

# From Confucian Archetype to Neoliberal Resemantization: The Resurgence of the Ideal “Good Wife and Wise Mother” (*Xiánqī Liángmǔ*) in Contemporary China

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**Abstract** This article traces the historical evolution and contemporary resemantization of the Virtuous Wife and Good Mother (*xianqi liangmu* 贤妻良母) ideal in China, from its origins as a Confucian archetype to its neoliberal resurgence under Xi Jinping. Ideologically rooted in Confucian texts such as the *Book of Rites* (*Li Ji* 礼记), the *xianqi liangmu* (XQLM) model has long functioned as a patriarchal mechanism confining women to the domestic (*nei*) sphere. Rejected as ‘feudal’ during the Maoist period, the ideal has since been revived and adapted to align with contemporary state policy and market imperatives. This study examines the nexus between the neoliberal resemantization of XQLM and traditional ethics, showing how it reasserts moral and structural constraints on women’s agency in private, professional, and familial domains. The article considers counter-discourses and emerging feminist subjectivities in art, literature, and activism — both within and beyond China — as sites of resistance against this coercive revival. The aim of this analysis is to bring to the foreground the discursive structures and traditional gender categories that, across centuries, have constrained women’s identity and agency, inscribing them within the boundaries of Chinese patriarchal tradition, leading to the formulaic expression of XQLM to its contemporary interpretations.

**Keywords** *xianqi liangmu*; Confucian moral; *ryōsai kenbo*; patriarchal discourse; gender risemantization.

## 1. Theoretical Framework: From Coercion to Agency

The *xianqi liangmu* (XQLM) ideal is examined here as a device of power in Foucauldian terms, rooted in Confucian ‘ideational traditions’ — to borrow Jana Rošker’s expression (Rošker 2017: 44) and their historical sedimentations, yet also as a discursive site where possibilities of subjectivation emerge. This framework thus moves from the analysis of coercive gender regimes to the exploration of the subtle forms of negotiation and resistance enacted by women. The patriarchal system, by defining women as ‘inferior and weak’ (*beiruo* 卑弱),

institutionalizes submission (*zhongnan qingnü* 重男轻女) and confines female identity to reproduction and lineage continuity (*rending xingwang* 人丁兴旺). Although the formulation XQLM is a modern one (as will be seen in the following paragraphs), it carries the ideological legitimacy of a long Confucian genealogy.

This study critically examines gendered structures through an interdisciplinary methodology informed by both Chinese feminist scholarship and post-structuralist theories, revealing how gender constructs function as sites for both constraint and potential subversion. It draws from both modern and contemporary Chinese feminist critiques (Qiu Jin, He-Yin Zhen, Ding Ling, Dai Jinhua, Wang Zheng, Lü Pin) and post-structuralist researchers on gender studies (Judith Butler, Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Tani Barlow, Harriet Evans, Elizabeth Croll, Doroty Ko, Rebecca Karl, Susan Mann, Bret Hinsch, among others). This ‘polyphony of voices’ allows us to trace how structures of coercion — through exclusion, confinement, and naturalization — also contain the potential for agency, as women reinterpret or subvert these inherited roles. As Liu, Karl & Ko (2013) demonstrate, the man/woman distinction in the concept of *nannü* (male/female) is not a neutral description of social relations but a cognitive mechanism through which the world itself is gendered. This ontological asymmetry supports hierarchically predetermined and unjust structures, articulated in socio-economic abstractions (e.g., *nan zhu wai, nü zhu nei* 男主外, 女主内, men rule the outside, women rule the inside) and cosmological ones (*yang/yin*, 阳/阴 and *qian/kun* 乾/坤). From a feminist perspective, *nannü* must thus be read as a mechanism of division — but also as a site where women’s re-signification of gendered identities can begin.

From the Han dynasty (206 BC–220 CE) onward, prescriptive ethics transmitted ideals of wifedom and motherhood that confined women to the ‘inner’ domain (*nei*).<sup>1</sup> The XQLM model crystallizes these norms into an ideology of submission embodied in the *Three Obediences and Four Virtues* (*san cong si de* 三从四德). Yet even within such coercive frameworks, historical and literary records, such as those analyzed by Lu Xun 鲁迅 (1881–1936) and Xiao Hong 萧红 (1911–1942), reveal spaces of suffering that lead toward self-awareness and critique.

In sum, both Chinese and Western feminist analyses expose the coercive power of categories like *nannü zhibie* 男女之别 (gender differentiation), *xianqi*

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<sup>1</sup> In early canons, women occupied a liminal space. See Ardizzoni (2020).

*liangmu*, *nei/wai*, and *yin/yang*, which naturalize subordination. Yet this very discursive rigidity has also generated counter-discourses, enabling women to transform the language of virtue into a language of critique — marking the theoretical and historical transition from coercion to agency.

## 2. The Confucian Archetype: The Role of Rites and Texts

The ideological foundation of the rigid socio-spatial binaries upon which woman's social construct is built can be traced back to the *Li Ji* 礼记 (Book of Rites), which dates back to the early third century BCE (Mair 2001: 92). The *textus receptus* is the edition prepared by Zheng Xuan 郑玄 (127–200 CE), who composed his commentary during the early part of the first century BCE (Wang, 2003: 48). The *Li Ji* fixes the sacrality of rituals: birth, marriage, funerals, but also everyday actions. The 12th chapter, named *Family Conduct* (*Nei Ze* 内则) establishes the normative principle of gender differentiation through the separation of spaces and spheres of action, inside and outside, as well as through differences in learning, ceremonial performance, clothing, and family relationships.

This is the narration of a normal day for a woman:

At the first crowing of the cock, they [women] should wash their hands, and rinse their mouths; comb their hair, draw over it the covering of silk, fix this with the hair-pin, and tie the hair at the roots with the fillet. They should then put on their jacket, and over it the sash. On the left side they should hang the duster and handkerchief, the knife and whetstone, the small spike, and the metal speculum to get fire with; and on the right, the needle-case, thread, and floss, all bestowed in the satchel, the great spike, and the borer to get fire with from wood. They will also fasten on their necklaces [meaning doubtful], and adjust their shoe-strings (Legge 1885: 450).

