

Gewuting as a Contested Space in Early 1990s China: A Reading of *Haima Gewuting*

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Abstract

This article, through an analysis of the TV show *Haima gewuting* (1993) against the sociopolitical background from the 1980s to 1990s, examines how dance halls, particularly singing and dancing halls (*gewuting*), enable the modern identities of individualism, democracy, and globalism while still being restricted by the state, and how the space of dance hall demonstrates the transition from early reform era to the postsocialist era as conflicted and contested. As a center of fusions and contradictions between state control and individual freedom, socialism and market-driven economy, *gewuting* presented in the TV series operates as a contested site where individuals negotiated the tension between socialism and postsocialism, collectives and individuals, public and private, nationalism and individualism. Yet, different from sixth-generation movies which portray *gewuting* as an imaginary space for expressing desires, this show extends the functions and meanings of *gewuting* in the early 1990s. I argue that in *Haima gewuting* the singing and dancing hall represents a “real-and-imagined place” (in Edward Soja’s words) where people started stretching free of social constraints and sought individuality. Yet, in these spaces, people also negotiated contradictions and ambiguities through the transition from socialism to a market-based economy.

Keywords: reform and opening up, postsocialism, singing and dancing halls (*gewuting*), *Haima gewuting*

In 2019 during a visit to my hometown Guangzhou, I revisited *Liuhua wuting* (Liuhua dance hall, 流花舞廳), inside one of the main parks in Guangzhou. In the

early afternoon, I saw quite some middle-aged to elderly folks dancing in the hall, and from the smiles on their faces, I could tell that they were having a good time. Some of them told me that they had frequented this place for the last two to three decades. This Liuhua dance hall was built in the 1980s, and growing up, when I visited the park in 1990s, I often saw crowds of people dancing there. Today there is a wider variety of places to dance, but these pictures (Figure 1) show that dance halls as such have continued to be popular in China long after the 1990s.



Figure 1 People dancing in Liuhua wuting, Guangzhou, in the morning in the summer of 2019

The Liuhua dance hall is plain and simple, with square tiles on the floor and some blue, green, and red LED tubes on the ceiling. The floor, ceiling, and walls are mostly white and off-white color, making the hall look plain. A mirror hangs on the wall at the back of the room. Several chairs are lined up at the edges of the room. People practicing dancing wear quite casual, comfortable outfits. The opening hours are 9 to 11:30 am and 2 to 4:30 pm, seemingly attracting retired folks during the week and working people during the weekends, providing an entertainment space to relieve the boredom for the “salaried class” (*gongxinjiecheng*).¹

Unlike these restrictive, colorless, and plain dance hall spaces in the early 1980s, *Haima gewuting* (海馬歌舞廳, *Seahorse Dance Hall*, 1993) offers a much more colorful and interesting depiction of the singing and dancing hall. The TV show features various characters from different regions and backgrounds in each episode, including overseas Chinese coming back from abroad, people of different social classes, etc. *Haima*, along with other dance halls and *gewuting* emerges as a commercialized space as a product of privatization.² After a decade of the Cultural Revolution, as well as the reform and opening up, we see a growing number of

- 1 Farrer and Field point out that the dance halls of the 1980s were associated with a working-class culture.
- 2 Privatization could mean either the transfer of ownership, property, or business from the government to the private sector or a public-traded company taken over by a few people. Here I refer to the former definition.

privatized entertainment spaces that not only inherit the cultural legacy of socialist realism but also newly create the personal, individual space. In the 1990s, new bars, discos, and dance clubs emerged, and the customers were often middle-class or above, including foreigners, overseas Chinese, and repatriated Chinese. Unlike the public spaces of the 1980s, the dance spaces in the early 1990s were often privately owned and run by corporations or individuals. They cared less about politics and more about their personal interests and private desires. Social dance halls (*wuting*), therefore, slowly departed from socialist styles and transformed into a new style of commercial space as a product of economic development. Many have developed into *gewuting* (singing and dancing hall, 歌舞廳)—a combination of singing and dancing hall.³ In the early 1990s, “going out for a night” became a social practice, and *gewuting* like *Haima* served as an important entertainment space for people to mingle, chat, sing, and dance. The indoor, private space gives people more privacy, enabling them to have a social life beyond their work and family life. But, at the same time, the dance hall is not fully private, as the KTV station, dance floor, and stage are in the middle of the hall, among the audience. The dance hall is isolated from the outside, but the inside of the hall is an open space where people can see each other. It is not the privatization of the dance hall business that creates private desires.⁴ Private desires existed during the early reform period in the 1980s, as shown by the surveys and self-organized parties such as the “black light dance halls.”⁵ But privatization allows individuals to pursue private desires that have been suppressed. Therefore, the transition from public to private renders more possibilities to express private desires.

