

SMALL SCREEN CHINA: AN EXPLORATION OF CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL  
ISSUES AS DEPICTED IN CHINESE TV DRAMAS

by

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As Mainland China transitions from a planned socialist economy to one more market-focused, its economic successes have garnered attention worldwide. However, this astounding economic growth brought with it a number of negative side effects, including corruption and a resurgence of prostitution. Gender relations have also undergone major shifts from state mandated gender equality in the Mao era to a call for the refeminization of women in the Reform era. How is the Chinese population navigating this transition? In this thesis, I utilize existing melodrama theory and relevant sociological studies to explore how three Chinese TV dramas—*I'm Not a Hero* (2004), *Close to You, Make Me Warm* (2006), and *Give Me a Cigarette* (2006), later renamed *Evening Rain*—expose and explore some of these existing social problems, providing a platform for their viewers to reflect on and explore these issues on their own.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

At the start of China's market reforms in 1978, "there was less than one television receiver per hundred people, and only 10 million had access to television."<sup>1</sup> By 2002, just over twenty years later, "there were a total of 448 million televisions in use in China, averaging 107 per 100 households."<sup>2</sup> This astounding growth led to China's becoming, by 2008, "the world's largest TV market by audience and [to] fast becoming one of the world's most prodigious producers of TV content."<sup>3</sup> The growth of Chinese TV serial drama mirrors this more general trend. While only a total of 200 television dramas were broadcast between 1958 and 1966, and the first Chinese serial drama, *Eighteen Years in the Enemy Camp* (*Diying shiba nian*) did not air until 1981,<sup>4</sup> by 2005, China had become the world's largest producer of TV dramas, with a total of 12,000 episodes being

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<sup>1</sup> Ying Zhu and Chris Berry, introduction, *TV China*, ed. Ying Zhu and Chris Berry (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009) 3.

<sup>2</sup> Tongdao Zhang, "Chinese Television Audience Research," *TV China*, ed. Ying Zhu and Chris Berry (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009) 172.

<sup>3</sup> Kristian Kender, Anke Redl, and Rowan Simons, ed., *2008 China Media Yearbook and Directory* (Beijing: China Media Monitor Intelligence, 2008) 18.

<sup>4</sup> Ying Zhu, Michael Keane, and Ruoyun Bai, introduction, *TV Drama in China*, TransAsia: Screen Cultures, ed. Ying Zhu, Michael Keane, and Ruoyun Bai (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2008) 4.

produced that year.<sup>5</sup> These dramas are immensely popular with Chinese audiences, and according to Michael Keane, “the ‘Chinese viewer’ watches an average of fifty-two minutes of television drama per day—a diet constituting thirty per cent of overall television consumption.”<sup>6</sup> Statistics reveal that in 2002, “ninety per cent of all revenue from television advertising came from television drama.”<sup>7</sup> In recent years, Chinese television drama has garnered increased scholarly attention; since 2005, numerous articles, essay collections, and books focusing on Chinese television drama have been published. The thesis that follows will build on this recent scholarship to closely examine three popular Chinese TV dramas, illustrating how they expose and explore existing social issues in contemporary China. It will also consider recent developments in melodrama theory to investigate the complex social issues they embody. To set the stage for this exploration, I will examine recent developments in China’s TV industry, followed by an overview of relevant theories of melodrama.

### ***A Brief History of Chinese TV Dramas***

A number of separate genres of TV drama have emerged since China’s first serial appeared on screen in 1981. In the 1980s, most dramas explored issues related to social

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<sup>5</sup> Kristian Kender, Anke Redl, and Rowan Simons, ed., *2007 China Media Yearbook and Directory* (Beijing: China Media Monitor Intelligence, 2007) 15.

<sup>6</sup> Michael A. Keane, “Television Drama in China: Remaking the Market,” *Media International Australia (Culture and Policy)* 115 (2005): 82, 21 May 2008 <<http://eprints.qut.edu.au/archive/00002430/01/2430.pdf>> . Note: This information is based on statistics from *China Television Drama Report, 2002-2003* (Beijing: CSM Publishing, 2003), a report I have not been able to access.

<sup>7</sup>Keane, 82. Note: This information is based on statistics from *China Television Drama Report, 2002-2003* (Beijing: CSM Publishing, 2003), a report I have not been able to access.

injustice; however, by the end of the decade, “the focus had turned...toward the more secular concerns of living in an increasingly competitive and less egalitarian society.”<sup>8</sup> In particular, family-focused dramas took off in 1990, with the hit *Yearning (kewang)*, “a heart-wrenching Chinese television drama about the intertwined lives, loves, and tragedies of two ordinary families, the intellectual Wangs and the worker Lius.”<sup>9</sup> Viewers became mesmerized with the plight of these two on-screen families, “as the vicissitudes of their joys and sorrows unfold[ed] over the two decades from the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) through the late 1980s.”<sup>10</sup> As Shuyu Kong notes, the show “caused a paradigmatic shift in the evolution of Chinese television narrative by zooming in on family life and domestic space.”<sup>11</sup> In addition to these family-focused dramas, the 1990s also saw an increase in popularity of period dramas, which “tell stories that purportedly occurred in pre-1911 China.”<sup>12</sup> The early 2000s saw “a surge of interest in tales of corruption and crime,”<sup>13</sup> although this trend was supposedly stalled in 2004 when the State Administration for Radio, Film and Television (SARFT) issued a regulation removing “the entire crime drama genre from prime-time television.”<sup>14</sup> According to

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<sup>8</sup>Zhu, Keane, and Bai, 5.

<sup>9</sup> Lisa Rofel, “The Melodrama of National Identity in Post-Tiananmen China,” *To Be Continued...: Soap Operas Around the World*, ed. Robert C. Allen (London: Routledge, 1995) 301.

<sup>10</sup> Rofel, “The Melodrama of National Identity in Post-Tiananmen China,” 301.

<sup>11</sup> Shuyu Kong, “Family Matters: Reconstructing the Family on the Chinese Television Screen,” *TV Drama in China*, TransAsia: Screen Cultures, ed. Ying Zhu, Michael Keane, and Ruoyun Bai (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2008) 76.

<sup>12</sup> Zhu, Keane, and Bai, 7.

<sup>13</sup> Zhu, Keane, and Bai, 8.

<sup>14</sup> Zhu, Keane, and Bai, 8.

Ying Zhu, “ostensibly, the SARFT issued the ban in order to protect children watching during primetime, but the result has been to curtail crime dramas in general, including the state’s own anti-corruption vehicles, effectively paving the way for a revival of dynasty dramas.”<sup>15</sup> By the late 1990s, a new subgenre of “pink dramas” had appeared, “reflecting the social empowerment of single women in modern Confucian societies.”<sup>16</sup> According to Ya-chien Huang, this genre focuses on “single, childless urban women who are successful in careers but nevertheless confused in personal relationships.... Educated, independent, and enjoying Westernized lifestyles in cosmopolitan cities, they symbolize a generation growing up since the late 1980s.”<sup>17</sup>

### ***The Regulatory Process***

The entire TV drama production process is state controlled. Before the filming of a TV drama can begin, the script must first pass an initial review by SARFT. In addition, the drama must be “produced by a licensed television drama unit, pass the end-product censorship by SARFT or its local affiliated bureau, and receive a distribution license.”<sup>18</sup> Even if they pass these initial screening procedures, controversial dramas may still be

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<sup>15</sup> Ying Zhu, *Television in Post-Reform China: Serial Dramas, Confucian Leadership and the Global Television Market*, Routledge Media, Culture and Social Change in Asia 13 (London: Routledge, 2008) 3.

<sup>16</sup> Zhu, Keane, and Bai, 13.

<sup>17</sup> Ya-Chien Huang, “Pink Dramas: Reconciling Consumer Modernity and Confucian Motherhood,” *TV Drama in China*, TransAsia: Screen Cultures, ed. Ying Zhu, Michael Keane, and Ruoyun Bai (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2008) 103.

<sup>18</sup> Zhu, Keane, and Bai, 10.

taken off the air or, at the very least, be “subject to major revisions.”<sup>19</sup> Once the drama is ready for broadcasting, the rights are sold to one of China’s many TV stations—whether national (China Central Television, or CCTV), provincial (such as Zhejiang TV), or local (e.g. Chengdu TV). Usually, the station will show at least one episode daily until it is finished, and the series is shown in its entirety within a few weeks. After the initial screening, the drama is often re-aired in a similar fashion multiple times on other channels throughout China, in an effort to maximize revenue. The TV station that airs the show first pays the most for the right to do so, but also benefits from the opportunity to bring in more advertising revenue that sometimes accompanies a drama’s much-awaited first airing. It is worthwhile to emphasize here that although CCTV is China’s only “official” national network, most provincial TV stations are accessible throughout China via satellite. As a result, when a show is aired on Zhejiang TV, for example, viewers outside of Zhejiang province can tune in. In fact, “with cable and satellite bringing television channels from all over China and even Hong Kong, a typical Chinese television viewer today has at least dozens and often more than a hundred channels to choose from.”<sup>20</sup> As a result, any one TV drama must compete with those being shown at the same time on other stations (whether local, provincial, or national). Because dramas are re-aired multiple times on other channels, however, if a viewer misses the first airing, he or she is likely to be able to watch it at a later date.

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<sup>19</sup> Zhu, Keane, and Bai, 10.

<sup>20</sup> Chris Berry, “Shanghai Television’s Documentary Channel,” *TV China*, ed. Ying Zhu and Chris Berry (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009) 75.

### ***Audience Construction***

The 2003-2004 edition of the *China TV Drama Report* indicates that “TV drama tends to attract female audiences and people with lower level of education. Women spend eight minutes per day more than men on TV drama, and those with junior high school education watched sixteen minutes more than viewers with a college degree.”<sup>21</sup> Moreover, “the age group of sixty-five and older watched more than other groups; and those with a monthly income of RMB900 and less watched fifty-nine minutes as opposed to the forty-one minutes spent by people earning more than RMB2000 a month.”<sup>22</sup> These statistics, however, do not take into account consumers who purchase TV drama on video. Rong Cai observes that, “consumers of TV drama on video...belonged to a different socio-economic group.”<sup>23</sup> The majority of these consumers (based on an investigation regarding the purchasing of pirated discs) tend to be “white-collar workers, with good education and high incomes.”<sup>24</sup> In other words, published statistics that indicate TV drama is watched in larger amounts by older, less educated, and lower wage earners, are likely reflecting a shift in medium for younger, more educated, and higher income viewers, rather than a shift away from TV drama itself. As Rong Cai further explains, “video viewing subverts state restrictions, allowing viewers to choose ‘what to think

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<sup>21</sup> Rong Cai, “Carnavalesque Pleasure: The Audio-visual Market and the Consumption of Television Drama,” *TV Drama in China*, TransAsia: Screen Cultures, ed. Ying Zhu, Michael Keane, and Ruoyun Bai (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2008) 137. Note: I have not been able to verify this information as I have not been able to obtain the *China TV Drama Report*.

<sup>22</sup> Cai, 137.

<sup>23</sup> Cai, 137.

<sup>24</sup> Cai, 137.

about.’ Many titles on ‘restricted topics’ were readily available in the video market.”<sup>25</sup> Due to this increased availability, “government regulations no longer retain their power to regulate viewer intake and modes of consumption.”<sup>26</sup> For example, the 2004 SARFT ban on crime dramas in primetime only affected those who watched TV dramas as they were broadcasted. Those who watch DVD versions were still free to watch crime dramas in “primetime” simply by inserting a disc into their DVD players. Although Rong Cai limits her discussion to the video and DVD markets, increasing numbers of TV dramas—including the three examined in this thesis—are also available on the internet, offering yet another option for those with high-speed internet access. *Give Me a Cigarette*, a TV drama explored in Chapter 3 of this thesis, disappeared from the airwaves after initially being shown in a number of markets in 2006 and 2007, and, as a result viewers had to wait until a newly edited version aired in September 2008. The original version remained available for purchase on DVD or for free download via the internet, and many viewers turned to these media to enjoy the series.<sup>27</sup>

### ***Melodrama as a Theoretical Framework***

“Melodrama” is a concept that has had different meanings for different scholars at different times. At its most basic level, the term refers to a dramatic narrative that is

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<sup>25</sup> Cai, 140.

<sup>26</sup> Cai, 140.

<sup>27</sup> “*Evening Rain* Defrosted and Broadcasted in Beijing: Zhang Duo Once Again Plays a New Good Man 《夜雨》北京化凍播出 張鐸再次演繹新好男人,” *Sina Entertainment* 新浪娱乐, 19 September 2008, 15 January 2009 <<http://ent.sina.com.cn/v/m/2008-09-19/19432176146.shtml>>.

accompanied by music ('melos'). Peter Brooks has suggested that "the origins of melodrama can be accurately located within the context of the French Revolution and its aftermath."<sup>28</sup> In his view, melodrama "[came] into being in a world where the traditional imperatives of truth and ethics have been violently thrown into question, yet where the promulgation of truth and ethics, their instauration as a way of life, is of immediate, daily, political concern."<sup>29</sup> For Brooks, "melodrama [became] the principal mode for uncovering, demonstrating, and making operative the essential moral universe in a post-sacred era."<sup>30</sup>

Although cinema has utilized melodramatic techniques since its inception, the dramatic form has only garnered serious attention since the 1970s. As John Mercer and Martin Shingler explain, "During the 1970s and 1980s, melodrama acquired a new status amongst film historians, theorists and critics, many of whom sought to define the basic thematic and stylistic features of the form, its antecedents and evolution on screen, its influence, appeal, and its ideology."<sup>31</sup> This initial attention focused mainly on films by Hollywood directors such as Douglas Sirk and Vincente Minnelli, and in particular on films that explored issues related to the family and women's position in society. As Mercer and Shingler emphasize, however, melodrama "consists of much more than the Hollywood family melodrama and the 'woman's film.'" Since the 1980s, some film

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<sup>28</sup> Peter Brooks, "The Melodramatic Imagination," *Imitations of Life: A Reader on Film and Television Melodrama*, ed. Marcia Landy (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991) 60.

<sup>29</sup> Brooks, 60.

<sup>30</sup> Brooks, 60-61.

<sup>31</sup> John Mercer and Martin Shingler, *Melodrama: Genre, Style, Sensibility*, Short Cuts: Introductions to Film Studies (London: Wallflower Press, 2004) 4.



scholars have been rethinking melodrama beyond generic boundaries, as a style, mode, sensibility, aesthetic and rhetoric, crossing a range of genres, media, historical periods and cultures.”<sup>32</sup> The work of one such scholar, Linda Williams, is instrumental for my study of contemporary Chinese TV dramas. In an essay entitled “Melodrama Revised,” Williams argues:

If emotional and moral registers are sounded, if a work invites us to feel sympathy for the virtues of beset victims, if the narrative trajectory is ultimately more concerned with a retrieval and staging of innocence than with the psychological causes of motives and action, then the operative mode is melodrama.<sup>33</sup>

She further identifies five conditions to which melodramatic texts adhere: they begin and end in a sphere of innocence; they depict so-called victim-heroes who are recognized for their virtue; they appear “modern” by borrowing elements from realism; they involve a combination of pathos and action; and finally, their characters portray Manichaeian conflicts of good versus evil.<sup>34</sup>

Williams also suggests that “part of the excitement of the form is the genuine turmoil and timeliness of the issues it takes up and the popular debate it can generate when it dramatizes a new controversy or issue.”<sup>35</sup> It is this aspect of melodrama in particular that makes it such an attractive theoretical approach for examining the texts

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<sup>32</sup> Mercer and Shingler, 76.

<sup>33</sup> Linda Williams, “Melodrama Revised,” *Refiguring American Film Genres: History and Theory*, ed. N. Browne, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998) 42.

<sup>34</sup> Williams, 65-77.

<sup>35</sup> Williams, 53.

explored in this thesis. Another influential scholar of melodrama, Christine Gledhill, further articulates these ideas:

Melodrama addresses us within the limitations of the status quo, of the ideologically permissible. It acknowledges demands inadmissible in the codes of social, psychological or political discourse. If melodrama can only end in the place where it began, not having a programmatic analysis for the future, its possibilities lie in this double acknowledgment of how things are in a given historical conjuncture, and of the primary desires and resistances contained within it. This is important for understanding not only what we want to change but the strengths and weakness of where we come from.<sup>36</sup>

What is important in a melodramatic text, therefore, is not the ending, but the tensions that appear throughout the course of the narrative, where the “primary desires and resistances” can be found. If this holds true for a two-hour film melodrama, it is even more convincing for a TV drama that is shown over the course of a number of weeks, months, or years.

This brings me to the question of which theories of melodrama are most useful for analyzing the three TV dramas explored in this thesis. Are these shows Chinese soap operas, or do they relate more to “traditional” forms of film melodrama? Perhaps they fall somewhere in between. Generally speaking, TV melodramas can be divided into two forms: the open serial, such as the US soap opera, which are “never ending,” and the closed serial, which, like most Chinese TV dramas and Latin American telenovelas, has a fixed ending. Ana M. Lopez has argued that in comparison to US soap operas, the Latin American telenovela’s “narrative closure and extraordinarily persistent use of standard

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<sup>36</sup> Christine Gledhill, “The Melodramatic Field: An Investigation,” *Home is Where the Heart is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman’s Film*, ed. Christine Gledhill (London: British Film Institute, 1987) 38.

melodramatic devices...square it firmly within a rather 'purer' melodramatic tradition."<sup>37</sup> If the strength of film melodrama "lies in the amount of dust the story raises along the road, a cloud of over-determined irreconcilables which put up a resistance to being neatly settled in the last five minutes,"<sup>38</sup> the strength of soap opera melodrama may lie in the fact that the soap opera, "because it is always going along the road, [can] raise an infinite amount of dust without worrying about clearing it up."<sup>39</sup> One might be tempted to choose one of these forms of melodrama or the other as the basis for the theoretical framework. While it is clear that Chinese TV dramas have a lot in common with their Latin American counterparts, I suggest that Chinese TV dramas embody characteristics of both soap opera and film melodrama. The narrative closure of Chinese TV dramas certainly links them to film melodrama, but at the same time, many of the issues raised throughout a TV series are not resolved until the final few episodes, and, typically, not within the episode during which they are introduced. With this knowledge, we should also consider the dramas with regard to theories associated with the never-ending soap opera. Since there is no guarantee that viewers will ever actually see the final episode (or really any particular episode) of the series, we should focus on the "dust raised along the way," whether or not it settles back down in the end. Indeed, as Robert C. Allen observes in a discussion of TV melodramatic texts, "because of the gaps created by its serial

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<sup>37</sup> Ana M. Lopez, "Our Welcomed Guests: Telenovelas in Latin America," *To Be Continued...: Soap Operas Around the World*, ed. Robert C. Allen (London: Routledge, 1995) 261.

<sup>38</sup> Laura Mulvey, "Notes on Sirk and Melodrama," *Home is Where the Heart is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film*, ed. Christine Gledhill (London: British Film Institute, 1987) 76.

<sup>39</sup> Ien Ang, "Dallas and the Melodramatic Imagination," *Imitations of Life: A Reader on Film and Television Melodrama*, ed. Marcia Landy (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991) 487.

structure, even the closed serial, for a time at least, opens up issues, values, and meanings that the text itself cannot immediately close off.”<sup>40</sup> In light of these observations, I will utilize a combination of theoretical works regarding both film and soap opera melodrama in the chapters that follow.

### *Melodrama in the Post-Mao Context*

The post-Mao Chinese context is an environment particularly well-suited to the melodramatic form. As mentioned previously, Peter Brooks has argued that melodrama became the “principal mode for uncovering, demonstrating, and making operative the essential moral universe in a post-sacred era.”<sup>41</sup> In the Mao era political arena, although the concepts were ever changing, the distinction between “right” and “wrong” was clearly delineated. In the post-Mao era, however, the endeavor to create a market-based economy led by socialist principles has blurred the boundary and created a sizeable “grey area” within which the Chinese populace must function. In this new era, melodrama can be seen as a useful medium for dramatizing the social issues and resulting ethical dilemmas that have accompanied economic reforms. Unlike the Mao era, when urban residents were promised an “iron rice bowl,” ensuring life-long employment and access to health care and other benefits, market reform efforts led to the destruction of this guarantee, abandoning citizens to navigate the new market economy on their own. In the chapters that follow, three women from three different television dramas attempt to

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<sup>40</sup> Robert C. Allen, introduction, *To Be Continued...: Soap Operas Around the World*, ed. Robert C. Allen (London: Routledge, 1995) 24.

