

# 5

## Family Matters: Reconstructing the Family on the Chinese Television Screen

Shuyu Kong

Family is central to television soaps in the West. Not only does domestic space constitute the primary site for the majority of soap opera plots, but the melodramatic interwoven desires, troubles and joys of family life provide much of the content and rhythm of these TV dramas. This defining feature of Western soaps, however, does not necessarily apply to Chinese TV serial dramas, which originated from a very different narrative tradition and have developed a quite different social function from Western soaps within the sphere of contemporary life. Until the 1990s, narratives of social change and public events constituted the mainstream among Chinese television dramas dealing with contemporary life. Groundbreaking television dramas of the 1980s, such as *Eighteen Years in the Enemy Camp* (*Diying shi ba nian*, 1981), *New Star* (*Xinxing*, 1985), and *Plain-clothes Police* (*Bianyi jingcha*, 1987) all framed their stories within a much broader social space, be it revolutionary history, rural and urban social reforms, or law and social justice. Rarely did the more “secular” and private concerns of family life become their central subject matter.

The downplaying of family in Chinese TV drama during the 1980s was a residue of the socialist realism tradition — the direct result of a highly centralized and politicized national culture. From the late 1940s, the socialist state had sought to transform the national economy and culture, both through the reform of private property ownership and enterprise, and through appropriating and erasing private space from social imagination and artistic representation. With such a cultural legacy and narrative tradition of socialist

realism, it is not surprising that the personal sphere and domestic space of the family did not immediately become the central focus of Chinese television serial drama.

*Yearning* (*Kewang*), produced by the Beijing Television Arts Center (hereafter, BTAC) in 1990, was influential in many ways in the development of Chinese TV drama. Utilizing the concept of “indoor drama” (*shinei ju*), the fifty-episode *Yearning* was produced with limited resources and budget, and developed a new mode of commercialized production of television drama. *Yearning* also caused a paradigmatic shift in the evolution of Chinese television narrative by zooming in on family life and domestic space. Centered around the “intertwined lives, loves and tragedies of two families” and the tension between a young woman’s romantic relationship and her maternal love, the phenomenal popularity and success of *Yearning* lay in its effective borrowing of the format and conventions of family melodramas from other parts of the world,<sup>1</sup> including “coincidence of fate, hyperbolic figures, mysterious parentage, romance and tragedy, and the quintessential location in domestic space, as well as the symbolic construction of woman, the maternal and the feminine, through stories of desire, personal relations and daily family life.”<sup>2</sup>

Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, “family drama” steadily gained popularity. More and more TV dramas focused on family relationships and everyday experiences of individuals in contemporary urban family settings, resulting in a profusion of subgenres, among them “urban romances” (*dushi qinggan ju*), “family values dramas” (*jiating lunli ju*), and “dramas of urban ordinary folk” (*dushi pingmin ju*).<sup>3</sup> According to a recent industry survey, the *China TV Drama Market Report 2003–04* (*Zhongguo dianshiju shichang baogao 2003–04*), these subgenres rank very highly on the broadcast and reception ratings. For example, in 2002, what the report calls “urban life” (*dushi shenghuo*) dramas ranked second in broadcast ratings (16.5 percent) and third in reception (12.1 percent), coming just after crime dramas (20.7 percent and 19.4 percent respectively). And ordinary folk dramas ranked fifth, with broadcast and reception ratings of 8 percent and 8.2 percent respectively.<sup>4</sup> Unlike crime and costume dramas, both of which achieved sudden success mainly due to expensive marketing campaigns and the political controversy surrounding their subject matter, family dramas have been less dependent on such external factors. Hence, the consistent and growing popularity of these family subgenres clearly demonstrates the deep and broad appeal of family issues among Chinese audiences today. So much so that Yin Hong, a Chinese film and TV critic, in a recent study of the general characteristics of Chinese TV drama, claims that family stories dealing with mundane quotidian concerns have become the core subject matter (*hexin tica*), and this thematic

preference has directly affected the aesthetic experience of viewing Chinese TV dramas.<sup>5</sup>

So if family has become such an important trope in representing contemporary lives, what kinds of families are articulated in Chinese soap operas? How has family drama responded to the recent changes in Chinese society? How are different social agencies involved in constructing family in Chinese TV dramas? And what ideological and social functions does this construction of family serve? In the rest of this chapter, I will discuss the representation of contemporary urban families in recent Chinese TV drama and how this new discourse of domestic space is implicated with gender issues, class concerns, and state ideology. By examining the rise and acceptance of the “domestic space” in television culture and public discourse, I will argue that Chinese family drama has opened up a cultural forum for various social groups and ideological agents to make sense of dramatic social changes and to address the everyday emotional concerns of Chinese viewers.

