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COMM5600M Dissertation and Research Methods

Subjectivity and Representation:

Investigating the contemporary female dilemmas in Chinese TV

series *Ode to Joy*

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Abstract

Since the reform and opening-up, China's socialist market economy and people's material living standards have rapidly developed. In this context, rapid urbanization has become a characteristic of the times. As a result, contemporary urban TV series has quickly taken over China's television market with their realistic content and famous actors. In 2016, a phenomenal TV series *Ode to Joy* appeared on the television screen in China. The objective of this thesis is to analyse the contemporary female dilemmas reflected in Chinese TV series. Through conducting critical discourse analysis, it found that the portrayal of women in television dramas continues to face dilemmas from family, workplace and gender relationships. Furthermore, the formation of these problems is influenced by the economic, political, and socio-cultural context. This research mainly contributes to providing a starting point for scholars interested in the development of Chinese feminism reflecting in TV series and the embodiment of Chinese traditional values in popular culture.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, Chinese TV dramas have continued to develop, which is not only reflected in the increase in number but also in the rich diversity and maturity of TV series genres. In 2016, the TV series *Ode to Joy* was produced by Daylight Entertainment and directed by Sheng Kong and Chuanhe Jian. The TV series tells a story about the families, careers, lives, friendships and loves of five girls from different families, professions, personalities and values, who live together on the 22nd floor of a building "Ode to joy" in a big city. From guessing to gradually accepting each other, they work together to solve various problems and witness each other's growth in Shanghai. Its narrative focus on the single woman as both the careerist, consumer, and romantic participant. The drama portrays several women of different ages and social classes, with a detailed understanding of urban women's living conditions in today's society. Because of these realistic themes and content and the participation of well-known actors, this drama has generated widespread discussion on the internet. The objective of this dissertation is to address the women's dilemmas inherent in this TV series. It will adopt the critical discourse analysis to examine how Chinese TV series construct contemporary Chinese women's representations and reflect their dilemmas in three aspects: family, workplace and gender relations. The main objective of this dissertation is to investigate how and what dilemmas are reflected in recent Chinese TV series, especially with the theme of urban women's life. As Hall (1997, p.2) argues that, "representation makes meaning rather than reflect them" and it is the process by which "members of a culture use language…to produce meaning" (p.45). Gill (2007, p.10)

also claims that it is matter to start from the representation proposition, feminist analyses of the media have been animated by "desire to understand how images and cultural constructions are connected to patterns of inequality, domination and oppression." Therefore, in light of the ever-changing social background, this research will also explore the women's representations within contemporary feminist discourse. At the same time, it is also attempting to locate these topics within Chinese political and socio-cultural contexts.

This dissertation will be divided into four parts. Firstly, the literature review will provide background information about Chinese and Western female representation's development in TV series and feminist theoretical foundation for the research. The literature review includes five parts, contemporary feminism and popular culture, the development of women's representation on television, contemporary feminism in China, and the transformation of women's representation on TV. Secondly, the methodology for the research, critical discourse analysis will be introduced. Thirdly, detailed examples and results will be presented and analysed. With this method, the selected examples are mainly about characters' dialogues and significant plots in *Ode to Joy*. Finally, the conclusion part will sum up the main findings of this research. Hence, the key parts of this research will be: what kinds of female dilemmas in family, workplace, and gender relationships are reflected in contemporary female dramas, together with the influence of socio-cultural context on the development of female representations in TV series.

This research is an innovative combination of female representation and Chinese urban female drama. There have been several studies on female representation in film and television in western countries, but fewer studies on Chinese contemporary TV series. Previous Chinese scholars' research on the portrayal of women in Chinese television drama mostly lacks an integrated analysis of the conflict between recent feminist criticism, contemporary Chinese popular culture and traditional values. Therefore, this research could provide some thoughts on how Chinese values and socio-cultural context influence the female representations in TV series through applying media representation theory and recent feminist criticism in *Ode to Joy*.

1.1 Research Objectives

How and what contemporary female dilemmas are reflected in recent Chinese female urban TV series?

1. What kinds of women's representations are reflected in the TV series, and what new features do they have?

2. What issues do female characters face?

3. How can these issues contribute to the discussion of contemporary urban female dilemmas in reality?

2. <u>Literature Review</u>

2.1 Introduction

In this section, the literature review will be divided into three parts. Firstly, it will investigate the primary debates about contemporary feminism, particularly concerning popular culture. Then, the discussion will go further within the television industry and examine the development of women's representation on TV. Finally, it will be contextualised within the Chinese cultural discourse to review the contemporary transformation of women's representation on TV series. In this part, the political and economic context of China will also be considered.

2.2 Contemporary feminism and popular culture

The research of women's representation has been one of the significant areas in feminist communication studies. According to Richardson and Wearing (2014, p.110), "hegemonic ideologies are throughout the dominant media and discourses of gender/race/class/sexuality are encoded throughout popular culture." In the 1980s, the critical debates about post-feminism appeared as a popular cultural form and sensibility in the West and became widespread since the 1990s. Post-feminism is often described as a "sensibility" (Gill, 2007), a "set of assumptions" (Tasker and Negra, 2007) or discursive construction (Projansky, 2001). It is also used to describe the "retrenchment of politically and culturally conservative positions in relation to gender, particularly as reflected in media representations" (Richardson and Wearing, 2014, p.29). According to Diane Negra, she characterised the post-feminist subject as "white and middle class

by default, anchored in consumption as a strategy (and leisure as a site) for the production of the self" (Negra and Tasker, 2007, p.2). Like Vavrus (2002, p.168-169) asserts that post-feminism "privileges individualism" and belongs to the elite, white and straight women, "at the expense of a collective politics of diverse women's needs." Meanwhile, except for the consuming behaviours, post-feminism primarily spreads through media representations. Negra and Tasker (2007, p.2) defined the post-feminist ideology as "freedom of choice with respect to work, domesticity, and parenting" as well as "physical and particularly sexual empowerment." Recently, Banet-Weiser, Gill and Rottenberg (2020) illustrate that the current feminist discourse in media is closely related to the interaction among post-feminism, neoliberal feminism, and popular feminism. To be specific, Gill concerns about post-feminism and argues that it is perceived as a sensibility and requires to "'upgrade' one's psychic life to be positive, confident and glowing" (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020, p.5).

Variety critics have noted the critical features of post-feminism, Brunsdon (2013, p.378) suggests that "it entails different articulations of feminism and femininity, 'the girl' is its central figure…its characteristic subjectivity is congruent with neoliberalism…it is often glossed with reference to fictional female characters." In addition, this term is highly emphasized on women's appearance and related to conventional forms of femininity, and it is often "exclusively heterosexual in its 'raunchy' 'sex positivity'" (Richardson and Wearing, 2014, p.30). Notably, one of the key features of post-feminism is consumer culture, and it plays an important role in

women's domestic life and the submissiveness of women's labour (Brunsdon, 2006; Negra, 2009). Within the popular discourse, Tasker and Negra (2005, p.107) claim that feminism has "frequently taken the form of a pre-packaged and highly commodifiable entity", so that discourses having to do with "women's geographic, professional, and perhaps most particularly sexual freedom are effectively harnessed to individualism and consumerism." Post-feminism is widely distributed in popular culture, and it is widely spread in advertising, news and film and television. As McRobbie (2007, p.34) pointed out, post-feminism gives young women certain freedom, but they still face various constraints, "the new female subject is, despite her freedom, called upon to be silent, to withhold critique, to count as a modern sophisticated girl, or indeed this withholding of critique is a condition of her freedom." Therefore, these post-feminist criticisms will also help to analyse the women's representation on television, especially TV series.

