

Capitalizing on *Wenyi* in the Age of WeChat: Huang Tongtong's Semi-autobiographical Writings

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Abstract

Despite the flourishing of scholarly research on web literature, little critical attention has been devoted to how WeChat, the dominant technological platform of the contemporary era, has shaped literary fame and cultural entrepreneurship. Taking as a case study Huang Tongtong, a former journalist turned celebrity writer, operator of a popular public account, and entrepreneur, this essay addresses the nexus encompassing culture and e-commerce. Engaging in a close reading of Huang Tongtong's works in relation to her career trajectory, this essay argues that the significance of Huang's writings lies in the ways in which they encapsulate the drastic changes that accompany the professional growth of journalists working in the fields of entertainment and fashion since the late 1990s. Huang's ability to cope with societal changes could serve to encourage educated urban women to embrace an alternative lifestyle—one that celebrates their own independence and prioritizes mutual support and empathy among women while downplaying the importance of heterosexual marriage. Amid a decline in the privilege enjoyed by socialist literary institutions, Huang's literary ambitions illustrate the enduring appeal of *wenyi* and creative writing. Meanwhile, despite the fact that *wenyi* is an integral component of Huang's public persona, her delicate taste preferences are directed toward the promotion of luxury consumption, paving the way for her transformation into an entrepreneur in the age of e-commerce. These paradoxical representations of *wenyi*

demonstrate the role that technological platforms, genre conventions, and gender dynamics play in shaping literary production.

Keywords: *wenyi*, *wenqing*, Huang Tongtong, *Women Are Superior to Men*, *First Class*, WeChat public accounts, semi-autobiographical writing

Introduction

Since the late 1990s, digital media has rejuvenated various genres of creative writing in China, including poetry, microfiction, and fiction. Web literature not only expands the scope of individual expression (Hockx 2015) but also inspires new modes of producing, circulating, and consuming literary genres (Inwood 2014; Feng 2013). Despite the flourishing of scholarly research on web literature, little critical attention has been devoted to how WeChat, the dominant technological platform of the contemporary era, has shaped creative writing and literary fame. Writers who assume an active role in the realm of cultural entrepreneurship also remain understudied, with a few notable exceptions (Kong 2010; Kunze 2017; Xiao 2020).

This essay addresses this gap, taking writer Huang Tongtong 黄佟佟 as a case study for an exploration of the nexus encompassing culture and e-commerce. Engaging in a close reading of Huang Tongtong's works in relation to her career trajectory, this essay examines the ways in which the WeChat sphere factors in the shaping of literary fame and cultural entrepreneurship. A former journalist turned celebrity writer, operator of a popular public social media account, and entrepreneur, Huang exemplifies a generation of artistic Chinese youth who take a documentary approach to their public and private lives through different mediums, such as print, social media, and visual media. In the meantime, Huang's portrayal of disillusioned artistic youth marks a departure from the work of her predecessors of a similar age, including Wei Hui, Mian Mian, and Mu Zimei, who pride themselves on living a rebellious lifestyle. The different implications that *wenyi* 文艺 (letters and arts) carries for these female writers reveal the diverging means by which they cope with the unceasing tension between a consumerist desire and artistic autonomy.

In this article, I first engage with scholarly writings about the embodiment of *wenyi* sentiments since the term's introduction to China and situate Huang's work within the context of contemporary semi-autobiographical writing by women. I then conduct a textual analysis of two works of fiction published by Huang, *Women Are Superior to Men* 女人是比男人更高级的动物 (*Nüren shi bi nanren geng gaoji de dongwu*) and *First Class* 头等舱 (*Toudeng cang*). I argue that the significance of Huang's writings lies in the ways in which they encapsulate the drastic changes that accompany the professional growth of journalists working in the fields of entertainment and fashion since the late 1990s. Huang's ability to cope with societal changes could serve to encourage educated urban women to embrace an alternative lifestyle—one that celebrates their own independence and prioritizes mutual support and empathy among women while downplaying the importance of heterosexual marriage. Ironically, the alternative lifestyle Huang advocates illustrates the ambiguous dimension of embodied *wenyi* sentiments in the digital era. Amid a decline in the privilege enjoyed by socialist literary institutions, Huang's literary ambitions illustrate the enduring appeal of *wenyi* and creative writing. Meanwhile, despite the fact that *wenyi* is an integral component of Huang's public persona, her delicate taste preferences are directed toward the promotion of luxury consumption, paving the way for her transformation into an entrepreneur in the age of e-commerce. Consequently, on the one hand, Huang's representation of *wenyi* sentiments promotes sisterhood among women as a lifestyle alternative to one dictated by the patriarchal society. On the other hand, she strategically appropriates the desires of middle-class audiences to promote consumerism. These paradoxical representations of *wenyi* demonstrate the role that technological platforms, genre conventions, and gender dynamics play in shaping literary production.

