
**Chinese Women in the Official Chinese Press:
Discursive Constructions of Gender in Service to the State**

Cara Wallis

Annenberg School of Communication
University of Southern California
Los Angeles, US

Keywords: China, women, gender, media representations, nationalism

Abstract

Theories of gender and the nation posit that women are prescribed certain roles according to the needs of the state at a particular historical moment and that such roles are frequently articulated in media discourses. In China, the government has a long-standing tradition of using the state-run media to convey a national vision and mould its citizens. Hence, the mediated representation of Chinese women has ebbed and flowed according to radical shifts in government policy and ideology. In recent decades, massive economic and social changes have necessitated a quest for legitimacy on the part of the government through a vast reorganization of the country's ideological environment, including the official construction of gender. This paper discusses three discursive representations of women currently articulated in state-run Chinese newspapers –worker, housewife, and consumer – and examines how the government press emphasizes the equality of Chinese women while simultaneously positioning them as inferior to men.

In December 2000, the All China Women's Federation (ACWF, the largest mass organization for women in China) along with the National Bureau of Statistics undertook a survey on Chinese women's social status, ten years after the first such survey had been conducted in 1990.¹ Nearly 50,000 participants were interviewed from various geographic regions and social strata within China, with questions designed to examine the impact of China's market reforms on women's status. While the results revealed that Chinese women have made progress in education, health, and family life, they also showed that women's unemployment had increased and the income gap between males and females, particularly in rural areas, had widened. One third of female respondents agreed that 'Men are more able than women by nature' and about 54 percent of men and 50 percent of women believed that 'Men take society as their dominant factor while women the family.'

Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture © 2006 (University of Westminster, London), Vol. 3(1): 94-108. ISSN 1744-6708 (Print); 1744-6716 (Online)

In response to such findings, Peng Peiyun, then-president of the ACWF, expressed hope that the government would increase its efforts towards women's equality (*Women of China* 2001).

As this survey and numerous studies have indicated, since China embarked on a path of economic reform in the late seventies, the changing status of Chinese women has been marked by both progress and reversals. Certainly many women have benefited from the reforms and enjoy greater autonomy and a higher standard of living. However, such improvements have been coupled with the return of a traditional, subordinate image of women that has paradoxically grown in tangent with women's expanding rights and opportunities. In much media and public discourse, a notion of essentialized gender differences encourages females to seek the approval, protection, and material support of men in much the same way they formerly sought these from the party. When such traditional gender ideology first resurfaced, many were alarmed that these ideas could so quickly take hold in a country that only a few years earlier had ardently proclaimed gender equality (even if the ideal surpassed reality). At that time, debates published in the official press paid particular attention to the images of Chinese women found in the advertisements that suddenly proliferated in the post-Mao era (Croll 1983; Hooper 1998).

Although it has been more than two decades since the original debate began to take shape, in this article I revisit the topic of the mediated depiction of women in China. I examine the discursive representation of women in the official (as opposed to commercial) press, drawing primarily from the *People's Daily* (*Renmin Ribao*), the ACWF's *China Women's News* (*Zhongguo Funu Bao*), and the English-language *China Daily*, though I also include some examples from other regional newspapers. My assumption is that these sources operate as a mouthpiece for the government and thus are most representative of the state's view of women's proper role at this particular historical moment. Still, it should be pointed out that even within official publications, there are diverse and often contradictory discourses. China is currently caught up in a whirlwind of market-driven reforms that perhaps have gone far beyond anything imaginable when these policies were first set in motion. The tensions and ambiguities inherent in the country's development course are thus often manifested in the Chinese media.

Many believe that the mediated representation of Chinese women has often served as a stand-in for the condition of the nation and has dramatically shifted in accordance with changing government policy and ideology. Indeed, the mutually constitutive construction of gender and nation is found in both the official and commercial Chinese press. In China, as in many nations, women's citizenship is often constructed differently than men's not only through particular laws pertaining to their civil or political rights, but also in how they are positioned

within and through certain discourses. Here I identify three representations – worker, housewife, and consumer – and argue that these align with the government’s current political and economic goals, and that a discourse of gendered labour and consumption practices serves to contain women for the sake of the nation.

