

The Rise of the Neoliberal Chinese Female Subject in Go Lala Go

Su-lin Yu

National Cheng Kung University, TAIWAN

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>



Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [Film and Media Studies Commons](#), and the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

Dedicated to the dissemination of scholarly and professional information, [Purdue University Press](#) selects, develops, and distributes quality resources in several key subject areas for which its parent university is famous, including business, technology, health, veterinary medicine, and other selected disciplines in the humanities and sciences.

CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: <clcweb@purdue.edu>

Recommended Citation

Yu, Su-lin. "The Rise of the Neoliberal Chinese Female Subject in Go Lala Go." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 20.6 (2018): <<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.3322>>

This text has been double-blind peer reviewed by 2+1 experts in the field.

The above text, published by Purdue University Press ©Purdue University, has been downloaded 215 times as of 11/07/19.

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

This is an Open Access journal. This means that it uses a funding model that does not charge readers or their institutions for access. Readers may freely read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, or link to the full texts of articles. This journal is covered under the [CC BY-NC-ND license](#).

CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture

ISSN 1481-4374 <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>>
Purdue University Press ©Purdue University

CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." In addition to the publication of articles, the journal publishes review articles of scholarly books and publishes research material in its *Library Series*. Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: <clcweb@purdue.edu>

Volume 20 Issue 6 (December 2018) Article 3

Su-lin Yu,

"The Rise of the Neoliberal Chinese Female Subject in *Go Lala Go*"

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol20/iss6/3>>

Contents of **CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 20.6 (2018)**

Special Issue ***Belief in Global Capitalism***. Ed. Fu-jen Chen

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol20/iss6/>>

Abstract: Built upon feminist critique of neoliberalism, this paper will examine a prominent medium through which neoliberal feminist ideology is disseminated: *Go Lala Go*. The essay argues that the film co-opts the discourse of neoliberalism, and reworks it to construct neoliberal female subjects. First, the author explores what kind of role neoliberalism has enacted in the formation of an emergent type of female subject in China. Then, the essay demonstrates how the contentious process of neoliberal feminism affects young career women's identities. More than career guides promoting different techniques for making women more successful at their workplaces, the film communicates to women by engaging neoliberal rhetoric in a connotative manner to cultivate a compelling female identity. It offers self-help advice and tactics to work around discrimination without directly confronting it. Instead of fighting for structural reforms, the film advocates strategies for pay raise, promotion and negotiations as updated, professionally themed etiquette lessons. In particular, the essay compares the ways in which the film adopts different varieties of neoliberal rhetoric in Chinese cultural contexts and conditions. China offers a challenging case study on the intersections of gender discourse and neoliberalism in transnational context. This essay on contemporary Chinese women will create interesting parallels with recent U.S. analyses of the emergence of neoliberal feminism and expose its contradictory logic. The Chinese experience in turn would add complexity and depth to the critical engagement with neoliberal feminism.

Su-lin YU

The Rise of the Neoliberal Chinese Feminist Subject in *Go Lala Go*

Over the past decade, an ongoing debate over the relationship between feminism and neoliberalism has arrested the critical attention of feminist community. More and more feminist scholars have noted that feminist ideas and language have been appropriated, seduced by, or aligned with neoliberalism. This ongoing discussion is an important one, because it reveals the extent that neoliberalism has changed the meaning of feminism in global north and south. Indeed, critiques of feminism's co-option show not only that neoliberal capitalism has incorporated feminist language in order to further intensify capital accumulation, but also that neoliberalism as a political rationality has a great impact on feminist theory and politics.

Built upon feminist critique of neoliberalism, this article will examine a prominent medium through which neoliberal feminist ideology is disseminated: *Go Lala Go*. By analyzing the film, I will show how it co-opts the discourse of neoliberalism, and reworks it to construct a neoliberal female subject. First, I will explore what kind of role neoliberalism has enacted in the formation of an emergent type of female subject in China. Then, I will demonstrate how the contentious process of neoliberal feminism affects young career women's identities. More than a career guide promoting different techniques for making women more successful at their workplaces, the film communicates to women by engaging neoliberal rhetoric in a connotative manner to cultivate a compelling female identity. It offers self-help advice and tactics to work around discrimination without directly confronting it. Instead of fighting for structural reforms, the film advocates strategies for pay raise, promotion and negotiations as updated, professionally themed etiquette lessons. In particular, I will compare how the director adopts similar neoliberal rhetoric in other Chinese cultural contexts and conditions. China offers a challenging case study on the intersections of gender discourse and neoliberalism in transnational context. This study on contemporary Chinese women will create interesting parallels with recent U.S. analyses of the emergence of neoliberal feminism and expose its contradictory logic. The Chinese experience in turn would add complexity and depth to the critical engagement with neoliberal feminism.

