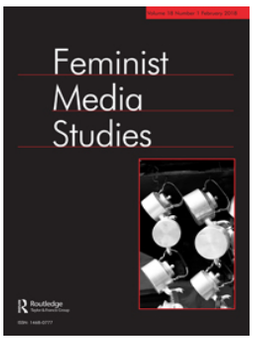

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The contradictions of "women's work" in digital capitalism: a "non-Western"/Chinese perspective

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The global digital economy has facilitated new trends towards the feminization of labor, increasing demands for versatile, flexible, mobile, and affectively invested labor outside the traditional workplace, beyond the dichotomies of global and local, production and reproduction or consumption, private and public, and work and leisure. Scholars studying gender and digital and cultural labor have been grappling with the implications that these transformations hold for feminist politics, asking whether they help mitigate or reinforce the gendered inequalities under capitalism (Sarah Banet-Weiser 2012; Kylie Jarrett 2016; Angela McRobbie 2016; Michele White 2015). However, the discussion in the English-speaking academic literature primarily focuses on Euro-American women's experiences. Non-Western and transnational dimensions are underrepresented. In this essay, I address this gap by focusing on Internet-based Chinese luxury resellers—transnationally mobile middle-class Chinese women who resell Western luxury products on social media and e-commerce sites. I argue that traditional, socialist, and emerging gendered ideals converge and interact in complex ways with the digitalized global capitalist system in shaping the subjectivities and lived realities of these women.

This essay is part of a larger project that I have been working on since 2013 on Chinese women entrepreneurs who rely on social media to run innovative micro-enterprises. Over the years, I have been conducting longitudinal online and offline ethnography following a

group of Chinese women luxury resellers living around the world, observing their businesses while collecting stories from them about work and life. Specifically in this essay, I historicize this new digital female subject by situating her hybrid subjectivities in the history of women's labor in modern China. In doing so, I hope to set the ground for new questions to be asked to broaden the current debate on the politics of "women's work" in the global digital economy. How does the logic of mobile transnational capital intersect with Chinese traditional gender norms and residual socialist politics in constituting contemporary gendered entrepreneurial subjectivities? What implications does women's increased participation in Internet-based transnational entrepreneurial labor have for feminist politics?

Historically, women's experience of work under capitalism has been shot through with contradictions. The entrenched divides between home and workplace, private and public sphere, and reproductive and productive labor have either rendered women's work invisible and uncompensated, or have subjected women to the double burden of domestic labor and work in the public sphere (Sharon Hays 1996; Arlie Hochshild 1989). The valorization of "feminine" soft skills in contemporary digital capitalism, such as communication and social relations, affective and emotional labor, aesthetic judgment, and the blurring between labor and consumption, work and life, and production and reproduction have generated more opportunities for women to experiment with new career tracks and lifestyles, and to rewrite the dominant scripts of femininity (White 2015). Meanwhile, these liberating potentials are also tempered by the normalization of precarity and flexibility and postfeminist trends towards retraditionalization and celebration of consumer citizenship (Banet-Weiser 2012; Jarrett 2016; McRobbie 2016).

Chinese middle-class women's experiences complicate this debate over the impacts that new technologies have on women's work and life. Contemporary Chinese women have been caught in-between different forces. The Confucian cultural tradition that idealizes submissive and self-sacrificial femininity is being revived and appropriated by both the market and the state to perpetuate gender inequalities. The socialist history that both empowers women and subjects gender-neutral laboring women to the nation-state's political visions is fading from the mainstream politics, leaving a void to be filled by new ideologies. The complex interplay between the traditional and modern, the global and local has shaped post-socialist feminine subjectivities. Gendered Internet-based flexible labor, I argue, has emerged as the solution to the paradoxical demands—individualization and retraditionalization—placed on contemporary Chinese middle-class women.

In the Confucian moral system dominated by rigid patriarchal hierarchical orders, a woman's "proper place" was considered to be at home while men monopolized the public sphere (J. Sherry Mou 2004). Championed by modernist reformers like Liang Qichao, the introduction of feminist ideas into China in the beginning of the twentieth century had a dual effect on Chinese women: perpetuating their inferior status as a scapegoat for a "weak Chinese race" and emancipating women from the domestic sphere to participate in nation-building.[1] During the socialist years, women's identities were defined by their contribution to state-led socialist revolution and modernization. In the public sphere, the ideal female subject was embodied by the image of "*Tie Niangzi*" (translated as "iron girl")—a working-class female figure whose gender identity became subordinate to its class and national identity as a working-class Chinese citizen contributing to the nationalist and socialist revolutionary cause. Yet, in the private sphere, women were still responsible for the bulk of housework

and were burdened, like their counterparts in Western capitalist societies, by a second shift of domestic and reproductive labor (Jing Wu 2012).

China's reintegration into the global capitalist system in the 1980s challenged women's equal rights of employment and income. The state's embrace of an export-oriented and labor-intensive manufacturing economy and the emerging urban consumer market since the 1990s facilitated intragender class differentiation and instigated parallel waves of class-based feminized labor.[2] Women's participation en masse in the urban workforce boosted their consumer power and spawned a booming consumer sector targeting professional women. The rise of consumerism was fuelled by a return of traditionally gendered morality and gender essentialism, which worked together to reinforce gender inequality with the withering of socialist egalitarianism (Wu 2012).[3] While a younger generation of middle-class women experienced new feminized labor opportunities and consumption choices as liberating from Maoist asceticism and the erasure of sexuality, such empowerment was tempered by a widening urban–rural divide and class differentiations (Amy Hanser 2008).[4]

The technologically empowered female entrepreneur emerged from these fluctuating gender dynamics in the latter years of the 2000s. The majority of those who resell luxury items online are college-educated and transnational mobile middle or upper-middle class, and in their twenties to thirties.[5] As members of the urban post-'80s and post-'90s generations—those born after the Communist state reforms of the late 1970s—they have both reaped the fruit of socialist feminist revolution and enjoyed the opportunities created by post-socialist education reform. However, few of them identifies with collective-oriented and gender-neutral socialist femininity. Having grown up in the 1990s immersed in an unprecedented influx of commodities, images, and ideas from the West and from Asian neighbors, and coming of age after the nation's entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001, they are cosmopolitan, enterprising, transnationally mobile, savvy consumers attuned to global pop culture trends. Upon graduating from college, many of the women worked or are still working in foreign or joint ventures in major cities as white-collar workers. Financially supported by their parents, a growing number obtain Western degrees or migrate abroad as professionals or middle-class wives.