Wenyi, Wenqing, and Semi-autobiographical Writing

A loanword from Japanese, *wenyi* first appeared in China during the late Qing and Republican periods (Yeh 2013). Since its coinage, *wenyi* has carried two sets of ambivalent implications. Left-leaning cultural elites envisioned *wenyi* as having a utilitarian function in hopes of reforming the nation via literature and art (Tam 2015; Yeh 2009). Following Mao's "Talks at Yan'an Literature and Arts Forum" in 1941, *wenyi gongzuo zhe* (cultural workers) has become a politically loaded term that highlights the importance of using literature and arts to propagate the Chinese Communist Party's policies. Film publicists, by contrast, perceived *wenyi* as a crucial branding strategy for promoting a sense of modernity in movies (Yeh 2013). During the 1930s and 1940s, the popularity of Hollywood movies and European

cinema in the Chinese market enhanced the *wenyi* sensibility among Chinese filmmakers (Wang 2013; Xiang 2013; Zhang 2007). The term “*wenyi* pictures” (*wenyi pian*) suggests that the style of these movies resembles that of art cinema. In practice, nevertheless, the crossover between *wenyi* pictures and commercial blockbusters occurs all the time.

The connotations of *wenyi*, therefore, vary from a utilitarian vision of literature and arts as practiced under the cultural policies of the PRC to an ambiguous film genre attuned to a distinctive set of cultural tastes. These diverging connotations are summed up in two terms, *wenyi gongzuo zhe* and *wenyi qingnian* (artistic youth; hereafter *wenqing*). Along with the deepening of media commercialization in the 1990s, *wenqing* bears no such political connotations as cultural workers. *Wenqing* evokes a variety of concepts that range from a self-indulgent lifestyle to a celebration of one’s passion for literature and arts.

In the digital sphere, typical representations of contemporary *wenyi* sentiments can be found in the Douban community, an online forum renowned as a space of congregation for users to publish creative writing and comments on literary and artistic works. Using Douban as a site to explore digital archives, Yizhou Guo argues that *wenyi* should be conceptualized as a “postsocialist digital affect” that is nurtured by commercial popular culture and the internet (2020, 156). In particular, the individual experiences of postsocialist youth emphasize the subjective dimension of *wenyi* sentiments. Moreover, there is a “persistent rhetoric that differentiates the superficial *wenyi* youth as a branding label and a copiable commodity from the authentic *wenyi* youth as a sincere temperament and personality” (Guo 2020, 169). The two distinctive sets of discourses that Guo delineates—an association of *wenyi* with commercial branding versus *wenyi* as an individual disposition—nonetheless find a way to converge in the semi-autobiographical writings of women in the late 1990s, which has continued on into the new millennium.

All born in the 1970s, Wei Hui, Mian Mian, Mu Zimei, and Huang Tongtong made their literary debuts in the mid-1990s (Wei Hui and Mian Mian), early 2000s (Mu Zimei), and late 2000s (Huang Tongtong), respectively. Wei Hui, Mu Zimei, and Huang Tongtong all have a background in journalism, and partially because of that, they exhibit an inclination to employ a documentary approach to creative writing. The cross-fertilization between journalism and creative writing may be traced back to a genre called “journalist literature” (*jishi wenxue*), which first appeared in popular magazines and literary journals in the early 1980s and was later published in books in the 1990s (Xu 1996). Most of the writers in this genre were reporters and editors. Their writings used autobiographical narratives

to challenge conventional marriage practices and endorse unconventional sexual behavior of women (Xu 1996). Carrying on this tradition, a wave of semi-autobiographical novels that emerged in the late 1990s and featured the lifestyles of artistic youth caused a media sensation because these writings focus on experiences less commonly represented in literature, such as drug abuse, sexual desire, and materialism of educated urban women. Semi-autobiographical novels by Wei Hui and Mian Mian gained popularity against the backdrop of the increasing tabloidization of Chinese media, the emergence of the commercial publishing industry, and the rise of middle-class consumers (Kong 2005). They also showcase a tension between the commercial appropriation of *wenyi* lifestyle and adherence to artistic autonomy. On the one hand, the branding of Wei Hui and Mian Mian as representatives of artistic youth who live unconventional lifestyles was an important marketing strategy that catered to the voyeuristic desires of readers. On the other hand, the writers themselves held ambivalent attitudes toward such framing. According to Jing Song, these novels were situated at a “marginalized mainstream” position in the cultural marketplace: “In using women’s own voices, the writers make visible the reality that urban educated women are marginalized by mainstream formations of patriarchal and neocolonial power, and they struggle with the tensions created by their desire to be part of the mainstream culture while being discontented with the current male-dominated social order” (Song 132). Similarly, Lingzhen Wang highlights the importance of interpreting the ambivalent stances that popular cultural products take: “[H]ow are we to read or hear the voices that, despite their active engagement with the commercial mode of representation, also refuse to be completely consumed and appropriated by market forces in contemporary China, thereby conveying different messages?” (Wang 5).