The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism

In her 2005 seminal article, Hester Eisenstein claims that feminist vocabulary of women's personal empowerment has been used to facilitate neoliberal globalization. Eisenstein asks the provocative question of whether feminism has entered into a dangerous liaison with capitalism. More specifically, she queries whether the contemporary women's movement has actually facilitated the growth and spread of corporate globalization. Maintaining that feminism has been "seduced" by "corporate leaders and elites," Eisenstein concludes that feminism in its twenty-first century incarnation has become a handmaiden of capitalism.

Partly drawing on Eisenstein, Nancy Fraser further articulates a similar argument in her well-known intervention in *New Left Review*. Fraser's article reconstructs the history of second-wave feminism, positing that feminism has not simply been co-opted by neoliberalism, but that there is some "subterranean elective affinity between feminism and neoliberalism" ("Feminism"). She offers a timely warning that feminism as a program of advancing individual women's careers can become an ideological support for exploitative economic systems. According to Fraser, current manifestations of feminism have been influenced by neoliberal capitalism, which focuses on individual freedom and the free market. Neoliberal ideas about the "free, unencumbered, self-fashioning individual" can harness "the dream of women's emancipation" to "the engine of capitalist accumulation" ("Feminism" 220-21). Thus, Fraser sees second wave feminism as having "unwittingly provided a key ingredient to the spirit of the new neoliberalism" ("Feminism" 110).

However, not all feminists desire an alliance with neoliberalism. Nancy Fraser's account has faced criticism for misrepresenting the unity of second wave feminism, especially in her construction of an idealized second-wave dominated by socialist feminists, and depicting feminism as a static, monolithic body (Funk; Prügl). Nanette Funk has suggested that Fraser and Eisenstein misrepresent second wave feminism, generalizing from the socialist feminist critique to all feminism, when in fact liberal feminism has always been hegemonic. For liberal feminists, gender equality could be accomplished within the parameters of capitalism. Feminism thus did not need neoliberalism to flourish, though neoliberalism may have needed feminism. While some feminists may embrace neoliberalism, this is certainly not true for all (Funk). In addition, Sonia E. Alvarez has noted that there were feminists who "remained critical of working with the State and international institutions under conditions of restricted democracy and global neoliberalism" (221).

As the debate continues in the global north, feminists concerned with women in the global south also join the conversation, noting that neoliberal globalization has been universally but differently impacting women across the world. Chandra Talpade Mohanty sees a special danger in feminist language where the political is being increasingly neutralized into "a privatized politics of representation, disconnected from systematic critique and materialist histories of colonialism, capitalism and heteropatriarchy" (968). Kalpana Wilson also points out the appropriation and transformation of feminist concepts by neoliberal development discourses. Literature on Third World women workers also reveals the great variety of ways in which women are incorporated into transnational capitalist production and the ways in which existing local gender relations are a resource for capital. Christina Scharff contends that the empowered and capable female subject is positioned in opposition to powerless, "other" women. Mary E. Hawkesworth argues that "neoliberal privatization contributes to a regendering of the state," delegitimizing social welfare agencies and imposing a "reproductive tax" on many women. (20-22). Likewise, Runyan and Peterson note that "by 'slashing social services,' women's reproductive labor becomes more burdensome as the public sector abandons its previous responsibilities" (199). In spite of such feminists' warnings, many have become the followers or believers of the call of the neoliberal fantasy. As a dominant regime of truth, neoliberal ideology has interpellated a new kind of feminist subject and thus produces a new variant of feminism.