### Urban Romances and Women

Among television dramas that depict contemporary family life, a substantial number deal with love and marriage in the urban middle-class family. Some of these “urban romances” depict new forms of sexual relationships and family values evolving among young and fashionable urban Chinese. Well-received works include *Live Life to the Limit* (*Guoba yin*, 1993), *Sunrise in the East, Rain in the West* (*Dongbian richu xibian yu*, 1995), *Love Comes First* (*Rang ai zuo zhu*, 2001) and *Gallery of Passion and Love* (*Qing'ai hualang* 2004). Others explore the collapse of family relationships and moral dilemmas facing the middle-aged. In this category we find  *Holding Hands* (*Qianshou*, 1999), *Coming and Going* (*Lilai wangwang*, 1999), *Ten Years of Married Life* (*Jiehun shi nian*, 2003), and *Chinese Style Divorce* (*Zhongguo shi lihun*, 2004). Still others focus particularly on women’s self-identity and growth in the context of their romantic and family relationships, such as *Lipstick* (*Kouhong*, 2000), *Mirror* (*Kong jingzi*, 2002), *Empty House* (*Kong fangzi*, 2004), and *Romantic Affairs* (*Langman de shi*, 2004).

This overt preoccupation with romantic and family relationships in TV dramas clearly reflects peoples’ concerns about the impact of urban social transformation on the personal and familial level. During the 1980s and 1990s, Chinese society experienced enormous changes caused by the economic reforms and the government’s “open door” policy. One obvious effect of these changes on ordinary families has been the destabilization of the

institution of marriage and the breakdown of family life in urban China. The deterioration of the traditional family structure, coupled with more social mobility and “contemporary” moral values which prize individualism and materialism, have placed great strains on ordinary Chinese families. The fragile foundations of the contemporary Chinese family based on revolutionary socialist ideas have made it even more vulnerable to the various temptations and challenges of an increasingly materialistic and individualistic society. As a result, many urban Chinese families have endured relationship crises in the last two decades. Rising divorce rates, an increase in extramarital affairs, and the revival of illegal sexual practices such as prostitution and concubinage are symptomatic of these crises.<sup>6</sup> They are a frequent topic of media commentary, and — not surprisingly — they provide the recurring plot motifs of television dramas too.

Another factor that has directly contributed to the emergence of the urban romance subgenre is the major impact of women writers.<sup>7</sup> Drawing on their personal experiences and sensitivity to women’s issues and family relationships, many women writers, including Chi Li, Zhang Kangkang, Tie Ning, Pi Pi, Wang Hailing, and Wan Fang, have chosen to set the majority of their works against the backdrop of marriage and family crises in urban society. Their sensitive depiction of the emotional upheavals and struggles of ordinary Chinese women within a rapidly changing society have won a loyal following among urban readers. With the conscious promotion and cultivation of these women writers by commercial publishers — a typical example being the popular Cloth Tiger Series of Urban Romances by Chunfeng Publishing House<sup>8</sup> — these works have created a new subgenre of “middle brow” romantic fiction. The popularity of these women writers’ fiction subsequently led to adaptations of their works into TV dramas, and in several cases, to new works written specially for television.<sup>9</sup>

The name “urban romance” may conjure up a slightly misleading impression however, as a substantial number of TV dramas dealing with love and marriage in urban middle-class families are not “romantic” in the traditional sense. Mirroring the reality of moral collapse and unstable human relationships in a rapidly changing and greatly confused society, the family lives and sexual relationships represented in these TV dramas are often full of turmoil and tension, mid-life crises, extramarital affairs and marriage breakups.

*Holding Hands* and *Chinese Style Divorce*, by the female screenwriter Wang Hailing, are typical of this subgenre. Compared by some commentators to a Chinese version of *Kramer v. Kramer*, these two serial dramas depict the bleak sexual relationships and breakdown of seemingly perfect middle-class

professional families. Unlike the family tragedies caused by political persecution or social disasters in previous Chinese literature and cinema, the family crises in these TV dramas arise from stressful work situations, “trivial” everyday conflicts, and unfulfilled sexual and emotional desires.

