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Post/Feminist Impulses: Neoliberal Ideology and Class Politics in Annie Wang's *The People's Republic of Desire* (2006)

By Kelly Yin Nga Tse¹

Abstract

This paper critically examines post/feminist imperatives in relation to neoliberal ethos and class dynamics in *The People's Republic of Desire* (2006) by transnational Chinese women writer, Annie Wang (b. 1972). While the novel positions itself as a transnational satire of the Western-styled consumptive furor in post-socialist China, its textual focus on a class-based commodity culture demands a critical consideration of its neoliberal investments. In probing Wang's text, this paper adopts a feminist reading that attends to how neoliberal ideology and class politics operate together to corroborate a postfeminist stance. The awareness of feminist ethics notwithstanding, the text's overall postfeminist disposition and the attendant class purview work to depoliticize its expressed intent. The tension between feminism and postfeminism eventually translates into that between the local and the global. That the discursive polarization of China and the West is implicitly inscribed in the denouement also registers the limits of the novel's transnational engagement.

Keywords: Feminism and Postfeminism, Neoliberalism, Class

A transnational Chinese women writer, Annie Wang hails from a middle-class background and possesses "flexible citizenship" and global mobility (Ong, 1999:6). As Arif Dirlik underscores, the rise of global capitalism is attended by the rise of a "transnational capitalist class," which is responsible for the management of global "institutional, legal, and cultural" sectors (2006:167). This transnational class includes social groups such as "third world" intellectuals and cultural producers in a postcolonial context (Dirlik, 1997: 155). As a transnational professional, Wang had working experience in "high-tech companies" in Silicon Valley, *The Washington Post's* bureau in Beijing and the US Department of State (*Washington Post*, 2016). Insofar as she names herself "a bobo, a bourgeois bohemian," Wang is of a privileged class that benefits from the globalization of capital (Vongs, 2006), and growing up among "the higher echelons" of China, she had friends from the government elite (Crampton, 2001). With a liberal father who was a senior journalist, Wang regards herself and her two sisters, identified as "the Chinese Brontë sisters," as intellectuals who relish "high culture and non-commercial art" (Kim, 2012). In interviews, Wang fashioned an image of her younger self as a bourgeoisie bad girl, "a misfit in China" who was "too independent-thinking and opinionated" (Random House, 2012). Deemed by her Beijing neighbours as "too wild, too direct, too rebellious, too uncouth," the writer did not act "the Chinese way" nor possess "the good traditional manners expected of a Chinese girl" (ibid). A bourgeois rebel in a reticent Chinese

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society, Wang the “outcast” “naturally [felt] closer to Western culture:”

In early 1980s when most Chinese had never heard of the Swan songs, or the Nutcracker, my father took me and my sisters to see ballet, modern dance by foreign troupes, opera. I was totally fascinated with the bourgeois. I became more familiar with Beatles songs than revolutionary songs. Our idols were James Bond and John Lennon instead of Chinese revolutionary martyrs Dong Cuirui or Lei Feng. I traded newly available translations of *On the Road*, *The Birth of Tragedy*, *[The] Catcher in the Rye*, and *The Diary of Anne Frank*, and Michael Jackson and Madonna tapes with my friends. My dream was to get a college degree from a famous American school
(ibid)

Wang’s childhood fascination with the bourgeois and the West lured her into the University of California, Berkeley,² thus fulfilling her American dream (*Washington Post*, 2016). This authorial narrative about the Chinese middle-class and its access to global and Western culture reverberates with those of the heroines in *The People’s Republic of Desire*.

Identifying herself as a “women’s rights activist” alongside other descriptors, Wang is not equivocal about her political sympathy for women (Chinese Culture Net, 2016). This avowed interest in feminism echoes that of her father who, according to Wang, was “on the vanguard of the feminist movement” in the early Chinese reform era (ibid). Remarkably, Wang’s authorial positioning calls forth the controversial group of post-seventies Chinese female writers such as Wei Hui and Mian Mian who go by various appellations: “beauty writers,” “glam lit writers” and “bad-girl writers” (Yang, 2011: 2; Chan, 2010: 53). On the one hand, their portrayal of exuberant female sexuality in consumerist urban spaces seemed to initiate a unique brand of post-Mao Chinese feminism through a sexual revolution that set the Chinese and global literary markets astir in the 1990s. On the other hand, their espousal of sexual agency and individual choice in a class-based neoliberal rhetoric chimes with postfeminist ideology in Euro-America. As Sheldon H. Lu holds, the phenomenon of “beauty writers” constitutes not only the “politics of liberation and excess” in post-socialist China, but also the “logic of cultural commercialization” in a global capitalist milieu (2007:54). Given Wang’s interest in women’s rights, how is the feminist-postfeminist dichotomy played out in her text? How do the neoliberal logic and class interests intersect with its transnational critique?