In the last couple of years, one can witness the emergence of a new cohort called "neoliberal feminism" represented by prominent female leaders from the corporate environment aiming to displace and mute the more critical liberal feminist voices and to promote neoliberal governance (Rottenberg). For instance, in her best-seller *Lean In*, Sandberg recommends as part of her "feminist manifesto" that to succeed, each woman must work on herself to remove what Sandberg calls internal barriers. In other words, the neoliberal feminist project requires each woman to cope with gender inequalities by working on herself and pushing through gender-related obstacles with confidence and determination. Sandberg believes *Lean In* will support individual women, so they can then attain corporate and political leadership positions. From these influential positions the individuals will ostensibly improve the lives of other female employees. Sandberg's statement demonstrates the essence of neoliberal feminist ideology; the individual, rather than any larger social structure, is the site of revolution, and through each internal revolution women as whole are ostensibly progressing. Since its publication, Sheryl Sandberg's *Lean In* has excited much debate and discussion. Many academic and grassroots feminists have criticized Sandberg's brand of feminism, arguing that she only represents the interests of a select group of highly privileged women. I will emphasize that neoliberal feminism—via its well-known manifesto, Sandberg's *Lean In*—has been widely cautioned for its emphasis on the power and ability of the individual to effect positive transformations at the expense of a wider, structural critique of neoliberalism. Ultimately, I argue that Sandberg engages in neoliberal rhetoric as a way to rebrand the status quo, excluding race and class from discussions about women in the workplace. Sandberg's *Lean In* is not a feminist manifesto, but rather a neoliberal manifesto for women in the workplace.

Catherine Rottenberg is one of the most important feminist scholars who claim the emergence of neoliberal feminism that transforms feminist political goals into individualist personal projects. The most remarkable difference between neoliberal and liberal feminists is that the former does not criticize or problematize anything about neoliberalism and the role it plays in creating gender (and other) inequalities (419). According to Rottenberg, neoliberal feminists are fully aware of the existing social inequalities between men and women, but they claim that these unequal relations can and should be handled individually (419-20). Following Rottenberg and others, I will further argue that the neoliberal feminist agenda is the shared belief in isolated self-examination and self-actualization, practiced by individuals through their self-interested pursuit of success or happiness. Consequently, neoliberal feminism's followers are those who have fundamentally reimagined political agency and its practice. Their choice of an entrepreneurial form of agency to achieve their feminist goals fits perfectly with the neoliberal idealization of entrepreneurship as the preferred mode of contemporary subjectivity.

Another feature of neoliberal feminism is the insistence on the individualization of the female subject. Whatever the gender problem is, its solution under neoliberal feminism is individual rather than collective. In fact, as part of the general neoliberal logic, it suggests that each woman is personally responsible for her own fate. The neoliberal female subject is the one who should bring herself to a position that would allow her to compete in the market, whether it is the market for jobs or the market for products. She then needs to carefully manage herself in a manner that will keep her in the competition and allow her to progress. Such self-care, or self-empowerment, entails more than getting the right formal education. It requires continuous self-investments in developing and maintaining the kind of selfhood that has what it takes to be successful in a neoliberal world. As a result of its privatized

and individualized framing, neoliberal feminism follows the general neoliberal rationality in posing minimal demands on the public state.

More recently, neoliberal feminism has been receiving increasing attention as a field of research. Neoliberal feminism has become the dominant mode of engagement with women's rights in our moment, and it selectively borrows neoliberal ideology and rhetoric while rearticulating them under its own rationality. The neoliberal feminist platform interrupts collective action by decentralizing political attention from the group to the individual and by encouraging self-actualization and self-sufficiency as the means for economic and political advancement. Unlike other feminisms, neoliberal feminism seems to disagree with the idea that "the personal is political," or that the problem of a gendered society is a public issue that calls for joint efforts to change the infrastructure of society. Rather, this new feminism—as its name suggests—is embedded in the neoliberal ideology and is not critical of it. The highly individualized practice of entrepreneurship challenges feminism in a new way and requires a careful rearticulation of feminist ideas.

Neoliberalism and Gender Discourse in China

Neoliberalism was successfully integrated with global capitalism into Chinese society, effectively becoming one of China's major contemporary ideologies. Yet, the effects of neoliberal policies are increasingly recognized as contradictory and problematic. David Harvey has stressed the contradictory characteristics of China's neoliberalism. He argues that while neoliberalism seems to support market logic in order to privatize all things into the marketplace, the autocratic power of the Chinese State has never diminished in the market. Harvey's important observations raise a set of questions that Lisa Rofel's book, *Desiring China: Experiments in Neoliberalism, Sexuality, and Public Culture*, aims to answer, namely how is such a contradictory cultural logic of neoliberalism enacted in Chinese people's daily lives today? Or rather, I would like to add the following questions: How do young women in China express their newfound post socialist freedom and cosmopolitanism through consumption of transnational goods and services? How do they struggle for ways to define themselves within a newly emerging cultural context that includes neoliberal policies producing increased privatization, economic reform, foreign investment and consumerism?

