

Consumerism and Chinese Postfeminism: Visual Economy, Chick Flicks, and the Politics of Cultural (Re)Production

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Abstract Chinese cinema uses the consumer habits of young professional women to reimagine post-feminist gender identity. These films employ the visual economy of chick flicks to shape the representational concept of an urban middle class. In them, post-feminist women gain agency not by subverting the dominant patriarchal social order but through economic advancement and emotional independence. As an example of this process, this article looks at how *Go Lala Go!* (2010) legitimizes women's financial freedom and career success within the grand narrative of nation building and economic development, foregrounding the cultural politics of consumerism by portraying young professional women's coming-of-age story in a globalized China. It juxtaposes the career success of the female protagonist Du Lala with the new financial independence and transnational commercialization of China. *Go Lala Go!* aestheticizes the struggles of young office workers as they climb corporate ladders to achieve economic success.

Key words postfeminism; gender identity; Chinese cinema; adaptation; visual economy

Adapted from Li Ke's popular novel *A Story of Lala's Promotion*, Xu Jinglei's film 杜拉拉升职记 *Go Lala Go!* (2010) employs the original novel to present a postfeminist re-configuration of female gender identity. The film adaptation foregrounds the cultural politics of consumerism by portraying young professional women's coming-of-age story in a rapidly globalized China. In the wake of China's economic boom and cultural transnationalism, *Go Lala Go!* strategically embeds the postfeminist media representation of young office ladies within a grand narrative of nation building and economic boost. Juxtaposing the female protagonist Du Lala's career success and financial independency with China's economic development and Beijing's

transnational commercIALIZATION, *Go Lala Go!* aestheticizes young office workers' struggles to climb corporate social ladders as a necessary stage before they enjoy the benefit of economic success. Cinematographically, this film reflects Chinese popular cinema's comfortable attitude toward the assimilation of a Western postfeminist visuality by offering chic costume design and a glamorous cosmopolitanism. The success of *Go Lala Go!* is the combined result of both the film's quick response to a market vacuum in the production of popular culture and its unpretentious celebration of consumerism, which it achieves by glamorizing fashion and style and the consumption of luxury products.

The plot of *Go Lala Go!* traces Du Lala's career development from a young, inexperienced junior office lady to a mature senior executive in DB company, a Fortune 500 American corporation whose Asian headquarter is located in Beijing. As Du Lala adapts to the capitalist corporate culture in her professional life, she also develops a keen sense of gender awareness in her romantic relationship with Wang Wei, a senior colleague. Yet the film does not center on Du Lala's emotional life in a typical romantic-comedy style; instead, it provides a workplace handbook for the generation of young professional women who strive for career success and financial affluence in contemporary China. Accentuating the Du Lala's upward mobility in her career and her prioritizing job over romantic relationships, the film markets itself as a chick flick while also portraying the undertones of masculine gender anxiety. Recently successful women have stratified Chinese society, because traditional Chinese women were generally not expected to be financially responsible for the family, or compete with men in careers. In a sense, *Go Lala Go!* engages in a postfeminist Chinese gender discourse that legitimizes women's fight for financial independence as they proactively participate in China's fast growing international economy.

Although not the first Chinese language film to attempt to tap into the vast potential interests in representing the works and lives of metropolitan white collar workers, *Go Lala Go!* synthesizes the postfeminist women's autonomy in their high fashion style and female sexuality so explicitly demonstrated in the *Sex and the City* franchise (1998-2010) and *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006). Such a combination of career ambition and success is far from kitsch. *Go Lala Go!* aims not merely to dazzle audiences with its runway style fashion and beautiful actors but also appropriates the original novel's avowed intention to serve as a "practical handbook of career development" (Li, 2007).¹ The story becomes an allegorical narrative that alludes to and comments on the highly-consumerized landscape of transnational cultural politics in contemporary China, especially metropolitan Beijing.