As a feminist reading, this paper argues that despite its feminist consciousness of class inequality, *The People’s Republic of Desire* ultimately aligns with postfeminist ethos, neoliberal ideology and its restrictive class politics. A transnational commentary on China’s pursuit of Western-inspired globalization, the novel ironically depoliticizes its professed pedagogy with the espousal of neoliberal values. Eventually, the tension between feminism and postfeminism translates into that between the local and the global. The tacit inscription of the discursive divide between China and the West in the finale also exposes the limits of the novel’s transnational engagement.

It is instructive to begin by elucidating the entwined discourses of postfeminism and neoliberalism, whose provenance lies in Euro-America. As Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra define, postfeminism entails “a set of assumptions, widely disseminated within popular media forms, having to do with the ‘pastness’ of feminism, whether that supposed pastness is merely noted,

² The term, “the West,” is understood as a discursive construct in this article.

mourned, or celebrated” (2007:1). In a more emphatic vein, Angela McRobbie affiliates the postfeminist paradigm with “anti-feminist sentiments,” and contends that the negation of feminism is often “amply rewarded with the promise of freedom and independence, most apparent through wage-earning capacity, which also functions symbolically, as a mark of respectability, citizenship and entitlement” (2009:1-2). Importantly, postfeminism as a cultural phenomenon shares ideological affinity with neoliberalism as an economic practice. As David Harvey explicates, neoliberalism “proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade” (2005:2). In Wendy Brown’s formulation, neoliberalism “normatively constructs and interpellates individuals as entrepreneurial actors in every sphere of life” and “figures individuals as rational, calculating creatures whose moral autonomy is measured by their capacity for ‘self-care’” (2005:42).

In their comparative exegesis, Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff argue that both postfeminist and neoliberal discourses foreground the primacy of “individualism” and often repudiate “notions of the social or political” (2011:7). Besides, like the “active, freely choosing, self-reinventing” postfeminist subject, the neoliberal citizen is “autonomous, calculating, self-regulating” (ibid). Since it is often women who are “called on to self-manage, to self-discipline,” the critics wonder whether neoliberalism is not “always already gendered” with women being its “ideal subjects” (ibid). In postfeminist chick lit such as Helen Fielding’s *Bridget Jones’ Diary* (1996) and Candace Bushnell’s *Sex and the City* (1996),³ neoliberal market rationality figures as a reigning ideology. Sexually confident and financially assertive, heroines in postfeminist writing endorse the individualistic rhetoric of “empowerment” and “choice” in a consumptive culture and stay away from feminism as a social struggle (McRobbie, 2009:1, 11). The prioritization of the individual over the social and the valorization of a self-governing and self-seeking subjectivity are echoed in Wang’s text.

That Wang incorporates Western conventions of postfeminist writing in a novel set in post-socialist China is not unfathomable granted her transnational exposure to Euro-American culture and the global flows of gender epistemologies. In importing postfeminist elements from a Euro-American frame to a Chinese context, the question of cultural specificity assumes particular prominence. In her exegesis of Wang’s text through the generic lens of chick lit, Wenche Ommundsen argues that chick lit from localities outside North America embodies “what Kwame Anthony Appiah has dubbed the ‘slogan’ of cosmopolitanism: ‘universality plus difference’” (2011:111). This slogan speaks to Wang’s narrative, which, while signaling the globalizing phenomenon of postfeminist culture, also registers the local particularity of post-socialist China in a global neoliberal landscape. Specifically, with its socio-political context, post-socialist China problematizes a neat distinction between feminism and postfeminism. As Mayfair Yang notes, the epoch of Mao was an epoch of “gender erasure” (1999:35-67). Defying submissive and docile forms of pre-socialist Chinese femininity, the socialist erasure of sexual difference conflated gender sameness with gender egalitarianism. This Maoist state discourse of “women’s liberation” is problematic because, as Chinese feminist Dai Jinhua contends, the category of “the liberated woman” was defined and dictated by “revolutionary (male) norms” (2002:99-150). Reacting against this Maoist state discourse, the post-Mao era might be designated as an era of “gender difference” (Yang, 1999:35-67). The resurgence of femininity, to which Wang’s novel attests, is perceived as a marker of modernity and a new form of “female liberation.” Insofar as it contests

