

Hot Mums

Motherhood and Feminism in Post-socialist China

BY YIFEI SHEN

ABSTRACT

Hot Mums. Motherhood and Feminism in Post-socialist China

The term “hot mum” (La Ma, 辣妈) has become popular in the Chinese media in the 21st century, being regarded as a “feminist” image of the modern mother, as it breaks with the stereotype of the traditional Chinese mother. Departing from a historical framework of motherhood and feminism, as well as western theories of subjectification and individualization, the article explores the discourses of hot mums in contemporary China. Based on an analysis of more than eight hundred articles in a Chinese database, this article explores the impacts of the image of the hot mum upon practices of motherhood among contemporary Chinese women. The findings show that the notion of the hot mum has been transformed into the concept of “all-around hot mums” who take care of both their families and their careers. It is argued that this process has not changed power relations between men and women, nor the roles of father and mother. Commercial and market aspects have turned hot mums from an initial expression of women’s subjectivity with particular maternal values into subjects of consumerism. The hot mum discourse is apparently contributing to the oppression rather than empowerment of Chinese women, let alone their increased sense of individuality.

KEYWORDS

China, gender equality, individualization, motherhood, feminism

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INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

My research interest in the phenomenon of the hot mum derives from a picture featuring a renowned Taiwanese Chinese TV host, Lady S,¹ and a Korean movie star (see photo page 39) proudly posing with their baby daughters in their arms. The image of Lady S presented in the picture seems to constitute a break from the traditional image of the Chinese woman as “a virtuous wife and good mother” (Xian Qi Liang Mu, 贤妻良母), for example, in how she is holding her baby, her make-up, facial expression and fashion style, as well as her way of walking. Among the articles in the Chinese media with the term “hot mum” in the title, many seem to emphasize this contrast between the hot mum and the traditional Chinese mother. As a quote from a local Chinese newspaper points out:

The advent of the hot mum era has completely overturned the traditional Chinese image of a mother. It enables a mother to seek for her women’s charm unremittingly. Who says that motherhood is difficult? Who says that a mum should be law-abiding? We have to be flirtatiously charming, fashionable and stylish, sometimes graceful and elegant, sometimes sexy and enchanting, bringing our pretty baby onto the stage of our life show. “Hot-mum IN Era”, City Express, May 8th, 2009.

The term “hot mum” first appeared in the Chinese media in 2003 and gradually became popular over the ensuing decade, with numerous TV programmes revolving around this idea, for example, *The Hot Mom College* from Shenzhen Satellite TV, *Mamma Mia!* from Shanghai Satellite TV and a very popular soap opera, *Hot Mum*, in 2013. The image of the hot mum in the Chinese media has promoted the idea of “a strong woman” (Nv Qiang Ren, 女强人)³ and is often connected with the ideal of motherhood and images of independent middle-class women. A “hot mum” like

Lady S was seen as a “feminist” by the media, while the soap opera *Hot Mum* was seen as “fashion feminism” in China.

The link between the notion of the hot mum and feminism interestingly echoes the public debate on feminism and motherhood during the Republican period in China (1911-1939), a focus which faded out of the public discourse after the founding of the People’s Republic in 1949. At the contextual level, such perspectives link this article to past discussions about motherhood and feminism in both east and west. The article will also analyze this phenomenon in present-day China in light of Ulrich Beck and Yunxiang Yan’s theoretical discussion of the relationship between individualization and what is claimed to be the rising status of women in China. The article questions how women’s subjectivity is being generated and negotiated in practicing motherhood in present-day China.

Despite numerous search results under the entry “hot mum” on the Internet, in order to grasp the mainstream attitude of the public discourse the analysis particularly focuses on articles on the hot mum phenomenon in the printed media, especially newspapers. The data used for the analysis in this study have been selected from the *Duxiu* database, a huge content-based database that searches full-text books, journals, newspapers, theses, web pages, conference proceedings and video clips and covers Chinese publications from the early 1930s to the present.⁴ The analysis is based on those newspaper articles that include the words “hot mum” in their titles and that were retrieved from *Duxiu*’s newspaper category, the first such article appearing in 2003. By 31 December 2011, a total of 1573 articles with “hot mum” in the title had been found. After eliminating reprints, 967 articles remained.