2.3 The development of women's representation on television

As a significant symbol of modern life and the active part of the mass media, television impacts on society, politics, economy and culture. Many scholars have shown the important role of television in socialisation and modern political and economic activities. For example, several studies have shown that the message conveyed by television has a heavy impact on people's perceptions and life (Ang, 1985; Allen, 1995). Television also has extensive influence on the construction of individual identity (Brown, 1994; Seiter, 1999). As a medium, television connects the private sphere to the public sphere and provides a sense of connection for isolated individuals (Mankekar,

1999). Television also transcends local and transnational boundaries by introducing audiences into a larger economy of consumption and desire (Mankekar, 1999). Representations are images, descriptions, and frames for understanding "what the world is and why and how it works in particular ways" (Hall, 1997, p.5). It is crucial because representations are "inextricably inscribed in relations of power" (Orgad, 2012, p.25). In light of Hall's argument that representation involves meaning-making, Orgad (2012, p.20) also claims that representation is "inherently and inevitably a construction, a selective and particular depiction of some elements of reality, which always generates some specific meanings and excludes others." Therefore, it is significant to observe television's portrayal of female representations.

According to Philo and Miller (2001, p.13), media representation can "crystallise and express the key moments in relations which define a period or type of society." Previous representations of female characters on television are often stereotypical. A stereotype is usually defined as a group of people who have a lot of similarity on characteristics or physical and mental attributes and are described in a fixed way (Liebert and Sparfkin, 1988; Durkin, 1985). It is often associated with negative race and gender evaluations. Hall (1997, p.263) explains that "victims" of stereotypes "can be trapped by the stereotype, unconsciously confirming it by the very term in which they try to oppose and resist it." Dowling (1980, p.3) suggests that "stereotypes reinforce, reassert and capitalise on socially approved beliefs, and the women's movement." As an influential medium, television has become a valuable tool for

conveying dominant ideology, establishing norms and frameworks, and constructing stereotypes. Martel and McCall (1964) argue that in order to attract viewers' interest, entertainment media often exaggerates reality, which is often different from real life. In early studies of female representations in television, Siu (1981) notes that television might lead to a bias against women in reality. Tuchman (1978, p.8) famously describes the representation of women in the mass media as "symbolic annihilation", she finds that fewer women were portrayed, and they were generally confined to being either a "childlike adornment" or a dutiful housewife. Regardless of the various substance in television series, female characters are frequently underrepresented for knowledge, competence and occupational status (Thompson and Zerbions, 1995). McGhee (1975) suggests that the woman in primetime TV series often performed as secretary, nurse, and entertainer rather than the more dominant roles, like ministers or employer. In the domestic domain, women's duties are often perceived as family-oriented, and they are rarely seen in the public sphere participating in business decision-making. (McGhee, 1975). In the 1980s observations, women's roles are more related with household tasks than job plans (Henderson and Greenberg, 1980). Furthermore, younger women make up a major proportion of the total number of female characters in TV series, while women in 30-50 are discontinuously described (Liebert and Sparfkin, 1988; Craig, 1991; Davis, 1990).

Over time, women on western television have been portrayed as more vital, more independent, and more authoritative (Gunter, 1995). As Buonanno (2017, p.13) argues

that, "when depictions of femininity witnessed significant expansion, following an unprecedented increase in female-centred dramas." In Bodroghkozy's research about some paragons of second-wave feminism (1970-77) in primetime television, she (2004, p.12) argues that they often displayed all the traditional signifiers of femininity "young, slim, white, classically pretty, and usually deferential to men." However, they are not "good wife and mother", the narration seldom emphasized on their search for love, marriage, or children (Bodroghkozy, 2004, p.12). Meanwhile, a key feature of them is their status as a career woman, and they no longer only appear in the traditional female workplace, such as secretary or nurse, but more work in a male-dominated environment as boss, doctor, and producer (Bodroghkozy, 2004). Subsequent female dramas such as *Sex and the City* (1998-2003), *Ugly Betty* (2006-2009) and *Desperate Housewives* (2004-2012) have revealed the unique ways in which women see the world, deal with problems and shape themselves from a female perspective. Nevertheless, their sexual dress and appearance still appeal to the male gaze and indicate that women could still be stereotyped and restricted in traditional female sexuality. Subsequently, the television series of the 2010s broke the discourse and opposed the traditional and stereotypical portrayal of women on television, replacing it with the establishment of a feminist discourse (Hohenstein and Thalmann, 2019). Moreover, more women from different races, genders, ages, body types and hairstyles appear in TV series (Hohenstein and Thalmann, 2019, p.111). In the mid-2010s, new feminism emerged in television culture in which female characters have become what male characters have always been described, "complex, multi-dimensional, and even transgressive heroines

of their own stories" (Hohenstein and Thalmann, 2019, p.113). In contrast, Furnhan et al. (2000) find that the representation of gender role in Asian television has not diminished but rather enhanced. In the following sections, the early female representations of Chinese TV series will be reviewed.

2.4 Contemporary Feminism in China (especially in post-socialist China)

Most research on post-feminist culture is examined in the Western context. As Dosekun (2015, p.963) points out, Western scholars have an ingrained bias on the spread of post-feminist culture in non-Western countries, and it is deemed as "a tame, derivative copy of its putative Western original." From the dominant Western perspective, these non-Western attempts embody a desire to achieve the image of Western femininity and sexuality in popular culture, even they have "minimal access to global feminine consumer culture" (Dosekun, 2015, p.963). Meanwhile, the process of globalisation brings new challenges to women's empowerment and subordination. The limited discussion of post-feminism in China has approved post-feminist global transmission and expansion with the global development of neo-liberalism. For Chinese scholars, Chen (2012, p.217) defines the Chinese neo-liberal female subjects as "young generation of educated professional women" through her study of neo-liberalism and "chick lit" in China. However, her research is based on the manifestation of Western chick lit' global features in the local texts. Remarkably, Wu and Dong (2019) claim that contemporary Chinese feminism has received much attention, but its ontological roots and naming politics have largely escaped scrutiny. New gender power structures

emerged with China's post-socialist transition, while urban women engaged in various discursive and material practices in their struggles (Wu and Dong, 2019). Recently, Peng's (2019) review of feminism in neo-liberal China also reveals post-feminist transcultural expansion and duplication. Specifically, Peng emphasizes that contemporary Chinese feminism has inherent similarities with Western post-feminism in the transnational neoliberal consumerist economy. This relation to the consumerist economy can be found in Luo and Sun's (2015) exploration of the "leftover women" predicament on China's TV show. Their research sheds light on the representation of single womanhood in an influential television genre and the media's impact on gender mandate in rapid China's social transformation. According to their research, women's subjectivity should consider their intertwined gender and social class identities. Therefore, it is important to contextualising Chinese women's representation in the media "within both the sensibility of global post-feminism and the specificity of local gender politics" (Luo and Sun, 2015, p.241).