The issue of Chinese women’s representation in the media was debated with varying degrees of intensity throughout the eighties and nineties, yet there are compelling reasons for a re-examination. First, most previous analyses of changing depictions of Chinese women looked not at rhetorical discourses in the state press but at advertisements or entertainment (Croll 1983; Riley 1997; Robinson 1985). A notable exception is Evans’ (2002) discussion of changing images of the ideal housewife as found in the popular and academic press. Second, since the mid-nineties, in the wake of Deng Xiaoping’s 1992 ‘Southern tour’ in which he wholeheartedly endorsed market reforms as a way to improve people’s standard of living, the changes in China’s economic and ideological environment as well as in the lifestyle of ordinary people are unprecedented, and these have had a profound impact on notions of gender and sexuality. With the loosening of socialist asceticism, women have become increasingly sexualized in the media, yet there has been a parallel movement of gender consciousness, largely as a result of the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995. My analysis is undertaken with knowledge of the work of the Women’s Media Watch Network and other groups which have in the years since the women’s conference arduously sought to monitor the media from a gender perspective (Bu 2005; Cai et al. 2001). To place these current representations of women in the official press within a historical context, I will begin with a brief discussion of mediated discourses about women during the Mao era followed by a short overview of the significant economic and social changes affecting Chinese women today.

Chinese Women in the Revolutionary Press

Many have noted the reliance of the modern nation-state on media technologies for implanting national consciousness and values, and articulating national identity as a ubiquitous and often banal part of everyday experience that influences other identities, including gender and sexuality (Anderson 1983/1991; Billig 1995). Perhaps few countries have been as purposeful in their use of media in shaping the nation as the People’s Republic of China, where upon its inception, the strong political and ideological nature of the new regime was thoroughly integrated into everyday life through mass mediated campaigns and the distribution of pamphlets containing Mao’s sayings. Though widely criticized as ‘thought control’ by westerners, the early years of the Mao era offer a striking example, albeit with a socialist twist, of Anderson’s theory of the nation. Mao’s endless campaigns were intended to transform ordinary citizens into zealous ‘new Socialist men.’

Yet it was not just men who were transformed in China's revolutionary society. Mao's oft-repeated adage that 'women hold up half the sky' is still in use today by some government officials, and since the earliest days of China's communist party, Chinese women have been expected to play an active role in building the nation, even as that role has shifted to meet changing social and economic needs. As Gail Hershatter (2004, 1028) notes, 'In twentieth-century China, women were the site at which national modernity was imagined.' From the outset, the communist party did its utmost to discard the old ways embodied in Confucianism and feudalism, which were blamed for China's backwardness, in particular with regards to women. Mao immediately banned foot binding, granted women individual citizenship, and gave them equal rights under the law. While some have argued that the enforcement of such laws was often ignored for the sake of male peasant support for the revolution; nevertheless, many Chinese women's lives did improve (Stacey 1983; Wolf 1985).

Women were also actively inducted into the public labour force, and the highly politicized nature of life in Maoist China meant that to the greatest extent possible, the former division between public and domestic spheres was removed. The press was used to construct the new socialist woman, and stories of liberated women enjoying life as equals to men were prominent in newspapers, books, film, and television. Continuing the Confucian tradition of the use of ideal citizens to be emulated, an important role was assigned to 'the promotion of model women displaying in their daily lives exemplary words and deeds' (Croll 1995, 72). Such state-regulated gender equality reached its height during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), when femininity or any assertion of a feminine identity was rejected. To deny symbolic differences as part of a larger plan to mould the collective and reduce individuality, a state-imposed discourse of 'gender erasure' (*xingbie muosha*) was manifested in androgynous styles for women (Yang, 1999). Maoist slogans such as, 'The times have changed, whatever a man can do, a woman can do too' were disseminated, and state propaganda featured the strong, brave, and technically-skilled 'Iron Girls.' Showing interest in love or sex was treated either as 'the shameful expression of a warped mind or as evidence of bourgeois individualism and detrimental to collective welfare' (Evans 1997, 2).