The husbands in these two serials, one of whom is a computer engineer and the other a doctor, have to pursue more highly paid jobs in order to improve their living conditions and get ahead in a competitive environment. Though initially committed to their marriages, work pressures and other distractions soon cause them to lose interest in their families. At the same time, their wives are also torn between work and family. But after they choose to give up their own careers to support their husbands and children, they find that they have lost not only economic independence but also their self-identity and confidence, especially when their husbands find success in their careers and begin extramarital affairs with younger women who seem happy to admire their achievements. The estranged marriage relationships deteriorate into hostility and endless fighting, and eventually the men flee their families, leaving the wives with not only broken marriages but also broken selves.

There is a unique feminine perspective and sensibility in the articulation of sexual and family relationships in these TV dramas. While not lacking sympathy for the mid-life crises and high pressures that Chinese men face in an increasingly competitive society, these dramas pay much greater attention to the middle-aged female characters torn between their careers and families, and struggling to reconcile all the conflicting demands that family and society throw at them. As a result, they directly address many of the pressing issues and concerns specific to women in a transforming society. Both Xia Xiaoxue in *Holding Hands* and Lin Xiaofeng in *Chinese Style Divorce* represent the dilemma of intellectual and seemingly independent women who have grown up in “New China”: the contradictory and double standards demanded of women in China’s puritan socialist-turned-capitalist consumer society make them suddenly vulnerable and confused. Despite being highly educated and employable, deep-rooted social conventions and their own self-imposed conception of “woman’s virtue and duties” cause them to sacrifice their own interests for the sake of their husbands and families. In addition, growing up in an “ungendered” revolutionary society has also left them insensitive to the emotional and sexual needs of their husbands, and ignorant of their own sexual natures, which often puts them at a disadvantage compared with younger women. Their sense of insecurity, especially their sexual inadequacy in a society where sex appeal has again become important, is most intensely demonstrated in their marital relationships, as they face hostility and betrayal from their own husbands.

These urban romances are particularly successful in capturing the inner emotional world of the female characters with great sympathy and sensitivity. The anger, confusion, frustration, jealousy and even hysteria of middle-aged women are convincingly built up, episode by episode, ultimately reaching crisis point. In some dramas, the crisis can become a catalyst for revelations about self-identity and the meaning of intimate relationships — and frequently an opportunity for inner growth, personal development and independence (both financial and spiritual) beyond the bonds of family. In *Lipstick* the main female character Jiang Xiaoge undergoes a transformation from a dependent, naïve and weak wife to a mature, strong-headed and successful female entrepreneur. In *Empty House*, two divorced women form a strong sisterhood to support and console each other through difficult times, and finally realize that happiness comes from being true to themselves rather than constantly trying to meet other people's expectations.

Thus, although Chinese TV drama, unlike Western soap opera, lacks a separate “women's tradition,” the emerging subgenre of urban romances has opened up a gendered space to portray many of the problems and concerns facing women in Chinese society today. Despite their sometimes over-idealistic endings, these dramas provide consolation for viewers and a sense of social bonding with other women going through a similar difficult transition within capitalist-consumer society.

### Family Values Drama and Drama of Ordinary Folk

Besides the crisis of urban middle-class families and the dilemmas of middle-aged career women, another substantial concern of TV drama in recent years has been the everyday family lives of common people, or “ordinary folk” (*putong baixing* or *pingmin*). In particular since the late 1990s, urban working classes, retirees, and the unemployed have displaced some of the glamorous images of upwardly mobile groups — the successful business managers and “public relations girls” that previously crowded the TV screen in the mid-1990s.<sup>10</sup> These dramas of ordinary folk, which overlap to a large extent with another subgenre called “family values dramas,” are often centered on materially poor families in urban settings, and vividly portray their mundane and difficult daily lives. The style is distinctively naturalistic too: they are often shot against very plain, even ugly, scenic backdrops and interior sets, with minimal performing by the actors. Providing a drastic contrast with the dramatic and fast-paced police/crime stories and glossy cosmopolitan “white collar” urban dramas (see Chapter 7, for instance), this new subgenre has

quietly and steadily won loyalty among ordinary Chinese viewers, who can closely relate to the characters and events portrayed.