There has been a considerable debate on how post-feminism is situated in a Chinese context, and it is noticed that the term "consumerist pseudo-feminism" coined by Yang is used for the Chinese equivalent of post-feminism. In the discussion of Chinese post-feminism, Yang (2020) takes the "chick flick" as the study subject and argues that post-feminism exists in China, but it differs significantly from Western feminism in its subject class, female elites' relationship with the state, and entanglement with local feminism. In this way, while Chinese pseudo-feminism appeals to the female

public by claiming to address gender inequality, this feminist rhetoric creates a socio-cultural environment that encourages women's daily consumption and promotes the profitability of female-focused businesses (Meng and Huang, 2017). Based on the transnational perspective, Yang mainly focuses on middle-class young women, which is also the target audience of urban female TV series. Yang (2020, p.2) maintains that "any discussion of post-feminism's discursive circulation in China must be situated within the corpus of Chinese history and politics." The term he coined stressed the local discursive context while keeping the relationship with Western post-feminism. Hence, the Chinese context plays a crucial role and need to be further discussed in this review.

China's economic reforms in the 1980s have led to the wide spread of European and American-led neoliberalism in mainland China. Nevertheless, as the market economy replaced the centrally planned socialist economy, the communist power does not disintegrate post-socialist China. Luo and Sun (2015, p.241) mention that this change makes the "neoliberal values of marketisation, privatisation, and consumerism intermingle with the lingering socialist ideals of collectivity and the common goal of prosperity." This result in post-socialist China brings challenges for Chinese women, facing not only a comprehensive social and economic transformation but also the reconstruction of post-socialist femininity (Luo and Sun, 2015, p.242). Rofel (1999, p.217) points out that the notion of gender in the post-socialist period celebrates "innate femininity, marriage, and motherhood." Evan (2002, p.348) also argues that the discussion about women's natural attributes is remained "attached to a notion of

motherhood as a desirable state for all women" and "motherhood emerges as an inalienable aspect of wifehood." Under the influence of emerging consumerism, young urban Chinese female sexualised and commodified bodies signify the emergence of a new gender representation. In the process, post-socialist femininity expresses China's new economic power and modernity while also remapping class differences. After observing the post-socialist gender mandate of young urban single women, Hanser (2005, p.582) finds that they are "called upon to represent a new, capitalist modernity", but in reality, are still restricted by the responsibilities of traditional normative gender roles, as wives and mothers. Additionally, Luo and Sun (2015, p.242) further argue that new local gender politics cultivate "male privilege, and spreading a new spouse-matching norm, which plagues contemporary single womanhood, and constrains the social and cultural dimensions of their subjectivity." Zheng (2001, p.45) notes that this male privilege results from neoliberal restructuring, and the unequal distribution of social wealth promotes an "entrepreneurial masculinity that entails power, wealth, sexual prowess, and rebellion." These cultural observations about male privilege suggest a post-socialist reconfiguration of gender relations and the production of a new relationship of inequality.

In the 1980s, the middle class mainly conducts the formation and practice of consumerism and individualism in China. The government began to consider the group with middle-level income because they are closely connected with the level of income and the ability to consume (Yang, 2020). According to Dai (1999), the middle class are

induced and imagined widely in mass culture and consumerism, such as the middle-class lifestyle in the advertisement, but it is not until the new millennium that they developed into an actual group. This consumerist culture also provides today's women with various choices that encourage them to "indulge in the possibilities and pleasures of feminine expressions" (Liu, 2014, p.20). In 2015, Credit Suisse issued the "Global Wealth Report", "the number of China's middle-class adults…has reached 109 million…to become the largest in the world" (Ma and Liu, 2017, p.105). The middle class is often seen as a significant consumer force, and recently the spending power of middle-class women has been highlighted in the research. In 2007, "her-economy" appears, it is an economic phenomenon that highlights the female subjectivity in consumption and marks an increasing compelling economic contribution of female audiences. Whereas from the survey on the sex ratio in the middle class, Li (2011) reveals that the majority of middle-class women are in the lower level of the middle class, as most of the power and wealth is concentrated on the male side, this difference demonstrates the power dominance of men in politics and the economy. Meanwhile, Yang (2020) points out that Chinese middle-class women are characterised by low levels of economic and social resources and high consumption levels, which is primarily attributed to the importance they place on the family over career development and their dependence on men. These notions have profoundly influenced the representation of women in the media.

2.5 The transformation of women's representation on TV

In contemporary China, it is important to consider the historical and institutional

contexts in which television became a crucial part of China's media industry. According

to the review of Chinese TV series, Zhu et al. (2008) suggest that the idea of television

as a vehicle for reprocessing and reproducing the collective values and culture through

narrative relies on a highly centralised national broadcasting system. Raymond

Williams (1961) also regards the television as a medium that regulates and maintains

"structures of feelings." Its portrayal of social reality shows how drama is influenced

by political realities, customs, values and context. In the new technological

environment, television drama presents multiple meanings, mainly in the reflection of

real life and the shift in cultural attitudes (Zhu et al., 2008). The early Chinese

government used television as an essential way to promote modernisation and

education, and the main purpose of encouraging the development of the television

industry was to strengthen the connection between the government and the public. The

Chinese government began to promote the slogan "women hold up half of the sky" to

improve women's social status. In the process, women's participation in work and

education has increased significantly (Xinhua News Agency, 2010). Over time, the

main content of Chinese television series has also changed and become more diverse,

and the women's representation is also different from the past. With the gradual

loosening of ideological control and an increasingly commercialised environment, the

role and function of television have gradually changed. The deregulation has also led

to a more autonomous operation of TV stations. Regarding the cultural realm, there still

lacks discussion on how the contemporary feminist discourse is embodied in mass

culture media, such as TV series. The pre-eminence of domestic consumption of television drama contrasts with the lack of academic attention. Studies of Chinese TV dramas have focused on the extent of their distribution overseas, the context of social forms or cultural discourse (Zhu et al., 2008). Until the 1990s, contemporary Chinese drama's dominant narratives are constructed by social change and public events. In the following years, the subject matter of television drama has changed, and new genres have emerged. Since the late 1990s, there are a number of dramas about everyday life.

In the previous research, Kong (2008) mainly focuses on family matters and the reconstruction of the family on the Chinese TV screen in an ever-changing context. She comments that family life and sexual relationships represented in the family dramas are often problematic, reflecting the reality of moral breakdown and unstable relationships in a rapidly changing Chinese society (Kong, 2008). Sun's (2009) research of gender relations and female issues in popular culture offers a different contemporary private life image. With the changes in the domestic area and the abroad vision, the Chinese TV drama market shows an "interpersonal model of production", which integrated diversified sources into an awareness of differentiated markers (Keane, 2005, p.85). More significantly, Huang (2008, p.13) explores the "pink drama", "a new subgenre reflecting the social empowerment of single women in modern Confucian societies." Her study discusses post-feminist irony elements, representations of changing femininity, and "tensions between modern and traditional gender values faced by young single women" (Huang, 2008, p.13). Based on these discussions, as a sub-genre of TV

drama, this study of contemporary female urban drama will complement Chinese

women's studies and take a new look at the portrayal of women in contemporary media.