The visual style of *Go Lala Go!*'s strategically aestheticizes everyday life in China's cosmopolitan capital, filled with glamorous shopping malls, luxury goods,

and high-end residential buildings that promise comfortable living. But underneath the visual politics of postfeminist cinematic text lies a consumerism that legitimizes women's upward social mobility, a major step in the history of gender politics in China since 1949. Ultimately *Go Lala Go!* qualifies the influence of Western chick flicks by creating a postfeminist protagonist whose high fashion sense co-inhabits with her practical life philosophy.

Visualizing Chinese Postfeminism and Gender Politics in China

In contrast to their Western counterparts, women in socialist China are neither represented as sexual objects nor as subjects with sexual power because “the liberation of women is concomitant with a process of gender erasure” (Lu, *Historical Introduction* 21),² in the sense that a woman's gender identity is devoid of the defining element of a female sexuality. Indeed, the socio-cultural representation of women turns them into agents “politicizing desire, love, and family relations by delimiting and repressing sexuality” (Yue 118). The woman is therefore not looked upon as an object of male desire and pleasure; on the contrary, she is wrapped in the gender-neutral colors of grey and black, viewed as a sister in revolutionary struggles, a comrade in the socialist cause. This gender discourse completely displaces any residual, masculine, political, historical narrative.

As part of this uniquely Chinese background, Lydia Liu (1993) points out the historic difference between Western feminists and Chinese women:

Post-Mao Chinese women are...dealing with an order of reality vastly different from that which feminists in the West face within their own patriarchal society, where the female gender is exploited more on the grounds of her difference than the lack thereof. Being named as the “other” and marginalized, feminist in the West can speak more or less from a politically enabling position against the centered capitalist ideology. By contrast, contemporary Chinese women find their political identity so completely inscribed within official discourse on gender and institutionalized by Fulian (the All-China Women's Federation) that they cannot even claim feminism for themselves. (36)

The dilemma that Chinese women face, therefore, is three-fold: their top priority is to position themselves in the re-configuration of the female subjectivity, and differentiate that position in relation to a dominant patriarchal ideology in order to re-claim the legitimacy of a female identity. Yet because Chinese women are doubly silenced by their gender and political institutionalization, they have to accomplish these tasks without the readily available model of Western feminist movement.

Due to these sociopolitical differences, Chinese cinema cannot benefit from the successful example set forth by its Western counterpart in the cultural representation of Chinese women. Western second-wave feminism, when examining the visual representation of female characters in classic Hollywood narrative cinema, uses psychoanalysis and semiology to reveal how patriarchal ideology is successfully sustained cinematographically in the “men gaze/women being looked at” dichotomy (Mulvey 33, 38). When women are visualized only as passive bearers of men’s gaze rather than active initiators of the cinematic look, they become objectified sexual symbol, the Other that has no agency. Yet Chinese women do not even exist in filmic narratives as a pleasure-giving Other, because they are rendered genderless by the socialist discourse. They are in the frame but indistinguishable from their male comrades; and consequently the pleasure does not exist in looking, but in being integrated with the masculine look.

Surrounded by such unusual circumstances, Chinese cinema must develop an alternative postfeminism that deconstructs the official gender discourse from within. It must break away from the political incorporation of masculine socialist cultural politics. In cinematic terms, there must be a re-imagination of a postfeminist Woman who defines her own gender identity. The need to re-establish a characteristically Chinese postfeminist awareness and its visual representation requires a full embrace of femininity, portraying postfeminist Woman as financially independent, emotionally mature, and sexually conscious, a person who seldom verbalizes her conscious feminist stance or articulates radical political statements.³ Recent cinematic portrayals of female characters reflecting this re-imagination of postfeminist women include Stanley Kwan’s 长恨歌 *Everlasting Regret* (2005), Ang Lee’s 卧虎藏龙 *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000), Xu Jinglei’s 一个陌生女人的来信 *Letter From an Unknown Woman* (2004), and the recent film remake of 花木兰 *Hua Mulan* (2008), which all celebrate the strong, confident, intelligent, and beautiful female protagonist.