*Garrulous Zhang Damin's Happy Life* (*Pinzui Zhang Damin de xingfu shenghuo*, 2000, hereafter, *Happy Life*) exemplifies the narrative style. Originally a popular novel by Beijing writer Liu Heng, *Happy Life* portrays a poor urban family of seven living in a single cramped room in a back-lane courtyard (*da za yuan*) in Beijing. The main character is Zhang Damin, the oldest brother in this extended family. With the burdens of looking after his family — an elderly mother who develops Alzheimer's, and four siblings who frequently demand material and financial support — coupled with his unsatisfactory job as a factory worker who later becomes unemployed when the state factory goes bankrupt and shuts down, Zhang Damin is not the most attractive candidate for a “happy life.” The story revolves around Zhang's constant struggle to find space for all the family in their cramped home and somehow keep the household going. The everyday troubles of most ordinary urban Chinese left behind by the reforms are realistically depicted and the often black humorous survival strategies developed by Zhang Damin to deal with his extreme poverty produce a tragicomic effect. The enthusiastic response of the novel's readers led to it being adapted several times: into a film comedy, a stage play, a local opera (*pingju*), and the television series.

The TV series was particularly successful, not only winning official recognition (receiving the Golden Eagle Award for best TV program and the Propaganda Ministry's Five Ones Project Award) but also becoming one of the highest rated TV dramas of 2000, especially in Beijing and Northern China.

The TV series retains the basic storyline of the original work, and by taking advantage of the extended serial form, it is able to vividly capture the quotidian details of everyday Beijing life. The narrow back lanes of the Beijing courtyard ghetto, the cramped and shabby room of the family, and the dusty streets and cheap restaurants all create a realistic environment and atmosphere with which ordinary viewers can immediately identify. Each episode deals with yet another struggle for the family with their limited resources: how to share a bedroom between two couples at night; how to find more funds for a small start-up business; how to obtain money to feed a newborn baby and then locate a good daycare center so that the parents can go back to work; or how to share the duties of looking after fading elders. At the center of the entangled relationships between siblings and different generations, with their trivial arguments, little tricks and power struggles, stands the sad but also resilient figure of Zhang Damin. He is constantly challenged to find ingenious methods to make the family's scarce resources go further, but he manages

somehow to retain his optimism and humor to deal with the bleak realities of poverty.

The success of Zhang's characterization and the serial as a whole largely stems from the vibrant and humorous dialogue inherited from the original novel. Full of local flavor, the dialogue complements the earthy street life scenes, and its down-to-earth wit and black humor shows the characters coming to terms with the difficulties and trivial dilemmas of their life situation. This quality is best captured by the performance in the title role of Liang Guanhua, a veteran stage actor from Beijing People's Arts Theater.

Following the success of *Happy Life*, critics were quick to label its approach the "common person style" (*pingmin fengge*) and a whole group of works in this vein followed, including hits such as *Eldest Brother* (*Dage*, 2002), *Mirror* and *Mother-in-Law* (*Popo*, 2004). These ordinary folk TV dramas altered the aesthetic style of Chinese serials, and have contributed greatly to the emergence of what has been termed a "common style" (*pingmin fengge*) or "documentary style" (*xieshi fengge*) in Chinese TV drama as a whole. These dramas present intimate narratives of human relationships in everyday surroundings, with plain and simple story lines and very few scenes of high suspense or melodrama. Their shooting and performances are also realistic, even naturalistic in style, almost like "fly on the wall" documentaries. This approach to production contrasts drastically with the big-budget spectacles of recent Chinese cinema, which are obviously inspired by Hollywood blockbusters. The plain style simply reinforces the sense that TV drama has become primarily an entertainment and leisure activity of the common people.

The common folk subgenre conspicuously reflects a populism that has recently emerged in the popular culture industry, and reveals the effect of class stratification on cultural production and consumption due to China's market economic reforms. While the internet and cinema, with their higher entry costs, have become popular among the middle, upwardly mobile classes — the affluent "white collar" techies, intellectuals and college students — television drama, which up to the early 1990s had appealed to a range of different viewers,<sup>11</sup> has more recently become increasingly attuned to the true "mass audience." According to one survey in 2002, TV audiences now primarily comprise viewers of lower educational levels, females, the middle-aged and the elderly, and the economically less affluent.<sup>12</sup> Television in China is cheap and easily accessible (a monthly fee for satellite or cable TV costs only RMB 10 or so), and as a result, it has become the ideal leisure and entertainment activity for less privileged, less mobile audiences, such as retirees or the unemployed. Television production and investment companies have

been quick to recognize this social change, and have responded with new series aimed specifically at this audience demographic.