To answer these questions, we need to understand how global capitalism/neoliberalism affects gender relations and female identities in China. Feminist research has revealed that women are increasingly positioned as ideal neoliberal subjects (Gill and Scharff; McRobbie). Angela McRobbie has demonstrated that women have become "privileged subjects of social change" who are fully equipped to maximize their newly gained opportunities, for instance, access to the labor market and control over reproduction. In particular, the transition from organized capitalism to neoliberal hegemony over the recent period has brought about a corresponding transformation in the role of Chinese women. As Eva Yin-I Chen has noted, there is an increasing number of a new type of Chinese woman who "departs radically from the socialist-era gender-neutral, public-serving body-erasing 'androgynous,' and traditional, pre-socialist Chinese woman who was submissive and self-sacrificing" (57). One of the most visible impacts has been the increased participation of Chinese women in the labor market. The educated middle-class women have had increased opportunities for professional and managerial employment since 1990s. For some women, increased opportunity for paid employment may mean greater autonomy and equality in personal life, or avenues out of oppressive relationships.

However, there are blunt contradictions and inequalities regarding the image of women as empowered subjects and the process of governmentality involved. Even though the dominant gender ideology has shifted in the post-Mao era, gender inequality remains unchallenged in many aspects of Chinese women's lives. The Maoist position that erased gender differences to enhance women's labor force participation has shifted to the post-Maoist position that essentializes gender differences to meet the demands of labor reduction for a market economy (Honig and Hershatter; Rofel, *Other*). Both gender ideologies have served and legitimized the Party's economic and political objectives rather than addressing women's concerns and raising their status as nominally claimed. This gender ideological shift has not only created conflicts and discontinuities in attitudes towards women, but also opened discursive space for new modes of governing gender. Gender has been increasingly mobilized for neoliberal defense.

Through the lens of neoliberal allure, the Du Lala phenomenon (on which I elaborate below) exposes the contradictory logic of neoliberal ideology in postsocialist China. It serves as a good case to examine the contentious process of neoliberal globalization affecting young career women in contemporary China. The hierarchy of the company where Lala works is a microcosm of the new Chinese society. *Go Lala Go!* reveals a Chinese gender discourse that legitimizes women's fight for financial independence as they proactively participate in China's fast growing international economy. As a representative of this

movement, Lala is the modern woman whose adaptive struggle shows how a neoliberal female subject negotiates her positioning in the new age of postsocialist market.

The Du Lala Phenomenon

Since its release in 2007, *A Story of Du Lala's Promotion* has become a spectacular bestseller, followed by three sequels, was then adapted into a film, *Go Lala Go* (2010), and finally morphed into a similarly popular TV series in the same year. The film adaptation traces Du Lala's career development from a young, inexperienced sales assistant to a mature senior executive in DB company, a Fortune 500 American multinational corporation in a rapidly globalized China. The total box-office revenue of the film reached 100 million RMB (approximately USD16 million) within days of its release, while the television show also enjoyed huge popularity (Cai). A rookie in the foreign-owned firm, Lala gradually learns the professional skills required by her assistant job as well as the office culture that belongs particularly to transnational companies, with its organizational hierarchy. Along with her career development, she embarks on a meandering romantic relationship with her manager that peaks at the end of the film with a Hollywood-style happy ending.

Even though the movie was extremely popular, it has received relatively little critical attention. Some scholars notice that the movie shares some characteristics of a commercial "chick flick" modeled on western postfeminist cultural productions, while others see it as a "capitalist fairy-tale." Nevertheless, it should not merely be viewed as light "chick lit" entertainment or career advice parable. The cultural significance of the movie deserves further analysis. Using Du Lala as a case study, I will examine whether global process of social and cultural change, especially the hegemony of neoliberal capitalism, challenges local gender orders. To analyze the effects of this process, I will explore how *Go Lala Go!* not only reflects integration of the Chinese urban society in a global consumer culture, but also contains complex and contradictory messages about young Chinese women's struggles with hegemonic patriarchal culture as well as global capitalism. Portraying young professional women's coming-of-age story in a contemporary China, the story juxtaposes the career success of the female protagonist Du Lala with the new economic independence and transnational commercialization of China. On the one hand, it celebrates an active, empowering form of female sexual and financial independence in neoliberal market terms, suggesting a significant departure from earlier representations of Chinese women. On the other hand, it legitimizes young Chinese women's agency through neoliberal process of subjectification rather than subverting the dominant patriarchal social order. Therefore, *Go Lala Go* aestheticizes the possibilities and limits of neoliberal influences on modern Chinese women as they gain individual freedom and economic advancement within a global consumer culture.