<sup>41</sup> Brooks, 60-61.

traverse this new reform-era reality. Xie Xiangmei in *Close to You, Make Me Warm* (靠近你, 温暖我, 2006) sacrifices her femininity in order to financially support her family of four women (her mother, her divorced and laid off older sister, and her sixteen year-old niece) on her white-collar salary. Throughout the series, Xiangmei attempts to “regain” her femininity as she is (re)educated at the hands of Lin Danqing, one of her employees. The drama *Give Me a Cigarette* (给我一支烟, 2006) explores the plight of Yezi, a young girl from Qingdao who has resorted to dancing and entertaining male customers in a Shenzhen nightclub in order to meet her rising tuition and other living expenses. We watch as she confronts the social and legal consequences which accompany her decision to sell her body. In the third television drama examined, *I'm Not a Hero* (我非英雄, 2004), He Jianying, or Chairwoman He, has masterminded an extensive corruption and embezzlement scheme in order to financially provide for herself and her daughter now that she is nearing retirement age. At the same time, the show also explores the plight of the “ordinary” worker, whose benefits have been sacrificed due to Chairwoman He’s greed.

The popularity of the three shows illustrates how “part of the excitement of the form is the genuine turmoil and timeliness of the issues it takes up and the popular debate it can generate when it dramatizes a new controversy or issue.”<sup>42</sup> Prostitution and corruption have both garnered a great deal of attention in China in recent years. While the third issue, the “overly aggressive” businesswoman, may seem like a relatively minor social issue in comparison, the fact that China’s leading universities, such as Peking

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<sup>42</sup> Williams, 53.

University and Fudan University offer training courses for female managers to teach them how to manage their employees more “femininely” suggests that even this seemingly minor social issue has become a bit of a “hot topic” in reform-era China.

CHAPTER II

THE THREAT OF WOMEN IN THE WORKPLACE AND THE RISE OF  
A NEW *BAIGUJING* IN *CLOSE TO YOU, MAKE ME WARM*

The Chinese TV drama *Close to You, Make Me Warm* (靠近你, 温暖我, 2006) follows the lives of three women in contemporary China: Fang Kezhou, who is in a loveless marriage, grappling with her marital obligations and her developing interest in another man; Ding Aiyu, who has fallen in love with a married man; and Xie Xiangmei, who is extremely successful in her career, but unsuccessful in her search for love. The 26-episode series first aired on Beijing's BTV2 channel on June 10, 2006, and was quickly picked up by various TV channels throughout the country. Dubbed "The Most Awaited Emotional Drama of 2006" by the media, it achieved great popularity throughout the country. When it aired on Hunan TV, for example, it was the most watched show during the coveted 7:30pm time slot from June 26-July 9, 2006, surpassing even the immensely popular "Endless Love 2" and the Hong Kong hit, "The Three Musketeers" which aired at the same time.<sup>43</sup> Chinese media reports suggest that the reason for the show's success is largely due to the fact that "just about everyone can find

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<sup>43</sup> "The Secret to *Close to You, Make Me Warm's* Success 《靠近你, 温暖我》荧屏内外解析热播秘密," *Sina Entertainment* 新浪娱乐, 26 July 2006, 7 June 2008 <<http://ent.sina.com.cn/v/m/2006-07-26/16191173645.html>>.

someone to identify with in the series.”<sup>44</sup> In addition, the series quickly drew attention from viewers “due to its authenticity and its direct portrayal of the spiritual and emotional world of ‘white-collar’ female workers.”<sup>45</sup>

The series pivots around negative female stereotypes, such as the “other” woman (the 第三者), and the overly masculine and aggressive woman who sacrifices family for career. Our first introduction to the characters is framed via these stereotypes – we meet Ding Aiyu as her love interest cancels plans with her after he discovers that his wife has returned from England, and we meet Xie Xiangmei as she harshly and unsympathetically criticizes her employees for their less than satisfactory performance. As the series continues, however, we quickly realize that these women do not fit these stereotypes at all.

In this chapter, I will focus on the overly masculine Xie Xiangmei and her “transformation” into a more feminine character. The series effectively suggests to the viewer that Xiangmei is not innately masculine, but that her role as the sole breadwinner in a family of four women has forced her to take on a masculine exterior. This exterior is directly at odds with the traditional view of women, who were expected to be “soft on the outside, tough on the inside” (外柔内刚). Due to her financial situation, Xiangmei has become the inversion of this – “tough on the outside, soft on the inside” (外刚内柔).

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<sup>44</sup> “*Close to You, Make Me Warm* Hot Nationwide; Ke Lan Triggers Sympathetic Response for the ‘White Bone Demon’ 《靠近》全国热播 柯蓝引发“白骨精”共鸣,” *Sina Entertainment* 新浪娱乐, 29 March 2007, 7 June 2008 <<http://ent.sina.com.cn/v/m/2007-03-28/19161496951.html>>.

<sup>45</sup> “*Close to You, Make Me Warm* Hot in Shandong: Instructs You to Defend Your Love 《靠近你，温暖我》山东热播 教你捍卫感情,” *Sina Entertainment* 新浪娱乐, 3 July 2006, 7 June 2008 <<http://ent.sina.com.cn/v/m/2006-07-03/15301144553.html>>.



Although the series blames this reversal on her family's individual plight, public reaction to the show indicates that there are increasing numbers of "Xie Xiangmeis" in contemporary urban China.

In the sections that follow, I will first lay out a theoretical framework based on existing theories of melodrama, and then examine briefly gender-related trends of the post-Mao period and attitudes towards career women in contemporary China. Following this initial discussion, I will turn to the series itself, showing how, as a melodrama, it first breaks open the career woman stereotype, but requires Xiangmei to return to a more socially accepted female role by the end of the series. At the same time, I will explore how those around Xie Xiangmei are critical of her gender transgressions, and will look at the depiction of her "transformation" into a more feminine character to gain a better understanding of how post-Mao ideals of masculinity and femininity are defined in the series. Finally, I will look at how the ending encourages viewers to read against the grain, and show how recent reviews and discussions regarding the TV series indicate that viewers did just that, ignoring the conservative ending of the series, and instead focusing their debate on the issues facing women like Xiangmei in contemporary Chinese society.

### ***Theoretical Framework***

*Close to You, Make Me Warm* can be seen as part of a recent "trend towards dramas that target female viewers" in China.<sup>46</sup> In Michael Keane's discussion of two Chinese *Sex and the City* copycats, earlier examples of this trend, he states that they

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<sup>46</sup> Keane, 88.

“focused on topics like love at the first sight, marriage, and life as a single woman.”<sup>47</sup> In light of these observations, it is worthwhile to include a discussion of the theoretical writings of Pam Cook regarding “Melodrama and the Women’s Picture.” Cook examines existing feminist approaches to melodrama, including the work of Laura Mulvey. In Cook’s reading, Mulvey advocated focusing on “the function performed by melodrama in working through the contradictions of women’s position in society.”<sup>48</sup> In *Close to You, Make Me Warm*, a number of contradictions are raised; for the purposes of this chapter, the most relevant is that Xiangmei, as the only employed member of her family, is forced to shoulder the typically masculine burden of supporting her family, yet is criticized and condemned by colleagues, family, and friends for displaying masculine tendencies.

Cook later notes that in the women’s melodrama, “the heroine’s transgression resides in her desire to act against socially accepted definitions of femininity, bringing her face to face with society.”<sup>49</sup> Indeed, Xiangmei’s desire to be successful in her career is in direct conflict with socially accepted definitions of femininity. She finds herself in a double bind: either remain unloved and despised as an “overly masculine” but successful “white collar” female, or reclaim her innate femininity and be reaccepted by society. At the same time, however, melodrama allows viewers an opportunity to begin working out these frustrating issues; as Cook explains, “Reconstituted as an object of feminist study,

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<sup>47</sup> Keane, 88.

<sup>48</sup> Pam Cook, “Melodrama and the Women’s Picture,” *Imitations of Life: A Reader on Film and Television Melodrama*, ed. Marcia Landy (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991) 250.

<sup>49</sup> Cook, 254.

melodrama is useful in helping us to understand how women are positioned under patriarchy so that we can formulate strategies for change.”<sup>50</sup>

Also relevant for our purposes here is Thomas Schatz’s observation that in most melodrama, “The existing social and familial structures act as both the problem and its eventual solution.”<sup>51</sup> Even though problems are usually resolved by the end of the melodrama, “the problems themselves are so immediate, familiar, and intense, they scarcely can be resolved as easily as their narratives suggest.”<sup>52</sup> Indeed, as Mulvey noted in her essay, “Notes on Sirk and Melodrama,” “the strength of the melodramatic form lies in the amount of dust the story raises along the road, a cloud of over-determined irreconcilables which put up a resistance to being neatly settled in the last five minutes.”<sup>53</sup> As will be further discussed at the end of this chapter, it is the dust raised in *Close to You, Make Me Warm* that seems to have struck a chord with women viewers. Both Schatz and Elsaesser seem to argue that this trend indicates a covert function of melodrama “to formulate a devastating critique of the ideology that supports it.”<sup>54</sup> While it may be difficult to prove that the writers of *Close to You, Make Me Warm* were purposely formulating a critique of postsocialist China’s view towards women, viewers are nonetheless provided the opportunity to formulate that critique on their own by utilizing the feminist options explored by Pam Cook mentioned above.

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<sup>50</sup> Cook, 250.

<sup>51</sup> Thomas Schatz, “The Family Melodrama,” *Imitations of Life: A Reader on Film and Television Melodrama*, ed. Marcia Landy (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991) 162.

<sup>52</sup> Schatz, 162.

<sup>53</sup> Mulvey, 76.

<sup>54</sup> Schatz, 151.

### *The Post-Mao Ideal of Femininity and Career Women*

In the past few decades, a number of scholars and critics have argued that the Maoist notion that “what men can do, women also can do” effectively erased gender as a category, rather than creating actual gender equality, leading to a call for the refeminization of women during the early post-Mao period. As Lisa Rofel notes, the “postsocialist allegory of modernity...tells a story of how Maoism deferred China’s ability to reach modernity by impeding Chinese people’s ability to express their gendered human natures.”<sup>55</sup> As Xueping Zhong further explains, “after years of Communist rule, Chinese men had become too weak and Chinese women had become too strong; known in Chinese as *yinsheng yangshuai xianxiang*, the myth literally means ‘the phenomenon of the prosperity of the feminine and the decline of the masculine.’”<sup>56</sup> As she further notes, however,

In this particular context, [the term] was no more than a euphemistic expression denoting gender relations and configurations affected by the CCP’s dominant ideology, linking woman (rather than the feminine) directly with the *yin* in *yinsheng* and man (rather than the masculine) directly with the *yang* in *yangshuai*. In this sense, the phenomenon can be simply translated as the “women-are-too-strong-and-men-are-too-weak phenomenon.”<sup>57</sup>

Although the *yinsheng yangshuai* phenomenon is associated here with the period immediately following the Maoist era, in some ways the same threat is also present in the TV drama we will be exploring—while Xie Xiangmei is the one criticized by Lin

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<sup>55</sup> Lisa Rofel, *Desiring China: Experiments in Neoliberalism, Sexuality, and Public Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007) 13.

<sup>56</sup> Xueping Zhong, *Masculinity Besieged? Issues of Modernity and Male Subjectivity in Chinese Literature of the Late Twentieth Century* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000) 40.

<sup>57</sup> Zhong, 40.

Danqing for being too masculine and for being not enough like a woman, by the end of the series it becomes clear that this criticism is due at least in part to his own feelings of inadequacy of not being “man” enough to marry her. In other words, what is problematic is not simply that Xiangmei is unfeminine, but that her lack of femininity threatens Danqing and other male characters’ masculinity, and as a result they are unsure of their role and how to act. As her boyfriend explains to her in Episode 2, if she is “tougher” than a man, what can he bring to the relationship? Or, in his words, “What’s the point of being with a woman at all?”

Indeed, as Rofel points out, Maoist feminism “is said to have emasculated men, masculinized women, and mistakenly equated the genders.”<sup>58</sup> As a result, “in post-Mao China, it [became] imperative to make radical distinctions between femininity and masculinity;”<sup>59</sup> as such, a new ideal appeared: “a woman who was ‘obedient’ (*tinghua*) to her husband, considerate of his needs, and ‘gentle and soft’ (*wenrou*) in her approach.”<sup>60</sup>

Women who identified more with the idea that “what men can do, women also can do” than the idea that distinctions between femininity and masculinity are necessary likely found it difficult to transition to this new ideal, and some even needed to be taught how to become more feminine. As Mayfair Mei-hui Yang points out, “training classes

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<sup>58</sup> Rofel, *Desiring China*, 117.

<sup>59</sup> Rofel, *Desiring China*, 117.

<sup>60</sup> Harriet Evans, “Past, Perfect or Imperfect: Changing Images of the Ideal Wife,” *Chinese Femininities/Chinese Masculinities: A Reader*, ed. Susan Brownell and Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002) 340.

and self-help classes for women have sprung up in the 1990s in Chinese cities.”<sup>61</sup> These courses taught “women to be more feminine, and to realize their women’s identity and roles.”<sup>62</sup> This trend has continued in the early 21st century, with similar courses (to be discussed further below) being offered to female managers to help them develop a more “feminine” style of management. Indeed, many Chinese businesswomen are criticized for being unfeminine. According to an article entitled “Wonder Women,” published in the English-language *China Daily* on April 25, 2007, “there is a dichotomy of stereotypes of Chinese businesswomen. These women are usually believed to either be tough, aggressive females who’ve sacrificed family for career, or they are viewed as maternal figures in the workplace who nurture staff and clientele.”<sup>63</sup> It is the first stereotype that we are concerned with here. The reception of such aggressive females has often been negative. In May 2008, the China Europe International Business School (CEIBS) hosted its second annual Women’s Forum. One of the speakers, Chialing Hsuen, told attendees: “female business leaders ... encounter double standards; if you are successful and determined, people will criticize you that you are so tough. When I raise my voice at a meeting to argue, my subordinates will criticize me that I am not like a woman.”<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Mayfair Mei-hui Yang, “From Gender Erasure to Gender Difference: State Feminism, Consumer Sexuality, and Women’s Public Sphere in China,” *Spaces of Their Own: Women’s Public Sphere in Transnational China*, ed. Mayfair Mei-hui Yang (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999) 49.

<sup>62</sup> Yang, 49.

<sup>63</sup> “Wonder Women,” *China Daily*, 25 April 2007, 28 April 2008 <<http://www.china.org.cn/english/features/cw/208877.htm>>.

<sup>64</sup> China Europe International Business School, “CEIBS Hosts 2nd Annual Women’s Forum,” Press release, 9 May 2008, 15 May 2008 <<http://www.ceibs.edu/media/archive/27853.shtml>>.

These women are not only criticized, but are also encouraged to develop a more attractive (i.e. feminine) management style. In fact, according to another *China Daily* article, management schools throughout the country have established special training programs for female managers. Fudan University, one of Shanghai's top schools, offers an "Excellent Women Program" for female entrepreneurs. Peking University's Guanghua School of Management offers a "Women Development Program," and a second school in Shanghai, the Management School of East China Normal University offers the "Perfect Women Program." One of the attendees of these programs, Ding Jia, a mid-30s advertising executive, noted that prior to attending, she had utilized a "masculine way of management, using scolding and fury to discipline employees. It made [her] firm but not so popular."<sup>65</sup> However, the course "taught her how to integrate both soft and firm measures to impress her employees and manage them more harmoniously."<sup>66</sup> Although one may suspect that men who use Ding Jia's "masculine" management style, and who discipline employees through "scolding and fury" would be just as problematic for the workplace setting. However, these courses are targeted specifically at female managers; by identifying certain leadership characteristics as "masculine" and "feminine," the courses are recreating boundaries within which women are expected to operate in the office setting. These courses can be contrasted with trainings for male managers, which focus more on skill development than personal development or positive image creation.

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<sup>65</sup> "Course Turns Female Bosses into Counselors," *China Daily*, 12 October 2006, 28 April 2008 <<http://www.china.org.cn/english/features/cw/183728.htm>>.

<sup>66</sup> "Course Turns Female Bosses into Counselors."

### *A Close Look at the Series Itself*

Keeping these comments in mind, I would like to explore how we are introduced to Xie Xiangmei. In the second episode of the TV drama, we meet a woman dressed in a manly pantsuit with her hair tied tightly back. We first watch her reprimand her employees about their less than satisfactory performance. A few minutes later, we see her walk into a restaurant to meet her boyfriend, as she harshly criticizes a colleague on her mobile. We also see the boyfriend's frustrated reaction to her tone of voice. After hanging up the phone, and before saying "hello" to her boyfriend, we first hear her ask him whether or not he has ordered. She looks at his choices, calls the waitress over, and informs her that she wants to change the order. This being taken care of, she turns back to her boyfriend, and straightforwardly asks him why he called her to meet him. She doesn't bother to say hello, or ask him about his day, or offer any pleasantries. As he hesitates to respond, she reminds him that she only has thirty minutes before she has to return to work. At this point, the boyfriend tells her that he wants to break up with her. When she asks him why, he merely posits a question: "Do you really even need a man?" and walks out of the restaurant.

The next day, we watch Xiangmei in her office as she picks up the phone, calls her boyfriend, and instructs him to meet her later that night at the same restaurant to explain why he is breaking up with her. Again, she does not bother to really say hello, or ask if he is even free – she directly orders him to meet her. That night, at dinner, she again asks him why he is breaking up with her. He tells her, "It is still the same reason – do you really even need a man?" When she responds, "Of course I do! I'm a woman,"



he retorts, “Unbelievable! You still think that you’re a woman (你还能想起你自己是个女人).” When she asks him to explain, he asks her, “Have you ever noticed your tone of voice? It’s like iron nails hitting the ground. Every day I ask myself—does this sound like a woman speaking to a man? Does it sound like a woman and a man in love? No, it doesn’t. It sounds like a general talking to a recruit on the battlefield.” He continues,

Xie Xiangmei, I really don’t understand—you are dating a man. Why do you have to be so tough? I am a man. If you ask me what I am looking for in a woman, I of course hope that she can be as ‘tender and soft as water.’ But here I am, dating a woman tougher than I am—what’s the point of being with a woman at all?

These few scenes serve as our first introduction to Xie Xiangmei. The image created is certainly not a positive one. At this point, the viewer is likely to sympathize with the boyfriend, for Xiangmei shows no real compassion or feeling for him at all. Although he appears to care about her, he seems to have reached a breaking point. In these scenes it is obvious that he is afraid of her and that his attempt to end the relationship has tested his courage. Throughout this entire introduction to Xiangmei’s character, she appears extremely aggressive, forceful, and as he noted, tough—the very epitome of the “aggressive career woman” outlined above. It is perhaps fitting that he emphasized her toughness when we look back at the stereotypes outlined in both the “Wonder Women” article and the speech given at the CEIBS Women’s Forum. They, too, emphasize the fact that these women are seen as “tough.” While we have only briefly seen Xiangmei at her office, we nonetheless have the impression that she is one of the women in need of a training course on how to better manage her employees. In these first scenes, we see Xiangmei being judged by society (and, perhaps, the viewer) for “her desire to act against

socially accepted definitions of femininity.”<sup>67</sup> As her boyfriend elucidates, a woman should be as “tender and soft as water,” not tough like Xiangmei. In addition to her tough exterior, however, her boyfriend is also criticizing her tone of voice, accusing her of not sounding like a woman, but instead like a general on the battlefield. For her boyfriend, perhaps, Xiangmei’s manner of speaking is a manifestation of her outer “toughness.”

As the episode draws to a close, we watch Xiangmei arrive home for the night. Her older sister is waiting up for her. Xiangmei asks about her niece’s exam, which her sister tells her did not go very well. Xiangmei asks to see it, and tells her sister to wake up the sixteen-year-old to go over the exam. Both the sister and Xiangmei’s mother urge Xiangmei to wait until the morning. Xiangmei acquiesces, telling her niece and mother to go to bed. She then hands her sister her monthly salary, and tells her to take care of the bills. In this first, brief introduction to Xiangmei’s family life, we see that she occupies a similar, masculine role here as well. However, we also watch her hand over her entire salary to her sister, which is the first indication that Xiangmei’s salary is the only source of income for the family of four.

It is scenes like this that cause the viewer to start questioning how masculine Xiangmei really is. When we see her, late at night, completely exhausted, we hear her voice take on a much “softer” tone. Drawing on Ellen Seiter’s exploration of the use of stereotypes in media, we can see here that what is being brought into question about the “overly masculine” stereotype is its “innateness.” We discover that at her core, Xiangmei

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<sup>67</sup> Cook, 254.

really is a “soft” (温柔), feminine woman. In effect, however, this merely confirms another underlying stereotype, that Chinese women are innately “soft” and tender. We may question the accuracy of the “overly masculine” stereotype, but we are not to conclude that it is acceptable to be overly masculine, but only that it is not innate. Instead, we are led to believe that it is something imposed on Xiangmei by society and her need to support a family made up entirely of women. Rather than directly tackling the issue of the place of such women in society, the series instead employs a typical melodramatic technique of displacing the problem from its more general social context onto Xiangmei’s unique situation.