Thus, from 1949 until Mao's death in 1976, Chinese women's patriotic role in the nation was articulated quite clearly in terms of their economic, political, and societal responsibilities. The state-run media dutifully reported and portrayed women's equality as well as their role in the revolution and economic production, yet this was obviously a 'reductionist theory of women's liberation' (Hershatter 2004, 1023). A key aspect of this era was that women relied on the state for their status while deeply embedded cultural and structural impediments to women's true equality were never eliminated. Indeed, many have noted that the fate of Chinese

women has always been secondary to that of the nation; hence, improving the status of women and working toward actual gender equality have often been deferred whenever these have been seen as a threat to the welfare of the nation, politically or economically (Riley 1997; Stacey 1983; Wolf 1985).

Women in the Reform Era

Since the late seventies China has embarked on a path of modernization involving a transition from a centrally-planned to a market-driven economy. Increasingly, the government's drive for efficiency has meant that while some Chinese have benefited, vast numbers have seen their rights and opportunities diminish. Women in particular have been affected due in many ways to the resurfacing of formerly suppressed traditional, patriarchal attitudes. 70 percent of China's illiterates are women, primarily living in the countryside, and rural economic reforms have caused many women to join the estimated 120 million 'floating population' migrating from the interior to the large coastal cities to look for work. Urban women are usually the first to be fired as a result of restructuring unprofitable state enterprises, and of the millions unemployed in China, more than 60 percent are women. Recent female university graduates are also discriminated against in hiring and are euphemistically called 'waiting for work.' In this context, many have noted the return of a discursive environment where clear gender differences are upheld by both males and females, in particular as a reaction against the suppression of gender during the Cultural Revolution (Evans 2002; Honig and Hershatter 1988). In today's China, 'modernity' is often associated with essentialized notions of gender, and a 'modern' woman adheres to a blend of 'traditional' and westernized standards of physical beauty and feminine comportment (Rofel 1999).

A significant question is thus how does a government maintain legitimacy in the face of such destabilizing change and contradiction? One way, of course, is to employ the media to promote the state's aims. The hegemony of the state means that the 'nation' is always a process of contestation between various social and political interests. Despite a growing phalanx of commercial media in China, the official press still holds sway in influencing the thoughts and actions of ordinary Chinese (Bu 2005). As mentioned earlier, the current images of Chinese women in advertising and other media have become increasingly sexualized and present exaggerated notions of femininity as something all women should strive for (Brownell 2001; Evans 2002; Hooper 1998). Here, however, I am specifically concerned with how rhetorical discourses found in the official press try to shape and disseminate gender representations for the state's own ends. These mediated images of the 'correct' Chinese woman have indeed shifted according to the needs of the state and the market (which are often hard to separate). While the representations of women are different and more diverse than in the past, they also are often stereotyped and contradictory. This is true in other countries, but what is

distinctive in the Chinese case is the concerted effort of the *government* press to emphasize the equality and advancements of Chinese women while at the same time allowing for implicit and explicit discourses that frame them as inferior, which undoubtedly has a profound impact on their everyday lives.

Three Discursive Constructions of Chinese Women

Woman as Worker

China has sought to maintain a stable, organized transition from a centralized to a market economy, and the trope of the female worker has often figured prominently in this discourse. Unlike the singular image of the revolutionary worker, currently in China's media, women in the workforce are highlighted in a variety of ways according to their place within the economic reforms. The most common manner in which the Chinese press deals with women's place in the labour market is by either holding up exemplary women who have made it in the new economy, especially in the face of difficulties, thus proving China's path towards modernization is working, or publishing survey statistics on women's employment. Occasionally, the long hours, unsafe working conditions, or physical abuse suffered by certain classes of working women are discussed and usually blamed on corrupt individuals rather than a system that allows for such exploitation. Articles that directly address the issue of job discrimination against women tend to take a 'blame the victim stance' while reminding readers that new laws have been promulgated and organizations set up to promote women's status.

Professional women are one example of working women who are a favoured subject in the news. Savvy and unfettered by traditional thinking, they exemplify how women have benefited from the country's economic marketization and the loosening of social strictures. Typical of this type of reporting is a story in *China Women's News* praising a hard-working young woman who changed jobs several times, each time improving her income and position (Wu 2003). Though she obtained a civil service job upon graduation, she soon left to try her luck at an employment fair. Her current position allowed her to earn a high salary and interact with clients from around the world, but she didn't hesitate to say she would quit given the right opportunity. Such boldness and individuality would have been unthinkable even ten years earlier, and the young woman's actions had met with disapproval by some of her family members. For the journalist, however, the woman's self confidence made her and others feel ashamed.