The first episode of the film immediately shares ideological affinity with neoliberal capitalism. On her first day of work, Lala is aware of the hierarchical structure and the capitalist values that the corporate micro-society obviously promotes. The head secretary tells Lala, "By the way, this company has really different personnel levels: small potatoes below manager make less than 4,000 RMB, the "middle class" managers own their own cars and make over 200,000 RMB a year, the "higher middle class" directors make more than 500,000 RMB a year and enjoy overseas vacations. The CEO, the upper class, makes more than a million a year." In this distinctive neoliberal climate, understanding her low position in this clear hierarchical division, Lala needs to improve herself in order to advance her status, which implies that she has to enhance the skills necessary to her specific professional tasks and learn the customary practices of this particular micro-society.

Lala's gradual career advancement also resonates with the concept of neoliberal self-enterprise where practicality, efficiency, planning, taking initiative, and calculations are inherent parts of this type of subjectivity. As she is resourceful and committed to her job, she quickly manages to be recognized by her superiors, gains their appreciation, and gradually improves her career prospects through a series of promotions. In order to build a successful career, she eagerly embraces and identifies with the values and goals of the company. She is willing to take challenges when her supervisor, Rose, the administrative manager, fakes a pregnancy and miscarriage and takes a six-month leave to avenge herself against the HR director, leaving behind a significant and unfinished renovation project. The crisis turns out to be a blessing: Lala's familiarity with DB's organizational structure and her accumulated knowledge make her the best substitute for Rose. The success of the project enables her supervisors to see her abilities and subsequently gains her first promotion. Step by step Lala manages to climb the ladder of the corporate hierarchy as a result of her successful professional performances.

Lala's image and struggle are identifiable with the neoliberal female subject and her experiences also serve as a metaphor of female individuality and autonomy. Pursuing her upward mobility, Lala achieves economic independence in her early twenties; by her late twenties, she has become a successful single woman. Her accomplishment provides an alluring representation of an ideal neoliberal female subject

who can provide guidelines to appropriate conduct in a ruthlessly competitive and unequal world. To some extent, her career struggles and successes demonstrate the capacity of contemporary Chinese women to gain a sense of rights and achieve a measure of independence and authority in the workplace. *Go Lala Go* thus illustrates the process of constructing an ideal neoliberal female subject since the Reform Era.

The major significance of the film is also its ability to reflect on the gender role in China's corporate office space populated by a new type of neoliberal female subject working for foreign investment companies. The emergence of the Du Lala style women in China provides an alternative to the traditional image of the "white-collar beauty." Lala begins with DB as an assistant, but is eventually promoted to HR and administration manager. This new image of white-collar women workers stresses the importance of women's career performance in foreign-invested enterprises. This is a particularly important message given that the careers of working women have traditionally been circumscribed by male-domination and that women to a large degree remain a marginalized subclass in China. In the film the female worker is given a new image. Instead of holding positions such as secretary, receptionist, typist and assistant, many female workers are now the company's supervisors and managers.

Consumption is another part of the construction of a neoliberal female subject. Lala's entrepreneurial self is formed and developed through her consumer activities. Indeed, Lala's salary and material possessions show her upward progress. At the beginning, Lala is carefully portrayed as a typical low maintenance woman, and her financial philosophy is one of saving and frugality instead of spending. When they get to know each other better, Lala tells Wang Wei, "Women have two ways of decompressing—shopping or eating. 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, Lala indulges herself with more high-end fashion, jewelry, and makeup. Later in the film, when Lala becomes jealous of Wang's suspected relationship with his ex-girlfriend Rose, she spends all her savings on an open-top Mazda car, and asks Wang Wei to send her home by the car. It is clear that she intends to use the car as a way to bond with Wang Wei. Yet, such materialism does not help women reach true self-actualization, and in fact has many negative repercussions. As Lala rises higher and higher in DB, perhaps she will echo Rose's disillusionment with her ambition: "The title's different. So what. I'm not happy at all."

