

Consumption Plus Love:

Inequality, Domestic Utopia, and the New Politics of the Future

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Future

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Abstract

With hundreds of millions of rural migrant workers now dominating the labor market in China's fastest growing regions, this group embodies that nation's most intractable problems of inequality. Young, single, socially disenfranchised rural migrants, particularly men, reportedly experience widespread difficulty in finding a marriage partner, largely due to their inability to own a home. The resulting potential social instability is of pressing concern to the Chinese Communist Party. How do discourses of governmentality reconcile/manage class inequality? How do they construct the future and encourage hope? What moral, cultural, and rhetorical resources does this ideology of the future draw on, and to what extent does it represent a rupture from China's revolutionary—and traditional—past? Do China's most disenfranchised socioeconomic groups buy into the "China Dream" rhetoric? This paper addresses these questions through a series of "love stories" screened by CCTV. It aims to pinpoint a particular moment in China's state capitalism when romantic love becomes a means of managing, if not solving, social inequality. It uncovers a new discursive blueprint for future state narratives of inequality, and brings to light some new ways of restructuring the fantasy of the "good life."

Keywords

Inequality, rural migrants, romantic love, revolution plus love, consumption plus love, politics of the future, fantasy of the "happy life"

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In February 2013, around the time of the Chinese New Year, China Central Television (CCTV) launched a series of news reports under the overall title “Love on the Assembly Line” (流水线上的爱情). Each segment features a young rural migrant couple and their relationship—some already married, others still at the courting stage. With the notable exception of one couple, none of the couples has an apartment to their name, because of which the woman in each couple is facing social pressure against her romantic involvement with a propertyless man, and their relationship is put to test. Life is hard for all these couples at the time of these reports, but each of their stories ends with an optimistic message: as long as they love each other and work hard for a future together, things will somehow work out.

Around the same time as the CCTV stories, the media, academics, and labor advocacy groups alike also started to call on the government to address the problem of rural migrants’ difficulty in finding marriage partners. Feng Gong, a nationally well-known performance artist—in addition to being a member of the national committee of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC)—formally submitted a motion to the 12th National People’s Congress in 2013, alerting the government to the fact that many young male rural migrants, due to their low socioeconomic status and especially their inability to own a home, were having trouble finding a marriage partner. He argued that to be able to find conjugal love is rural migrants’ “China Dream,” and that the government should work hard to “elevate the level of their happiness” (Shao, 2013).

While waiting for their level of happiness to be elevated, rural migrants—long cast in the role of cheap labor—are now expected to become better consumers. At the beginning of 2016, rural migrants were singled out as a possible solution to the problem of surplus housing stock. According to a CCTV news story on January 31, 2016, real estate totaling an area of 0.7 billion square meters lay vacant at that time, mostly in townships and small cities. The experts and policy makers quoted in the news item suggested that a key strategy for solving this problem could be to remove restrictions resulting from the *hukou* (household registration) system, so that rural migrants could afford to purchase properties (CCTV, 2016).

Meanwhile, housing shortages and volatility in the real estate market in the big cities stratifies the urban population, ranging from those who are desperately trying to get a foothold in the market to those wishing to capitalize on the housing crisis as a form of investment. To ease the pressure, in early 2016 local governments issued new regulations stipulating that a couple who already owned one property but wished to purchase another must pay a larger deposit and higher assorted fees. In order to get around this regulation, some couples were resorting to “fake divorces.” By late 2016, the Chinese media were replete with stories of couples who were getting divorced in order to purchase a second apartment, but with no intention of ending their relationship—only to realize that a fake divorce could have very real consequences: some relationships fell apart as a result of this investment strategy (Xinhua, 2016).

A few observations can be made by juxtaposing the housing issues faced by these two different social groups. As Li Zhang (2008) point out, private ownership is not merely an expression of class difference but also the very means through which class-specific subjects are formed. At the same time, notwithstanding class differences, housing is now inexorably linked to the achievement of a “happy life,” yet in some cases the pursuit of the property ownership dream can end up becoming a hindrance to one’s affective fulfillment—the very

thing it is supposed to facilitate. For a Party-state that is concerned with political legitimacy and social stability, the challenge of managing class inequality cannot merely be a matter of policy adjustment; it must also involve adjustments in the population's affect and mentality, particularly in their ways of imagining the future.

Decades of economic reforms in China, characterized by a “tense articulation between neoliberal logic and socialist sovereignty” (Ong and Zhang, 2008: 2), have led to some enduring paradoxes. The state has retreated from the provision of a range of public goods and services, and clearly prefers to govern “at a distance” on issues relating to individuals. Following the transition from a socialist economy to a privatized market economy, the population is now encouraged to actively pursue a wide range of self-governing and self-enterprising practices that shape and optimize their life chances (Ong and Zhang, 2008: 8).

More than ever before, the projection of a better future, or at least raising hope for such a future, is crucial to the political project of governing “from afar.” Tracing the shift from the utopianism of communist China to the hedonism of the reform era, moral philosopher Jiwei Ci (2014: 206) observes that utopianism, which derives from the European notion of time as progress and the future as the realm of perfect happiness, gave the Chinese people a heightened sense of meaning and purpose. In return for that promised future happiness, people were prepared “to believe, to obey, to strive, to sacrifice, and to expect—in ways unprecedented in Chinese history” (Ci 1994: 4). However, Ci argues that by making the future the “locus of an ambitious goal” (4), this utopianism, though powerful, was dangerous and likely to lead to disappointment. Ci was writing in the early 1990s, when that disappointment had already led to nihilism and hedonism—what Ci (2014: 26) calls the “desublimation of the original utopianism.” Abandoning higher values of liberty and equality, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), with no higher goal than to maintain stability, now declares its ultimate goal as being to meet people's “desire for a happy life” (Xi, 2012). Ci's

analysis of how the future is configured in the revolutionary utopian discourse is instructive, but he stops short of addressing the question of whether the trope of the future has any continuing relevance in the CCP's contemporary project of stability maintenance. This is despite his observation (Ci, 1994) that the Party, in order to justify its ongoing leadership, has had to provide moral guidance, however ineffectual and vacuous, to the Chinese population.

Of course, it is not just the Chinese people who have had to make adjustments during times of social transition. In *Cruel Optimism*, Lauren Berlant (2011: 2) argues that liberal-capitalist societies can no longer be counted on to deliver on their promise of prosperity, security, upward mobility, and enduring intimacy. Postwar optimism has run into an "impasse" of the present, whereby people, despite living with precarity, contingency, and crisis, remain attached to the fantasies of the good life. To Berlant, this optimism is a "scene of negotiated sustenance that makes life bearable as it presents itself ambivalently, unevenly, incoherently" (14). She argues that such optimism can be cruel because it has the power to make one believe that, despite evidence of the "instability, fragility, and dear cost" of the precarious present, life will somehow work out in the future, and that they and the world will "add up to something" (2). To Berlant, examining the "improvisation of genre" (2011: 6) as well as the "pattern of adjustment in specific aesthetic and social contexts" (7) is crucial if we want to track the "impact of neoliberal restructuring on fantasies of the good life" (18).