³ The two commercially successful books are often hailed as the inaugurating the postfeminist chick lit formula (Ferris and Young, 2006).

the patriarchal presumptions of the Mao years, the revival of femininity in the wake of Mao might be construed as “feminist.” Yet this mode of “feminist” sexual liberation is also entangled with a neoliberal logic that commodifies sexual difference as it valorizes individual consumerist agency over collective social solidarity, a defining feature of postfeminist culture. As Wang Hui specifies, the year of 1989, which witnessed not only the Tiananmen movement in China,⁴ but also the disintegration of the Soviet bloc in the world theatre, initiated the global domination of neoliberalism (2009:19). In the aftermath of Tiananmen, Chinese leaders were convinced that “more rapid growth and opening” were crucial for state legitimization and thus turned to vigorous marketization (Vogel, 2011:665). The unique combination of a local post-socialist context and a global neoliberal climate thus complicates the debate about feminism and postfeminism in the case of China. The friction between the two divergent impulses is further sharpened by class dynamics in Wang’s text.

While the novel may have a transnational agenda of picking apart the consumerist mania in post-socialist China, its market imperative has been rather unambiguous since its inception. With a column to book trajectory that echoes those of Fielding’s and Bushnell’s⁵, Wang’s novel initially appeared as a popular lifestyle column in *The South China Morning Post*, a Hong Kong daily, and was then turned into a best-selling book published by HarperCollins in the West (Smith, 2008). From the outset, the text has been informed by market forces. It is perhaps not a coincidence that the “About the Author” page includes a picture of Wang posing with self-possession in a fashionably-designed cheongsam. Literally creating a self-image of a marketable “China doll,” Wang’s photo recalls the popular postfeminist practice of Chinese “beauty writers” who slip glistening self-portraits in their works (Yang, 2011:24). In the novel’s preface, Wang reveals how she transforms from a serious intellectual to a frivolous player, perhaps not unlike the Chinese hooligan writer, Wang Shuo.⁶

There was a time when I was heavy-hearted, all for the sake of writing, metaphysics, and the future of Chinese civilization. Who did I think I was? Only later did I understand how foolish I was. Now, I’m drunk with reality. No more a serious, obstinate, foolish intellectual. I want to be free-falling, free-falling with a China that is no longer homely. [...]
After all, aren’t we the new breed? Aren’t we young? Aren’t we lonely modern souls? Don’t we deserve to be happy and carefree? Don’t we need a little fun? So let’s play. After all, we have always been good at games
(Wang, 2006:xii)

This prefatory remark, which activates an anti-intellectual ethos of playfulness, provides an analytic frame with which to interpret the novel. “Play” is indeed the operative term in Wang’s narrative, which pertains to the sense of frippery and frivolity frequently attributed to postfeminist works. This credo of playfulness, however, undermines the novel’s feminist pedagogical potentials.

Given the transnational terrain she inhabits, Wang enacts the role of a cultural translator, a

⁴ The Tiananmen movement refers to the student-initiated democracy movement in Beijing in 1989.

⁵ Fielding’s *Bridget Jones’s Diary* and Bushnell’s *Sex and the City* appeared as newspaper columns in *The Independent* and *The New York Observer* respectively before being turned into books (Smith, 2008).

⁶ Wang Shuo (b. 1958) is a Chinese writer and cultural icon. His popular catchword is “wan’r (play).” Enamored of the “Wang Shuo phenomenon,” urbanites relish greeting each other with the question: “What are you playing at lately?” (Jing, 1996:262).

role that is not without risks. In another prefatory comment, Wang expounds on her trans-Pacific trajectory as a journalist-writer:

I have chosen to lead this life – going back and forth between East and West, China and the United States. I feel like a migratory bird traveling across the globe with the changing seasons. For what? Stories, perhaps. In 2000, I gave up my job in Silicon Valley when “information technology,” “Internet,” “initial public offering,” and “venture capital” were the hottest concepts in the world. I went back to China looking for interesting stories for the *Washington Post*. I told myself that I am a story collector of the poor, not the rich
(Wang, 2006:ix-x)

Wang here links her transnational shuttling between the Pacific coasts to the enterprise of compiling Chinese stories for Western readers, an enterprise resonating with that of her narrator, Niuniu, a twenty-something returnee (*haigui* or its homophone, “sea turtle”), who is a journalist for the English newspaper, *World News Agency*, at its Beijing office, garnering Chinese stories for a global reading public (Wang, 2006:57). While the author aspires to be a “story collector of the poor,” her novel ironically enacts the reverse by collecting mostly stories of rich Chinese. In relating her profession as a journalist, Wang, perhaps unbeknownst to herself, raises the spectre of a politics of knowledge production in cross-cultural encounters: China the cultural other is replete with fascinating stories *for* readers of the *Washington Post*, the leading American paper. This covert discursive divide between China and the West alerts us to the potential operation of unequal power dynamics in the transnational space, within which the novel is situated.