The central concept of *Li* 礼 (rite/ritual) is conveyed specifically through the relationship between husband and wife:

Rite begins with attending to the relationship between husband and wife: within the household, a distinction between inside and outside is made. Men are positioned outside; women inside (*Nei Ze*, 57).

It regulates that:

Men and women do not sit mixed together; they do not share the same clothes rack or the same combs and towels, nor do they hand things directly to one another. Sisters-in-law and younger brothers-in-law do not engage in mutual inquiries; aunts and nephews do not wash garments together. Words from the outside must not enter into the inner quarters, and words from the inside must not go out beyond the threshold (*Nei Ze*, 38).

Boys and girls are allowed to play and study together, but:

A girl, until the age of ten, does not go outside. Her governess instructs her in gentleness and obedience, in handling hemp and flax, in processing silk cocoons, in weaving and braiding, in needlework and sewing, so that she may learn the womanly task of providing clothing. She observes the rites of sacrifice, assists by presenting wine and food offerings — grain, beans, pickles, and sauces — and, according to ritual, helps in arranging them upon the altar (*Nei Ze*, 81).

The *Record of Ritual Matters* by Dai the Elder (*Da Dai Li Ji* 大戴禮記), compiled in the first century CE, transmits several passages from the *Li Ji* and expands upon its substance. In the chapter *Benming* 本命, we read:

A woman (*nü* 女) is one who conforms (*ru* 如); a son (*zi* 子) is one who increases and continues (*zi* 孳). A “woman” (*nüzi* 女子) therefore signifies one who, in conformity with the teachings of men, extends and carries forth the principles of morality. Thus, she is called *furen* (婦人). The term *furen* means ‘one who submits to another.’ For this reason, she is not to possess authority of her own, but to follow the Three Obediences: in youth, she follows her father; when married, she follows her husband; when her husband dies, she follows her son, never daring to act according to her own will (*Da Dai Li Ji* – BM, 11).

The same passage further defines the roles and functions of women within the family:

Her instructions and commands must not go beyond the inner chambers; her proper affairs lie in the preparation of food, and therein lies her rectitude. Thus, a woman remains within the inner quarters throughout her days, not traveling a hundred *li* except for mourning rites. She does nothing on her own, accomplishes nothing independently. Only after consulting

others does she act; only after confirmation may she speak. When moving about at night, she must carry a lamp; in matters of the household, she must measure with care. When livestock prospers within the household, this is called fidelity (*xin* 信). Such is the way by which a woman's virtue (*fude* 婦德) is to be rectified (*Da Dai Li Ji* – BM, 11).

In these early Confucian texts, female socialization is structured around two complementary domains: domestic labor and textile production (spinning, weaving, sewing), which ensured the material reproduction of the household, and participation in ritual economy, through auxiliary roles in sacrifices, where women's labor is incorporated into the moral and spiritual order of the family. Philosophically, the canonical literature establishes women's identity as ontologically dependent and socially derivative. Women's agency is circumscribed by rules of propriety and prudence (e.g., when walking at night, carry a lamp), practical household duties (e.g., manage livestock), and ritual obligations (e.g., do not travel even a hundred *li* for mourning), all framed as expressions of *xin* 信 (trustworthiness/fidelity). The boundaries of female agency are defined as simultaneously productive and ritual, but always derivative and supportive of male-centered authority. The instructions emphasize spatial enclosure as a foundational element of female identity, while the stress on obedience and gentleness codifies virtue as submission. In Mencian terms, the most crucial role of a woman, one that also involved the man, was to ensure lineage continuity. As *Mengzi* stated:

Mencius said: "There are three forms of unfilial conduct, and the greatest is to have no descendants" (*Mengzi, Li Lou* I, 26).

Foucault describes the emergence of 'docile bodies' shaped by disciplinary mechanisms that render individuals both obedient and productive. Through disciplinary discourse, institutions such as the school, and education in general, generate forms of knowledge that normalize conduct (Foucault 1977: 135–169). Thus, in Foucauldian terms, these canonical passages may be read as instances of 'disciplinary discourse,' producing 'docile bodies' through normative injunctions that regulate space, speech, labor, and desire. Dorothy Ko (1994: 17) distinguishes between the 'official ideology,' embodied in texts addressed to the literati class (*shi* 士), and the 'applied ideology,' referring to the practical strategies through which women negotiated this discursive framework. The earliest and most influential text aimed at guiding women's everyday conduct was written by Ban Zhao (45–115 CE). In the introduction to her *Admonitions*



for Women (*Nüjie* 女诫), a foundational work that served as a model for later women's manuals, Ban Zhao explicitly stated that her purpose was to help women avoid being reprimanded 'for no apparent reason', by providing them with knowledge fostering social and ethical awareness (Ban Zhao 2011; Ardizzoni 2020; Pang-White 2018). In her manual, Ban Zhao expounds upon the *Three Obediences and Four Virtues*, providing a pragmatic interpretation of these moral precepts. In the second chapter, which addresses a woman's relationship with her husband, she asserts that a wife must be *xian* 贤 (worthy or virtuous); otherwise, she cannot adequately serve him. Here, *xian* does not signify an inherent moral quality but rather a relational condition — one that defines female virtue through the act of service and thereby reinforces its subordinate, instrumental nature.

If the *Li Ji*, together with the *Biographies of Exemplary Women* (*Lienü zhuan* 列女传), Ban Zhao's *Admonitions for Women* and other canonical texts were the official channels through which the ethical framework of the XQLM model was transmitted, its diffusion was by no means confined to the elite domain of classical readership (Kinney 2014; Ardizzoni 2020). From the late imperial period onward, the ethical message of female virtue and obedience reached a much wider audience: through an expanding corpus of popular manuals, referred to as the "Women's Elementary Learning" (*Nüzi mengxue* 女子蒙学), as well as through oral traditions including folk songs, rhymes, and didactic poems, which were often reproduced in genealogies and local family records (Ardizzoni 2024). This broad spectrum of textual and oral didacticism ensured that the principles of female morality were disseminated across all strata of society, regardless of levels of literacy or social standing.

