another widely circulated socialist poster from the late 1970s which promotes the alliance of workers and the peasants. Two women seem to be earnestly shaking hands, one dressed like a factory worker, the other as a farmer. Behind them, machinery and sacks are piled high on a truck and a tractor, which seems to confirm their respective identities. Red flags and a red banner can be seen further in the



background. In the spoof the original slogan ‘workers and peasants marching forward hand in hand’ is changed to ‘share your *Taobao*<sup>3</sup> link with me now!’



Figures 9 & 10

Socialist symbols are being appropriated to resignify a consumerist ideology. Zhao and Belk (2008, p. 231) analyse how advertising has reconfigured ‘both key political symbolism and communist propaganda strategies’ to promote consumption during China’s political and economic transition from the late 1970s to the early 2000. Li (2008, p. 1125) points out that Chinese advertisers often ‘sell nationalism by celebrating Chinese history, contemporary events, and Chinese lineage’. Yet social media posts celebrating the Double Eleven Shopping Festival differ from earlier advertising campaigns in two ways. There is, first, a shift from production to consumption. Be it *Changhong* TV naming its main product line ‘the red sun’, or *Maotai* liquor’s slogan of ‘Carry on the spirit of the Long March<sup>4</sup> and rejuvenate national industry,’ advertisements utilizing socialist symbols can be read as seeking to build a brand by invoking developmentalist and nationalist elements of socialism. The underlying message is that a strong

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<sup>3</sup> Taobao.com is the major e-commerce platform owned by *Alibaba*, besides the aforementioned Tmall.com.

<sup>4</sup> *Maotai* is the most famous hard liquor brand in China produced in Zunyi, Guizhou. The city of Zunyi was also where an important meeting of the Chinese Communist Party was held in 1935, after which Mao Zedong decided to take the Red Army to the inland area through the famous Long March.

nation requires strong economic growth, which in turn is driven by the production. In contrast, the Double Eleven spoofs impoverish the original connotations of the socialist posters. The variety of politicized passions in the Mao era is now being homogenized and channeled through a passion for consumption. The spoof posters fetishize consumption as the basis for mass mobilization (figure 5), for developing shared experience and social ties (figure 9) and as the ultimate life aspiration (figure 7). Thus ‘the productivist logic of Maoist China has now been replaced by a consuming desire, construing a yearning for setting China on the rail of global modernity.’ (Pun 2003, p. 487) The argument is that as the global economy slows down what China has lost as a world factory can be compensated for only via strength as a market for global products. As manifested in the Chinese premier’s congratulatory message to Alibaba, driving up domestic consumer demand is the government’s priority in its efforts to boost and sustain economic growth. In this context, the performativity (Butler 1990) of Double Eleven speech acts is even more significant than the actual sales figure, as these are key steps toward the construction of a gendered consumer subject.

Second, as much as sexism has always been present in advertising, these texts drawn from social media posts stand out in their interpellation of women as consumers and only consumer. Women in socialist posters appear in a wide range of professions—workers, farmers, soldiers, scientists—taking an active part in building and defending the collective project. Even when they are alluded to as wife and mother with their husbands and children in the same image, which is rare, women are never assigned only a domestic role. They are depicted as the socialist model worker who proudly shows her children her certificate of commendation, or as the conscientious citizen responding to the government’s call for family planning. The Double Eleven spoofs subvert the history and ideology of Chinese state feminism. The multiple female roles in social

life are reduced to the single role of consumer by the discursive practices of Double Eleven, which are collectively constructed by the state, the companies, the media, and middle-class Internet users. Instead of men and women defending the nation, a gendered war between men as breadwinners and women as spendthrifts is presented. Such reversion to the conventional gender division of labour repudiates the progress made on gender equality in socialist China and reduces the care work women provide for the family to commodity purchasing (Brown 2015, pp. 104–105). Although Double Eleven spoofs reject the ethos of socialism, they effectively take advantage of the rhetorical style of socialist propaganda, which is direct with little or no room for contestation or ambivalence. The mode of address in the original posters is an example of what Althusser (2008, p. 47) calls ‘hailing’ where ‘all ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects, by the functioning of the category of the subject.’ While the socialist state called on its citizens to contribute to a common project, consumerist ideology hails its subjects as women who define their femininity through consumption.

