
***Nannies for Foreigners:* The Enchantment of Chinese Womanhood in the Age of Millennial Capitalism**

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In one episode of a popular TV serial aired in China in 2001, a middle-aged Shanghainese woman works as a nanny for a young Canadian English teacher who is eager to learn Chinese and the Chinese way of life. The nanny shows up for work in the morning and announces to her employer (who is offscreen) that she is going down to the market to shop for the day's groceries. As he busily dresses himself for work, the Canadian cheerily calls out (in Chinese) from the bedroom: "Let us be lewd together!" To the nanny's astonishment, he walks out and repeats the line with an innocent and infectious smile. After a few rounds of probing, further confusion, and clumsy clarification, it finally becomes clear that the hapless Canadian has mispronounced the Chinese word for "going down the stairs" (*xialou*) as "being lewd" (*xialiu*).

This comical sequence is just one of the many hilarious moments in this twenty-part television serial about cross-cultural contact and conflict. *Nannies for Foreigners* (*Shewai baomu*, directed by Zhuang Hongsheng) was produced by the Shanghai Television Station, broadcast to appreciative domestic audiences in major Chinese cities from 2001 to 2002, and is now enjoying a still wider recep-

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tion through video sales at home and abroad. It tells the story of three unemployed women who find a new calling in providing domestic services to Shanghai's fast-growing expatriate community. In dramatizing cultural clashes and cross-cultural bonding, the episodes combine realism and melodrama, stereotype and thoughtful reflection, exoticism and a will to knowledge. The serial boasts an unusually large cast of foreign actors who, with their peculiar habits and varying abilities to struggle through their lines in Chinese, generate considerable comedy and dramatic appeal. But it is the three Chinese women who, in their idiosyncratic and endearing ways, act out the hopes, desires, and anxieties of a China that is relentlessly reinventing itself vis-à-vis its others.

In this essay, I explore the ideological currents at play in this TV serial, paying particular attention to the intersecting discourses of gender, culture, race, and class and to the relationships between nationalism, (self-)Orientalism, and the occult economy of millennial capitalism. I argue that the serial figures the Chinese nannies as apprentices in a modern, cosmopolitan subjectivity and similarly figures the foreigners' homes as a training ground for that subjectivity. As the site of cultural and emotional clashes and negotiations, these homes become a quasi-public sphere where Chinese women engage in transitional object play to mourn the loss of socialism and to effect their (and China's) rebirth as citizens of the world. This process entails not only the displacement of class by cultural and gender dynamics but also the enchantment of womanly virtue as the secret engine of China's march to the neoliberal world order.

Neoliberalism: A Chinese Fairy Tale

The story of China's economic reforms in the closing decades of the twentieth century is well known. Scholars and journalists have scrutinized the difficulties, promises, and implications of a vast socialist country embarking upon a path of freewheeling capitalist development with little intention or effort to pursue concomitant political liberalization. Observers and critics have called special attention to the human costs of dismantling the socialist relations of production and the infrastructure of social welfare. They point out that despite official rhetoric, China is going down the slippery slope of unbridled capitalism that has already engendered serious social problems such as high unemployment rates, staggering disparity of income, human rights abuses, rampant corruption, the AIDS pandemic, and environmental degradation, among others. Scholars in women's studies have also shown that women have largely borne the brunt of these adverse trends. The drastic downscaling of the state sector, for example, has resulted in

the disproportionate laying off of female workers, subjecting large segments of the urban female population to the hardships of unemployment or the vagaries of temporary, low-paying, and little-respected jobs. This particular trend, which Wang Zheng calls “gendered lay-offs,” affects primarily middle-aged, less-skilled women, who are considered liabilities in their workplace and who are ill-equipped to compete with the better-educated younger generation—from female entrepreneurs (*nü qiyejia*) and white-collared beauties (*bailing liren*) to tri-service escort girls (*sanpei nü*) and migrant girls (*dagong mei*) (Wang 2003).¹

How does the state tell the story of those unglamorous older women for whom the “rice bowl of youth” (Zhang 2000) is decidedly out of reach? One of the earliest high-profile efforts to cast light upon the unspectacular plight of older underemployed women is the film *Pretty Mother* (*Piaoliang mama*), directed by Sun Zhou (2000). Starring Gong Li, who garnered international fame playing the eternal Oriental woman in such films as *Raise the Red Lantern* and *Shanghai Triad*, the film tells the story of a divorced mother who scrambles to earn some extra cash in order to give her young hearing-impaired son some semblance of a normal childhood (by buying expensive hearing aid devices, among other things). She tries to peddle petty commodities on the street and is busted by the police; while working for a bachelor as a paid-by-the-hour housemaid (*zhongdian gong*), she barely escapes an attempted rape. The film’s choice of a handicapped boy is arguably a pandering ploy designed to tug at the viewer’s heartstrings. But it also contributes to the ideological fiction that the greatest challenge facing middle-aged women is not the loss of income and social standing but is rather the inability to be a good mother. Their salvation, it follows, lies not in finding a new career but in the extravagant sacrifices they make on behalf of their families. Even if they have to go on peddling in the street or scrubbing the floors of a stranger’s house, so long as they do so for the sake of their loved ones, they can still be beautiful (as the film’s title implies) at middle age.

The discourse of female virtue has deep cultural roots and continues to resonate with audiences by turning women’s drab plights into visual spectacles. With China’s accession to the World Trade Organization in 2001, changing representations of disadvantaged women became central to China’s bid to become a key player in the global economy and synchronize with the pounding pulse of moder-

1. “White-collared beauties” are usually college-educated young women with excellent foreign language skills who hold high-paying jobs and live a fashionable lifestyle. “Tri-service escort girls” are young women with little education who work in bars, cafés, salons, and nightclubs and offer escort services to male clients (accompanying men in dining, singing, dancing, and likely other activities).

nity. The TV serial *Nannies for Foreigners* is a prime example of this tantalizing new vision of Chinese womanhood: instead of assuming their habitual role of the heroic victim, Chinese women have begun to play the role of the vanguard—the bridge between a traditional, stagnant China and a vibrant new world order of millennial capitalism.