Although most prescriptive texts for women were composed by Confucian scholars, a significant number were authored by women of high social rank who sought to articulate, transmit, or occasionally negotiate these moral expectations. Once received by communities at the lower end of the social hierarchy, these prescriptions were frequently transformed and domesticated into more accessible forms — oral verse, popular ballads, mnemonic rhymes — ensuring their integration into everyday life. From the Ming dynasty onward, with the expansion of the printing industry at both commercial and local levels, many of these orally transmitted forms were fixed in print, thereby consolidating the range of gendered moral instruction.

Women and children's education developed significantly during the Ming–Qing period, when moral didacticism became increasingly systematized,<sup>2</sup> and continued to evolve in the Republican era, when discourses of female virtue were rearticulated in light of modernizing reforms, nationalist projects, and new forms of print culture (Ko 1994; Mann 2007). In this *longue durée*, the XQLM formulation, at the end of the 19th century, functioned not only as a moral prescription but also as a 'cultural technology' (Foucault 1977; 1978) for lineage perpetuation, embedding the Confucian gender order into the daily lives and affective structures of Chinese women across time and space. In that time, as we know, there was a wave of modernization that introduced new elements in gender culture.

### 3. Challenges to the Ideal: From Modern to Revolutionary Critique

At the turn of the 19th century, China underwent a profound wave of modernization that proved essential to the construction of a new society. This process entailed the systematic inclusion of women in scholarly and intellectual life, a movement that emerged simultaneously from multiple quarters. First in the Yangwu 洋务 movement (1898) and then in the 1915–1921 New Culture Movement (*Xin wenhua yundong* 新文化运动), progressive modernists, anarchists and young Communist intellectuals were all attentive to international developments. Internationally, influences from the West and Japan played a significant role, particularly through the diffusion of ideas concerning universal education, gender equality, scientific pedagogy and democratic movements ("Mr. Science" and "Mr. Democracy" personified the new configuration of Chinese thought in the second decade of the twentieth century). Internally, a growing generation of young Chinese — students, writers, and activists — called for cultural renewal that would break rigid Confucian hierarchies, challenge traditional gender roles, and promote critical engagement with knowledge and society. In these debates at the turn of the century, the Confucian model of the

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<sup>2</sup> It is worth mentioning here the *Four Books for Women* (*Nü si shu* 女四书) assembled and printed in 1624 by Wang Xiang. This collection, that mirrored the *Confucian Four Books* (*Si shu* 四书), included, besides Ban Zhao's *Admonitions for Women*, the *Song Sisters' Women's Analecta* (*Nü Lunyu* 女论语), *Empress Xu's Instructions for Women* (*Nüxun/Neixun* 女训/内训), *Lady Liu's Quick Guide for all Rules for Girls* (*Nüfan Jielu* 女范戒律) by Wang Xiang's own mother. A complete translation of the *Nü Sishu* is in Pang–White (2018).

*cainü* 才女 — an elite woman who received specific education within the domestic chambers and whose artistic and literary accomplishments were cultivated as leisurely pursuits — was increasingly questioned. A vivid reformist energy responded directly to this model and to the popular Ming–Qing saying, “Ignorance is a woman’s virtue” (*nüzi wucai bianshi de* 女子无才便是德). On one side, this perspective continued to be firmly upheld by modernist reformers such as Zhang Zhidong 张之洞 (1837–1909), who participated in the post-1898 reform of the educational system which led to the abolition of the imperial exams (*keju* 科举 system) in 1905. The reform envisaged the establishment of female schools designed to train *baomu* 保姆 — nannies or early childhood instructors<sup>3</sup> — through the use of traditional educational texts (*mengxue* 蒙学), but it essentially kept women confined to the domestic sphere and did not introduce any new curricula in female education. Against this position, among advocates of women’s emancipation, Liang Qichao 梁启超 (1873–1929), one of the main protagonists of the 1898 Reform movement, in his *General Discussion on Reforms* (*Bianfa tongyi* 变法通议) argued that a new model of XQLM through female education would strengthen the nation even before benefiting women themselves (Liang 1941: 41). Reformers sought instead a new ideal of womanhood aligned with the needs of national renewal. In 1906, following the establishment of a Department for Education, the imperial government yielded to demands for the opening of private schools. In 1907, the Qing government promulgated regulations for private education, thereby granting official recognition to women’s schools.

The establishment of modern schools facilitated the dissemination of new educational materials, which incorporated both indigenous reformist ideas and selected concepts from foreign intellectual currents. These texts became instrumental in promoting literacy, moral education, and socialization aligned with the emerging vision of a modern nation, while simultaneously reshaping the role and identity of women in domestic and public spheres.

One of the responses that at this stage seemed to meet the needs of the time came from Japan, where similar debates were underway. In 1875, Nakamura Masanao 中村正直 (1832–1891), a Confucian scholar sent to study Western culture, coined the term *ryōsai kenbo* 良妻賢母 (good wife, wise mother). He envisioned women as devoted to family, frugal, educated, and responsible for raising healthy children: an effort framed as patriotic service, cultivating citizens who would strengthen the nation. A woman’s efforts in managing the household

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<sup>3</sup> *Baomu* was one among the numerous neologisms and cultural phrases that entered Chinese from Japanese, along with the terms for ‘male’ and ‘female’ (*nanxing* 男性 / *nüxing* 女性).



and raising healthy, intelligent children were seen as a form of patriotic service: by educating her sons and daughters, she would help produce future citizens capable of strengthening the nation.

According to Nakamura, women were naturally inclined toward child-rearing, a quality that was to be recognized, cultivated, and placed at the nation's service. Moreover, Meiji women were expected to abandon the passivity that had characterized them in the past and become autonomous individuals capable of contributing to and defending the nation. Better education for women would provide them with the tools to educate their children more effectively. This aligned with Liang and his legacy's vision. Within this context, a large group of new intellectuals sought to improve women's condition, integrating the label of *ryōsai kenbo* 良妻賢母 — sinicized, with a reversal of morphemes, into *xianqi liangmu* 贤妻良母 — into the social and cultural modernization discourse that was taking place.