Using grounded theory (Corbin and Strauss 2008) as an analytical approach, a mixed method that quantifies qualitative data has been employed to analyse these

articles. “Keyword coding” was applied to identify the theme of each article, as well as the high-frequency descriptive words for “hot mum” that recurred throughout the database. This assisted in mapping out an overview of the public discourse on the hot mum phenomenon in the Chinese media. The data were then sorted by “type coding”, which traces the origin of the term “hot mum” and the evolution of its contents throughout the articles, thus helping to gain a better understanding of the logics behind the hot mum phenomenon. Type codes included words like “appearance” (wai biao, 外表), “skills” (ji shu, 技能), “personality” (ge xing, 个性), etc. These codes were partly pre-designed based on previous discussions on womanhood, subjectification and individualization, especially on the aspects of motherhood that were valued in different times in both east and west. Contents that were not covered by these pre-designed codes were also coded and added to the pool along with the process, showing what seems to signify the hot mum during the period 2003-2011. By comparing the pool of codes before and after the analysis, the data may also point to the development of motherhood throughout contemporary China and the variations between east and west.

DISCOURSES OF MOTHERHOOD AND FEMINISM IN CHINA DURING THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

Ideas of feminism and motherhood were introduced into China at the beginning of the twentieth century and soon became contested among feminist scholars. Accompanying the publication of *About Feminism* (Nv Quan Shuo, 女权说) and *The Women's Bell* (Nv Jie Zhong, 女界钟) as early as 1903, the idea that “men and women are born with equal rights” began to spread in China. However, understandings of feminism and of the aims of women's movements differed from scholar to scholar.

In *The Women's Bell*, the model of Chinese women was depicted as a woman who “thinks progressively, yet still pays acute attention to domestic work and child rearing, of which the very role of ‘mother’ is emphasized” (Sudo 2010:67). The concept of a “mother of all citizens” (Guo Min Zhi Mu, 国民之母) was proposed for the first time in the same work in 1903. To become a “mother of all citizens” was seen as *the* path for women to contribute to their country; “feminist” ideas also emerging at the time. However, according to *The Women's Bell*, the idea of “feminism” is motherhood, and it can only be realized by advocating it (ibid.:84). At that time, it was said, “the (prior) goal of education for women is to produce good wives and mothers who can keep the family” (Y. Jin 2006).

Nonetheless, other contemporary Chinese feminists in the same period, such as Chen Xiefen, Zhang Zhujun and He Zhen, paid greater attention to women's rights and saw education as an avenue to women's independence, rather than producing good wives and mothers (Sudo 2010:83–103). This conflict between the idea of feminism as women's political participation and the idea of the woman as a “virtuous wife and good mother” (Xian Qi Liang Mu, 贤妻良母) turned into a major struggle over women's rights during the Republican Revolution (1911-1912).

In 1923, *Women's Magazine* (Fu Nv Za Zhi, 妇女杂志) introduced the Swedish reformer Ellen Key's radical ideas of motherhood, described in her book, *The Renaissance of Motherhood*, of 1913. Key took it for granted that women have stronger intuitions in terms of mothering and weaker powers of reasoning than men (Key 1914). She believed that motherhood was women's duty. “Through her motherhood” – and presumably in practicing it – “women's sexual nature gradually become purer than man's” (ibid.:27). Key's ideas heavily influenced contemporary Chinese

intellectuals, and women's movements were then understood to consist of two branches: 1) the feminist movement, which urged women to pursue their own personal happiness; and 2) the "more progressive" motherhood movement, which "emphasized the maternal instinct". Here motherhood was viewed as a higher level of feminist movement (Sudo 2010:150). Along these lines the ongoing rivalry ended with the denial of women's political participation, the fading of feminist ideas and the increasing advocacy of the notion that "the 'virtuous wife and good mother' is women's duty".

The discussion gradually faded from the public discourse after the founding of People's Republic in 1949, after which a series of national policies were introduced to encourage women's participation in the labour market. A public child-care system was established in order to support women's work, which produced a generation of so-called "working mothers" (Gong Zuo Mu Qin, 工作母亲) (Jin 2013). The sense of self-dignity and achievement that "working mothers" obtained from working supposedly compensated for the marginalization of the role of mother.

Nonetheless, during the reform era, in particular in the 1980s, traditional gender divisions between men as breadwinners and women as carers were revived. Accompanying the progress of China's social transformation and the rise of the market economy, the emphasis on motherhood was especially strengthened. Women were encouraged to return to the home so that there could be enough jobs in the labour market for young people to fill, and also so that the children would be taken better care of. The collapse of the Danwei (work unit, 单位) system, China's principle unit of policy implementation and welfare provision before its economic reform, directly led to the disintegration of the system of public childcare facilities (Liu 2007). Child care in this sense became a purely private matter,

this privatization of parenting once again turning mothers into carers (Jin 2013).