The dynamics between market forces and the agency of women writers continue to be reflected in newer platforms of publishing; for example, Mu Zimei’s “sex diary” created a nationwide obsession. A journalist by training, Mu Zimei popularized blogging as a new mode of individual expression in the early 2000s, as she shared her adventures in sexual intercourse and online dating, as well as her cynicism toward marriage. In the years that followed, when Weibo (meaning “microblog”) became a popular social media platform, Mu Zimei published essays (*chang weibo*) on her Weibo account (active until June 17, 2019) to address readers’ inquiries about everyday matters, including family relations, dating issues, and career choices. She has gained a massive following for her quality writing, incisive analysis, and genuine concern for helping readers out of difficult situations. Nevertheless, her divulgence of bittersweet moments between her and a married

taxi driver in Beijing—as well as her bickering with the man’s wife—led to attacks against her. Mu Zimei presents herself as having moral and sexual values that run contrary to those of mainstream Chinese society. This confrontational moral—or even amoral—stance and the realistic flavor of her writing ultimately confine her to the role of a mere “sex blogger,” marginalizing the sophistication of her writing and making it impossible to translate her status to that of a professional writer in the public consciousness (Guo 2021).

In the writings of Wei Hui, Mian Mian, and Mu Zimei, female artistic youth is portrayed as aloof, celebratory, and rebellious. In contrast, Huang Tongtong’s fiction adopts a skeptical view of the *wenyi* lifestyle. The portrayal of *wenyi* figures in her writing conveys a sense of disillusionment connected to her failure to adapt to the drastic changes of the contemporary era. Huang herself, however, has succeeded in marketizing the *wenyi* lifestyle on WeChat through the rhetoric of *wenyi*. A case study of Huang Tongtong thus sheds light on the changing choices female artistic youths make in the midst of sociopolitical transformations, as well as the role that political, economic, and technological factors play in fostering these transitions.

Career Trajectory

Born in Hunan, Huang Tongtong spent four years working as an English instructor after graduating from college. In 1999, Huang relocated to Guangzhou and started working as a journalist and editor for the fashion magazines *Hope* (*Xi wang*) and *Flore* (*Hua xi*). This timing was crucial, as the starting point of her career as a journalist aligned with commercial print media’s golden age of growth. According to Huang, her monthly income as a journalist was twenty-five times her paycheck as a teacher in Hunan (Fanchen 2021). As a migrant relocating to the modern metropolis of Guangzhou, Huang worked her way up to the senior editorial director. Sensitive to the impact that technological developments exert on the media landscape, Huang has made active use of emergent platforms to diversify her publishing channels, including blogs, Weibo, and WeChat. In 2014, she launched a joint public WeChat account with her business partner, Lan Li. Within three years, their total number of subscribers grew to 600,000 (Yilan 2021). Titled “Miss Lan and Miss Huang” 蓝小姐和黄小姐, this collaborative account boosted Huang’s fame and paved the way for her transition into entrepreneurship. Adopting the popular model of e-commerce, Huang and Lan capitalized on their established readership and launched a fashion brand under the same name as their WeChat account.

While Huang Tongtong’s career trajectory is typical of many journalists who

created social media accounts in response to the drastic decline of commercial print media in the 2010s, it is of particular interest how Huang has retained her passion for creative writing. In addition to numerous essay collections, Huang has published two novels, *Women Are Superior to Men* (2006) and *First Class* (2020). Huang's persistence in the realm of creative writing demonstrates the continued appeal of *wenyi*. A loyal fan of Eileen Chang and Yi Shu (aka Isabel Nee Yeh-su), Huang frequently quotes both writers to support her arguments for an alternative lifestyle that is not dependent on romantic relationships. In the eyes of her fans, Huang exemplifies the kind of independent women featured in Yi Shu's works (Zhou 2017). In an interview, Huang highlighted her self-positioning as an observer during socially stressful events and that incorporating her observations into her literary work has greatly helped to relieve her anxiety (Yilan 2021). Huang's self-defined role as an observer is partially rooted in her background as a journalist and aligns with the "documentary impulse" embraced by independent filmmakers who have endeavored to capture the drastic social changes that have occurred since the late 1990s (Zhang 2007). Further, Huang's road to literary fame exemplifies the continuing evolution of Chinese literary celebrity since the late 1990s. If the cases of authors such as Wang Meng, Wang Shuo, and Wei Hui illustrate the roles that the socialist literary establishment, commercial media, censorship, and branding strategies play in fostering literary recognition at different historical moments (Kong 2010), then Huang, a latecomer to the literary field, demonstrates the importance that "mediated authenticity" plays in shaping an author's public image on social media (Enli 2015).

Published fourteen years apart, *Women Are Superior to Men* and *First Class* offer fictional accounts of the rise and fall, respectively, of commercial print media. Against this backdrop, educated urban women experience ups and downs in their professional and personal lives. In both novels, there are prevalent portrayals of *wenyi* figures working in fields of and related to literature and the arts, including creative writing, photography, journalism, and film production. Some of these characters align with stereotypical conceptions of artistic youth in the popular imagination, such as rebelliousness and aloofness, while others capitalize on the niche market of *wenyi* to transform themselves into cultural entrepreneurs. Where *Women Are Superior to Men* features the transition of innocent artistic youth into disillusioned middle age, *First Class* reinforces the sense of nihilism suggested by the former novel by depicting its artistic youth characters as living the lives of "losers." This shift in the discursive representation of artistic youth highlights the triumph of market forces.