This article builds on and expands existing studies on dance halls. Previous scholarship focuses on ballroom dancing and the cabarets that mostly emerged with the Westernization and the jazz age in the 1920s and '30s that target the higher-class clientele; this paper turns to focus on the *gewuting* the caters to a popular

- 3 I use the pinyin *gewuting* (歌舞廳), or “singing and dancing” hall, the direct translation of *gewuting* to distinguish it from pubs or nightclubs in Western contexts. Nightclubs usually mean Western-style clubs where young people go out dancing. They often offer otherworldly environments filled with loud music, distracting interior design, and lighting effects. Pubs target a variety of customers that cross age and style boundaries and involve more drinking than dancing.
- 4 In *Private Life under Socialism: Love, Intimacy, and Family Change in a Chinese Village 1949–1999*, Yunxiang Yan shows that private desires existed even when the public life of the village was flourishing. She argues that privatization did not create private desires but rather enabled individuals to pursue those existing desires.
- 5 “Black light dance balls” (Farrer 2006) were, at the time, well-known to signify intimacy of dancing in the dark.

audience and a wide range of social classes in the early 1990s. Many of the themes that characterize the *gewuting*, however, also appear in ballroom dance halls, including individualism, desire, the meeting of diverse social groups, attempts to navigate the new market economy, etc. The *gewuting* in the show raises some new questions about postsocialist tensions and offers a different perspective on *gewuting*. Particularly, James Farrer's analysis of social dance halls primarily treats them as spaces for extramarital affairs and a pressure valve to release the boredom of work life for middle-aged employees of government *danwei*. (Farrer 2000 & 2006) Similarly, Feng Chongyi defines these halls as "cabarets with a whole range of services by girls," which would lead to misunderstanding.⁶ The social singing-and-dancing scene represented in *Haima gewuting* is quite different from that described in Farrer's discussion. It offers *gewuting* as a place of multifold meanings—at times, it is a place for stress relief; at times, it is a place to achieve individual identities that imagine; at times, it is a place for justice. Rather than a reinforced form of community and national spirit like in the 1920s (Field 2010) or just a stress reliever from the government *danwei* in the 1980s and '90s (Wilcox 2019), the TV series captures the nuances of the postsocialist society through *gewuting*: how *gewuting* is a site for both fusion and contradiction of the public versus private, socialist versus postsocialist, and individualism versus collectivism in the transition from socialism to marketization.

Haima gewuting is a forty-episode drama produced in 1993, and it stars several famous actors and actresses, including Liang Tian, Chen Xiaoyi, and Zhang Guoli. The TV show raised a lot of attention from its inception. Many enterprises, corporations, and TV stations were interested in collaborating. It took them only fourteen days to produce the whole series. But, after it aired, the TV show received a lot of criticism (Ge 1994, Tian 1995). One point critiqued is the limited space in the TV show, as nothing but the small, dark singing and dancing hall occupies the whole series, thereby making audience bored after watching long episodes. Some other critics also disagree with the show's portrayal of the postsocialist reality during the time. As one of the TV shows written by the famous yet controversial literary figure and scriptwriter Wang Shuo in the 1980s and '90s, the show somehow follows his style of *liumang* (hooligan) or *pizi* (ruffian). Some categorize

6 Feng points out a few reasons why *gewuting*, among other commercial entertainment spaces, became popular nightlife space in China: 1) the decline of Marxist ideology and drastic social change; 2) urban commercial nightlife in China in the '80s was imported from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and other overseas Chinese communities; and 3) male patrons are drawn to the services provided by girls in these places.

it as *kan* (侃, “to piffle,” “a pointless chatter”), as the plot is largely made up of conflicts between the characters, as well as the overuse of long conversations. This show is listed as a prime example of *kan ye TV* in TV Review, indicating that the show makes fun of everything, but the critiques stay superficial. Most criticism of the show focuses on the overuse of ridicule and chitchat, repetition of plots, and unreasonable conflicts in the TV show.

These controversial comments on *Haima gewuting* are worth exploring, whether the criticism directs at the flaws of the show or towards the social phenomenon in reality. Chinese social media and press critique websites such as Douban, Sohu, and Zhihu view the show positively and consider it as a realistic portrayal and critique of postsocialist China.⁷ It may not be among the most beloved shows, but it expands our understanding of the social world of social dance halls in this period by using the social dance hall as a site to explore many issues that arise in the '80s and '90s, ultimately presenting a conflicted view of Chinese postsocialism.

Sixth-generation films have included *gewuting* as a modern site that emerges with consumer culture and stands in between reality and imagination. Jia Zhangke has incorporated *gewuting* in several films of his, including *Xiao Wu* (1998), *The World* (2004), *Jianghu Er'nv* (*Ash Is Purest White*, 2018). In *Xiao Wu*, *gewuting* becomes a site where a frequent thief, a marginalized figure of the society, falls in love and gets his desires fulfilled momentarily, yet his relationship with this bargirl is transient, just like his relationship with the society. He is an outcast from beginning to end, only witnessing the modern transition going by just like the street filled with bars passing by in the shots near the end. Similarly, in Lou Ye's renowned *Suzhou River* (2000), the protagonist, after looking for his girlfriend Moudan for a long time, has finally run into a girl called Meimei in a *gewuting* called *Shiji kaixin guan* (Happy Tavern), who looks exactly like her. The protagonist, uncertain if the girl is actually her or not, sneaks into her room. The camera focuses on her dressing as a mermaid, just as she promised. Yet when he talks to her she rejects being the girl he recognizes. He keeps going to the bar every day to watch Meimei's performances and tell her the story of him and Moudan. Eventually, the tavern closes down, and Meimei disappears. Madar finds Moudan in a convenience store, but soon they pass away together. Only when Meimei finds them dead does she realize he has been telling the truth the whole time. In these sixth-generation