During the 1980s, the feminists' belief that motherhood is not inherent in the nature of women declined in the public discourse, as did discussions on the relationship between women's rights and the practice of motherhood in China.

While the myth of motherhood was created in and steered by the modernization process in contemporary China, American scholars in particular, who were confronted with a similar notion of "natural womanhood", began to debunk this myth. From a psychoanalytical and sociological perspective, Chodorow (1978) pointed out that even the most basic subsistence economy cannot prove that women's ability to bear children inevitably leads to the gender division of labour, and evidence for a maternal instinct is also lacking (*ibid.*). On the contrary, she suggests that the idea of motherhood is merely socially constructed. In a similar vein, Rich and Oakley (Oakley 1979; Rich 1986) also pointed out that motherhood derives from a social structure that oppresses women. Many of the demands of motherhood, such as self-sacrifice, were and are in conflict with the principle of female autonomy (*ibid.*).

From the perspective of cultural analysis Shari Thurer pushed the above arguments further and demonstrated that the so-called "good mother" is a cultural construct, with different cultures of childcare and ideals of motherhood in different eras. For Thurer, the idea of women being instinctively good mothers is merely a myth (Thurer 1994). Following Thurer's path, Apple elaborates on the meaning and development of the "perfect mother" idea in America. She points out the pressure and confusion such concepts can cause women. A perfect mother is supposed to know all kinds of "scientific" parenting knowledge, and she also needs to accept the overwhelming demands of parenting fostered in our contemporary culture, even though the socio-

economic environment she lives in might be different from the others (Apple 2006).

Such perspectives on motherhood enable us to have a clear view of how feminism opposes the notion of natural motherhood and how it has revealed the incompatibility between the idea of motherhood and feminist ideals. Nonetheless, seen from the perspective of the hot mum phenomenon, a new image seems to have emerged that incorporates such feminist ideals, created out of what it means to be a mother in today's China. From the feminist's perspective, it is important to analyse the new motherhood in respect of whether it changes relations of power between men and women or gender roles within the family. The next section traces the evolution of the hot mum phenomenon by demonstrating the range of its implications.

THE EMERGENCE OF THE HOT MUM AND THE EVOLUTION OF ITS MEANING

On the Chinese Internet, it is commonly recognized that the hot mum idea originated with the nickname of the former Spice Girl, Victoria Beckham. As "Spice Girl" is translated as "hot girl" (La Mei 辣妹) in Chinese, Victoria therefore "rightfully" became a hot mum (La Ma, 辣妈) after giving birth to her babies (Baidu Baike). In the printed media in China the term "hot mum" appeared for the first time in the Chinese translation of the film *Freaky Friday: Hot Mum and Hot Girl*.

Since 2005, the hot mum phenomenon has moved beyond the characters in the film and entered the celebrity community: Canada-born Hong Kong actress Christy Chung and Hollywood actress Angelina Jolie were the first to be described as "hot mums" (*Modern Chauffeur*, 现代司机报 2005). In these articles, Christy Chung was given the title for her beautiful figure and sexy style, while Angelina Jolie received it when she was voted among the "Top Ten Hot Mums in Hollywood" by the Ameri-

can magazine *In Touch*. In 2006, actresses from Hong Kong and Taiwan, such as Alyssa Chia, Lady S and Ching-ying Tao, also started to attract people's attention as hot mums. Lady S, a famous Taiwanese hostess whose body shape remained "sexy" after the delivery of her child, has been uncontentiously recognized by the media as the representative of the hot mum. In this way, before 2007 the term "hot mum" was generally used to refer to female public figures in show business who have managed to retain a good figure after giving birth. This was followed by a phenomenal increase in reports of hot mums: since its first appearance in 2003 in a single article, in 2011 the term "hot mum" was identified in 976 articles.

Since 2007 the meaning of the term "hot mum" began to become more extensive and enriched while spreading. There are, in general, two trends observed in the articles: 1) not only are celebrities hot mums, but the term "hot mum" now also refers to ordinary women as well; 2) the focus for the hot mum shifted from women's physical appearance to their "qualities" – their temperament and even their gender roles, such as being independent or career-driven. Specifically, four main categories of the hot mum appeared in these articles: 1) the original focus of the media, namely celebrities who have given birth; 2) women with unique characters who catch the media's interest; 3) figures from popular TV series; and 4) a general term that designates a specific group of mothers.