Women Are Superior to Men: The Love of Ambiguity

Women Are Superior to Men tells a familiar story of extramarital affairs. Ji Rong 吉榕 and Zhu Sitan 朱思潭 are high school sweethearts and subsequently enroll at the same college. When the story begins, the pair have known each other for sixteen years and have been married for eight. Ji Rong is the chief editor of the supplement section of a newspaper, the *Metropolis Evening News* 都会晚报, while Zhu Sitan is a senior photographer and vice-director in the photography department for *Dajiang Daily* 大江日报. One day, Ji Rong accidentally discovers her husband is having an extramarital affair with Wu Lala 乌啦啦, an intern who works under his supervision. Before the couple divorces, Ji Rong manages to get pregnant.

Another male protagonist in the story is Cheng Xiaodong 程小东, Zhu Sitan's college roommate. A talented photographer, Cheng Xiaodong maintains a close relationship with Ji Rong and Zhu Sitan because Cheng's ex-girlfriend, Mai Jie 麦洁, is Ji Rong's cousin. Cheng and Mai fell in love at college yet broke up because of Cheng's disloyalty. Cheng feels nostalgic about his time with Mai Jie, and he frequently changes his dating partners. After Ji Rong's divorce, Cheng begins to be confused about his feelings toward Ji Rong. The sense of confusion intensifies during the 2003 outbreak of SARS. The two end up spending more time together because their entire neighborhood is quarantined. Without saying anything, Cheng leaves his house keys with Ji Rong. Soon after, Cheng visits Mai Jie's family in Chicago and realizes that he no longer has feelings for Mai Jie. He flies to New York to launch his photography exhibit, but he is tragically shot. Zhu Sitan travels to the United States to bring back Cheng's remains.

The story then jumps forward two years, when Zhu Sitan is promoted to the director of the photography department at the newspaper office, and Ji Rong is transitioning into middle age, letting go of her innocent youth. The two remarry. One day, Zhu Sitan spots Wu Lala and her French husband at a museum. Zhu Sitan texts Wu Lala but never hears back, and there the story ends.

Huang's writing is episodic. While her novel's portrayal of extramarital affairs is unexceptional, it provides a valuable account of the era in which the story is situated. First, the novel features the market reforms that impacted print media, in particular the newspaper industry in Guangzhou—a city that took a leading role in media commercialization due to its early start with economic reforms and adjacency to Hong Kong. Consequently, the roles of journalists and photographers working for commercial print media departed from those of “cultural workers,” a leftist appellation. Under the rules of the market, hardworking employees may improve their economic status, but professional women are punished when they participate

in child-rearing activities due to a weakened childcare system. That Zhu Sitan is promoted and Ji Rong is demoted because she takes maternity leave illustrates this point. Further, along with its depiction of the dissolution of the socialist media system, *Women Are Superior to Men* offers a glimpse into the lives of self-made businessmen in the cultural marketplace as they engage in activities ranging from the retail sale of magazines and newspapers to opening bookstores and creating book clubs that cater to artistic youth.

Women Are Superior to Men also portrays the extent to which an external crisis has the power to catalyze change in interpersonal relations. The initial 2003 outbreak of SARS happened in Guangzhou. The novel portrays life under quarantine and how the epidemic has the potential to strengthen bonds among colleagues who usually do not get along in the workplace. Huang's quasi-journalistic account of individuals' experiences in the face of crisis offers a glimpse into the complexity of human relations.

These social conditions—the commercialization of the media industry, gender disparity, and the epidemic crisis—form the backdrop against which lifestyles of those working in the fields of literature and the arts are portrayed. In the face of male infidelity, *Women Are Superior to Men* proffers an alternative possibility for progress through homosociality. The queer family of Zhang Si 张思 and Zhang Xiang 张想 presents a life path that diverges from the hegemony of heterosexual norms in modern China. The words *si* and *xiang* can be combined to form a Chinese word for “thought,” *sixiang* 思想. In the late 1980s, Zhang Si resigns from her job at a state-owned publishing house and begins to work as a wholesale magazine vendor in Guangzhou. She accidentally discovers her husband is having an affair, subsequently kicks him out, and opens a bookstore that sells foreign magazines. After she meets and gets to know Zhang Xiang, the two start a bookstore called “Double Zhang” 双张 and decide to raise together their children from each of their dissolved marriages. Double Zhang functions as a haven where women can forge bonds. Clients come over to have tea, read books, play chess, and host business meetings. Ji Rong arrives at all the difficult decisions she makes, including her decisions to get a divorce, have a child, and start all over again after maternity leave, while she is at Double Zhang. It is the company of female friends that helps Ji Rong escape desperate situations, as she herself reflects: “Ji Rong genuinely felt that the most fortunate thing would be to find the right friends; even in the hardest of times they are always there for you” (Huang 289).