Jean and John Comaroff propose “millennial capitalism” as a category for understanding the “Second Coming” of capitalism at the turn of the twenty-first century—capitalism that “presents itself as a gospel of salvation” (2001: 2). They identify its three main characteristics as the rise of occult economies (new forms of enchantment), hyphen-nation (a nation-state whose status and fetishes are uncertain), and the neoliberal discourse of civil society. For the Comaroffs, these are the corollaries of the millennial moment’s epochal shifts in the constitutive relationship of production to consumption and in the displacement of class by gender, race, and generation “as indices of identity, affect, and political action” (3). The implications of these epochal shifts, particularly for the marginal and the disempowered, have been occluded by the culture of neoliberalism, which has spread the gospel of the free market with astounding efficiency, gaining receptive audiences both among the former antagonists of the capitalist world and among new and old victims of globalization (1–56).

Since the early 1990s, the culture of neoliberalism has, with the assistance of the postsocialist state and a global ensemble of cheerleaders, become the reigning, if not officially enshrined, ideology in China. The heroic figures emerging from the roaring 1990s are consumers, entrepreneurs, lawyers, white-collared beauties, pop idols, bestselling teenage novelists, and sex diarists, all of whom derive their aura from associating with the occult economies of millennial capitalism. According to the Comaroffs, occult economies are characterized by the seeking of wealth through magical means, that is, “techniques that defy explanation in the conventional terms of practical reason” (19). Around the globe, such efforts can include gambling and speculating, pyramid schemes, new fee-for-service religious movements, fortune-telling-cum-counseling, e-mail divination, and zombie conjuring, all of which are animated by the allure of casino capitalism, or the idea of getting something for nothing. In fin de siècle China, occult economies may assume somewhat different, locally idiosyncratic guises, but they are no less propelled by the casino capitalist spirit. One need only think of the massive appeal of various forms of quasi-religious movements (not least the Falun Gong), the feverish popularity of lotto and pyramid schemes, and the unstoppable revival of the national gambling game, mahjong (Festa 2006), to stop repeating the hackneyed dictum that modernity has spelled the demise of enchantment.

The return of enchantment has supplied the most powerful means for the ideological operation of misrecognition by casting a dense fog of mystification between neoliberal policies and their social consequences. People are intent on seeing “arcane forces intervening in the production of value, diverting its flow toward a new elect” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001: 25). The new elect in China are the aforementioned heroic figures of the reform era, who seem preternaturally endowed with a knack for navigating those arcane forces. In the ideological discourse of neoliberalism that speaks fondly of the “miracle” of economic take-off, the marginalized and the disempowered are seen simply as the less fortunate, and they are encouraged to project “their feelings of erasure and loss” onto these arcane forces. State-sponsored economic reforms offer “the prospect that everyone would be set free to accumulate and speculate, to consume, and to indulge repressed cravings in a universe of less government, greater privatization, more opulence, infinite enterprise” (25). The fact that older unemployed women are not free to accumulate, speculate, and consume can therefore be attributed to their withering age (even if they are only in their forties and fifties), a force of nature that helps to provide an incontrovertible alibi for neoliberal capitalism’s disregard for social justice.

But neoliberalism is also most enchanting when the invisible hand of the market unexpectedly overpowers the all-too-visible hand of fate. It is my contention that *Nannies for Foreigners* performs precisely this sleight of hand by turning three unemployed and seemingly unemployable women into the Cinderellas of China’s millennial capitalism. In the remaining portion of this essay, I seek to discern the ideological forces behind the magical production of value that precipitates a highly gratifying fairy-tale ending.

Cosmopolitan Nannies

Nannies for Foreigners tells the intersecting stories of three women venturing into the new profession of providing domestic service to the foreign residents of Shanghai. We begin with Qiaoyun, a demure woman in her forties who used to work in a government office before being laid off and who now lives with her ailing mother-in-law and teenage son. Her husband, like so many restless Chinese men, has gone south (probably to Shenzhen) to sail the high seas of capitalism and, also like so many nouveaux riches males, has found true love in a white-collared beauty and is now importuning Qiaoyun for a divorce. Qiaoyun enrolls in a free program provided by the city’s career training and referral center that trains female domestic workers specifically for jobs in the expatriate community of

Shanghai. The trainees are taught basic English, home economics, Western cuisine, and cross-cultural etiquette, and are then referred to potential employers.

Qiaoyun completes the program with flying colors and is promptly hired by an American couple named Charlie and Denise Moore, both business professionals recently relocated to Shanghai by their multinational corporate employer. The Moores are the quintessential globe-trotting masters of the market who move from locale to locale in order to lend their expertise and to spread the gospel of wealth to desiring locals. They live in a plush two-story house in a suburban gated community called Milan Garden. From the day that Qiaoyun shows up for work, the drama of cultural difference unfolds in a gripping fashion.

First, Qiaoyun has to cope with the hostility and mischief of Frank, the Moores' six-year-old son and the enfant terrible of the house. She overcomes this hurdle in two ways. First, Qiaoyun becomes aware that her Chinese ways of disciplining children are proving completely counterproductive with the devilish towheaded boy. Fortunately for Qiaoyun, Denise speaks fluent Mandarin Chinese (she is said to be one-quarter Chinese) and is thus able to impart to her some useful fundamentals of a Western, democratic, and laissez-faire approach to child pedagogy (for instance, instead of scolding the boy after he splatters ink all over the white-washed wall, as Qiaoyun does, Denise praises him for his artistic instinct). At the same time, however, Qiaoyun persists in her faith that the sincerity of her heart is what will ultimately win the affection and trust of Frank, and she succeeds exactly on the basis of this inner conviction. Working as a live-in maid in the Moores' lavishly furnished and immaculate company-funded house, Qiaoyun gets her first taste of what the best possible (capitalist) world has to offer. The house's palatial size (by Shanghai standards) and range of modern amenities are indeed the focal point of visual pleasure and consumer desire in the serial. But material opulence pales before the model of companionate marriage that the Moores demonstrate through their daily ritual of kissing, hugging, and lovemaking. Their world, it seems, is a fairyland that is intrinsically complete, except for the conspicuous fact that it cannot sustain itself without relying on the labor of a Chinese woman. In the show, however, this power relation is concealed behind the far more fascinating business of cross-cultural (mis)communication and (mis)understanding.