In terms of the focus on the hot mum, apart from two introductory articles on the "freaky mum" published in 2003 and 2004 respectively, all the articles on the hot mum began to appear in 2006, mainly focusing on celebrities from Hong Kong and Taiwan. The contents often consisted of gossip, for example, Lady S's figure was thought to be more attractive after delivery, she was wearing high heels only a month after delivery, etc.

In 2007 there was a surge in the number of articles in which female celebrities are referred to as hot mums. In part this also made this year a turning point in the evolution of the term. Although the total number of articles was still limited, their scope and tone underwent a number of changes, containing not only gossip, but also more critical comments. Other than tabloid stories about celebrity mums, there were also an increasing number of tips for beauty and postnatal slimming, as well as plastic surgery. What underlies these changes is the idea of an increasingly accessible hot mum: no matter how you look at the moment, as long as you start learning these tips or get the plastic surgery you can become a hot mum too. This way, the label “hot mum” quickly extended from the elites to the masses, stressing a new and expensive body shape. Although the total number of these reports on “ordinary” hot mums did not exceed those on celebrities in 2008, the number is rising every year. From 2009, “hot mum” has increasingly been used to refer to ordinary mothers. In some cases, the term does not even refer to any particular individuals, but merely a group of women:

So what kind of mums can be called hot mums? The first response from most people is that one must have a good figure, a nice temperament and beauty. There is a reason why a good figure is placed first. But within this short phrase “hot mum”, there is a great deal of knowledge. Apart from appearance, a positive attitude towards life, the courage of always being at the forefront of fashion and good understandings of children can all be counted as the charms of fashionable hot mums.

From Internal and External Virtues, Fashionable Hot-mums in Progress, Qianjiang Evening News, 2007.05.11

The original meaning of hot mum as “having a good figure and a nice temperament”

is enriched by the idea that women should be encouraged to develop both their external and internal values. Beside one’s physical appearance, one’s inner qualities, such as a pleasant personality, are also regarded as significant. This lays out a convenient path for ordinary people to become a hot mum. Although the bodies of ordinary Chinese women may not be comparable to those of the celebrities, inner qualities and personality, such as positive attitudes towards life and the love of beauty, are accessible to and can be learned by everyone. This being the case, ordinary Chinese women can also be hot mums.

The meaning of “hot mum” in the Chinese media has thus become more and more complex as time goes by: a hot mum could be someone who loves to dress up her baby (Xu and Li 2008), who joins group chats online about how to raise children (*Kunming Evening*, 春城晚报, 2010), who breastfeeds her baby while watching a match in the stadium (*Xihai Metropolitan*, 西海都市报, 2010), who loves traveling (*Zhanjiang Daily* 湛江日报 2012), who starts up her own business (Chen 2010), who weans her baby early because she wants to dye her hair (*Yantai Evening*, 烟台晚报, 2010), and even impersonates her fifteen-year-old daughter in high school and is sentenced by the courts (*Yangzi Evening*, 扬子晚报, 2008). In short, the hot mum has become an all-around hot mum who possesses all the knowledge and skills of parenting and can do anything for her children and family.

Sometimes, mothers with a strong personality, or out of character, are also referred to as hot mums. A mother called “Diandian” became famous on the Internet for a rap video she made herself and is widely recognized as a hot mum (*Jinghua Times*, 京华时报, 2011). It seems as though whoever is against tradition, or is unique, or who just shows bizarre behavior, can be called a hot mum. “Hot” seems to be synonymous with “unique” and “anti-traditional”.