7 See related references: http://www.sohu.com/a/149471804_563938; <https://www.zhihu.com/question/22644856>; <https://movie.douban.com/subject/3018484/>; <https://kknews.cc/zh-sg/entertainment/jzx14le.html>.

films, *gewuting* serves as an imaginative site where one's desires are expressed or exercised in comparison to the tragic life they face in reality. These shows only use *gewuting* as one of the minor backdrops, along with other urban spaces like pool halls, discos, and hotels, to show the changing scene from a socialist world to a modernized, consumer-oriented postsocialist society.

Haima gewuting extends such meaning and notion of these dance halls. In this show, the *gewuting* is no longer a mere backdrop but the center of the show. Yet just like the sixth-generation films portray, the majority of the characters in this show are marginalized, and what happens inside the *gewuting* shows an uncertain, unstable world in the postsocialist world. However, it also expands the meaning of *gewuting*, from the mere imaginary, transient space in sixth-generation movies to an urban space that emerges from modernization and globalization after the reform and opening up, as well as a contested site that demonstrates the conflicts and fusion. This article examines how *Haima gewuting* portrays the singing and dancing hall during the transition from socialism to postsocialism, from a state-driven to a market-driven economy. It also unpacks how the experience of the *gewuting* portrays and reflects—within urban Beijing in the late 1980s and early 1990s—the dynamic between social development and the problems that arose after the reform and opening-up policy. The space of the singing and dancing hall, as well as the staff and customers in the show, demonstrate the materialistic, commercialized society and its various kinds of people in the market-driven economy. Throughout the forty episodes of this series, the viewer observes a myriad of characters within the singing and dancing hall (i.e., dancers, singers, divorced couples, young couples in love or on first dates, and so on). Each has been through different experiences, joys, and sorrows, but they are all connected through the material culture of music, dance, and drinks. Meanwhile, the main staff in the *gewuting* serve as the hosts of justice, helping to maintain peace in these conflicts. Indeed, the program presents social relationships being dramatized or harmonized, and, in general, the show advocates the *gewuting* as a space much more than a mere stress reliever or affection outlet, but a moral test ground or harmonizer for conflicts to be resolved in the market-economy society.

One might say the drama seems to critique the material culture as a by-product of the reform and opening up, yet it also shows the singing and dancing hall to be an imaginary space to formulate individual identities, an imagined, representational space to negotiate individualism and collectivism, legal and illegal, socialism and capitalism, as well as to resist the declining morality. This early 1990s drama shows that *Haima gewuting* is a space of negotiation between government control,

economic reform, and individual expression. I find it appropriate to term this *gewuting* as “real-and-imagined” spaces, a phrase coined by urban planner and political geographer Edward Soja (1996) to describe cultural contexts in which the *real* and the *imagined* are no longer separate but, rather, revolve around each other. His notion fuses two readings of the world that have been traditionally kept apart—the real and the imaginary. To do this, he divides spaces into first, second, and third spaces: The *first space* is the “real” material space; the *second space* is the representational space (a mental construct of how space is represented by stories, images, narratives, and TV productions); and the *third space* combines first and second space, referring to “a fully lived space, a simultaneously real-and-imagined, actual-and-virtual locus of structured individuality and collective experience and agency” (56–57). In other words, the third space brings together and extends the first space and second space to intermesh subjectivity and objectivity, abstract and concrete, real and imagined, mind and body, and consciousness and unconsciousness. The singing and dancing hall portrayed in this *Haima gewuting* represents but also extends Soja’s “real-and-imagined” third space, that of paradox.

At the same time, the particular singing and dancing hall portrayed in the TV show does not simply show a dichotomous or harmonious combination of the “real” and “imagined” but a complicated, irreconcilable relationship of the two due to the historical and political transition from the early reform to postsocialist era. It is, after all, a space of paradox and controversy, just like the *pizi* literature of the time. Meanwhile, through the relationships they imagine in the *gewuting*, people reexamine what they need and what they want, thereby redefining themselves. The following will examine the transition in various aspects portrayed in the TV show, the ambiguities and paradoxes during this transition, and how people generate their identities in this space.

***Gewuting* as a Commercialized Space—Critique of Increasing Materialism**

The dance venues in the 1980s targeted the working class, like the Liuhua dance hall in Figure 1. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, when marketization took over, commercialized dance halls emerged to attract higher-class clientele. The design outside and inside the *gewuting* shows its modern, commercial elements.



Figure 2 Beginning of episode one of *Haima gewuting*, screenshot from YouTube.