Female entrepreneurs and private business owners are also often showcased because they clearly exemplify women's rising social status, and, like the young woman above, they demonstrate innovative thinking and an independent spirit. When official newspapers cover the topic of women in business, there is frequent reference to the fact that 20 percent of the country's entrepreneurs and over 40

percent of private business owners are women. When such women are featured, the Maoist rhetoric of 'holding up half the sky' is frequently invoked, but it is the individual – not the collective – Chinese woman that is praised, as in the case of three 'steely ladies' who started their own companies (Jia and Qi 2005). Occasionally, in addition to highlighting the women's trade and profits, articles will mention the women's physical appearance, their (designer) fashion sense, and their elegance. These women thus stand in for both the success and correctness of the government's economic path as well as the globalized and cosmopolitan China, where a woman's looks are just as important as her ability.

In contrast to these sophisticated women, there are numerous stories about middle-aged women – representing the 'old' China – who have been laid-off from state enterprises yet have triumphed through hard work and sacrifice. An example is seen in a front-page article in the *People's Daily* about a laid-off woman in Liaoning province who became a successful clothier (Zheng 2004). The story has all of the familiar elements as it relates how the woman 'was bored at home' and 'unwilling to be a failure,' how she 'relied on herself,' and at first 'faced hardship' but eventually became so successful that she manages 1200 workers and has donated millions to charity. This story thus serves several purposes – it gives hope to the laid off, it assuages any guilt of the growing middle class that is prospering perhaps at the expense of those less fortunate, and, most importantly, it reaffirms the wisdom of the government's economic decisions, particularly replacing 'the iron rice bowl' with the rhetoric of self reliance.

Laid-off women who aren't quite as successful also appear in the press in stories praising professional 'job hunters' who have helped close to half a million such women find new employment. According to the ACWF, in 2003, of the millions of women who had been laid off from jobs in industry, 40 percent were assisted in finding work in private homes as cooks, maids, or nannies. The women's reemployment was hailed as a success, but they first had to be 'persuaded' by the federation to take such jobs (Getting laid-off 2003). Such persuasion has also been termed a 'mental conversion' of women who have discarded a 'feudal' view that such jobs are demeaning. While the state press, including the publications of the ACWF, is apt to regard legitimate employment of any kind as a positive step for unemployed women, such downward mobility has been noted with concern by many. Ironically, the same language of 'throwing off feudalism' currently used with laid-off women was also employed during the Mao era as women were given equal rights and were actively inducted into the work force. For the nation at this time, however, such a discursive shift ensures the hegemonic dominance of party policies in the public labour force, with women's labour frequently transferred to the domestic sphere. This is not to say that there aren't a significant number of professional women, as noted above, but they and the domestics who serve them are mutually constitutive components of China's economic transition.

On the other hand, laid-off women who seek employment outside of domestic service often face rampant discrimination. In the same survey mentioned at the beginning of this article, it was found that not only did women still have a lower employment rate than males, but they also had a much more difficult time finding work after being laid off. Furthermore, non-professional women are more likely to be employed in jobs deemed suitable for women and thus offering lower remuneration. An extreme example of this job segregation is experienced by young female migrants who are funnelled into low-paying, sometimes dangerous jobs as labourers in factories, domestics in private homes, employees in the low-level service sector, or sex workers. However, in the press their plight is usually glossed over, sensationalized, or fetishized (Sun 2004).

Despite the previous example of the job-hopping young woman, recent female college graduates also face prejudice, as they are often required to have higher Chinese and English language skills than men and to meet strict height and weight requirements, not to mention beauty standards. It is no wonder then that some female graduates have begun attaching revealing photos of themselves to their resumes or highlighting their drinking and dancing skills on job applications. Even employment fairs held for young female graduates frequently do not pan out; there are myriad stories of invited employers not bothering to show up. Though the government tends to use the media to stress its stance on men and women's equality, clearly male employers do not follow the government's lead. Many won't hire women because they do not want to provide state-mandated maternity leave, and some put 'male only' along with necessary qualifications in their job announcements, which are published without comment or disclaimers by the state newspapers. Such practices were cited by Robinson (1985) over twenty years ago, yet they continue to persist seemingly unhampered by the government. For example, according to an article in the *People's Daily*, at a job fair in Shandong province, 10,000 female graduates turned out to try for one of 1,000 positions (Wang and Mei 2005). The journalists writing about this event then used it as a springboard for discussing the obstacles young women face in becoming 'talented persons.' Although they cited gender discrimination as a problem, their tone tended to blame women for having limited awareness (*guannian zhubuxian*) and for insisting on balancing work and family. For these reasons, they concluded that 'a mid-level position is suitable' for women and that women 'must improve their abilities.'