Another shift in the process of creating the modern hybrid of the hot mum happened in 2009 and 2010, identified as a trend towards “generalization” in the following. During this period, the focus of the “hot mum” articles shifted from the subject (the women themselves) to the object (their actions), such as the children they are raising, the products they need to purchase, etc. In a growing number of articles, the concept of the hot mum is no longer used as a gimmick in the article, but as a general designation for “mother”. For example, an article entitled “Four don’ts in child-rearing for the fashionable hot mum” (*Liangshan Daily*, 凉山日报, 2011) is mainly about knowledge about parenting. Questions like whether the mother is a hot mum or how one can become a hot mum are not regarded as interesting. Nonetheless, the meaning of the generalized concept of the hot mum is not entirely eroded by or equated with concepts such as “female” or “woman”. It carries an implicit expectation of “women being confident in their job”: as a hot mum, you can be an achiever in the task of *being a mother*, as described in the article. In this way, “hot mum” becomes a concept full of forceful expectations for women. In the name of the hot mum, one can indulge and immerse oneself in the consumption of cars, furniture, beauty products, fashion or even electro-nics and real estate. These articles predominantly become advertisements advocating that “as a hot mum, or if you want to become a hot mum”, you must do as the advert says. In general, articles on the hot mum gradually changed from focusing on her appearance to a wider focus on her personality, further increasing the category of mother. From 2003 to 2007, the very limited number of articles (fewer than thirty) on hot mums were dominated by a focus on women’s appearance, especially their body shape. Accompanying the surge in articles on hot mums in 2008, a simulta-neous focus on women’s

personality emerged, as well as an increasing trend to use “hot mum” as a general designation for “mother”. Proportion-wise, the percentage of the “hot mum” articles that focused on *appearance* dropped from almost 100 % in 2006 to less than 60 % in 2011. In 2011, the articles with a focus on the hot mum’s *personality* and the ones that use “hot mum” as a synonym for mother increased by approximately 15 % and 25 % respectively when compared to 2006.

Accompanying the generalizing process, the referent of “hot mum” has also changed from denoting a specific group of women to representing (good) mothers. “Hot mum”, in this evolved sense, has taken a step further towards becoming an all-round notion. Mothers are “hot” not only for their beautiful and sexy looks, but also for their versatility in parenting and caring for their families. More importantly, the media claims that every woman aspires to become a hot mum:

A standard hot mum loves beauty and spending money. But she also loves her life and family. They can make use of technology and new knowledge to make family life easier. They are not self-complacent. They are not being left behind in the Internet or beauty treatment. They no longer lock themselves away but are active in the social circle...

Admittedly, the hot mum has become the spokesman for a new generation of mother figure.

– Excerpt from “Hot-mum New Generation”, “Channel Guide”, 2010.05.27

Following the increasing commercialization of the hot mum in the media, the phrase has become a synonym for (young) Chinese mothers. “Hot mum” is used as a replacement for “mother” in many advertisements that target mothers. Based on their contents, these articles are categorised into two types: consumption of the term “hot mum”, and consumption *by* the hot

mum. The former covers articles that introduce specific female characters, which normally include clear subjects and profiles, whereas the latter refers to articles in which “hot mum” is used of women in general as a marketing strategy to create consumption demands, especially those involving commercials and marketing. With the surge in the commercial discourse about hot mums, there has been a huge increase in articles on the consumption by the “hot mum”, the proportion of articles on this having increased from 0 in 2006 to 25 % in 2011. This is also consistent with the period when the concept of the hot mum became generalized in the media. Commercialization has diluted the meaning of “hot mum”, gradually transforming it from an expression of female subjectivity into a subject of consumerism.

But it is one thing to draw up the implications of being a hot mum in the media; it is quite another how to become an individual mother, one who may, for instance, pursue the characteristics of a hot mum, especially in China, with its strong Confucian ethics of the family and filial piety. In the following section, the dominant western sociology on individualization will be used to illustrate the individualization process in China and its relationship to women’s development in the country.

PERSPECTIVES ON INDIVIDUALIZATION

The Chinese sociologist Yan Yunxiang summarizes the process of individualization in relation to four different characteristics: (1) de-traditionalization, or the “loss of tradition”; (2) the detachment and re-embedding of institutionalization; (3) the loss of “real” individualization as a consequence of a compulsion to pursue “one’s own life”; and (4) the internalization of the risks incurred by the insecure freedom and uncertainty one may face. Yan furthermore points out that this phenomenon takes place not only in the West but also in

China. Nevertheless, individualization in China is different from that in Europe or the United States (Yan 2009). As the German sociologist Ulrich Beck emphasizes, the sense of individuality in China has developed differently (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2011). In Europe, the process of individualization has taken place within a framework ensured by the social welfare system and it builds on basic civil, political and social rights obtained during the first wave of modernity through political struggles and negotiations. In China, what makes the process of individualization different is its conditions, such as the framework and the basic rights (for instance, marriage law and labour law), which are still central aims of the struggle for civil rights, and the result of this struggle is still inconclusive and ongoing (Yan 2009). Seen in this way, the key difference between individualization in the West and in China lies in whether or not there is a space for basic individual rights between the individual and the state. In China, individual rights only apply when one participates in public service (e.g. participating in political, economic or educational activities). In private relationships, especially within the family, the concept of individual rights borders on Confucian ethics. Neither sons nor daughters can speak to their parents of individual rights; to speak of individual rights among family and friends would be considered patently absurd (Jin and Liu 2009, 161).