Within this evolving intellectual and educational landscape, the *ryōsai kenbo* or XQLM model was not the only emerging rearticulation of womanhood that came to front. Among these rearticulations, figures such as the new woman (*xin nǚxing* 新女性) and the modern woman (*modeng nǚxing* 摩登女性), along with the *xianqi liangmu*, embodied an attempt to reconcile tradition with the ideals of progress. Far from representing a complete rupture, the new models blended traditional morality with emergent cosmopolitan and romantic ideals, embraced love marriage and urban sophistication, remaining tethered to patriarchal expectations. They perpetuated the image of the urban, cultivated woman who embraced love marriage as an alternative to arranged unions, while drawing inspiration from Western notions of romantic individualism and self-expression.

In 1927, Ding Ling 丁玲 (1904–1986), with her *Miss Sophie's Diary* (*Shafei nǚshi de riji* 沙菲女士的日记), introduced a new model of womanhood that, while not overtly rejecting patriarchy, further interrogated the patriarchal framework by exploring the intersections of individual subjectivity, traditional morality, and emerging political consciousness. Women's interiority became a site of negotiation between personal desire and societal expectation, foreshadowing debates that would intensify in the Republican and Maoist eras.

In this phase, the redefinition of women's roles often occurred within the same discursive space that linked female education to moral refinement and, ultimately, to national regeneration. The most significant critiques of these models arose in Anarchist or pre-Communist — and then Communist — intellectual movements. A paradigmatic event was during the New Culture

Movement, with the translation and publication in 1918 of Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, in *New Youth* (*Xin Qingnian* 新青年). This ignited a vivid debate on women's destiny beyond marriage and the broader question of female autonomy in a rapidly transforming cultural and political environment.

#### 4. Nationalist and Maoist Transformations

During the 1930s, political divisions sharpened approaches to women's roles. Aligned with international conservative and Fascist models, including that of Fascist Italy, which celebrated the 'pluriactivity' within the family, depicting women as loving mothers and good wives under a strict control of the male head of the family, the Guomindang (GMD) government issued directives encouraging women's return to domestic chores. After decades of female participation in industrial and urban production during the 1920s, this policy sought to reassert the image of woman as *fattrice*, the nurturing mother and 'queen of the household' (*regina del focolare*).<sup>4</sup>

During the same period, within the framework of the New Life Movement (*xin shenghuo yundong* 新生活運), Chiang Kai-shek (Jiang Jieshi 蔣介石, 1887–1975) articulated a vision of national reform in which the moral regeneration of Chinese society was to be realized through the family, and in particular through women. In his programmatic speeches, such as the *Outline of the New Life Movement* (*Xin shenghuo yundong gangyao* 新生活運動綱要),<sup>5</sup> he explicitly entrusted women's associations with the task of disseminating moral and domestic norms grounded in the Confucian principles of *li*, *yi*, *lian*, and *chi* (禮, 義, 廉, 耻), that is, propriety or ritual decorum, righteousness, integrity and sense of moral shame. These associations were also responsible for implementing programs aimed at encouraging women to return to the

<sup>4</sup> I use Italian expressions here because these concepts resonate in both Italy and China. See, for instance, the words of the Italian Minister of Education Giovanni Gentile in his 1934 speech: "In the family, a woman belongs to her husband and is what she is by virtue of belonging to him [...]. A woman is one who devotes herself entirely to others, to the point of self-sacrifice and self-abnegation; she is, above all, an ideal mother before being a biological one [...]. A mother to her children, to the sick, to the young entrusted to her care — in every case, to all those who may benefit from her love and draw upon her innate, original, and essential motherhood." (Gentile, Giovanni. (1934) *La donna e il fanciullo: due conferenze*. Firenze: G. C. Sansoni.)

<sup>5</sup> Original text in

[http://www.ccfed.org.tw/ccfed001/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=351:0001-67&catid=210&Itemid=256](http://www.ccfed.org.tw/ccfed001/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=351:0001-67&catid=210&Itemid=256).

household (*funü huijia* 妇女回家) and to cultivate feminine morality according to the ideal of XQLM. The New Life Movement redefined female patriotism in terms of moral domesticity and ‘motherhood nationalism.’ The GMD ideology reinterpreted the traditional model of XQLM aiming to produce disciplined “Republican mothers” rather than emancipated women. The rhetoric of Chiang and his wife Soong Mei-ling (Song Meiling 宋美齡, 1898–2003) positioned women at the center of the nation, yet always within the confines of Confucian order and marital duty.

In contrast, Communist Party leaders critiqued the XQLM ideal as a patriarchal constraint. On September 25, 1942, Zhou Enlai 周恩来 (1898–1976) published an article in the *Xinhua Ribao* entitled “On the ‘Good Wife and Wise Mother’ and the Duties of Mothers” (*Lun XQLM yu mu zhi* 论贤妻良母与母职), in which he argued that it functioned as a ‘chain binding women,’ denying them public participation while preserving patriarchal power structures. He wrote:

In every society, it is natural for a mother to be good and for a wife to be virtuous. The same is true of fathers and husbands, who should also be good and virtuous; these are fundamental and unchangeable principles. [...] In the past, women’s virtue was defined by the ‘three obediences and four virtues’ and by the ‘three Cs’ — Church, Cooking, and Children. Yet today, the expression ‘good wife and wise mother’ has become a fixed formula whose meaning has been distorted. Within patriarchal society, it functions as a chain, binding women, representing only the interests of conservative men. Under this label, women’s roles are rigidly defined: confined to the home as wives who serve their husbands and mothers who rear their children, they are denied any position in public life. In all countries where this ideal is promoted — Japan, Germany, and others — women occupy no political role, and these are societies that perpetuate a strong patriarchal tradition. (*Zhongguo funü yundong lishi ziliao* [Historical Materials of the Chinese Women’s Movement, 1937–1945], Beijing: Zhongguo Beijing chubanshe, 1991 [1943], 647–54).