Qiaoyun's best friend, the tomboyish Genxiong, by contrast, has too much old-fashioned pride to want to follow Qiaoyun's example of becoming a nanny for foreigners. Sleeping in her reluctance are all the ferocious denunciations of foreign imperialists from the socialist era. In her factory days, Genxiong was a section head and a big-sister figure to her coworkers. She was, in other words, a socialist female subject who had achieved a measure of social standing: eco-

conomic independence, visibility in the public arena, and love and respect from her peers. It is difficult not to see this history of women's proud ascension to socialist subjectivity and the painful contraction of their status in post-Mao China as the underlying reason Genxiong looks upon Qiaoyun's new profession with reservation, even as she fumbles about for a practical excuse, such as her ineptitude for English. She flounders through a couple of petty business adventures and, in desperation, allows herself to be persuaded to enroll in the domestic service training program.

However, bad luck seems to follow Genxiong all the way through her first and second jobs as a nanny for foreigners. Her first employer is a shifty and stingy Hong Kong businessman known simply as Mr. Huang. His wife (who turns out to be his illicit "wife number two," or *ernai*) is a taskmaster, a hypochondriac, a finicky eater, a squeamish mother, and a distrustful snob all rolled into one. Working under Mrs. Huang's upturned nose is sheer torture for the proud and headstrong Genxiong, even if she can endure the physical exhaustion and even if she is developing an attachment for Baobao, the Huangs' young autistic son. Before long, Genxiong throws off her apron and quits in a dudgeon after Mrs. Huang humiliates her in front of her employer's lady friends and mahjong pals.

Genxiong's next assignment is no improvement. The Ingrams are a team of siblings with five rambunctious foster children. Miss Ingram is an arrogant English woman, and her insults are bearable only because they seldom translate across the language barrier. Still, there are a few occasions when Genxiong, with the aid of a dictionary, catches a nasty epithet or two (e.g., "pig"), but then collects herself and finds an equally nasty retort from the dictionary to hurl back at the stiff-necked English lady. The indomitable Genxiong also succeeds, against all odds, in bargaining for a salary raise. But a broken porcelain dish (falsely claimed by the Ingrams to be an heirloom) finally terminates Genxiong's roller-coaster experience with that family.

With her third employer, Genxiong's luck takes a brighter turn. A young Canadian English teacher named Donald Atwood hires her to keep house for him and to be his language partner. He wins her affection instantly when he sits down with her during her interview to begin an earnest dialogue in Chinese. Their daily interaction is always cordial and pleasant, albeit not without some comedy of errors. In order to pursue his desire to go native and to find a Chinese girlfriend, Donald moves into a Chinese neighborhood with the assistance of Genxiong and her friends.

Just as Genxiong is devotedly focusing on her new post with Donald, her peace of mind is abruptly ended when two officials from the public security bureau pay

her a surprise visit. They have come to ask her to be the guardian of Baobao, the son of her first employers, Mr. and Mrs. Huang, who are now serving jail time for drug trafficking. Resentful as she may be of the Huangs, Genxiong simply cannot find it in her heart to refuse this request. For Baobao's sake, she quits her job with Donald, but recommends her friend Xiangcao, the third female lead character, as a substitute.

Xiangcao is somewhat different from Qiaoyun and Genxiong in that she is much younger (in her midtwenties) and not a Shanghai native (she is from rural northern China). She is nevertheless a familiar figure in contemporary Chinese cities: the migrant girl (*dagongmei* or *wailaimei*). Her husband, a Shanghainese man, died of illness after their son was born, and Xiangcao is left to bear the ill will of her mother-in-law. Finding her marital home intolerable, Xiangcao welcomes the opportunity to work as a live-in maid in the vicinity of Shanghai so that she can still occasionally see her son, who is living with her mother-in-law. Xiangcao's first employer is a short-tempered but big-hearted Mexican botanist named Rachel Lampson. After a rocky start, the two women forge a strong bond. In one episode, Xiangcao reveals to Rachel, whom she affectionately calls Mother Rachel (*Lei dama*), that she will no longer have a place to return to after her mother-in-law moves out of the one-story courtyard house (slated to be razed) that she currently inhabits and into a new high-rise apartment building in the suburbs, for her mother-in-law has maneuvered to have Xiangcao's name removed from the household registration records. Unbeknownst to Xiangcao, Rachel shows up at her marital home and, in her off-key Chinese, gives the mother-in-law a dressing-down with all the neighbors watching. Then she pulls some strings through the municipal government and helps Xiangcao win back her right to move into the new apartment. But Xiangcao scarcely needs to exercise this right as the drama unfolds on other fronts. As soon as Xiangcao, now with a trendy hairdo and an urbane outfit, turns up at Donald's apartment for work, the stage is set for a bona fide Cinderella story. Predictably, the two fall in love. After their wedding ceremony, for which Rachel returns to be the surrogate mother of the bride, the young couple takes off for North America.

All the while, dramatic events are taking place at the Moores' residence. The couple's conjugal bond, which has elicited so much envy from Qiaoyun, turns out to be rather brittle. Mr. Moore has an affair during Denise's absence and the couple decide to separate. Moved and inspired by Denise's determination not to prolong a marriage when love has been betrayed, Qiaoyun grants her estranged husband the long-awaited divorce. At just this time, Denise receives two visitors: her fashion-model sister, Helena, and her African American fiancé known

simply as Brown, who is a fashion photographer. Brown wants to shoot Chinese women in *qipao* (cheongsam) dresses for his portfolio titled “Centennial Chinese Women: Tradition and Modernity” and talks Qiaoyun into modeling for him. As if touched by the magic of his camera lens, the plain-featured Qiaoyun emerges as a stunning oriental beauty. Upon learning that Qiaoyun’s mother-in-law is a skilled *qipao* maker, Helena proposes a business partnership with them to market *qipao* in North America. In the final episode, Qiaoyun packs for an extended stay in the United States. She explains to Genxiong that she will continue to babysit in the States for Denise, who “cannot possibly do without her,” but that she will also explore business opportunities while there and bring them back to China.

