

Post-Feminism and Feminism Shifts in Contemporary Chinese Urban Discourse: Insights from B for Busy

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Abstract. The study places the film *B for Busy* (2021) in the modern urban culture of China. The study looks at how post-feminist ideas appear in that setting. The study mixes film review with academic work. The study says the film *B for Busy* shows a post-feminist feeling that does not push politics. The study says that feeling comes from middle-class taste. When the general public watches the film *B for Busy* they see the city life backdrop and the middle-class style. The public notices the film *B for Busy* keeps the post-feminist vibe gentle and depoliticized. This film *B for Busy* reflects a middle-class taste that shapes the post-feminist feeling. The film shows subjectivity through personal choice. The film also points out limits. The limits include class blindness, commercial pressure and women being left out. This article says that modern Chinese feminism is at a point. Modern Chinese feminism moves from advocacy to personal consumer focused engagement. That shift creates a range where the mainstream commercial deals sit alongside resistance.

Keywords: Post-feminism, modern Chinese feminism, double entanglement, intimate-public commons, soft resistance

1. Introduction

The Chinese feminism has taken its path. Chinese feminism has broken away. Rebuilt instead of copying Western movements. Siyuan Yin notes a change Chinese feminism moved from the state-supported feminism that focused on the working class rights and gender equality to the market-driven model that highlights different kinds of women and personal power [1]. In the century this change turned into a common post-feminist sensibility in cities.

Stéphanie Genz points out that post-feminism is not a reaction but a many-sided free-market culture [2]. In China Fan Yang calls distancing a way of avoiding the socialist past that tried to erase gender differences [3]. Fan Yang also says that double distancing avoids feminism that looks like a far-away Western idea [3]. The middle way shows up in *B for Busy*. This research notices that in *B* for female self-worth does not come from the group fight but comes from taste buying stuff and personal freedom.

The study uses a methodology that mixes a qualitative case study with reading. The study spreads the analysis across levels from micro-individual details to macro-structural dimensions:

Decoding Characters and Symbols: The study looks at the female characters. The study looks at Mrs. Li and her dependence on luxury goods such as Jimmy Choo. The study looks at Gloria and her

emotional buying of paintings. The study combines Hu & Cai's Power-to theory with Thornham's framework [4,5]. The study shows that material consumption replaces resistance. The study shows that material consumption works as the entry ticket, for building subjectivity.

2. Film synopsis

B for Busy is a Shanghai-set drama. The drama follows Mr. Bai, a middle-aged artist, as Mr. Bai deals with three women: the Ms. Li, the enthusiastic Gloria and the ex-wife Beibei. The story moves through food and coffee scenes. The story shows adult romance, in the life as Mr. Bai meets Ms. Li at a cafe; as Gloria invites Mr. Bai to a dinner and as Beibei appears in a kitchen suddenly. The public watches *B for Busy*, which film shows how Mr. Bai moves between the cool Ms. Li, the enthusiastic Gloria and the ex-wife Beibei. The drama captures love. The film has a side story about Mr. Wu and a European actress. The side story feels like a contrast. The side story makes the film's main idea clear. The public can notice the side story works. The main idea of this film is that real love is not in myths. The film's main topic is that real love lives in the routine of daily life.

3. Theoretical framework

3.1. Pseudo-feminism and consumerism

B for Busy shows a picture of femininity. The public can notice that the picture relies more on consumer power than on political empowerment. Thornham and Feng point out that in China's modernization the idea of female independence often works only as a "slogan" [5]. Their study says the media celebrate "independence", in addition the media move away from calls for systemic change [5]. The media replaces change with a consumer-driven facade that ties autonomy to buying power [5].

This perspective matches Fan Yang's idea of pseudo-feminism. Fan Yang's idea says empowerment is measured by spending [3]. In the film Ms. Li appears not as a figure but as a person defined by consumer habits. Ms. Li shows those habits through Ms. Li's prized Jimmy Choo heels. The narrative turns on a heel breaking. The broken heel becomes a symbol that tells the audience that Ms. Li can be both fragile and valuable. In the moment, Gloria shows independence by spending a lot of money. Gloria treats the karaoke bars and the galleries as places for recreation. This female character of film Gloria using the recreation spots to feel free.

In this context liberation means money to shape a life. Liu and Brice say that the discourse changes capitalism into freedom [6,7]. Neoliberalism trains women to see self-care spending such as skincare and fashion as liberation [7]. When people feel dissatisfied the remedy uses market solutions such as products and self-control instead of collective action [7]. The film ties the notion of autonomy, to class privilege.

