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Sex, City, and the Maid: Between Socialist Fantasies and Neoliberal Parables

SUN Wanning

Abstract: Of the many rural migrant workers who go to Chinese cities as cheap labourers, the one who interacts most intimately with urban residents is the domestic servant. In fact, precisely because of this “intimate stranger” status, the figure of the “maid” has captured the imagination of the urban population. This fascination is evidenced by the plethora of television narratives centring on the fraught relationships between the rural migrant woman and her male employer. This paper analyses a range of television narratives from the genres of dramas and documentaries. It shows that in these narratives, sex functions as the metaphor of social inequality between two social groups. It shows that if we explore how love, romance and marriage are constructed, we may gain some insight into processes of social and ideological contestation in the domain of cultural production.

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Keywords: China, sex, domestic worker, television narratives, socialist fantasies, neoliberal parables

Dr. Sun Wanning is a professor of Chinese Media and Cultural Studies at the China Research Centre, University of Technology, Sydney. She was a visiting professor at the Asian and Asian American Studies Program at the State University of New York from 2005 to 2006. She researches and supervises research students in a number of areas, including Chinese media and cultural studies; gender, migration, and social change in contemporary China; and diasporic Chinese media. She is the author of two monographs, *Leaving China: Media, Migration, and Transnational Imagination* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2002) and *Maid in China: Media, Morality and the Cultural Politics of Boundaries* (Routledge, 2009).

E-mail: <Wanning.Sun@uts.edu.au>

Introduction

The six most common types of employment undertaken by China's rural migrants are in the fields of manufacturing, service and hospitality, construction, cottage-style garment-processing, garbage- and scrap-collecting, and finally domestic work (Solinger 1999). Paid domestic work, an age-old line of employment, has re-emerged in urban China since the economic reforms. A growing number of urban households need domestic help of some kind, and becoming a *baomu* (保姆, maid) in the city has become, for rural women leaving villages to seek income in the city, a most viable employment option. In comparison with public or semi-public spaces such as restaurants or massage parlours, the urban home is often believed to be safe, protecting young, inexperienced rural women from the dangers of the city. Many rural women therefore choose domestic work over waitressing or bartending, despite the lower pay and poorer working conditions (Gaetano 2004; Jacka 2006).

It is difficult to estimate the exact number of rural migrants who work as domestic workers, but available statistics do suggest that the demand for qualified domestic workers in cities has been on the steady rise. More and more urban families are employing domestic help: Young families need childcare for their young children; a growing number of Chinese families need domestic help to care for their elderly. While live-in maids are common, the trend of employing part-time, live-out domestic help is on the rise. Typically, the part-time domestic worker lives in a rented room in a farmhouse outside the city, or in a crowded dormitory room in the basement of an urban apartment building.

In other words, in comparison with her *dagong* (打工) brothers and sisters in other, publicly visible lines of occupation, a *baomu* is an “intimate stranger” (Sun 2009) to urbanites. She exists mostly in the domestic spaces (including the public areas inside the residential compounds) and performs domestic chores of the most personal nature. At the same time, the *baomu* and her urban employers do not share a common history, and have little knowledge of each other's life experiences. Apart from knowing the name, place of origin, and approximate age of their maid, most employers know next to nothing about the women who cook their meals, care for their children, and hand-wash their intimate apparel.

In Victorian times, the maid was thought of as what McClintock (1995) describes as a “threshold figure”, negotiating a set of boundaries including gender, race and class. Similarly, the post-Mao domestic worker is an even more fraught embodiment of boundary-crossing, and

the boundaries she crosses can be based not only on gender, sexuality and class, but also on such factors as rural versus urban attributes (behaviour, dress, attitudes). She may also cross the boundary between those who perform recognised, paid work versus those whose work is neither recognised nor paid, and the boundary between the domestic versus the public. And it is precisely because of her status as a “symbolic border guard” that her sexuality – or social mobility via the pathway of her sexuality – lends itself to perennial representation in the media and popular culture. A recurring theme in public narratives regarding the domestic worker revolves around the sexuality of the maid, ranging from, at the coercive end of the spectrum, cases of sexual harassment, to, at the least coercive but equally unsavoury end of the spectrum, cases of extramarital affairs. We know from available research that the former takes place on a regular basis but is seldom registered in the public discourse, and we also know that the latter is regularly reported, but mostly in the form of urban, profit-seeking, tabloid journalism (Sun 2009).