The serial ends on the eve of the millennium. As Genxiong’s family of three sit around the table for a millennial dinner and watch a CCTV (Chinese Central Television) program that spotlights the celebratory activities in major cities around the world, greeting cards from Genxiong’s former employers (including Miss Ingram) pile up on their table, literally bringing the entire world into their tiny apartment. The phone rings, and it is Donald and Xiangcao sending their millennial wishes and announcing Xiangcao’s pregnancy. Next comes Qiaoyun’s call, also wishing them a happy millennium. As stirring symphonic music swells up and dazzling fireworks light up the sky, Genxiong and her husband walk out onto the street to bask in the shimmering glow of an ecstatic Shanghai. In a gesture of intimacy, Genxiong inclines her head against her husband’s shoulder and murmurs in a dreamy voice: “I too would like to be a foreigner someday, going to other places and seeing other things. Ah, how nice it must be.” The camera pans to take in the glorious cityscape of high-rises and speedways—a montage sequence that has been used throughout the serial as a transition device between its otherwise primarily indoor scenes. A sense of hope and infinite potential thus brings the serial to an end.

What is most daring about *Nannies for Foreigners* is perhaps less the incorporation of a large cast of foreign actors (more about this in the next section) than the casting of Chinese nannies as cultural vanguards. At the beginning of their stories, the three women each lead a parochial life typical of most ordinary Chinese: they don’t speak any foreign languages, they cannot claim any foreigners as friends, and they have never traveled abroad. By the end of the serial—at the cusp of the new millennium—all three have had extensive experience dealing with foreigners, and two of them are residing or sojourning abroad. Working as nannies has placed them in a unique position to learn about the foreigners’ ways and habits. In the intimate setting of domestic life, the nanny is a participatory observer of the foreigners in their simulated native habitat. She gets to see them

in their true colors, so to speak. Whatever public personae the foreigners strive to maintain at work, they necessarily slough it off at home and reveal their true selves. In the foreign males' affectionate and paternal exchanges with their wives and children, the nanny sees the *homme* behind the bourgeois (see Habermas 1991). She learns about their philosophy on life; their gender and affective norms; their attitudes toward pleasure and health; their childrearing techniques; and their dietary and leisure habits, even down to their most trivial quirks and fixations. This repertoire of knowledge is held up as a prerequisite for cosmopolitan citizens charged with the millennial mission of propelling China into a global future.

Qiaoyun, for example, not only acquires a new attitude toward love and marriage but also learns to summon children with her palm up instead of down (as the Chinese do and which strikes the foreigners as condescending) and learns that foreigners take their milk cold instead of warm. Xiangcao has impressed upon herself the importance of punctuality and of respecting the supreme sanctity of individual privacy (never, ever, barge into your employer's bedroom while she is still in bed). Owing to the privileged status of the private over the public (Sennett 1992), employment in the households of foreigners doubles as a kind of apprenticeship that grants more direct access to the essence of being global than does employment in a foreign firm or joint venture. If Chinese elites have agonized for a century trying to discover the source of the West's wealth and power, fixating on its gunboats and cannons, constitutions and elections, novels and plays, there is a sense in the serial that the true source has at long last been identified: the values and sentiments underlying the Westerner's private life and self. Thus it falls not on Chinese managers or secretaries but on nannies to act as the spy-apprentice-ambassadors who will link China up with the rail tracks of the world (*yu shijie jiegui*), starting at the intimate terminal of domestic life.

But this civilizing process is portrayed as a two-way street. The nannies also teach the foreigners something in return, such as the Chinese valuation of familial ties, traditional healing arts, and ritual etiquette. At these moments, the power relations between employer and maid are temporarily reversed, and the foreigners are fitted into a familiar image: the barbarians who gratefully submit to the sinifying powers of the Middle Kingdom. The foreigners who are disagreeable or downright odious (Mrs. Huang and Miss Ingram immediately come to mind) are those who refuse to mask the power relations between themselves and their Chinese maids, or to be placed at the receiving end of the civilizing process. In their relationships with their nannies, class and racial dynamics are rather naked for lack of a cultural veil. However, the representation of these particular foreign-

ers as morally deficient changes the question of class and race into one of good foreigners versus bad foreigners.

Thus, on the one hand, cosmopolitanism in the form of cultural encounter displaces class as an autonomous discourse and a compelling idiom of identification. On the other hand, cosmopolitanism as a mode of knowledge and a will to think and feel beyond the nation inspires a serious effort at understanding the other. The nannies are the primary agents of this cosmopolitanism, but their mission cannot be accomplished without the cast of multicultural foreigners.

Multicultural Foreigners

What sets *Nannies for Foreigners* apart from earlier literary, pictorial, cinematic, and theatrical works featuring foreign characters is its multicultural foreign cast. We have not only the usual white Americans (the Moores) and British (the Ingrams), but also a Mexican (Rachel), a Canadian (Donald), an African American (Brown), and even Hong Kongers (the Huangs). The spectrum of nationalities, personalities, and motives resolutely breaks with older representations of foreigners as one-dimensional ciphers: “foreign devils” (*yangguizi*) in the populist, xenophobic imagination; third world brethren in socialist iconography; paper tiger imperialists in official Occidentalism; welcome harbingers of freedom and enlightenment in anti-official Occidentalism; and enticing icons of consumer desire in reform-era advertisements and calendar posters (Chen 1995; Schein 1994). If foreigners come in all stripes, the conventional role of the foreigner as the archetypal other against which a unified national self is defined becomes problematic.²

The foreign characters fall roughly into three categories: (1) multinational corporate employees and international venture capitalists; (2) foreign experts, English teachers, and cultural pilgrims; and (3) overseas Chinese businessmen. The Moores and Mr. Ingram obviously belong to the first category. As opposed to being portrayed as latter-day imperialists coming back to resume the unfinished project of colonialism, they are portrayed as well-mannered and upright citizens of the world whose presence in China is welcomed and sought after. Their relations with Qiaoyun and Genxiong are, for the most part, formal and professional and conform to the laws of the land (Denise and Qiaoyun are able to forge a

2. Claire Conceison's study (2004) of the representation of Americans in Chinese theater works of the 1990s shows that even when foreign characters are not multicultural, they have largely ceased to be a stereotype on Chinese stage—thanks in part to the resistance and input of a few American actors active in theatrical productions.

sisterly bond toward the end, but this is only after Denise has largely shed her identity as a corporate warrior).