The politics of the future as conceived by Ci and Berlant presents a good point of departure for my pursuit of a number of questions in this paper. How do discourses of governmentality reconcile/manage class inequality, and what narrative shape and form do such discursive efforts take? How do discourses of governmentality construct the future and encourage hope, despite the growing precarity that currently confronts people in their everyday lives, especially those in marginalized social groups? What moral, cultural, and rhetorical resources does this ideology of the future draw on, and to what extent does it

represent a departure, even a rupture, from China's past—both traditional and revolutionary? Furthermore, if the political project of a “happy life for all Chinese” has become a key ingredient of the official “China Dream” rhetoric, does this project have any buy-in from China's most disenfranchised socioeconomic groups? To address these questions is a matter of urgent political concern, since they afford us a hitherto unexplored prism through which to assess the political purchase of the government's China Dream project and its prospects for stability maintenance.

Situated in an extended analysis of CCTV's love stories, this paper pursues these questions by taking an approach that is at once analytical, ethnographic, and historical. My aim is to pinpoint a particular moment in China's state capitalism when romantic love becomes a means of managing, if not solving, social inequality. To effectively engage with the questions raised above, I approach CCTV's love stories on a number of levels: political economy, social semiotics, viewer interpretation, and historical connection. In methodological terms, I put CCTV's love stories to a number of uses. First, these stories are part of a heuristic ethnographic device, functioning as vital conversational fodder and an interview tactic, for the purpose of generating among interviewees a set of potentially different or even contradictory statements and positions. Second, the stories themselves function as a prism through which we can understand the political, economic, and media-institutional context in which the official discourse of conjugal love is produced. Third, they present themselves as an example of the narrative forms and strategies that are deployed to construct a normative way of imagining the future. And fourth, the stories can be viewed as a textual palimpsest, containing traces of mutation of past tropes and speech acts against which we can read the gaps, disruptions, and continuities in the new “consumption-plus-love” narrative framework.

The first of these uses—the ethnographic—warrants a brief explanation. Brokering media studies and anthropology, this method is intended to produce neither an ethnography of rural migrants’ media consumption—important in its own right—nor an “objective” account of migrants’ lives. Instead, it aims to bring to light, through juxtaposition, the tensions, contradictions, ambiguities, and sometimes even the complicities between and within these two bodies of material. As I have discussed elsewhere (Wanning Sun, 2017), using media material to generate ethnographic data has two methodological benefits: first, it shifts the focus away from the interviewees themselves and onto a fictional (depersonalized) set of moral circumstances and dilemmas; and second, it sheds light on how emotional textures, love, and feelings of intimacy are also products of particular kinds of social, political, cultural, and economic structures—thus getting at the often complex relationship between mainstream media/cultural expressions and the subject positions of rural migrant individuals.

Stories, Genre, and the Context of Production

The CCTV series of love stories in 2013 consisted of five segments, each one lasting between five and fifteen minutes, and they were broadcast over five days, starting on February 4. The first, called “Home is Where You Are,” centers on a couple who had met on the assembly line in a factory in Baoding, Hebei Province. In this segment, Qiu Guoying, from Inner Mongolia, and his wife Hao Ranran, a local girl from a nearby township, talk about how they had courted. Her parents had objected to the marriage as his family was poor. Though under a lot of pressure, Qiu went ahead and married Hao, and the couple set out to realize their dream—earning enough money to put a deposit on a flat in Baoding. They scrimped and saved every penny; Qiu worked extra shifts, and never took time off work. And their hard work finally paid off: viewers see the couple about to move into their new flat. While busy sanding the wall in their new apartment, Qiu tells the reporter that “he feels only sweet happiness in his heart, even though he has tasted a lot of bitterness.” His wife, also busy

furbishing the apartment, says, with obvious rapture, that she cannot wait to see the installation of a big wardrobe that can hold lots of clothes. Qiu has also been promoted from a worker to a supervisor. “He has his goals, and he’s so driven to achieve them. Their story is like a motivational film,” says one of Qiu’s colleagues to the reporter.

Another couple featured in the series was Xiao Han and his fiancée Xiao Qing, whose story was broadcast on February 12 and 13 in 2013. Entitled “Xiao Han’s Wedding,” the segment is about a young man from Anhui who had brought his bride-to-be, a young woman from Sha’anxi, to get married in his parents’ village home—a run-down dwelling with muddy paths. The couple are painfully aware that the groom is usually expected to build a new house for his bride—something Han could not afford. His fiancée loves him, but she is under a lot of pressure; her mother objects to the marriage, and her girlfriends think that “she is selling herself short.” She cries as she talks to the camera, saying that both she and her loved one are under enormous pressure. The reporter and his camera follow the couple to the local marriage registration office in the county’s township, and then to their humble but happy wedding ceremony. Han tells the reporter that he is trying to start a business back in his hometown, and hopes to save enough money to purchase a place of his own one day. He declares to his bride, “I love you. I’ll take care of you forever. You will not regret marrying me” (CCTV, 2013).

The final story in the series, entitled “The World Outside Is Really Wonderful,” broadcast on February 16, tells the story of two young people who dare to dream. Both born in the 1990s in Fuyang, Anhui Province, the couple met on the assembly line in a factory in Ningbo, Jiangsu Province, and fell in love, although at the time of their interview they still lived in separate dormitories. Apart from the fact that they could not afford a flat and a car and could barely get by on their combined wages (6,000 *yuan* a month between the two of them), their most immediate obstacle was that the young woman’s father objected to their

marriage, believing that his daughter should marry someone more skilled, someone from a more financially comfortable family or, preferably, someone with a small business of his own. Viewers see the couple going home, hoping to persuade her father. When asked by the reporter what his dream is, the young man, wearing his work uniform and standing next to his girlfriend, says, “My dream is to have enough money to put a deposit on a property somewhere in Ningbo. I don’t know if it’s realistic, but that’s my dream.”

The same optimism governs the narrative in “Chen Huan’s Choice,” broadcast on February 11. A married couple from rural Anhui are eking out a living in Shanghai. Chen Huan’s husband came to Shanghai in 1992; he now works as a window repairer while she works on the assembly line. Their child has to stay behind in Anhui due to *hukou*-related restrictions on schooling for rural migrants’ children. In order to keep the family together, her husband suggests that they go back home to start a new business. But going home would mean that Chen Huan would have to give up her job, as well as a lot of the things she likes about city life; moreover, she believes that she would need to work harder back in the village. However, she has agreed to go home even though she and her husband may have different views about what their future should be. The story ends with the couple being seen off at the long-distance bus station, with the voiceover reminding viewers that “as long as two people are together and support each other, they have a good future even though it may be simple and ordinary.”