When such dismal discrimination is addressed directly in the press, commentators often blame women for being less competitive, less flexible, and too passive in their job searching. When laid-off women refuse menial jobs with no benefits, they are derided for not accepting reality; in other words, they have not undergone the proper 'mental conversion.' In other cases, they are shrugged off as outmoded and

hopeless. The normalizing message is then clear: poor labour chances for many women – whatever their social status – will continue to exist; women should not complain but should accept a circumscribed place for their labour in the nation as their sacrifice for China's progress.

Woman as Housewife

The image of woman as worker finds her reflection in woman as housewife, whose presence has been called 'a major feature of changing public discourse in the post-Mao era' (Hooper 1998, 178). Clearly women's household labour never disappeared under Mao, as women throughout China were saddled with the triple burden of labour in and outside the home along with political work, yet the *public* representation of the housewife was rarely present. While it is true that during the mid-fifties unemployment in urban areas caused the government to urge women to return home as part of their duty toward the country, for the most part women were not encouraged to regard being a housewife as an important role during the revolutionary era (Evans 2002). In another noticeable example of the change in contemporary Chinese women's role, the reversion of women to the domestic sphere, both by choice and under compulsion, is increasingly common. For several years the modern housewife has been prominent in many of China's commercial magazines and television shows as well as in the official press. Just as with the embrace of essentialized femininity, some believe the focus on Chinese women as housewives is a reaction against the gender sameness of the Mao era and is vindication for women whose sexuality had been denied (Yang 1999). Others view it as the obvious manifestation of this already existent but formerly sublimated gender essentialism (Evans 2002). Women's 'returning home' has also been seen as a consistent government policy in the reform era designed to free up jobs for men (Jacka 1990).

Exemplifying the continuing discursive transformation of woman from model worker to model housewife, in 2002 in a highly publicized survey of residents of Guangdong province, although most female respondents opposed the idea that 'family and husband are center of a woman's life,' 60 percent of all respondents agreed that 'a man should devote himself to building up a career while a woman's role should be at home' (Yang 2002). The figures represented a roughly 15 percent rise compared to a similar questionnaire produced in the early nineties. A more recent survey of Beijing residents found that 60% of *professional* women were willing to be full-time housewives. In response to such surveys, sociologists are quoted in the press about the contribution to society women make through raising children and doing housework and how more full-time housewives is a sign of social evolution, in particular if highly educated and relatively well-off *career* women make this choice. In some instances, the government has encouraged women's return to the home by emphasizing housewives' contribution to the GDP and by creating new policies to safeguard their rights.

The Women's Federation has expressed ambivalence regarding the issue, with some agreeing that a public debate over women choosing to be housewives was a sign of social progress. However, others have expressed disappointment, viewing this trend as a definite step backwards for women. In an article in *China Women's News*, for example, the media were explicitly blamed for romanticizing the housewife's life and thereby adding fuel to the fire of the 'return home' phenomenon (Ding 2003). The writer also criticized the media's propensity for making a few women who enjoy being a housewife representative of all Chinese women. Another article blamed the media for neglecting the significant differences available to educated versus uneducated women as well as the double burden carried by women in the workforce (Xi 2003).