The second category includes Rachel, Donald, and, to a lesser extent, Brown (whose on-screen time is rather brief). They are the contemporary incarnates of such venerable “foreign friends” (*waiguo pengyou*) of China as Edgar Snow, Norman Bethune, and William Hinton. Unlike the corporate warriors, they often go out of their way to learn Chinese and to get to know the common folk (going so far as to form fictive kinship ties or nuclear families with them). They therefore readily endear themselves to the Chinese, even if their less-than-opulent lifestyle and their sometimes poorly disguised “foreign bum” (*yanghunzi*) traits may elicit disapproval from the latter. In the serial, they form close bonds with their nannies and practice a kind of international humanitarianism that puts certain Chinese (for example, Xiangcao’s mother-in-law or local officials) to shame for their indifference toward (if not active abuse of) their victims. Also unlike the long-faced businessman type, this group of foreigners is the serial’s chief source of comic relief, owing as much to their surprising command of Chinese proverbs and folk sayings (and their unabashed desire to show off) as to their broken Chinese syntax and outlandish accents.

The third category of foreigners is the most problematic and most usefully highlights the problem of the hyphen-nation under conditions of global capitalism. The fact that the couple from Hong Kong is shady and obnoxious is perhaps a symptom of their ambiguous position as neither insider nor outsider, neither self nor other. As ex-colonials, the Huangs need to be renationalized by living in Shanghai and having Genxiong — an authentic Chinese woman — work for them. However, Mr. Huang proves himself uncivilizable and unnationalizable: as the drug-trafficking and philandering boss of a criminal gang, he is likely to spend the rest of his life in a Chinese jail. Mrs. Huang repents, cooperates with the authorities, and is allowed to return to Hong Kong with Baobao before her jail term is up, a gesture that is meant to signify the magnanimity of the state, while also reflecting a desire to rid China of its rotten elements. Neither, it is clear, will be allowed to become Chinese citizens proper or to interact with (and contaminate) other Chinese. The overseas Chinese are thus stuck between the unenviable alternatives of being either a “fake” foreigner (and being sent away)³ or a degenerate self (and being made invisible through incarceration).

3. Upon learning that her mother’s new employers are a Hong Kong couple, Genxiong’s teenage daughter snorts: “I thought you’d be working for a real *laowai* [a slightly derogatory term for foreigners]. After all that trouble, you only landed some Hong Kongers!”

It is clear that we have come a long way from the old dichotomy of imperialists versus friends of China. As individuals who may or may not fit neatly into one of the above categories, the multicultural cast of foreigners possesses a full range of moral qualities, personalities, and emotions. They interact with their nannies as individuals and as families in need of domestic help, not as the emissaries of larger imperialist interests or colonialist designs. (The fact that some of them are the foot soldiers of global capitalism is easily camouflaged by the atomizing culture of neoliberalism.) They no longer have to be accompanied by a government-assigned guide/interpreter/spy wherever they go, and the Chinese they come into contact with are no longer compelled to speak for all Chinese. Sociability between foreigners and Chinese has become free in the sense that it is no longer dictated by the exigencies (or paranoia) of the state or circumscribed by the imperative of national sympathy (Lee 2004).

By welcoming foreigners into its bosom and trustingly sending its women to work and live in their midst, China reinvents itself for the global age as a capacious, confident nation with flexible borders and an elastic sense of Chineseness. By intermixing Chinese and foreigners, the serial loosens Chineseness from the primordial registers of language and ethnicity.⁴ Here we have foreigners who speak the language and care more about their nannies than do other Chinese; we also have Chinese who look Chinese but carry themselves like foreigners and behave worse than foreigners. At some level, the importance of the self-other distinction fades away and what matters are ethical qualities of love, integrity, self-respect, and compassion. The serial shows that these universal ethical principles can underwrite a new, cosmopolitan national identity, because they are most splendidly personified in the enchanted figure of the Chinese woman.

The Enchantment of Chinese Womanhood

While still employed by the Ingrams, Genxiong is approached by David, Mr. Ingram's assistant from work, who has an indecent proposal to make to her. David is a Shanghai native who has lived abroad for many years and who is one of those peripatetic citizens of the world (also known as "astronauts"; Ong 1998; Liu 1999). He is scheming with Mr. Ingram's estranged wife, a rich heiress, to frame Mr. Ingram in a sex scandal so that she can sue for a divorce. If Genxiong

4. I do not mean to suggest that Chineseness had previously been firmly grounded in language and ethnicity. The genealogy of national identity is too complex to venture into here. Suffice it to say that in post-Mao China, language (or "Chinese culture") and ethnicity, after ceding the front stage to class during the Mao era, have been revived as the most significant markers of Chineseness.

were willing to sign a false deposition testifying to having had a sexual relationship with Ingram, her reward would be 500,000 yuan (over US\$60,000) in cash, instant ownership of a condominium, and an overseas tour package for her whole family. Tantalized by the unimaginable spoils and yet frightened by the prospect of committing perjury, Genxiong agonizes for some time before her conscience speaks up against such a nefarious scheme. She will, of course, have nothing to do with it.

In such acts of conscience, virtue becomes a defining national character trait and the organizing trope of self-Orientalism. In the context of China's millennial dreams, virtue is also a principle of enchantment, preparing its feminine embodiments for the Cinderella moment. Both Qiaoyun and Xiangcao undergo the Cinderella moment: the former when she slips on *qipao* dresses and poses for Brown; the latter when she falls in love with and marries Donald. These moments are self-Orientalist in that the female characters are reborn as *Chinese* Cinderellas under the exoticizing and desiring gaze of foreign princes. Xiangcao and Donald's wedding ceremony, for example, is conducted in the Chinese pop-traditional style, replete with long gowns, bridal veil, sedan chair, and the three bows (to heaven and earth, to parents, and to each other). The ceremony is also deliberately modified so that the Orient is shown to be perfectly capable of modernization: thus the Western ritual of exchanging rings and kisses follows the three bows.