3.2. Neo-heroines and confucian patriarchy

The public can notice that consumerism sets the material background. According to the theory that the film's emotional patterns follow what Bowen Hu identifies as the "Double Entanglement" [8]. Chinese women must achieve professional success and also uphold traditional feminine values that come from Confucian patriarchy.

Actually, *B for Busy* reduces this tension by using a Shanghai feel [9]. The lead characters appear as Big Heroines [8]. The lead characters are capable and sure of themselves. That lead characters still follow rules. The whole social story revolves around Mr. Bai. The women meet in Mr. Bai's

space. The women set their relationships by how close they are to Mr. Bai. This scenario looks like a wife-concubine story hidden as city friendship. The women use irony and detachment as the women deal with the dynamic. The power imbalance does not change.

4. Analysis

4.1. Ms. Li: navigating material realities

The general public can notice that Ms. Li lives in the Western-style house. That Ms. Li buys things that show the class worries that many middle-class people feel. In the film Ms. Li is a career woman. Ms. Li ties Ms. Li's sense of control to the way Ms. Li looks. When Ms. Li's Jimmy Choo heel breaks that moment becomes a sign of Ms. Li's inner balance shaking, because Ms. Li relies on material things. In the film the remark says, "I fell for that sort of thing when I was young" the remark is clear. The remark marks a shift from ideas to the practical view of post-feminism.

Hu and Cai suggest that characters like Ms. Li show what they call power-to (competence) [4]. According to the film the power-to (competence) often creates anxiety that rests on a "material entry ticket" [3]. Ms. Li's obsession with designer footwear serves as a coping mechanism. When supportive structures such as childcare are not their urban women build a sense of independence through luxury consumption [5]. The existential anxiety that hinges on the material entry ticket push Ms. Li toward designer footwear while the lack of supportive structures such as, childcare forces urban women to fashion independence through luxury consumption.

4.2. Gloria: the emotional economy and sexual agency

Gloria shows a sexual self that lives inside the capitalist world. Gloria says, "I am a collar now—the 'white' as in 'getting something for nothing'." Gloria turns the absence of Gloria's husband into a chance for leisure of a loss. Gloria spends ¥25,000 to buy paintings to end a relationship. Gloria creates a link from sexual subjectivity to neoliberal consumer empowerment. In a feminist framework Gloria is not only the starter of desire but also the consumer, in the relational dynamic. Gloria uses market logic, where purchasing power equates to control. Gloria changes an encounter that traditional morality might judge into an act of artistic consumption based on subjectivity. In the film Gloria shows how a purchase can become a way to control a relationship. The reverse objectification changes the woman from an object of the view or a possession in old stories into a person who decides how the woman is defined. The reverse objectification shows that in today's city talk female sexual freedom often needs capital for validation [4]. Gloria pays the gender debt. Gloria uses money to draw the boundary, between sex and love. The money turns any feelings into a transaction. This is both a playful parody of the traditional "male provider/female reciprocator" model and a defensive declaration of independence—she purchases not the painting, but the freedom of "mutual non-indebtedness" and the "right to no consequences" within this one-off relationship [4]. Gloria flips the idea that men take from women. Hu and Cai write that when female characters try to use power over others in gender relations to change the passive roles, female characters often receive punishment or are pushed aside in the narrative [4]. In the film Gloria spends money to buy paintings. That shows Gloria's control, as an emotional buyer. This break of male rules makes the narrative try to bring back balance. Thus, the desolation and emptiness she reveals in the karaoke scene are not mere emotional release, but rather the 'narrative price' she must pay for such radical independence. While the film permits her a veneer of 'unfettered' freedom, it covertly implants a causal logic by imposing 'emotional isolation' as its consequence: that female dominance in

relationships invariably sacrifices profound intimacy [4]. This subconsciously disciplines any perceived 'excess' of female agency.

4.3. The dining table as an 'intimate-public commons'

This film through Beibei —Mr. Bai's ex-wife shows the film's ways of thinking. Beibei says, "a woman's life is not complete until she has children ". That line starts a big argument in the film. The argument takes place at a dinner table. The dinner table talk fits Zhen Zhang's idea of the Intimate-Public Commons—a place where private talk changes how the public thinks about what a woman is [6].

The trio argues. The director through the trio use sentences to state the trios ideas of a complete woman. Beibei defends the duty. Ms. Li says, "living solely for children is incomplete." Gloria says, "not living for oneself is incomplete." The exchange shows Wang's idea that a short political space can be built through talk [10]. The womens talk goes beyond gossip. The women work to set the line between tradition and modernity.