In the next episode, we watch Xiangmei as she leads the hiring process at her company. One of the interviewees, Lin Danqing, arrives quite late. She begins the interview by noting that his resume indicates that he took a two year break between jobs; she then asks him to explain. He refuses to answer her, and even questions her reasoning. We see this new character stand up to Xiangmei in a way we have not seen before. He does eventually answer the question, but the entire interview is a tense exchange between the two. A few days later, she asks her secretary to offer him the job, on the condition that he cut his hair. His initial response is to ask the secretary whether her company is an advertising firm or a labor re-education camp. Xiangmei realizes it is Danqing, and puts the phone on speaker. As a result, the entire office overhears Danqing ask, “I’m guessing that it is that female boss of yours, you know, the one whose gender needs checking, that requested this? Who does she think she is?” Again here, Xiangmei’s outward “toughness,” displayed during Danqing’s interview, led him to conclude that her “gender

needs checking.” He could have referred to her in many different ways—the one who led the interview process, the one who questioned his commitment to his career, etc. His claim that her “gender needs checking” speaks very much to the double standards businesswomen face discussed during the CEIBS Women’s Forum. Xiangmei’s (ex)boyfriend’s comment that he finds it hard to believe that she still considers herself a woman, while perhaps equally offensive, is at least spoken by someone who dated her for over a year; Danqing is quick to draw the same conclusion after only meeting her for ten minutes.

After Danqing comes to work for her, he continues to make critical comments regarding her lack of femininity. He encourages her to be nicer to her employees, and to wear more feminine outfits when she goes out on dates and company events. He begins to help shoulder her burdens, as he offers to tutor her niece who is struggling with her studies. In many ways, Danqing becomes a much needed confidant for Xiangmei, and it is through observing her conversations with him that the viewer gains a deeper understanding of the complexities that she faces. It is in the moments when she opens her heart to him that she appears the most feminine—as she lays bare the inner softness (内柔) behind her tough exterior (外刚). At the same time, however, we are also witness to the ways in which Danqing “re-educates” her, just as we would expect one of the female manager training courses to do. He encourages her to remove her masculine “mask” and let others see the femininity which exists beneath.

Although this “re-education” process takes place over a great number of episodes, there are a few key scenes in episodes 9-11 which illustrate Danqing’s role in the process

and help us to further identify what “masculine” elements he finds problematic in Xiangmei’s character. The first such example highlights the issue of Xiangmei’s unfeminine attire. Towards the end of Episode 9, Xiangmei calls Danqing into her office to ask him to go with her to a client event the next day. After he agrees, she asks him to dress more professionally for the event. He concurs, but then adds his own request: “Could you possibly dress a bit more feminine? (你能不能也穿得女人味儿一点儿?) Don’t wear one of your three-piece suits. Save me some face.” While she does not seem entertained by his request, she consents anyway. As the episode continues, we discover that Danqing is not the only character who has issues with the way she usually dresses. Indeed, when Xiangmei tries on a colorful dress later that night and asks her family’s opinion, they are pleasantly surprised by her change of wardrobe. Her mother even exclaims, “How nice! So much better than those androgynous (不男不女的) suits you wear!” This term (*bu nan bu nü*, 不男不女), which can be literally translated as “neither man nor woman,” reappears later in the series as well, and so it is perhaps important to discuss its meaning in a bit more detail. Although the term at a more basic level can be defined as “dressing or behaving strangely,” the term is often used to indicate an androgynous appearance or behavior. For example, according to the Beijing-based online dictionary *nciku*, 不男不女 means “unwomanly” or “gender bender,”<sup>68</sup> a term defined as “a person who dresses or acts like the opposite sex.”<sup>69</sup> However, it is

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<sup>68</sup> “*bu nan bu nü* (不男不女),” *nciku Online English Chinese Dictionary*, 2009, *nciku*, 20 May 2009 <<http://www.nciku.com/search/all/不男不女>>.

<sup>69</sup> “gender bender,” *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*, 2009, Merriam-Webster Online, 20 May 2009 <[http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/gender bender](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/gender%20bender)>.

important to emphasize that the Chinese term often carries a negative connotation that might not be present in terms such as “androgynous” or “gender bender.” The term is also used by transgender and transsexual individuals to describe how they feel. In fact, Pan Suiming, director of the Institute for Research on Gender and Sexuality at Renmin University, even uses the term in a discussion of how to translate “transsexuality” into Chinese. In his discussion, he suggested that a certain word meaning “change,” *bian* (变) is better than another, *yi* (易) because *bian* incorporates the sense of changing into *bu nan bu nü*, while the other term does not allow for a blurring of the genders and instead only implies an actual change into a man or a woman.<sup>70</sup> While there is no question in the series that Xiangmei herself identifies as a woman, and is frustrated that others see her as androgynous or unfeminine, the fact that this term is also used in a transgender or transsexual context may provide a clue as to why Xiangmei is considered threatening by others in the show, as well as why the show requires her to become more feminine before allowing her to find someone willing to love her.

The next morning, as Xiangmei enters her office wearing the dress, we are perhaps in as much shock as her colleagues are. One even mumbles in disbelief, “the iron tree has blossomed (铁树开花了),” a phrase that refers to something rarely seen or hardly possible. Even the filming style emphasizes the change in Xiangmei’s appearance, as the director uses a tracking shot to follow her entrance into the office; the film speed

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<sup>70</sup> Pan Suiming, “Concerning the Translation of Transsexuality 关于‘变性’一词的翻译,” Renmin University Institute for Research on Sex and Gender 中国人民大学性社会学研究所, 12 April 2006, 7 December 2008 <<http://www.sexstudy.org/article.php?id=2662>>. As he notes in the article, “‘变’比‘易’更好, ‘易’只能在男女之间转换; ‘变’, 可以变成不男不女.”

slows briefly during her entrance, further accentuating her feminine walk and allowing the viewer ample time to notice her colleagues' reaction. In this scene Xiangmei almost looks more like a model walking down a runway than the boss arriving at the office. She becomes the object of their gaze, rather than the boss of whom everyone is terrified. This echoes Mayfair Mei-hui Yang's point that in the post-Mao period, "it is not so much that the meaning of woman is expressed through sexual difference, as the meaning of woman comes *to be* sexual difference...the effect of making women palpably visible is to make viewers identify with the subject-position of the male eye."<sup>71</sup> As a result, "male subjectivity and its power are made invisible, as in the Maoist gender order, but this invisibility is not based on an erasure or blurring of genders but depends on the hypervisibility of the female image."<sup>72</sup> In this brief moment, slightly elongated by the film speed, Xiangmei catches the attention of her male and female colleagues alike because her feminine appearance is strikingly different from her typical, androgynous one.

Later, when Xiangmei and Danqing arrive at the client event, she appears to be the epitome of femininity—she is clinging to Danqing's arm, and looking shyly and pleasantly at the other guests. When she greets the client, she introduces Danqing and sweetly praises his abilities. Her tone of voice is noticeably different from the tone she normally adopts in her office and the one her (ex)boyfriend had complained about in Episode 2—rather than sounding like a general on a battlefield, her tone of voice in this scene is "soft and gentle," or that of the post-Mao feminine ideal. After Xiangmei and

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<sup>71</sup> Yang, 50.

<sup>72</sup> Yang, 50.

Danqing make their rounds, they find a quiet area and chat for a while. Danqing leans back and gives Xiangmei an obvious glance over, at which point Xiangmei awkwardly looks away. Danqing then says, “That dress really illuminates you,” and tells her that, “All of a sudden, I get the feeling that you are a woman!” Clearly annoyed, Xiangmei responds, “What do you mean, ‘all of a sudden’ I am a woman? I’m one every day!” Danqing shakes his head, and says, “You really aren’t.” He leans in close to her and quietly continues, “It is just the last few moments where you *really* looked like a woman. Now you’ve already transformed back into my boss.” She retorts, “Well then treat your boss with a bit more respect.”

This series of scenes not only confirms to the viewer that Xiangmei, despite her unfeminine attire and “masculine” temperament, nonetheless possesses feminine characteristics, but also implies that her typical “masculine” behavior is in some way tied to her attire. At the very least, we are shown that Xiangmei is capable of “acting” feminine, even if she eventually (in Danqing’s eyes) transforms back into his boss whose “gender needs checking.” At the same time, however, the fact that this change is so immediate, so obvious, and so easy for Xiangmei implies that femininity is merely performative—by putting on a colorful dress and a coquettish smile, Xiangmei is able to transform into someone able to pass as feminine. As such, it would appear that what is problematic for Xiangmei is not that she is strong-willed and “masculine” in temperament, but that these traits are not hidden behind a feminine “mask.”

Later in Episode 10, we watch Xiangmei at dinner with her college roommates as they celebrate the youngest roommate’s marriage; Xiangmei is the only one who remains



unmarried. Xiangmei's roommates ask her to tell them about her boyfriend, and when she informs them that she is still single, one of them responds, "You lie! Who could possibly believe that you don't have a boyfriend? Back in college, there was a long line of men trying to pursue you!" Xiangmei smiles awkwardly, and continues to insist that she is single, blaming it on her work. This again confirms to the viewer that Xiangmei's natural temperament is not to be found in her tough exterior – otherwise, why would so many men have pursued her in college? The series has already made it clear to us that masculine women are unloveable. The implication is that had her sister not gotten divorced or lost her job, then Xiangmei would not have been under so much pressure to singlehandedly support the family of four, and therefore would have retained her "innate" femininity.

After the dinner, Xiangmei returns to her office, and sits in Danqing's cubicle. He walks in with his takeout dinner, and sits down at the table across from his desk. Xiangmei has risen from his chair, but remains facing the opposite direction. Danqing asks whether or not she has eaten, and she informs him that she had met her college roommates for dinner. He chuckles, and says, "A party with your college classmates. I bet just about all of them are married, eh?" She swings around and angrily asks what he means by his comment. He looks at her with surprise, saying, "Why are you so sensitive? I was just casually making conversation." She eventually sits next to him, and begins confiding in him: "There were eight of us in my college dorm room. Seven have gotten married. Four have children. I'm the only one who is still alone." As she is saying this, she starts to cry. She continues, "Even my colleagues here all say that I lack human

feeling, that I'm arrogant and lack femininity (没有女人味儿). I'll never find a good man to love me." Danqing tries to comfort her, and even tries to compliment her for her outstanding intellect. However, Xiangmei remains upset. "What use is that? No matter how 'outstanding' I'm still androgynous (也是个不男不女)." Danqing smiles, and says, "You just haven't met that person yet. Once you meet him, you will definitely exude femininity. All women have one side like a rock and one side like water. In front of us, of course you only display your rigid side. But now, as I watch you cry, I'm starting to catch a glimpse of your softer side." Indeed, the viewer, too, is seeing her inner, softer side.

This conversation confirms to the viewer that Xiangmei herself is concerned that she is seen as unfeminine or androgynous. Danqing's response is telling – he does not tell her that there is nothing wrong with her masculine nature; rather, he consoles her by explaining that she will become feminine once she meets the right person. Danqing might not expect her inner personality to change just because she meets "the One," but he does seem to expect that she will outwardly appear much more feminine, as she reverts back to meeting society's expectations of being "soft on the outside, tough on the inside." Indeed, later on in the show it is striking how much more outwardly "feminine" Xiangmei becomes once she and Danqing start dating: in her attire, her tone of voice, and her behavior.

From this point on in the series, Danqing focuses his attention on "teaching" Xiangmei how to become more feminine. One obvious example of this can be found in Episode 11, when Danqing convinces her to go with him to an amusement park, noting

that he's "sacrificing [his] valuable weekend time to train [her]", as he is worried that she won't be able to convince her future boyfriend that she is, indeed, a woman. After they go on what appears to be a terrifying ride, Danqing teases her about grabbing his hands so hard that they turned black and blue. Xiangmei thinks for a moment, and says, "Not possible! I remember just now I grabbed onto the safety bar for dear life – I didn't remove my hands at all." Danqing, chuckling, responds, "You were afraid? You, too, are capable of being afraid? After you find a boyfriend, be sure to bring him here and go on that ride. That way you can take advantage of the situation and grab his hand." He emphasizes that she does not realize how strong she is, and comments,

If you don't actively grab someone's hand, who is going to have the guts to grab yours? That's why I'm telling you to come here, and go on that ride. That way, in that brief moment when you are on the verge of death, and you've lost all logic, and are frightened out of your wits, you can grab his hand. This will let him know that you really are a woman, that you need a man to protect you.

In Danqing's view, then, Xiangmei can convince her future date that she is a woman by showing him that she is in need of a man to protect her, by showing him that she is scared enough on the amusement ride to grab his hand. Adding this to what we learned in earlier scenes, we can round out how femininity is defined in the show: it is determined by a woman's attire, tone of voice, softness and gentleness (at least on the outside), and recognition that she needs a man's protection. If Xiangmei is able to achieve this while also maintaining her job as a manager, she will represent the new ideal woman. As Ying Zhu explains in her discussion of Chinese "pink dramas" about single professional women in contemporary China, "what is desired are independent women who are capable of participating in the modern economy but who also remain true to Confucian ethics by

avoiding overt sexual transgression and do not insist on complete independence from men.”<sup>73</sup> Xiangmei’s character evolution at the hands of Lin Danqing appears to reflect the modern quest for feminine ideals described by Zhu.

Later in the series, after Danqing and Xiangmei start dating, we witness a Xiangmei who is much more patient and kind towards her colleagues, and dresses much more femininely. While this results in a more pleasant office environment for her staff, it also leads to Xiangmei being subjected to sexual advances and harassment at the hands of her boss. Danqing realizes what is going on, and bursts into the boss’ office to protect Xiangmei, punching the boss in the process. The boss has him arrested for assault, and only drops the charges at Xiangmei’s pleading. However, the damage has been done—Danqing loses his job and Xiangmei is demoted. Although she considers pressing charges herself, the company lawyer reminds her that she has no proof. When her boss humiliates her in front of her colleagues, however, she accuses him of harassing every single woman that has worked at the company, and then resigns. Her colleagues erupt in applause. This confrontation with her boss seems to question how realistic this new ideal for professional women professed by Zhu really is—Xiangmei’s boss had a great deal of respect for her when she dressed androgynously and was demanding and harsh towards her employees. However, once she adopts a more feminine exterior, Xiangmei’s future success at work appears dependent on her acceptance of her boss’s sexual advances. Xiangmei faced a dilemma: either use her androgynous appearance to gain respect from

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<sup>73</sup> Zhu, 97.

her boss based on her abilities alone, or use her femininity to seduce him into giving her the promotion she deserves.

Xiangmei's decision to quit her job becomes problematic for her relationship with Danqing. He had been urging her to quit for weeks, but once she does, he realizes that her entire family is now dependent on him. He had just found a new job, but is nonetheless concerned that his new income will not be sufficient for the family to live comfortably. As he explains to Xiangmei in front of her family, "I believe that when I marry you, I should be responsible for ensuring that your entire family can live well." At this point, in Episode 24, we discover that the entire burden Xiangmei once carried has been placed on Danqing's shoulders, and he is collapsing under the weight. Danqing starts coming home very late at night, where Xiangmei is always waiting for him with leftover food, just as her sister used to when she would come home quite late. As they are talking one night about how hard he is working, Xiangmei emphasizes that "You know that it's not money that I value, but you. I don't want to marry your checkbook; I want to marry you. As a matter of fact, my expectations really aren't all that high. I just want the two of us to be happy together." However, Danqing communicates his concern that he is not "man" enough to support Xiangmei:

You resigned from your job. I can't even speak of taking care of you.  
 You want to get married, you want a family – I can't even afford an apartment. Even if you can afford one, I don't have the money to renovate it. Do I still count as a man? In the end, is it you giving me your hand in marriage, or me giving you mine?

In the end, even though Xiangmei tried to remind Danqing that "men can't be expected to shoulder every single problem on their own," Danqing nonetheless decides that he is not

“man” enough to shoulder the entire burden, and the two end their relationship. Despite the fact that Xiangmei and Danqing eventually reconcile their differences, these comments emphasize that Danqing’s issues with Xiangmei’s “masculine” nature are at least in part due to his own issues of masculinity. If a woman like Xiangmei is able to support herself financially, what is Danqing supposed to provide? Ironically, during the conversation between Xiangmei and Danqing in the office after her roommate dinner, Danqing had criticized her for setting her standards too high and expecting to find a man willing to accept her family burden. He then told her that she will never find love based on such criteria, and that love is only based on a feeling one finds deep within his or her heart. Here, however, the two have completely switched places. Xiangmei is now concerned only with the feelings between them, while Danqing is focused on the burden he is supposed to bear.

As the two reconcile towards the end of the show, Danqing poignantly tells Xiangmei that although “you always say that I taught you how to be a woman, actually, you also taught me how to be a man.” His comment is telling—apparently the qualities which constitute the post-Mao ideal “woman” or a “man” come to neither one of them naturally; instead, both had to be *taught* how to behave in ways appropriate to their “gender.” Whatever our feelings regarding the fact that Xiangmei was unwelcome in society as a more androgynous figure, we do have to admit that within the series he is right—Danqing *taught* Xiangmei how to become the post-Mao ideal of what a woman should be, while Xiangmei taught him that in contemporary China, it is unnecessary for the man to be the sole provider of the entire family, and that he need not shoulder the

entire burden alone. While Xiangmei may be seen as an extreme case of how a woman must adjust to meet society's expectations of what a woman should be, the show's depiction of society's attitude towards her unfeminine nature and her "re-education" process provides us with a compelling look at what constitutes femininity and masculinity in early 21st century China.

### *Reading Against the Grain*

The implied marriage between Lin Danqing and Xie Xiangmei is not the only one to come at the end of the series—the other main female characters in the show, Fang Kezhou and Ding Aiyu are also rushed into marriages (or, in Fang Kezhou's case, re-marriage to her original husband). The way Xiangmei and Danqing reconcile their differences may be read simply as a plot device, serving to bring the relationship to a conservative ending. The fact that the series ends in a number of marriages without really resolving the underlying issues encourages the viewer to read against the grain. Just as Schatz notes, the "solution" to the problems in *Close to You, Make Me Warm* is found within the same social framework which created the problems in the first place. If the series were focused mainly on Xiangmei's experience, we might be left hopeful that she and Danqing will enjoy the implied "happily ever after." However, earlier in the series we watched Fang Kezhou and her husband end their marriage. As Fang Kezhou explained to another character, the two had fallen in love in college. During the first few years of their marriage, they struggled to make ends meet and had to live in the husband's dorm. Four years later, they had acquired everything society considers important—an

apartment, a car, and secure employment. However, they had fallen out of love, and eventually divorced. The fact that the couple decides to remarry at the end of the series reminds viewers of their experience and the unnecessary suffering Fang Kezhou underwent just before and after her divorce. Xiangmei and Danqing might be marrying for love, but the experience of other characters indicates that there is no guarantee that this type of marriage will be free of conflict. If this is not enough to encourage the viewer to read against the grain, the series provides another reason to do so. Xiangmei's sister, in an attempt to ease the burden Danqing would have to shoulder, married a relatively wealthy man for whom she had no feeling, but who was willing to care for the rest of the family. Even as the viewer is relieved to learn that Xiangmei does not succumb to the temptation to marry for economic reasons, this relief is subdued by the realization that her sister did.

And how is the viewer left to reconcile the sacrifices Xiangmei made for Danqing? The series has tried to convince the viewer that she is feminine at her core; however, there is no denying that she was ambitious and passionate about her job. Her overly masculine exterior may have frustrated her subordinates, but it was welcomed by her superiors. Once she transitioned to a more feminine exterior, she was no longer respected by her boss and instead was subjected to harassment at his hand. In the end, to echo Chuck Kleinhans, she had to sacrifice personal achievement and career in order to regain her femininity and to obtain love. Even these sacrifices appear insufficient, as Danqing (at least temporarily) decides that he is not "man" enough to shoulder her burdens.