With the establishment of the People’s Republic of China (1949), gender discourse shifted from traditional morality to class struggle. Legal reforms, such as the 1950 Marriage Law, abolished arranged marriage, along with children marriage, concubinage, and coerced suicides, declared possible the divorce on women’s side, thus creating the legal conditions for a formal gender equality. The XQLM ideal was recast as bourgeois and individualistic, incompatible with the collective ethos of Socialist society. In the drive to eliminate all social and

gender inequalities, the new model of femininity was embodied in the figure of the “Iron Girl” (*tie guniang* 铁姑娘), a strong worker, equal to men in labor and revolutionary spirit. The urban figures of the XQLM and the modern woman were supplanted by the idealized image of the smiling peasant or factory-worker woman, rosy-cheeked and vigorous, laboring alongside men in agricultural and industrial production. The emphasis was no longer on family or lineage, structures associated with the ‘cannibalistic’ traditions of the past, but on collective participation in Socialist labor units such as the *commune* (*gongshe* 公社) in the countryside and the work unit (*danwei* 单位) in the city. In this context, female identity was redefined primarily through the lens of productive labor, proletarian consciousness, and revolutionary commitment, subsuming the personal and the domestic into the collective project — once again — of national transformation. As Wang Zheng notices,

Iron Girls became the symbol of ‘masculinization’ of women in the socialist period. This discursive maneuver powerfully operated in a politics of erasure, erasing a socialist feminist history, and constituted a crucial part in the production of a post- (and anti-) socialist hegemonic discourse that enabled China’s dramatic turn to capitalism (2017: 221).

This will be described in the next paragraph.

## 5. Neoliberal Resemantization: Literary and Cinematic Transmission

The reforms initiated after 1979 and the current valorization of traditional culture constitute the core of a neoliberal resemantization, through which the dominant ideology consolidates patriarchal control by promoting a state-sanctioned morality and the popularization and commodification of women’s double burden, as well as the pressures related to marriage and physical appearance. These dynamics contribute to modernizing and at times implicitly legitimizing, the XQLM rhetoric. At the same time, heterogeneous voices have emerged that challenge and problematize this hegemonic ideology. These counter-discourses found expression in the diverse artistic forms that proliferated from the 1990s onward, when literature, theater, music, cinema, and other visual arts witnessed the rise of women artists who set forth new trajectories of female subjectivity. Through autobiographical and gender-

conscious narratives, often framed as *herstories*, women writers animated subjective reflections on the evolving relationships between the self, family, state, and traditional morality within a rapidly modernizing society. Authors such as, Zhang Ailing 张爱玲 (1920–1995), Zhang Jie 张洁 (1937–2022), Can Xue 残雪 (1953–), Wang Anyi 王安忆 (1954–), Tie Ning 铁凝 (1957–), Chi Zijian 迟子建 (1964–), Mian Mian 棉棉 (1970–) and Guo Xiaolu 郭小橧 (1973–) critically engaged with entrenched patriarchal structures embedded in both Socialist and Confucian frameworks, while exploring new modes of agency and selfhood shaped by market reforms and globalization. Male writers including Mo Yan 莫言 (1955–), Yan Lianke 阎连科 (1958–), Wang Shuo 王朔 (1958–) and Su Tong 苏童 (1963–) likewise depicted women negotiating liminal spaces between traditional expectations and the pressures of life in a transforming social landscape.

In cinema, filmmakers began portraying women as complex, contradictory figures — strong, resilient, and pragmatic — negotiating the tensions between private obligations and public visibility. Many scholars agree in considering Huang Shuqin's 黄蜀芹 (1939–) *Woman · Demon · Human* (*Ren · Gui · Qing* 人·鬼·情, 1987) as the highest achievement of Chinese feminist cinema (Qu, quoted in Wang, 2011: 195); a film that, by crystallizing the very concept of female consciousness, marks a critical transition not only in cinematic language but also in the social positioning of gender constructs in post-Mao China. The film features a female protagonist who performs male roles in traditional Chinese opera, thereby challenging normative gender boundaries deeply rooted in both Confucian hierarchies and revolutionary discourses. Yet, the women intellectuals and filmmakers of the 1980s and 1990s consistently emphasized in their statements that their reflections were grounded in the revolutionary premise of gender equality: that women 'hold up half the sky,' and that their interventions were not intended as political claims but as explorations of identity, subjectivity, and the evolving roles of women in contemporary Chinese society. A paradigmatic example is 1992 Zhang Yimou's 张艺谋 (1950–) *The Story of Qiu Ju* (*Qiu Ju da guansi* 秋菊打官司), in which the protagonist's struggle is not directed toward revolutionary transformation but toward justice within the intimate sphere: the defense of her husband, disabled after a bullying encounter with the local officer. Qiu Ju, portrayed as a tenacious rural woman in the advanced stages of pregnancy, embodies a new ideal of the XQLM: a woman who, through her perseverance and strategic negotiation with the bureaucratic system, transcends the boundaries of the domestic (*nei*) to confront a hostile public (*wai*). Her journey illustrates both the continuity and



redefinition of feminine virtue in the post-socialist context: domestic devotion intertwined with a growing sense of civic agency. The previous year, the same Zhang Yimou had presented another striking exploration of female subjectivity in *Raise the Red Lantern* (*Da hong denglong gao gao gua* 大红灯笼高高挂, 1991), a film that won international acclaim at the Venice Film Festival. Here, the story of Songlian exposes the claustrophobic logic of patriarchal power and the psychological alienation it produces among women trapped within its hierarchical structure. The rivalry and cruelty that emerge among the women (wives, concubines and servants) are not expressions of inherent malice but the consequences of a system that turns female bodies and affections into instruments of control. The film underscores the deep entanglement between gender, discipline, and desire in traditional society, offering a scathing critique of how patriarchy perpetuates psychic fragmentation and social paralysis among women.