Indeed, as the economy in China moves toward a neoliberal structure, one cannot ignore the impact of consumerism on women. Consumerism was once viewed as one of the bad western influences, but now it has become one of the prevailing norms. The film adaptation of the novel highlights Lala's lifestyle, including the pursuit of luxury goods and well-known Western brands. This particular feature of globalizing processes at work in China occurs within the domain of consumption, and further consolidates the impact of global economy and consumerism, especially in relation to the growing economic independence enjoyed by Chinese middle-class women. As individual social status is increasingly reflected by material symbols, the gender consequences are remarkable. The modern ideal female image increasingly emphasizes fashion and spending power. For Chinese women who wish to climb the mainstream ladder, consumer goods that are symbols of social status have become sources of aspirations and objects of pursuit.

Lala also performs an exemplary function, and acts as a neoliberal female model personifying the values and virtues considered most desirable and legitimate in "post socialist market" China. This heroine embodies the values and virtues that are not only desirable in the interest of the individuals who pursue them, but also in the interest of the Chinese state, as the strengthening of the middle class and the creation of a middle-class consciousness are considered fundamental to the governmental objectives of sustaining economic development and maintaining social stability (Fumian 332). Being hardworking, self-conscious, committed, and autonomous, Lala can therefore assume important responsibilities in the interest of the company's good. Such is a neoliberal self: a competitive individual who is exceptionally self-reliant and rather indifferent to the fact that her predicament is shared with others. As a result of this transformation, by the end of the movie, she has not only elevated her position and upgraded both her status and salary, but also advanced her accomplishments as a neoliberal citizen.

Neoliberal Manifestations in Gender Relations

With China's embrace of global capitalism, gender relations seem to be transformed by a market economy and the commercialization of the society. As Lala adapts to the capitalist corporate culture in her professional life, she also develops a keen sense of gender awareness in relationship with her male colleagues in multiple scenes. While Lala works harder than her male colleagues and supervisors, she argues with them over projects and competes with them for promotions, because men still dominate

leadership positions, such as managers and senior clerical staff. For instance, when Lala is directing an office-renovation project, she has a heated argument with Wang Wei, the sales director. On the day that the office area must be vacated, Wang Wei and his colleagues refuse to obey Lala's order. At the beginning, Lala attempts to negotiate with him, but Wang Wei refuses to cooperate. Eventually Lala insists on her plans and wins the argument. At the beginning of their disagreement, Wang Wei, who has long been accustomed to Western office politics, wants to teach Lala a lesson. He tries to intimidate her so that he and his department can win the upper hand. However, to Wang Wei's surprise, Lala has also understood the corporate culture and instead of being submissive she speaks up for herself with confidence.

When she and Wang Wei begin a secret office romance, Lala thinks over the possible consequences of their relationship in her pursuit of career aspiration. Given that DB has strict regulations that prohibit office relationships, Lala decides to intentionally shun Wang Wei, thereby indicating that she prioritizes her career in DB over her affection for him. When she runs into Wang Wei in the company the day after their one-night-stand in Thailand, Lala whispers to him, "I had too much to drink, and let's just pretend that it never happened." Lala is determined that this relationship should not interfere with her career development. She "should concentrate on work," because "a good job is hard to come by." For her, financial security and career success are far more important and dependable than romantic relationships. More than once, she expresses that she does not want to be Wang Wei's secretary. She told Wang that she has her own career aspiration, and then she takes the initiative to apply for the HR administration manager position. When Wang asks her if she would like to travel with him, she gives him a simple answer, "I never thought of giving up my career." In the end, it is Wang Wei who willingly quits his highly paid job in order to preserve Lala's reputation and position at DB. Not surprisingly, Lala continues her professional ambition. Although she is reunited with Wang Wei in Thailand at the end, it does not resolve the question of whether she can find a balance between career and love. The film, which ends on a Hollywood-style happy note, fails to transform underlying *gender relations*.

These aspects of women's lives are presented as elements of self-made success within which women can seem to exert a level of control. The director/female lead Jinglei Xu further stated in an interview that she thought about conflicts within the office environment and the love story depicted in the novel and decided the latter would be more attractive as a film plot. As Leung notes, "the representation of the young professional woman in *Go Lala Go* conforms to the Hollywood romantic comedy genre and neglects the struggles over gender, sexuality and class that continue to exist for many young women in urban China" (136). In particular, the kind of subjectivity that the film promotes may be also in conflict regarding women who belong to lower classes in society.