But the representation of the maid is not limited to tabloid journalism. What is less noted is that the intimate stranger is also a central figure in many television narratives about urban life, including television drama series, which enable the production of “main melodies” (主旋律, *zhǔ xuǎnlǜ*), “ideologically sound” public narratives intended to shape new modes of sociality in the transformed social order, and *jìshí* (纪实, literally translated as “documents, reports, or truthful records”) genres such as news and documentaries, which present readers and viewers with real-life ethical dilemmas and choices, and which usually do not refrain from exposing the shady side of things. In these narratives, the maid is often burdened with a more complex discursive task. She must serve two masters, the Chinese state and the market, whose desires at times converge and at other times diverge. By coming to the city and entering the labour market as cheap labour forces, rural migrant women also become “raw materials” willing to be disciplined by the state’s discourse of quality (素质, *sùzhì*) and moulded into useful neoliberal subjects.

But how do socialist fantasies co-exist with neoliberal parables? How does television tell the story of romance, love and marriage involving the maid and her employer(s)? Given that the sphere of media and popular culture in the reforms era is dominated by two genres – television drama series and documentaries – it seems crucial to understand how these television narratives play a pedagogic role in helping people make moral and ethical choices in a de-regulated, affective market. We

already have some knowledge of how television narratives of middle-class love and marriages are informed by, and in turn shape, China's domestic culture (Xiao 2010; Zhong 2010), but we are much less knowledgeable about how social inequality between China's marginal groups and its urban middle class is played out in these narratives. With this in mind, I will turn to two television genres, dramas and documentaries, which appear regularly on both central Chinese television (CCTV) and provincial satellite television.

Fantasies of Social Mobility in Television Dramas

Over the past decade or so, Chinese television audiences have witnessed a proliferation of television dramas configuring the rural migrants in the Chinese city (Sun 2008). These stories are what Lisa Rofel (2007) calls "public allegories", which configure a social order in terms of ethical value and moral action, and through a process of identification, establish collective identities around certain values (Farrer 1999). There has also been a steady growth of television dramas centring on the figure of the maid in the urban household, including *Professor Tian and His Twenty-Eight Maids* (1999), *Chinese Maids in Foreign Families* (2002), *Ultimate Justice* (2004), and recently *Maids* (2007). In 2010, capitalising on the phenomenal success of *Maids*, another drama series, *Baomu and Bao'an* (Maids and Security Guards), also centring on the love and romance between members of the two social groups, again captured the imagination of Chinese viewers.

Unlike tabloid journalism of extramarital affairs or the hidden reality of sexual harassment, television narratives of sexual relationships between the employer and the maid are consensual, consummated in marriage, and sometimes, but not always, in the name of love. On the surface, these stories can be read as little more than Cinderella-style fairytales, whereby the virtue and kind-heartedness of the humble girl is rewarded with happiness by winning the affection of the seemingly unreachable man (Lee 2006). And in some ways, these rural migrant women are akin to Pygmalion, whose ascent to the "society" is conditional on her willingness to denounce her uncultured habits and engage in ceaseless elevation and self-refashioning through education. For instance, a migrant woman is told both by the officials of the *Fulian* (All-China Women's Federation) and by the domestic-service management that to reap the benefits of the market economy, she must improve her