CCTV is the centerpiece of the CCP’s propaganda machine. Its 7.00 pm daily news bulletin is widely understood to be the most authoritative and “politically correct,” albeit perhaps not the most riveting, coverage of news and current affairs. For this reason, the content of CCTV’s news bulletins is scrutinized most closely by the censors, and carefully studied by both ordinary viewers and Party officials—not because it is taken to present transparent and objective information but because it is the most reliable evidence of the

government's position and policies on certain issues. The love stories outlined above are scheduled in CCTV's annual Spring Festival "Grassroots Report" segment. For several years, as part of the state television network's coordinated efforts to showcase the central and local governments' people-centered philosophy of governing, CCTV's news hour has included a special segment entitled "Reports from the Grassroots during the Spring Festival" (新春走基层). The kinds of stories included in these Grassroots Reports are not routine news reporting in the strict, technical sense; their suitability is judged not according to their timeliness, novelty, or scale of impact—as is the case with disasters, crises, or accidents—criteria of newsworthiness that are widely assumed in journalism. Rather, they are stories about real, ordinary individuals whom reporters have "dug out" from the grassroots of society. Featuring everyday individuals who face difficult circumstances yet exemplify a "positive energy," and combining the narrative styles of documentary, reality television, and news reporting, these stories are intended to convert negative feelings such as frustration, discontent, and despair into hope for the future and gratitude to the government. Conceived thus, these grassroots stories comprise a particular news genre that attempts to renovate the old ways of doing propaganda. This is especially since many "ideological workers"—including CCTV's own news crews—realize that the old, hackneyed sloganeering form of propaganda does not work, and that new forms of indoctrination must, in the words of Zheng (2013), head of CCTV's news team, work like "gentle rain soaking the earth without making any sound" (细雨润无声).

The fact that CCTV's flagship news and current affairs program dedicated an entire series of its special features to the topic of rural migrants and their love life is clear evidence of the Party's acute awareness of the problem facing "young rural migrants" (新生代农民工). In policy and media parlance, the term "rural migrant workers" (农民工) is used to include a vast and heterogeneous cohort of people with rural *hukou* who work in a wide range of low-

skilled or manual jobs in the city. This is a diverse group, differentiated along various lines including age/generation, place of origin, and employment sector. The experiences of individuals also vary depending on the specificities of the local politics, economic policies, and administrative regulations of the city in which they live.¹ A National Bureau of Statistics report published in 2016 reveals that the number of internal migrants within China has now reached 278 million. Migrant labor forces are to be found in a wide range of sectors including the manufacturing, construction, service, and hospitality industries, with the manufacturing sector employing the largest cohort—around 31.1% of the total migrant force. Up to 29.2% of all rural migrant workers are in the 21–30 age bracket, and another 3.7% are aged between 16 and 20 (National Bureau of Statistics, 2016). This means that about one-third of the entire rural migrant labor force are under 30 years old. And the percentage of single workers has increased exponentially. According to a 2010 survey by the All-China Federation of Trade Unions, up to 80% of the second-generation migrant labor force cohort is now single. This is in contrast to a 2006 survey, which showed that 80% of the entire rural migrant workforce then were married (ACFTU, 2010).

In comparison with their parents, young rural migrants are more exposed to urban lifestyles and consumption practices, and are less willing to contemplate going back to their villages. Yet their prospects for settling in the city and enjoying similar entitlements as urban residents are hardly better than for their parents (Qiu, 2015). Despite certain reforms of the *hukou* system, its discriminatory policies—unequal access to employment, housing, education, and health care for urban versus rural citizens—remain mostly intact (Chan and Buckingham, 2008). Among the myriad socioeconomic problems facing individuals from this cohort, the most pressing issue is their difficulty in forging intimate relationships and finding marriage partners. In 2011, the All-China Women’s Federation, the government body in charge of women’s affairs, conducted a national survey in collaboration with the Chinese

Association of Family Studies. The survey uncovers some key causes of this difficulty, including, for instance, precarious job situations, low income, and high mobility. The gender imbalance in many work places, long work hours, and little access to free or affordable space for socializing are also obstacles. Furthermore, this group's inferior socioeconomic status often translates into a lack of confidence and money, both of which are needed in dating and courting (ACWF, 2011). A similar survey by China Youth Daily, the mouthpiece of the Youth League of the CCP, reports that difficulty in finding a partner trumps work fatigue as the leading cause of unhappiness, followed by other concerns, such as children's education, social welfare, and support of ageing parents (Xiang, 2015).

In a smaller survey of 579 young Foxconn workers conducted by a labor-advocacy group, up to 70% of male workers were found to be single and without a girlfriend. This alarming statistic compels labor advocates to ask, somewhat rhetorically, "Who killed Foxconn workers' chance for love?" (Deng, 2015). This question preoccupies labor activists as well as the left-wing intelligentsia within China. According to Marxist scholar Lü Xinyu, young rural migrants' romantic love has died a tragic death in the age of transnational capitalism—a death that has occurred in both real and symbolic senses. Up to the 1980s, love stories had provided a perennial narrative framework within which rural–urban inequality could be negotiated in moral terms. However, due to the drastically widened rural–urban gap, young rural migrants now can no longer be convincing protagonists in love stories within the framework of mainstream cultural production. In Lü's view, in today's cinema and literature the romantic love of rural migrant youth is represented only "in the form of its absence" (Lü, 2015). Lü's observation of the death of rural–urban love in the realm of cultural representation is borne out by sociological evidence. The few cross-*hukou* marriages between rural and urban residents are not based on romantic love, and where marriages do occur, rural

migrant women tend to marry urban residents with disadvantage—they are mostly disabled, old, or poor (Shen, 2007; Jin, Zhang, and Yang, 2016).

From the state's perspective of maintaining social stability through morality and law and order, the growing number of emotionally lonely and sexually unfulfilled young rural migrants of a marriageable age is deeply concerning. Thus framed, effective propaganda must be able to facilitate what Berlant (2011: 15) calls a necessary "affective adjustment" by convincing rural migrants that, despite their present "stuckness," as long as they work hard, their future will be bright.

Foxconn Workers' Perspectives

Do these stories resonate with the individuals in the cohort they seek to represent? How do migrant workers respond to the state's attempts to redefine love and marital happiness in the ways described so far? As part of my longitudinal study of the romantic experiences of young factory workers in Foxconn,² I decided to use CCTV stories as visual prompts to begin what turned out to be intimate conversations with workers about their private emotional lives.³ I started these conversations by showing my interviewees video clips of CCTV's "love stories" on an iPad. It turned out that, with the exception of one interviewee, none of them had seen these stories when they were broadcast by CCTV. In fact, many told me that they seldom watched CCTV news, or television in general, preferring to get their news and entertainment from digital and social media on their mobile phone. Their responses were diverse, and considerably differentiated along lines of gender and age (the 1980s cohort versus the 1990s cohort). One young female worker expressed surprise that CCTV would report on the love life of people "like us." A few seemed bemused that CCTV went to such lengths to cover this topic.⁴ Many respondents considered the series to have a "propaganda" purpose, although some explained the propagandistic nature of these stories more explicitly than others.