Curiously, though, Xiangcao's peasant parents are nowhere to be seen at the ceremony (it is Rachel who gives her away). They seem to have been excluded as a tacit acknowledgment that certain sections of the Chinese population are not amenable or at least not yet ready for the collective assumption of a cosmopolitan identity. The erasure of Xiangcao's rural identity is thus symptomatic of the "spectralization of the rural" that Hairong Yan (2003) writes about in an article on rural migrant women. In the post-Mao embrace of the discourse of modernity, the city is projected as a space of modern subjectivity and futurity, whereas the countryside is rendered as a site of inertness, despair, and symbolic death and thus depleted of its Mao-era ideological authenticity and dignity. The rural women that Yan interviews migrate in large numbers to the city in search of work and of ways of being a so-called proper human being. Yan contrasts this tidal wave of migration in post-Mao China to an earlier trend in the socialist period, where rural women, especially those from Anhui province, were discreetly permitted to work in cities (mostly Beijing) as domestics in the homes of communist officials. Though these women brought home decent wages that contributed significantly to family incomes during those spartan years, their labor was not a source of pride in themselves, and they alluded to it with a tinge of embarrassment. Yan attrib-

utes this to a combination of the patriarchal possessive attitude toward women's bodies and their labor power *and* the effect of the socialist narrative of women's liberation.

During the Mao years, under the state directive that women's liberation be premised upon full participation in social production, rural women participated in unprecedented numbers in collective agricultural work, public-works projects, cultural and artistic production, and rudimentary health care, and they were compensated by the village collective in the form of "workpoints." To be sure, patriarchal values and institutional arrangements continued to structure rural life and disadvantage women in subtle or overt ways (Wolf 1985), but one cannot deny that women and women's work were a vital component of the rural socialist public sphere. I would argue that it is in reference to their role in this particular public sphere—and not to how many workpoints they earned or how freely they were allowed to choose their spouses—that we can best speak of women's liberation in socialist China.

Lamentably, it is precisely this public sphere that has been largely lost in the post-Mao reforms that have otherwise brought so much hope and prosperity to the countryside. The celebrated "household responsibility system" that returned the cultivation and management of farmland to individual peasant households (privatization without ownership) resurrected the incentive principle and the entrepreneurial spirit. But it also sent women back into the home and to the patriarchal authority and power of their parents and husbands. Yan's interviewees' startling invocation of the countryside as a field of death is really an acute recognition of the dissolution of the socialist public sphere. Feminist scholars have long theorized the domestication of women as a form of "civil death" (Pateman 1988: 119). When rural women speak with resigned dread of the prospect of marriage, childbirth, and domestic life—a life of "moving around the stove" (*wei zhe guo-tai zhuan*) (Yan 2003: 588)—they are indeed mourning their civil death. It is thus poignantly ironic that many rural women end up in the city working as domestics. Official discourse seeks to cloak this paradox through a seductive discourse of desire and consumption, highlighting these young women's earning powers in the city and celebrating their potential as agents of change in the exhilarating world of capitalist modernity. Thus, in place of the rural public sphere of collective work and communal life, they are inducted into the urban public sphere of consumption in which the cultivation of taste and the freedom of choice constitutes the extent of their agency (Yan 2002).

In *Nannies for Foreigners*, Xiangcao's reason for not wanting to return to the countryside after the untimely death of her husband is ostensibly her maternal

attachment to her infant son. Her eagerness to find employment, likewise, is supposedly fueled by her desire to flee her truculent mother-in-law. The serial therefore declines to ask whether domestic service is meaningful and fulfilling for women. On the contrary, working as a domestic in the receptive home of Mother Rachel seems ideal to Xiangcao, both because her new role is a “natural” extension of her truncated motherhood and because it provides her with a shelter apparently superior to that afforded by unscrupulous sweatshop owners who routinely hire and fire young women in rapid succession and who extend few benefits to their employees beyond subsistence wages.

The serial’s main setting, the foreigner’s residence, is thus a highly significant strategy of enchantment. The foreigner’s home is dramatized as a quasi-public sphere in a way that might not be possible in a Chinese home. Thanks precisely to the foreignness of the employer, his or her home becomes an arena of cross-cultural sociability where the nanny experiences the thrills and risks of meeting and interacting with strangers. It is a public realm of sorts because the nanny is “seen and heard” by her employer, who clearly occupies a location different from hers—a condition that Hannah Arendt believes is essential to guaranteeing the multiplicity of perspectives and aspects (1958: 57).⁵ Cultural clashes become the hyperbolic expression of this multiplicity of perspectives, which proves much more mesmerizing than whatever drama may be found in nationally circumscribed public spheres. The latter is rather like family life writ large, where even strangers are not nearly as strange, outlandish, and outrageous as these foreigners who never fail to enchant and exasperate their nannies (and the audience) at the same time.

That the foreigner’s home functions as a quasi-public sphere is further reinforced by the subplot of romance. With its insistence on the emotional and ethical validity of sheer contingency and spontaneity, romantic love is arguably the most privileged trope of modern sociability (Lee, forthcoming). Falling in love with and marrying one’s foreign employer, therefore, is the ultimate gesture that affirms the modernity of the foreigner’s home-cum—public sphere. As I have suggested earlier, interracial romance also conveniently displaces class dynamics with those of gender and culture. What we have here is not only a secular Cinderella tale but also a millennial update of the courtship between Mr. B. and Pamela

5. In theory, this should also be a realm in which all parties are free agents and interact as equals. The foreigner’s home is quasi-public in that while the primary axis of social relationship is a hierarchical one, it is deliberately misrecognized and displaced through the discourse of gender and culture.

in Samuel Richardson's novel *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded* (1740). In the novel, Pamela, a servant girl, fends off the impudent advances of Mr. B., her employer. Overcome by the charm of her virtue, Mr. B. duly falls in love with her and makes her his proper wife, thereby transforming himself from an aristocratic libertine into a bourgeois gentleman.