suzhi, acquire new skills and knowledge which are needed in the market economy, and more importantly, become a “new person” (Yan 2008; Sun 2009). This means shedding the old self that is imbued in rural, “uncivilised” and “backward” values and behaviours. It also means acquiring or improving literacy, not only in the literal sense of reading and writing, thus meeting the market demand, but also in order to adopt a new, more “cosmopolitan” sensibility. The “deserving” ones are rewarded with public recognition of their contribution to the nation’s economy and, in many of these representations, the opportunity to move up the food chain – they either become trainers of domestic workers or they leave the profession to become “white-collar ladies”. But more relevant to the discussion here, the “deserving” are also rewarded with sexual gains. The message for migrant-women viewers is thus not so subtle: Improving *suzhi* will not only get you jobs, it will also increase your sexual attractiveness. Migrant woman Xiangcao in *Chinese Maids in Foreign Families* ends up marrying a handsome young Canadian. Viewers are not told where she and her new husband will go after the romance comes to its predictable fruition, and can only speculate that she will mostly likely migrate to Canada and no longer work as a maid (for more detailed discussions of *Chinese Maids in Foreign Families*, see Lee 2006 and Sun 2009). Similarly, Ma Xiaohui in *Baomu*, after a torturous journey of love in the city, finally wins the love of the neighbourhood policeman.

But it would be wrong to assume that sexual attractiveness is constructed in these narratives as having a similar set of motivations and purposes to narratives of the sex and sexuality of urban, middle-class female characters. To be sure, both represent the young, sexed body as a site of realising the promise of the market to reward individual efforts. Analysing images of the sexed female body of the urban consumer in the market narratives, Evans (2008) points out that although the female body represents wealth, social mobility and personal success, the completion of the sexually attractive woman depends on the implied presence of the male. In other words, it is the guidance, affirmation and appreciative gaze of such wealthy, successful males that validate her sexual attractiveness and in turn enable it to be further capitalised upon. However, there is a marked difference in the way in which such gains come to be acquired and delivered. Rural migrant women do not come across as the main protagonists in the realm of popular culture and its dominant narratives of sexuality. These roles are mostly reserved for urban, middle-class figures and more “qualified” members of consumer citizenship.

While in both cases, images of the sexed body connote individual desire and fulfilment, rural migrant women appear to have a much more arduous challenge ahead to realise their desires in comparison with their urban, middle-class counterparts. This is because, due to her widely assumed lack of *suzhi*, a migrant woman not only has to engage in ceaseless personal improvement in order to gain the appreciation of the male with whom she has a romantic prospect, but her success in winning the object of their desire is also contingent upon her securing the approval of, at the same time, the market and the state. In other words, she is not allowed to aspire as a “sexual citizen” unless she achieves the ideological makeover, and is seen to acquire a new sense of self, one that is commensurate with the logic of the market.

But market narratives of sexuality are not the only story in town; sexuality, class and rural-urban differences enter the *baomu*-employer relationship with extremely contradictory forces. In fact, the political economy and cultural politics of the Chinese media transformation have been defined by an ambiguous and paradoxical process that has witnessed the progressive application of the neoliberal strategies of market rationalisation on the one hand, and a continuous (re-)articulation of China’s socialist legacies on the other (Zhao 2008). Television as a visual technology of story-telling and subject-making possesses an intimate connection with the broad political economy of China’s ongoing social transformation during the era of a worldwide neoliberal revolution. At the same time, such story-telling also is equally dedicated to reaffirming its commitment to socialism throughout the reform era (Sun and Zhao 2009). In other words, what gives coherence, structure and continuity – rather than contradiction and rupture – to stories of romances and sexuality configuring the migrant women domestics is a grammar of conventional characters, choices, purposes and acts that underscore the interplay of these two impulses (for a discussion of the various visual aspects of the representation of domestic workers in television dramas, see Sun 2008). In the narratives of the free market, class difference exists but only to be transcended through individuals’ efforts, hence producing fantasies of individual upward mobility. Working in tandem, a socialist discourse nevertheless attempts to erase class or socio-economic stratification and instead engages in the production of equally phantasmagorical tales, whereby everyone, regardless of the differences in their social positions, works toward a common, collective goal of building a harmonious society. The production of such “phantasmagoric” harmony has acquired an

even greater political urgency in the new millennium, when it became apparent that the economic reform measures of the early 1990s resulted in drastically stratified social relations and across-the-board, class-based social discontent.