To illustrate how Chinese viewers read against the grain and focused on the issues raised within the series, I would like to briefly examine an article analyzing the actress who plays Xiangmei, Ke Lan. The article emphasizes that Ke Lan's performance "triggered a sympathetic response in viewers for the strength of the 'white collar' female worker."<sup>74</sup> The article continues,

Ke Lan serves as the typical example of the urban female white collar worker: she has a strong work ethic and is quite capable; she is firm and independent; she takes responsibility for her family, and shoulders the burden like a man; she desires love but dares not hope for it, and has no time to find it.<sup>75</sup>

Rather than seeing these characteristics as negative, as is implied in the series, the article instead celebrates them. The article further identifies Ke Lan, and through her, Xiangmei, as the prototype of the new "White Bone Demon" (白骨精, *baigujing*). This phrase, which refers to an evil spirit in the pre-modern classic, *Journey to the West*, has traditionally had a pejorative connotation, and was even used to describe Madame Mao after she fell from grace. The article, however, effectively reclaims the phrase in a positive light: rather than referring to the devious, cunning female demon from *Journey to the West*, here it is (re)defined as the "white collar" (白领, *bailing*), "backboned" (骨干, *gugan*) "elite woman" (女精英, *nü jingying*).<sup>76</sup> This article, along with many others, recognizes the strength of the Xie Xiangmei character and of the actual women she represents. An analysis of the drama published by the *Journal of Hunan Mass Media*

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<sup>74</sup> "Close to You, Make Me Warm Hot Nationwide.

<sup>75</sup> "Close to You, Make Me Warm Hot Nationwide.

<sup>76</sup> "Close to You, Make Me Warm Hot Nationwide.

*Vocational Technical College*, for example, notes that “women have no choice but to become independent in today’s China. As more and more Xie Xiangmeis are appearing around us, the difficulties she faces are also creeping closer and closer to us.”<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Huang Weiling, “An Analysis of the TV Drama *Close to You, Make Me Warm* 电视剧《靠近你,温暖我》浅析,” *Journal of Hunan Mass Media Vocational Technical College*, Volume 6, No. 6, November 2006: 66, *China Academic Journals Database*, 24 April 2008 <<http://china.eastview.com>>.

## CHAPTER III

*GIVE ME A CIGARETTE* AND ITS PORTRAYAL OF *SANPEI*

## AND THE RICE BOWL OF YOUTH

*Give Me a Cigarette* (给我一支烟, 2006, later renamed *Evening Rain* or 夜雨) explores the lives of *sanpei*<sup>78</sup> and other young women working in a Shenzhen nightclub through the eyes of Li Haitao, a young client at the club. Haitao falls in love with Yezi, who used to work “on stage” (坐台, *zuotai*) and who still services certain clients upon request. On a superficial level, the drama is a love story, focusing on the trials and tribulations Haitao and Yezi’s love is forced to undergo. However, due to Yezi’s occupation, the show also excoriates the world of Shenzhen’s underground nightlife for its viewers. The drama, based on a well-known online novel written in 2003, was popular in Chengdu, Shanghai, and parts of Zhejiang province when it first aired in 2006. According to the 2007 edition of the *China Radio and TV Yearbook*, for example, it was one of the 30 most popular evening shows in Hangzhou in 2006.<sup>79</sup> Media reports also

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<sup>78</sup> *Sanpei* (三陪), literally “girls who accompany men in three ways.” This concept will be further explained in the section entitled “*Sanpei xiaojie* and the KTV industry in China” below.

<sup>79</sup> *China Radio and TV Yearbook: 2007* 中国广播电视年鉴 - 2007 (Beijing: Zhongguo guang bo dian shi chu ban she, 2007) 246.

indicate that the show was a “hot item” in terms of DVD sales and internet downloads.<sup>80</sup> Although these earlier versions spread widely, a newly edited version was shown in September 2008 on Beijing TV (BTV2) with all *zuotai* references removed. For the purposes of this chapter, I will focus on the original DVD version which matches the version still in circulation on the internet, looking at the social issues it explores which may at least in part have led to the re-filming in 2008.<sup>81</sup> In addition to exposing legal and social issues relating to prostitution and the *sanpei*, I argue that the show is also exploring the concept of “eating the rice bowl of youth,” in which young women exploit their beauty to make money. First, however, I examine the internet novel on which the drama is based. Exploring the differences between the two versions will help illuminate how the show is utilizing melodramatic techniques to evoke viewer sympathy for the KTV girls while at the same time providing a warning for girls contemplating entering the profession.

### *A Close Look at the Internet Novel*

*Give Me a Cigarette*, China’s “most popular internet love novel of 2003-2004,” was accessed over a million times on hundreds of websites, and apparently was the most

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<sup>80</sup> *Evening Rain* Defrosted and Broadcasted in Beijing: Zhang Duo Once Again Plays a New Good Man.” 《夜雨》北京化凍播出 張鐸再次演繹新好男人。”

<sup>81</sup> It should be emphasized here that I have not yet been able to compare the DVD and internet versions with either of the versions aired on Chinese TV. Therefore, my analysis is limited to the versions aired in these mediums.

searched-for internet text on both Xinlang and Sohu's websites that year.<sup>82</sup> The author of *Give Me a Cigarette*, whose online identity is roughly translated as "Beautiful Woman Turned into Big Tree" (美女变大树, or 美树 "Mei Shu" for short), remarks in her preface that she first posted a brief story of only a few hundred characters entitled "Give Me a Cigarette" on a Sohu BBS feed on July 18, 2003.<sup>83</sup> Over the next few days, she unexpectedly received a number of responses from readers who wanted to know the rest of the story. As a result, she resumed writing, and by July 28 had posted the first eleven chapters of the novel. At this point, she had already received over 200 responses to her work, and began posting an average of two chapters each weekday; the entire 69-chapter novel was completed by September 2, 2003.

The novel revolves around Haitao's relationship with Yezi, as well as other prostitutes at the nightclub, including Xiao Yu, who has also fallen in love with Haitao. In addition to following the love triangle, we also learn about the love lives of Yezi's other prostitute friends. As the novel's social web becomes more entangled, the story-line oscillates between titillating scenes of sexual encounters the girls have with clients and boyfriends, and slower-paced scenes that simply help to advance the plot. A key element of Mei Shu's success in the novel is the balance she achieves between the more exciting and suspenseful passages and the more typical elements one expects in a love story. The prostitution and sexual elements of the novel serve to make the story-line

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<sup>82</sup> Meinü bian Dashu 美女变大树, "Complete Edition: 2003-2004 Most Popular Internet Love Novel *Give Me a Cigarette* (Author: Beautiful woman turned into big tree) 完整版 2003--2004 年度最受欢迎的网络爱情小说:给我一支烟 (作者: 美女变大树)," 11 April 2004, 18 February 2009 <<http://www.havebook.com/main/showthread.php?t=45736>> .

<sup>83</sup> Meinü bian Dashu 美女变大树, "Preface to *Give Me a Cigarette* 给我一支烟自序," Xiaoshuo.com, 6 March 2009 <[http://www.xiaoshuo.com/readbook/0011021828\\_13047\\_1.html](http://www.xiaoshuo.com/readbook/0011021828_13047_1.html)> .

compelling. However, had Mei Shu eliminated the more typical narrative elements, the story may have been too pornographic to have garnered such a large audience, even though the story would still have been publishable online. At the same time the internet medium for which she was writing allowed her the liberty to explore the more risqué aspects of her story without the fear of censorship, it also may have actually encouraged her in that direction in order to continue entertaining her audience, luring them to return the following day. In other words, the existence of these more racy passages can perhaps be seen not only as a celebration of the form in which they were written, but also as a product of the demands of that same form.

### ***The Transformation into a TV Drama***

At this point in Zhao Baogang's career, he was a well-established and well-respected director of contemporary TV dramas, and therefore was likely confident in his ability to take on the risk of exploring such a politically-sensitive topic on television. However, when he turned this internet novel into a TV drama of the same name, he altered a number of specific details of the story, in particular toning down the more risqué elements regarding the professions and experiences of the girls, but kept the general storyline intact. Why did Zhao Baogang make these changes? Is there something about the TV form that required (or encouraged) him to substantially alter specific details while remaining faithful to the overall storyline? Why not use *Give me a Cigarette* as inspiration but write a different narrative? Was he hoping to capitalize on the popularity

of the online novel, yet feeling constrained by his medium (and the censors), and therefore unable to tell the same story?

Upon first reading the online novel, Zhao Baogang was not interested in directing a series based on it, as the subject matter was too sensitive. However, a short while later, he created his own story-line, using the novel as a springboard. Although he could have created a TV drama without using the online novel at all, he nonetheless decided to purchase the rights to the novel, because reading *Give Me a Cigarette* was a source of inspiration for his idea. As he explains in an interview,

I told the author that I had no intention of filming it the way it was written...I had already abandoned the original contents, and only wanted to use the same characters and film another story according to my own vision, from a very different perspective. My story is a clean, positive, and uplifting work; I did not think I needed to use the rest to entertain the audience.<sup>84</sup>

In the interview, Zhao Baogang also explains how he was intrigued by the lives of those working in the entertainment industry: “The entertainment industry makes up a considerable part of our society, and most cities contain a number of entertainment venues. Therefore, I wanted to make a TV drama about the livelihood of those working in the entertainment industry, and the clashes they have with society.”

As we shall see, Zhao Baogang’s version utilizes melodramatic techniques that not only evoke sympathy in the viewer for the KTV hostesses, but also allow for social commentary. The drama ends with a return to the status quo, and is infused with social

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<sup>84</sup> “*Evening Rain*: Zhao Baogang Surprisingly Straightforwardly Tackles a Sensitive Topic 《夜雨》袭京赵宝刚直面敏感话题,” *Sina Entertainment* 新浪娱乐, 19 September 2008, 14 March 2009 <<http://ent.sina.com.cn/v/m/2008-09-19/12362175567.shtml>>.

commentary that for the most part does not exist in the original novel version. In analyzing his use of melodrama, I will draw on Tania Modleski's work regarding American soap operas, in which she observes that the viewer, "identifying with each character in turn, is made to see 'the larger picture' and extend her sympathy to both the sinner and the victim."<sup>85</sup> Although the viewer sympathizes with Yezi and the other girls, "at the same time, the spectator is made to forgive and understand the unforgiving characters, for she is intimately drawn into their anguish and suffering as well."<sup>86</sup> These observations by Modleski will be instrumental in exploring how Zhao Baogang is using melodrama to meet his goals of depicting the lives of these girls, as well as the "clashes" they have with society at large.

### ***Sanpei Xiaojie and the KTV industry in China***

Before turning to the series itself, however, it is important to define some relevant terms and examine some of the social issues depicted in the show. The first such term is the *sanpei*, or hostess. As Zheng Tiantian observes in her study of KTV bar hostesses in Dalian,

The companions or hostesses are referred to in Chinese as *sanpei xiaojie*, literally young women who accompany men in three ways. This is generally understood to include varying combinations of alcohol consumption, dancing, singing, and sexual services. Generally between the ages of seventeen and twenty-three, these hostesses provide services that

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<sup>85</sup> Tania Modleski, "Search for Tomorrow in Today's Soap Operas," *Imitations of Life: A Reader on Film and Television Melodrama*, ed. Marcia Landy (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991), 452.

<sup>86</sup> Modleski, 452.



typically include drinking, singing, dancing, playing games, flirting, chatting, and caressing.<sup>87</sup>

While the term *sanpei* indicates that these women offer sexual services to their clients, girls do have the option, at least in the upper-tier KTV nightclubs, to refuse sexual services if they so choose. The term *xiaojie* itself can be difficult to define. On a basic level, *xiaojie* means “Miss,” but “a certain diffidence generally forces the Chinese to refer to female sex workers obliquely as *xiaojie*” as well.<sup>88</sup> The *sanpei* conduct a large majority of their work within the nightclub as *zuotai*, which Zheng defines as “sitting on the stage.” This is contrasted with servicing clients outside the nightclub, *chutai* (出台), referred to by Zheng as “offstage.” Within the context of the show, we mainly observe the girls when they are “sitting on the stage,” although we are witness to a few instances when they go “offstage” as well.

Many women who work as *sanpei* come from rural areas, and are attracted to the job due to its economic potential. As Tamara Perkins elaborates, “Because factory work, or work in the service industry is long and hard and pays little, the quickest route to a more cosmopolitan dress and lifestyle for an un- or under-educated rural woman is hostessing or prostitution.”<sup>89</sup> By working as a hostess for one or two hours, a woman earns “an average tip of 200 to 400 yuan—the equivalent of, and often more than, other

<sup>87</sup> Tiantian Zheng, “Anti-Trafficking Campaign and Karaoke Bar Hostesses in China,” *Wagadu: A Journal of Transnational Women’s and Gender Studies*, Volume 5, Summer 2008: 75, 18 November 2008 <[http://wagadu.org/Volume%205/Articles%20pdfs/wagadu\\_2008\\_vol5\\_chap5\\_zheng.pdf](http://wagadu.org/Volume%205/Articles%20pdfs/wagadu_2008_vol5_chap5_zheng.pdf)>.

<sup>88</sup> Pan Suiming, “Three ‘Red Light Districts’ in China,” trans. Liu Zhenghong, *Sexual Cultures in East Asia: The Social Construction of Sexuality and Sexual Risk in a Time of AIDS*, ed. Evelyne Micollier (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004), 24.

<sup>89</sup> Tamara Perkins, “The Other Side of Nightlife: Family and Community in the Life of a Dance Hall Hostess,” *China: An International Journal* 6, 1 (March 2008): 114, 18 November 2008 <<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/china/v006/6.1perkins.pdf>>.

rural migrants' monthly wage and almost half the average monthly wage of an urban worker."<sup>90</sup> In addition, by working in this industry, women are able to distinguish themselves from the usual stigmas attached to rural women, as they are successful in their ability to attract urban and wealthy men. As Perkins further suggests,

Given the clothes and lifestyle that this can offer, [hostesses] may be able to convince themselves and others that they have made it to the top of the spatial hierarchy. The added sense that they are successful with their efforts in getting customers to surrender large sums of money through the hostesses' own savvy is what makes their status as hostesses or prostitutes tolerable.<sup>91</sup>

These examples help to explain why poor (and in particular rural) women are willing to join this profession—not only are they able to make a “decent” living working as a hostess, but through their ability to afford expensive clothes, they are able to “enter” urban society and attract urban male customers. However, it is important to emphasize that rural women are not the only ones attracted to the profession for these reasons. As Elaine Jeffreys indicates,

Chinese policing scholars consistently cite the benefits to be realized from engaging in prostitution—in terms of more disposable income and improved access to upwardly mobile social circles and lifestyle options—as one of the major reasons why urban residents with socially sanctioned forms of employment, including university-educated women, have not only chosen to prostitute in their original city of residence, but also have proved just as willing as their rural counterparts to travel elsewhere in the PRC for the explicit purpose of engaging in prostitution.<sup>92</sup>

The fact that urban women also choose this profession might help explain why rural women see the occupation as an opportunity to shake off the usual stigmas attached to

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<sup>90</sup> Zheng, 87.

<sup>91</sup> Perkins, 118.

<sup>92</sup> Elaine Jeffreys, *China, Sex, and Prostitution* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004) 98.

rural women, although at the same time they adopt other social stigmas attached to prostitutes. Zhao's TV drama reflects these urban and rural demographics: Yezi, the main female character in the show, has a college degree, while many of the other female characters either ran away from home or left their families without completing their education.

### *Violence and Lack of Legal Protection*

Although the hostess profession is much more lucrative than other options for rural (and, increasingly, urban) women, it is also one fraught with legal issues. Male customers often become violent, and the hostesses are unable to turn to the police as they themselves would be implicated. As Pan Suiming, a sociology professor and director of the Institute for Research on Gender and Sexuality at Renmin University has noted, *sanpei* “face high risks in our society—from disease, from attacks by police and violent clients, and from criminals trying to rob or murder them.”<sup>93</sup> Zheng, who spent months conducting research while pretending to be a *sanpei* herself, personally witnessed the violence these women face. As she reports,

Unarmed or armed (with beer bottles, knives, and glass), fights between drunken clients and between clients and hostesses are daily occurrences. At times, hostesses come downstairs, crying from their injuries: their legs, arms, and breasts black and blue from the hard pinches of some clients. Some hostesses chose to endure whatever abuse they are subjected to, but some opted to quit and consequently received no tips for the time they had put in. Those who clenched their teeth to see it through with big bright

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<sup>93</sup> Liu Kaiming, “Legal Protection of Hostesses: An Interview with Gender Studies Expert Professor Pan Suiming ‘三陪小姐’ 的法律保护问题——访著名性社会学专家潘绥铭教授,” *Shenzhen Law Newspaper* 深圳法制报, 25 June 2002, 30 October 2008 <<http://www.sexstudy.org/article.php?id=490>>.

smiles held back their tears and complaints for later, when they sent off the clients and returned to the crowd of idle hostesses.<sup>94</sup>

Indeed, as we shall see, *Give Me a Cigarette* viewers are witness to examples of such violence in the very first episode of the show.

Although one might think that the *sanpei* would turn to the police for legal protection from such abuse, Pan emphasizes that these hostesses have lost the “confidence and courage” to seek legal help following the anti-pornography campaigns and crackdowns that have taken place in recent years; “as a result, when they are confronted with violence or become injured, they have no choice but to endure it. The vicious cycle continues as criminals are able to avoid punishment, which makes things even more dangerous for the girls.”<sup>95</sup> As Zheng explains, the “main vehicle for PSB [Public Security Bureau] intervention is the anti-pornography campaign (*saohuang dafei*), itself a part of a wider comprehensive attack on social deviance known as ‘crackdowns’ (*yanda*—literally, to strike severely).”<sup>96</sup> As Zheng further elucidates, “hostesses fall into a gray area—although the law does not clearly identify them as either illegal or legal in everyday practice, it is recognized that ‘hostesses’ are ‘sex workers’ who provide illegal erotic services and hence are the major subjects of anti-prostitution campaigns.”<sup>97</sup> Although the series does not spotlight an anti-prostitution campaign or crackdown, we will learn that Yezi had previously been apprehended during one such campaign.

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<sup>94</sup> Zheng, 84.

<sup>95</sup> Liu, “Legal Protection of Hostesses.”

<sup>96</sup> Zheng, 80.

<sup>97</sup> Zheng, 81.

Attempts to eradicate prostitution in karaoke dance halls are part of a much larger attempt by the Chinese government and Chinese police to control a very complex prostitution web in contemporary China. As Elaine Jeffreys explains, campaigns during the 1980s and early 1990s led Chinese police to categorize prostitution into seven groups, including “second wives” (*waishi* or *baonai*); *baopo*, or women who are hired to accompany men on a business trip or something along those lines; *santing*, or “three halls,” which includes women working in KTV nightclubs and other entertainment venues; “door-bell girls,” who offer their services by calling all of the rooms in a hotel; *falangmei* who provide sexual services in addition to massages; *jienü*, who pick up men on the street; and *xiagongpeng* or *zhugongpeng*, who service migrant workers. Jeffreys puts forward a very compelling argument regarding the difficulties Chinese police face in combating most of these categories of prostitution, and suggests that as a result “the primary target of the PRC’s prostitution controls in practice, therefore, is China’s burgeoning hospitality and entertainment industry.”<sup>98</sup>

The campaigns were designed to eradicate prostitution in karaoke bars; however, they were rather unsuccessful. Instead, they “only aggravated hostesses’ working conditions. Police raids of karaoke-bar hostesses made them legally and socially vulnerable.”<sup>99</sup> As a result, the girls found themselves working in a profession where the very men who provide them with their “urban” lifestyle are also the ones who abuse them

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<sup>98</sup> Jeffreys, 173.

<sup>99</sup> Zheng, 83.

with no fear of retribution. Although the clients may no longer be seeing these women according to “rural stigmas,” they certainly do not treat them with respect.

### *The Rice Bowl of Youth*

Although the key social issues raised in *Give Me a Cigarette* revolve around the plight of the *sanpei*, it is nonetheless worthwhile to include a brief discussion of a related social issue, namely young women eating the “rice bowl of youth.” It could perhaps even be argued that the 2008 version of the drama, which no longer contains issues related to *sanpei* and *zuotai*, and instead depicts Yezi and others as “dancing girls,” still tackles this less politically-sensitive social issue. Researching this phenomenon, scholar Zhang Zhen explains:

While the iron rice bowl is now perceived as rusty and broken, a new figure, the “rice bowl of youth” (*qingchunfan*), has gained wide currency since the early 1990s. The *rice bowl of youth* refers to the urban trend in which a range of new, highly paid positions have opened almost exclusively to young women, as bilingual secretaries, public relations girls, and fashion models. Youth and beauty are the foremost, if not the only, prerequisites to obtaining lucrative positions, in which the new “professionals” often function as advertising fixtures with sex appeal.<sup>100</sup>

Although, as Zhang notes, modeling and competing in beauty contests are the most sought after occupations for those eating the rice bowl of youth, “commanding less visibility but equal allure are the singing and dancing girls at nightclubs and discos and ‘hostesses’ catering exclusively to the clubs’ male clients.”<sup>101</sup> One important question, of

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<sup>100</sup> Zhang Zhen, “Mediating Time: The ‘Rice Bowl of Youth’ in Fin de Siècle Urban China,” *Public Culture* 12 (1), 2000: 94, 15 November 2008  
<<http://publicculture.dukejournals.org/cgi/reprint/12/1/93?ssource=mfc&rss=1>>.