In China, where the family and family life (familism) are central to mainstream values, individualization poses great challenges for people, yet it also attracts them. Reform and liberalization have thrust China into modern society, where individuals are gradually allowed to have the freedom to choose different lifestyles in terms of sexual practices and internal family relationships. Such changes are closely linked to China’s transitioning into a post-modern society, as post-modernism empha-

sizes the top priority of “the self as a project” (Allan and Crow 2001:8), for example, the ongoing transformation of urban family structure from familism to iFamily, that is, a family structure that focuses on the needs of the individual, yet is still constrained by social conditions, especially in its involvement with close generational relationships (Shen 2013). As Beck has said, “the development in China is different, yet in many ways similar. [...] People in China are caught up in a dramatic ‘plunge into modernity’”(Beck 2002, 1).

During this process, Chinese women’s lives have also changed to a great extent, especially within the family. Both Goode and Giddens recognize that in modernity women’s development is having tremendous influences over societal change, particularly in the family sphere. One could almost say that the main features of family transformation are exemplified through changes in women’s roles and status (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2011; Giddens 1990). This reflects the progress of individualization in China, which has often been closely related to women’s role in the family. In the nineteenth century, “their vocation was gentle and ever ready ‘living for the family’, its highest commandment: self-abnegation and self-sacrifice.” (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002:56) The process of individualization has changed Chinese women’s role from the traditional idea of “living for others” to “a life of one’s own”. Women are no longer required to live as the “centre” of the family, but as individuals who are not only allowed, but also expected, to have their own forms of behavior.

However, such progress is also pervaded by conflicts and negotiations between different discourses, alongside women’s struggles between their gender role and their self-development, particularly as brought to light during her transition from girlhood to motherhood. In every culture there are expectations, norms and rules that define

what it means to be a woman, and especially about motherhood. One basic feature of motherhood is “self-sacrifice”, meaning that the interests of the family are always placed above one’s own. Nonetheless, the process of individualization which advocates “a life of one’s own” enables women to place individual rights on the same level with, or even above, that of the family. In this way, a tension seems to have arisen between a woman’s rights and her “duty” as a mother.

In the case of the hot mum, despite the influence of consumerism, it seems that this new idea of motherhood that has emerged in the era of individualization has to some extent paved the way for Chinese women to strut about in style with a baby in their arms. Feminist ideas which emphasize women’s rights and independence are being reconciled with the traditional idea of motherhood that pays greater attention to women’s reproductive function. Women are more empowered in making their own choices. The subversive potential brought about by the emergence of hot mums appears to be widely recognized and celebrated in the public discourse. However, the question is whether this image is a consistent one? Does a woman in today’s China really have the freedom to make choices regarding her responsibilities as a mother?

THE DILEMMA OF MODERNITY IN ARTICLES ON THE HOT MUM

In China, the traditional image of Chinese mother – “Auntie yellow face” (Huang Lian Po, 黄脸婆) – is praised and respected in the literature, and a mother often accepts her grey hair and wrinkles with gratitude. This, however, is not the case with the contemporary hot mums, who do not so much as tolerate wrinkles or grey hair themselves.

Here it should be noted that, even though the manifestations of the hot mum

between celebrities and ordinary women in the media are different, they are more or less two sides of the same coin: there is an ongoing tension between the identity of a woman and the gender role of a mother in present-day China. For celebrities, their delicate face and figure have strengthened their identities as women. In addition, however, they are also pursuing their role as mothers, which ordinary people can see verified. What they need to stress is their identity as women, a process in which they reject the traditional Chinese image of the “self-sacrificing” mother.