The recent drama series *Baomu* seamlessly reconciles the paradoxes between a form of sociality underpinned by the free market and a type of relationship which extols a socialist rhetoric of equality. When *Baomu* was shown on Chinese television in 2007, it was touted as one of the finest examples of a new sub-genre dubbed “*ku qing ju*” (苦情剧, “drama of emotional hardship”). Ma Xiaohui, the protagonist, comes to Shanghai from rural Anhui hoping to pursue further study. She falls in love with saxophonist Zhang Xiaoguang, a divorced single parent with a three-year-old daughter, moves in with him, and gives up her original idea of going to university in order to care for the three-year-old girl. Xiaohui lives under the illusion that her boyfriend is going to marry her on the third anniversary of their sexual consummation, as promised. Little does she know that her boyfriend never has the intention of marrying her. After Xiaohui’s repeatedly attempt to hold him to his promise, Zhang finally blurts out: “You’re a *baomu*, and I could never marry a *baomu*”. It dawns on Xiaohui only then that the romantic relationship she thinks she is having is only a one-sided affair. Her boyfriend is happy to sleep with her, but he has always regarded her as an unpaid *baomu* and thus will never marry her. Devastated, Xiaohui is persuaded by a well-meaning female lawyer to seek justice. From the point of view of the middle-class lawyer, Xiaohui has an unlosable case against her former lover: If Zhang claims that Xiaohui is no more than his maid, then he should pay Xiaohui three years’ wages owed to her. To the lawyer’s frustration, Xiaohui decides to drop the charge against her former boyfriend, simply because he replies – untruthfully, as it transpires – in the affirmative when she asks him if he ever loved her: “He said that he once loved me. That’s enough”. In such an unfortunate sexual liaison, Xiaohui is portrayed as a firm, though somewhat naive, believer in true love; her boyfriend, on the contrary, a moral degenerate who takes advantage of a woman’s body and plays with her feelings. Both appear to inhabit an ideological fault line, with Xiaohui hell-bent on linking sex with love and her boyfriend unable to do so.

In his study of the sexual culture and sexual story-telling of youth in Shanghai in the 1990s, James Farrer (1999) observes that “romantic

love” and “material benefit” should not be seen as opposing motives. They are best interpreted as:

paired rhetorical opposites in which the increased emphasis on one entails the compensatory emphasis on the other, reflecting socially structured dilemmas of sexual choice and a desire for ethical and practical resolutions in the market economy (Farrer 1999: 15).

If that is true, the tropes of material benefit and romantic love enter narratives surrounding the sexuality of migrant women workers with even more poignant ambiguity. Xiaohui’s next romantic entanglement is a case in point: The middle-class female lawyer (who wants to help Xiaohui in her initial lawsuit against her former boyfriend) has a brother, a bachelor policeman in need of some domestic help. With the recommendation of the lawyer, Xiaohui starts working for the policeman, without having the chance to meet him. Every day she forms a routine of going to his flat (the lawyer sister provides her with the key), cooking a tasty meal, washing his clothes (including ironing his uniform), tidying up his place, and sticking a note of greeting on the wall to her absent employer. Similarly, the policeman has also got used to coming home to his clean and tidy apartment, enjoying a nice meal kept warm for him, and leaving a nice thank-you note with payment attached for the maid that he has never set eyes on. While Xiaohui works as a *baomu* for the policeman and a couple of other employers, she has also become the object of desire of a very friendly policeman in the neighbourhood. Although Xiaohui is still recovering from the traumatic break-up with her boyfriend, she has come to like the attention of the very helpful policeman. She is particularly moved by the fact that Dalin, the policeman friend, genuinely loves her despite her lowly position as a maid and her being of humble, rural origin. It takes a long time and many missed clues before the two finally realise they have been having a two-pronged connection: as employer and maid, and as cross-class lovers – the policeman who expresses his affection for Xiaohui turns out to be the policeman for whom she works. The parallel narrative is intended to create suspense, add intrigue, or even to give a playful undertone to the drama, but it is also central to the cultural economy and moral grammar of sex surrounding this “intimate stranger”: The sexuality of the migrant women domestic workers is the site of economic exchange in the labour market. At the same time, it is also the site of negotiation between the inevitability of inequality brought about by the liberalisation of the market and the ideological need to reaffirm a socialist ethos of equality and common