<sup>101</sup> Zhang Zhen, 99.

course, is what happens to these women once they lose their youthful beauty? How does one move from working as a hostess into a more reputable career (if one so desires)? As we shall see, the television version of “Give Me a Cigarette” explores these issues as well.

### *A Close Look at the Series Itself*

*Give Me a Cigarette* opens with a seductive performance by a lone female dancer in what our narrator tells us is a famous nightclub in Shenzhen, *zuanshi renjian* (钻石人间), or “Passion,” its English name. As she is joined on stage by her fellow dancers, we hear a young woman say, “Give me a cigarette.” With this one sentence, our love story begins. Our narrator turns to look at the woman beside him and offers her one of his; as the camera lingers on her, our narrator tells us she’s the most beautiful woman he has ever seen. As the episode continues, our narrator (Li Haitao) returns to “Passion” to attend a party in one of the KTV rooms in the nightclub. While there, he watches Yezi dance onstage. After she finishes dancing, she sits next to him and asks for another cigarette. He offers to buy her a drink, but one of the waitresses comes over to let her know that a certain “Wen Ge” (“Brother Wen”) has been asking for her for quite some time. Yezi clearly does not want to go, but is convinced by the waitress to do so. As Haitao heads back to the room where his friend is having a party, he sees Yezi come out of another room. We overhear a man inside the room yelling, “Don’t pay any attention to her! She dared lie to me!” Haitao follows her to the bathroom, where Yezi washes blood off her face. As she comes out, he asks whether or not he can take her to the hospital.

She says no; when he offers to give her a ride home, they instead go to another bar to have a drink.

Over drinks, Haitao begins to narrate her story to us, as we watch flashbacks of Yezi as a young girl. We learn that she is a 22-year-old from Qingdao who started working as a waitress in a local hotel and as a dancer in a local nightclub after graduating from high school. She then took the college entrance exam and entered a foreign languages university in Shenzhen. One summer, she visited the Shenzhen nightclub “Passion” where she resumed dancing and met some of the girls working as *xiaojie*. At the time, she was having difficulty meeting her increasing tuition fees and other expenses, and after encouragement from the other girls, started to *zuotai*.

As Yezi continues her story, she reminisces about her first night working as a *zuotai*. She confesses that although she felt extremely uncomfortable the first night, she gradually became used to it. Haitao, continuing his narration, reflects, “although Yezi made a lot of money, she has paid an unbearable price for it, experiencing deep fear and humiliation. After being beaten and cursed at time after time, she decided to quit working as a *zuotai*.” However, as Haitao observes, quitting was not that easy. “There were always a few people she didn’t dare offend, so she forced herself to serve them, such as today’s Brother Wen.” We then are shown a flashback of what had happened earlier that night in Wen’s room. Wen asks Yezi where she had been, and she tells him she had been dancing. Accusing her of lying, he strikes her quite hard, and her head hits the table. As one of the waitresses tries to help her out of the room, we watch Wen kick the waitress as well.



From the very first episode of the show, then, we not only learn what drove Yezi to this occupation, but we also see how badly the girls are treated by their customers. It is worth noting that part of this scene also occurs in the second chapter of the internet novel, when Yezi and Haitao meet up one night after she finishes working. She tells him a little about her past, including how uncomfortable she felt the first night she worked at the club. The novel, however, did not include Haitao's remarks about violence or that Yezi was beaten by Wen Ge, a character who does not even exist in the internet novel. The novel also makes no mention about Yezi's decision to leave the profession due to the way customers treated her. On the contrary, she continues working as a *sanpei* throughout the majority of the novel. These script additions of realistic social commentary reveal how Zhao Baogang is adapting the internet novel to satisfy his own vision.

As the dramatic episode continues, Haitao returns to "Passion" to look for Yezi. Instead, he runs into Xiao Yu, another *sanpei* who was working as a *zuotai* the night when he was at the club for his friend's party. When Haitao asks Xiao Yu whether Yezi is there, Xiao Yu tells him Yezi's in the hospital, as she has been hit in the head and needed stitches. When Haitao asks Xiao Yu what happened, she responds, "What else could it be? He wanted her to work as a *zuotai* but she refused, so after work she was hit in the head with a brick." Although Xiao Yu does not answer Haitao directly, we are led to believe that this "he" is Brother Wen. When Haitao asks her why no one reported the incident to the police, Xiao Yu responds, "You idiot! In this line of work, when she gets to the police bureau, she'd be the first to be arrested." In this TV episode, we observe a KTV hostess who is "confronted with violence" at the hands of one of her clients, yet has

lost the “confidence and courage” to seek legal help, for fear that if she files a report, she herself will be apprehended, just as Pan Suiming had indicated in his research.

Viewers are presented with many other examples of how Yezi and the other girls are afraid to seek legal protection as the series continues. In Episode 7, for example, during an altercation between Haitao and Xiao Yu, Haitao accidentally rips off Xiao Yu’s shirt, and she takes off. While Haitao and Yezi try to find her, Yezi expresses her frustration at being unable to report Xiao Yu’s disappearance to the police:

On the surface, it looks like we live a life of luxury, wearing brand name clothes like Gucci and Versace. But has anyone ever thought about the fact that we live underground? We are basically just like mice, and whenever we see a policeman we run and hide. How could we have the guts to report a case to them?

At this point, Haitao tells the audience that he wants to convince Yezi to leave “Passion,” and that he will take care of her. While he is clearly moved by her predicament, he does not reflect on it for long. However, after Yezi is attacked by two men hired by Xiao Yu, Haitao and Yezi are taken to the police station and interrogated individually about what had happened. During his interrogation, Haitao recalls their earlier conversation: “I remember Yezi once said they are mice from underground and are afraid of the police. I didn’t really think much of it at the time, but now I hope as a result I don’t bring her any trouble...” In an attempt to protect Yezi, he claims that she has no job. As he waits for Yezi in the lobby after his interrogation ends, he begins to worry about how she might have answered questions about her background. When he asks one of the policemen whether or not Yezi can leave, the policeman tells him to go home and not worry about her, as they suspect she is a *sanpei*. When Haitao insists that she’s a nightclub dancer,

not a *sanpei*, and that she's the victim of a crime, the policeman responds: "We know that she's the victim. However, if she's a *sanpei*, according to relevant regulations we have to first send her to a reeducation camp and then send her back to her hometown." Although Yezi was able to post bail in this instance, the scene nonetheless substantiates the girls' fear of police: even though Yezi was the victim of an attack in her own apartment, the police were able to detain her on suspicion that she might be a *sanpei*. We later learn that Yezi has a police record, as she had been caught about six months earlier during an anti-prostitution campaign. The previous arrest makes it even more understandable why she would be averse to approaching the police. So ingrained is this fear of the police that Xiao Yu herself, when hiring the men to attack Yezi, is not worried about being caught; she is quite confident that Yezi would never go to the police to report the incident, and, therefore, she reassures the men that they can do whatever they want to Yezi without fear of retribution.

### *Societal Attitudes Towards Workers in the Entertainment Industry*

Throughout this series, we are reminded of the social prejudice facing the *sanpei*. Yezi repeatedly tells Haitao that as a former *sanpei*, she is not worthy of his attention. In Episode 4, while trying to end her relationship with Haitao after learning about Xiao Yu's feelings for him, she emotes, "I'm not a piece of beautiful jade, I'm just a piece of rock that has been broken too many times to count. I'm not good enough for you." In Episode 7, after Xue er leaves for Xi'an, Yezi again tries to break up with Haitao, reminding him of her past: "We met at a nightclub when I borrowed a cigarette from you—have you

forgotten? Listen to me. I'm Yezi. I used to work at 'Passion' as a *xiaojie*. In this circle [i.e. Shenzhen], there isn't anyone who doesn't know who I am." She concludes by encouraging him not to waste his time and affection on her—"I'm not worth it. I'm really not worth it." After Yezi finds a pair of movie tickets in Haitao's jacket pocket in Episode 12, which she assumes indicates that he had cheated on her with his colleague Xiaolin, she breaks up with him again, saying that Xiaolin is clearly a better fit for him. When he protests, Yezi challenges, "Have you forgotten how we met? Have you forgotten that I used to be a *xiaojie*? ... Li Haitao, tell me the truth—can you really marry me? Do you even want to?"

Generally speaking, Haitao is quite sympathetic to the girls' plight, and in Episode 6 even reflects that prior to meeting Yezi, "I had no idea, nor was I at all concerned with the fate of those we call *xiaojie*. These young, beautiful girls are like dust, with no root." In Episode 8, however, Haitao narrates to the viewer his concern about how others would react to his dating a former *xiaojie*. After his parents tell him they want to meet his girlfriend during the Spring Festival, he reflects that while they are quite open-minded and say they will accept anyone, he does not think that this includes someone with Yezi's history.

The most striking use of "social commentary" in the series, however, comes from Haitao's parents once they discover that Yezi is a former *sanpei*. When Haitao initially tries to deny that Yezi used to work as one, his father erupts in anger: "You dare lie to us! We are respectable people, and you have a college education. After all of those years of education, you still got mixed up with that kind of girl!" His mother continues,

Haitao, your father and I have always trusted you, and we have never interfered with anything you have done. When you just decided to end things with a wonderful girl like Xiaolin, your father and I were both quite upset, but we still didn't say anything. But... but, you can't get this mixed up! When your father heard the news, his heart problems started up again, and he had to take a lot of medicine. You've broken my heart as well!

As she starts to sob, the father adds a final threat: “You must make a clean break with that woman. Otherwise...otherwise, I will no longer recognize you as my son!” As Haitao's mother helps the father into the bedroom to rest, Haitao narrates to the audience that he “really is the most unfilial bastard on earth.” Haitao's parents have only met Yezi once, and do not know her the way Haitao and the viewer do. Haitao's parents are not concerned whether or not he is actually in love with her, or with the events in her past that led her to work as a *sanpei*. The idea that a respectable young man would date a former *sanpei* is clearly great enough of an offense that Haitao's father threatens to disown him. This confrontation with his parents, coupled with his fears of Yezi's infidelity, lead him to end things with her once again.

### *The Rice Bowl of Youth as depicted in Give Me a Cigarette*

There are a number of scenes in the show that point to the fact that these girls are eating their “rice bowl of youth,” and that they eventually come to regret that decision—providing a warning, perhaps, for young girls considering this profession as an easy way to make money. In Episode 7, Yezi's addiction to the “rice bowl of youth” becomes apparent when she tries to end things with Haitao:

My life right now is very good—really. Look at my clothes. Each item I own costs over RMB3,000 [approximately US\$365]; all are famous brands. Can you support me financially? I'm sorry—I'm not trying to

hurt you, I'm just trying to make you understand. I'm very vain; I've grown accustomed to this kind of lifestyle. You're still young, handsome and educated; you have a great future ahead. Perhaps in the future you will have enough money to support a number of girls like me.

Yezi has clearly grown accustomed to the “benefits” of working as a *sanpei*. At this point in the show, she sees no need to adjust her lifestyle to accommodate Haitao, regardless of any feelings she might have for him. After she is released from jail, however, she starts to regret her decision to work in this industry. As she laments,

Women who take this road are making a fundamental mistake. At the beginning we all think it is rather prestigious—we have plenty to eat and drink, and have pretty clothes to wear. We don't really have to do anything during the day, and at night you just put on some makeup and beautiful clothes, smile a little bit at men or... Then wait until you've made money, buy an apartment and a car, open up a hair salon or something like it, find a man who doesn't already know you, marry him, and everything will work out. But in this world, there's no such thing as a free lunch. I really regret it. I regret that I was so shortsighted, and only saw the opportunity to make easy money. I really didn't know what I would lose by making this money.

This passage summarizes both the dangers of eating the rice bowl of youth and the reasons sociologists suggest women agree to work as “hostesses” in the first place.

Later in the series, Haitao tries to help Yezi find a respectable job, following her brief marriage to a wealthy, middle-aged Singaporean businessman named Eric, whom she divorced when he forced her to abort a pregnancy that was the result of a passionate reunion with Haitao. As Haitao explains to viewers, finding Yezi a job was not as easy as they had expected. “She doesn't understand English, she doesn't know how to type, and her resume is completely blank, as she hasn't done anything other than dance at Passion.” Although Haitao suggests that she lower her expectations a little bit, Yezi is concerned with how his parents would react if she takes a job in the service industry.

One of their friends, who works for a travel company, suggests that Yezi become a tour guide for German tourists. However, Yezi does not remember much of the German she had learned in college, and struggles to relearn it. At this point, Eric offers her a job as manager of his Shenzhen jewelry store, which she accepts.

The other girls in the show are also depicted as eating the “rice bowl of youth,” and rather successfully at that. Yiting saves enough money working as a *sanpei* to open her own hair salon. Xue er ultimately resists the temptation to work as a *sanpei* in the show, but she nonetheless is eating her rice bowl of youth by flirting with male customers while selling cigars in the nightclub in an attempt to save money to study abroad in France. Although Yiting’s ability to leave the profession and open a hair salon might be interpreted as a positive result, we later discover that Yiting’s plan was unsuccessful. After her boyfriend squanders her money on a flawed business deal and runs off with another woman, Yiting becomes consumed with the desire for revenge, and after failing to find someone on the black market willing to kill him, takes matters into her own hands, killing both him and herself.

*Reading Give Me a Cigarette as Melodrama*

In the final part of this chapter, I would like to focus on how the show utilizes melodramatic techniques to not only evoke sympathy in the viewer for the KTV hostesses, but also to interject social commentary, allowing the show to end with a return to the status quo. Although this series encourages the viewer to ponder the plight of the *sanpei* and arouses sympathy for them, comments by Haitao and his parents affirm for

the viewer that Yezi's history as a *sanpei* is a social stigma that cannot be overcome; Haitao cannot marry her.

As mentioned previously, although the overall storyline of the original internet novel and the TV show are relatively similar, there are some key differences which help to highlight the melodramatic nature of the TV version. The novel, which also contains melodramatic elements, is more "realistic" than the show in its depiction of the various *sanpei*. In the internet novel, Haitao himself is depicted as a "hooligan" who frequents nightclubs like "Passion;" shortly after meeting Yezi, Haitao pays her for sex. This coarse scene contrasts greatly with the "pure" beginnings of the relationship we witness in the television drama. In Episode 4, when Yezi tries to break up with Haitao after realizing Xiao Yu has feelings for him, she even offers to sleep with him if he was upset because he hadn't "had" her. He is outraged at her suggestion, and storms out of her apartment. Yezi, for her part, continues working as a *xiaojie* for a large portion of the novel, while in the TV version, she is introduced instead as a former *sanpei*.

Xue'er's story also undergoes major changes in the transition from online novel to TV drama. In the novel, she is a *sanpei*. She has no qualms about the fact that her love interest, Geng Zhi is already married, or that he is financing her studies in the United States. In the show, however, she is depicted as a very moral individual who resists the temptation to work as a *sanpei* and instead struggles to save the lesser amount of money she is able to make selling cigars. When she discovers her dreams of studying in France are put on hold, she laments the fact that she has lived on nothing but ramen noodles and worn the same clothes for the past few years in order to save enough money. She will not



accept Geng Zhi's advances once she discovers he is married, nor will she accept money from him to study in France.

As mentioned previously, in the show, Yiting is admired by the other girls for successfully saving enough money after working as a *sanpei* for a few years to open a hair salon. When her boyfriend, Gao Chan, squanders her savings on a flawed business deal, and then leaves her for another woman, viewers are sympathetic. Therefore, when she seeks revenge by murdering him towards the end of the show, we are more empathetic than we would normally be. We can understand her rage and frustration. In the online novel, on the other hand, she remains a very active *sanpei*, both inside and outside of China, and never leaves the profession to open a hair salon; she even refuses to leave the profession when Gao Chan begs her to. In contrast to the show, Gao Chan does not leave her for another woman after squandering her savings; instead, he leaves her after she sleeps with all of his friends in order to get back at him for something he had done. As a result, when she murders him a few years later, readers are much less likely to be sympathetic toward her considering the circumstances.

The television drama is repositioning the girls in a much more sympathetic light, which allows us to see Yezi, Yiting, and Xue er as victims, and as relatively moral individuals, despite their type of work. At the same time, we are able to understand the concerns expressed by Haitao and his parents regarding the *sanpei*. Although we are sensitive to Yezi's experiences, we can also understand Haitao's father's perspective when he threatens to disown Haitao if he continues to date the former *sanpei*. This resonates with Tania Moedleski's observation that the viewer, by "identifying with each

character in turn, is made to see ‘the larger picture’ and extend her sympathy to both the sinner and the victim.”<sup>102</sup> One could argue that even Xiao Yu is worthy of our sympathy, as we learn that she was a victim of abuse as a child, and she appears to have reformed after serving time in jail. By the end of the series, it becomes clear that she never really reformed, and instead sabotaged Haitao and Yezi’s relationship once again. She is the one who informs Haitao’s parents about Yezi’s past. She also prints the false rumors about Yezi’s relationship with Eric online and sends Yezi the romantic texts that lead Haitao to suspect her infidelity. As such, Xiao Yu is perhaps “the one character whom we are allowed to hate unreservedly: the villainess.”<sup>103</sup> Xiao Yu certainly seems to fit Modleski’s description of the villainess: “Although much of the suffering on soap opera is presented as unavoidable, the surplus suffering is often the fault of the villainess who tries to ‘make things happen and control events.’”<sup>104</sup> Of course, not all of the problems that arise between Yezi and Haitao can be traced to Xiao Yu, and the problems faced by Xue er and Yiting certainly had nothing to do with her. The majority of the “surplus” suffering that Haitao and Yezi experience, however, was indeed caused by Xiao Yu.

The fact that the viewer is encouraged to sympathize with at least most of the KTV girls would indicate that while the show is depicting the profession of *sanpei* in a negative light, it is also stressing that girls working in the profession are worthy of our compassion and attention. At the same time, the show can be viewed as a warning for young girls tempted to enter the profession in order to eat their “rice bowl of youth.”

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<sup>102</sup> Modleski, 452.

<sup>103</sup> Modleski, 452.

<sup>104</sup> Modleski, 452.

Yezi's comments about how she regrets being so shortsighted, combined with the miserable fate that awaited all of the *sanpei* in the show, reinforces the idea that working as a *sanpei* is not the opportunity it appears to be. Yiting and Xiao Yu both commit suicide after avenging former loves (Yiting by murdering Gao Chan, and Xiao Yu by sabotaging Haitao's relationship with Yezi), while Yezi disappears after not being able to work things out with Haitao. Xue er, on the other hand, by remaining committed to her morals by ultimately resisting the temptation to work as a *sanpei*, is finally able to achieve her dream of studying in France.

Zhao Baogang's decision to create the TV drama, and in particular his desire to create a "clean, positive, and uplifting work," is not always clear cut. The change in Yiting's character from the novel to the TV drama in particular should lead us to question Zhao Baogang's claim that his television show is "clean, positive, and uplifting." Although viewers are perhaps more understanding when watching Yiting murder Gao Chan in the TV drama than in the online novel, the fact remains that she murders Gao Chan and then commits suicide, neither of which is particularly positive or uplifting. It is possible that Zhao Baogang's desire to capitalize on the popularity of the internet novel led him to retain more of the basic story-line (i.e. the murder/suicide) than he originally planned.

Despite this example, I agree with Zhao Baogang's claim that he approached his TV story from a different perspective and for a different purpose than the original novel. Zhao Baogang changed certain elements about the characters to better suit his objectives, while remaining faithful enough to the internet version to still benefit from the original

novel's popularity. Some of the changes may have been required due to censorship. For example, he moves the story from Beijing to Shenzhen, a city perhaps more "suitable" for such depictions. To suggest that such depravity is occurring in the PRC capital was likely too much for the censors to handle. In addition, he changes the profession of the girls from prostitutes to *zuotai* (and later to "dancing girls" in the 2008 version of the TV drama). However, other changes that he made appear to be much more in concert with Zhao Baogang's stated objectives. For example, Yezi left the profession due to the violent treatment she experienced at the hands of her clients; Yiting left the profession and opened a hair salon; Xue'er resisted the pressure to work as a *zuotai* and instead toiled away as a cigar seller. By focusing attention on the dangers of the profession, as well as by creating more admirable and moral characterizations, Zhao Baogang was able to foster viewer sympathy for the girls' plight. As a result, he was better able to make his case for the need for viewers to ponder the livelihood of girls within the industry and the "clashes" they encounter in society at large.