While the unsustainability of heterosexual marriages in Huang's novel serves to empower women's solidarity, the bonds among its male characters pale in

comparison. The brotherhood of Zhu Sitan and Cheng Xiaodong, for example, seems to be fragile: Zhu Sitan is secretly envious of Cheng Xiaodong's artistic talent and his easy path to success. Zhu Sitan's accidental angry outburst over this issue harms their friendship. The men are reluctant to maintain a committed relationship. Zhu Sitan attributes Ji Rong's discovery of his affair to a matter of bad timing and regrets not having placed his high-resolution camera in its usual spot—had he done so, Ji Rong would not have noticed the photos he had taken for Wu Lala. Zhu Sitan's monologue goes as follows:

Why is life so difficult? Lao Zhu at my workplace also had an affair, and it took more than ten years before his wife found out. Why is it the case that I just plan to catch up with this girl, have barely gotten back into a relationship with her, and have every intention of ending it with integrity, and then all of a sudden, I am exposed? What am I supposed to do if Ji Rong reports the affair to my employer? What's going to happen if she talks to my parents?... Why am I so unlucky? Cheng Xiaodong has slept with so many girls, and no one has accused him. I simply took a slight detour on the long road of marriage; how come everyone is so pissed off at me?! (Huang 23)

In Zhu Sitan's mind, his getting caught is simply a matter of bad luck. Moreover, sensing that Ji Rong seems to have let the affair go, Zhu Sitan resumes contact with Wu Lala via text and feels comfortable with his new strategy. A similar mentality leads to Wu Lala's breakup with Zhu Sitan. When he takes advantage of the fact that a female colleague has a crush on him, he does not expect Wu Lala to immediately learn about his intimacy with this colleague, but she does. Despite all this, Zhu Sitan is not depicted as an entirely evil figure. He is vulnerable when facing a crisis and tries to support Ji Rong when he can. He also feels guilty about aspects of his relationship with Wu Lala—coming from a very wealthy family, she adjusts to a frugal lifestyle to accommodate him.

Through the lens of midlife crises, *Women Are Superior to Men* delineates a binary opposition between disloyal men and uncompromising women in heterosexual relationships. While the behaviors of disloyal men resemble those of the freewheeling artistic youth featured in the writings of Wei Hui, Mian Mian, and Mu Zimei, the men in Huang's novel lack their counterparts' charismatic appeal as they take an opportunist stance regarding romantic relationships. In contrast, Huang's women are less tolerant of ambiguity. Ji Rong's decision to get pregnant

before her divorce is an unusual one, especially because she keeps her pregnancy secret. When Zhu Sitan does find out, Ji Rong refuses to accept his financial support, even though she is suffering from economic hardship. Although Ji Rong ends up remarrying Zhu, their remarriage holds many uncertainties. Neither husband nor wife wants to pursue the philosophical question of love anymore. What remains for the couple is merely to carry out the duty of child-rearing, signified by the way they now address each other—as “Ji Xiang’s dad” and “Ji Xiang’s mom.” Despite her ultimate compromise to remarry, Ji Rong’s story heralds the beginning of an era in which female professionals celebrate the decision to raise a child out of their own desire rather than a duty to their family line. Ji Rong’s change over time also symbolizes the end of an idealistic era, as Huang writes: “That young literary woman, who used to apply hairspray to make her short hair look so messy like a puppy, seems to have fallen into the gap of time, and disappeared for good” (Huang 368).

First Class: The Myth of Female Hysteria

Similar to *Women Are Superior to Men*, Huang’s second novel, *First Class*, offers a glimpse into an era of drastic change through the lens of the experiences of educated women. If *Women Are Superior to Men* portrays disloyal men and celebrates women’s solidarity, then *First Class* enriches this narrative by laying in the story of a well-educated woman who becomes hysterical. The rise and fall of commercial print media and fashion newspapers, in particular, rapid changes to state policies, and the new roles available to women as cultural entrepreneurs constitute the backdrop against which the story unfolds. Huang Tongtong’s decision to resign from the newspaper industry and become a freelancer and entrepreneur clearly inspired the writing of this novel, which she completed during the initial outbreak of COVID-19 in China.

First Class tells the stories of four female roommates who entered college in the early 1990s. All English majors—one of the most competitive majors in humanities at the time—they are also part of China’s first generation of white-collar women working in private enterprise, including the fields of newspapers, fashion, advertising, and real estate. Thirty years later, however, the ups and downs of their lives function as barometers of an ever-changing era in which nothing is permanent.