Furthermore, by comparing reports on both celebrity hot mums and ordinary hot mums, it appears that hot mums are supposed to take care of both career and family. Reports on celebrity hot mums often emphasize their conforming to women’s duties as a mother, sacrificing their careers to take care of children and the family. For example, it was widely reported in the media that Lady S had reduced her working hours in order to look after her daughters, claiming that “being a mother means behaving like a mother.” Likewise, Christy Chung claimed that “I am not a hot mum, but just an ordinary mum”, supposedly revealing her joy at being with her children, as well as expressing her happiness at being a mother. Nonetheless, reports on ordinary hot mums focus more on appreciating their betrayal of motherhood, their unwillingness to be housewives, and their pursuit of career and beauty instead. Some articles even put forward a slogan – “being a mum does not necessarily mean looking like a mum” – as a way of looking down on those women whose lives revolve around their children and husbands rather than their appearance, and to promote instead the image of a capable mother who can take care of both her career and her family:

They are outgoing, able to entertain guests and cook well. They can nurture their baby

and take care of their husband. Being talented and possessing good personality, they perform well both at workplace and at home – looking after the husband and family well... “Changchun Hot-mum- a lady and a cook”, “New Culture News” 2010.09.02

Though the descriptions of celebrity hot mums and ordinary hot mums seem to be different, both point in the same direction: a woman needs to secure both her career and her family. While the celebrity has already achieved a successful career and is striving to present herself as a “virtuous wife and a good mother”, ordinary people need to prove they are professional achievers, as well as beautiful and caring of their family. Among the discourses on hot mums, however, this “double burden” was rarely mentioned in the articles. It seems that this is not seen as a problem at all for the hot mums, which also reveals another aspect of individualization: risks are borne by individuals. The promotion of hot mums has attributed the risk of the double burden entirely to women themselves. Feminism has nothing at all to say in this kind of discourse. On the one hand, hot mums have the urge to reject and subvert traditional ideas; on the other hand, they are also required to conform to tradition. For example, hot mums have to make efforts to break away from the stereotypical image of the self-sacrificing mother, while they are also compelled to care for the well-being and the futures of their children, which today seems to require that they are good at making use of technology in child-rearing. The gender role of a hot mum is clear: to assist her husband and bring up her children. Even for the feminist-like Lady S, this is no exception. She revealed to the media that “No matter what role you perform, you need to act like it!” After giving birth, she said she would still find time for her husband, as well as taking care of her children:

I think as a mum, you should have patience to listen to your kids, and as a wife, you should speak appropriately without appearing to be too needy and hostile. If you need to apologize, then apologize; if you need to behave coquettishly, then do so. Don't deliberately appear to be flirtatious. Sometimes being natural is sexy... to me, kids are more important than career..."

"Hot-mum Lady S: A Mum Should Behave Like a Mum", Qianjiang Evening News, 2010.03.26

At this point, one cannot help but ask: What motivates the seemingly "greedy" contemporary Chinese woman to keep pursuing a career and physical attractiveness after getting married and giving birth? Is it because such women have a strong awareness of gender equality and have already broken out of the prison of patriarchy? Or do they simply prefer their work?

There are surely many answers to these questions, but one answer may relate to contemporary Chinese women losing their sense of security for marriage, which is why they need to develop their businesses as well as retain their youth. Since the threat of mistresses exists, not only do modern women need to fulfill their duties as a wife and mother, they also need to prevent aging and avoid falling out of their husbands' favor. This threat of mistresses is explicit in many articles on hot mums:

She (the hot mum) can entertain guests and is able to cook well. She can remove computer viruses, leap over great firewalls, drive a nice car and afford to buy new houses. She can also keep mistresses away and beat up bad people. To be hot mum born in the eighties demands wisdom and bravery both at home and in the work place.

– 2010 Small Events and Big Impact-Envy, Jealousy and Hatred – Hot Mum Everywhere", 2010.12.31

After giving birth to my kid, my colleagues

laugh at my bad figure. My husband didn't even give me the Valentine's Day gift this year. I swear, after I finish raising my son, I am gonna lose weight, I am gonna have my breasts increased, and get my husband's heart back!

In an online forum, this post from one mother, Sandy, caused a lot of comments. Many mothers born in the eighties said they thought they might have an early "mid-life crisis". Some even posted their friends' examples, describing how the latter had "aged" after giving birth and also "faced" the misery of their husbands having an affair ("mistress", 小三). Articles refer to this too, for example, "Causing a Fortune to Remove Pregnancy Spots and Lose Weight, Three Percent of Hot-Mums Born in the 80s Go for Cosmetic Surgery with Too High Expectations", Shanghai Daily, 2011.02.22.

Capable yet full of contradictions, those hot mums who struggle to prevent their husbands turning to mistresses get pushed further away from feminist ideas. Confronted with harsher and harsher demands, these women are driven to live a life in a dilemma.