The singing and dancing hall portrayed in *Haima* has a modern design. Such a *gewuting* is a privatized, commercialized space, yet embodies many characteristics of public space. The door has a flashy sign reading “Haima Singing and dancing hall” (*Haima gewuting*), with the Chinese word for “karaoke” (*ka la OK*) in the background, all lighted with colorful LED lights. On the side, a big neon sign “OK” hangs, and on top of that, a couple of neon stars flicker on and off, an eye-catching design, indeed. A security guard stands by the door, welcoming the patrons while standing guard. Episode one starts the show with quite some crowds walking into *Haima*. Then the camera shifts into an overview of the inside, where the audience can see a full bar; different seating sections with tables, chairs, lounges, and couches; a karaoke station in the main hall; and some private rooms for parties and special guests at the side. A professional karaoke stand can be seen on the stage with a small TV and a projector screen, and a professional audio technician at a recording studio taking care of the sound and video control. On the other side, a drummer plays. In the middle of the *gewuting*, there is a dance floor surrounded by chairs, lounges, and couches. The bar is surrounded by a semicircular bar table where clients can sit, order, and drink. On one side of the bar, a phone sits on a stand where the managers and clients call; on the other side of the bar, a neon sign advertises “Lang Pai Chewing Gum.” To the side, the audience can see the office where the boss and manager work. The wine and drinks are stored downstairs, and the boss rests in an upstairs bedroom. The decoration is pretty simple—an array of tables and chairs, cozy couches that remind one of home, and walls and bar tables painted in red, arousing people’s romantic feelings. Besides the neon-lighted billboards inside and outside of the dance hall, nothing is particularly fancy. But the stage, neon lights, and advertisements all show the effort to decorate and attract clientele as it is privately owned and run.

Compared to the earlier public spaces that provide entertainment to the public,

Haima is a privately owned, commercialized space that is self-sustained. With the change in clientele came a shift of social morality—from following socialist ideals to postsocialist, materialistic ones; the show presents its critique of the moneymaking and materialistic ideology in the late '80s and early '90s. This is suggested by the theme song for the show, “Game in Life,” which says, “I stay in the busy world/many dreams become miserable/where would you end up in/to wait for the dreams in heart/looking at the hustle and bustle in the world with a smile/many helpless changes/why not letting it go/why not gaming the world.” (*Haima* 1993) The lyrics depict the fast changes in society during the time when one had more opportunities to make dreams come true, but confusion remained about how to actually achieve said dreams. This theme song casts the singing and dancing hall as a real-and-imagined space—one where people enjoy the luxurious, colorful, dreamy ambiance of the space, even as that very dreaminess causes them to lose their purpose. This song is heavily criticized by some governmental and military entries and reviews, reading it as unhealthy for spiritual development and educating the youth. A commentary in “Voice of the Soldiers” in 1994 critiques the song as unhealthy, as it encourages people to live like a game. It calls for people to instead hear songs to praise the Communist Party and the country, such as “Party, Dear Mother” or “Great Motherland.” However, the theme song of *Haima* is not necessarily encouraging people to be materialistic. It could be interpreted as a critique of materialism at the time, as the “gaming in life” in the lyrics suggests neglect of grudges and disturbances (Zheng 1994). The song and the drama portray the confusion people face in the hustle of the colorful material world and the difficulty of locating themselves in such setting. Yet the one-sided reading of the theme song presents the biased view from the state-governed media and the challenges that the *gewuting* culture faced during the time.

The intense drama taking place within the *gewuting* reflects the highly stressful environment of the society of the time. The staff are concerned with and stressed about the survival of the singing and dancing hall. Their profits largely depend on how many tickets and how many drinks they sell in the club. Singing and dancing, comparatively, are less important to the business itself. The end goal of the dance hall is not to provide entertainment for the public like the dance venues in the 1980s, but rather, it has to make money. In episode fifteen, the owner of *Haima* hires a rising star singer Ms. Wang, when manager Meng tells Ms. Tian, the partner of the *gewuting* owner, that the boss has come to the *gewuting* for Ms. Wang. Ms. Tian is happy that Ms. Wang has brought some new business. Ma says, “but not everything is for money.” Tian responds, “we are not here as a social welfare institute.” Her

statement proves that making profits is the foundation of running and sustaining this *gewuting* business. In the TV show, the manager and some waitresses are often impatient with those who have not bought expensive drinks. Sometimes, waitresses would get annoyed if customers would order just one beer, a coke, or a coffee.