3. **Methodology**

In light of the discussion on the importance of representation in media analysis, this research raised three questions to explore women's representation in this TV series: What kinds of women's representations are reflected in the TV series, and what new features do they have? What issues do female characters face? How can these issues contribute to the discussion of contemporary urban female dilemmas in reality? This research chooses a recent urban TV series to analyse female representation in contemporary China. Based on the popular Chinese TV series *Ode to Joy* (2016), this analysis will focus on the issues faced by middle-class women in family, workplace and gender relations, as well as the power relations underlying the presented femininity. This research will adopt the analytical framework of critical discourse analysis (CDA) to focus on the selected media representations, study metaphors in the dialogue and the narrative structure of the plots in the TV series. Its study texts can be spoken language, written language, and other semiotic activities that produce meanings, such as visual images (television, film, photography). Aiello and Parry (2020) also point out the centrality of the image in meaning-making processes. Therefore, this research will also use CDA to conduct visual analysis to further analyse the representations of female characters in these two texts. According to Machin (2013, p.347), "Discourses are communicated through different kinds of semiotic resources, different modes, and realised through different genres." These communicative activities are all infused and shaped by power relations and ideologies. Thus, critical discourse analysis often shows the underlying identities, actions, and circumstances and reveals these discourses'

ideological and political effects (Fairclough, 2003). As one of the most prominent branches of discourse analysis, CDA provides both modes and theories for the "empirical study of the relations between discourse and social and cultural developments in different social domains" (Jørgenson and Phillips, 2002, p.60). The paper by Moran and Lee using this approach to examine the text and images on the cosmetic surgery companies' websites. This approach is also used by Li (2015) to analyse the female representation in TV shows and how the show is shaped by the socio-cultural practices in contemporary China. Similarly, Li (2015) takes this method to investigate the women's representations on television, and his chosen text is a reality show with the theme of romantic relationships and marriage. Hence, he is thematically limited in the socio-cultural study of female representations. In light of his study, this research chose TV dramas with more complex themes, relatively complete presentation of female characters, and diversified content as the main texts. As Machin and Mayr (2012, p.10) mentioned, "Visual communication, as well as language, both shapes and is shaped by society." Hence, this research will pay more attention to how visual and spoken discourses of this TV series interact with socio-cultural language in producing meanings about women's representations.

Through the ground-breaking works *Reading Images* (1996) and *Multimodal Discourse* (2001), Kress and VanLeeuwen introduced multimodality in linguistics. Texts create meaning through language and visual features such as images, colours, and layouts of pages (Machin, 2013). This notion takes the study of discourse beyond the

linguistic level. Machin (2013, p.348) mentions that in multimodal communication, "the different modes had become more integrated and visual elements were being used to communicate complex ideas and attitudes." This approach is conducted by Fairclough (2003) when examining the social relations involved in a cigarette advertisement. In this process, MCDA can help to understand how different types of semiotic resources are deployed. Therefore, the multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA) could better allow this research to analyse how these non-linguistic elements in the TV series are being used to communicate identities, attitudes, and ideas.

This 2016 TV series has garnered over 1 billion views and has gained a great deal of attention (Yan, 2012). The TV series depicts the personalities and social backgrounds of the five female characters, and these female representations have resonated with the audience and brought a wide range of discussion. Unlike the previous domestic dramas with women as the protagonists, it is closely linked to the contemporary social reality, and the characterisation of the characters is more influenced by contemporary social culture. Notably, Dyer (1993, p.1) describes that "how we are seen determines in part how we are treated; how we treat others is based on how we see them; such seeing comes from representation." Therefore, the study of representation is important for understanding the situation of Chinese women in the contemporary context. To conduct the analysis, I reviewed all the episodes of this TV series, and they are available and free on YouTube. This TV series has clear and major female protagonists, and they all show the various dilemmas women face in contemporary China. Meanwhile, the

context setting and concentration on urban middle-class women provide diverse examples for this study. Previous studies such as Li's research on Chinese dating show tend to choose highly discussed content and has controversial topics for analysis. Likewise, this study will also select clips that have generated extensive discussion as the main examples. They are mainly reflected in: Fan Shengmei's family problem (Episode 32), Andy's workplace problem (Episode 2, 41), and Fan Shengmei's consumerist life (Episode 1, 11). Meanwhile, some female representations in these episodes will also be analysed through screenshots from visual aspects.

In watching the drama, almost every character's story revolves around three aspects, their family background, work experience and romantic relationship. There are many conversations and plots related to these topics, while female characters face difficulties from these aspects, which also become the main conflict point in the drama. Therefore, the study will then analyse women's representations in selected episodes around these three themes. The analysis process will include the description of the plots, the image of female characters, and the transcript of their conversation in light of both the socio-cultural context and feminist theoretical criticism. The selections of clips will focus on the horizontal comparison of the presentations of different female characters on these three themes. In this process, characters relationships and dialogue are also important objects for conveying meanings. Horizontal characters' comparisons will look at what diverse and homogeneous are the dilemmas faced by women. The study will then look at the main female characters' experiences through the selected episodes

based on the differences between each character and the socio-cultural context to analyse how women's dilemmas arise. Through discussing under the analytical framework of critical discourse analysis, this study will further analyse the women's representation in Chinese TV series.

4. Findings and Discussion

Contemporary television dramas are often based on the realistic background and audience's expectation, and to some extent, it is the projection of women's cultural identity and self-identity in the current society (Yan, 2012). As a form of popular culture, TV dramas use images and sounds to tell stories, and at the same time, express their ideologies, which has become a power to construct representation. According to Press and Strathman (1993), changes in television image do not always coincide with actual changes in society, particularly in the portrayal of women, which reflects how social ideology mediates changes in the real world. Richardson and Wearing (2014, p.6) also claim that representations are not a simple reflection of the world but a construction which has been "built or produced", and the meaning these images conveying is often not the vision of the producer, but following "dominant ideologies of the period." In light of the three research questions mentioned before, this section will be divided into three parts to illustrate the main findings from the selected texts. It will mainly focus on *Ode to Joy* (2016) and analyse how this television drama will maintain and disrupt the gender ideology and help to understand the contemporary female situation. Specifically, this research will explore how this drama has reflected the changing social and economic shifts influence the female characters' lives, while also providing sources for exploring the new constraints on female resulting from these changes.

Female television products are more likely to appeal to the female audience by portraying representative female characters' behaviour and lives. However, this

portrayal is not always positive, a key strategy within media representation is "stereotyping", it works by applying a trait to a small minority of group and "representing it as indicative of the whole group" (Richardson and Wearing, 2014, p.8). These TV series often present and summarise the relationship between the character traits of women as a group, their life choices and their consequences through the plot, and complete the imaginative construction of the social environment in which women live, thus influencing the perception of women in actual society. As Orgad (2012) claims, media representation establishes a strong relation between mediated subject and audience, and it can also construct values, beliefs and knowledge. Different from other representational objects, media representations' function is to "produce meaning, to capture in some way 'reality' in signs" (Orgad, 2012, p.47). In this drama, it provides various mediated female characters for viewers to identify with, and they usually have an easily identifiable and fixed characteristic and classifies them into specific categories, this further contributes to gender discrimination and promotes gender prejudice. The stereotypical female representations in this TV series will be pointed out, and the causes behind them will be further analysed in the following parts.

4.1 Woman in the Family

At the beginning of *Ode to Joy*, there is a famous line, "One's family is one's destiny." This sentence implies the importance of family ethics in Chinese society. Urban women living in contemporary China grow up in the integration and conflict between Chinese and Western cultures. On the one hand, they pursue independence in

life and work, and on the other hand, they are constrained by traditional Chinese values about marriage and family. To begin with, it is noticeable that the play has attracted widespread attention because of its focus on middle-class women, a group that is also the targeted audience for contemporary female urban drama. Lyle (2008, p.320) proposes the term "middle-class gaze" to understand the way middle-class habitus operationalise in the media. Middle-class gaze is a "mode of production" which is strengthened by an anxiety about the working classes that entailed the "(mis)recognition of the working class as being of lesser value" (Lyle, 2008, p.320). In this series, the upper and middle classes identities are often described as morally good and the presentation of good taste and propriety. Therefore, it will firstly provide more details about the five female characters' family backgrounds and the class division rooted in their families.