purposes. Interestingly, unlike her counterpart maids in other series, Xiaohui does not go on to bigger and better things. Even though she marries the policeman and is offered a job with a Canadian family, she continues to work as a *baomu*.

There's nothing wrong with being a maid. I get an honest day's pay for an honest day's work. I feel my heart is in the right place [心里踏实, *xinli ta shi*] this way.

Thus, the story comes full circle: Despite her initial refusal to be labelled a *baomu*, she has finally come to identify with this role. Through the prism of Xiaohui's sexual maturity, both the market and the state seem to have their cake and eat it, too: From her refusal to be called a *baomu* and her insistence on being loved by an urban man, she is now happy to continue her role as a foot soldier in the neoliberal market's economic order, invoking the dignity and self-pride of workers of the socialist era. This is despite the fact that she is no longer a worker (工人, *gongren*), an employee of a state enterprise in the socialist era who is entitled to a range of social benefits such as medicare, housing, and retirement pensions (Yan 2008); she is merely a "migrant working girl" (打工妹, *dagongmei*), a commodified form of cheap labour in the capitalist market economy. And for her compliance, she is rewarded with the true love of a city policeman. In the cases of both Xiangcao (in *Chinese Maids in Foreign Families*) and Xiaohui, the sexuality of migrant women becomes the very stuff of which fantasies of social mobility are made. Their docility as migrant workers willing to be disciplined by the market and their sexual attractiveness despite their lowly status render them imminently suitable materials in morality tales of new urban life, blending neoliberal logic with socialist rhetoric.

News, True Stories, and the Moral Economy of Sex

Television as a visual technology of imagining the city is not limited to fictional accounts of urban life. To understand the double texture of the (sub)urban life, we need to go beyond television dramas and entertainment-oriented media formats and focus on the vibrant growth of a hybrid genre of Chinese television that is often described as *jishi*. It implies that the people and events in these programmes are real and factual, and that the stories, like those in current affairs and investigative reports, are "true". *Jishi* narratives form the staple diet of most "serious", non-enter-

tainment channels on Chinese television. A mixture of on-location action, reality-TV-style footage and current-affairs-style interviews, these stories belong to an emerging television genre that turns private experiences into public narratives. They also focus on tragedies, and dilemmas of individuals are presented as needing an either moral or technical solution, often of a legal, medical or economic nature. Often featuring “expert” opinions and statements from academics, professionals and policy-makers that advise citizens of their rights and responsibilities, these stories usually present moral improvement, science, the law, medicine and education as logical solutions for the problems of contemporary Chinese society.

The *jishi* genre often deals with the topic of the employer-*baomu* relationship, and, in comparison with television dramas, can endow migrant women domestics with an even higher degree of moral complexity. On 21 July 2008 *Renjian* (Human World), a documentary programme on Jiangsu Satellite TV (a nationally accessible channel from Jiangsu Province), told a true story titled *Odd Bedfellows Elope*. In the story, a 90-year-old widower in Shandong Province decided to marry his rural maid, 46 years his junior. He prepared a new will bequeathing all his assets – including his retirement pension and two properties in his name – to his new wife, which left his children without an inheritance. Early last year, (15 January 2009), *Stories and Legends*, a documentary programme on Jiangxi Satellite TV, another provincial TV station commanding a national audience, told the story of a retired medical professor, Mr. Kuang, who married, at the age of 86, his migrant maid, 23. According to the story, Professor Kuang married his maid Ms. Zhu despite the vehement opposition of his children. He died 20 years after his marriage and left a huge inheritance to his wife, thus starting a protracted legal dispute between the professor’s maid-cum-wife and his children.