While *Haima* portrays a singing and dancing hall that is relatively free from government control and provides a relatively healthy environment, it also demonstrates increasing tension between following the rules of the state and creating an attractive, lucrative environment. The *gewuting* displays a series of social problems brought by the postsocialist market economy, including alcohol indulgence, theft, prostitution, and drugs. Because of its relative freedom, the boundaries between good and evil, legal and illegal become blurred. When the business is not doing well, *Haima*'s boss hires a Hong Kong manager, Ms. Wu. She fires some of the old staff and hires young, attractive girls, insisting that appearance and attractiveness are key in the entertainment business. Later on, based on her own experience in Hong Kong, Ms. Wu pushes the boundaries by having the female staff sit and drink and dance with and even accompany the customers somewhere after work. Once, one policeman says that the dance hall is full of "dirty air" (*wuyanzhangqi* 烏煙瘴氣)—that is, not clean, implying a sense of messiness in social order and darkness of society. The staff of *Haima* are dissatisfied with the changes Ms. Wu has brought to their workplace. However, boss Ma is conflicted between making a profit and keeping to traditional moral and social boundaries. In the end, the conflict causes *Haima* to be temporarily closed. While the dance hall attracts customers with beauty, sex appeal, alcohol, and entertainment, it pushes the boundaries of a legal entertainment space that follows the rules. In the same way, *Haima*, as a commercial singing and dancing hall in the new market economy, reflects the tensions that arise when economic changes push social changes, as the hall operates both as a sexualized space that challenges the traditional morality and a legal entertainment space exploring the boundaries of the new market economy.

The TV drama shows that people are easily drawn to financial benefits and wealth as a by-product of the increasing materialist culture in the market economy. The *gewuting* is, rather, a place to show the growing number of new middle and upper classes in the "neoliberal capitalist model."⁸ In the show, some people use the space to show off their wealth, no matter whether they are single or married. In one episode, a Taiwanese boss takes two female companions to the dance hall; one

8 Alvin Y. So argues that through "decollectivization and proletarianization, marketization, fiscal decentralization, opening and spatial differentiation, post-socialist China was clearly moving toward the neoliberal capitalist model" (2013: 38).

accompanies him to dance, and the other sings for him. He then gives each of them big tips (RMB 200) before leaving. Most male customers in the TV show bring female companions to drink with them and sing for them. The *gewuting* is a space for these middle- to upper-class men to conspicuously display their wealth. This way, they could imagine a happy life in a materialistic world.

As a commercial space, the staff sometimes take advantage of the pride people show in displaying their wealth. The management team, especially Mr. Meng, like to observe the customers and make money off them, even if that is based on conflicts between the customers. In episode four, a divorced couple that happens to encounter each other in the club competes by showing off how “happy” and in love they are with their new partners. The women keep ordering food and drinks while singing and competing against each other. Hearing one woman sing, the other woman says to her ex, “her happiness means to me insult and ridicule.” The men, too, play along by purchasing massive bouquets of flowers and buying whatever the women order. Mr. Meng of the club sees their jealousy and competition as an incentive for profit, so he assists with their game and motivates them to buy. In the end, one of the women gets embarrassed by her partner falling down while dancing the tango with her. She falls into a daze when the other couples laugh at them and departs in embarrassment. This episode opens up different interpretations: it could be that the staff take advantage of the occasion to make money; however, the TV show makes the claim that family conflicts intensified in postsocialist China.

The TV show critiques the materialistic, capitalistic mindset some people might have in the market economy after the reform and opening-up period. In episode two, a coincidental meeting occurs between soldiers and a former soldier who became a successful businessman, Mr. Luo. He looks arrogant, but he gives a lesson to a *liumang* (hooligan) who makes fun of the soldiers and military songs. Finding himself humiliated by someone mocking a song he used to sing in the army, the rich manager encourages the whole audience to compete in an “I Am a Soldier” singing competition, offering a prize of 10,000 RMB to anyone who can sing it the best. He takes out the cash immediately from his pocket, shocking everyone there at how rich he became after leaving the military to work as a deputy general manager of a company. He insists on giving out money before he leaves, and a girl with him criticizes him for “burning money.” Later on, Mr. Luo says to the soldiers: “here whoever is rich makes the decision.” Not until he hears the soldiers sing the song does he get completely touched and nostalgic, admitting that he was not a qualified soldier before. At that moment, as the businessman stares at his fellow soldiers singing on the stage, he sheds some tears as he realizes that money

is not everything. In the end, the soldiers leave without accepting the prize money, leaving Mr. Luo startled on the stage while speaking. The camera first focuses on his startled expressions and frozen movement on the stage, then shifts to everyone else in the *gewuting* looking at him standing there, indicating his embarrassment in comparing his own materialistic values with the soldiers' immaterialism.

While Mr. Luo may have benefited from the market economy, the show also dramatizes how materialism might negatively impact people. In episodes thirty-five and thirty-six, an innocent girl named Little Li takes a job as a waitress in *Haima* at the age of seventeen after the Hong Kong manager arrives. This innocent girl is corrupted by capitalism, becoming materialistic and getting into illicit relationships with the clients. First, she starts drinking with a client after work, which is encouraged by the Hong Kong manager. Next, she takes bribes from a business owner, resigns, and follows yet another owner abroad, in spite of her old grandmother's warning. Between the dance hall and the people Li gets to know there, she imagines a life beyond where she is, making her long to see the world. Li symbolizes the imaginary life of a bar girl—that is, they can strive for life through the connections they make with officials, businessmen, and higher-class people. However, Li chooses the wrong path to follow. She wants to become someone like the Hong Kong manager, but her transformation leads to her separation from her grandmother as well as from her own Chinese identity. Scenes such as this, thus, critique the colorful yet impure environment of capitalism and materialism.