Indeed, the space of transnational circulation is an ambiguous space. Reading Wang’s novel as a negotiation of transnational identity under the rubric of Asian American writing, Binbin Fu also notes that “transnational writing is implicated in the late capitalism’s partnership with and control over global cultural production” (2015:56). As with her first English novel, *Lili: A Novel of Tiananmen* (2001), *The People’s Republic of Desire* is seasoned with Chinese adages, idioms and sayings in *pinyin*,⁷ which may enhance “authenticity,” magnify “Chineseness,” and boost the cultural appeal of the narrative in a global multicultural market. These italicized lexical terms are explained in the text and elaborated in a list of “Popular Phrases” succeeding the snippet-like chapters. This rhetorical design is reflective of Wang’s attempt to render her “native” culture accessible for the global reading public. Such a rhetorical arrangement, however, also recalls the employment of glossaries for explaining transliterated terms in some Asian diasporic literature in Euro-America, which for Sheng-mei Ma, carries Orientalist impulses (2011:152). In this common rhetorical “conjunction,” Ma argues, each linguistic challenge “resembles a mini-awakening, leading to the narrative denouement or the enlightenment over the uncharted virgin land in the East (ibid). Conceivably, as Wang assumes the transnational position of a cultural explicator, she may unwittingly morph into a cultural exporter who thrives on her “native” culture. From this perspective, the attempt at presenting linguistic hurdles (*recognized* as Chinese culture) and then overcoming them by making them transparent, translucent and hence, consumable (*legible* by the West), may indicate embroilment in the global market. The problematic of recognition and legibility again shows the divided nature of the transnational terrain.

Anchored in a complex transnational space, Wang’s novel sets out to elucidate through a gendered lens how post-socialist China is a historically amnesic country that embraces the logic

⁷ *Pinyin* is a system of Romanization used on the Chinese Mainland.

of capitalist economy. As Wang bemoans, “No one remembers what happened at Tiananmen Square in 1989. Nor are they concerned with China’s political future. Money and status rule the day” (2006:x). In this distinctive neoliberal climate, Beijing is the city of westernized “bad-girl” professional elite of middle or upper-middle classes or what Dirlik identifies as the transnational capitalist class (1997:155). Akin to *Sex and the City*, the novel features four high-powered female characters.⁸ Niuniu the American-born and China-bred narrator studies at an American university and returns to China to seek refuge from her cultural roots upon being deserted by her Chinese-American lover. She is among the “overseas returnees who come back with advanced degrees, westernized lifestyle, and nice jobs” (2006:57). Since China’s economic reforms, “more than a million students” have studied overseas (Louie, 2013:48). Though the drift does not subside, a growing number of them have returned to the country because of government incentives in abating the “brain drain” (ibid).⁹ A Western-trained journalist, Niuniu partakes in a post-socialist Beijing where her cosmopolitan female friends celebrate their newly found economic and sexual freedom. The bold and brash Bei Bei, who has an adulterous husband and takes young gigolos as her lovers, is the chief executive of an entertainment company. Lulu, a seductive and winsome fashion magazine editor and an aspiring writer struggles to redefine herself as her relationship with a France-educated Chinese artist turns sour. The Oxford-educated Hong Konger, CC, a business manager in the field of international public relations, is a returnee from England whose Welsh boyfriend forsakes her for another Chinese girl. From this brief account, it is conspicuous that Wang’s female characters reverberate with their middle-class counterparts in Euro-American postfeminist writing. These new women, who “hold up half of the sky” as they claim their social presence in the post-socialist Chinese public sphere, all have fraught or failed heterosexual relationships. In line with heroines in postfeminist work, they embrace global and Western capital. Enamored with a commodity culture in a neoliberal milieu, theirs seems to be a generation oblivious to China’s historical past and indifferent to its political future.