In the beginning of the film, Lala lands her dream job at DB while trying to get out of another company where she is sexually harassed. In her job interview, when being asked why she left her previous job, Lala merely mentioned that she has her own career aspiration. The brief scene reveals that neoliberal discourse is characterized by alleviating the responsibility of society over the individual destinies and transferring this burden to each person. Thus, if a female worker is unemployed, this is not explained as a structural problem of sexism, but as a presumed personal search for a dream job in the labor market. Consequently, this individuating of the serious unemployment problem blames the individuals themselves for their own afflictions rather than the structures of inequality that circumscribe their success. Neoliberalism serves to "privatize" or "trivialize" serious social problems. Collective mobilization demanding social justice and measures gives way to individual initiative. The obvious gender inequality and hierarchy within the workplace are understated in the film because it briefly relates this part of the narrative. Such understatement undermines the film adaptation's potential to comment on gender and power in contemporary Chinese society.

Conclusion

Since its Chinese translation was released in June 2013, *Lean In* has sold over 100,000 copies in China. The organization LEAN IN has also grown in popularity in China, and there are LEAN IN communities in 20 cities and at 50 colleges all over the country, with 100,000 Chinese men and women involved. Most of the Chinese LEAN IN participants belong to the middle class. In a New York Times article, Didi Kristen Tatlow claims that although feminism in China predates Sandberg's LEAN IN concept, LEAN IN could have caused a new focus for the Chinese women's movement. Yet, Ragnhild Sofie Selstø's findings indicate the contrary. Comparing Chinese LEAN IN groups with Sandberg's LEAN IN concept, she finds that Chinese LEAN IN groups' perspectives on feminism are different from the original LEAN IN concept based on Sheryl Sandberg's book, but have similarities with the American LEAN IN organization's views. She indicates, "LEAN IN in China cooperates with All-China Women's Federation, who could decide to

prohibit LEAN IN in China if they step out of their discourse." Not surprisingly, the message promoted by LEAN IN China has to be sanctioned and approved by the State.

Likewise, the film supports a new gender regime offering displacement of the feminist challenges to patriarchy. It avoids the issue of institutional structures oppressing women. Instead, it delivers a neoliberal belief that has already been universalized as a result of the triumph of global capitalism (Fumian 329). The audience is encouraged to believe in personal improvement in women's lives by the independent heroine rather than collective change, allowing gender hierarchy to continue to exist unchallenged (Leung 132). Therefore, the struggle of Lala, which does not focus on the newly re-emerged gender and class divisions in China, is instead an individualized professional challenge. The film portrays the journey of a young woman as a corporate "body" and consumer, and thus aligns with the neoliberal rhetoric.

One cannot deny the fact that neoliberal feminism may be viable for certain group of women in contemporary Chinese society, mainly middle and upper- class women. As Jan Rehmann points out, "neoliberal interpellations in contemporary societies may have different and even opposite effects in different 'milieus' to the degree that the appeals to creativity and initiative might play a mobilizing and constructive role in the formation of identities if they correspond to labor conditions that require and reinforce certain (relative) autonomy and freedom" (317). Ultimately, Lala's story reveals the ambivalent effects of neoliberal influences on young women's life in China. On the one hand, it depicts the rise of a new class of professional women and the urban office space as a sphere of everyday life for young Chinese women. The image of Lala as a strong, independent, intelligent, sexually open, and professionally successful woman epitomizes the new visibility of career women in the neoliberal era. The film portrays modern Chinese women who construct their own gender identity through a consumer subculture, and who strive for financial independence and career opportunities without being delimited by the dominant gender discourse. On the other hand, the film masks many of the continuous conflicts and struggles for other women in China, so the potential for the Du Lala phenomenon to comment on professional women's experiences becomes absorbed into a new gender regime "with Chinese characteristics" (Leung 136).