***Haima* as a Moral Testing Ground: Harmonizing Social Conflicts**

Restless China, an interdisciplinary edited volume on postsocialist China, raises a main question in China's global development since the 1990s: should moneymaking or ethical values take dominance? In this TV series, the dance hall is a privately owned, moneymaking entity, and the space offers some private, safe zone for customers' leisure activities. Yet the owners and staff of the dance hall hold high ethical principles, thus turning *Haima* into not only a space for healthy entertainment after work but it can also potentially be a space for people to harmonize their relationships and resolve their conflicts. In some way, *Haima*'s decoration, setting, and furnishing are homey, giving people a sense of community and family. The staff are very nice and get acquainted with the customers, and some patrons have been going there for decades. The sense of belonging and community in this drama echoes some of the themes in the popular family drama throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, including "urban romances" (*dushiqinggan ju*), "family values dramas" (*jiating lunli ju*), and "dramas of urban ordinary folk" (*dushi*

pingmin ju, cited from Kong 2008: 76). Therefore, *Haima gewuting* serves as a site for us to examine the negotiation between moneymaking and ethical values in the 1990s.

Many characters choose to meet up in *Haima* as a way to recall their memories, as it was once a place where they often hung out. It serves as a space for people to feel a sense of belonging away from home. For others, the place enables them to reconnect with their lovers and families. For instance, episode three depicts a girl who returns from abroad, yet is afraid of meeting her long-time boyfriend because she has cancer and does not want to burden him. She goes to the club every Friday in order to watch him from the window and to call him from the public telephone. Eventually, Ma, her girlfriend, and manager Tian host a secret party to reunite the couple by gathering her boyfriend and all the staff in the *gewuting*. This episode dramatizes how the girl is touched by this surprise—when she is led to the *gewuting* by the manager, she glances through the hall, which is surrounded by the staff. Before long, she spots her boyfriend standing in the middle of the hall. Everybody has drawn some colorful shapes on their faces. The camera then follows her gaze to zoom in on her boyfriend, highlighting his happiness to reunite with her, and then zooms out to see both of them, with the staff circled around as the background. Behind the couple stands the owner of the *gewuting* looking at them, feeling exhilarated by the couple's reunion they facilitated. The owner here acts like the director of this scene, showing the touching reunion, yet this scene underscores the affection and support from the crowd. The crowd of friendly faces surrounding them presents this space as a warm, welcoming place. This episode highlights the staff of *Haima* as kind-hearted people who make the reunion happen, thereby making the *gewuting* kind-hearted in the same fashion.



Figure 3 Selected from Episode 3, screenshots from Youtube

Such stories prove that this singing and dancing hall can be a healthy space

for people's lives, even in the time of a market-driven economy that prioritizes moneymaking. Interestingly, some scholars even compare *Haima* to a charity that gives customers comfort and happiness and argue that the space represents the spiritual civilization (*jingshen wenming jianshe*)⁹ of socialism by setting up a good example of commercial morality and communal building (Zhang 1988). Indeed the foreman Mr. Meng mentions at one point their *gewuting* as “socialist *gewuting*” in the show. For many of the patrons in the show, the singing and dancing hall offers a space in between their workplace and their home lives. Many customers coming to the dance hall are seen as wearing their work suits, seemingly making a stop before they go home. Unlike their workplaces (which beget stress) or their homes (which beget family drama), the singing and dancing hall is an interior space that is relatively free and relaxing for both gathering and entertainment. It bridges the two facets of everyday life and, possibly, relieves people's stress from the other spaces.

Even more than that, *Haima gewuting* creates a space to negotiate the tension between “spiritual pursuits” (*jingshen zhuiqiu* 精神追求) and “material pursuits” (*wuzhi zhuiqiu* 物質追求). Emily Wilcox has nicely summarized the conflicts between the two: while the new reform era encourages materialistic development, the state warns against excessive materialistic pursuits that would potentially cause “spiritual pollution” (*jingshen wuran* 精神污染), a political movement initiated by conservatives to avoid excessive influence of Western popular culture on Chinese society (43–44). Such tension exists in *Haima* yet is different from the sixth-generation films produced around the same time; this production shows the staff in *Haima* making efforts to harmonize and balance the two, thereby creating the *gewuting* as a moral testing ground that could function within the government rules in the early 1990s on Mainland China while making a decent profit as an entertainment business.