After graduating from college, the main character, Li Xiaofeng 李晓枫, moves to Beijing from Hunan province to accompany her boyfriend, Liu Yude 刘裕德. Three months later, Li finds out that Liu has been dating other girls and frequently meeting sex workers. Li then relocates to Guangzhou and becomes a fashion

reporter, working her way up to the position of a lead journalist for the fashion section of a Guangzhou-based newspaper, *Yuecheng News* 粤城新报. Initially, her fashion knowledge is limited, but she becomes a well-respected senior professional. Having worked for *Yuecheng News* for twenty years, Li is there for the radical growth of the newspaper since the 1990s: within some ten years, its yearly revenue reaches over 100 million RMB (Huang 17). Li's career path is representative of the sorts of careers that blossomed during the rapid ascension of China's fashion industry in the 1990s, the golden age of commercial print media's growth in the 2000s, and its drastic decline in the 2010s. To cope with this latest challenge, Li Xiaofeng and two female friends, Shanbao 珊宝 and Zhong Lulu 钟露露, resign from their jobs and launch a public WeChat account. Created at just the right time, their account grows rapidly, and the three business partners soon attain financial freedom. What accompanies the economic rewards for Li, however, is a health crisis—she experiences a sudden breakdown that reminds her of the importance of physical well-being, which ultimately leads to her quitting the business she co-founded.

Another close friend of Li Xiaofeng, Li Xiaozhen 李小贞, was born into a family of intellectuals and is passionate about her work as a producer of independent films, although she is not widely known. Li Xiaozhen's mother works for a newspaper office, while her father is a film director. At a young age, she was already acquainted with many renowned actors and directors. Li Xiaozhen accords with the popular image of artistic youth, free-spirited and not very concerned with financial gain. However, simple as Li Xiaozhen's concerns may be, she harbors regrets. She suffers from chronic illnesses and loses her job in 2018 because the film production company she works for goes bankrupt. Li Xiaozhen's experience mirrors the crisis in the entertainment industry around the same time when an outbreak of celebrity scandals resulted in legal investigations and discouraged investors from supporting film and television production in China.

If Li Xiaofeng's and Li Xiaozhen's experiences are representative of urban female professionals, then those of the two other former roommates, Mei Lanhua 梅兰花 and Zhou Mi 周蜜, reflect the lives of educated housewives. An exceptionally pretty woman, Mei Lanhua immigrates to England soon after graduating from college and leads a middle-class lifestyle. Smart, proud, and wealthy, Zhou Mi initially works for a foreign company but later follows her parents' arrangements and marries Hu Dajun 胡大军, an ordinary-looking man who soon becomes an upstart in real estate, and she becomes a housewife. Li Xiaofeng feels quite distant from Zhou, as Li Xiaofeng cannot possibly keep up with Zhou's luxurious lifestyle

and does not have much in common with her. Years later, however, Li learns that Zhou Mi suffers from mental disorders. In pursuing the leads that explain Zhou Mi's mental illness, Li Xiaofeng begins to sympathize with her as she discovers how Zhou Mi has gradually come to be insecure in her family relationships. After a divorce and several rounds of medical treatment, Zhou Mi becomes a Buddhist practitioner and moves back to Sichuan province. Li Xiaofeng and Li Xiaozhen visit Zhou Mi and her parents. During this visit, Li Xiaofeng has a chance encounter with her ex-boyfriend Liu Yude, who turns out to be hiding in the mountains in an attempt to escape creditors—in spite of his social media self-mythologization as a successful entrepreneur. After this chance encounter, the novel ends with a flashback in which the four college roommates, at the age of nineteen, converse and imagine their futures.

Regardless of their lifestyles, midlife crises hit both housewives and professional women. Among the four, only Mei Lanhua conforms to a conventional lifestyle. Zhou Mi's marriage ends in betrayal and mental illness. Li Xiaofeng and Li Xiaozhen remain single for their individual reasons. Initially hurt by her experience with male infidelity, Li Xiaofeng later discovers that most married women end up effectively being servants to their husbands and comes to consider marriage overrated. Li Xiaozhen, on the other hand, is never interested in the potential constraints of marriage. In this respect, similar to *Women Are Superior to Men*, *First Class* highlights the unreliability of long-term heterosexual relationships. Mutual support among women is again of principal importance, as exemplified by the bonds forged among Li Xiaofeng and her business partners. The success of their WeChat public account symbolizes the sustainability of their friendship and business partnership.

Another point shared by both novels is the portrayals of the vanishing spirit of artistic youth. Li Xiaozhen, the representative of artistic youth in *First Class*, was once Li Xiaofeng's role model. Growing up in a working-class family in Hunan, Li Xiaofeng was naturally attracted to Li Xiaozhen because of her artistic talent. However, as the story unfolds, the novel demystifies Li Xiaozhen's seemingly attractive lifestyle as an artistic youth as she combats physical illnesses and financial instability. It turns out that she told stories about her privilege to her friends that exceeded the reality of her situation. Li's idealistic artistic pursuits also are severely challenged by the pragmatic need to please the investors funding her movie projects. The dead ends of Li Xiaofeng's career and personal life symbolize the complete triumph of commercialism.