The 'return home' movement has been openly debated in the Chinese press for a number of years. The types of surveys mentioned above proliferate in the press, yet their validity could be questioned, especially since the rise in both the percentage of unemployed women and of women who prefer to stay at home is roughly the same, at about 60 percent. Still, the message is clear: containment in the home is good for women, the family, society, and thus, for the nation. Certainly some women do want to stay home and devote themselves to their family, and this surely is a contribution to society. What is problematic is the pressure on women, particularly educated, urban women, to take this route. Expecting to find good jobs after securing a college degree, they are then told their degree ensures their higher status in the home, not the workplace. With labour unrest on the rise in the last decade, largely due to unemployment and low wages, a discursive construction of the acceptability and desirability of women as housewives seems designed to alleviate pressure for equal employment, thus freeing up jobs for men and ensuring social stability. Some newspaper columnist have openly insisted that it is women's patriotic duty to return to the home, and here the parallels between China now to that of the post-World War II United States cannot be missed. America's Rosie the Riveter finds her corollary in China's Iron Girls, who, under Mao, were integrated into the labour force to build socialist society. In the present era, however, many of China's women, as citizens, like their post-war counterparts in the U.S., are needed in the home.

Woman as Consumer

Ever since Deng Xiaoping declared, 'To be rich is glorious' in the early 1980s, China's path toward modernization and development has been coupled with a drive for private consumption encouraged by the state. Such a phenomenon is not unique to China, but as Beverly Hooper (1998) has so insightfully elucidated, in China it has necessitated a vast reorganization of the country's ideological climate over the past few decades. Gone are the frugality and self-denial of the Mao years. Instead, the government encourages the purchase of consumer goods and luxury

items as part of its stated goal that most Chinese will live a 'fairly comfortable life.' Chinese advertising is full of attractive men and women touting the latest products, but newspaper articles also emphasize fulfilment through consumption, often with distinct masculine and feminine qualities. In other words, China, like post-war America, is notable for its active construction of highly gendered consumer practices. While it is possible to see this trend as merely in accordance with the seemingly inevitable triumph of global capital, such a view ignores the agency that states still exercise in determining economic policy. Clearly, the discursive representation of Chinese females as consumers plays an important role in building China's economy and aligns with a particular discourse of nationalism and modernity (Brownell 2001). Although compared to the commercial press, the state media tend to take a much more temperate approach towards consumption (sometimes outright condemning it), consumerism is still portrayed as crucial to the nation's place in the contemporary, globalized world.

In the official press, news about the latest beauty products, appliances, and gadgets available for women abound, with Chinese females as capitalist consumers often smoothly linked to glowing statistics on China's rising GDP, per capita income, and spending on certain goods and services. The representation of woman as consumer also calls on the essentialized notions of femininity mentioned earlier as well as gender stereotypes. For instance, in an article published in May 2005, the male consumers profiled spent their money on outdoor equipment, computers, and mobile phones while the woman who was interviewed was browsing at designer clothing boutiques (Hey, big spender). Despite earning a considerable income and living rent-free with her parents, she was broke from a shopping spree a week earlier and had no savings. She confessed to frequently asking her parents for money and came across as a stereotypical compulsive female shopper. Citing the results of yet another survey, the journalist concluded there was 'nothing odd about her addiction to shopping.'

The Women's Federation also participates in such discourses, as exemplified by *China Women's News'* publication of excerpts from a book, *Cultivating Charm*, over the course of several weeks in 2005. Topics covered included beauty, skin as revealing a woman's cultivated (high) social stratum, dining, and fashion. In one excerpt, the writer states that, based on her observations of American women, Chinese women should have ten times the number of clothes they now have (Zhang 2005). Part style tip sheet, part etiquette guide, this series reveals the tension inherent in striving for gender equality, the stated goal of the ACWF, while simultaneously subscribing to beliefs about naturalized gender and class (though this term is not used) distinctions. This is even more problematic in the context of the state's embrace of the market while paying lip service to socialist egalitarianism.

Increasingly the position of woman as consumer is only one part of a duality that is completed by woman as object to be consumed. In this latter construction, women are positioned as objects of male desire, even as they supposedly exercise their agency and choice in fulfilling male fantasies. The rise of prostitution and proliferation of pornographic materials seems likely tied to such discourses, and the press publishes frequent condemnations of both of these. More and more, however, it is not the impoverished or 'low quality' women that participate in such illicit activities. In May 2003, a huge scandal erupted in Wuhan (and reverberated across the nation) when a state youth newspaper published an investigative report on the phenomenon of female university students prostituting themselves in exchange for money and gifts from older, wealthy businessmen (Chen 2003). According to the report, Wuhan's female undergraduates had become a 'characteristic' of Wuhan's prostitute industry, so much so that taxi drivers frequently advised male visitors to the city to find a *xueshengmei* (student prostitute) since they were 'educated, younger, didn't carry sexually transmitted diseases ... and were half the price of those in hotels.' Perhaps most scandalous about this story was that the young women interviewed showed neither remorse nor any inclination to stop. Instead, they were happy to have the freedom offered by the job and the extra disposable income.