However, caught between the market, the state, and reinvented traditional forces, these young women are confronted by a contradictory reality. On one hand, this new generation of women appears as increasingly individualized. They are often depicted as the "me generation," ostensibly identifying with the individualistic and interactive communication style of the Internet over traditional media. Consumption becomes the primary mode to construct and express their individuality with global luxury brands emerging as the latest marker of cosmopolitan identity and class distinction. Well-groomed, forever youthful, and luxury-brand-wearing women are represented as "empowered" consuming subjects who exercise their consumer agency and financial power to carve out their unique identities through commodities (Zheng Wang 2017). Yet, more recently, a discourse of "passionate work," compelling women to do what they love, rather than just love what they do, has been gaining traction among the younger generation (McRobbie 2016). Combining an individualized version of the socialist working-women feminism and a gendered variation of the Silicon-Valley-inspired IT entrepreneurialism, women are encouraged to quit traditional nine-to-five employment to become their own boss and to prioritize the pursuit of self-actualization, creative and autonomous careers, and personal achievement.

On the other hand, these women's pursuit of individualism is often curtailed by a bleak reality of unequal gender relationships sanctioned by various commercial, political, and cultural agents. Workplace gender discrimination and female underemployment is on the rise, along with a decline in women's participation in the labor market, especially following the state's retreat from ensuring egalitarianism in employment and welfare for women in the mid-1990s under pressure from the market, more recently exacerbated by the flexibilization of labor in both traditional and new knowledge sectors (Hanser 2008). Meanwhile, women again bear the brunt of negative impacts resulting from the retreat of the socialist welfare regime. The privatization of childcare and education and the state-advanced human capital regime aiming at cultivating well-rounded talents competitive in the neoliberal global capitalist market have shaped a new culture of "intensive mothering," placing more demands on young mothers determined not to let their children "fall behind at the starting line" (Susan Greenhalgh 2010, 23). These transformations have led to a revival of traditional Confucian gender discourses, calling upon women to "return home" and become housewives (Song Shaopeng 2016a). Importantly, the revival of traditional cultural values is framed through the discourse of "work–life balance" as expanding women's choice and freedom, and are often experienced by young, middle-class mothers as a search for and realization of "authentic femininity" (Song Shaopeng 2016b; Wu 2012).

I have explicated in this essay how Chinese middle-class resellers' experiences are shaped by culturally and historically specific forces, which are often neglected by the emerging Western feminist research on women, technology, and contemporary capitalism. These converging elements in post-WTO China conspire to make the female entrepreneurial self the ideal subject of the global new economy, opening up new political possibilities while generating new regimes of power and exclusion. No passive consumer of Western luxury, she knows where and how to locate the best deal using her "feminine" consumer skills and knowledge. More importantly, her technological aptitude and cosmopolitan worldliness serve her effort to convert "feminine" knowledge and gendered networks into monetizable capital for innovative businesses and self-driven careers. The valorized entrepreneurial self often manifests through self-conscious and highly skilled construction and publicization of a personal brand based on classed and gendered identities, experiences, networks, and bodies. This gendered and technologically empowered entrepreneurship seems to have handily "resolved" the conflict between the neoliberal feminine ideal of a consumerist, individualistic, global mobile, and actively desiring woman, and the self-sacrificing and family-oriented woman demanded by traditional patriarchal norms. Though young women might still be structurally disadvantaged, their entrepreneurial practices serve as a coveted alternative—or supplement—to their white-collar career track, educational pursuits, and housewifery. But this cultural solution to structural problems runs the risk of legitimizing, even making desirable, the rising flexibilization of labor, withering of public welfare provisions, new domesticity, and feminine retreatism. Far from a nondiscriminating equalizer, this emergent regime of value generates new forms of exclusions and privileges certain versions of "femininity," rendering others less valuable, visible, or desirable (Lin Zhang 2015).

Notes

1. According to Song (2016a), many of the early advocates of women's rights were nationalist men who turned to Western philosophy (including feminist ideas) to modernize China. These

modernist ideas, though justifying and encouraging Chinese women's participation in the public sphere, also perpetuated the beliefs that the Chinese nation was weak because Chinese women (who are mothers and wives) were weak, less educated, and confined to the domestic sphere.

2. I am referring to the feminization of the middle white-collar office worker in metropolitan China, the rise of so-called "pink-collar" service workers, the increasing number of women entrepreneurs, and most importantly, the vast number of working-class female manufacturing workers who are often rural migrants.
3. The decline of the socialist welfare system and gender politics has paralleled rapid privatization and the commoditization of society, which had led to the resurgence of traditional and conservative gender ideas along with "post-feminist" trends towards consumer citizenship and political apathy in post-reform (post-1980s) China.
4. The coexistence of poor rural women and female migrant workers and ultra-rich women entrepreneurs and housewives in contemporary China can serve as an example of such division.
5. There is no research on the demographics of Chinese women luxury resellers. I get a sense of the demographics mainly through my interviews and by observing the resellers' social media self-narratives.

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