Dramas about ordinary folk not only attract the loyalty of broad demographics, but they are also a very safe card to play politically. Clearly the writers and producers of these dramas have recognized the emotional anxieties faced by the less well-off in an increasingly aggressive and individualistic society where morals and family values, whether traditional or socialist, have collapsed. To assuage this anxiety, common folk dramas offer a conformist view of family and family relationships, and therefore satisfy the emotional needs of their mass audience for a warmer and more stable representation of human relationships than they experience in real life. Not surprisingly, many of these dramas are concerned with moral issues, as they directly address how family relationships and values are threatened by an increasingly individualistic and materialistic society. Filial duties, in-law relationships, parental responsibilities, and maintenance of family harmony in an extended family are constantly recurring themes. The many difficulties faced by the central families lead to frequent ethical dilemmas and moral conflicts. Yet more often than not, the resolution of these conflicts promotes a more traditional and conservative moral outlook in which harmony and stability prevail.

A noteworthy feature of many of these dramas is the idealized woman character, who embodies the virtues of kindness, hard work, tolerance and good sense, and who puts her own interests last in order to maintain the harmony of the family unit. She is a combination of the traditional Confucian ideal of the "virtuous wife and good mother" (*xianqi liangmu*) and the self-denying "socialist morality" of Lei Feng. The obvious precedent for this character type was Liu Huifang in *Yearning*, but similar kinds of female characters appear in several recent series such as *Mother-in-Law* and *Eldest Sister* (*Dajie*, 2004).

Whether intentionally or not, the relatively conservative aesthetics and moral values of ordinary folk dramas tie in with the mainstream state ideology of "social stability" and building a "harmonious society," and this might explain at least partially the official recognition and promotion of dramas like *Happy Life* and *Mother in Law*.<sup>13</sup> While many other TV drama genres, such as anti-corruption or crime dramas, re-made red classics, and even some costume dramas, have challenged the legitimacy of the communist government by touching on sensitive political issues, and therefore faced suppression and attacks in the official press,<sup>14</sup> ordinary folk dramas have easily received approval from the official censors, and have won frequent praise from critics. This subgenre has thus managed to satisfy both the emotional

needs of the mass TV audience and the political demands of cultural officials, a necessary balancing act for all successful cultural products in contemporary China.

### Nation and Family in Main Melody TV Drama: *Year after Year*

As family drama has steadily won over TV audiences and addressed their emotional needs, the state has also attempted to appropriate the discourse of family to present its own agenda.<sup>15</sup> More recently, as state legitimacy and its reform discourse have been challenged from all sides due to social problems and serious inequalities arising from the economic reforms, the government has actively sought to take advantage of the trend by producing its own “main melody family TV dramas” as mouthpieces to justify and make sense of the difficult social changes that are taking place.

One such example is the 21-episode TV drama *Year after Year* (*Yinian you yinian*, 1999), made specifically for the occasion of the 50th anniversary celebrations of the People’s Republic in 1999. The producer BTAC drew on its top human resources and best crew and its production enjoyed a high priority and a generous budget. In early 1999, the serial was broadcast during prime time on Beijing Television’s Channel 2 and was relayed by many other provincial and municipal stations. It was commended by the Propaganda Department as one of the ten best 50th anniversary celebration works and won many official awards, including the Five Ones Project Award.

On the surface, *Year after Year* follows the typical recent Chinese TV drama trend of focusing on the family and everyday life. The story portrays the personal lives and relationships of two extended and interrelated families in Beijing over the two decades from 1978: the Chens, who represent ordinary citizens living in a typical traditional courtyard (*siheyuan*) shared by many families, and the Lins, who represent the elite and educated class living in a gated villa. Although these two families are loosely connected by a long courtship and subsequent failed marriage between Chen Huan and Lin Pingping, their true function is as foils for the public events that occur “year after year,” and it is the passing of time and historical events that are the real focus of the drama.