This shift in women’s cultural representation in contemporary Chinese language films coincides with a popular sub-genre of the Western postfeminism — the chick flick, which primarily means “commercial films that appeal to a female audience” that both reflected and shaped women’s “new visibility” and “a growing recognition of women’s significance in contemporary culture” (Ferriss & Young 2). Similar to the new postfeminist Chinese women’s attempt to disassociate from previous totalitarian feminist traditions, consumers of chick flicks are “a third-wave feminist or postfeminist generation” that “has rejected or at least questioned some of the central tenets of feminist thought,” and re-appropriated and re-imagined these previous tenets to “refashion their identity” (Ferriss & Young 3). By re-embracing what was unacceptable and diminishing to their predecessors, Chinese postfeminists and their

Western counterparts proactively celebrate their femininity and gender differences.

The postfeminist consumerism of Xu Jinglei's *Go Lala Go!* is embedded in the inscription of an urban middle class. The phrase "middle class" is strategically centralized in the foreword to *A Story of Lala's Promotion* (2007), the original novel: "The protagonist Lala is a typical representative of the middle class. She does not have a well-connected family, but she received decent college education, and she is a stand-up person who believes in success from hard work" (Li, 2007).⁴ Through Lala's characterization, we realize that the definition of middle class is carefully de-politicized to foreground the significance of financial success and career aspiration.

This empowering consumerism attracts the young, well-educated, ideologically Westernized, and financially comfortable Office Lady (popularly known as the OL), the representative of a significant consumer group particularly eager to embrace the socioeconomic freedom depicted in the chick culture. Following the almost over-night boom of China's international commerce and economy, a large population of young college graduates have entered foreign-funded enterprises (*waiqi* 外企) for higher salaries, better benefits, and more significantly, a broader platform that connects them to the globalized consumerist culture. As a representative of this movement, Du Lala is the modern workplace Everywoman whose adaptive struggle is still fresh to those who have made it and instructive and inspiring to those who are trying to make it.

It is the nature of post-feminism not to reverse or overturn the patriarchal gender hierarchy but to offer a similarly structured feminist one. With this goal Xu Jinglei's film visually re-produces the original stress on women's freedom without seeking to manipulate or delimit men. It offers instead a series of representational strategies such as spectatorial positions and costume design, tactfully employed to create a meticulously manicured metropolitan look. The image of a strong, independent, intelligent, sexually conscious, and impeccably attired woman epitomizes the new visibility of women in the postfeminist era.

The film also avoids class differentiations. Du Lala's transformation from anonymity to the top tier of the corporate food chain is conspicuously punctuated by the changes in her job titles and her monthly salary throughout the film. The audience is encouraged to identify with this new consumerist social ladder. Thus on the first day of Lala's work at DB Technology, the Beijing headquarter of a Fortune 500 American company, senior secretary Helen matter-of-factly teaches Lala show class identity can be structured in materialistic terms in the workplace: the "poor petty bourgeois" who makes under 4000 RMB (Chinese currency, with an approximate exchange rate of 6.3:1 to US dollars) a month, the "middle class" managers who own their own cars and make 200,000 RMB a year, the "higher middle class" directors who make more than 500,000 RMB a year and enjoy overseas vacations or expensive outdoor

activities, and the “real rich” president, who makes more than one million RMB a year. Such classification is visually juxtaposed within a single frame to reinforce a carefully defined yet fluid social microcosm within the company. Without explicitly advocating any particular directionality of this class configuration, *Go Lala Go!* nevertheless contextualizes a postfeminist *bildungsroman*, or, a coming-of-age novel, within an acutely consumerist social microcosm.