But the most common response was that the stories were not “realistic.” By this, workers did not mean that they did not find the stories to be true and authentic—in fact, on seeing Xiao Han and his fiancée walking along a muddy path on a rainy day to get married, more than one interviewee commented that the path in their own home village was “just as muddy.” What they were reacting against was the stories’ optimistic projection of the future, as well as the question of what constitutes a realistic level of consumption that rural migrants should aspire to. To be sure, rural migrants, especially from the second-generation cohort, aspire to a lifestyle and consumption standards befitting middle-class urban residents, and they exercise their agency as consumer–citizens in the enthusiastic uptake of a wide range of consumer goods including, most visibly, mobile phones and fashion items. However, when there is too great a discrepancy between what they are inspired to aim for—e.g., ownership of a property in the city—and their actual consumption power, these stories can only end up having an alienating rather than an encouraging effect.

My conversations with these workers made it clear that owning a place of their own in the city where they currently live and work was a pipe dream. In fact, it would also be beyond the dreams of many of the young, educated professionals who are struggling to gain a foothold there, it being one of the most expensive cities in China. The most that these workers could ever hope for would be to save up enough money for a deposit on an apartment in the closest township to their village, although even that would be beyond the reach of the majority of them. A handful of workers told me that this is what they are doing—putting a deposit on an apartment—but their apartments lie empty while they continue to work in Shenzhen: jobs in rural townships are scarce, and, with very little capital to their name, rural migrants have few, if any, opportunities to start a successful business there. The most affordable option, then, is to build a home on the rural land where their parents live. However, this is their least attractive prospect, given that most young people have no

intention of going back to live in their village. Moreover, a not inconsiderable number of young workers I spoke to did not even have enough money to build in their own village.

At the end of the CCTV story about the hard-working Qiu Guoying and his frugal wife Hao Ranran, the announcer observes: “For rural migrant workers earning 1,000–2,000 [*yuan*] a month, the dream of buying a flat seems far-fetched. But with their own hard work, this couple has made it possible” (CCTV, 2013). Although this may be true, the rural migrants I interviewed for this study believe that the couple gave up too much in exchange for a chance to buy a house. One male worker said:

I notice that they have no friends to help them move, and no friends to help them refurbish their place. The guy spends all his waking hours working, and has no time for friends. Who wants to live like that?

Another male worker agreed: “Happiness is not just about a man and a woman and their property. It’s also about having friends and enjoying life—getting together with friends, smoking, drinking, and eating with them.” And a third worker, also male, chimed in: “If this is love, it’s too exhausting; I’m better off without it.” It was clear that many of my male worker interviewees did not like the take-home message from this story. To some of them, friendship and homosocial ties are important, and the pursuit of a domestic utopia based exclusively on kinship-based support and conjugal love is undesirable and unworthy.

In addition, although workers typically do not object to CCTV’s message of putting love before money, they do refuse to take a leap of faith, as the stories urge them to do, and accept that even though the present is bad, the future will be better. Many workers told me that, based on their experience, it would be foolhardy to believe in the future. For Jiang YY, a man in his late 20s from Hubei Province, having walked away empty-handed from numerous blind dates arranged by match-makers, there is every reason to be skeptical about what blind faith in the future may bring:

Sure, Xiao Han and Xiao Qing's story ends in their happy wedding, but who knows what's going to happen after that? Xiao Han has a five-year plan, but we all know how hard it is to start a business. Would Xiao Qing still love him if (when) he fails to deliver on his promise of buying a property? I'm pretty sure the odds are against him. I haven't seen any evidence suggesting that he has what it takes to afford a property.

While fantasies of a "good life" interpellate individuals across the entire social spectrum, the cruelty of such optimism lies in the fact that rural migrants' consumption power remains woefully low, yet more than ever before, they are hailed by both the state and the market to become aspiring consumers. A 2015 survey indicates that rural migrants' average monthly income was then 3,072 *yuan*, with those in the manufacturing sector earning on average 2,970 *yuan* a month (National Bureau of Statistics, 2016). In addition to earning significantly less than their urban counterparts, rural migrants are also deprived of discounted housing prices, subsidized health care, free education for their children, and other public goods and services that urban-*hukou* workers and public service employees take for granted. This cruelty was vividly brought home in June 2016, when 46-year-old Huang Ying, a rural migrant cleaner in Hefei, Anhui Province, hit the national news. Huang and her family made an initial deposit on an apartment in Hefei using her husband's and her own lifetime savings—which they had earned by doing two jobs each—then moved into the apartment, but they failed to pay the next installment by the due date as agreed in the contract. So when the market value of property in Hefei skyrocketed by 300% and the vendor wanted to rescind the contract, Huang found that neither the law nor the market was on her side (Han and Chang, 2016). Feeling trapped and desperate, and in deep debt, Huang jumped from a tall building and killed herself. Ironically, Huang's death took place just six months after the launch of the

policy encouraging rural migrants to purchase surplus housing in small cities and townships, which I mentioned at the start of this paper.

CCTV's love stories represent a new speech act of promise-making, whereby the trope of a better future is conjured up to dull the pain of the present. This forms a sharp contrast to the revolutionary-era proletarian speech act of "speaking bitterness," wherein the hardships of the past would be ritualistically evoked to accentuate a happy present. In the case of the CCTV stories, however, although the current reality of material deprivation, psychological insecurity, and emotional stress are real, they are rationalized as a natural, teleological progression toward a better future. The consumption-plus-love formula may have eliminated the revolutionary utopia, but a trope of utopian optimism for the future is still serviceable to the CCP's efforts to produce hope. But it is not a message that young migrants like Jiang YY are prepared to buy. Workers' comments also make it clear that the notion of pursuing the kind of individualistic, romantic love promoted in these stories would not work. They typically do not make decisions about their love lives defiantly or independently of their parents' and peers' opinions, as the individuals in the CCTV stories appeared to do. My interviewees reminded me that, unlike their urban, middle-class professional counterparts, they can less afford to displease their parents and risk alienating themselves from their kin. Because their prospects in the city remain uncertain, their parents are, after all, the only people they can really count on.

Li WJ, a female Foxconn worker from Henan Province, exemplifies the dilemma of being caught between parental opinions and her own desires. Born in 1988, Li is aware that time is not on her side. Many women of her age are already married with children. Li has a romantic interest in someone she met on QQ, but she is not sure how to proceed as "his material circumstances are not so good." In the eyes of her mother, this potential marriage partner has three strikes against him: he owns no property; he has two younger, unmarried

brothers (hence he may need to support them in the future); and his mother is not interested in helping with childcare. And to add a final straw, he may not be able to afford a betrothal gift, even though the expected betrothal “fee” in Li’s hometown is not high. Li is obviously keen on the man, but the attitude of her mother and neighbors is impossible to ignore: “My mother keeps saying that he combines all the undesirable attributes in one person.” She said that she admired Xiao Qing’s courage to marry Xiao Han, but she does not have that courage. She feels stuck. In the meantime, time continues to tick by while she works on Foxconn’s assembly line, and the pressure to end her single status continues to mount.