As explained earlier, inasmuch as female sexuality was repressed in Mao’s China, the return of the repressed in Wang’s post-Mao China may signify a form of feminist emancipation. The portrayal of assertive femininities also exorcises the Orientalist apparitions of obedient and obsequious Chinese women.¹⁰ This is evident when an American expatriate is taken aback by how Chinese women are no longer passive or submissive: “Am I mistaken? Isn’t this a paternalistic society based on Confucianism? Not long ago, women still had bound feet, but look at this! Girls are wearing colorful sandals, with toenails painted a rainbow of colors, sexy, liberal, and seductive” (2006:74). As the novel’s playful title intimates, *The People’s Republic of Desire* explores the PRC’s transformation into a stupendous desiring machine. Lisa Rofel captures this general structure of desire thus:

A sea-change has swept through China in the last fifteen years: to replace socialist experimentation with the “universal human nature” imagined as the essential ingredient of cosmopolitan worldliness. This model of human nature has the desiring subject at its core: the individual who operates through sexual, material, and affective self-interest. [...] “Desire” is a key cultural practice in which both the government and its citizens reconfigure their relationship to the postsocialist

⁸ This formula also applies to the film, *Perpetual Motion* (2005), a Chinese version of the Hollywood screen classic. Perhaps it is not accidental that the protagonist of the film is also named Niuniu (Marchetti, 2011).

⁹ See also Zweig and Changgui, 1995.

¹⁰ Ommundsen also notes that the novel breaks down stereotypes of Asian women (2011).

world. In official, intellectual, and popular discourse, this desiring subject is portrayed as a new human being who will help to usher in a new era in China (2007:3)

In Wang's text, the Chinese heroines are the desiring subjects who symbolize a globalizing China. At the same time, however, these new Chinese femininities are subject to the neoliberal regime of recognition, which inscribes new stereotypes through restrictive conceptions of female subjectivity: Chinese women are recognized as empowered individuals because they now possess consumerist agency, financial power and sexual freedom. In an ironic twist, the novel's debunking of Orientalist myths surreptitiously engenders neoliberal myths about post-socialist Chinese femininity. This neoliberal politics of recognition is problematically predicated on the reification of female agency. Such a mode of recognition *as* and *by* reification fails to problematize the neoliberal market economy that seeks to re-subjugate women through the rhetoric of "choice" and "empowerment."

Through the transnational perspective of its narrator, the novel attempts to mock the craze that is China's Western-styled "consumption turn" during this "second cultural revolution" (Dirlik, 2001:1). In an interview, Wang stresses that her text is "a satire" (Vongs, 2006). If the English title is not sardonic enough, she makes it patent in the title of an earlier Chinese version of the book, *俗不可耐* (2011), which literally means "intolerably vulgar," thus suggesting a supposedly vulgarized form of post-socialist globalization. As Ommundsen opines, the "desire" in the rubric of the English novel is "primarily a desire for a Western lifestyle and the consumer goods that go with it" (2011:112). What Wang seeks to satirize is the relentless pursuit of Western capital in the wake of China's integration into the world economic order. A means of this pursuit is through English:

Yingyu, or English, is big in China. After China's entry into the World Trade Organization, the whole nation was motivated to learn English. First-graders are offered English classes in school. Seniors in big cities get together every morning in their English corner to practice. Even state leaders like to drop English words into their speeches or sing songs in English to impress the public. English workshops make millions of bucks, especially those TOEFL, GRE, LSAT, GMAT preparation classes (2006:204)

Niuniu is quick to point out that the English courses merchandise not only the language itself, but also "*meiguo meng*, the American dream" as "[e]veryone wants to learn English to get a job, preferably at a *waiqi*, or foreign company, or to get the chance to study in the United States" (2006:204-205). "Harvard," the most popular brand in China, is turned into "Harvard Inc." (2006:42). Even Niuniu's stepmother yearns to give birth to a baby in America. Part of the neoliberal incitement to self-betterment, this desire for the West is prevalent among the nouveaux-riches for whom an American passport is "an ideal to be held up, a status symbol, a safeguard of freedom" (2006:139).

In Wang's portrayal, the obsession with global and Western capital engenders moral crises in post-socialist China (Ommundsen, 2011).¹¹ As autonomous and calculating neoliberal subjects, people deploy various means, even morally unchecked ones, to live up to their interpretations of

¹¹ Concurrent with China's economic rise is "a whole range of social and moral regressions." (Tong, 2011:1).