Fashion Spectacle, Chick Flick, and Visual Economy

By exploiting a visual market economy, Xu Jinglei’s film has changed the landscape of commercial film production in contemporary China. Although not the first Chinese language director to include product placement advertisements, Xu turns the entire film into an unapologetic exhibition of haute couture fashion in the corporate offices nestled in the skyscrapers of Beijing. The spectacle features not only clothes and fashion accessories, but also household electronics, computers, and even interior décor. Characteristic of postfeminist popular culture’s “hyperaestheticization of everyday life” (Tasker & Negra 7), this fashion display was made possible real-life firms seeking to advertise their products. *Go Lala Go!* attracted advertisements worth 20 million RMB, exceeding its budget of 15 million RMB. In other words, the film made a profit even before it was released. With a box office of 44 million RMB in the opening weekend, *Go Lala Go!* grossed an astounding 12.4 million RMB domestically, firmly positioning itself among the highest grossing Chinese films in the past decade.

The commercial success of *Go Lala Go!* testifies to Chinese cinema’s transition to a Hollywood style production mode. Rather than approaching sponsors and investors after the films are made, producers resort to a seamlessly orchestrated marketing strategy that combines accurately pinpointed audience, popular mass media coverage, and strategically selected product placement in the film to secure financial support even before production begins. *Go Lala Go!* followed a path established in the early 2000s, when film director Feng Xiaogang systematically integrated product placement in his popular *hesui pian* (贺岁片, New Year Blockbusters), such as *没完没了 Sorry Baby* (1999), *手机 Cell Phone* (2003), and *天下无贼 A World Without Thieves* (2004). To both filmmakers and sponsor companies, product placement can be the guarantee for commercial success.

It is this success that has become controversial among film critics and moviegoers. Not all “in-text” advertisements are tastefully done, and frequent bombardment by big logos risks brand saturation. Many moviegoers have been upset by the vulgarization of film and the loss of cinema as a fine art. The controversy turns on the politics of visual economy. When films are consumed as commercial products,

how they appeal to consumers determines their use value in the system of capital appreciation. Explicitly articulating its intended audience to be young professional women, *Go Lala Go!* employs a visual style that appeals to a targeted audience that finds it easier to identify with the characters because of their own familiarity with the fashion brands shown, as the film proactively exploits the halo effects of brand names to enhance spectatorial identification. When the audience finds that Lala uses the same brand computer, reads the same fashion magazines, eats the same brand chocolate, and even drives the same car that they do, Lala becomes a more visually concrete character rather than merely a fictional construction.

Not only is Lala easy to identify with, such identification is visually contextualized in a pleasant and inspiring way, making her something of a modern role model. The film begins with an extreme long shot of Beijing's skyscrapers in its Central Business District area, with several landmark buildings clustered under clear blue sky. This establishing shot foregrounds Beijing's trendy cosmopolitan downtown in a deliberately homogenizing manner, powerfully reminiscent of numerous visual representations of New York in the immensely popular TV drama *Sex and the City*. Beijing and New York seem almost identical, equally glamorous. As the camera cuts to a closer view of the buildings, this visual resemblance becomes disorienting yet simultaneously reassuring to its OL audience, because when Beijing appears indistinguishable from other modern cities, its integration into the highly commercialized global economy is even more assured.

Du Lala is introduced against this backdrop of metropolitan Beijing through quick paced cross cuts, where the camera pans among corporate buildings, her comfortable apartment, and the city on the ground level. Her exposition is economically executed with a few shots of her sending resumes electronically, waiting in lines for job interviews, and being interviewed in the corporate meeting rooms. Professionally dressed and confidently gaited, Lala personifies the upward energy visually represented by the high rising buildings and the camera's angle up position in the opening sequence.

Such visual parallel between Lala and the city is conspicuously reinforced throughout the film. Each time when Lala takes one step up the corporate ladder, her visibly more fashionable image is always preceded by snapshots of Beijing, which undergoes similar beautifying transformations. Not only does the film foreshadow Lala's evolutionary trajectory metaphorically by means of such municipal upgrades, it also invites audience to share Lala's gradually elevated point of view by adopting corresponding camera positions from ground level to higher altitude, until the audience, like Lala, can look down at the city from above. Vibrant, chic, confident, and dazzlingly beautiful, Beijing is anthropomorphically the double of Du Lala.