The *xueshengmei* are not unique to Wuhan, and they comprise just one part of an entire array of positions where young women's value in contemporary China is based on their looks and ability to tantalize sexually, whether as contestants in university beauty pageants, 'image ambassadors' for organizations, or promoters of services and products for companies. The most perverse manifestation of this objectification is seen in trafficked women who are sold as prostitutes or brides. Even if they are rescued, once 'used' they are reluctant to return home because they have lost their value (Wu 2000). Hence, like the commodities they consume, many Chinese women in turn have become objects for consumption. The state press has sounded alarms about what the government sees as the erosion of morality in society, yet the blame is often placed on western influence, not on China's own economic and social climate, where women are frequently utilized to construct desire.

Conclusion

The representations just discussed are not meant to be taken as a comprehensive account of all of the discursive constructions of Chinese women in the state press. However, these emerged just after China's economic reforms were introduced, and they have persisted in the official press to varying degrees despite numerous debates on their legitimacy. While the Chinese leadership expresses its concern for women's status, these government-sanctioned images send conflicting messages regarding women's value in the post-socialist era. To reconcile the contradiction

between the emphasis on women's commodification and place in the domestic sphere with official proclamations of women's equality and participation in the work force, the state has effectively utilized a changing official construction of essentialized gender where women's 'natural' qualities and abilities (or lack thereof) relegate them to certain segments of society and the economy. The paradox is that just as China's quest for modernization has opened up new possibilities for women, their circumscribed place is justified in the name of modernity.

The rhetorical constructions highlighted above serve to contain Chinese women within certain roles and locations that align with the needs of the nation at this particular moment in China's history. Occasionally, commentaries in the official press on the status of women are surprisingly truthful, noting the widespread discrimination on the basis of gender and the female face of poverty in China. Even so, the state's attempt to maintain ideological legitimacy even while shifting its official ideological constructions of gender fits the pattern found throughout communist China's history. Stacey (1983) maintains that such manipulations of women are enacted intentionally by a male-dominated socialist patriarchy seeking to preserve and strengthen the status quo. Wolf's analysis (1985), on the other hand, is that a patriarchal society intent on development is not willing to push for the advancement of women at the expense of economic growth. Rofel (1999 219) sees the state as actively involved in adopting policies that 'shape the trajectory of women's lives...in the direction of naturalized femininity,' where 'even as 'nature' provides the grounds upon which many hope to move beyond socialism into modernity, it also provides the state with a source of legitimation.' To conclude, the ebb and flow of women's position in the economy and in society is paralleled in their representation in the official press, according to the Chinese government's strategy of either socialist reconstruction or market-driven economic development in what can be viewed as a case study of a mediated discourse of gender serving the nation

Notes

¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented at the annual International Communication Association conference in New York City in May 2005. I would like to thank Sarah Banet-Weiser, Bu Wei, Arianne Gaetano, and Sun Wusan for their help and suggestions with revisions.