Haima often serves as the place to discover and lecture those who violate the rules, and the main staff there hold high moral ground to judge and criticize the ones who become corrupted in the market economy. For instance, in episode eight, the new husband of Ma's ex brings some bureaucrats to the singing and dancing hall. He works for the government and tries to take advantage of the benefits to use government funds illegally. When he comes in, he says all expenses will be reimbursed. Before he leaves, he asks for an invoice that reads “rental fee for conference” instead of entertainment expenses. However, Mr. Meng in the

9 For more discussion of the meaning of the meanings of “spiritual” and “materials” at this time in relation to critiques of postsocialism and dance culture, see Emily Wilcox's chapter “‘Selling Out’ Post-Mao: Dance Labor and the Ethics of Fulfillment in Reform Era China” (336).

gewuting does not agree and says he cannot lie on the receipt. “We here are socialist *gewuting*, and have to follow the rules,” he says. He then goes and writes on the invoice “singing and dancing fees,” which annoys the client. When asked to change the invoice, Mr. Meng changes it to “entertainment fees.” When the client is still dissatisfied, and Meng does not help make a fake invoice, Meng educates him to “seek truth from facts,” which originates in the Marxist ideology and is encouraged by the Communist Party. The client gets annoyed, tears apart the invoice, and leaves. He represents the corrupt officials in the government that take advantage of the political system because of the greed induced by the new market economy, thus an indictment of the reform policies.

The *gewuting* gives customers more privacy and freedom and helps legalize the entertainment itself, but some people abuse their power in this privately owned enterprise. This proves that *Haima*, while legitimizing singing and dancing as a leisure activity that helps to harmonize people’s relationships, remains a site of conflict and abuse of power. Ruoyun Bai has pointed out that “[c]orruption has been featured in television dramas from the mid-1990s.” (48) A few episodes in the TV show *Haima* showed corruption—abuse of political power for private gains through the misappropriation of state assets. The *gewuting* serves as a space to demonstrate some of the corruptive activities like having beautiful ladies as companions in the space, competing with others on how much they can afford to spend using government resources, and spending money falsely as a public expense for private consumption. This TV show constructs the staff in *gewuting* as a moral community characterized by concerns for the public and judgment based on moral consensus. The staff embody high moral standards and try to resolve conflicts and criticize the corrupted clients. In some ways these, staff serve as the “clean” link that connects the government and the people. At times, however, the staff are conflicted between making profits from the business and holding onto justice, emphasizing the conflicts and paradoxes in postsocialist China.

A Space that Enables Imagined Identities

The singing and dancing hall provides a space for individual expression, which is demonstrated by both the structure and characters of the show. The TV drama consists of a series of standalone stories involving a variety of characters. The only consistently recurring characters are the owners and staff of the dance hall. In essence, they act as both observers and participants within the *gewuting*. In particular, the owner, his lover, and the leader of the servers, brother Meng, all act as observers as well as judges of the society, for they often appear sitting together

talking about their customers. In the show, they often sit around the stage, by the bar, and in the office, serving as the supporters and observers of the featured characters in each episode. The three make a good team. Manager Ma is a smart, experienced, and observant businessman. He is good at sorting out problems of all sorts. His secret lover, sister Tian, is a talented lady who handles public relations. According to director Ge Xiaogang (1994), sister Tian (played by Chen Xiaoyi) is a complicated character who “is strong to others, but weak to the boss.” Brother Meng, on the other hand, presents himself as a playboy while flirting with the attractive women who come to the dance hall. Thus, all three characters are unique and represent various personalities in the new global era.

Gewuting provides people with an opportunity to imagine a new identity separate from their real selves. In episode six, a man pretends to be an official working within the government. He calls the dance hall to inform them of his visit, and before he comes, Mr. Meng considers it a good idea to sing revolutionary songs and use revolutionary wording. When the man posing as an “official” unexpectedly shows up in a regular van, it surprises everyone. In the dance hall, he acts like a superior, examining the dance hall and sending regards to the staff working there. He makes a speech on the stage and expresses that the *gewuting* “enriches the lives of the masses,” “helps build socialist spiritual civilization,” and that “private businesses are supplementary to the socialist economy” (*Haima* 1993, episode 6). Yet he also criticizes the capitalist consumptionist values. In saying this, the man seems to echo the government’s position. Meanwhile, the man speaks from the supposed position of a superior, and he refers to the clients as the “masses” (*qunzhong*). However, his speech is so illogical that it raises suspicion. When the boss discovers that the man’s identity is fake, he privately points out his lie, but he then gives the impostor a chance to act out the role that he had pretended to occupy—that is, the role of “vice-minister.”

Having grown up in poverty, the man had dreamed of being an official, and through the singing and dancing hall, he is provided with a venue and an opportunity to act out the identity he imagines and covets, an escape from his actual self. He finds a way to indulge in the freedom from his everyday life, a fulfillment of an individual desire, but ironically, the method he chooses is to adopt an important role in the collective as a government official. His act makes not only himself but also the staff around *Haima* laughable. In the dance hall, the staff welcome the “official,” not because it is how they always treat their customers, but, instead, because of his official status. His impostor role as a socialist leader gains him attention. In his position, the man acts, however, he desires; for instance,

he is intimate with the women in the *gewuting* and gets their attention. The show demonstrates that the social hierarchy still exists after the socialist era, and the socialistic ideology still remains. *Gewuting*, on the one hand, reflects the suppressed desires of these working-class people stepping beyond their class, on the other hand, enables them to perform their imagined identities that they may never have been able to.