Casting Beijing as a doppelganger for its titular heroine, *Go Lala Go!* maximizes its investment in the visual pleasure of the urbanite audience with mesmerizing fashion design for its star actors, whose combined influence reaches almost all major Chinese language cinemas. Its versatile stars include writer-director-editor-actress Xu Jinglei from mainland China, ethnic Chinese singer-actor Stanley Huang from the US, singer-actress Karen Mok from Hong Kong, singer-actress Pace Wu from Taiwan, and hostess-model Li Ai from mainland China. Together, they represent Xu's ambition to achieve maximum publicity coverage in the film's promotional campaign. In other words, these actors are casted not necessarily because they are the best fits for the characters, but because each attracts a unique body of fans and supporters without costing a fortune to the production. Thus, they become the film's visual capital whose combined purchasing power is larger than the sum of the individuals. Ultimately, audience consumes both their own fantasies about the stars and the fashion trend they exemplify when they watch these beautiful, elegant, trendy actors re-enact familiar scenarios in the office or at home.

Conclusion: Gender, Consumerism, and the Politics of Cultural (Re)Production

While Beijing is cinematically re-imagined "as beautiful as New York," as director Xu Jinglei proclaims (Lin), Lala resembles the Chinese counterpart of the postfeminist "singleton" in Western chick culture. According to Stephanie Genz's (2009) investigation of media representation of single professional women, the singleton "navigates an uncertain course on the postfeminist frontier, fluctuating between backlash pessimism and Girlie optimism in her attempt to displace a dualistic logic and hold together conflicting life components" (138). While Lala experiences ups and downs in her work, her attitude toward romantic relationship does not objectify into a polarizing force against her work. Her character differs from Western singletons such as Bridget Jones in *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001) or most women in the TV show *Sex and the City*, because Lala does not seem too eager to find herself a man. This dissimilarity might be explained by an oriental feminine modesty that is deeply rooted in the Chinese culture, except that the film allows Lala to enjoy a sexual freedom without any guilt or over-analysis. Lala's determination not to let this interfere with her professional relation with her boss-turned-boyfriend Wang Wei is expressed in a typical rom-com style. When she runs into Wang Wei in the company the day after they have sex, Lala whispers to him, "I had too much to drink, and let's just pretend that it never happened." What is self-reflexively funny is that this is line typically used by irresponsible men, not the other way around.

Lala's apparent aloofness externalizes a new gender discourse in the Chinese cinematic reproduction of postfeminist professional women. In her remapping of a

postfeminist experience, Lala manages to prioritize her career over romance without being stereotyped as the “leftover women” (剩女).⁵ In the subsequent scene, Lala shares her relationship concerns with her brother Manyi, who urges her to take this opportunity while she can still catch a golden bachelor before she becomes a leftover woman. To this, Lala announces that she “should concentrate on work,” because “a good job is hard to come by.” For her, financial security and career success is far more important and dependable than romantic relationships.

An implied either-or logic between work and relationship is dramatized in her hush-hush relationship with her co-worker and superior Wang Wei. Lala is warned on her first day at work that office romance is a danger to her career, because if two employees are discovered to be romantically involved, one of the couple must leave the company. Knowing that she as the inferior employee will have to leave if her relationship with Wang Wei is revealed, Lala avoids making such a sacrifice, a decision reinforced by Wang Wei’s non-committal attitude and a workaholic habits. As Rose teaches her to do, Lala analyzes advantages, disadvantages, reputation, and risk before making decisions, and her ability to hold polarizing forces together eventually enables her to reunite with Wang Wei after their breakup.