In *Ode to Joy*, the five main female characters all have different conflicts with their families. Xiaoxiao Qu (Ava Wang) and Andy are both in the upper class, Qu's family is wealthy, but her parents' relationship is chaotic. Her financial capital comes from her family and social connections, and she usually behaves in an ingratiating and flattering manner towards the upper elite, such as Andy, and does not dare to disobey Andy's words too much. She is also polite to Guan, who comes from a middle-class background and has a high cultural taste. However, for Qiu and Fan, who are relatively low on economic status, she shows more disdain and ridicule, and her attitude is more arrogant. Furthermore, her economic capital is not successfully transformed into cultural capital.

Her lack of cultural background makes her feel inferior and anxious, prompting her to try her best to imitate and pursue a tasteful lifestyle. Andy (Tao Liu), who enters the upper class on her work and financial income, faces a lace of affection and a fear of intimacy. She is a typical successful person who has succeeded in replacing intellectual and cultural capital with economic capital, and the elite status she enjoys makes her character overbearing and decisive. Guan Juer (Xin Qiao) has an affluent life in an urban middle-class family, with highly educated parents who gave their daughter a relatively well-rounded education and upbringing, but the doting parents caused her timid, depressed and conservative character. As a representative of the typical middle-class, she has both conservatism and an enthusiastic vision of upward mobility towards the upper class. No matter in the way of work or life, she is actively close to the upper elite Andy, which reflects the desire of the middle class to transcend themselves and shows the idealised of the upper class. Yingying Qiu (Andy Yang) and Shengmei Fan (Xin Jiang) are both middle-class, but they have a completely different fate. None of them has strong family backgrounds to support them, nor do they have innate talents or acquired opportunities, and are representatives of the ordinary urban underclass. Qiu was born in a standard middle-class family, but her overprotective parents have made her lack a sense of self-protection and safety. Qiu's parents have been telling her for years that "you are ordinary" while placing the responsibility on her that "your father has moved from the countryside to the city, so you should move from the small city to the big city." Their femininities are all formed and shaped by family factors, with Fan Shengmei being one of the most prominent influences. Her parents are heavily

influenced by traditional patriarchal thinking that "preference for sons over daughters". Her marriage is influenced by her parents, and most of her income is used to support the family. Therefore, Fan's family issues will be further analysed as examples in the following parts.

Fan's family conflict mainly happens when her indebted brother runs away and directly entrusts their parents and his children to her. After a busy day of working, Fan still has to face criticism from her freeload parents. Her mother accuses her of buying herself too many clothes,

Fan: I already give half my salary to my brother, why can't I buy some clothes for myself.

Fan's mother: What's wrong with your brother? He's given the Fan family a grandson in the last few years, what about you? You bought these clothes and didn't save any money. How much money do you have left now? Go buy your dad something to eat, he's still hungry.

Meanwhile, when Fan reveals that all her money has given to her brother to pay his debts, she does not have enough money to eat.

Fan's mother: You can make do with what you have, but not my grandson, he needs milk and meat, he won't eat without meat.

Fan: What can I do? His father has already spent all our money and I have no choice.

Fan's mother: You can borrow money from your neighbours! I see they are very rich. Your brother said he'll call you when he finds a place to rest and that you should send them some money. They can't live without money in a strange place!

Fan: When I just came to Shanghai to work alone, why didn't you ever ask me if I had any money to live?

Then, when she shows records of money transfers to her brother over the years and asks for her brother's house as compensation, her parents show strong rejection.

Fan's father: Your money is for us, not your brother, so you don't have to ask what we do with it. The house should belong to your brother, not you. Otherwise, when you marry someone else, the house will belong to someone else too.

Fan: My surname is not Fan? Am I an outsider?

Facing her questioning, her parents' silence showed a kind of acquiescence. The traditional ideological values of Fan's parents are very evident in this dialogue. In her parents' eyes, even though Fan has become financially independent and provides substantial financial support to the family, her contribution is still less than their indebted son who has given them a grandson. Her mother's words indicated a traditional Chinese idiom "chuanzongjiedai", which means to carry on the family line. As Slote and Devos (1998) explain, in Chinese family culture, from ancient to contemporary China, it has been believed that more family members can present the power of a family, and the continuation of the family line can render the perpetuation of a family. In a patriarchal culture, this responsibility is usually carried by the male member, leading to "zhongnanqingnv" (preference for sons over daughters). Fan's family is a typical embodiment of this culture. In this family environment, Fan, as a victim of the family, not only needs to support her parents, but also helps her brother pay off debts to maintain the family line. In this case, she uses her appearance as a bargaining chip to relieve her financial pressure by obtaining a wealthy partner through a heterosexual marital relationship. This further leads to the representation of her money worship characteristics. It is a reflection of the oppression of women by a patriarchal culture.

For her parents, their daughter is an adjunct to the family, responsible for providing her value, and later she will belong to others by marriage. So even if their son abandons them in debt, they still think their son is the only one they can count on and see Fan's contribution as deserved. Hence, even though some female characters in the drama seem to have gained relative economic and intellectual freedom, Chinese family culture still influences and constrains them. Additionally, the middle-class gaze also can be found in this clip. Qiu and Qu choose to observe the actions of Fan's parents, who have come from the countryside, but their evasive and disgusting attitude towards Fan's parents' rude behaviours still show their superiority as the urban middle-class, thus contrasting with the lower class. The series embodies a glamorous portrayal of the middle-class elite, presented as noble, sensible and unmoved by money. But the working class is portrayed as greedy, snobbish and idle.

With the liberalisation of maternity policies, the portrayal of women presented in television dramas has also influenced, namely the emphasis on women's responsibilities in heterosexual marriages, wifehood and motherhood. Rofel (1999, p.271) notes that country's political and economic condition suggests the post-socialist discourse on women as "naturally motherhood, wedded love, and family care." This discourse is strengthened and spread with national policy advocacy on childbirth. TV series as cultural products also reflect this tendency. Liao (2020, p.263) mentions that television programs include a wide range of themes related to "singlehood, marriage, and family" in order to limit varied displays of sexuality and manage women's bodies

for the purposes of reproduction. However, these reproductive policies have neglected women's rights over "their bodies, workplace discrimination, and mistreatment in domestic contexts" (Liao, 2020, p.263). This series also reflects an "active re-domestication, privatisation, and responsibilisation of the female subject, and supports the tendency of the state to shift the burden of family care to the shoulders of individual wives and mothers" (Lewis et al., 2016, p.236). Within the family aspect, most of the female characters are suffering from being urged to get married by their parents. In this drama, Guan's mother often says that she hopes Guan could "quickly find someone to marry" and live a "stable life". This reflects that the influence of traditional cultural stereotypes of women as wives and mothers still exists and places many restrictions on contemporary women's socio-cultural identity. For some young people, marriage even becomes the restriction of career development (Schneider, 2014), especially for women who may be faced with fertility and child-rearing, their professional space and upward mobility will be significantly squeezed. After discussing the influence and limitations of family factors on women, the next section will further explore the difficulties women face in the workplace.

4.2 Woman in the Workplace

This part mainly reflects the issue of discourse power in women's working life, the inequality of their discourse is closely related to their position of power. Like Press and Strathman (1993, p.7) mention that, early television feminism adopted the most "benign" form to promote a moral model of achievement and success for women who

were "making it in a man's world". Qu and Andy are obviously in a relatively strong position. Qu's strength comes from her possession of wealth capital and social resources. With her money and connections, she is able to obtain a social status inconsistent with her knowledge level. Andy's strong position comes from her high level of knowledge, personal ability and social status. As a business elite, her intelligence and education allow her to have a place in the male-dominated financial world. Qiu and Guan's vulnerability is mainly reflected in their lack of social experience. As newcomers to the workplace, they are faced with high work pressure and economic constraints, their material needs are not met and they are weak and timid in the face of difficulties. Among them, Fan is the more struggling and her situation is more complex. At thirty, she has some social experience and success at work, but her family also pressures her work life.