Both films, though set in vastly different social contexts, converge in their interrogation of female agency and moral constraint. They reveal how, in post-socialist China, virtue embodied by women becomes a crucial site for negotiating tensions between tradition and modernity, domesticity and public assertion, submission and autonomy.

Together, literary and cinematic practices contributed to a broader cultural landscape in which female subjectivity was not only represented but actively reimagined, negotiating the complex intersections of tradition, modernity, and personal agency.

## 6. Contemporary Revival

In 2020, five years after the abolition of the One Child Policy,<sup>6</sup> the average household size in China dropped to 2.62 people, a decrease of 0.82 people from 2000. According to the National Bureau of Statistics, the population decreased by 850,000 at the end of 2022 compared to the end of the previous year, with a natural growth rate of -0.60‰. This marked the first negative growth in China's population in over 60 years. The declining interest in marriage and children in today's China prompted the government to issue a series of policy changes which emphasize the need to promote family culture. Therefore, over the past decade, the values embedded in the XQLM narrative have been actively

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<sup>6</sup> In the Fifth Plenary Session of the 18th CPC Central Committee (26–29/10/2015), the central government issued the decision on allowing married couples to have a second child.

promoted at both governmental and societal levels, reflecting a broader attempt to reinforce normative ideals of femininity and domestic virtue, and, on the last run, enhancing the double burden on women. Wang Pei'an 王培安, at the time when he was Vice-President of the China Family Planning Association (*Zhonghua jihua shengyu xiehui* 中国计划生育协会), an organization affiliated with the Central Committee and State Council, in a 2023 interview to the China Daily lamented that fewer births and aging have become the new normal in Chinese society. The government, therefore, issued a plan aimed at “building a marriage and childbearing culture for the new era, promoting the social value of childbearing, and highlighting the social function of family care for the elderly”.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, the policymaker also warned that:

Influenced by traditional Chinese culture, the division of roles — with men as the main providers and women responsible for domestic duties — has persisted. Employed women face the dual burden of work and household responsibilities, which increases the cost of childbearing. Women who are advancing in their careers are often reluctant or even afraid to have children (China Daily 23/06/2023).

In the same interview, he further noted that, in response to these challenges, the government had launched a series of public campaigns — issuing advocacy statements, collecting promotional slogans, organizing knowledge contests, producing promotional films, and distributing posters — aimed at promoting what was termed the “marriage and childbearing culture of the new era.” These initiatives had a significant impact on cultural production, which, during the same period, came increasingly under state supervision and ideological control. The diffusion channels of these values were a variety of national-popular cultural forms, including songs, films, slogans, artistic performances, and even the conferral of honorary titles celebrating exemplary women. Moreover, so-called ‘schools for virtuous girls’ (*nüde ban* 女德班) were established, where the figure of the ‘good wife and wise mother’ was presented as a normative social ideal and a model of moral citizenship.<sup>8</sup> Framed as essential for social harmony (*hexie* 和谐), family ethics were promoted as core Socialist values, and women’s organizations were called to the propagation of these messages, just as during the Nationalist period.

<sup>7</sup> <https://cn.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202306/13/WS648811e2a310dbde06d232a3.html>.

<sup>8</sup> As early as 2017, the BBC website published an article “China closes school ‘teaching women to be obedient’”. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-42218618>.

The All-China Women's Federation (ACWF) (*Zhongguo Quanguo Funü Lianhehui* 中国全国妇女联合会, abbrv. *Fulian* 妇联), operating at both national and local levels, links female virtue, particularly filial devotion to the elderly, to national legislation, cultural heritage, and children's education. Moreover, it enforces gender-specific business, such as women's healthcare products, as an important factor towards enhancing national market:

The seventh national census data showed that China's women population stood at 688 million by Nov 1, 2020, among which 436 million were between 15 and 59 years of age, therefore contributing to strong consumption potential. [...] With the emergence of new companies and new technologies, the women's healthcare management sector is expected to flourish (Women of China, 14 Sept 2023).

*Fulian* actively disseminates XQLM values targeting both rural and urban women through differentiated campaigns tailored to their social contexts. Rural campaigns often emphasize traditional caregiving roles, family continuity, and participation in local reproductive and postpartum services, such as modern *yuezi* 月子 centers, reinforcing women's centrality in domestic and intergenerational care (Ardizzoni 2021). Urban campaigns, by contrast, combine moral guidance with modern expectations of education, career management, and social visibility, while still promoting filial and maternal responsibilities. Across both contexts, the Federation reinforces the ideal of motherhood through monetary awards and honorary recognitions for women with three or more children, thereby embedding XQLM values within a network of social incentives and moral expectations. Numerous highly commercialized education and parenting manuals and popular guides were published in the 2010s–2020s,<sup>9</sup> encouraging modernized prescriptions for producing 'well-educated, well-married' daughters. This is an important substantiation of the commercialized education channel that repackages XQLM values, promoting the XQLM ideal in modernized terms: how to raise a well-educated, well-employed, well-married (*wang nü cheng feng* 望女成凤) girl. On a popular level, visual and folk culture, such as songs, films, and slogans, depict the 'urban woman' as one who successfully participates in the workforce while

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<sup>9</sup> The controversial book *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* by Amy Chua (2011) became a symbol of Chinese mother commitment in raising a perfect Confucian-style child. Translated into Chinese with the title “我在美国当妈妈” (I am a mother in America), it followed a wave of publications on parenthood and successful education.

remaining devoted to her domestic roles. The valorization of marriage and childbirth is powerfully rehearsed in the institutional discourse, and widely encouraged at a commercial level. Right alongside comes a radical condemnation of non-heteronormative life choices, such as no-marriage, especially for women — who, when unmarried after reaching thirty years of age, get labelled as *shengnü* 剩女 (Fincher 2014; 2018) — or homosexuality. At the same time, these traditional values have also become the target of largely covert or indirect criticism, particularly in the realms of popular media and online discourse.

