

# Conditional Female Agency in Chinese Media: Intersecting Gender, Class, and Consumerism

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**Abstract:** Post-socialist China provides a paradoxical context for women, where economic independence is promoted even as traditional gender norms endure, shaped by class stratification and consumerist values. Drawing on intersectional feminist theories (Crenshaw, McRobbie, Banet-Weiser), this paper analyses the 2017 TV series *The First Half of My Life* by tracing protagonist Luo Zijun's transformation from dependent housewife to "independent" professional through character dialogue, visual semiotics of costume and setting, and cultural context. The analysis shows how the series frames female empowerment through neoliberal ideals of consumption, professional self-reinvention, and class-based mobility, while Zijun's apparent success remains profoundly conditional. Her ascent depends on class privilege and elite social capital, which undercuts the narrative of self-made agency. Juxtaposing Zijun with her professional friend and working-class sister further reveals how patriarchal expectations cut across class, while meaningful upward mobility remains tied to elite networks. Overall, the study argues that the series simultaneously critiques patriarchy and endorses commodified, consumer-driven notions of empowerment, challenging simplistic empowerment narratives and demonstrating how female agency in contemporary Chinese media is shaped by class-based conditions.

**Keywords:** Intersectional feminism, Female empowerment, Chinese media, Gender, Class, Consumerism

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## 1. Introduction

The 2017 television adaptation *The First Half of My Life* (《我的前半生》), based on Yi Shu's novel, became one of the most widely discussed Chinese dramas of the year, generating high ratings and sustained debate on platforms such as Weibo and Douban. The series achieved strong cultural resonance at a time when debates about gender equality and female independence were intensifying in urban China. The protagonist Luo Zijun (罗子君), a full-time wife pushed into the workforce after her divorce, became a symbol for many viewers of the precarious conditions faced by many middle-class women navigating conflicting expectations of tradition, professionalism, and self-realisation.

This paper adopts an intersectional feminist framework to examine how *The First Half of My Life* depicts women's agency in post-socialist China. Following Crenshaw's (1989) insight that gender, class, and other social positions intersect to shape lived experiences, the analysis situates Zijun's personal trajectory within broader shifts in state policy, workplace structures, and emerging consumer culture.

Under socialist and early reform-era policies encouraged women to participate in paid work and promoted formal gender equality, yet research shows that women were still expected to carry the primary burden of domestic labour (Evans, 2008). Market reforms intensified these contradictions. Scholars argue that post-socialist culture encourages women to express femininity, social status and desirability through consumption (Rofel, 2007; Friedman, 2005), while the rise of the middle-class "full-time wife" links a woman's value to marriage and lifestyle rather than independent income (Fincher, 2014). These combined pressures of family duty, market-shaped femininity and class aspiration form the background to Zijun's move from dependence to only limited autonomy. The series is therefore read as a cultural text that shows how her agency is structured and constrained by classed and gendered expectations, and what this reveals about the meaning of "empowerment" for urban Chinese women.

## 2. Classed Femininity, Consumerism and the Limits of Empowerment

The series presents women's lives in post-socialist urban China as shaped by the intersection of gender and class. Zijun's early life shows how a comfortable middle-class position can still limit women's agency. In the first episode, her clothes, shoes and accessories clearly mark her as a woman from an upper-middle-class background: she wears expensive heels and carries luxury bags, and her make-up and styling are always carefully done. She spends much of her time on beauty routines, shopping and meeting friends. This lifestyle gives her symbolic status but weak practical power. She appears elegant and successful, but because she depends on her husband's income and has left paid work, she has little control over her future.

Zijun's behaviour recalls Skeggs' (1997) argument that femininity is not only a set of personal traits, but a classed project of "becoming respectable", in which women use ways of behaving, dressing and living to gain

moral and social value according to middle-class norms. In front of her friends, she adopts a proud and superior manner, looks down on the simple food they have, and claims that she has eaten “much better” things. Before her divorce, she spends much of her time in luxury stores and beauty salons. She believes that maintaining her appearance will secure both her marriage and social status, which is an example of what Gill (2007) calls “aesthetic labour”. She even draws attention to the cost and delicacy of her luxury shoes, saying that “these shoes cost more than 6,000 yuan; they’re lambskin soles and will be ruined if they touch water”, to signal the amount of aesthetic labour and investment required to maintain her appearance. She also posts polished family photos with her husband and child on social media to gain “likes” and curate a supposedly enviable life. Through these acts, Zijun performs a respectable, caring, beautiful wife-mother role that displays her family’s middle-class status.