Narratives about *baomu* collecting inheritance have by now become most perennial in the media, the stories often involving doctors, lawyers and urban, middle-class families, with the rural migrant *baomu* as the cause of controversy. Details vary in each story, but stories become newsworthy when the disputes reach the court, often with one party contesting the will. Stories often unfold according to a common logic of motives and purposes, and bring to light a similar set of ethical questions. The larger the size of the inheritance, and the bigger the age gap between the *baomu* and the employer she marries, the more likely the story is to capture the imagination of the public. The ageing man in the

story vows to marry his maid despite his children's strong opposition, and argues that it is perfectly justifiable to leave his wealth to someone who has cared for him in his old age. Offspring in the story usually charge the migrant maid with harbouring an ulterior motive and manipulating their ageing father into marriage in order to secure his fortunes; the migrant maid either argues her entitlement or declares her true feelings for her husband. In the *Human World* story, migrant maid Wu Cuijin, 44, makes it clear that her marriage to her employer is motivated by material reward but only to the extent that she deserves. She tells viewers that she has been unable to have sex following a difficult childbirth in her previous marriage, and in marrying her current employer, who is 46 years older than she is, she hopes to benefit by inheriting no more than his retirement pension as his spouse, which she thinks she deserves: "I have never expected him to give me his property and savings", she tells the host of the show.

The rural maid in *Stories and Legends*, on the other hand, is anxious to convince viewers that she marries for love:

We have been really happy together, but I did not dare to face my true feelings for him, as there is a world of difference between us. He is a well-known professor and I am nobody. But once I was taken ill and was hospitalised and he came in to see me. I was really moved. I let myself become emotionally involved. I could tell that he loved me. He told me one day that he had a dream, and in the dream he married me.

The storyteller, often the host of the documentary, appears to be interested in telling a balanced story, giving a voice to all parties involved without passing moral judgement. A commonly used narrative strategy in these stories involves a process of mediation, whereby the programme host calls in various parties in the hope of clarifying and then overcoming disagreements and reaching an amicable compromise. Such efforts, though not always successful, promise engaging television viewing. The end result is often a cacophony of views and perspectives, and in the process of giving voice to these diverse views and perspectives, the moral complexity of the issue becomes progressively clear.

However, it would be wrong to say that these stories are typically open-minded in moral terms. Experts, such as lawyers, academics and doctors, are called upon to give their "objective" opinion, and in doing so, *jishi* programmes clearly privilege the authoritative voice of experts. Interestingly, these experts' opinions often extend beyond the boundary

of the scientific, legal and medical assessment to the domain of moral assessment. In the story aired on *Human World*, the lawyer gives his moral opinion:

If she [the maid] has taken good care of the old man, and has ensured that he obtains peace and serenity at the end of his life, it is perfectly justifiable for her to inherit the wealth passed on to her.

Experts' opinions often concur with that of the host, who usually ends the programme by imparting some kind of moral guidance to viewers on how to make sense of the moral complexity of the case. The woman host of *Human World* ends the show with this advice for the belligerent offspring who are involved in the legal dispute:

Nobody, including yourselves, want to see the old man end up lonely and sad. I hope you can understand your father's feelings and try to find a better way of resolving your disagreement.

To the rural migrant wife who stands to benefit from the old man's will, the host says, "Make sure that you take good care of the old man, won't you?" And she concludes the show by telling viewers that:

marriage and love enjoy freedom and autonomy in our country and are protected by the law. Everyone has the right to contest and defend their own interests, but at the end of the day, the rule of law must prevail.