Besides enabling one to have imagined identities like the fake official, the *gewuting* can provide a space to reach their dreams that they cannot achieve elsewhere or satisfy their nostalgia for the past. Episode five touches upon a famous ballerina who danced in revolutionary ballets during the Cultural Revolution. Unfortunately, after the reform and opening up, sister Zhuang stops dancing professionally. Yet she walks into *Haima* and recommends herself as a dancer for the club. The boss gives her a chance, and every day, he sets a ten-minute time limit for her dance. Gradually, she begins to dance beyond the constraints of her allotted time. Knowing the audience would not understand her dances, she gains satisfaction through her own self-expression. In this dance hall, she creates modern, expressive dances of her own and jumps out of the revolutionary ballets that she used to dance. This dance hall, though having a much smaller stage than the ones she used to perform on, provides her with a space for expressing and satisfying herself. Noticing this, the boss acknowledges sister Zhuang's dedication to dancing, saying, "She is never married; she is married to dancing" (*Haima* 1993). The fact that she only makes RMB10 from her dancing—half of what a taxi ride home costs her—proves that she is not dancing for material reasons but, rather, for the sake of art. One such character is a dancer who does not follow the money-pursuing ideologies of modern society but is pursuing an ideal of her own choice—art for art's sake, not for politics in the socialist era or money in a market-driven economy.

The above examples show how some become impostors and performers of their imagined identities, literally and metaphorically. Besides imagining their own identity, some characters establish a relational connection based on their imagination. In one episode, a young man is looking for manager Tian and has ordered a song for her. Later on, he tells Tian the reason: that he has been longing for his mother because of her absence in his youth. Tian resembles his mother, so he comes looking for her. To encourage him to confess to the police that he has accidentally killed someone, Tian acts like his mother and gives him comfort and advice as a mother would. Eventually, he calms down and turns himself to the police. In this *gewuting*, he creates an imaginary connection with his dead mother

through Tian, a person with whom he has no actual physical connection. This reunion with a motherlike figure is only imaginary but does change his attitude toward life and the accidental death and his role in it almost immediately. Tian, the manager of the *gewuting*, performs as the mother figure for this man to get him to admit his mistakes and submit himself to the police force.

Performance and impersonation serve different purposes in the drama—either to expose the remaining socialist problems or conflicts that arise from the capitalist influences or to prove again how *gewuting* can create a healthy space to negotiate the tension between market capitalism and socialism. The singing and dancing hall enables people to imagine a new identity and pursue their individualism, but it has limitations. Eventually, the owners of the *gewuting* still have to let the fake official and the passionate dancer go, as their main concern is the profitability of their business. They, however, try their best to bring together people from different places and allow them to perform their imaginary identities or fulfill their fantasies.

In addition to enabling imagined identities of the individuals, the *gewuting* provides a space for national identities to be recalled and celebrated. The show depicts a diverse clientele coming from mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and people from the Chinese diaspora who live abroad and come back for visits. They come to *Haima* with a strong sense of nostalgia for their homeland. Episode thirty, for instance, posits that one can only find a home in one's motherland. In this storyline, a Chinese citizen from overseas books the whole hall to host a gathering of his old classmates. This man claims that he was obscure and quiet when he was at school, so he should be easily forgotten by others. Yet in his memory retains fragments of a song he learned in school—called “Little Eraser” (*Xiao xiangpi*)—that has embedded a sense of *home* within him. He says the song coincides with his life, as it describes living as busy, difficult, and suppressed. The man hopes the reunion will help him piece together the memory of the song. At some point, a woman sings the song, which includes the lyrics “there's something one can never erase” (*Haima* 1993). In the end, after the man hears the song, he feels touched, saying, “Thank you all for finding my song.” He not only recalls the tune but, more importantly, it brings back to him the best memory of his life—that is, when he lived in China—as well as a love for the motherland that one can never erase. For an individual invoking and embodying an overseas Chinese citizen, the man's speech is quite patriotic. Although this little narrative is an individual story, it still renders a collective message, which is that one can never erase Chinese identity. In accordance with this, sister Meng comments, “There's still real love in this world.” However, this love could only exist with the support of the motherland.

Conclusion

This article, through studying *Haima gewuting*, argues that the singing and dancing hall in the early 1990s is a site for both fusion and contradiction of the public and private, socialist, and postsocialist ideals, as well as individualism and collectivism in the transition from socialism to marketization. The dance hall represents and extends Soja's notion of a "real-and-imagined place," with the "real" being a product of the socioeconomic climate after the reform and opening up and the "imagined" being a space for desire, sexuality, and cross-cultural, cross-social class interactions. *Haima* is portrayed as a commercialized space that critiques the increasing materialism in the postsocialist market economy. Meanwhile, the TV series represents *Haima* as a moral testing ground to negotiate and harmonize social conflicts, as well as a space that enables enacting imagined identities. In doing so, the series extends the meaning and function of *gewuting* beyond a mere space for stress relief or extramarital affairs. By centering on the *gewuting*, this TV series offers a new perspective on social life in the early reform and opening-up era.

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