the former leader Deng Xiaoping's slogan, "Getting rich is glorious" (Liu, 2004:10). Such moral decadence is often symbolized through a desiring female population. Women who become gold diggers chant the new rhyme of the era: "First-class girls marry the Americans; second-class girls marry the Japanese; third-class girls marry the Taiwanese or Hong Kongers; fourth-class girls marry the mainlanders" (2006:196). The assiduous desire for the West is exemplified by Niuniu's "bad-girl" acquaintance, Colorful Clouds, a woman from the countryside who engages in sex with various men before fulfilling her American dream as an upper-middle-class American wife. Envious of Yoko Ono, wife of John Lennon, and desirous of a Western lover, she professes, "Ever since I was young, America was always a dream, an ideal. I am a slave to America" (2006:89). Upon her return to China, however, Colorful Clouds casts a contemptuous gaze on the purportedly "fashionable" young women and chick writers whom she thinks are merely mimicking the game she played a decade ago: "Sleeping with Westerners, hanging out at embassies, going out to bars" (2006:102). Though Niuniu does not reproach her acquaintance, her qualms are palpable when she reflects: "Colorful Clouds' U.S. wealth is her answer to everyone's criticism of her. Just like so many other Chinese today, being wealthy is a justification for being rude" (2006:101). A journalist and returnee from America, Wang's narrator observes how the unleashing of capitalist values may devastate the moral foundation of her "native" country. Inhabiting a transnational position, Niuniu ridicules the economic premise of China's post-socialist globalization in a reconfigured world order. Note here that Wang's narrator is not critical of globalization *per se*, for she fully partakes in it. What she finds dubious is the Chinese version that she considers excessive and obsessive.

Irrespective of its professed agenda, however, *The People's Republic of Desire* invests in spectacles of neoliberal allure that echo those in Euro-American postfeminist work for middle- and upper-class female spectators. As Ommundsen (2011) and Fu (2015) both observe, Niuniu herself is part and parcel of the global consumerist culture afforded by her transnational middle-class lifestyle. Wallowing in beauty regimens through preening and primping and having manicures in beauty salons, she subscribes to the regulatory ideals of neoliberal femininity. Fully informed of the latest fashion and lifestyle trends, she presents her Western readers with a glamorous China inhabited by nouveaux-riches and indulgent in conspicuous consumption. Like her cosmopolitan female friends, she relishes Western cultures, be they highbrow or popular: George Sand, Simone de Beauvoir, Sartre, The Beatles, Sting, Nirvana, Pink Floyd, Eminem, Backstreet Boys, 'N Sync and Westlife, among others. Here, the invocation of feminist figures such as George Sand and de Beauvoir serves not to buttress feminist political causes, but rather to create a playful postfeminist textual space. As Tasker and Negra elucidate, postfeminism "works in part to incorporate, assume, or naturalize aspects of feminism; crucially, it also works to commodify feminism via the figure of woman as empowered consumer" (2007:2). In casually invoking feminist figures to "embellish" its narrative, Wang's text evinces a form of knowingness about feminist politics: it knows about feminism precisely because it is defined as the "pastness" of postfeminism.

With its spectacles of neoliberal allure, the novel's critical pedagogical aspiration may easily disperse under the governing logic of capitalism. Regarding her column-turned-novel, Wang maintains: "I am actually making fun of these shallow things and people have just learned the trends and followed them" (Chhibber, 2004:12). This discrepancy between authorial intention and readers' perception illustrates how forms of critique may become depoliticized in the transnational space of capital. Despite her authorial disavowal, Wang's novel risks being consumed not only as a fashion and lifestyle manual, but also a cultural manual about a globalizing China in the literary market. In fact, the novel exhibits a vertiginous array of social issues and cultural phenomena that

supposedly defines post-socialist China: the obsession with foreign high fashion and celebrities, infatuation with Western brands, changing status of women, promises and perils of cross-cultural romances, pitfalls of Internet dating, surging rates of divorce and abortion, the westernized one-child generation, beauty industry and cultural ideals of beauty, rural-urban divide, and the consumption of exotic foods. Though the novel is not without its social awareness, its critical energies may very well dissipate when received as a self-help book, or a relationship guide, or a cultural handbook about China. As Ommundsen submits, Wang's novel crystalizes "the tension between commercial and critical imperatives" of chick lit (2011:113). This tension, as I show, also speaks to the friction between postfeminism and feminism, which eventually turns into that between global and local desires.