In this drama, women's demands for the ideal career are not only high returns and the surface of fashion and glamour, but also pay more attention to the professional technical content and irreplaceability, from which it can be seen that women are desire to reflect their values in career. The circumstances, content and manner in which she works in this episode attempt to satisfy the audience's imagination of middle-class working life. When Andy is invited to become the CFO of her male friend Tan's company, her arrival generates much discussion among the company's employees. In figure 1, as she enters the company, the camera first closes up to her feet in high heels. In this shot, her female identity is firstly emphasized, rather than her professional status.

Meanwhile, in the background, the employees continue to discuss,

Figure 1

Employee 1: I heard she is very beautiful. The boss gives her this position, could there be something…?

Employee 2: You mean she has some special "relationship" with the boss?

Employee 1: Chief Financial Officer, everything in the company is under her control, if it wasn't for that kind of "relationship", would the boss be comfortable with a woman in that position?

There are many questions about a woman in an executive position when Andy has not demonstrated her professional talents. Her past achievements can all be ignored, while her current position is linked to her appearance and the help of her male friends. Hence, Ely et al. (2013) propose the Second-Generation Gender Bias, the theory suggests that women's pursuit of career achievements is influenced by social evaluation and that invisible gender stereotypes play a subtle and pervasive role, allowing women to internalise this role unconsciously and in turn regulate their behaviour and endeavour to maintain a mainstream feminine representation so that they do not break with

tradition and become subject to social prejudice and stigma. These biases create a context that women are advised to "take a role to accommodate family" and "excluded from consideration for key positions", all these situations reflect the disadvantaged position of women in the workplace (Ely et al., 2013, p.1). Andy is thought to have "special relationship" with male, which indicates the stereotyped thinking that women in high positions are often dependent on men or seen as a threat to men's power. This also shows when Andy appears in the car park in a luxury car, Qu is shocked and thinks she must be someone's mistress, she says "she looks so rich, she must be someone's mistress." When Qu knows Andy has a relationship with financial magnate Tan, she insists that Andy must be Tan's mistress and that her luxury car is a gift from Tan.

Qu: I saw her in the garage yesterday, driving a Porsche, she must have some rich background, I asked my friend to do some research for me and guess what? The holder of the car was really not her, it belonged to a rich man. Think about it, is there anything suspicious about this thing?

Qiu: What's suspicious?

Qu: You don't know this? The man gives his car to the woman for free, she must be his mistress.

Andy then appears behind her.

Qu: Don't pretend, you heard me talking about you right? you are quite calm, but unfortunately, you think some people hide you here and no one knows you are a mistress? Andy just keeps quiet and does not want to explain.

On the one hand, the drama exaggerates the vulnerability of women in the workplace. On the other hand, there is still a strong reliance on men to solve women's

workplace problems, and their career development is also closely linked to male support, which is still a stereotype and a denial of independent professional women.

The new generation of intellectual women who grew up during the reform and opening-up period is often referred to as "strong women", most of whom come from the modern white-collar class and are more concerned with developing themselves independently rather than living in reliance men (Yan, 2012). They are primarily on the boundary between the upper class and the new middle class, and in the series, this group is represented mainly by Andy. When she shows the excellent educational background and working ability, she is often called a "strong woman" by people around her. Liu (2007) claimed that the word "strong woman" implies the dilemma of women's gender role identity under the patriarchal culture. The subject of the word is "woman" and the emphasis is on "strong". She is different from the traditional feminine weak, single thought, economic dependence on the subordinate position of men, but shows opposite characteristics (Yan, 2012). On the one hand, it suggests that independence, responsibility, and career success are usually associated with traditional male values. Moreover, the emphasised gender role makes this word indicate a female quest for traditionally masculine values and further internalises stereotyped femininity such as gentleness and housewife as femininity. Women who are regarded as "strong women" are generally not recognised by traditional Chinese cultural concepts. In this drama, Andy is considered a "she-devil" when staff fall ill working overtime, her abilities and talents overshadowed by her gender identity in the public eye. On the other hand, the

word reveals that "strong" has always been associated with the control of power in a patriarchal society, either controlled or supported, and to some extent never achieved gender independence and separation from the male world. Although Andy is in a significant corporate position, her male friend Tan is always there to help and support her in both work and life.

Concomitantly, these "masculine women", despite their career successes, are stereotyped into an identity that "of a woman left alone by widowhood or a failed relationship" (Yang, 2020, p.12). The success of a career and the CFO are closely associated with masculinity, and when undertaken by a woman, her traditional femininity is eliminated and thus considered abnormal. Moreover, "strong women" are often perceived as having a poor work-life balance and having perceived barriers to family and social roles (Liu, 2012). This perception is further exacerbated by Andy's role representation, which sees her devoting all her energy and time to work to escape from unhappy family life. In the TV series, a dialogue is used to describe Andy, "She is afraid of intimacy and dependence, like a lonely ghost, and the only thing that makes her feel safe is her work." Along with this line, the scene in the clip showing Andy at work with melancholy music, it seems to emphasise her "lonely" feature. In a male-dominated society, the "strong woman" challenges the patriarchal system's social order and traditional concepts. Therefore, in order to maintain the dominant position of men, such women cannot be regarded as the normal binary classification and positioning group, so the mainstream social culture excluded them with specific titles.

Furthermore, Gill (2017, p.606) notes the post-feminist features are widely spread and reinforced in popular culture and is increasingly relies on "confidence, resilience and positive mental attitude" which is often considered as "right". These features are also presented by the female character, Qiu. When she loses her job due to sexual harassment, she encourages herself by loudly reading the motivational books.

Figure 2

Figure 3

In figure 2, Qiu's father takes her to the bookstore to buy books, which were categorised as "success books", and he repeatedly stresses that "you must have faith, and you must have confidence in yourself". In figure 3, Qiu returns home and watches

the "success video", she keeps shouting with the lecturer's "confidence-boosting declarations" and tries to increase confidence through this way. In this clip, confidence has already become a "technology of the self that invites girls and women to work on themselves" (Gill and Orgad, 2015, p.324). At the same time, confidence has become the new way for middle-class women to deal with workplace issues, and it seems that all these inequalities can be solved by increasing women's self-confidence (Gill and Orgad, 2015). However, the problem is that "for women to gain confidence they need continuously to work on manufacturing it through self-governance and self-improvement" (Gill and Orgad, 2015, p.332). Furthermore, what makes this self-management ultimately meaningful is the recognition that satisfies the male gaze in the patriarchal culture. In short, the confidence culture transforms feminism into neoliberal post-feminism that is "complicit with rather than critical of patriarchal capitalism" (Gill and Orgad, 2015, p.342). In the next part, this presentation of female self-governance and the male gaze will be discussed.