The political potential of the Herstory stays limited. Johnson say that discussions in cinema often turn into shallow jokes [11]. Johnson points to Shanghai-style humor as an example [11]. Johnson argue that the jokes stop structural critique [11]. The deep differences in the disagreements soften because of the comforts of consumer culture.

4.4. The alleyway cobbler's stall and the 'gentrified' narrative of the underclass

In the film *B for Busy*, the stall of cobbler at the entrance to a Shanghai alleyway serves not merely as a workplace. As Zhang defines it, the stall of cobbler functions as a "Intimate -Public Commons" [6]. This study notices the stall of cobbler when audience watches the film, within the stall of cobbler and private conversation mingles with the clamour of the street. In the film, the cobbler's "coffee moment" at the alleyway entrance but that the cobbler's "coffee moment" is not a break. The cobbler's "coffee moment" becomes a space act. The cobbler's "coffee moment" breaks the logic of traditional work spaces. The cobbler's "coffee moment" reshapes the shoe repair stall— just a tool for survival—into what Zhang defines as an "Intimate-Public Commons" [6]. The cobbler's "coffee moment" lets the hard work dissolve because coffee, a middle class leisure sign appears. The cobbler's "coffee moment" lets private enjoyment move, onto the public street. This posture of 'living within work' constitutes. The 'soft resistance' described by Yu – where marginalised individuals refuse to be reduced to mere labour power, instead appropriating elite aesthetic habits to contest spatial discourse [12]. Yet this romanticisation of working-class existence also lays bare the film's 'Narrative Gentrification'—a carefully orchestrated sense of ease that obscures the grit and anxiety of authentic grassroots survival, transforming the cobbler's stall into a scenic spectacle catering to urban middle-class imagination [12].

Yi &Huang describe a strategy employed in dramas such as 'Ode to Joy' [13]. This demonising strategy constructs migrant workers as 'abject rural other' [13]. *B for Busy* follows a similar path, utilising a strategy termed assimilation. The cobbler in the film inhabits society's margins. Yet the cobbler possesses capital that aligns with middle-class figures like Mr. Bai, cobbler appreciates coffee, quotes references, and lives with ease. This study observes how the cobbler bridges the divide between the periphery and the middle-class. This treatment renders working-class life more palatable, and this treatment obscure the realities of working-class existence. Much like Yin's critique of Chinese feminism and its class blindness, the film eases the tension and pain of class

divisions [1]. In the *B for Busy* this film imbues working-class characters with a middle-class aesthetic, and it employs this style to soften the class divide.

Thus the stall of cobbler in the film does not function as a workplace, that serves as a backdrop for soft resistance of class [12]. The stall of cobbler showcases the inclusivity and modernity of Shanghai, and constructs that inclusivity upon the exclusion of genuine poverty and anxiety [12]. The cobbler becomes a symbol of gentrification, a safe-even exoticism (coffee-drinking)— "other" who not only fails to challenge the spatial hegemony of middle class, but legitimises their right to transform urban space into a private garden. This represents a classic case of "avoiding the crucial issues". The film employs a sentimentalised "lane utopia" to obscure the real spatial folding and class segregation that exists.

4.5. Limitation

The limitation also reaches audience reception. Liu's study into empowerment advertising shows that viewers find the idea of 'empowerment through dialogue' engaging [6]. Viewers also acknowledge that empowerment through dialogue is risky in practice. Many people note that women like Ms. Li—who continue to handle the shift of family obligations, such as supervising homework—rarely achieve the smooth independence that Gloria portrays. The gap in these discussions is clear. Yi and Huang carried out interviews. The qualitative interviews show that the female audiences from second-tier cities and the female audiences from areas view the *B for Busy* as a picture of the Shanghai Brahmins [13]. The Shanghai Brahmins are the segment. The elite segment holds debates about self-actualisation. The elite segment talks about self-actualisation while the female audiences face the material struggles of the population. The female audiences feel that the elite segment lives far from the material struggles. The dining table then becomes the space of exclusion and the space of expression. The dining table works as the commons that only the people, with the cultural capital can enter.

5. The "invisible walls" of post-feminism

5.1. Othering in the urban-rural divide

According to the narrative of *B for Busy*, that the narrative of *B for Busy* rests on the exclusion of the other. Yi and Huang point out that urban dramas often set middle-class women against an old-fashioned rural backdrop [13]. *B for Busy* shows the exclusion by ignoring the housework that holds these lives together. In *B for Busy* pushes aside the work of maids and other helpers. The director display that the film removes class conflict. That the film shows feminism as a greenhouse rose [14]. The greenhouse rose is beautiful, and the greenhouse rose stays apart from real social life that could cause change, for all even when class conflict is gone [14].