Stories of women as gold diggers who use sex to achieve social mobility is not unique to China nor is it specific to our era. In addition, like the Filipino "mail-order bride" and other forms of commodified, transnational marriages, the rural migrant woman is the "internal oriental" in the Chinese city, her sexualised body metaphorical of the unequal relationship between her rural home and her urban destination. But perhaps the question is not so much: what is unique about these stories? as it is: what is distinctive about the way these stories unfold in the post-reform Chinese city? On one hand, economic reforms and market economics have led to such drastic socio-economic stratification that for the first time since the socialist decades, it is possible to talk not only about a propertied class of urban consumers, but also about a large reservoir of mostly unskilled, easily affordable and infinitely available, female, rural migrants. The socio-economic gap between the two extremely unequal groups has become vast enough for the sexual relations between them to become newsworthy on a regular basis. On the other hand, contemporary Chi-

nese society, although confronted with an unprecedentedly large ageing population, is at the same time experiencing the gradual vanishing of the extended family structure, communal care, and familial-affective labour. As a lawyer involved in one of these cases says,

as our society is ageing, more and more elderly people spend the last leg of their life in the company of their maid rather than their offspring. Disputes like this are bound to increase, endlessly staging the drama involving the *baomu* versus the offspring. It's not surprising at all (*China Youth Daily* 2008).

Like television dramas, stories such as these also function as “metaphors of social relations”, with the migrant sexed body “delineating social and gendered boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, hierarchy and privilege, acceptability and unacceptability” (Evans 2008: 362). However, unlike the fantasies of rural-urban romances in the television dramas discussed earlier, the sexuality of rural migrant women is constructed as having a purely moral economic dimension. Rather than via the pathway of self-development, *suzhi* acquisition, and becoming a “better” and more “useful” citizen – thus winning the approval of the state and the market as well as the affection of her urban/ foreign lover – the social mobility of a migrant woman in these documentaries is enabled by little else but her own willingness to offer sexual intimacy and affective labour to a specific individual. Nobody in these stories – except the offspring – accuse the migrant woman of being a “gold digger”; at the same time, nobody seems to expect her to marry the old man for romance. The consensus seems to be that both parties have made a voluntary choice to enter a “web of unequal relationship of exchange based on a morality of reciprocity, mutual obligation, and protection” (Ong 2006: 199), and since they have broken no laws in getting married, nobody has the right to judge them. Despite the sensational imbalance in age and socio-economic positions, the individuals in the story are not guilty of prostitution, bigamy, human-trafficking or domestic violence, all of which are against the law. As the host of the programme *Stories and Legends* told us at the end of the show, the marriage between the old man and the young *baomu* is protected by marriage laws, and although people – family members, neighbours and television viewers – are free to have suspicions of “ulterior motives”, they should “keep these judgements to themselves”. The perceived imbalance is seen to be justifiable in pragmatic terms, and pragmatism, in this case, works at two levels: At the individual level, the old man has a legitimate need for sexual and emotional intimacy and

spousal care, and has the economic capacity to purchase them. Similarly, the “moral economy of the female migrant” (Ong 2006: 199) dictates that the sexed body, the only capital available to the migrant woman, is considered a worthwhile trade-off in fulfilling an obligation to her family and kinship to generate income. At the social and institutional levels, adopting a discourse of moral tolerance and moral relativism enables the shift of the burden of providing adequate age-care and poverty alleviation from the state and its institutions to individuals.

Does the *jishi* genre of news, current affairs and documentaries – often purporting to “tell it like it is” – provide an important countervailing point, challenging the hegemonic discourse of *suzhi* deployed in the fictional genre of television dramas? And can the two genres be taken as evidence of the pluralistic media and public sphere? In comparison, *jishi* narratives are less didactic, less judgemental and less paternalistic, and seem to encourage viewers to appreciate the moral complexity of individual decisions. Furthermore, migrant women, although objects of suspicion and moral scrutiny, are given the opportunity to put forward their perspectives in their own words. This is important not because their own words reveal truths but rather because these words express these marginal individuals’ agency. In this sense, it goes some way towards challenging the dominant discourse of self-improvement, civilisation and useful citizenship promoted in the television drama series. It is indeed somewhat remarkable that on any given day, a Chinese television viewer could conceivably be presented with competing, even conflicting, ways of interpreting sex and social mobility in the city. At the same time, it would be risky to assume that the *jishi* genre is closer to urban reality than the television dramas are. In fact, my analysis so far cautions against reaching such a conclusion and instead suggests some alternative ways of looking at this.