Where *First Class* differs from *Women Are Superior to Men* is its emphasis on

class differences, which offers a realistic account of the unprecedented opportunities and unexpected crises that emerged along with the rise of urban professionals born in the 1970s. The career trajectory of Li Xiaofeng is representative of the glorious ascension and decline of journalism. In the golden age, media professionals were able to easily access luxuries like first-class airline seats by working with public relations companies. Thirty years later, once-influential figures in the newspaper industry were imprisoned following sudden policy changes and factional struggles, while journalists and editors in commercial print media faced layoffs. By the same token, exemplary entrepreneurs working in real estate and e-commerce may experience sudden downfalls, as happens to both Hu Dajun and Liu Yude. It seems that no one can withstand the tides of time. The sense of ephemerality and precarity, be it of wealth, fame, or physical well-being, captures the zeitgeist of the era, as Huang notes:

Life is in flux, relationships are fluid, wealth is fluid, fame is fluid, happiness is fluid, and grief is fluid. Under the uncaring eye of time, everything that appears solid is actually a bubble. All persistent pursuits are simply false hopes... Wealth and material gain can get you out of poverty, only to plant you in the midst of new challenges. For example, even if you are a frequent first-class passenger, you can't prevent the onset of diseases or mental breakdown; even if you're a VIP, you can't guarantee that one day you won't be beaten back to your original shape by the thunder and lightning of the times (Huang 283).

At the beginning of the story, Li Xiaofeng feels a strong sense of alienation during the gatherings that Zhou Mi hosts; years later, Li Xiaofeng unexpectedly becomes a businesswoman, only to discover that Zhou Mi struggles as a wealthy housewife. The ups and downs of educated women's experiences are portrayed against the historical backdrop of the unceasing and turbulent evolution of the media industry. Indeed, the story of Li Xiaofeng's success in business parallels Huang Tongtong's real-world experience of launching Miss Lan and Miss Huang, a collaborative public WeChat account.

Miss Lan and Miss Huang

The intersection of her life experiences and her writing practice nurtured Huang's professional growth and paved the way for her transition into a cultural entrepreneur in the age of WeChat. As Wang notes, "Life and writing do not simply

mirror each other; they intersect with each other to constitute writers' identities and subjectivities in history" (Wang 11). In the era of social media, "mediated authenticity" plays a crucial role in shaping celebrities' public personae (Enli 2015). As "a social construction," "mediated authenticity" refers to how major players during the communication process negotiate the ways in which reality is being represented (Enli 1). Fitness cultures on Instagram, for instance, stress the importance of posting unedited materials to present the image of authenticity and cultivate a sense of intimacy among users (Reade 2021). Similarly, authenticity plays a determining role for vloggers on YouTube in receiving recognition and esteem from their followers (Morris and Anderson 2015). The Miss Lan and Miss Huang account adheres to a similar operational logic that promotes "accessibility, presence, and intimacy" in the WeChat sphere (Jerslev 5233). Some of the strategies the account employs include timely responses to reader comments, private groups set up for fans, and the organization of offline get-togethers. The people behind the account also make use of a practice of self-disclosure, including the sharing of personal preferences and reflections, which is important for creating the effects of digital intimacy—further, this practice affords new perspectives for understanding women's semi-autobiographical writing.

Miss Lan and Miss Huang primarily publishes commentary on entertainment-related gossip and news, sponsored content, and advertorials for online stores. Content is mostly published under five main headings: People and Interviews 人物和专访, Vanity Fair 名利场, Memoirs of Hong Kong Celebrities 香江忆旧录, Nostalgic Memories 怀念忆旧, and Gossip 小八和扯白. The analysis of celebrity gossip, entertainment programs, and the precarious marriage status of various celebrity couples—including ordinary people marrying celebrities as well as marriages between celebrities and business gurus—is approached from a sociological standpoint. Huang meticulously documents the unfolding of celebrity disputes and shares her insights with readers. A recurring theme, which coheres with Huang's novels, is the unreliability of love and marriage—hence the pragmatic need for women to gain financial independence and seek allies.

A prime example is an influential WeChat essay that Huang published, commenting on disputes in the divorce between Lee Jinglei, a full-time housewife, and Wang Leehom, an Asian American singer-songwriter who achieved fame at an early age. Wang has been perceived as a talented artistic youth, nicknamed the "top-notch idol" (*you zhi oushi*) for the perfect public image he has created. On December 16, 2021, Wang announced the couple was in the process of filing for divorce. The next day, Lee Jinglei began posting a series of essays on Instagram and

Weibo, disclosing serial infidelity, emotional abuse, and other problematic elements of her married life to the public. Lee gave birth to three children within five years of her marriage, while Wang and his parents, according to Lee, were trying to deprive her of financial resources. Titled “Lee Jinglei Accuses Wang Leehom with Tens of Thousands of Words: The Collapse of a ‘Top-Notch Idol,’ and the Heat of This Divorce,” Huang Tongtong’s WeChat essay cautions against the popular belief in the Cinderella story.