However, when the XQLM model is negated and an alternative one is promoted, as in the works of actress and director Jia Ling 贾玲 (1982–), it often serves to expand the practical pathways of family-value ideology rather than reject it outright. Her *Hi, Mom* (*Nihao, Li Huanying* 你好，李焕英, 2021) is a time-travel narrative in which the protagonist meets her mother in the past, when she was a student. Her more recent *YOLO: You Only Live Once* (*Re la gun tang* 热辣滚烫, 2024) depicts the physical and personal transformation of an overweight woman into a boxing athlete, impersonated by the director herself, who is popularly recognized for her non-conformity to traditional beauty standards. These foreground the mother-daughter relationship while simultaneously highlighting and satirizing societal attitudes toward non-normative female bodies. Such narratives negotiate familial affection, filial responsibility, and gendered expectations, illustrating how contemporary media can reframe, parody, or subtly reinforce traditional moral ideals. In doing so, Jia Ling's films participate in a modern iteration of the XQLM discourse, demonstrating how popular culture mobilizes humor, bodily transformation, and maternal devotion to rearticulate the moral and social significance of women's roles in family and society. This rhetorical operation echoes the subversive strategy found in the traditional *The Ballad of the Lazy Woman* (*Lan fu ge* 懶婦歌), a popular folk song orally transmitted since late Qing Dynasty that humorously inverts the daily obligations imposed upon women as prescribed in the classical *Nei Ze*. Through irony and exaggeration, the ballad exposes the moral expectations and relentless domestic pressures that have historically defined women's virtue. As the text recites:

Everyone laughs behind the lazy woman's back. She wakes up around midmorning, she immediately wastes time in idle talk; she does not tie her hair, allows the pot to get cold, lets the fire die out; she does not wash her face or scrub the floor [...] (translated in Ardizzoni 2022: 176).

By parodying prescriptive moral codes, the ballad transforms the figure of the ‘lazy woman’ into a vehicle for resistance, undermining the ideal of the diligent and self-sacrificing wife. But in doing this, it still reinforces the hegemonic discourse. In 2024, this strategy of reappropriation has reappeared in digital popular culture, notably in the work of Zhou Linfeng 周林枫 (1998–), an online singer celebrated for her performances in traditional costume *Hanfu* 汉服 and her compositions in the classical *gufeng* 古风 musical style. Her songs revisit traditional Confucian and patriarchal motifs while subtly reframing them through contemporary sensibilities. Titles such as *Buxiao you san* 不孝有三 (There Are Three Forms of Unfilial Conduct), echoing the *Mengzi*, *Zhaodi* 招娣 (Calling for a Younger Brother) referring to a custom in which a young bride was married into a family to ‘invite’ the birth or rebirth of a son), and *Ji* 祭 (Offering Sacrifices to the Ancestors), which addresses the *Three Obediences and Four Virtues*, all foreground the persistence of traditional gender expectations. Particularly significant is her song *Xianqi liangmu*, which revisits Confucian womanhood. Through its nostalgic aesthetics and stylized vocal delivery, the song reactivates a moral lexicon of virtue and obedience, yet simultaneously invites critical reflection on the continued cultural authority of these ideals in contemporary Chinese society. Zhou’s engagement with these traditional tropes — performed in an ostensibly conservative idiom but circulated through digital media — embodies a nuanced form of cultural negotiation: a simultaneous citation, parody, and critique of the patriarchal narratives that continue to shape gendered identity. This is the text:

After midnight, when everyone is already asleep, she blows out the candle.	A “good wife and loving mother” how many hidden constraints bind her!
At dawn she rises, gathers firewood for cooking, and starts working again.	Her parents always tell her to give more, to always stay one step behind.
The baby cries, lunch is still simmering on the stove.	In the end, her in-laws are never satisfied.
The dog barks, words of reproach still echoing. She, too, cries.	A “good wife and loving mother” how much suffering must she endure: washing, cooking, caring for everyone.
She must manage both the living room and the kitchen, yet not a single praise is given to her.	Even if she swallows her broken teeth, no one cares about her tears.

Table 1 “Xianqi liangmu” translated by the author.



It is, in essence, a lamentation and an indictment of the woman's fragile destiny — an accusation formulated on a precise blueprint of the *Nei Ze*, echoing moral discourses articulated nearly a century ago. The woman depicted in this song bear little resemblance to the 'iron girl' who once 'held up half the sky'. Nevertheless, at the same time, Zhou also performs a song titled *Xia yi beizi bu jia ren* (下一辈子不嫁人, In the next life I will not get married), like a *manifesto* leading out of this framework. Zhou's accompanying videos, rendered as computer-generated animations, or costume-dressed video, evoke a stylized yet haunting visual world: traditional, predominantly rural settings populated by weary, suffering women surrounded by threatening figures — cruel men, and affectionate yet powerless mothers and grandmothers — unable to alter the predetermined fate of the female protagonist.

In parallel, on platforms such as TikTok, WeChat and Weibo, a search for "*xianqi liangmu*" yields a very different imagery. Here, the term is associated with young, well-groomed women who study — ideally completing a university degree — before marrying and having one, two, or preferably three children, to be raised with the assistance of their in-laws, often within multigenerational households. Other portrayals highlight women who use the best domestic products and appliances, excel in preparing refined dishes, and master small-scale entrepreneurial activities to support their families, while ensuring that their children attend the most prestigious schools.

In stark contrast to Zhou Linfeng's melancholic and critical reworking of the traditional ideal, these algorithmically promoted depictions reproduce a consumerist and patriarchal fantasy of femininity — one that conflates moral virtue with productivity, aesthetic self-discipline, and reproductive success. Zhou's reinterpretation thus functions as a counter-narrative, exposing the tension between nostalgic representations of domestic virtue and the neoliberal commodification of womanhood in China's contemporary digital culture, both conveying into the new XQLM ideal. A woman blogger writes that:

The good wife and virtuous mother of the new era should be a woman who is wise, gentle, and strong inwardly, capable of managing her emotions and facing life with calmness and courage. As a wife, she should be able to understand and support her husband, communicate constructively, and contribute to the well-being of the family; as a mother, she should be responsible, affectionate, and mindful, educating her children with love and intelligence, without venting her own tensions on family members (*Hong si xin yu* 鸿思心语, 2025).