4.3 Women in the Gender Relationships

In this part, it will also discuss the post-feminist characteristics reflected in these TV series. This TV series mainly focuses on affluent or elite women and are typically heteronormative. The crisis in the family and the workplace under the patriarchal discourse mostly reflects the restrictions imposed on women by the socio-cultural context of the external society, while issues such as women's self-identity process also reflect their contemporary dilemmas. Rofel (2007, p.3) points out that Chinese social

development has brought a new model of human personality, and the core of this model is "the individual who operates through sexual, material, and affective self-interest." Based on the model, Rofel (2007, p.118) regards consumption as a "post-socialist technology" of becoming "the self", especially for young women who are often defined as "the ultimate consumer". Hence, this women's self-construction process expressed as consumer behaviours is closely linked to the post-feminist culture influenced by the globalised neoliberal economy. Women's self-identity is often related to their physical appearance, social status, and romantic relationships.

One of the crucial aspects of the series is its setting in Shanghai, as a cosmopolitan city, the emphasis on this setting may "run the risk of deflecting attention from the alienation and diminished citizenship of single women who exist in a variety of class categories and geographical locations" (Negra, 2004, p.23). The female characters in the drama live in Shanghai, where has rapid economic development and a wide gap between the rich and the poor, their values and aesthetic senses are strongly influenced by the commercial society. The cult of consumption, appearance, wealth, and classism are all reflected in this TV series. The daily consumption of urban white-collar elites in the drama reflects that urban woman is captivated by brand consumption and blindly follow the life concept of high consumption. The typical representation of contemporary socio-cultural influence is the dilemma of beauty pursuit, where women are easily influenced to adjust their aesthetic expectations according to mainstream standards in popular discourse. This process also leads to an increase in class

discrimination and further surveillance of female appearance. In *Ode to Joy*, this concertation on appearance is mainly represented by Fan. She examines her appearance in the mirror many times, even when she first appears. In this clip, the introduction to Fan is accompanied by the shot of her dressing process. The narrator says, "Fan, thirty years old, is human resource management in a foreign company. She is a righteous person and is determined to marry a rich man. But those who like her don't have money, and those who have money don't care about her. She has gone from a beauty to a leftover woman, so she can only continue to work hard on the dating way." In figure 4, Fan confidently looks at her reflection in the mirror and says, "I have good looks, good body, and good taste. You deserve me." Similarly, this self-surveillance is also reflected in urban women's demands for perfect bodies.

Figure 4

Fan: I envy you guys for eating without gaining weight! After 30, you'll gain weight even if you drink water. I used to be a good eater, but when I knew I shouldn't, it was hard to stop.

Guan: It's ok, I often do belly dancing, which burns a lot of calories.

Fan: Look at me, I stopped after only half a bowl, why? I dare not eat too much, not even a single meal. So sad! Women rely on their natural talent until they are 30, but

after that, they have to work hard to look good.

Guan: But I have nothing, I've always been like an ugly duckling.

Fan: You're wrong. That's because you didn't work hard before. Look at you now, you've taken off your glasses and dressed differently. You're a new woman! You are the kind of girl who is quiet, gentle and makes people want to get closer.

Nowadays, the task of the single girl is to "embody heterosexuality through the disciplined use of makeup, clothing, exercise, and cosmetic surgery, linking femininity, consumer culture and heterosexuality" (Radner, 1999, p.15). Hence, in Fan's view, Guan's femininity "quiet and gentle" is sexually attractive. The TV series has described all their love stories, among which Fan and Guan both expect to get a better life through male partners, they connect the pursuit of romantic love to male economic conditions. Smith (1972, p.14) claims that female characters "revolves around her physical attraction and the mating games she plays with the male characters." In this context, *Ode to Joy* also reflects this tendency, and it shows that how women transform themselves to "embody the currently valorised formation of beauty and "soft" femininity" (Lewis et al., 2016, p.277). The television series exemplifies that even as times progress, long-standing traditional notions of mate selection persist, and these discriminatory labels continue to uphold this heterosexual male domination. Fan has always paid much attention to her appearance, taking her beauty and body as the condition to find a rich partner. Her beauty standard embodies patriarchal discourse, and her appearance is also designed to gain men's approval. Drawing upon Foucault's view of the panopticon prison metaphor, Richardson and Wearing (2014, p.85) cited

that it is a gaze which "each individual under its weight will end by interiorising to the point that he is his overseer, each individual thus exercising this surveillance over, and against himself." Bartky (1990, p.80) explains the panoptical gaze imposed on women who regularly check their appearance like "inmate of the panopticon, a self-policing subject, a self-committed to a relentless, self-surveillance. This self-surveillance is a form of obedience to patriarchy." Then, this internalised panopticon and patriarchal culture reveal that post-feminism presents "a shift in the way that power operates: from an external, male judging gaze to a self-policing, narcissistic gaze . . . one in which the objectifying male gaze is internalised to form a new disciplinary regime" (Gill, 2007, p.151).

As Roberts (2007, p.229) suggests that, capitalism produces femininity through consumer forms, like fashion and cosmetics, thus commodifying the female body and reproductive labour, then post-feminist discourses change it and redefine a model of "feminine identity and 'empowerment' organised around consumption." Relatedly, in this media context, "discourses having to do with women's geographic, professional, and perhaps most particularly sexual freedom are effectively harnessed to individualism and consumerism" (Tasker and Negra 2005, p.107). It has discussed the "strong women" under male-dominant discourse in the second part. According to Yan (2012), in Chinese heteronormative masculine discourse, men often emotionally avoid or even reject the "strong woman", essentially as a way of asserting male dominance and hegemony.

Figure 5

Figure 6

Therefore, when these women choose marriage partner, they also exclude most men who are inferior to them and look for men who are more superior. This is reflected when Fan looks at the mirror and says, "You deserve the best one" (Figure 5). The camera first shots the various clothes and shoes displayed in her room, highlighting her pursuit of material life (Figure 6). For her, material life and love are closely intertwined, and her reasons for choosing a marriage partner are more about satisfying her pursuit of material life. Yan's research reveals that, under the rule of traditional Chinese patriarchy, men and women usually follow an opposite mating gradient, that is, men tend to choose women who are inferior to them, while women tend to choose partners

who are stronger than them. This traditional view of marriage and the sense of male supremacy has given these women a new label, "leftover women", which means unmarried women who are "well-educated, highly paid, independent, and over the age of 27" (Zhang, 2020, p.37). This word first appeared in 2007, and was officially defined by the All-China Women's Federation. Leftover woman is defined in the context of the stigmatisation of singleness, and the word emphasises more on the autonomous choice that does not conform "the dominant ideology of Chinese social relations pertaining to marriage and motherhood" (Zhang, 2020, p.37).

As Richardson and Wearing (2014, p.65) sums up, these urban female TV series exemplify one of post-feminist most characteristic features, "a contradictory articulation of progressive and regressive elements of gendered identities and identifications played out against a lush backdrop of conspicuous consumption." It is noticeable that wide range of contemporary female figures appearing in the TV series, "group of women who are notably contradictory in their appeal as powerful action heroines, CEOs, working girls…above all, women fully at home in consumer culture" (Brunsdon and Spigel, 2008, p.2). The middle-class is usually regarded as the major power of consumption, while the power of middle-class women as consumers is highlighted. Under the influence of the neoliberal ideology brought about by the pattern of capitalist globalisation, the process of reforming China's social system has given birth to a large number of "middle-class" and "white collar" groups in the cities (Wang, 2016, p.210). With the adjustment of social structure, the acceleration of urbanisation

process and the continuous innovation of information technology, the new middle class

has gradually developed. Most of them are highly educated, have an attractive

appearance, and have high expectations and imagination for their white-collar status

(Wang, 2016).