Although the film returns to a conformist track when Lala decides to confess her feelings for Wang Wei and quit her job, Lala’s personal choice does not jeopardize her work ethic, nor does it subjugate her to the oppression of the patriarchal stereotype of the left-over women. She remains responsible to her company while also respecting her own femininity and acknowledging her true emotions. In other words, Lala does not try to become absolute equal with men, as traditional feminists would have wanted; rather, she embraces her gender traits and their social and psychological implications, because being different from man is empowering, both at work and in relationships. “I am not like you,” she tells Wang Wei, “I can’t separate work from personal feelings.” By refusing to internalize the masculine code of conduct of the company, Lala preserves her own gender integrity. Eventually it is Lala’s unpretentiousness that cements her relationship with Wang Wai. The sign of this character trait is her financial thriftiness. At one point she brags to her brother that she can save money on food by eating a bowl of leftover soup for a whole week. Dressed in plain, non-trendy clothes and wearing no jewelry, Lala presents an obvious contrast to her female co-workers, who are clad from head to toe with brand name clothes and shoes, complete with exquisite makeup and camera-ready hairstyle.

Such visual differentiation serves as a foil to Lala’s wisdom at work. Because of her ability to economize, she is able to come up with money-saving strategies when she is put in charge of the company’s under-budgeted renovation project. In addition, her habitual economizing subtly distinguishes Lala from her free-spending, fashion-

obsessed Western counterparts, who seldom engage in mundane chores such as cooking or managing personal finances. Lala's down-to-earthiness is thus a healthy antidote to the extravaganza of the film's visual hyperbole in the pristine mise-en-scene, lavish prop design, luscious color scheme, and accessorized costume.

The film establishes Lala's economy by letting us see her shopping. When it begins, Lala is carefully portrayed as a typical low maintenance woman, and her financial philosophy is one of saving and economizing instead of spending. When they get to know each other better, Lala even lectures Wang Wei on how women depressurize: One way is to go shopping, which is too expensive, and the other is to eat — inexpensive, but equally effective. But as her relationship with Wang Wei develops, and as she moves up the corporate ladder, the film allows her to indulge, as if by right in Lala more fashionable fancy clothes, jewelry, and makeup. It further excuses her because she uses shopping as a way to communicate and bond with Wang Wei.

In the movie's most striking post-feminist statement, the adrenaline high of shopping comes to symbolize the coming-of-age of hundreds and thousands of Chinese Du Lalas, who re-examine their desires through the lens of popular media representations. Now that China is undeniably an integral part of world economy and trade, the new generation of Chinese postfeminist women finds this integration empowering through the consumption of Chinese chick flicks. The image of the protagonist Du Lala as a strong, independent, intelligent, sexually open, and professionally successful woman epitomizes the new visibility of career women in the postfeminist era. Capitalizing on contemporary Chinese women's re-evaluation of femininity and gender re-configuration, *Go Lala Go!* portrays women who construct their own gender identity through a postfeminist consumer sub-culture, and who strive for financial affluence and career opportunities without being manipulated and delimited by the dominant masculine gender discourse.

Notes

1. All English quotes from Li Ke's *A Story of Lala's Promotion* are translated by the author, unless otherwise specified. The Chinese original of this quote is, “职场实用手册。”
2. The period of socialist China refers to slightly different historical periods depending on its political implication or socioeconomic development. Politically, socialist China is from begins in 1949 and ends in 1989; and socioeconomically it runs from 1949 to 1992, when the Economic Reformation was implemented. For a more detailed discussion, see S. H. Lu (2001 1-28).
3. Contemporary scholarly publications on Chinese literature and film have yet to address the new trend of Chinese postfeminism, but popular literature and films are presenting an emerging image of a New Woman that invites comparison to the New Woman figure in the 1920s and 1930s, when

Chinese society also underwent significant changes.

4. The original Chinese reads, “小说的主人公杜拉拉是典型的中产阶级的代表, 她没有背景, 受过较好的教育, 走正规路子, 靠个人奋斗获取成功。”

5. The “leftover women” or 剩女 is a newly popular term that refers to women who are single, born in the 1970s, and have remained single in their early thirties.. They are typically women who are well-educated, financially independent, and who for various reasons missed the best age to get married and are therefore “left over” in the marriage market.

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