CONCLUSION

At the beginning of 2013, a talent show called *Mamma Mia* produced by Shanghai Television, featuring mothers, won a huge audience. It was called a "hot mum talent show" in various commentaries. One of my students interviewed its project director, Jianing Shi. Talking about the program's positioning, Shi made a paradoxical comment:

Probably because of marriage, life and work, their soul is covered by a layer of ash. We hope that they can come to our program and get rid this layer of ash. By doing so, we want to set them free, to release them from the bondage of the traditional values of the role

of mother, so they can pursue their dreams, and express their personality. Although we have emphasized that women need to “be themselves”, this is definitely not the kind of motherhood the program intends to portray. It is irresponsible and inappropriate for a mother to simply seek for themselves, which also does not conform to the mainstream values of our contemporary society. In fact, although it is necessary to break the inherent thinking of motherhood, we still highly value some of the traditional values of motherhood, namely dedication, sacrifice, and being strong and brave.

Individualization itself is part of modernity. Shi’s comments reflect not only the paradox of modernity inherent in the image of the hot mum, but also the burden of what is involved in being a “good mother” in the modern world. The hot mum phenomenon reflects modernity and represents the image of the modern in the sense that “to be you” in fact means “to live for yourself”, which is consistent with the transitions of women in the process of individualization. But at the same time, there is a clear boundary around “being you”. Women still need to comply with their role as mothers and to promote the traditional virtues of motherhood. On their way to becoming independent feminists, however, they must follow the framework of the traditional patriarchal society.

In the process of individualization, the idea of women “living for themselves” denotes a strong desire to break away from tradition. In the articles on hot mums, this process of breaking away merely refers to one’s physical appearance. Barely any changes are taking place in terms of gender roles or relations between men and women. For a man, “hot mum” is still a synonym to “being pretty” – (piao liang 漂亮). There is no related discussion of decision-making power, no description of the emergence of new familial relationships and no attempt to create one’s own subjectivity. Wearing



Taiwanese Chinese TV host, Lady S, and a Korean movie star.

(1990) believes that everyone has the right to create a time and space in which one can enjoy oneself at any stage of one’s life.⁵ However, leisure, which, in Wearing’s opinion, is the weapon with which the invasion of motherhood – that is, the culture that is against female autonomy – can be resisted, receives no mention in any of the articles on hot mums.

As long as the concept of “a life of one’s own” remains at the individual level, one will rely on the goodwill of friends, colleagues and the people around one. And this kind of life will be threatened by political movements and government and economic crises. As a result, women are no longer satisfied with what politicians favour, namely “freedom of choice” on the individual level. Now women demand what goes “beyond freedom of choice”, namely changes in the law, the workplace, public systems and basic social standards. Women’s movements need to “transcend the simple equal rights for women to fight for autonomy; and to go beyond criticisms

of discrimination in order to challenge the modern power structure on the whole" (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2011:87).

This media-based study of the idea of the hot mum has shown that the change in the image of the mother is not identical to the developing awareness of female autonomy. Quite the contrary, the whole process is overshadowed by the traditional patriarchal culture and consumerism, in which a more demanding role is expected of women. Rather than engaging with the institutional environment and transcending freedom of choice, the concept of the hot mum loads responsibilities and risks on to women themselves. Since the image of the hot mum is not secured by institutional protection and reform, its occurrence may increase the oppression of women, rather than exemplify women's awareness of autonomy. Confronted by the capable hot mum, every Chinese woman may have this doubt: "Why can't I do the things others can?" In China's process of individualization, the struggle between feminist ideas and motherhood seems to return to what happened in the Xinhai Revolution in 1911: women's rights are again being replaced by the stress on motherhood.

NOTES

1. Lady S is a Taiwanese TV hostess famous for her open and expressive characters in the Chinese media. She is often described as a "feminist" by the media.
2. Both are talent shows.
3. "Nv Qiang Ren" is a term in Chinese popular parlance that refers to women with successful careers. Sometimes it also insinuates a woman lacking in femininity.
4. The Duxiu Database covers a total of 617 kinds of newspaper across the country, including special administrative regions, such as Hong Kong and Macao. It includes national newspapers, such as the *People's Daily* and the *Liberation Daily*, regional and local newspapers like the *Beijing Evening News* and *Jiaxing Daily*, as well as specialized pub-

lications like *Economic Daily* and *Jiangsu Education*.

5. Wearing, B. *Beyond the Ideology of - Leisure As Resistance, Australian and New Zealand Journal of Sociology*, 26卷: 第1期, 第36-58页, 1990.

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