Nevertheless, the middle class covers a wide range (annual household income of

60,000 to 500,000 yuan) and the majority of it increasingly constructs the large "new

poor"' class in China today (Wang, 2016). "New poor" is a product of contemporary

economic life's transformation, where they hold no capital goods and are subjected to

the double pressure of a social context with narrow upward mobility and a consumer

society that is constantly attracted by the desire to shop for luxury consumer goods

(Wang, 2014). In light of this context, Fan could be a typical example of "new poor",

her "poor" mainly comes from two aspects. First of all, the increasing solidification of

social classes, her abilities in many cases cannot break through the class barriers, and

the economic gap brought about by income becomes the main difficulty for her to enter

the upper class. At the same time, her family put much pressure on her life and mental

stress. Secondly, the middle class, which makes up a large proportion of the social

population is increasingly becoming the main target of consumer society. The material

world brings more powerlessness and frustration to her as she seeks both group identity

and her spiritual comfort.

From a transnational perspective, Yang (2020, p.1) coins a new term "consumerist

pseudo-feminism" for the Chinese equivalent of post-feminism. It refers to subjects who "middle-class women shaped by the values and practices of consumption in the neo-liberal economy", and they rely on ideologies of "the freedom of choice, self-betterment, and girl power" (Yang, 2020, p.2). After graduating from university, Fan, Qiu and Guan all left for the first-tier cities with the expectations of their families and the desire to move up the upper class. They represent a new middle-class group that aspires to achieve both career and marital rewards through their efforts, but they are also under the double pressure of the social context with narrow channels for advancement and the consumerist desire to buy luxury goods. In the series, Fan is willing to spend money on replica luxury goods even though she lives in poverty. Consumption has become a set of socially significant symbols, and the main purpose of pursuing famous brands is not its use value, but the satisfaction and psychological fantasy of entering the upper society experienced in buying and using. This behaviour suggests a re-coding of the relationship between man and self and man and the world by social rights (Liu, 2012). The "new poor" women suffer from economic and psychological hardship, and the chronic psychological stress and anxiety bring identity problems.

Figure 7

For example, in figure 7, when Fan receives a real designer bag from a rich wooer, she smells it and says, "it smells good". The materialised symbols brought about by consumer society form the meaningful norms that the female white-collar community potentially identifies with and adheres to and domesticate them mentally and behaviourally. Based on that, Chinese middle-class women have lower economic and social resources but higher consumption levels (Yang, 2020), reflecting their tendency to prioritise family and marriage and thus financial dependence on men rather than their own career development. Because "the glass ceiling of a career is foreseeable", professional women tend to focus more on the family and find a man who holds the socio-economic resources to maintain a certain level of consumption and middle-class status (Yang, 2020, p.5). In this process, "femininity is commodified in the form of the capital to be accrued from body/beauty, thus enhancing the asymmetrical power relation between sexes" (Yang, 2020, p.5).

In feminist criticism, Mulvey's gaze theory has been influential on film and

television works, she claims that woman stands in patriarchal culture as a "signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer, not maker, of meaning" (Mulvey, 1975, p.59). In her argument, women are looked at and displayed with "their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact", while men are always the bearer of the look and active in the erotic look (Mulvey, 1975, p.63). For instance, the shot shows Fan is changing her clothes, the camera directly focuses on her naked legs with her petticoat falls slowly to the floor (Figure 8).

Figure 8

The gaze is not just about looking, and it also implies a psychological power relationship in which the gazer takes precedence over the object being gazed. Berger (1972) also claims that men looking at women, and women looking at themselves being looked at not only determines the relationship between the majority of men and women, but also governs the relationship between women and themselves. Hence, in the Chinese cultural context, women are accustomed to starting from the patriarchal

discourse's demands and to recognise and regulate themselves in this process of being looked at. In this clip, all the sexual elements Fan displays represent her attempting to make herself more attractive to men. And this process not only places her in a passive position in gender relations, but is also the presentation of the patriarchal gaze. Thus, the power relationship of the gaze is reflected in the drama, mainly in the sexy features presented by the female characters' costumes and the passive position in their romantic relationships.

Although the TV series portrays diverse and contemporary women's representations, they are still affected by economic and socio-cultural influences, and the restrictions of traditional patriarchal culture. The drama also reflects that contemporary woman still faces difficulties in the workplace, family bearing, and self-identity in gender relationships. Furthermore, after showing the many dilemmas and stereotypes female characters face, the TV series does not offer realistic and viable solutions. Meanwhile, guided by national policy, these discussions are only superficial presented and discussed, and even reinforce the stereotypes of women to some extent.

5. Conclusion

Ode to Joy is a female urban television drama representing contemporary Chinese women's living difficulties. The pressure of family responsibilities, the dilemma of workplace life and the expectation of a romantic relationship all reflected the dual crisis of living space and spiritual space, and the deep anxiety and exhaustion of urban women. Some Chinese scholars have pointed out the feminist character of this drama. Indeed, part of the drama shows the development of contemporary female consciousness, but there are still limitations in the end. Its social roles are still dominated by male discourse, and female characters' life centre does not leave love and marriage. Women's autonomous consciousness is suppressed and ignored in patriarchal discourse narration. Moreover, this TV series also reflects that traditional values and gender stereotypes in China have changed with the social development, but in essence they still restrict the development of female representation and reflect the dilemmas faced by women.

Although the TV series takes five women as the protagonists and tells the story of their struggle in the metropolis, they all rely on or even depend on the male power in different aspects, presenting the concept of male status and male-dominated thoughts. Firstly, it investigated the relationship between women and family, especially the influence of traditional Chinese family values. Under this context, they face the dual pressure of independent professional women's survival and parents' urging marriage. In the second part, it discussed the women in the workplace. The series shows that successful career women group in the traditional male position is often seen as "strong

women" in the male discourse and patriarchal society. The word carries more negative meanings while affirming and praising women, and still expresses sexism and prejudice against women. The women's representation in TV dramas breaks the women's traditional image while still facing many dilemmas regarding the heterosexual male hegemony of marriage and family. The third part focuses on the changes of female representation in the neoliberal economy and post-feminist culture's popularity. In this context, women not only face the temptation of consumerism, but also internalise patriarchal discourses in the process of self-surveillance. By analysing the specific female characters' dialogues and experiences, in connection with the way *Ode to Joy* reflects the socio-cultural context in reality, this thesis has explored the women's representation in contemporary TV series and their dilemmas around the three themes of family, workplace and gender relations. Nevertheless, rather than seeing these dramas as failed representations of femininity, it might be more productive to consider them a potential force for transforming stereotypical female representation in dominant popular culture.

5.1 Limitations

There still exist some limitations that the research can be improved. Firstly, the study only focuses on one TV series *Ode to Joy*. Although it is a widely discussed and representative work, five years have passed and many new works have appeared on the market. The rapid development of the Internet has also brought more changes to women's representation, and the results of this study cannot be regarded as a complete

representation of contemporary women. Secondly, the subject of this research is limited, as there is more than one genre of contemporary female TV series, and women's representations are more diverse and complex. Moreover, the TV series cannot completely reflect reality, and it is more about reflecting contemporary popular culture and socio-cultural context. Thirdly, due to the specific themes selected and class limitations, the female groups concerned by this research are also limited. It mainly focuses on contemporary urban women's lives and ignores the representation of some broader groups such as rural women. Finally, this study mainly focuses on the selected TV series and the female representations and lacks further research about the audience's reflection. Hence, for further research, besides *Ode to Joy*, researching on other female television dramas may make the findings more diverse and comprehensive. It would also be helpful to conduct a survey or interview with the audience of these TV series for investigating how they perceive the experiences of the female characters in the series and combine them with their experiences to make the research more representative and practical.

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