In the serial, we know from his very first appearance that Donald intends to find a Chinese wife for himself. We are given the pleasurable task of conjecturing whom the lucky girl might be and how she might go about testing Donald's heart, thereby helping him shed the potential image of a foreign rake. In wooing Xiangcao, Donald goes overboard in his Orientalist clowning acts, such as singing Chinese love ballads and begging her to explain the symbolism of mandarin ducks and butterflies (traditional symbols of the romantic and conjugal bond). To top it off, the serial contrives to have Xiangcao faint on the job. Donald carries her to the hospital and gallantly donates his blood for a transfusion. Upon her recovery, Xiangcao, like Pamela, forces Donald to take a series of vows, including letting a whole year go by before he can have her as a wife. The postponement of gratification effectively transforms their relationship from a contract of employment to a sexual contract, thereby supplanting the political categories of the former with those of eroticism and exoticism. The effect of equalization achieved in their delayed union "empowers the female to give herself in exchange with the male" (Armstrong 1987: 112) by arrogating autonomous agency to the maid. The plot resolution of interracial marriage thus solidifies the foreigner's home not only as a quasi-public sphere but also as a schooling site for modern subjectivity.

The serial is none too subtle in suggesting that Xiangcao's Cinderella fortune has as much to do with her virtue as with her hard work. Underlying her story is the one kind of occult economy that the Comaroffs do not explicitly speak of: romantic love. Like gambling and speculating, romantic love is a form of occult economy in which one accrues wealth not by the sweat of one's brow but by the good fortune that Eros dispenses as a dividend of virtuous investment. For many, romance is also the last refuge of enchantment in our supposedly disenchanted world. It is in romance that we are still willing to believe that the truly magical can happen, because our hearts are still capable of responding to the mysterious stirrings of our bodies and to the unpredictable chemistry of sociability.

Romance interests Jane Bennett (2001) precisely for its enchanting qualities. In contrast to the familiar story of modern life told by such thinkers as Max Weber, she tells an "alter-tale" that strenuously captures the "fugitive" moments of enchantment lurking in our "calculable" world: cross-species encounters, modern technology, commodities and advertisements, and eroticism. These moments can

enchant because they are able to arouse “exhilaration or acute sensory activity” in us, and in response we become “transfixed in wonder and transported by sense” (5). Bennett believes that these moments hold ethical promise, for they enhance our enjoyment of the world and hence our spirit of generosity on the “wager” that one must be capable of being enchanted with existence in order to be capable of “donating some of one’s scarce mortal resources to the service of others” (4). Her project, therefore, is to construct a model of ethics in which enchantment functions as a positive resource (15).

How are we to reconcile the two opposing views of enchantment: as a positive ethical resource on the one hand and as a strategy of millennial capitalism on the other? It is no secret that romance has long partnered with commercial capitalism and continues to be the latter’s most profitable domain, from the wedding industry and other thriving “businesses of love” (Illouz 1997) to the global trade of mail-order brides. But romance has also long served as a powerful trope of freedom and spontaneity. The spirit of generosity that Bennett believes is foundational to ethics is most spectacularly displayed in the lover’s willingness to hand over his or her most precious possession—indeed life itself—to the loved one (for example, the blood transfusion scene in the serial). The serial unabashedly hallows itself with the enchanting power of love. In doing so, it taps into the ethical potential of an enchanting tale of cross-cultural and cross-racial romance. In permitting “a daughter of China” to marry a foreigner and emigrate to his native country, the serial molds a new image of China as a confident and magnanimous bride-giver, in contrast with the older image of China as a feminine territory that must be guarded against the penetration of foreigner intruders. It also overcomes the national patriarchal possessiveness, which, in literary and cinematic representations, is usually manifested in the plot pattern of a Chinese man taking in a foreign wife who makes heroic efforts to please her in-laws and assimilate to the Chinese way of life. Here, a Chinese woman marrying a foreign man is treated with bemused acceptance as the charming fruit of individual human interactions. There is no compulsion to allegorize it as a national-racial drama or to mobilize rescue or retaliatory action. The ethical potential of romance as a modern mode of enchantment seems to be in full play.

Nonetheless, it would be naive of us to read the romantic plot for only its ethical promise. Bennett constructs her enchanted model of ethics under the keen awareness that the quest for enchantment can easily slip into “a longing to forget about injustice, sink into naïvete, and escape from politics” (2001: 10). And yet this ideological function of enchantment is all too often activated in neoliberal fairy tales. Insofar as she is a Cinderella figure, Xiangcao encodes the ultimate logic of

millennial capitalism: have faith in the system and you will be rewarded when you least expect it. She exhibits the requisite qualities of a millennial capitalist player: independence (refusal to lean on the state) and faith in the global (marriage) market. She insouciantly walks into a bachelor's apartment, into a role that has spelled so much misery for women past and present (think only of Gong Li's character in *Pretty Mother*), entrusting herself entirely to fate—or to the rationality of the capitalist world order under the aegis of the postsocialist state (here personified by Teacher Ping, the always smiling and obliging director at the government job training and referral center)—and fortified by the lingering bond of socialist sisterhood. In this sense, she is much luckier than the archetypal Cinderella: thanks to the socialist revolution, the Chinese people have “stood up,” as Mao famously proclaimed in 1949. A foreigner's desire for China must take the form of reverence, longing, and love. He can access a Chinese woman's body only if he makes her his lawful wife, his emotional equal, and his partner in global enterprise.

Thanks also to the socialist revolution, we are reminded, Chinese women no longer live in fear, under the tyranny of patriarchy and its female surrogate, the wicked mother-in-law (the Chinese counterpart of the wicked stepmother). Xiangcao can always count on the sororal loyalty of Genxiong and Qiaoyun. Although it is not clear how Xiangcao, a migrant woman, could have established such a strong bond with the two city women, the few references to Genxiong's days in the state-run factory invite us to interpellate Xiangcao in the subject position of a socialist woman whose greatest asset is her membership in the sisterhood forged in the crucible of collective production. We are therefore to regard Genxiong and Qiaoyun not as jealous bourgeois sisters who want to steal Xiangcao's happiness, but as big-hearted proletarian sisters who help her find her prince and assist her metamorphosis from a country wench to a cosmopolitan citizen of the world.

Xiangcao is also much luckier than Ruth, the Moabite woman who followed Naomi, her Israelite mother-in-law, back to Bethlehem and who, by giving birth to a son, founded a new sovereign monarchy for the kingdom of Israel. For many, Ruth is the model immigrant who expresses her resolve to convert to the religion and culture of her adoptive land in these verse lines:

Whither thou goest, I will go
 Whither thou lodgest, I will lodge
 Thy people shall be my people
 Thy god shall be my god. (quoted in Honig 1998: 194).