Central to the feminist-postfeminist dynamics is the question of class. If post-Mao female sexual liberation can be construed as a mode of resistance to gender erasure in the days of Mao, it is crucial to recognize that this oppositional position as an "entitlement" is not readily accessible to those from the lower strata of the class ladder. Despite the socialist struggle for class equality, post-socialist China witnesses rising class divide as a social cost integral to its uneven development. Without a critique of class inequity, any feminist assertion of unrestrained female sexual and economic agency is at best illusory. Wang's novel is not unaware of class differences between women, the existence of which contests the neoliberal idiom of "empowerment" for all. A member of the transnational middle class, Niuniu is not unresponsive to the chasm between the haves and have-nots in post-socialist China (Ommundsen, 2011). Yet such responsiveness, brief and brusque as it is, remains inconsequential in a text that targets middle- and upper-class readership. Here and there, Niuniu drops a line about underclass women in the countryside, indicating her knowledge of class disparities. Relating her reportage of birth prevention and female sanitation in an impecunious village, she states that the female interviewees tell her "such exciting topics as rural abortions, improvised tampons, and child abandonment" (2006:187). Niuniu's reduction of grave social problems to "exciting topics" here bespeaks a postfeminist insensitivity to the complex lived realities of the dispossessed, which goes against her sensitivity to the latest fashion and business trends in the global market. Upon returning to urban Beijing, Niuniu gains an "insight:" a "newfound appreciation for the conveniences of modern city life" (2006:187). She does endeavour to lecture her female posse about peasant women's privation and hence, their urban privileges. As Niuniu explicates, rustic girls are sometimes married off for money and may even be shared among poor brothers. Where patriarchy reigns, physically abused wives are prevalent. In contrast to their urban counterparts, there are "no beauty salons or foot massages to pamper [rural women]" after their hard work, let alone gymnasiums or health clubs (2006:189). Continuing with her feminist indoctrination, Wang's narrator notices rural women's material destitution: "They don't have any kind of makeup or skin care products to help them look beautiful. They even use coarse paper made from cowshit as sanitary pads" (2006:190). Niuniu's didactic attempt notwithstanding, as soon as Lulu brings up an MTV party, the urban gang resumes their middle-class pastime; and the plights of peasant women are dismissed *en bloc*. In place of a feminist engagement with structural problems that plague post-socialist China, the female posse performs a postfeminist ethos of individual pleasure. Thus ends a cursory chapter on the distant poverty of underclass women.

The inability to translate feminist consciousness about class inequality into sustained social commitment in post-socialist China is conspicuous in the novel. After befriending another returnee, Mimi, Niuniu is awakened to the dark underbelly of the city and the wretched conditions of lower class women. What she observes in the peripheral urban space points to the spatial segregation in metropolitan cities. Sheltered in her exclusive space of "empowerment" and "entitlement," Niuniu

has been part of the exhilaration over global capitalism. Such exaltation, Dirlik warns, “disguise[s] the very real social and economic inequalities that are not merely leftovers from the past, but are products of the new developments” (2000:8). While the global capitalist regime is likely to attract the transnational class, its emancipatory promise is “just that – a promise that is perpetually deferred to the future” (Dirlik, 2000:9). Upon her encounter with migrant female workers, who are globalization’s subaltern others, Wang’s narrator conceives of a feminist social project with her affluent friends. They establish a Little Women’s Club, apart from their Jeremy Irons and Ricky Martin clubs,¹² to “raise money for the poor, uneducated, and mentally and physically traumatized girls” (2006:426). Following a neoliberal *modus operandi*, the club operates with the knowledge that charity is “a fashion among the rich” (2006:426). Conscious of the dubiety it entails, Niuniu nevertheless partakes in the styling of charity to attract rich members, and thus risks displacing the meaning of a feminist advocacy. To the degree that only a few out of the 101 mini chapters touch upon lower class women, Niuniu’s exploration of social injustice is rather marginal and minimal. The lack of thorough social engagement indeed constitutes one of the novel’s limits (Ommundsen, 2011). Significantly, Niuniu’s eventual resolution to go back to America bespeaks the abortion of a nascent female-specific communal endeavour that has the potential of effecting social changes in China. This lack of commitment registers the lack of interest in a feminist critique of political economy, and hence the novel’s overall ideological alignment with neoliberalism and its constrictive class purview. As McRobbie contends, in order for feminism to be “taken into account” in a postfeminist context, it has to be considered “having already passed away” (2009:12). Niuniu’s ultimate “pushing away” thus pronounces the “passing away” of feminist politics. In this fashion, the text lends indirect support to neoliberal epistemologies whose market rhetoric of universal “choice” masks socioeconomic injustice.

That the abandonment of feminist activism in China is followed by a return to the West merits critical attention. A trajectory enabled by middle-class mobility, this narrative move translates the central tension between feminism and postfeminism into one between local commitments and global mobility. Niuniu’s friend, CC, also a returnee, for instance, chooses to return to England to see her “online date or find a former classmates to get married” (2006:433). The return to the West thus entails an embrace of global mobility and postfeminist heterosexual romance rather than local feminist egalitarian politics in China. This textual trajectory also spells the limits of Wang’s transnational satire by reinstating the discursive divide between China and the West. Pestered by her “Chineseness,” CC has issues with contemporary China.