References

- Anderson, B. (1983/1991) *Imagined Communities*, London: Verso.
- Billig, M. (1995) *Banal Nationalism*, London: Sage.
- Brownell, S. (2001) 'Making Dream Bodies in Beijing: Athletes, Fashion Models, and Urban Mystique in China', in N.N. Chen, C.D. Clark, S. Z. Gottschang, and L. Jeffery (eds) *China Urban: Ethnographies of Contemporary Culture*, Durham: Duke University Press, pp. 123-142.
- Bu, W. (2005) *Review Report on Media and Gender in China (1995-2004/5)*, Unpublished manuscript (in Chinese).
- Cai, Y., Y. Feng and Y. Guo (2001), 'The Women's Media Watch Network', in P.C. Hsiung, M. Jaschok, C. Milwertz, and R. Chan (eds) *Chinese Women Organizing: Cadres, Feminists, Muslims, Queers*, Oxford: Berg, pp. 209-226.
- Chen, J.R. (2003) 'Institutes of Higher Education Will Become the Biggest Houses of Prostitution in China', *Youth References*, May 23 (in Chinese).
- Croll, E. (1983) *Chinese Women since Mao*, New York: M. E. Sharpe.
- _____. (1995) *Changing Identities of Chinese Women: Rhetoric, Experience and Self-perception in Twentieth Century China*, London: Zed Books.
- Ding, J. (2003) 'Looking at the Phenomenon of Women Returning Home', *China Women's News*, January 28, p. 3 (in Chinese).
- Evans, H. (1997) *Women and Sexuality in China: Female Sexuality and Gender Since 1949*, New York: Continuum.
- _____. (2002) 'Past, Perfect or Imperfect: Changing Images of the Ideal Wife', in S. Brownell and J. N. Wasserstrom (eds) *Chinese Femininities/Chinese Masculinities*, Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 335-360.
- Getting Laid-off Women New Jobs. (2003) *China Daily*, February 19 (electronic version).
- Hershatter, G. (2004) 'State of the Field: China's Long Twentieth Century', *Journal of Asian Studies* 63(4): 991-1065.
- Hey, Big Spenders! (2005) *China Daily Business Supplement*, May 10.
- Honig, E. and G. Hershatter (1988) *Personal Voices: Chinese Women in the 1980's*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Hooper, B. (1998) 'Flower Vase and Housewife': Women and Consumerism in Post-Mao China', in K. Sen and M. Stivens (eds), *Gender and Power in Affluent Asia*, London: Routledge, pp. 167-193.
- Jacka, T. (1990) 'Back to the Wok: Women and Employment in Chinese Industry in the 1980s', *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, 24: 1-23.
- Jia, J. and B. Qi (2005) 'Steely Ladies Hold Up Half the Sky', *China Daily*, July 12, p. 7.
- Riley, N. (1997) 'Gender Equality in China: Two Steps Forward, One Step Back', in W. A. Joseph (ed.) *China Briefing: The Contradictions of Change*, Armonk, New York: M. E. Sharpe, pp. 79-108.

- Robinson, J.C. (1985) 'Of Women and Washing Machines: Employment, Housework, and the Reproduction of Motherhood in Socialist China', *China Quarterly* 101: 32-57.
- Rofel, L. (1999) *Other Modernities: Gendered Yearnings in China after Socialism*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Stacey, J. (1983) *Patriarchy and Socialist Revolution in China*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Sun, W.N. (2004) 'Indoctrination, Fetishization, and Compassion: Media Constructions of the Migrant Woman', in A. M. Gaetano and T. Jacka (eds) *On the Move: Women and Rural-to-Urban Migration in Contemporary China*, New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 109-128.
- The Survey: Chinese Women's Status in Transformation (2001) *Women of China*, December (electronic version).
- Wang, X. and H. Mei (2005) 'Three Obstacles' to Women's Success, *People's Daily*, April 5, p. 9 (in Chinese).
- Wolf, M. (1985) *Revolution Postponed: Women in Contemporary China*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Wu, J. (2000) 'Trafficked Women, Why Not Heading Home?' *People's Daily*, September 6, p. 11 (in Chinese).
- Wu, Y. M. (2003) 'Job Hopping', *China Women's News*, December 31, p. 3 (in Chinese).
- Xi, J. (2003) 'Willing or Not, Able or Not' *China Women's News*, January 28, p. 3 (in Chinese).
- Yang, H. (2002) 'Man Makes Society his Priority, Woman the Family', *Jiangnan Daily*, March, 1, p. 3 (in Chinese).
- Yang, M.M.H. (1999) 'From Gender Erasure to Gender Difference: State Feminism, Consumer Sexuality, and Women's Public Sphere in China', in M. M. H. Yang (ed.) *Spaces of Their Own: Women's Public Sphere in Transnational China*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, pp. 35-67.
- Zhang, X. (2005) 'How Many Clothes Should a Woman Have?' *China Women's News*, December 2, p. 7 (in Chinese).
- Zheng, Y. (2004) 'A laid-off Woman's Life Transformation', *People's Daily*, May 2, p. 1 (in Chinese).