5.2. "Self-gazing" in a neoliberal context

Through the lens of Brice the characters look closely at skincare and fashion [7]. The careful attention shows a panoptic gaze mentality. The careful self monitoring goes beyond beauty preference. The careful self monitoring becomes a discipline. Liu says that the form of self-discipline is hidden by the talk of self-love [6]. The hidden self-discipline makes women take in a modified gaze. This study notices that people try to fit the idea of youthful beauty. People practice a self exploitation that reinforces the social standards through people's careful habits. People keep the cycle going.

6. From "soft resistance" to digital rebellion

6.1. Personal cinema as "soft resistance"

The audience can notice that the film does not shout. This film is new because it avoids political fights. Instead the film uses "soft resistance" and focuses on everyday lives that question common stories [12]. At the same time the audience can observe that the film shows the male lead doing house work and lets the women lead. *B for Busy* makes a small gender role flip. This personal cinema style works around censorship. Shows how private voices can still change gender politics [15].

6.2. Subculture and hard resistance

In contrast to the resistance of independent filmmakers like Ai Xiaoming or the digital feminism that emerges in online groups *B for Busy* appears relatively conservative [16,17]. Digital platforms let users try gender change and play with signs and symbols. *B for Busy* keeps gender norms. *B for Busy* also follows middle class family values. In fact, there is a split in Chinese feminism that shows a contrast between consumption in mainstream media and bold dangerous resistance, on the political edges. Chinese feminism has the side staying in the news and the risky side pushing back in the margins.

6.3. Negotiating censorship

In this article view the film succeeds because the director uses a way to negotiate [15]. The director puts gender themes inside the territory of Shanghai-style light comedy. The director lowers the urgency of critiques. The director moves feminist discourse from the sphere into a private emotional context. The director creates a vacuum zone that sits within the limits of censorship.

7. Future pathways and unfinished business for Chinese feminism

The cruelty of the entry ticket shows the exclusivity of the Shanghai myth from the description of film. This article combine Fan Yang idea of pseudo-feminism with Yi and Huang class analysis, conclude that the female subjectivity in the film depends entirely on the consumption entry mechanism [3,13]. The female subjectivity, in the film rests on the consumption entry mechanism. Ms. Li's independence comes from ability of Ms. Li to pay for Shanghai old-style houses and expensive shoes. The freedom of Gloria comes from her husband's asset even though the husband is not there. The story creates a survivorship bias that the rule of men can be fixed by taste and more spending power. The story displays this VIP Lounge Feminism that wipes out the lives of working-class women. Working-class women like workers cannot pay the price of entry. The film does not close gender gaps, in addition to pushes class stratification further.

Ontological Anxiety and Self-Exploitation appear for the privileged "Big Heroines" in the film. The general public can notice that freedom feels unstable for the "Big Heroines". Bowen Hu argues that the privileged "Big Heroines" exist in a state of "Entanglement" [8]. The autonomy of the "Big Heroines" is not a right but a "spectacle" that requires constant maintenance. Drawing on Liu and Brice discover that the privileged "Big Heroines" must manage the "Big Heroines" bodies, the privileged "Big Heroines" emotions and the privileged "Big Heroines" social standing with the strictness of a corporation [6,7]. Any slip in the appearance management can break the identity of "women.", and any slip in the money stability can also break the identity of "women." The

neoliberal "self-surveillance" is more sneaky, than the patriarchal discipline because the "self-surveillance" hides behind the idea of "self-love."

The future of feminism must not accept the "suspended narratives" shown by *B for Busy*. Wang and Yu argue that the discourse must move beyond fragmented consumption based "middle class self healing" [10,12].

8. Conclusion

B for Busy is more than a city comedy. The film *B for Busy* as an example of the upscale shift of feminism. The streets of Shanghai's French Concession have been cleaned up by boutique shopping. *B for Busy* shows how radical feminist politics have been pushed aside by a middle class look. The liberation shown in *B for Busy* is not change. The liberation shown in *B for Busy* is decoration.

The discourse must rebuild an "Public Commons" that goes beyond class barriers. Future cinematic practices must dare to pierce the sugar-coated shell of "Shanghai Chic" to engage with the gritty realities that exist outside the aroma of coffee and the logic of purchasing power. *B for Busy* should not be viewed as a victory, but as a warning, it reminds people that a feminism stripped of its structural critique is destined to become nothing more than another expensive ornament on the shelf of capitalism.

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