One of CC’s problems is that she’s too far ahead of her time. In China, it’s considered cool to carry a credit card, for instance, but CC has five or six. It’s considered cool to drive a Buick, but CC was chauffeured in a Bentley as a young girl. It’s considered cool to drink Blue Mountain coffee, but she’s gone through her coffee-drinking phase and has moved on to green tea. It’s considered cool to drop English words into your conversations even if your pronunciation is incorrect, but CC speaks fluent English. It’s considered cool to know how to bowl, but she grew up playing golf with her parents. It’s considered cool for young educated women to discuss works of the Beat Generation such as Jack Kerouac’s *On The Road* and Allen Ginsberg’s *Howl*, but she read them when she

¹² The Little Women’s Club is a reference to American writer Louisa May Alcott’s novel, *Little Women* (1868). The other two clubs are respectively named after Jeremy Irons the famous British actor and Ricky Martin the popular Puerto Rican singer.

was a student
(2006:431-32)

Despite its post-socialist globalization, China for CC is irrevocably fraught with a sense of belatedness. This temporalization of geocultural discrepancies, often invoked in Orientalist discourse, views China as the past of the West. As Niuniu opines, there are two choices for Western-educated returnees in China: “You either hold on to what you’ve learned abroad, applying it to your new life in China to become part of its native-born expatriate community, or you try to hide your Western values and pretend to be native all over again” (2006:432). Seeing the latter option as “a step backward,” CC makes what for her is the right “choice” in a neoliberal frame: “I don’t really want to go native” (ibid). CC’s “rational” assessment and identification with England parallel Niuniu’s “rational” decision and implicit identification with America.

The discursive asymmetry between China and the West is reinforced in the coda with an episode about the narrator’s failed romance. Niuniu discovers that her new acquaintance, Mimi, is the ex-lover of her ex-boyfriend, who could not commit to her because of Mimi. Niuniu is then determined to confront her failed romance in America. While Niuniu’s return to America may be construed as indicative of a transnational subject’s “continuous struggle over home and identity” (Fu, 2015:65), this return also registers an ideological return to postfeminism and neoliberalism after the brief feminist detour to the world of underclass women. With this final episode about Niuniu’s heterosexual romance, Wang returns us to the thematic preoccupation with individual desires in Western postfeminist writing:

It is time for *me* to learn to love again, to be intimate again. [...] It is time for *me* to take a chance with *my* life again. [...] The answers to the rest of *my* life lie somewhere in America. *I* still have unfinished business there. Even if *I* face defeat, *I* still have to go. Even if *I* have to search to the ends of the earth, *I* will never give up. [...] It is time to find *my* own story
(2006:444-45; my emphasis)

The primacy of the pronouns, “I,” “me” and “my” in Niuniu’s statement reiterates the neoliberal idiom that interpellates individuals as self-making and self-seeking subjects. Niuniu’s “choice”, then, is a postfeminist project of the self in America rather than a feminist project of the collective in China. This “choice” again concretizes the dichotomies between feminism and postfeminism, the collective and the individual, and the local and the global. By assigning America as the geopolitical locale of “[her] own story,” Niuniu by implication rejects China as a site of her female becoming (2006:445). If post-socialist China is “no longer homely” as Wang remarks, then with her transnational class mobility, Wang’s narrator indeed has the “choice” to return to America, a presumably “authentic” site of modernity, which is conducive to her female subjectivity (2006:xii). In mocking the incontinent globalization of her “native” country, one may argue, Wang also justifies her narrator’s flight from it. As the novel articulates its transnational ridicule of a globalizing China, what perhaps remains unarticulated is its covert desire for the West as a signifier of the global.

A cultural text of the current global conjuncture, *The People’s Republic of Desire* embodies competing ideological currents and forces. While the novel exhibits narrative moments of feminist impulses, it fundamentally conforms to a postfeminist and neoliberal ethos and the attendant class-based politics. With its desertion of local feminist social activism in China, the novel affirms the

postfeminist and neoliberal paradigm of female self-searching in Western locales. Despite its avowed mockery of China's imitation of Euro-America globalization, the novel's denouement unwittingly replicates the same structure of desire it seeks to ridicule. As a global text, the novel nonetheless compels us to rethink the political work feminism may perform in a neoliberal context. It also impels us to attend to the complexity of the transnational terrain structured by asymmetrical power relations.

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