Even a woman like Lee Jinglei, who is well educated and was willing to sacrifice her career for marriage and to raise children and support her husband, could be denied the value she created as well as the role she played in married life. Especially if the divorce involves financial interests, what you [housewives] can get is contingent upon what the other party is willing to offer. So how to protect housewives’ rights is an issue that deserves our careful investigation (Huang 2021).

Huang’s analysis of celebrity lives in the public eye and her portrayal of artistic youth in her novels complement each other to reinforce a central message. In so doing, Huang consistently advocates a lifestyle that is not dependent upon finding the right spouse or dating partner but rather centers on both individual career development and homosociality.

WeChat also has enabled Huang to brand this alternative lifestyle in the name of cultivating tastes among urbanites and celebrating the spirits of independent women. An advertorial titled “The List: Fun Aspects of Living in an Apartment,” starts with Huang’s narration of her daily routine of walking 5,000 steps from her parents’ house back to her apartment. Then, Huang lists the advantages of living in an apartment:

People often say buying apartments is not worth the investment, as the value does not increase much as time goes by. But if your life goals are not about investment but rather are to live an exciting metropolitan life, apartments might be your best option... Every single day of living in an apartment means that you are living for yourself. You are not distracted. You take good care of yourself, work hard, and socialize with friends. You are completely independent within this bustling metropolis. Read the book you like and buy stuff you enjoy. Nobody is there to scold you or teach you lessons. I have to admit that this [lifestyle] is a bit costly, but if you enjoy it

and can also afford to do so, then why not? (Huang 2022)

Following this, Huang lists recent favorite items in her apartment, including high-end skin care products and a luxury watch. Her 2018 book *I Will Surely Rebuild My Life* 我必亲手重建我的生活 (*Wo bi qinshou chongjian wode shenghuo*) illustrates a similar logic that integrates personal reflections and product placements, albeit more subtly. An inward-facing essay collection exploring the author's life trajectory, *I Will Surely Rebuild My Life* focuses on Huang's reflections about living spaces, including housing, hotels, and interior design. Of note, the notion of "rebuilding" one's life refers to restructuring or redecorating a physical—rather than spiritual—space to make it more homely or artsy. Therefore, the process of "rebuilding" one's life is premised on economic advancement. In her preface, Huang discusses the lack of aesthetic education for those born in the 1970s and hence her need to catch up when she assumed the role of the editor working in the fields of fashion and entertainment. Consequently, similar to Li Xiaozhen in *First Class*, she transitioned from someone with zero knowledge about fashion to someone who feels comfortable introducing readers to "quality products" (*hao wu*), including jewelry, luxury bags, drinkware, and clothing brands. In sharing this personal story, Huang appears approachable and serves as a fashion guide for her readers. The ability to appreciate quality products is one component of a way of life that supports consumption, which further justifies Miss Lan and Miss Huang's entrance into e-commerce to promote their products.

Conclusion

The diversification of monetization models available to public WeChat accounts offers new opportunities for cultural entrepreneurs, of which Huang Tongtong is representative, to connect with fans and strengthen corporate identities. The mutual referentiality between Huang's fiction, essay collections, and WeChat posts contributes to the building of her public persona as an artistic youth and reinforcing the appeal of the alternative lifestyle she advocates. Essential to Huang's public image, *wenyi* aesthetics are capitalized on in publicity campaigns that include social media posts and product placements. Huang's in-depth reflections on the experiences of educated urban women have also carved out a cultural niche for her. As Huang states, "I think the biggest problem women have with men is that they project too much desire and expectations onto them. Their biggest misunderstanding is that they always want to find a man to be responsible for their lives. They always want to rely on men for protection. In the era we are living in today, this is indeed

a luxury mindset” (2010, 315). This alternative lifestyle that Huang advocates is nevertheless largely premised on material prosperity, thus departing from the *wenyi* figures portrayed in the writings of Wei Hui, Mian Mian, and Mu Zimei. In both of Huang’s novels, artistic youths living unconventional lifestyles seem to have lost a sense of pride. The two representatives of artistic youth in *Women Are Superior to Men* do not seem to end up going anywhere: Cheng Xiaodong’s tragic death symbolizes the end of the era of artistic youth, and Ji Rong ultimately becomes a blandly ordinary middle-aged woman. In *First Class*, Li Xiaozhen, who represents free spirits, is presented as a “loser” at the end of the story. In comparison, the positive examples in both novels rarely show any personal inclination towards living a *wenyi* lifestyle. In *Women Are Superior to Men*, Zhang Si and Zhang Xiang capitalize on the appeal of *wenyi* lifestyle to support their business, and the portrayal of Li Xiaofeng’s start-up business focuses on careless spending as a reward for gaining financial independence. The nonutilitarian connotation of *wenyi* thus shifts to a utilitarian vision of capitalizing on *wenyi* as a cultural enterprise. These shifting narratives about *wenyi* showcase the drastically changing era in which commercial culture, aided by technological developments, dominates. Consequently, market commodification of *wenyi* sentiments promotes an alternative lifestyle that is dependent upon women’s financial power to consume material luxuries, which ironically function as a counterpoint to *wenyi* as a celebration of individual disposition.

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