My conversations with workers about these CCTV stories made me realize this: young migrant workers crave love, but they face two possible scenarios. Some, like Li, love someone but, facing myriad obstacles, are too scared to move to the point of putting their love to test. Others, such as 28-year-old Qing ZB from Hubei Province, have not even been given a chance to get to first base romantically. Most of Qing’s arranged dates have not gone beyond the first meeting. After several years of unsuccessful blind dates, he has become more and more despondent. But the pressure from his parents continues unabated: “My parents are so worried that their hair has turned white.” Qing recounted one of his several disappointments:

I met this girl, as arranged by a matchmaker. We liked each other enough to exchange QQ numbers, and we talked on QQ a few times. But then the matchmaker said the girl’s parents wanted 200,000 *yuan* as a betrothal gift. To raise that amount, my parents would have needed to borrow 100,000 *yuan*.

The girl said to me, “Everyone else borrows money to get married. Why can’t your family?” But I didn’t want my parents to go into debt because of me. I have a younger brother who will have to build a home plus raise a betrothal

gift in order to get married. If we're in debt now, it would be even harder to borrow money in the future. So, I said, "Forget it," and then came to Shenzhen.

Qing's experience is typical of many Foxconn workers I talked to. But despite his experience, Qing does not blame the girl:

She was also under a lot of pressure. If she agreed to go out with someone whose family couldn't afford a new home or betrothal gift, she would be looked down upon by others in the village. They compete with one another.

Girls don't want to look like losers.

Qing's statement helped me to understand the complexity of rural migrants' responses to the CCTV narratives. On the one hand, they notice that these love stories do not realistically represent their own lives, and that their projection of an optimistic future is not convincing. On the other hand, despite their rejection of certain elements of the stories, many workers in fact endorsed the individuals portrayed in them as role models who embodied a superior moral position to their own. After watching the story of Xiao Han's wedding to Xiao Qing, an immediate response from most rural migrant men was, "If only there were more women like Xiao Qing!" In expressing their preference for an ideal world over a present one—one in which economic considerations (ownership of a flat, the size of a betrothal gift) do not get in the way of love—these workers are not uncritically endorsing CCTV's message. Rather, it may well be because, in comparison with the love-as-consumption logic implicit in the market discourses, the official definition of love at least presents workers with a set of moral parameters that resonate with their economic circumstances and within which they can make sense of their present and future. Several single male interviewees made comments along the following lines: "Girls nowadays are too pragmatic. I would have a better chance of finding someone if there were more girls like them [the girls in the stories]." Similarly, several young women commented:

I think boys like to complain about us putting material things before feelings. But I think that's just their excuse for not wanting to try hard. I would be prepared to go out with someone without a property or betrothal gifts, as long as he shows a willingness and potential to acquire these things in the future, like the men do in these stories.

It seems that, despite the differences between these men and women, they all articulate a strong preference for a different world where love trumps economic considerations.

Key Ingredients in the Love Stories

It is clear from workers' statements that the effectiveness of CCTV's love stories is questionable. Nevertheless, they warrant careful analysis because they present important clues to, first, what the officially acceptable framework for imagining the future is; and second, how this framework informs the ways in which inequality is narrated.

To a considerable extent, CCTV's love stories underscore the essential elements of the "modern ideology of romantic love" (Illouz, 1997: 75). As befitting the mode of romantic love, the love of rural migrants in these stories is "irrational," on the one hand, and "disinterested," on the other (Illouz, 1997: 75; 2007: 90). By depicting young migrants in pursuit of love against the will of their parents who, in opposition to their offspring, base their notion of "romantic love" on the calculation of status compatibility or profitable transaction, these stories seem to reference the anti-traditional, anti-feudal individualism that was promoted by the CCP during the revolutionary era. But my interviewees' statements make it very clear that the idea of going against the wish of one's parents—and hence risking alienating them—in order to pursue love is both naïve and self-defeating.

At the same time, the "modern" discourse of romantic love embraced by young rural migrants in the stories is fused with a number of other key ingredients. In these stories, love is not commendable unless it is consummated through heterosexual marriage. None of the

stories portray love in the form of dating without the intention to marry, and although sexual experience before and outside marriage is common among rural migrant workers, all the couples in the stories are either married or are intending to marry. In fact, this emphasis on marriage can be seen as a gesture toward what some call the “re-traditionalisation of gender norms” (Martin, 2016). The emphasis on the need for romantic love to end in marriage is worth noting, since the government considers a stable heterosexual family structure to be the basic unit for the maintenance of social order (Evans, 1997). The government regards marriage to be especially important for a growing number of single, unmarried men from the socioeconomic margins, due to the long-standing perceived connection between frustrated marital aspirations and social unrest at various points in Chinese history (Brownell and Wasserstrom, 2002; Sommers, 2000).

While the consumption–love connection is at least three decades old and is certainly not specific to China, CCTV’s stories pinpoint a particular moment when this trope makes a conspicuous entry into official discourses. Furthermore, these love stories, while referencing the logic of the market, are significant for at least two additional reasons. First, they signal a discursive shift in the way rural migrants are constructed. These stories make an explicit and deliberate link between consumption and rural migrants as aspiring consumers. Far from being ideal consumers, rural migrants have until now been synonymous with cheap labor in capitalist production. But now they are positioned as the new consumer–citizens who dare to dream of a life with a bright consumerist future, all the while fulfilling their role of supplying cheap labor. Although owning a property remains a pipe dream for most rural migrants, a handful of individuals who have “made it”—like Hao Ranran and her husband—are now being made into role models. This transition in the role of rural migrants—from cheap labor to consumers—makes economic sense, given that their increased participation in consumption may help stimulate domestic production, which is key not only to sustained

economic growth but also to the continuing existence of jobs for rural migrants like themselves.

CCTV stories like those discussed earlier are also significant in that they provide a moral template according to which inequality between groups with different levels of consumption power is to be narrated. Unlike those urban middle-class consumers promoted in advertisements and myriad other cultural expressions, the individuals in these stories actually spend little money. In “Home Is Where You Are,” Hao Ranran demonstrated the virtue of frugality in a way that is strikingly reminiscent of the socialist era. She racked her brains about how to cut the grocery bills. She always bought the cheapest vegetables, and at one point the couple lived on a discarded cabbage for two weeks. It is worth noting that all the individuals in this series of stories make it clear that they have no higher goal than finally being able to purchase a place of their own. In other words, they are only probationary consumer-citizens; they voluntarily adopt a frugal lifestyle now in order to realize the ultimate consumer dream of owning a home in the future. Hao and her husband are model migrant workers here, not only because they embody the achievability of the housing dream, but also because they demonstrate a willingness to wait in hope for something to happen in the future while enduring their present hardship. This willingness to wait and to defer whatever present material comforts they can afford, Berlant argues, is key to the political project of restructuring the fantasy of the good life. Furthermore, Hao and her husband are so driven by their goal of owning an apartment that they seem to have divested themselves of their regular connections with friends and colleagues. This willingness to sever extra-familial ties and draw strength only from kin-based and conjugal support is consistent with state policies that encourage not only self-enterprise but also a competitive attitude toward those outside the kinship circle. Yet, as my interviewees argue, such a strategy may not be sustainable or culturally agreeable.⁵

Clearly, these CCTV stories aim to push a new message regarding love: love does exist and you can enjoy it now, even though currently you do not own a flat, you do not have a good job, and you do not have enough money. Love is not what you feel after you succeed in getting these material things; love is what happens when both of you work toward them. In other words, rural migrants who complain about not having enough money and therefore not being happy in their present life need to make an “affective adjustment” (Berlant 2011) in their mindset. As Zheng Xiuguo reflects, in the context of producing the story of “Xiao Han’s Wedding”:

On the surface, it looks like there’s nothing romantic about the love between Xiao Han and his girlfriend—they met on the factory shop floor, and even though they’ve dated for four years, they still don’t have a place of their own. Xiao Qing’s mother objects to the relationship, as she hopes her daughter will marry someone with more resources. But Xiao Han wins her future mother-in-law over with his “five-year plan,” and according to that plan, he’ll build a house for his wife by the end of five years. (Zheng, 2013)

Although the CCTV producer sees fit to let the narrative balance hinge on the promise of what will happen in five years, none of my interviewees who were shown the story shared this sense of optimism. In the same way that Xiao Han made a promise about what will happen in five years, CCTV’s love stories are also speech acts that make a promise about the future, when “something” may or may not happen. In this redefinition of love, individual rural migrants are not only desiring subjects but they must also pursue their desires in an appropriate fashion. Only when they do so can the state legitimate their personal, mundane home-building activities as valid—even admirable—self-constituting activities. Both Qiu Guoying and Hao Ranran are model migrants, because they are not just desiring subjects but they also behave most responsibly in order to obtain the object of their desire. They are thus

portrayed as following the example of China's new affluent groups in their participation in consumer activities. At the same time, they adopt class-appropriate methods of going about these activities. The main message promoted here is clear: discontent and disillusion about the present, however "stuck" it is, are not commendable sentiments. Instead, individuals should be willing to "eat bitterness" for the sake of a better future.

A model rural migrant is also unencumbered by class consciousness. In the post-Mao polity, the individual who embraces consumer values and is passionate about pursuing the dream of domestic bliss is politically more "correct" than someone with a revolutionary fervor for social change. Readers of Yang Mo's revolutionary novel, *Song of Youth*, may remember that Yu Songze lost out in a love triangle because, unlike his rival Lu Jiachuan the revolutionary, Yu was only interested in building a cozy home for his lover Ling Daojing and was not interested in the revolution. Today, the state makes it clear that China only needs individuals like Yu Songze, and revolutionary lovers "need not apply." The individuals in CCTV's stories are exemplary because they demonstrate a capacity to channel their passion "correctly" to achieve an outcome that is consistent with the CCP's dual imperative to transition the Chinese economy from production to consumption while also promoting cross-class harmony.

The sexuality of women and men is configured differently from each other in this new consumption-plus-love formula, returning to older, deeply entrenched assumptions regarding gender roles and what can count as acceptable forms of sexuality. None of the migrant women in these stories resort to their sexual capital to equalize their economic disadvantage. There are no "gold diggers" here. Instead of aiming to "marry up," as Chinese women traditionally do (Jin, Zhang, and Yang, 2016), they find romance within their own cohort. Finally, they are willing to go back to their hometown for the sake of their children and family, even though they themselves have adapted to city living and prefer to stay. More

importantly, these women demonstrate the desirable quality of being more conservative in sexual matters than their male counterparts (Choi and Peng, 2016) by refusing to resort to morally questionable means of escaping poverty such as prostitution. They are also shown to be capable of turning current poverty into a positive energy, even a passion, for pursuing consumerist dreams. They demonstrate moral courage by loving a poor man, and in return, so the story goes, their courage is rewarded in the form of materialistic gains. For these women role models, living through everyday hardships becomes a meaningful and character-building process. This way of configuring migrant women's sexuality is consistent with the state discourse's focus on the female as the agent of sexual purity. It is, however, a different story for the migrant man. The unhappiness of unmarried men in lower social classes is seen by the establishment to pose a threat to social stability, and, by implication, to the political legitimacy of the Party. In this context, a migrant woman can demonstrate her moral worth by marrying a migrant man and making her sexuality available to him (Evans, 1997: 110), thereby assisting the state in its efforts to maintain social and moral order. Here, as is the case with couples in urban China (Farrer, 2014), the man's sexual drive is assumed to be natural, whereas the woman's sexuality is expected to be passive and accommodating.

Sexuality aside, the discourse of love also positions men differently from women. For a man, according to this narrative, whether you succeed in finding love depends on your attitude. Indeed, love does not come easily, and even if someone loves you despite your poverty, your love may not last unless you work hard for a better future, provide her with a place to live, and achieve the means to support a family. In other words, as we saw in the previous paragraph, while rural migrant women are urged not to base their choice of partner on materialistic considerations, migrant men are told that the proof of their love lies not only in their capacity to provide for their significant other but also in their willingness to make a promise—as Xiao Han does to his fiancée.

From Revolution to Consumption: A Historical Perspective

Measured against the benchmark exemplified by the model lovers in the CCTV stories, the ardent love between two labor activists—discussed below—is unacceptable and dangerous. Toward the end of 2015, He Xiaobo, together with three other labor NGO activists in Guangzhou, was arrested—a high-profile incident that was widely reported in the international media. He’s wife Yang Min took to social media to give updates on her husband’s situation, but soon enough, she was warned by the police not to say anything “irresponsible” in that forum, or else she would “face the consequences.” Under intense police scrutiny, the couple resorted to publicizing their personal diary and private correspondence in order to maintain a public presence and garner moral support. These letters and diary entries, posted by the couple themselves and widely circulated on social media, were subsequently collated and distributed by various labor activist NGO newsletters. Some parts of this material read like love letters, and one is struck by the intensely personal nature of the couple’s revelations. For instance, on February 7, 2016, Yang posted a letter from her husband, complete with her own annotations. Addressing his wife as “my most beloved person,” the letter dwelled on how He and his wife had first fallen in love and started courting. On February 21, Yang posted a message on social media declaring her undying love for He, saying:

I believe in the power of love. Some people say that romantic love will turn into familial love when a couple get married, but my love for Xiaobo is still of the romantic type. It is still beautiful, like a gentle breeze and a drop of morning dew... (China Labor Aid, 2016)

The love between the two activists both harks back to and resonates with the old “revolution-plus-love” formula wherein the personal love of revolutionary heroes—like Sister Jiang in the 1960s novel *Red Crag* (红岩), and pro-democracy student leader Chai Ling, who married her

comrade in Tiananmen Square in 1989—unfolds against the backdrop of myriad revolutionary causes. With He facing jail and persecution, the re-romanticization of his relationship with his wife served an intensely political purpose. They are husband and wife, but more importantly they are comrades sharing a common political cause. The public declaration of their private feelings, carefully crafted to get around censorship, gestures—however fleetingly—toward a return to the revolution-plus-love formula. Poignantly, that formula, which dominated China’s revolutionary and socialist imagination for decades, is now the “weapon of the weak,” and is strategically deployed for the purpose of resistance and subterfuge. This example clearly reflects the actions and responses of only a handful of extraordinary individuals. Nevertheless, it indicates that notwithstanding this trend toward consumption as the dominant discursive scaffolding for love, the narrative framework of revolutionary love has not died a complete death in the post-Mao polity.