The TV show's social commentary, and in particular, Haitao's father's "final word" demanding that Haitao end his relationship with Yezi, serves to remind viewers of the "reality" of becoming a *sanpei*. In the end, the show returns to the more generally accepted attitudes held regarding the *sanpei*. The show's ending on some level follows that of the online novel, particularly with the idea that Haitao and Yezi were driven apart by Xiao Yu and the story ends just as it begins, with Yezi calling Haitao and asking for a cigarette. In contrast, however, unlike the TV version, Haitao's parents never find out that Yezi was a former *sanpei* in the original online novel. In some ways, the show's

loose commitment to the original novel complicates its ability to resolve conflicts with a return to the status quo, as the viewer is left to imagine whether or not Yezi and Haitao will eventually get back together. The open-ended manner in which *Give Me a Cigarette* ends reminds one of an American soap opera, unlike the other two dramas explored in this thesis. As mentioned in the Introduction, although film melodrama, as Laura Mulvey has pointed out, is celebrated for the “dust” it raises along the way, the soap opera can, “because it is always going along the road, raise an infinite amount of dust without worrying about clearing it up.”<sup>105</sup> In an odd way, *Give Me a Cigarette* combines both of these concepts in its ending: by having Haitao’s father threaten to disown Haitao if he does not end his relationship with Yezi, the dust raised along the road appears settled at the end, when Haitao breaks up with her one final time. At the same time, however, by ending the show with Yezi’s phone call, implying the possibility that the two might get back together, one could argue that none of the dust was ever really cleared.

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<sup>105</sup> Ang, 487.

CHAPTER IV  
 BUSINESS CORRUPTION AND CHINA'S UNDERWORLD  
 AS DEPICTED IN *I'M NOT A HERO*

The television drama *I'm Not a Hero* (我非英雄, 2004) opens in the fictitious city of Chiyang on a night when one of the city's police officers, Hu Jianguo, is mysteriously murdered in a tea house. The remainder of the series follows Hu's partner Chen Fei as he untangles the complicated webs of Chiyang's business community and criminal underworld in order to bring those responsible for his partner's death to justice. In August 2004, *I'm Not a Hero* became the first crime-related drama to be aired in primetime on Tianjin TV following the March 2004 SARFT ban on crime-themed shows in primetime.<sup>106</sup> Over the next few months, the show was popular throughout China, and according to the 2005 edition of the *China and Radio TV Yearbook*, it was one of the top five most popular shows aired on Shanghai's satellite TV station "Dragon TV" (东方电视台) in 2004.<sup>107</sup> Scholars, including Ying Zhu and Jeffrey C. Kinkley, have argued that the March 2004 SARFT ban resulted in a shift from contemporary to Qing dynasty period anti-corruption dramas. The series *I'm Not a Hero* reveals that the ban also led to a shift

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<sup>106</sup> "I'm Not a Hero Launches a Heavy Attack: Su Honglei Plays A Different Kind of Cop 《我非英雄》重磅出击 孙红雷演绎另类刑警," *Heilongjiang Daily* 黑龙江日报, 23 February 2005, 10 March 2009 <[http://www.hljdaily.com.cn/by\\_shb/system/2005/02/23/000082985.shtml](http://www.hljdaily.com.cn/by_shb/system/2005/02/23/000082985.shtml)>.

<sup>107</sup> *China Radio and TV Yearbook: 2005* 中国广播电视年鉴 - 2005 (Beijing: Zhongguo guang bo dian shi chu ban she, 2005) 193.

from government official anti-corruption dramas to ones focused more on private sector corruption. Just as the Qing dynasty period dramas are seen continuing the debate started by the earlier, more contemporary dramas, *I'm Not a Hero* contributes to this discussion as well. In the sections that follow, I will first explore relevant theories of melodrama that will aid in understanding the series. Following this discussion, I will turn to issues regarding corruption and organized crime as explored in earlier fiction and in society in general. I will then refocus on *I'm Not a Hero* to explore how the show is utilizing melodrama to contribute to the ongoing debate about corruption in contemporary China and the path China needs to take to resolve this and other pressing social issues.

### ***Theoretical Framework***

As mentioned in the Introduction, recent scholarship encourages us to consider melodrama not as a genre separate from more masculine dramas such as the action film, but rather as a concept or “mode” that encompasses a much larger field of genres. According to Williams, a work is considered melodrama if it evokes emotion and a moral response, elicits empathy for virtuous victims, and develops the plot with more emphasis on the recovery and presentation of innocence than on the psychology of character behavior and action.<sup>108</sup> Regarding action genres in particular, Mark Gallagher argues that “like melodrama, the action film emphasizes archetypal characters and non-psychological

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<sup>108</sup> Williams, 42.

development of those characters, displacement of conflict through hysteria and excess, unambiguous moral oppositions, and accessibility of meaning.”<sup>109</sup>

Linda Williams’ essay, “Melodrama Revised,” although focused primarily on the US film industry, is particularly relevant for my reading of *I’m Not a Hero*. As she notes, “Melodrama is structured upon the ‘dual recognition’ of how things are and how they should be. In melodrama there is a moral, wish-fulfilling impulse towards the achievement of justice.”<sup>110</sup> Furthermore, within the male action genres, “the suffering of the victim-hero is important for the establishment of moral legitimacy, but suffering is less extended [than in ‘woman’s films’] and ultimately gives way to action. Similarly the recognition of virtue is at least partially achieved through the performance of deeds.”<sup>111</sup> As we will see shortly, it is through suffering that the audience is initially convinced of Chen Fei’s moral virtue, but for the characters within the show itself, Chen Fei’s virtue is confirmed through his heroic and selfless action. We will also see how the show, as a melodrama, recognizes “how things are” in its exploration of the current social realities of corruption and organized crime while also suggesting how things “should be” due to Chen Fei’s heroic commitment to social justice.

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<sup>109</sup> Mark Gallagher, “I Married Rambo: Spectacle and Melodrama in the Hollywood Action Film,” *Mythologies of Violence in Postmodern Media*, ed. Christopher Sharrett (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1999) 203.

<sup>110</sup> Williams, 48.

<sup>111</sup> Williams, 60.



### ***Corruption and Criminal Gangs in Post-Reform China***

In order to place *I'm Not a Hero* in its proper context, it is important to examine the anti-corruption TV series and novels that preceded it, as well as subsequent attention to business corruption and criminal gangs. As evidenced by Hu Jintao's call for a "harmonious society," corruption has been identified as a key social problem in contemporary China by those at the highest level. Indeed, upon taking office in late 2002, President Hu Jintao emphasized the importance of clean government and professed a desire to combat corruption, an issue of great importance to the Chinese public. As scholar and journalist Willy Lam has noted, "apart from jobs and living standards, ordinary Chinese are most concerned about inequity in income distribution, and corruption, which has enabled well-connected but ruthless cadres and businessmen alike to get rich quick."<sup>112</sup> Hu Jintao's first major test in the business corruption realm was a scandal surrounding the Shanghai businessman Zhou Zhengyi, who was once listed by *Forbes* as the eleventh richest man in China. He was detained by Shanghai police in May 2003 for allegedly illegally obtaining over RMB1.5 billion in loans from the Bank of China and a number of Shanghai banks. Although many of the high profile cases following Zhou's arrest involved political figures, rather than businessmen, Willy Lam's observation clearly indicates that official corruption was not the only type that concerned the public.

However, the issue of corruption within the business sector was not often explored in the anti-corruption novels or TV dramas written in the 1990s and early 2000s.

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<sup>112</sup> Willy Wo-Lap Lam, *Chinese Politics in the Hu Jintao Era: New Leaders, New Challenges* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 2006) 144.

In his study of these works, Jeffery C. Kinkley finds that “Nearly all corruption in Chinese fiction is official; it is seldom initiated by the private sector.”<sup>113</sup> Moreover, a focus “on the top CCP leadership, instead of on capital and international capital, opens up a gap between anticorruption novelists and China’s elite critics.”<sup>114</sup> In discussing this issue, Kinkley raises the following questions:

Does this reflect an unspoken ban on showing corruption in the private sector, whose market logic is the hallmark and ideological bulwark of the CCP regime in post-Mao times? Is it intended as a reflection of reality? Is it a reflection of the authors’ felt obligation to excoriate official power, so long as official rather than private sector power remains hegemonic? Might it even reflect the solipsism of officials, who do not yet consider the domestic private sector powerful enough to have an active role in corruption? Or does it reflect the age-old Chinese discourse of corruption, which sees evil spreading from the top of society?<sup>115</sup>

Does the fact that the series *I’m Not a Hero* tackles private sector corruption indicate that by 2004, the private sector was no longer considered “the hallmark and ideological bulwark of the CCP regime”? By 2004, had officials begun to “consider the domestic private sector powerful enough to have an active role in corruption”? Does it signal a change in priorities regarding corruption from the Jiang Zemin era to the Hu Jintao era? Or was it perhaps an attempt on the part of the director, Guo Jingyu, to explore an issue similar enough to these earlier anti-corruption dramas to capitalize on their popularity, while altering the focus of attention onto the business sector, which for whatever reason was acceptable to the censors? In his analysis of the earlier dramas and novels, Kinkley

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<sup>113</sup> Jeffrey C. Kinkley, *Corruption and Realism in Late Socialist China: The Return of the Political Novel* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007) 43.

<sup>114</sup> Kinkley, 43.

<sup>115</sup> Kinkley, 43.

indicates that they were already in decline prior to the SARFT ban on crime-related dramas, and suggests that this might be due to oversaturation of the market. Perhaps Director Guo Jingyu recognized that the decline in popularity of contemporary anti-corruption dramas was due to this oversaturation, and believed that viewers would be interested in a similar show that tackled the issue from a different angle.

*Anti-Corruption Dramas and the Chinese New Left*

In her study of pre-2004 anti-corruption dramas, Ying Zhu suggests that they often reflect arguments put forward by China's New Left, a group of intellectuals concerned about "the problems created by the rapid marketization and decentralization policies of the reform era: extreme inequality, rampant corruption, and the dismantling of public health and education."<sup>116</sup> These intellectuals are critical of neo-liberals and neo-authoritarians for prioritizing the growth of the domestic and international market over all other concerns. In fact, the New Left views "general indifference to social welfare...as the result of a single-minded reform effort pursued at the expense of a social safety net and any prospect of building a civil society based on grassroots democracy."<sup>117</sup> Building on Ying Zhu's analysis of how pre-SARFT ban anti-corruption dramas reflect these New Leftist ideas, we will find that *I'm Not a Hero* is also engaging in a dialogue with these New Leftist arguments. Wang Hui, a leading "New Left" intellectual on whom Ying Zhu bases the majority of her discussion, stated in an interview that "China is caught between

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<sup>116</sup> Zhu, 26.

<sup>117</sup> Zhu, 26.

the two extremes of misguided socialism and crony capitalism, and suffering from the worst elements of both systems.”<sup>118</sup> In an essay entitled “Equity and Efficiency,” another

New Leftist, Hu Angang, argues:

China faces growing risks of social instability. Different groups and classes are splitting away from each other, conflicts of interest are intensifying, and social order is threatened with significant disruption. A high proportion of China’s enterprises—not only state-owned or collective enterprises, but township-and-village enterprises and private firms—are in operational difficulties today. Together with this, corruption and abuse of power are seriously harming the masses. Consequently, the incidence of all sorts of symptoms of social instability is on the rise, indeed increasing at a pace that is outstripping the growth of the economy itself.<sup>119</sup>

In light of these concerns, and the lack of a social “safety net” in contemporary China, Hu Angang emphasizes the “urgent need to set up a benefits system appropriate to Chinese conditions, covering pensions, unemployment insurance, health-care, housing loans, work injury compensation, and life insurance.”<sup>120</sup> In *I’m Not a Hero*, this issue arises when factory workers at the Chiyang Steel Group Company report to the police that their pension funds are unavailable, and that workers who have fallen ill have been unable to procure funding for medical treatment.

The New Leftists are not the only voices stressing these concerns. The more liberal leaning Wang Yi echoes this need for more balanced economic reform, commenting that:

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<sup>118</sup> Wang Hui, quoted in Jehangir S. Pocha, “China’s New Left,” *New Perspectives Quarterly* 22, 2 (Spring 2005), 26 May 2009 < [http://www.digitalnpq.org/archive/2005\\_spring/07\\_pocha.html](http://www.digitalnpq.org/archive/2005_spring/07_pocha.html)>.

<sup>119</sup> Hu Angang, “Equity and Efficiency,” *One China, Many Paths*, ed. Chaohua Wang (London: Verso, 2003) 224.

<sup>120</sup> Hu, 232.

The issue at stake... is not that of social justice in a market economy. It is the problem of social justice under the shadow of a pre-market economy and rule by ideology. The crux of the question is the betrayal by the CCP of the tens of millions of working-class people who struggled to support it for many years.<sup>121</sup>

In Wang Yi's view, in the reform era, the state has betrayed its promise of lifelong security to its workers, and instead "has continuously sought to evade, under the cover of 'legalization', the historical responsibility it voluntarily assumed on the very first day the CCP raised its revolutionary banner."<sup>122</sup> This issue of "social justice" and the need to consider the plight of Chiyang's workers appears throughout *I'm Not a Hero* as Chen Fei's primary objective in solving the case. Another liberal, He Qinglian, comments that "in name, China is still a 'socialist state where the working class is its own master', and all toilers enjoy basic human rights. In reality, local governments competing to attract overseas capital typically bend to investors' demands."<sup>123</sup> She continues to emphasize that even though local cadres "know perfectly well what are the working and living conditions in such factories, they would never intervene to do anything about them."<sup>124</sup> Moreover, even when major disasters occur, "the enquiry into such incidents is usually concluded in a rush, with the excuse that 'to protect local economic growth, we must not dampen the enthusiasm of investors.'"<sup>125</sup> As we will see, members of Chiyang's business

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<sup>121</sup> Wang Yi, "From Status to Contract?" *One China, Many Paths*, ed. Chaohua Wang (London: Verso, 2003) 191.

<sup>122</sup> Wang Yi, 192.

<sup>123</sup> He Qinglian, "A Listing Social Structure," *One China, Many Paths*, ed. Chaohua Wang (London: Verso, 2003) 176.

<sup>124</sup> He, 176.

<sup>125</sup> He, 176.

elite are insistent that the police investigation of their company not interfere with their ongoing joint venture negotiations with a US firm.

These arguments can be contrasted with those at the “neo-liberal edge of the spectrum,” for which “any reservations are dropped, corruption and theft of public assets being viewed as an affordable price of necessary privatization.”<sup>126</sup> As Ying Zhu further explains,

The New Left and Neo-authoritarians share the same belief in a strong central government for a strong China. The difference between the two lies in the New Left’s call for state intervention on the side of making the market more socially responsible, as against the Neo-authoritarians’ bet on putting the same strong central authority at the service of an unhampered, all out market economy. As the New Left argues, liberal market economics have been responsible for dismantled welfare systems, widening income gaps, and deepening environmental crises.<sup>127</sup>

We will see this New Left vs. Neo-liberal dispute acted out in *I’m Not a Hero* between Chen Fei and a manager at Chiyang Steel Group Company, Li Weicheng, who insists on the importance of a free, unhindered market.

### *Anti-Corruption Heroes and the Role of Women within the Genre*

Chen Fei’s heroic actions in *I’m Not a Hero* can be linked to the typical anti-corruption hero in fictional works that preceded this show. Kinkley notes that in these earlier works, “if the hero is in law enforcement, he is not senior in rank but is still seasoned and rational, verging on middle age... Being on the defensive much of the time,

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<sup>126</sup> Chaohua Wang, introduction, *One China, Many Paths*, ed. Chaohua Wang (London: Verso, 2003) 36.

<sup>127</sup> Zhu, 26.

the hero represents justice, not crusading reformism.”<sup>128</sup> Moreover, “he will be, withal, a classic, incorruptible ‘good official’ (*qing guan*), facing off against bad people at his level in the hierarchy or higher... To sternly face bad people, the hero must be not just a *qing guan* but a judicial righter of past wrongs.”<sup>129</sup> Another scholar working on these earlier dramas, Ruoyun Bai, emphasizes that:

These characters resonate strongly with an age-old but still powerful, pervasive ideology, known as ‘clean official’ (*qing guan yi shi*). According to this set of beliefs, society is bettered and justice restored by ‘clean officials,’ a minority of officials who are honest, fair, and who care for social underdogs. At the core of this ideology is a yearning for officials who pit themselves against powerful criminals to preserve the interests of ordinary people.<sup>130</sup>

In her essay, Bai traces the link between these “clean officials” and Bao Zheng (AD 999-1062), a high-level official in the Northern Song dynasty who “combated crime, injustice, and corruption.”<sup>131</sup> As she notes, “in popular culture, Judge Bao always appears as the foe of injustice and corruption perpetrated by imperial families... Judge Bao’s hatred of the corrupt powerful is paralleled by his concern and commiseration for the downtrodden.”<sup>132</sup> Chen Fei’s commitment to social justice, his unrelenting suspicion of the Chiyang Steel Group Company executives and his concern regarding how they treat their own workers links him closely to this description of Judge Bao.

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<sup>128</sup> Kinkley, 39.

<sup>129</sup> Kinkley, 39.

<sup>130</sup> Ruoyun Bai, “‘Clean Officials,’ Emotional Moral Community, and Anti-corruption Television Dramas,” *TV Drama in China*, TransAsia: Screen Cultures, ed. Ying Zhu, Michael Keane, and Ruoyun Bai (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2008) 49.

<sup>131</sup> Bai, 50.

<sup>132</sup> Bai, 51.

The final element of the genre that I would like to explore here is the role of women within it. In his study of earlier anti-corruption dramas, Kinkley argues that women often play a secondary role, and are never positioned as either the mastermind or the hero. As he explains,

The Chinese discourse of corruption has *always* centered on the misbehavior of *males* in power; women are chiefly means by which males are corrupted, or at least tempted... In realms of power, other females are likely to be mistresses. If they figure as investigative partners, they are subordinates, and perhaps romantic objects, of the ‘strong male’ who is the hero. The genre is not feminist.<sup>133</sup>

Kinkley’s reading of these earlier works suggests that in addition to shifting the anti-corruption focus from the public to the private sector, *I’m Not a Hero* is also noteworthy for the fact that it positions a female in power as CEO of a major company, who is capable of singlehandedly masterminding a gigantic embezzlement and corruption scheme.

#### *A Shift in the Focus of Anti-Corruption Efforts*

I would like to now turn briefly to more recent media articles regarding anti-corruption and gang criminal campaigns. According to Cheng Wenhao, the director of the Anti-Corruption and Governance Research Center of Tsinghua University, “a significant change occurred between 2005 and 2006 with respect to China’s anti-corruption campaign; whereas previously the campaign focused only on bribery and corruption in the public sector, the scope has now expanded, making anti-corruption in

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<sup>133</sup> Kinkley, 40, emphasis added.



the private sector a priority issue.”<sup>134</sup> As he notes, “in order to reduce demand for business bribery deals, China’s law enforcement agencies are now working to increase the costs for offering bribes.”<sup>135</sup> In February 2006, state media reported that “to effectively rein in commercial bribery, efforts should not only be made on the demand side. Domestic businesses should also be mobilized to help [create] a level playing field for all by renouncing bribery.”<sup>136</sup> The issue of commercial bribery was also one of the main concerns for the 2006 session of the National People’s Congress, during which time *China Daily* reported that “few businesspeople actively condone commercial bribes, but some continue to argue that they are forced to pay bribes because of the pressures from their competitors.”<sup>137</sup>

Around the same time that these announcements were published, the Chinese government launched a three-month nationwide crackdown on criminal gangs. According to official press reports, “police received more than 3,700 reports from the public by telephone, letter and e-mail” regarding criminal gangs, and as a result were investigating over a thousand gang-related crimes.<sup>138</sup> According to Executive Vice-

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<sup>134</sup> Cheng Wenhao, “China’s Ongoing War Against Business Corruption,” ChinaCSR.com, 7 September 2006, 15 March 2009 <<http://www.chinacsr.com/en/2006/09/07/711-chinas-ongoing-war-against-business-corruption/>>.

<sup>135</sup> Cheng, “China’s Ongoing War Against Business Corruption.”