Works Cited

- Alvarez, Sonia E., Claudia de Lima Costa, Veronica Feliu, Rebecca Hester, Norma Klahn, Millie Thayer, editors. *Translocalities/Translocalidades: Feminist Politics of Translation in the Latin/a Americas*. Duke UP, 2014.
- Chen, Eva Yin-I. "Shanghai Baby as a Chinese Chick-Lit: Female Empowerment and Neoliberal Consumerist Agency." *Asian Journal of Women's Studies*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2009, pp. 54-93.
- Cai, Shenshen. "A Cultural Reading of a Chinese White-Collar Workplace Bestseller and its Film Adaptation: Li Ke's *A Story of Lala's Promotion* and *Go Lala Go!*" *PORTAL: Journal of Multidisciplinary International Studies*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2014, pp. 1-19.
- Eisenstein, Hester. "A Dangerous Liaison? Feminism and Corporate Globalization." *Science and Society*, vol 69, no. 3, 2005, 487-518.
- Fumian, Marco. "Chronicle of Du Lala's Promotion: Exemplary Literature, the Middle Class, and the Socialist Market." *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture*, vol. 28, no. 1, 2016, pp. 78-128.
- Funk, Nanette. "Contra Fraser on Feminism and Neoliberalism." *Hypatia*, vol. 28, 2013, pp. 179-96.
- Fraser, Nancy. "Feminism, Capitalism and the Cunning of History." *New Left Review* vol. 56, 2009, pp. 97-117.
- . *Fortunes of Feminism: From State-Managed Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis*. Verso, 2013.
- Gill, Rosalind and Christina Scharff, eds. *New Femininities: Postfeminism, Neoliberalism and Subjectivity*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.
- Harvey, David. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford UP, 2005.
- Hawkesworth, Mary E. *Globalization and Feminist Activism*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2006.
- Honig, Emily, and Gail Hershatter. *Personal Voices: Chinese Women in the 1980s*. Stanford UP. 1988.
- Ke, Li. *A Story of Du Lala's Promotion*. Shaanxi Normal University, 2007.
- Leung, Wing-Fai. "Product placement with 'Chinese characteristics': Feng Xiaogang's films and *Go Lala Go!*" *Journal of Chinese Cinemas*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2015, pp. 125-40.
- McRobbie, Angela. *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change*. SAGE, 2009.
- Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. "Transnational Feminist Crossings: On Neoliberalism and Radical Critique." *Signs*, vol. 38, no. 4, 2013, pp. 967-91.
- Prügl, Elizabeth. "Neoliberalising Feminism." *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, vol. 20, no. 4, 2015, pp. 614-31.
- Runyan, Anne Sisson and V. Spike Peterson. *Global Gender Issues in the New Millennium*. Westview, 2014.
- Rottenberg, Catherine. "The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism." *Cultural Studies*, vol. 28, no. 3, 2014, pp. 418-37.
- Rehmann, J. *Theories of Ideology: The Powers of Alienation and Subjection*. Koninklijke Brill NV, 2014.
- Rofel, Lisa. *Desiring China: Experiments in Neoliberalism, Sexuality, and Public Culture*. Duke UP, 2007.

---. *Other Modernities: Gendered Yearnings in China after Socialism*. U of California P. 1999.

Scharff, Christina. "Gender and Neoliberalism: Exploring the Exclusions and Contours of Neoliberal Subjectivities." *Theory, Culture and Society*, 1 Apr. 2014, theoryculturesociety.org/christina-scharff-on-gender-and-neoliberalism/. Accessed 17 Jul. 2018.

Selstø, Ragnhild Sofie. *A New Feminism for China? A Case Study of LEAN IN Circles in Mainland China*. Thesis, University of Oslo, 2016.

Sandberg, Sheryl. *Lean In: Women, Work and the Will to Lead*. Alfred A. Knopf, 2013.

Tatlow, Didi Kirsten. "For China, a New Kind of Feminism." *New York Times*, 17 Sept 2013, www.nytimes.com/2013/09/18/world/asia/for-china-a-new-kind-of-feminism.html. Accessed 14 Jul. 2018.

Wilson, Kalpana. "'Race,' Gender and Neoliberalism: Changing Visual Representations in Development." *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 32, no. 2, 2011, pp. 315-31.

Author's profile: Su-in Yu teaches literature and feminism at National Cheng Kung University, Taiwan. Her interests in scholarship include gender studies, transnational feminism, and third wave feminism. She is the author of *Mapping Third Wave Feminism* (2012) and has published numerous essays on third wave feminism, transnational feminism and American ethnic women writers. E-mail: <sulinyu@mail.ncku.edu.tw>