Zijun’s close friend Tang Jing is also a woman from the upper-middle class, yet she lives out this class position in a very different way. While Zijun embodies the “full-time wife” ideal in China’s new middle class, Jing is a senior corporate professional who builds her status through work rather than marriage. She is competent, independent and well paid, but her success depends on long hours, constant self-discipline and emotional strain. She has to work harder than her male colleagues to keep her position and manage the pressures of leadership. The contrast between the two women shows that class privilege does not remove gender inequality; instead, it determines how that inequality is experienced. Both women benefit from upper-middle-class resources, but their agency remains conditional: Zijun’s respectability is built on economic dependence and leaves her highly vulnerable when her marriage ends, while Jing’s autonomy is secured at the cost of overwork and persistent pressure.

The series also links women’s agency to consumerism and bodily self-management through Tang Jing’s image. As a professional woman, Jing adopts a clearly “professional” style: her clothing is simpler and more tailored than Luo Zijun’s, her behaviour is more controlled, and her appearance is carefully managed. She looks confident and powerful, and the series presents her as a model of modern, independent womanhood. However, this professional image also depends on access to fashion, services and social networks that are only available to women with a certain level of class privilege. In this way, the series suggests that empowerment is achieved not only through work but also through performing the “right” look and lifestyle. This reinforces a model of conditional agency that is shaped by gender norms and by unequal access to class-based resources.

Zijun’s sister, Luo Ziqun, serves as a counterpoint that illuminates the class-conditioned limits of female agency. She marries “down” into a family with limited economic resources and lives under constant financial pressure. Their mother repeatedly criticises her choice, especially in comparison with Zijun’s earlier marriage into comfort, highlighting how class status shapes women’s perceived success. Ziqun’s low income, childcare responsibilities and lack of alternatives mean she cannot easily leave her husband, even when the marriage is unhappy. Her situation shows how women with fewer class resources have even less room to manoeuvre: their agency is constrained not only by gendered expectations of being a “good” wife and mother, but also by the structural limits imposed by poverty and dependence (Crenshaw, 1989).

The series also shows Ziqun performing intense emotional labour for her family, managing conflicts, supporting her husband and caring for her child, which are forms of “hidden work” that remain unpaid and largely unrecognised (Hochschild, 2019). Unlike Zijun, she has little access to consumer goods or a polished middle-class lifestyle through which to claim a sense of empowerment. Viewed alongside her sister, Ziqun makes visible another face of conditional agency: while Luo’s class privilege allows a temporary, consumption-driven sense of security that later collapses, Ziqun experiences structural constraints from the outset. Together, their stories illustrate how Chinese media imagines female agency as always shaped and limited by the intersecting forces of gender, class and, crucially, unequal access to consumerist forms of “empowerment”.

When Zijun’s marriage ends, the middle-class femininity she has performed as a full-time wife is exposed as fragile; without independent income or recent work experience, the security once provided by her husband’s salary quickly turns into economic risk. Her difficulty re-entering the labour market shows how gendered expectations that wives should withdraw from paid work can leave women unable to support themselves, even in an urban context that promotes images of modern equality. Luo’s move into a corporate office marks the start of a partial recovery of agency but also reveals what Acker (1990) calls “gendered organisations”: workplaces that appear meritocratic yet are structured around masculine norms of uninterrupted careers, long hours and constant availability. In several scenes, senior posts are held mainly by men, and Zijun is questioned about her years spent “just” as a housewife and pressured to work overtime despite her family responsibilities. These interactions link her personal struggle to broader patterns in Chinese corporate culture, where women

returning from marriage or motherhood must adapt to rules built around male life courses rather than reshaping those rules.

### 3. Conclusion

This paper has argued that *The First Half of My Life* offers a striking example of conditional female agency in post-socialist Chinese media, where women's choices are structured by the intersecting forces of gender, class and consumer culture. By tracing Luo Zijun's movement from full-time wife to professional worker alongside the contrasting trajectories of Tang Jing and Luo Ziqun, the analysis shows how middle-class femininity is both enabled and tightly constrained by class privilege, gendered family norms and the gendered organisation of corporate work. For feminist media studies and Chinese cultural studies, this case study demonstrates the value of an intersectional framework for reading popular drama not simply as "empowering" or "patriarchal", but as a contradictory site where neoliberal ideals of self-reinvention and consumerist "choice" coexist with enduring structural inequalities. Although the series appears to celebrate female independence, its narratives of success rely on access to elite networks, respectable appearance and forms of marketable bodily discipline, while leaving intact the social arrangements that render most women's autonomy precarious. By foregrounding these tensions, the conclusion returns to the core argument: that the women in *The First Half of My Life* do not exercise full or unfettered agency, but rather a conditional agency: one that emerges within, and is continually constrained by, the intersecting structures of gender, class and consumerist norms in contemporary Chinese media culture.

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