<sup>136</sup> “Allies Needed in Battle of Commercial Bribery,” *Xinhua*, 4 March 2006, 15 March 2009 <[http://news3.xinhuanet.com/english/2006-03/04/content\\_4255508.htm](http://news3.xinhuanet.com/english/2006-03/04/content_4255508.htm)>.

<sup>137</sup> “Commercial Bribes Being Top Concern,” *China Daily*, 13 March 2006, 15 March 2009 <[http://news3.xinhuanet.com/english/2006-03/13/content\\_4296123.htm](http://news3.xinhuanet.com/english/2006-03/13/content_4296123.htm)>.

<sup>138</sup> “China Clamps Down on Gang-Related Crimes,” *Xinhua*, 26 May 2006, 15 March 2009 <[http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/200605/26/eng20060526\\_268662.html](http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/200605/26/eng20060526_268662.html)>.

Minister of Public Security Bai Jingfu, “gang-related crimes are on the rise in China, as society is going through tremendous economic and social reforms.”<sup>139</sup>

Although these efforts postdate *I'm Not a Hero*, they nonetheless point to the fact that issues explored in the TV drama were soon to become key priorities for Chinese officials. It is perhaps worthwhile to note that the show's first airing on a Beijing television station was on BTV2 in March 2006, just as these campaigns were taking place.<sup>140</sup>

### *A Close Look at the Series Itself*

As we turn to the series itself, I would like to begin by looking at how we are introduced to Chen Fei in the first episode of the show. The series begins with a discussion between Du Gang, who is clearly a part of the city's underworld, and a smartly dressed businessman. The businessman plays a tape recorded message for Du Gang from a certain Li Weicheng, providing Du Gang with orders to murder Hu Jianguo, a corrupt cop (黑警察). Du Gang insists that he is more interested in killing a certain Chen Fei. Li Weicheng's tape recorded message confirms that Chen Fei will most likely be in attendance that evening. Immediately following this conversation, the camera cuts to Chen Fei, who is happily walking to meet his girlfriend Lu Ying for a date. However, just before he meets up with her, he receives a phone call from Bureau Chief Su

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<sup>139</sup> “Gang Crimes Under Control in Beijing,” *China Daily*, 12 April 2006, 15 March 2009 <[http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/200604/12/eng20060412\\_257789.html](http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/200604/12/eng20060412_257789.html)>.

<sup>140</sup> “*I'm Not a Hero* Popular; Li Qiang Feels Grateful: In Fact, I am a Good Person 《我非英雄》热播李强感欣慰:其实我是好人,” *Sina Entertainment* 新浪娱乐, 15 March 2006, 25 January 2009 <<http://ent.sina.com.cn/v/m/2006-03-15/16291016753.html>>.

instructing him to return to work to participate in a raid planned to capture Du Gang. Su informs Chen Fei that Li Weicheng has convinced Du Gang to meet him that night, in order to help the police arrest him. We then learn that Du Gang is a wanted criminal who has evaded the police for years.

That evening, the police are unable to apprehend Du Gang, and Du Gang is unsuccessful in his attempt to kill Hu Jianguo. Later that night, however, Hu Jianguo is found murdered in a tea house that he often frequented with Chen Fei. Chen Fei, upset about the loss of his partner, confronts Li Weicheng about his role in the murder, despite a lack of evidence implicating him. Shortly thereafter, we watch Chen Fei attack a suspect during an interrogation when the suspect claims that Hu Jianguo was a corrupt cop. As a result, Bureau Chief Su takes Chen Fei off the case, and encourages him to take a few days off from work; Su brings in Wang Zhong, a well-respected investigator from the countryside, to take over the case. At the same time, we watch Li Weicheng meet with Xue Fei, a psychiatrist who has recently returned from the US, and who has agreed, at Li's request, to falsely diagnose Chen Fei.

In the first few episodes, we observe how Chen Fei's strong commitment to solving Hu Jianguo's murder is undermined by everyone, including his boss. He is taken off the case, forced to take time off from his job, and falsely treated by a psychiatrist who is colluding with Li Weicheng. The fact that Chen Fei remains committed to the case despite all of these obstacles highlights his virtue and integrity as an upstanding police officer. These first few episodes allow us to witness the suffering of the "victim-hero"

Chen Fei, which “is important for the establishment of moral legitimacy.”<sup>141</sup> In some ways this suffering continues throughout the first half of the show, as we watch the psychiatrist secretly “medicate” Chen Fei by drugging his wine, causing him to have hallucinations. While hallucinating at one point in the series, Chen Fei unnecessarily fires his gun, which leads to the confiscation of his firearm. However, we also learn that Bureau Chief Su is fully confident in Chen Fei’s abilities and even assigns members of the department to ensure his safety. Chen Fei’s increasing success in solving the case despite the lack of a badge makes him much more of a “hero” in our eyes.

A key example of Chen Fei’s detective prowess is found in episodes 15 and 16, in which the police obtain information from the police department in Gaoping (another fictitious city) connecting Hu Jianguo’s murder to an unsolved one that occurred a decade earlier. In Episode 15, Wang Zhong follows the lead by heading to Gaoping, a city that had been dominated by criminal gangs for years; Chen Fei heads there as well to investigate on his own. Chen Fei learns more about the inner workings of the gang from an elderly locksmith, and puts himself in grave danger by tricking the gang into “kidnapping” him. Despite the fact that Chen Fei travelled to Gaoping without his badge and without any weapons, the gang somehow already knows that he is a police officer. At the start of Episode 16, we learn from the head of the gang, a man nicknamed Tuzi, that one of their “big bosses” (大老板) wants Chen Fei killed. As a result, Tuzi assigns one of his underlings the job of setting fire to the abandoned building where Chen Fei is being held captive. However, Chen Fei convinces the gang member to let him go,

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<sup>141</sup> Williams, 60.

reasoning that since Chen Fei is a police officer, the gang member will either be caught by the police or killed by Tuzi before the police can capture him. Eventually convinced by Chen Fei's logic, the gang member lets Chen Fei go while misleading Tuzi and the other gang members into thinking Chen Fei was still inside the building when he set it on fire. Not surprisingly, Chen Fei's hunch proves correct, which results in his saving both his own life and that of the gang member who let him go. Chen Fei then is able to secure a cell phone from one of the gang members and inform the Gaoping police force where the gang is located. As a result of Chen Fei's tip, and the grand shoot out that ensues, the entire criminal gang ends up either dead or in police custody.

In addition to helping cement Chen Fei's heroic image for the viewer (and, indeed, for characters within the TV drama as well), this scene sequence is also instrumental in depicting the havoc criminal gangs can wreak on Chinese cities. The elderly locksmith who provided Chen Fei with information to help solve the case indicated that Gaoping had been controlled by these criminal gangs for over a decade. The only reason the locksmith agreed to risk sharing the information with Chen Fei was because his own son had been greatly injured by the gang a few years before, and he considered Chen Fei his only hope for retribution. Despite the efforts of the city's hard-working police force, these gangs had more control over the city than the authorities. That Chen Fei was able to assist the police in finally apprehending these criminals reflects his superior detective skills; at the same time, however, the audience is well aware that had Chen Fei not convinced the one gang member to release him, the gang would still be at large. In

addition, capturing one gang certainly does not remove the threat that another one will spring up in its place.

*The Corruption of “Tiger” Wang Zhong*

I would like to now turn our attention to the corruption of Wang Zhong, the well-respected police officer who replaced Chen Fei on the case. Wang Zhong had a storied career in the countryside, obtaining the nickname “Lao Hu” (“Tiger”) due to his ruthlessness in solving crimes and apprehending criminals. In Episode 19, the TV drama focuses our attention on his difficult financial situation, when Bureau Chief Su checks in with him regarding his efforts to relocate his family to the city. Su expresses his regret that the police department’s ability to rectify the situation is quite limited, but nonetheless encourages Wang Zhong to keep him apprised of any developments. The scene immediately shifts to the head of Chiyang Steel Group Company, Chairwoman He, who is on the phone. While it is unclear with whom she is speaking, the subject of the conversation is Wang Zhong. She asks, “What’s this? Captain Wang gained the nickname of “tiger” while in the mountain areas? What’s so worrisome about a tiger?” She explains that Wang Zhong is not like Chen Fei, who has no needs or desires (无欲无求); as she puts it, “as long as the medicine is right, he’ll get addicted. Once he becomes addicted, there will be no holding him back.”

As the episode unfolds, we watch as Wang Zhong entertains some businessmen in an attempt to secure employment for his wife. The bill comes to RMB8000 (US\$1,000), a sum that Wang Zhong cannot afford. He calls Chen Fei to borrow money, but then

learns that someone else has paid the bill for him. The next day, Wang Zhong receives a phone call from one of the businessmen, Chairman Huang, informing him that he has found a job for Wang Zhong's wife. During the phone call, Chairman Huang thanks him for his generous gift, about which Wang Zhong knows nothing. Wang Zhong immediately suspects that Li Weicheng is trying to bribe him, and goes to his office to confront him and refuse the help. However, Li Weicheng insists that he has no idea what Wang Zhong is talking about.

A few scenes later, Wang Zhong is picked up by a driver and brought to Chairwoman He's office. She commends Wang Zhong for his remarkable service to his community, but laments the fact that his family is crammed into an old, tiny home, and that he earns less than RMB1500 (approximately US\$200) a month, which is not enough to support his wife and child, not to mention his chronically ill mother. She insists that she is only offering her help as a "friend," and implies that both Chen Fei and Hu Jianguo are corrupt, or at least unclean. She denies having killed Hu Jianguo, but insists that he was a corrupt cop, and encourages Wang Zhong to be a bit more "realistic" and to think of his future, along with that of his wife, son, and mother, as that is what is most important. Even so, he is hesitant to join her crew, and even accuses her of trying to corrupt him. However, Chairwoman He manages to trick him into thinking everything she is asking him to do is aboveboard. Although she provides him with a bank card and the keys to a brand new apartment, Chairwoman He insists that she is not trying to corrupt him, and is only seeking his help to prevent Chen Fei from interfering with the

company as it enters a critical period of negotiations with the American company with which they are trying to joint venture (JV).

In Episode 21, as things become more complicated and Chairwoman He becomes increasingly concerned that the ongoing police investigation will prevent the joint venture from going through, she provides Wang Zhong with evidence implicating Li Weicheng in a number of illegal activities. Again, she provides him with the evidence on the condition that he ensure that it does not impact the ongoing negotiations.

However, it is not until Episode 22 that it becomes clear that Chairwoman He's "medicine" is working. After one of the employees at the Chiyang Steel Group Company, Huang Ying, comes forward to Wang Zhong with suspicions that Chairwoman He and Li Weicheng had created false account reports prior to starting the negotiations for the JV. Wang Zhong relays the information to Chairwoman He rather than reporting the accusation to Bureau Chief Su. He identifies his source to Chairwoman He, and leaves it to her to decide how to resolve the situation.

Even so, it is perhaps not until Huang Ying is murdered by one of Chairwoman He's underlings, Xue Wei, and is found by Jin Bo, one of Wang Zhong's fellow police officers, that Wang Zhong becomes a fully corrupt cop. In Episode 23, Wang Zhong and Jin Bo are on their way to investigate another case when Wang Zhong receives a call from a terrified Huang Ying, who has been locked in a villa and is convinced that people within the company (and in particular Li Weicheng, who has been framed by Chairwoman He) are trying to kill her. However, when Wang Zhong and Jin Bo arrive at the scene, Huang Ying is nowhere to be found, and the only person on site is Xue Wei.



As Wang Zhong and Jin Bo are about to leave, Jin Bo manages to open the back door, and finds Huang Ying's body outside on the porch. Xue Wei then shoots and kills Jin Bo; as Jin Bo slowly dies, he watches Wang Zhong stand there and make no effort to apprehend Xue Wei. When Xue Wei attempts to flee the scene, Wang Zhong shoots him in the back, killing him. An officer of the law, who is only supposed to kill criminals in self-defense and as a last resort, Wang Zhong has instead fulfilled Chairman He's prediction that there would be no holding him back. From this point on, Wang Zhong, although clearly distraught with the position in which he finds himself, is nonetheless completely under Chairwoman He's control: he begins to falsify reports to Bureau Chief Su and helps her to frame both Li Weicheng and Chen Fei.

Why did the series devote five episodes to the process through which Wang Zhong becomes corrupt, and why would the series want to imply that such a well-respected officer could be corrupted in the first place? Usually, the model cop is the hero of the drama. One would expect that it would be nearly impossible to corrupt someone of Wang Zhong's reputation. If Wang Zhong can be corrupted, what does that say about the average police officer? However, as Chairwoman He herself commented in Episode 19, even a "tiger" can be corrupted, as long as you discover his weakness and offer him the right kind of "medicine." Although Wang Zhong is certainly to blame for not going directly to Bureau Chief Su for help and instead allowing Chairwoman He to supplement his income, the way the drama depicts the corruption process makes it clear to the viewer that Chairwoman He specifically concocted the exact kind of "medicine" necessary to corrupt Wang Zhong.

We are witness to Wang Zhong's reluctance to meet her demands and accept Chairwoman He's help at the beginning; however, she convinces him that everything is aboveboard by actually providing him with evidence that will help his investigation. Of course, the viewer knows that by Episode 21, Chairwoman He has decided that Li Weicheng is expendable, and her provision of evidence to Wang Zhong is not really meant to help his investigation but to steer him in the wrong direction. Therefore, it would appear that the series is largely placing the blame for Wang Zhong's corruption on the *corrupter*, Chairwoman He. At the same time, however, it is also providing a subtle critique of the state's failure to reward "tigers" like Wang Zhong with enough income to support their families. Bureau Chief Su is acutely aware of Wang Zhong's situation, but laments the fact that there is not much the department can do. If "Tiger" Wang is not paid enough to support a family of four, if he is struggling to finance his ailing mother's medical expenses on his police officer's salary—what does this say about how model police officers are being compensated by the state for their service?

*The Battle between New Left and Neo-liberal Ideals in I'm Not a Hero*

The final aspect I would like to explore in *I'm Not a Hero* is the disagreement between Chen Fei and Li Weicheng regarding the "future" and the correct direction that needs to be taken to reach such a future—a disagreement that reflects the larger debate between New Left and Neo-liberal intellectuals in contemporary China. In Episode 17, Chen Fei and Li Weicheng have a confrontation in the hospital where Chen Fei's former girlfriend and Li Weicheng's current girlfriend Lu Ying works. At this point in the series,

Chen Fei is investigating Chiyang Steel Group Company's financial records due to employee reports that there is something wrong with the company's social security fund; employees who have fallen ill have discovered that there is no money to cover their health expenses. Li Weicheng, frustrated by Chen Fei's investigative attempts, challenges him:

Who do you think you are? You think you are a hero? Don't act out your heroic dreams. The era during which you were a hero has passed. You think you represent justice? Do you think you understand the order of today's society? Do you understand why I have exerted all of this effort? All you are capable of is being suspicious and stirring up trouble.

In response to Li Weicheng's assault, Chen Fei threatens,

If what you are calling the order of the times is obtained at the cost of sacrificing other people's lives, or sacrificing workers' basic interests, if your dream is created by making other people's lives a nightmare, then of course I will be suspicious; I will cause trouble for you until the very end.

As they continue arguing, Chen Fei reminds Li Weicheng who he is fighting for: "People have died.... People are lying on hospital beds without the money for treatment.... There are people whose interests have been displaced due to other people's dreams. That is why I am doing this." Here we begin to see Chen Fei articulating some of the New Leftist ideals regarding the need for social justice and the importance of preventing workers' rights from being sacrificed in the name of economic development. At this point in the series, however, Li Weicheng remains convinced that Chen Fei is after him for personal reasons, and not because it is the "right" thing to do. By Episode 25, after Li Weicheng realizes that he has been sacrificed (and framed) by Chairwoman He, he is finally more receptive to Chen Fei's point of view.

During a second confrontation, Li Weicheng admits to Chen Fei everything that he has done, including killing Du Gang, and continues to defend his behavior:

First of all, I have never killed an innocent person. Everyone I have killed has been a criminal or an accomplice; their hand must previously have been covered in someone else's blood. Secondly: I refuse to compromise with anyone who tries to interfere with my dreams. I will try every method to fight against them to the end—this once included Du Gang, and later you. All right, I have now confessed everything to you. You've won, I admit it. You can interrogate me, punish me, even ridicule me. My dream has already been shattered, there's nothing left for me to say.

Chen Fei insists to Li Weicheng that he is wrong: “There never was any battle between us; there is no winner or loser. If the day comes that you are brought to trial or punished for some crime, it will not be accomplished by me as an individual.” Li Weicheng disagrees, saying that Chen Fei had been fixated on him and would not let him go. Chen Fei insists that it was not that he himself was focused on Li Weicheng, but that the law and social justice forced Chen Fei to continue investigating Li Weicheng and his company. Li Weicheng once again scoffs at Chen Fei's “meaningless” social justice (虚无的公正), and defends his goal: “Do you know what my dream was about? It was about wealth, about capital, about creating a larger market, about creating more freedom, about Chiyang Steel Group Company, about Chiyang's future!” In this highly dramatized moment, we are witness to Li Weicheng passionately expressing his “Neo-liberal” ideals. However, Chen Fei rejects Li Weicheng's dream with equal passion:

If we lose “social justice” (公正) what future do we have? What future? Your dream sounds wonderful. But in the process of achieving your dream, the cost to others was far too great; it even took some of their lives. I, too, have dreams. My dream was Lu Ying. I tell you, what I say about “social justice” is not meaningless. It is related to every single person's means of livelihood, every person's bed, every person's health, safety, and right to happiness. While you were so busy trying to achieve your dream,

do you know how many people were lying on sick beds facing the threat of death and suffering through their illnesses, without the money to pay for treatment? Didn't you just say that you have never hurt an innocent person? But every time you took an additional step towards your dream, innocent people ended up falling down behind you, including the woman you loved so deeply. Your future is not *our* future. At the very least, it is not the future for those who have lost their lives. It is just your own personal future, it is only the future that you imagined from your bright, spacious office...Li Weicheng, is this future really the one you dream of? Perhaps. But I tell you, it's a nightmare; a never-ending nightmare.

This time, Li Weicheng ultimately concedes that Chen Fei is correct, and agrees that his dream has instead become a never-ending nightmare. Despite the loftiness of Li Weicheng's ambitions, despite the fact that his goal was to improve Chiyang and bring prosperity to the city, Li Weicheng ended up a pawn in someone else's chess game, to quote Bureau Chief Su's phrase from an earlier episode. Unlike Chairwoman He, whose ambitions were strictly selfish—she cared only about her own future and that of her daughter, and was willing to sacrifice anyone and everyone, including her entire company—Li Weicheng was not thinking of only himself. Once Chairwoman He turned on him, he recognized the fact that his dream would never come true—at least not by the path he had taken. In Episode 13, during a conversation with one of his colleagues, Xie Ying, Li Weicheng explained that he, like Chen Fei, utterly despises evil: “It is because I hate it that I work so hard, that I want to expand Chiyang Steel Group Company's strength. It is only through the power of capital that you can change the world and eradicate evil.” However, by Episode 25, he has come to realize that instead of eradicating evil through his efforts, he has instead helped the exceptionally evil Chairwoman He commit an unimaginable crime—one that turned his respectable dream into a horrifying nightmare.

I would like to return here to Jeffrey C. Kinkley's questions regarding why previous anti-corruption dramas avoided implicating the private sector, and in particular his first question, namely: "Does this reflect an unspoken ban on showing corruption in the private sector, whose market logic is the hallmark and ideological bulwark of the CCP regime in post-Mao times?"<sup>142</sup> Keeping this question in mind, how do we read this final speech by Chen Fei, which points to a larger argument being made by the show as a whole? Is there an ultimate flaw in the market logic of the private sector? Is the noble dream of relying on capital to "change the world and eradicate evil" ultimately flawed? Is there too much potential for abuse by greedy individuals like Chairwoman He? Like a typical melodramatic text, however, the show provides no real solution to the problem. Yes, Chairwoman He is apprehended in the end; yes, her daughter returns the embezzled money as it would not bring her happiness; yes, the woman who replaces Chairwoman He as the new representative of the company, Xie Ying (Chairwoman He's cousin) ensures that she will make sure the workers are taken care of properly—but what is the larger answer to the problem?