The narrative device that this drama exploits to insert the official reform discourse into the domestic story of the serial is the clever use of a chronicle structure. Claimed by the producers to be “a chronicle of ordinary people, and annals of local (Beijing) life” (*wei baixing li zhuan, wei difang xie zhid*),<sup>16</sup> the serial devotes one episode to each of the twenty-one years of reform

history from 1978 to 1999. Each episode records the activities of the two families’ members in the chosen year.

For viewers familiar with the history of the last two decades, these episodes conspicuously cover all the major social events and trends that emerged from the political and economic reforms by inscribing them into the everyday lives of the Chen and Lin families. These include: the revival of university entrance exams after the Cultural Revolution; the introduction of the responsibility system in the countryside; the rapid inflation and panic buying during the early 1980s; the strange and often corrupt phenomenon of government officials going into business; young people going abroad to seek their fortunes; the stock craze; foreign investment and real estate development; the unemployment of state factory workers and the rise of private entrepreneurship. In fact, while preparing the script, Li Xiaoming, the veteran screenwriter who penned *Yearning* ten years before, claims to have drawn inspiration and material from reading *Beijing Daily* — the mouthpiece of the Beijing government — page by page, and making several books of notes and clippings.<sup>17</sup>

Thus, in this epic serial, the “everyday lives” of ordinary people are not introduced to get viewers to focus on individuals; rather, the characters are created to embody the national history and associated public events that reflect the progress of economic and political reform led by the Communist Party. As a result, these everyday lives and experiences are heavily selective and edited based on the criterion of “national importance”. And the individual families here merely serve as a microcosm of a nation on the move. This is a marked contrast with the more individualistic approach of the other family drama genres that we discussed above.

Because of this pre-designed theme and purpose, it is not surprising that the characters in *Year after Year* ostensibly represent the different groups or “types” that emerged from the social stratification and restructuring engendered by reforms. Their social relations, economic status, educational background, and their attitudes and opinions toward Deng Xiaoping’s reforms merely confirm the social identities they have been given. We can find almost every type in these two families: the Chens’ father works as a film projectionist in a local theater, a model worker of the older generation; the Chens’ mother is a warm-hearted but sharp-tongued housewife; older daughter Chen Qing is a state factory worker who later, after being laid off, starts her own community service company; her husband Dahai is a private entrepreneur who sells all kinds of goods, from clothes to furniture; the son Chen Huan continues to teach in a university as an economics professor after graduating. In the Lin family, the father is a retired high official who strongly supports

the reforms; the Lins' mother is a senior literary editor; the son Yida works as a junior government official and later becomes the business manager of a state-owned company, his wife Chaoying starts out as a cook from a provincial town who eventually finds success by running a restaurant business; and the Lins' daughter Pingping goes abroad to study, later returning as a representative of a foreign company.

Being typical representatives of the different social groups in Chinese society, the characters' comments, opinions and attitudes toward the government reform project are also designed to "represent" the views and different voices of their types. For example, in the episode 1983, the Chen family experiences the government's increases in the prices of essential goods and the subsequent panic buying throughout the country. We see a scene where the radio announces the government's open price policy, and the Chen family members, especially the housewife mother, react with confusion, distrust, and complaints, and they immediately rush out to stock up on supplies. But the son Chen Huan, who is conveniently cast as an economics professor, explains to them how the adjustment of prices is a way to stimulate the economy, and in the long run it will benefit ordinary people like themselves. And as the story proceeds, supply increases and the prices stabilize, and the once confused characters finally see the point of the reform. Of course, the differing voices have been moderated in such a manner that they never develop into an alternative or oppositional discourse, but rather complement and interpret the mainstream voice, often represented by the radio and TV news that are inserted skillfully into the everyday scenes, and legitimate the state ideology of reform. The constant refrain is that, despite many frustrations, difficulties and problems, the reform project has eventually brought China into a new and prosperous era, and things can only get better from now on.