Concluding Remarks

These television narratives interest me not because they faithfully reflect the reality of the romantic prospects between city residents and rural migrant women. As a matter of fact, the opposite is true – for instance, research based in Beijing (Jacka 2006) and Shenzhen (Cai 2008) suggests that marriages between rural migrant women and city men are few, and only a small number of rural women stand to inherit a large fortune by marrying a much older man. Marrying a city man or a foreigner is not

usually a sexual choice available to migrant women, nor is marrying an older man to inherit his fortune a motivation that most migrant women can identify with. However, not in spite of but precisely because of this, these media narratives are significant cultural texts, as they offer clues to normative values and exemplary moral action, thus enabling the production of the ideal subject positions. They are, therefore, indexical to the “official” vision of the ideal modes of urban sociality. In the case of *jishi* narratives, although viewers are not necessarily encouraged to identify with the individuals in the story, they are advised to make sense of the “imbalance” in these relationships in ways that naturalise rather than problematise neoliberal values. In doing so, this narrative position is complicit in a neoliberal strategy which “recasts governing activities as technical rather than political and ideological” (Ong 2006: 3), while also cultivating “self-governing” and “self-engineering” subjects (Ong 2006: 6). The formation of these new subjects is necessary, as they can cope with the downside of economic liberalisation alone or by helping each other, and in both cases, without becoming an economic burden on the state. Media (Chinese media being no exception) teaches citizens to make informed and individuated – instead of “right” or “wrong” – investment decisions which best suit their individual needs and which are likely to maximise return, be it property, shares or cash. It advises consumer citizens to pursue these ends wisely and legally. The message is remarkably consistent across the board in these stories: In so far as people respect law, including marriage-property laws, the sexual choices individuals make are their own “business”, and people should be allowed to enter mutually agreed-upon exchanges so as to take advantage of what the market economy can offer.

It is clear that the two genres play discrete discursive roles. While television dramas promote the “forced romantic idealism about love” (Farrer 1999: 148), the *jishi* narratives acknowledge the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of marrying for “feelings” (感情, *ganqing*) in the market economy. However, in both cases, the private domain of the urban home is clearly an intensely social space, and in representing this social space, the needs and wants of urban consumer citizens are almost always privileged over those of migrant women. Whether through self-development or self-sacrifice of romance, narratives of rural women’s sexuality and social mobility hinges upon the urban consumers’ rights to and need for quality domestic service and/ or quality emotional life. Neither tales of cross-class romances nor reports of pragmatic marriages set out to lay

bare the underlying social causes that make such romances so rare and individuals' practical solutions via sex so poignant in the first place. In conjunction, the two genres provide parallel building-blocks to a discursive regime which provides "lofty" main melodies with the motif of official vision on the one hand and practical and continuous orientation for individual citizens to wade through everyday moral and ethical morasses on the other. Each needs the other for reinforcement and stability, and neither can function without the support of the other. Together, they maintain the hegemony of the discourse of social harmony without jeopardising the advancement of market forces. Seamlessly, these sexual stories graft a socialist rhetoric of "harmony" onto the market logic of quality control. In each case, the sex of migrant women is both the metaphor of urban-rural inequality as well as the site whereby such inequalities are managed and negotiated. In these stories of the sexuality of the rural domestic worker, class and rural-urban differences rely on gender for articulation, the binary between the sexually desirable, urban spouse-lover-girlfriend and the sexually abject, rural migrant worker is becoming gradually undone.

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