## 7. Resistance

Significant forms of resistance have emerged as strategies through which young Chinese women navigate and cope with entrenched social expectations. A growing number of women choose to, or are forced to, reside outside China, thereby creating a physical and psychological distance from pressures imposed both by state authorities and social actors within their communities (Ardizzoni 2025). The year 2015 marked a critical moment of collective mobilization with the suppression of the #MeToo movement in China and the arrest of the “Feminist Five”: Wei Tingting, Li Tingting, Wu Rongrong, Wang Man, and Zheng Churan (Fincher 2018). From that moment on, women’s discourse became more and more ‘action oriented’ (Wang 2018). In the ensuing decade, resistance has increasingly migrated to digital spaces or intimate discussion circles, where non-normative life choices — such as celibacy, postponement of marriage, refusal of motherhood and homosexuality — are deliberated, normalized, and strategically enacted. As widely defined by scholarly analysis, the evolution of digital feminist platforms exemplifies a broader transformation in Chinese gender discourse and in the articulation of feminist subjectivities (Mao 2020). Independent initiatives, such as *Feminist Voices* (*Nü quan zhi sheng* 女权之声)<sup>10</sup>, established on Weibo and WeChat by transnational activist Lü Pin 吕频, alongside other transnational feminist networks, illustrate this shift. Unlike earlier generations of cultural producers who often distanced themselves from the ‘feminist’ label, contemporary activists increasingly embrace it, engaging in more individual, radical critiques of patriarchy, state control, and dominant gender norms, moved by an “emotional desire to eliminate gender inequality from their personal lives” (Lü 2023). This represents not only a reconfiguration of public feminist visibility but also a generational shift in the frameworks through which women in China conceptualize empowerment and agency. A reflection of this shift is visible also in the literary world, where new trends emerge, shattering traditional conceptions of heterosexual experiences, and conventional power dynamics, embracing ambiguity and fluidity, as exemplified in the “Queer Utopia” literature (Wang Der-wei 2020; Song Mingwei 2022; Wang Xinran 2025, among others). Everyday resistance is also enacted through micro-practices embedded in everyday life, which subtly destabilize normative gender scripts and create spaces for alternative subjectivities. These include the reappropriation of ritualized domestic practices

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<sup>10</sup> A feminist social media platform that has been active between 2009 and 2018, when it was banned by Chinese authorities.

— such as the tea ceremony (*daocha* 倒茶), once reserved for male participation — and the pursuit of same-sex relationships, which challenge heteronormative expectations and social hierarchies of intimacy. Public interventions exemplify both practical and symbolic forms of resistance. For instance, campaigns to provide free menstrual products in school and university restrooms not only address material inequalities but also constitute a broader act of reclaiming social meanings around the female body. This reclaiming extends to language: euphemisms traditionally used by older generations, such as *dayima* 大姨妈 (Big Auntie), *lijia* 例假 (routine break), *qinqi* 亲戚 (family relative), *nage* 那个 (that thing), or even *daomei* 倒霉 (bad luck), are now being mobilized as markers of social and cultural reclamation, rather than being replaced by the term *yuejing* 月经 (menstruation). Simultaneously, gendered violence — including domestic abuse, gender-based bullying, and the abduction of women for reproductive purposes (*guaimai* 拐卖) — is increasingly analyzed through a critical feminist lens that questions the persistence of patriarchal structures and the resurgence of cultural norms valorizing marriage and lineage as core values.

The contemporary Chinese feminist imagination is also shaped by transnational flow of knowledge and intellectual exchange. Just as earlier women's gender discourse in China often drew inspiration from Japanese cultural productions — such as the inversion of *ryōsai kenbo* 良妻贤母 into the Chinese formula *xianqi liangmu* 贤妻良母 — today's gender debates is once again influenced by Japanese feminist scholarship. Notably, the work of sociologist Chizuko Ueno, whose extensive writings, over fifteen books translated into Chinese, have become highly influential, exemplifies this transnational dynamic. Since 2019, she has delivered more than fifty lectures at Chinese universities, in which she slated both overt misogyny and the cultural construction of women as weak, dependent, subordinated to socially and aesthetically normative frameworks (Ueno 2015 [2023])<sup>11</sup>. Her interventions resonate with a new generation of Chinese women who are increasingly questioning inherited gender hierarchies, asserting autonomous subjectivities, and experimenting with non-conventional life trajectories. Overall, these phenomena underscore the complex interplay of digital activism, micro-resistance, and transnational feminist knowledge in shaping emergent forms of gendered agency in contemporary China. They reveal how young women navigate structural constraints, engage in creative acts of self-fashioning, and

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<sup>11</sup> More than 20 books from the author have been translated into Chinese. *Onnagirai* (Misogyny) has been translated with the title *Yannü* 厌女 in 2015 and re-published in 2023.

participate in evolving networks of feminist solidarity, both locally and globally, thus challenging deeply entrenched social norms and expanding the conceptual boundaries of Chinese feminist praxis.

## 8. Conclusions

Across historical periods, the XQLM ideal demonstrates remarkable adaptability. Inherited from Confucian *ideational tradition* by Republican-era reformers, eliminated by Maoist labor models and post-socialist feminist expressions, recovered in Xi Jinping's contemporary moral revival, the ideal has functioned as a tool for social regulation, shaping female labor, morality, and subjectivity. Critically, its contemporary re-emergence illustrates the interplay between traditional patriarchy, state ideology, and neoliberal pressures, producing persistent tensions between autonomy, domestic obligation, and nationalized gender roles. Women's labor and reproductive capacities continue to be instrumentalized for social and political ends, underscoring the enduring relevance of historical patriarchal frameworks in shaping modern gendered experiences in China. Yet, its top-down resemantization process is challenged by an insurgent generation of educated rural and urban women, intellectuals and artists who incorporate the contemporary tensions between individualistic, consumeristic, global and socialist and collective moral trajectories, challenging the dominant discourse in differentiated, creative and unexpected ways.

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