The narrative and visual devices that are used to construct and support the chronicle format in *Year after Year* are abundant. Overall there is a realistic, documentary feel to the production, which is liberally sprinkled with archival footage and reports from various media of past years. The live recording and naturalistic performances also contribute to this sense of documentary. Carefully researched domestic arrangements, decorations and passing fashions, radio and television news broadcasts, film clips, and popular songs appear in each episode as appropriate to the year being described. These details not only give the audience an illusion of their shared history and effectively evoke emotional identification with the story; but also, just as important, they give opportunities to insert the official or mainstream ideology, embodied in the media and public events of the time. Also, unlike many TV dramas which tend to use medium-length and close-up shooting to focus on personal

relationships, *Year after Year* unusually uses numerous long shots to establish the panoramic sense of history and national scale, even when the main part of the scene is in a domestic setting. The establishing shot for each episode best represents this panoramic perspective: It starts with a broad city view of Beijing as a growing and changing landscape, and gradually focuses on the smaller scale of neighborhoods, finally moving into the courtyard where the Chens live, as stereotypical microcosms of China's social reforms.

## Conclusion

For centuries, the basic social and ethical unit of the family has been central to and constitutive of the nation and state in Chinese culture. From Confucian teachings to socialist propaganda, the interchangeable and interdependent relationship between *guo* and *jia* (the family/nation or family/state) has been repeatedly exploited by those in power. In the socialist discourse that prevailed during the Maoist period, the individual private family was totally subordinated and eventually erased by the demands of the collective nation/state, and this was clearly reflected in the suspicion directed toward private relationships in cultural products of that time.

The collapse of the socialist economic system and ideology and the emergence of an individualistic consumer society during the 1980s and 1990s led to a new perspective on family. As we have seen, TV drama of the last two decades has increasingly reflected this renewed popular fascination with domestic space and familial experience after a long period of neglect. The centrality of the family and family relationships in TV drama not only reacts against the previous socialist discourse but also reflects and responds to the deep impact of recent social changes on this most basic human relationship. As real-life families increasingly succumb to the pressures of contemporary life, breaking apart under the strains of unemployment, social mobility and materialism, imaginary television families become still more important by providing a sense of solidarity and emotional identification for ordinary viewers.

At the same time, TV family dramas have also diversified into a variety of subgenres that focus on distinct audiences and articulate the views of different social agents. While urban romances largely represent the female point of view, especially that of middle-aged married women, the renewed interest in mundane life seen in ordinary folk and family values dramas clearly resonates with the poor, the unemployed, the retired, and all those left behind by the economic reforms. Thus, we see the cultural imagination, and more

practically, the newly-commercialized cultural industries, registering the effects of social stratification and growing inequalities in China's post-socialist society.

While the state's cultural bureaucracy has retreated well into the background in most of these new family subgenres, we still occasionally see its influence even at this most personal and private level. Official awards tend to go to those commercial TV dramas that promote conservative family values and thus accord with the government's vision of social stability within change. And alongside their commercial TV dramas, the state-controlled TV production centers must continue to produce main melody dramas that use screen families to subtly disseminate the official ideology of historical progress and continuing economic reform.

Television family drama thus involves diverse social agencies and agendas, and appeals to a range of different audiences. It creates a complex narrative that both reflects the wrenching social changes and class stratification occurring in China today and at the same time attempts to make sense of those changes, especially for those who feel they have been left behind.

## 6

### Maids in the Televisual City: Competing Tales of Post-Socialist Modernity

Wanning Sun

Chinese television dramas over the past few decades have seen the rise and decline of various narratives: stories of successful entrepreneurs, stories of Chinese going to live overseas, anti-corruption political drama, crime and police drama, not to mention epic historical dramas reinterpreting Chinese historical figures and events. None of these, however, quite captures the imagination of urban residents as vividly as narratives of ordinary people living mundane lives in their homes on an everyday basis. And no other narratives speak to the emerging urban middle-class's fear and anxiety about the urban "other" more palpably than the stories of the maid. For the first time since the founding of the PRC, the relaxing of the *hukou* system unleashed massive rural-to-urban migration, which has permanently and profoundly changed the streetscape of the Chinese city as well as the habitat of its residents.<sup>1</sup> The insertion of the liminal but ubiquitous figure of the "stranger" and "foreigner" into various intimate crevices and interstices of urban space brings both uncertainty and fear for both the local resident and the migrant, albeit for different reasons. In spite of her low socio-economic status, the figure of the maid has become perennial precisely because of the liminal nature of her existence. Confronted with mobility — both physical and social — questions of social identity naturally become inevitable: Who am I? What have I become? Where do I belong? And the anthropological impulse to gaze upon, to know, the "natives" among us, and to document "our" experience of dealing with "them," becomes all the more urgent.

In other words, the ongoing fascination with the maid in the popular