### **Concluding Remarks: Gender, Class and Socialist Imaginary**

In her characterization of the ‘postsocialist’ conditions as an attempt to redefine the political project of seeking gender justice, Fraser (1997) emphasizes the importance of integrating ‘the politics of recognition’ with ‘the politics of redistribution’. Her critique of the separation of these two kinds of politics in Western democracies helps to shed light on the regression of gender politics in contemporary China. Far from being a celebration of ‘female essence’ (*nvxing qizhi*) and independence, Double Eleven discourses seem to embody the double injury that Chinese women suffer. During the socialist era when gender equality was pursued through the aspiration for class equality premised upon the radical restructuring of the political economy, gender difference was ignored and care work by women went unrecognized and uncompensated. To be

sure, the socialist revolution provided opportunities for millions of women in rural and urban China to seek liberation and equality. Welfare provisions such as free childcare, health clinics and subsidized canteens were located within living compounds, helping to alleviate the burden for women. Yet, as Fraser argues, gender justice can never be achieved via ‘the politics of redistribution’ alone. Calling for women to shoulder half the sky by joining social production is only the first step.

In post-socialist China, where the commodification of femininity has returned with a vengeance, hard-won progress on the gender front is being continuously undermined by a receding class politics concurrent with the aggressive advance of patriarchal capitalism. Three key factors are at play. First, as many historical works on Chinese women have pointed out (e.g. Croll 1978, 1995, Honig and Hershatter 1988, Evans 1997, 2008a, 2008b, Zhong 2006), the gender sameness that was part of Maoist state feminism was widely rejected after the Cultural Revolution. Urban Chinese women in particular ‘were quickly captured by a kind of bourgeois feminine imaginary, desiring return to a female identity or “female essence” (*nvxing qizhi*) that was very much informed by that imaginary’ (Zhong 2006, p. 637). The pendulum seemed to have shifted. Gender politics, previously subsumed under class politics because they were considered a distraction from the broader programme of social change (Croll 1978, pp. 3–5), have now become devoid of concern with the political economic structure. Female images in socialist posters are represented either as the target of ridicule conveying pity for their lack of femininity, or as transformed into a shopaholic consumer subject.

Additionally, the changing nature of the Chinese state and what Wang Hui (2009) characterises as ‘depoliticized politics’ have profound implications for the gender order. Wang (2009, p. 6) argues that in contemporary China the space for political debate has largely been eliminated: ‘the

Party is no longer an organization with specific political values, but a mechanism of power.’

Instead of being driven by class politics and oriented toward egalitarianism, the Party-state now follows the technocratic logic that prioritizes economic development and political stability. This resonates with what Fraser (1997, p. 3) identifies as the primary feature of post-socialist conditions in the West, ‘the absence of an overarching emancipatory project’ and ‘a decentring of claims for equality in the face of aggressive marketization and sharply rising material inequality’. The state becomes much less interventionist in promoting equal employment opportunities and complicit in encouraging a heavily gendered consumer culture. It is no coincidence that the Chinese premier singled out Taobao as the engine of China’s consumption boom. After all, the carnivalesque shopping festival of Double Eleven functions effectively as a ‘depoliticizing and individualizing move in which power and oppression are dislocated from those in positions of power onto the individual (consumer) subject’ (Yang 2011, p. 353).

Profit-driven corporations have a significant stake in promoting a highly gendered consumer discourse. This discourse ‘advocates a gender essentialism that defines femininity as aesthetic sensitivity and intrinsic sexuality’ (Yang 2011, p. 352), which figure in the formation of women’s subjectivity while also turning them into objects of consumption, as illustrated by the Tmall advertisement in the Shanghai subway. It fixates women on the conventional roles of good mother and caring wife, both of which are to be realized through the ‘right’ kind of consumption. Represented by the contrast between ‘thrifty wives’ and ‘spendthrift chicks’, this discourse projects a strong middle-class normativity that reprimands rural women and female migrant workers for the lack of femininity resulting from their inferior purchasing power. The manifestation of structural inequality is attributed to personal failure and consumerism is prescribed to alleviate symptoms of gender inequality and class oppression.

The misogynist discourse of the Double Eleven shopping festival has emerged at a low point in the history of Chinese feminism. Contemporary urban youth's refusal of Maoist gender sameness has been hijacked by consumer capitalism with the aid of a patriarchal state, before it had the chance to evolve into a politics of recognition in the Western liberal democratic sense. In this context, the 'bivalent' approach advocated by Fraser (1997) is arguably the way forward. The socialist legacy which sought economic equality through redistribution needs to be combined with a restructuring of the traditional gender order on the symbolic and discursive level. Only then will we be in a position to bid a collective farewell to the imaginary of 'spendthrift chicks'. Meanwhile, the successful articulation between state capitalism, patriarchy and consumerism, and the embodiment of such ideology by the urban middle class, are surely accompanied by instances of disjuncture and disarticulation. These instances, along with the counter-hegemonic practices already attempted by some Chinese feminists, will be of great interest for future research.

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