We cannot appreciate the profound significance of these labor activists’ gesture toward revolutionary love without a historical perspective. Left-wing writers in the 1930s, faced with the question of how to negotiate the potential tensions between individuals’ erotic desires and the demands of the revolutionary cause, mostly adopted a “revolution-plus-love” formula in their representation of romantic experiences. Despite various permutations of this formula, it is clear that revolution presents itself as both a motivation and a social milieu in which lovers relate to each other while participating in revolutionary activities. In this sense, personal love is mobilized by revolution, and individual love stories necessarily unfold in the grand narrative of class, nation, and revolution.

In Liu Jianmei’s (2003) view, as a literary formula, revolution-plus-love may have its origin in the political novel of the late Qing period, which is known for its concern with questions of cultural, national, and racial identity. This theme continued in the discourses of a new modern China and women’s emancipation that emerged during the May Fourth period,

which began in 1919. But it is the revolutionary period that saw the emergence and proliferation of writings following the revolution-plus-love formula. Liu (2003: 212) sees the revolution-plus-love formula as an attempt on the part of leftist writers, who are committed to proletarian literature, to “mix utopian desires with reality anxiety.”

Similarly, Haiyan Lee (2006: 256) attributes the rise of this literary genre to the radicalization of the intelligentsia in the 1920s, and their need—from both the left and right ends of the ideological spectrum—to reconcile the tension between “revolutionary fervor” and a “reluctance to relinquish the discourse of love.” One particular way of resolving this tension was to postpone love and subordinate the sexual relationship to the revolutionary agenda. However, as David Der-Wei Wang (2004: 91) observes, while some—such as writer Mao Dun—see revolution and love as in conflict, others—such as Jiang Guangci—see the dynamics between the two as part of a “coherent agenda through which the revolutionary subjectivity progresses from the domain of eros to that of polis.”

Literary historians believe that the heyday of the revolution-plus-love discourse was the post-1927 Revolutionary period. Although this discourse continued to inform leftist literature after that, it no longer retained the power to inspire and galvanize young people. Also, romantic love did not disappear in the post-1949 socialist literature, and the revolution-plus-love formula continued to evolve, albeit in various permutations. In Cai Xiang’s (2010) account, we see how Zhao Shuli, author of *Xiao Erhei’s Marriage* (小二黑结婚), transplanted the revolution-plus-love formula from the social space inhabited by urban, elite intelligentsia to a rural, peasant, and grassroots milieu. Here, revolution became synonymous with “turning the body” (翻身) and land reforms, and political stories often took the form of love stories (Cai, 2010: 147). Cai further observes that this framework for narrating romantic love greatly influenced the socialist fiction writing of the 1949–1966 period. While this may be true, in this particular figuration, only the “true love of the proletariat,” which puts

socialist values before private pleasure, is legitimate (Evans, 1997: 91). This formula was again to change during the period of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), during which period class struggle became the only narrative framework, and gender relations and individual affect were submerged beneath the theme of class identity, and portrayed only in ways that served the “repressive power of the revolutionary discourse” (Liu, 2003: 174).

It is therefore small wonder that, having emerged from the Cultural Revolution, Chinese writers, and the public in general, were eager to farewell revolution and reconnect with love. In the decades since the advent of economic reforms, during which time a split has emerged between official and market-oriented cultural expressions, public discourses have all but abandoned revolution except as a trope to be parodied and deconstructed (Liu, 2003). Expressions of sexuality, private pleasure, and individual desire have tended to come more or less exclusively from the market sector. These market narratives of love feature peasants and rural migrants only as figures that are antithetical to love: perpetrators of sex crimes, home wreckers, prostitutes. With the exception of Women’s Federation narratives that urge rural migrant women to become self-respecting and independent (Wanning Sun, 2004), official discourses have been largely at a loss as to how to construct love stories involving the peasant and the worker. The proletarian protagonist, it seems, is dead.

Poignantly, the more fervent the search for love, the more elusive it has proved to be. It has been widely asserted that the market economy has gone so far as to render genuine love impossible. As one cultural commentator in *新周刊* (New Weekly)—a leading chronicle of cultural trends in China—laments: “Love suffuses our Internet, dominates television dramas, and is dished up everywhere as chicken soup for the soul. But this linguistic excessiveness only highlights the fact that real love has vanished” (Sun Linlin, 2015). Hence the enormous challenge facing the state propaganda machine: on the one hand, it needs to restore people’s faith in the power of love; on the other hand, it must keep revolution out of the equation.

Considered against this historical backdrop, it is possible to see in the CCTV stories a decisive de-coupling of love and revolution. The trope of revolution has been demobilized, and replacing it is the indomitable force of the market—so much so that we can describe the current formula as “consumption plus love.” Subscribing to this new formula, the love stories in CCTV’s Grassroots Reports treat the lovers’ commitment to each other as synonymous with their commitment to realizing a consumerist goal. What we see here is a relocation of love from a revolutionary discourse to a market discourse, which also has the desired outcome of minimizing the possibility of a revolution. Thus, while the linking of consumption and love is informed by the logic of the market, the de-linking of revolution and love in the official discourse is motivated by political as well as economic considerations.

The new discourse of domestic utopia replaces the communist vision of the common good with a fantasy of domestic happiness and individual fulfillment via the pathway of consumption. However, despite this replacement of revolution with consumption, the CCP’s project of building a new moral culture still relies to a certain extent on mobilizational strategies that are often associated with the promotion of a communist utopia. A dimension of this utopian imagining, as evidenced in CCTV’s love stories, is a future-oriented optimism. The current material circumstances facing the five couples featured in the CCTV love stories are unsatisfactory, to say the least. Xiao Han has no means of providing Xiao Qing with a roof under which they can live as husband and wife. In fact, they even disagree about what to do after getting married. Zhang Qianqian, the CCTV reporter who produced “Xiao Han’s Wedding,” wrote in her field notes:

Fairytales usually end with the prince and princess living happily ever after, but reality is more precarious. Xiao Han and Xiao Qing in fact disagreed about their future. Xiao Han wanted to go back home and try to start a business; Xiao Qing wanted to stay in Shanghai and continue to *dagong* [work casually].

We decided to leave this tension in the story to make it look more realistic.

After all, we were not producing a fairy tale. (Zhang Qianqian, 2013)

Similarly, Qiu Guoying and Hao Ranran have saved enough money for a down payment on a flat, but the road toward paying off the mortgage is long and arduous—Qiu will spend all of his waking hours at work instead of being with his wife, and there may be many more meals consisting mainly of discarded cabbage.

The life that these individuals now face will be mostly drudgery and hardship, and it is only made bearable by their imagination of a better future. This way of envisioning the future provides a means of making sense of as well as coping with the present. For this reason, although CCTV did not set out to write a “fairy tale,” the news anchorman had this to say at the end of “Xiao Han’s Wedding”:

Xiao Qing is wearing a bridal veil, and she looks like a princess, but Xiao Han seems a bit nervous. Perhaps reality will present many more obstacles to them, but with love in their hearts, and with their hard work, they have a bright future ahead. (CCTV, 2013)

If utopia is the “temporal locus where the future and the present, hope and reality, are supposed to meet” (Ci, 1994: 221), then it is abundantly clear that today’s rural migrant workers are being invited to envision a domestic utopia.