By considering the argument between Chen Fei and Li Weicheng as taking place between the New Leftist and Neo-liberal camps, perhaps we can begin to see how the show is actually suggesting a possible solution to the problem. Viewing the argument in this manner, it becomes clear that the show is not proposing that the problem lies with the Neo-liberals or the market economy itself. Instead, the problem lies with corrupt, greedy and evil forces, who, like Chairwoman He, have misused the opportunities created by the

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<sup>142</sup> Kinkley, 43.

market economy for their own personal gains rather than to achieve the lofty and respectable ideals of the Neo-liberals. The drama further suggests that the New Leftist approach on its own is not enough to resolve the issue. Chen Fei cannot solve the crime without Li Weicheng's help. In this way, the show is advocating the need for the New Leftists and Neo-liberals to come together to find a "new way" to combat the corrupt, greedy and evil forces that have profited most in the reform era, at the expense of the majority of the population. The show also suggests that business(wo)men, such as Xie Ying are waiting in the wings, ready and capable of taking on this responsibility as long as the corrupt, greedy and evil ones are found and removed from positions of power.

#### *Reading I'm Not a Hero as Melodrama*

In closing, I would like to consider *I'm Not a Hero* in light of Linda Williams' identification of five key elements of melodramatic texts. Williams maintains that "melodrama begins, and wants to end, in a space of innocence...the narrative ends happily if the protagonists can, in some way, return to this space of innocence, unhappily if they do not."<sup>143</sup> In *I'm Not a Hero*, the show itself does not technically begin in a space of innocence, as the first scene is a discussion among members of the gang underworld and the business community. Even so, our first introduction to Chen Fei does take place within a space of innocence, as he is cheerily walking to meet his girlfriend for a date. This innocence does not last long, as he receives a phone call from Bureau Chief Su informing him of that night's raid. The drama ends with order being restored to the

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<sup>143</sup> Williams, 65.

city of Chiyang, with the crime solved and the embezzled money returned to its rightful owners in China. In some ways, rather than a “return to innocence,” this ending is instead suggestive of a future space of innocence, which will be created once the New Leftists and Neo-liberals work together to light the path China will follow going forward.

A second key element of melodrama, according to Williams, is that it focuses on “victim-heroes and the recognition of their virtue... Though an initial victimization is constant, the key function of the victimization is to orchestrate the moral legibility crucial to the mode.”<sup>144</sup> As mentioned previously, Chen Fei is depicted as a victim-hero throughout the series—at the hands of his psychiatrist and at the hands of the law—particularly when his gun is taken away and when he is taken off the case. According to Williams, melodrama also “appears modern by borrowing from realism, but realism serves the melodramatic passion and action.”<sup>145</sup> This is certainly the case in *I’m Not a Hero*. Although Chen Fei manages somewhat unrealistically to survive multiple attempts on his life, a large portion of the drama is depicted realistically. Several social problems are explored throughout the drama, including corruption in the private sector, gang violence, and the need for medical coverage for workers. On a more detailed level, the amount of time Du Gang spends obtaining a gun and ammunition for it realistically reflects China’s strict gun laws.

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<sup>144</sup> Williams, 66.

<sup>145</sup> Williams, 68.



The idea that “melodrama involves a dialectic of pathos and action—a give and take of ‘too late’ and ‘in the nick of time’” permeates *I’m Not a Hero*.<sup>146</sup> It was “too late” for Hu Jianguo, Lu Ying, Jin Bo, Du Gang, and, in the final shoot-out, Li Weicheng; on the other hand, Chen Fei often solves crises “in the nick of time,” perhaps best illustrated by the crime being solved just before the evil Chairwoman He departs for the airport to flee China (and, hence, prosecution).

Williams explains that a final element of melodrama is that it “presents characters who embody primary psychic roles organized in Manichaeian conflicts between good and evil.”<sup>147</sup> Within *I’m Not a Hero*, our “good” characters include a number of police officers, such as Bureau Chief Su, Chen Fei and Hu Jianguo (whose name is cleared by Chairwoman He at the end of the series), as well as members of the business community, including Xie Ying. The “evil” characters include Chairwoman He, her underlings, and members of the gang underworld. We also encounter transition characters who encompass a “grey area” between good and evil, such as Li Weicheng and Wang Zhong, both of whom were merely pawns in He’s chess game.

Through melodrama, the series exposes the great risks and challenges facing police in contemporary China. On the one hand, there are extremely strong and violent gangs who elude the law for years, and on the other hand, there are business(wo)men colluding with these gangs and other criminals to protect their (illegal) business interests and prevent the police from “getting in their way.” Finally, the speeches between Chen Fei and Li Weicheng showcase that just as *Close to You, Make Me Warm* questions the

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<sup>146</sup> Williams, 69.

<sup>147</sup> Williams, 77.

post-Mao feminine ideal, *I'm Not a Hero* questions the post-Mao ideal of a market economy governed according to socialist principles.

## CHAPTER V

## TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY WHITE BONE DEMONS AND FOX FAIRIES

In the preceding chapters, I have sought to illustrate how the three Chinese TV dramas *Close to You*, *Make Me Warm*; *Give Me a Cigarette*; and *I'm Not a Hero* utilize melodrama to explore key social issues facing China in the early twenty-first century. Within each chapter, I have critiqued the dramas individually, examining how each, within its own rather distinct genre, explores very different social issues. At the same time, as suggested in the Introduction, these three shows also highlight the “dust” that has been created by market reforms in the contemporary Chinese context. That these dramas “settle” the majority of this dust within the boundaries of the current status quo, rather than suggesting possible solutions, could be viewed as a fundamental weakness or limitation of the melodramatic mode. It is important to recognize, however, that the very nature of the state-controlled Chinese TV drama production process encourages directors to discover “solutions” within the current social order. To suggest otherwise could be interpreted by the censors as an attempt to criticize the Party and would likely result in the drama not being aired. By focusing on the “dust” raised within these shows, we can see how these dramas are, for a few episodes at least, directing viewer attention toward key issues that have appeared in the market reform era. The lack of a single protagonist

in the shows further encourages viewers to consider the issues from multiple angles (for example, from both Lin Danqing and Xie Xiangmei's point of view in *Close to You*, *Make Me Warm*; from Yezi, Li Haitao, and his parents' point of view in *Give Me a Cigarette*; and from Chairwoman He, Li Weicheng and Chen Fei's point of view in *I'm Not a Hero*). At the same time, the varied and sometimes conflicting perspectives held by various characters further emphasize the complexities of the issues raised—perhaps providing a subtle justification as to why the government or the Party has not yet successfully resolved them.

In a way, the very “failure” of these texts to provide concrete solutions to the problems they raise is a reflection of China's current social reality. Prostitution and corruption have both been recognized by the CCP as serious problems that must be eradicated; despite repeated “crackdowns” on both, solutions to these two key problems have not yet been found. The creation of training programs for businesswomen to help them manage their employees in a feminine manner may suggest that a “solution” has been found to this problem. However, the fact that some viewers celebrated the Xie Xiangmei character as a “prototype” of the new independent and successful woman, rather than one in need of re-education, suggests that another solution must be found.

### ***The White Bone Demon and the Fox Fairy***

In their exploration of the post-Mao social context, the dramas focus a great deal of attention on the issues faced by female characters as they strive to financially support themselves. This attention on how women in particular are navigating the market reform

era economy suggests that the three dramas can also be considered in light of gender-specific concerns. With this in mind, I would like to explore how these three dramas relate to recent debates among China's netizens regarding the twenty-first century version of the "ideal Chinese woman." This debate, briefly alluded to in Chapter 2, centers around a redefinition of two pre-modern female spirits, the "White Bone Demon" (*baigujing*, 白骨精) and the "Fox Fairy" (*hulijing*, 狐狸精).<sup>148</sup>

These spirits have evolved and taken different forms throughout Chinese history. In the Mao era, for example, the White Bone Demon gradually became a symbol of those attempting to sabotage the Party from within; during the Cultural Revolution, in particular, Red Guards and other youth were encouraged to attack such "White Bone Demons" through published cartoons and picture book retellings of *The Journey to the West*.<sup>149</sup> Jiang Qing became perhaps the most well-known White Bone Demon of this period as people started referring to her this way as they blamed her and the other members of the Gang of Four for the excesses of the Cultural Revolution.

The twenty-first century version of these two spirits differ from their predecessors. Netizens taking part in the online debate emphasize that these two terms no longer refer

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<sup>148</sup> While the White Bone Demon can be traced back to a specific literary text, *The Journey to the West* (西游记, circa 1590s), the "Fox Fairy" is a figure which has appeared in many tales since at least the Six Dynasties Period (220-589). The White Bone Demon, who appears in Chapter 27 of *The Journey to the West*, is feared for its desire to "eat" men's flesh and its use of treachery and deception by assuming the form of three human figures: a young girl who has left home in search of food, her mother, and her father. Although the fox fairy can be a good or bad spirit, fox fairies are also feared for their ability to transform into human form and their use of treachery and deception. In particular, fear of the fox fairy is often related to issues of sexual desire.

<sup>149</sup> Rudolf G. Wagner, *The Contemporary Chinese Historical Drama: Four Studies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990). Wagner's third chapter, "Monkey King Subdues the White-Bone Demon: A Study in PRC Mythology" provides a fascinating exploration of the changing image of the White-Bone Demon during this time period.

to the pre-modern images. The *baigujing* is now personified by the acronym for “white-collared, back-boned, and elite woman.” Such women are also known as the “three highs” (三高女性), or in plain English, the “triple threat”: they have high levels of education, high incomes, and high corporate positions. As one netizen explains, on the other hand, the *hulijing* now refers to “the kind of ‘gentle lady’ (温柔小女子) who is full of grace and tenderness and has a charming appearance, causing men’s eyes to bulge on first sight.”<sup>150</sup> The netizen further suggests that the issue contemporary women face is a version of Hamlet’s dilemma of “To be or not to be.” In the twenty-first century, the dilemma has become: “To be a *baigujing* or a *hulijing*: That is the question.”<sup>151</sup> As the netizen explains, “the first kind [the *baigujing*] works and competes as an equal with men at the office; the latter [the *hulijing*] is sweetly willing to become the man’s ‘little cotton jacket’ outside of his workplace.”<sup>152</sup> As a result, the *baigujing* “exhausts men’s body and mind, doubling his stress, while the other provides men with unlimited love that cannot be surpassed.”<sup>153</sup>

The internet debate has largely centered on whether women should become a *baigujing* or a *hulijing*. While many netizens suggest that becoming a *baigujing* is preferable to becoming a *hulijing*, as it allows one to be economically independent and

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<sup>150</sup> Ban Xia 半夏, “Question: Women, To Be a White Bone Demon or a Fox Fairy, That is a Question! 问题: 女人, 当白骨精还是狐狸精, 还是个问题!,” 3 March 2009, 3 May 2009 <<http://bbs.gz163.cn/viewthread.php?tid=264241>>.

<sup>151</sup> Ban Xia.

<sup>152</sup> Ban Xia.

<sup>153</sup> Ban Xia.

promotes self-respect, other netizens have suggested that the ideal woman is a combination of the two. One notion that has often been quoted suggests that on the “island” of women, most occupy the center, while those on the left are *baigujing* and those on the right are *hulijing*. Those on the “outskirts” of the island yearn to develop the skills of their opposite, and want to return to the “middle.”<sup>154</sup> Within this context, many voices discuss the possibility of women becoming a combination of *baigujing* and *hulijing*. Numerous articles have been written providing advice to *baigujing* regarding how to balance their work and personal lives, among other issues, while BBS feeds and online communities of women who consider themselves *baigujing* or *hulijing* have appeared in recent years.<sup>155</sup>

Although many of these articles and blogs refer to the *baigujing* or *hulijing* in a relatively positive manner, it is worth noting that these terms, because of their pre-modern connotations, likely contain negative elements, particularly when used by those who do not approve of their behavior. The pre-modern images have also retained contemporary significance due to the popularity of TV dramas based on *Journey to the West* and Pu Songling’s *Strange Tales of Liao-zhai*, both of which first aired in 1986 and are reaired on a somewhat regular basis.

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<sup>154</sup>Xiaofeng Chanyue 筱风婵月, “White Bone Demon on the Outside, Fox Fairy at Home 在外做白骨精, 在家做妖精,” 15 November 2006, 5 May 2009 <[http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog\\_48ef666b010007oj.html](http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_48ef666b010007oj.html)>.

<sup>155</sup> See <http://www.baigujing.com/> and <http://www.fox-jing.cn/> as example online community sites with target audiences of “white bone demons” and “fox fairies,” respectively.

### *A Reexamination of the Three Dramas*

How can these three dramas be viewed in light of this debate? As discussed in Chapter 1, the actress who played Xie Xiangmei in *Close to You, Make Me Warm*, Ke Lan, has been identified as the prototype of the new *baigujing*. Perhaps the threat of Xie Xiangmei is not that she is overly aggressive at work, but that she remains this way after leaving the office, acting as a *baigujing* at home and in her relationships with men. A look back at a conversation in Episode 10 with Lin Danqing illustrates this point. Xiangmei communicates her concern to him that although she is “outstanding,” she is still androgynous. In response, Lin Danqing comforts her, saying, “All women have one side like a rock and one side like water. In front of us, of course you only display your rigid side. But now, as I watch you cry, I’m starting to catch a glimpse of your softer side.” Danqing, like some of the bloggers discussing the *baigujing* – *hulijing* continuum, implies that all women contain characteristics of both of these “prototypes.” At work, Xiangmei is a *baigujing*, and although her colleagues—and in particular, Danqing—communicate their frustration with her behavior and her temperament, in this conversation Danqing reassures her that there is nothing wrong with her appearing this way in the office. Earlier in this conversation, Danqing attempted to explain to Xiangmei why he had commented on her lack of femininity:

I only spoke the truth for your own sake. I think you are very intelligent, and able to take it. That’s the only reason I said what I did. The same goes for our usual bantering and bickering—I only do that because I think we are equals intellectually, and well-matched in ability. I actually think you are pretty outstanding!



Although Danqing clearly thinks Xiangmei is too aggressive or “masculine” in her temperament, he still holds her in high esteem. This quote resonates well with comments bloggers have made regarding the fact that the *baigujing* compete as “equals” with men in the workplace.

As the series continues, Danqing’s efforts to “reeducate” Xiangmei are all focused on helping her shed her *baigujing* mask outside of her work environment. He takes her to the amusement park to help her learn how to act like a “woman” in preparation for a future boyfriend. It is perhaps significant that his expressed intention here is not to teach her how to act like a “woman” *at work*; rather, he is focused on helping her act like one outside of the office. Unfortunately for Xiangmei, Danqing’s “reeducation” leads to her acting more feminine in the office. By the end of the series, Xiangmei had perhaps moved too far along the spectrum towards the *hulijing* end, which helps to explain why her boss implied that the only way for her to get a promotion was through accepting his sexual advances. She was no longer the *baigujing* who could compete with her colleagues based on her ability alone.

Reading *Give Me a Cigarette* in the same light, the threat of the *sanpei* may be that they act like *hulijing* at their place of work, and not just in their personal relationships. Unlike Xie Xiangmei, who can return to the ideal by “relearning” how to become more feminine, Yezi is unable to do this even after finding a more “proper” job, due to social prejudices regarding the *sanpei*.

*Give Me a Cigarette* may also be examined in light of its relationship to more “traditional” tales expressing the fear of the *hulijing*. Haitao had a stable job, his own

apartment, and considerable savings at the beginning of the series. However, after becoming involved with Yezi and the other *sanpei*, his situation rapidly deteriorates. As his life begins to revolve around the nightclub “Passion,” he gets fired from his job, squanders his savings, and ends up having to move back in with his parents. Later in the series, once Yezi leaves him and marries Eric, Haitao starts to put his life back together. He becomes engaged to his colleague Xiaolin, who his parents, friends, and colleagues all consider to be an “ideal” woman. However, when he learns that Yezi is planning to divorce Eric, Haitao breaks off his engagement with Xiaolin and succumbs yet again to the *hulijing*. Although at this point in the series, Yezi can perhaps be seen as a “reformed” *hulijing*, Haitao’s previous involvement with another *hulijing*, Xiao Yu, continues to destroy his life and his relationship with Yezi. Looked at from this perspective, the show may be providing a warning for male viewers regarding their desire for a *hulijing*.

How does the final series, *I’m Not a Hero*, fit into this paradigm of *baigujing* and *hulijing*? The series’ major themes were private sector corruption and criminal gangsterism, but as Jeffery Kinkley observed in his study of earlier anti-corruption dramas, women were not masterminds of corruption schemes; rather, females filled the role of “temptresses,” or *hulijing*. However, in *I’m Not a Hero*, a woman is the sole orchestrator behind the corruption in question. Perhaps more importantly, the TV drama does not require the woman to depend on her sexuality to tempt men into becoming corrupt. Nor is Chairwoman He depicted as an overly aggressive and competitive *baigujing*, although the very fact that she has risen so high in the company may place her

in that category. In any case, Chairwoman He may have been able to evade suspicion for so long because she performs the role of the “ideal woman” so perfectly. As a result, the other characters find her completely trustworthy and nonthreatening. When Chen Fei interrogated her regarding her discussions with Hu Jianguo’s wife the night Hu was murdered and the day his wife committed suicide, Chairwoman He was quite cooperative and forthcoming with information regarding their conversations. This leads Chen Fei to believe her version of what had transpired. The viewer, who has witnessed conversations Chairwoman He had with Hu’s wife prior to her suicide, knows that Chairwoman He is lying about the content of their conversations. This knowledge allows the viewer to evaluate how effectively He plays the role of a *baigujing*, feigning honesty as she successfully deceives even Chen Fei.

The viewer is also witness to how Chairwoman He deceives Li Weicheng into thinking that the two share the same dream regarding Chiyang’s future. In Episode 16, Chairwoman He reminds Li Weicheng, “Don’t forget about your dream. We are about to finalize the JV agreement, which will allow us to enter the international market,” and emphasizes that the two “need to continue to work together” in order to achieve Li’s dream. Chairwoman He appears compassionate and committed to making Li Weicheng’s dream come true. However, even at this point in the series the viewer already suspects that her true intentions do not coincide with Li Weicheng’s, particularly considering the conversations she had with Hu Jianguo’s wife before the latter committed suicide.

The way Chairwoman He “corrupts” Wang Zhong is also worth reconsidering from this angle. In identifying the best “medicine” with which to corrupt him,

Chairwoman He feigns concern about his family's financial situation. She offers him her help as a sign of "respect" for his heroic efforts. She convinces him that she truly cares about his family and the fact that he is unable to support them because of his limited income. The viewer is well aware that she is not really concerned about his financial situation, and instead is motivated by her concern to limit the investigation into her company. As a result, we are able to watch her yet again perform the role of the caring woman who is concerned with Wang Zhong's livelihood.

The viewer and the characters within the TV drama itself eventually discover Chairwoman He's plan to flee China with all of the money made in the joint venture, and see her for the woman she really is. She expresses no remorse over the fact that she is planning to flee the country with the money that rightfully belongs to the company's hard-working employees. Chairwoman He does not resort to the aggressive behavior of the twenty-first century *baigujing*, nor does she depend on the charm of a *hulijing* in order to tempt and seduce those around her. Instead, she uses her feminine "nature," all the while avoiding suspicion by acting exactly as a woman should. Recalling the original White Bone Demon from the *Journey to the West*, it would appear that Chairwoman He "transformed" herself into an apparently trustworthy middle-aged woman who had the best interests of her company at heart and who was willing to cooperate with the police. Luckily, however, Chen Fei and Li Weicheng were able to work together to uncover the "demon" which lurked beneath Chairwoman He's perfect exterior.

It is worth pondering the way in which the series resolves the issue of Chairwoman He's replacement. She is not replaced by a man, but by a woman who

embodies the exact characteristics feigned by Chairwoman He. Xie Ying, Chairwoman He's cousin, cooperated with the police throughout the drama, providing them with everything she knew, and helping them to gain access to the information necessary to solve the case. Moreover, she was genuinely concerned about the welfare of the workers at the factory. Read in this manner, the series suggests that women are as capable and competent as men to (nearly) pull off a giant corruption scheme, but by replacing Chairwoman He with Xie Ying, the series avoids any implication that women are inherently deceitful and more likely to succumb to greed and evil when in a position of authority.

Reexamined in this light, then, we can see that these three dramas, although on the surface deal with very different social issues, also attempt to define the new boundaries of what it means to be a woman in twenty-first century China. Xiangmei is depicted as having progressed too far towards the *baigujing* side of the spectrum; while she is economically independent, she must return to the “center” of the island to find love. Yezi traveled too far to the *hulijing* side in her own desire to become independent, and also seeks a return to the “center” to be worthy of love. In contrast to these two, Chairwoman He disguises herself as occupying the socially acceptable “center” in her pursuit of financial independence. While Xiangmei and Yezi are both seen as “threats” to the existing social order, since both have strayed too far from the ideal, it becomes clear that Chairwoman He is the true “White Bone Demon.”

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