For Bonnie Honig, however, Ruth is not someone we should look up to as a model immigrant. Borrowing from Eric Santner's theory of play, Honig argues that

Ruth's immigrant experience lacked the three necessary dimensions of transitional object play: mourning, empowerment, and intersubjectivity. Because of the total, traumatic severance from her people and because of her "furious and hyperbolic assimilationism" (208), Ruth was deprived of the transitional object play through which she could act out "her bereavement and thereby [become] empowered for separation and individuation" (207). The foreigner's home, in contrast, is traversed daily by the nannies but does not totally absorb them—they return to their own home in the evenings or on weekends and they socialize with one another in person or by phone. Employment in the foreigner's home can therefore be seen as a kind of transitional object play that enables the women to mourn the loss of the socialist state, to empower themselves as the vanguards of China's neoliberal era, and to be "witnessed periodically by the figure whose (temporary) absences are being borne" (207). Here, the witnesses are played by Teacher Ping, the women's beloved family members, and their fellow nannies. Socialism, even as it is being jettisoned wholesale, is here called upon to witness China's rebirth in the new world order of millennial capitalism. Woven into the enchantment of Chinese womanhood is thus not only a new ethic of generosity, but also a national fantasy of finally overcoming the aporia of self-transformation and self-sameness.

Conclusion: To Be a Foreigner

I have argued in this essay that the figure of the foreigner is crucial to the national project of self-reinvention in the age of millennial capitalism. In the quasi-public sphere of the foreigner's home, Chinese people (represented by the nannies) undergo a collective rebirth as cosmopolitan subjects while remaining true to the abiding essence of Chineseness. As a transitional object, the foreigner's home is by definition a temporary play/training ground, not a permanent site within national boundaries. For this reason, the foreigners are all sojourners who come and go at a dizzying pace. They are not immigrants.

If, in choosing to live among "us," foreign sojourners make us "feel good about who we are" (Honig 1998: 196), their inevitable departure eases the anxiety that immigrants usually introduce to a community. In *Nannies for Foreigners*, some foreigners do not just bring a piece of the outside world to China, they also insist on its primacy and demand reverse assimilation. But others make the characteristically immigrant effort to learn the language and adopt Chinese wisdom and mannerisms; in doing so, they stoke Chinese national pride. They may initially induce nervous discomfort for having insinuated themselves into the linguistic

realm of national intimacy. But ultimately they solidify the sense of national identity by desiring what the Chinese have by birth and by paying tribute to that cultural heritage while being barred from laying claim to Chineseness on the ground of ethnicity. Their accents and linguistic slipups usually elicit bemusement and indulgence rather than the scorn that typically greets southern or overseas Chinese, who mangle their Mandarin pronunciations like foreigners but who are nonetheless able, ethnically, to lay claim to Chineseness. They are likely to be disavowed as the inferior self because their halting Mandarin exposes the artificiality of language and ethnicity as legitimating principles of the nation.

As sojourners whose telos of life is always elsewhere—and this elsewhere is by implication a more desirable place than the place of sojourning—the foreign characters in the serial engage the problematic of national identity by rendering the Chinese as the default immigrants. Like Naomi, Denise and Donald bring their Chinese nannies with them to their places of origin. By apprenticing themselves in the sentiments and values of the neoliberal world order, the nannies also learn to desire what their foreign masters desire. They are the “good” mimetic immigrants à la Ruth. Yet their act of emigration is also inherently destabilizing and disconcerting, a reminder that China has been and still is at the donor’s end in the global flow of people. In the character of Xiangcao is simultaneously an acknowledgment that thousands of Chinese emigrate to the metropolitan West every year *and* a disavowal that some of them are washed up on the shores of New York and elsewhere as economic migrants while others turn up in Western courts seeking political asylum (not to mention the growing number of abandoned Chinese infants adopted by Western parents). Premised upon romance, Xiangcao’s act of emigration is given sentimental and ethical validation. Global economic mobility or political freedom is thus banished from the realm of representation.

But the kind of life that probably awaits Xiangcao in her adoptive country—motherhood and a series of entry-level jobs suitable for new immigrants—makes her an unlikely candidate as an ambassador of China’s image to the world. Qiaoyun, on the other hand, would fill this bill far more satisfactorily. Having enchanted the world through Brown’s camera lens, Qiaoyun has launched into the public sphere of consumer culture. Her enchantment goes beyond that of romance or eroticism and conjoins Orientalist visuality with commodity fetishism. We know that nursing Denise’s children is only part of Qiaoyun’s reason for going to the United States. No longer nubile, Qiaoyun may well remain a single mother and therefore transcend, to a degree, the limiting bounds of femininity. We can reasonably look forward to her coming into her own as a mobile and resourceful player in the global commodity economy, once she has acquired the skills and

connections through her partnership with Helena and Brown. She will then return to China, as she promises in the final episode, to enlist Genxiong's help in her international fashion business, thereby transforming the socialist sisterhood into a business partnership fully attuned to the possibilities and excitements of global capitalism.

With this prospect lying in the wings, then, Genxiong is not simply a Chinese Orpah, Ruth's sister who does not follow Naomi to the land of the Israelites and who stands for foreignness that cannot be assimilated. For the time being, it seems that Genxiong will go on serving foreigners in her mothering role, and in this capacity she reflects China's role as the world's factory floor, supplying millions of homes with cheap, low-tech consumer products through the pipelines of international trade. But the hope exists that one day she will realize her millennial wish of becoming a "foreigner," which is really shorthand for becoming a world citizen. In other words, Genxiong will one day cast off her identity as a gender-based service provider, shed the stigma of being rooted and inflexible, and cross over to the other side—the side of mobile capital and cosmopolitan freedom. But she would have all this only as a foreigner or sojourner, not as an immigrant. She would always return, albeit as a new, worldly woman and as the embodiment of a new, worldly China. In her we also see the hope for a situated and democratic cosmopolitanism in which the nation is an important but not all-encompassing site of identity and that finds "ethical renewal in the engagement with foreigners" (Honig 1998: 206) as well as in the transformative possibility of *being* foreigners.

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