Conclusion

This discussion has uncovered a new discursive blueprint according to which future state narratives of inequality may be constructed. It has also brought to light some new ways in which neoliberal restructuring of the fantasy of the good life takes place in China. But situating our analysis in a historical context, we are able to see that CCTV’s narrative is, very much like a bride’s outfit, a mixture of something old, something new, and something borrowed. What we see is not an ideology that arrived fully formed and made to last; rather,

we see a new ideology-in-the-making, with the Party actively exploring ways of improvising and innovating its genres of story-telling. When the Party encourages rural young people to defy their parents' traditional expectations about marriage compatibility, it seems, at first glance, to be contributing to "affective individualism" (Donner and Santos, 2016). But this official script of love is not about "delinking" intimacy from marriage, as is the tendency with urban educated young people in China (Farrer, 2014). Nor does it advocate the hedonistic values that market discourses of romance articulate (Zavoretti, 2016). Instead, it promotes a willingness to endure a frugal, if not ascetic, material life for the time being, in the hope of bringing about a happy future. But casting rural migrant individuals in the positive role of hopeful lovers enjoying romantic love despite hardships does more than just provide a corrective narrative to the widespread and worrying phenomenon among this cohort of casual or commodified sex, "shotgun weddings," high divorce rates, and "left-behind children," as has often been reported in the media and a number of research papers (e.g., Song and Li, 2015). The political usefulness of these stories does not end here. Rural migrants have been brought in to play the new protagonists in a politically useful love story, within a new normative framework for narrating the present, with a redefined and reconstituted trope of the future. What the state deems in need of correction is a widespread view of sex for pleasure that detaches itself from both responsibility and commitment. Also in need of correction is the prevalent idea that love is expensive and thus available only to those with the means to purchase it. From the point of view of the state, both scenarios run the risk of further entrenching and highlighting the consequences of socioeconomic stratification, leading to social tension and social instability.

As it stands, this discursive blueprint has several political objectives. It is, first and foremost, charged with the dual goal of lowering rural migrants' expectations about love and marital happiness, on the one hand, and fuelling a utopian consumerist dream, on the other.

Though almost impossible to achieve, this goal is intended to replace a prevailing sense of despair with a new sense of hope and optimism for the future. Instead of young rural migrant individuals being depicted as facing the “death of love,” faith in the power of love must be (re)instated as a motivating force behind individuals’ desire for self-improvement. Finally, while rural migrants’ desire to get married and start a family is being encouraged by the state, the passion it generates must be effectively and carefully channeled so that that it aids rather than undermines the political objective of stability maintenance. In other words, yet again, love has been repurposed to function as what Lee (2006) describes as a “discursive technology,” deployed to manage inequality in an increasingly stratified social order. If loving in the new normative way promotes social stability, enhances social harmony, and assists the political legitimation of the Party, then the Party must identify role models who demonstrate such love. Again, rural migrants are singled out to be such role models. In contrast to urban laid-off factory workers and the urban poor who are subsisting on social welfare (Solinger, 2010), rural migrants are often commended in official discourses for their hard work and entrepreneurship. In the case of the CCTV stories, while it is the job of the state’s propaganda workers to construct a normative love story, the task of performing the role of the authentic lover falls—once again—on the shoulders of the rural migrant.

This new normative framework for narrating love is built on the symbiotic relationship between affect and consumption—the twin engines of narrating a precarious present and projecting the fantasy of a happy life in the future. It aims to build and sustain hope, a key dimension of the Party’s political project of stability maintenance. In the CCTV stories, we see a shift of the temporal locus from the present to the future, and from an experienced reality to an imaginary one. The future, by definition, has not yet arrived, so it is up for grabs, and the CCTV stories offer a good example of how this imaginary space can be colonized. The more vague the future time span is, the more room there is for political

maneuvering. Xiao Han asks his fiancée to wait for five years. But, as my rural migrant interviewees remind us, there is a good chance that he will be unable to honor his promise, even though this may not be because of a lack of effort on his part.

As is clear from this discussion, rural migrant workers' moral agency shines through their capacity to bargain freely with these hegemonic messages, take what suits them, and reject what does not. On the one hand, they resonate with the lovers in the CCTV stories and express admiration for their courage, even though they are fully cognizant that these lovers have been hand-picked as role models in the state's propaganda. And they concur with the editorial message that comes with the love stories: happiness should be based on the strength of love, not on the size of one's wealth. On the other hand, my interviewees reject the Party's speech act of promise-making, given that such a promise does not come with concrete social and economic policies that are likely to make good on it. They also refuse to feel optimistic and make the necessary "affective adjustment," even though they carry on enduring their hardships as well as they can. Individuals from this disadvantaged community may fall in love in whatever circumstances they find themselves in, get married with or without a property or a betrothal gift, and do their best to pursue happiness, however they may understand that. And they may have varying degrees of success in these pursuits. Above all, however, they know that the state is interested in neither delivering them a similar level of privilege and entitlement to their urban professional counterparts, nor recouping a proletarian subject position. Thus, if one is required to look for hope and some cause for optimism, then the resilience and realism of this group may be the best place to start.

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Notes

- ¹ For a recent discussion of the diversity within this group, the politics of the naming of *nongmingong*, and the similarities and differences between this group and laid-off state factory workers and the urban poor, see Wanning Sun (2014).
- ² Foxconn is a Taiwanese-owned electronics manufacturer that has plants in various parts of China, with its plant in Shenzhen being the earliest and biggest. As China's biggest global factory and manufacturer of parts for Apple and other electronics companies, Foxconn employs young and mostly unmarried workers, most of them with rural *hukou* status. For discussions of labor conditions and Foxconn workers' experience with the industrial regime, see Chan and Pun (2010) and Selden, Pun, and Chan (2013).
- ³ I conducted these interviews as part of a larger, ongoing ethnographic project on the romantic experience of factory workers in the Pearl River Delta. From August to October 2015, I spent time with workers in the industrial complex of Longhua New District in Shenzhen, with a view to exploring how social inequality shapes their views on and experiences of romantic love and romantic consumption. During that period, I interviewed 25 workers at Foxconn, Shenzhen. These one-to-one interviews mostly lasted an hour and a half, often in the small, crowded rental rooms where workers lived, or occasionally in a café located in the residential areas of the industrial complex often described as a "village within the city." In October 2016 and 2017, I returned to the same site and conducted follow-up interviews with eight of these interviewees. I also maintain regular contact with these individuals via WeChat, the most popular social media platform in China.
- ⁴ As mentioned in the Introduction, my interest is not to produce an ethnography of workers' media consumption practices; readers who are interested in this topic can refer to my previous work (Wanning Sun 2014). Rather, I use these media texts primarily as an

interview strategy in order to circumvent some of the difficulties involved in talking about emotions and relationships in a research setting.

- ⁵ See Brandtstädter and Santos (2009) for a discussion of kinship in China and the persistence of homosocial ties in Chinese society.