SCIENTIFIC CULTURE

www.sci-cult.com

SCIENTIFIC CULTURE, Vol. 12, No. 1.1, (2026), pp. 3311-3324
Open Access. Online & Print

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.121126241

MAKING THE MALE PUBLIC SERVANT DESIRABLE AGAIN: RECONFIGURING NEO-SOCIALIST SUBJECTIVITY IN CHINESE IDOL DRAMAS

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Received: 05/08/2025
Accepted: 23/01/2026

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the reconfiguration of "neo-socialist governmentality" in contemporary Chinese idol dramas, specifically the state-led shift from market-oriented to socialism-oriented masculinity. Under the Xi Jinping administration, media directives have sought to eliminate feminized "sissy men" aesthetics, promoting instead the male public servant as the ideal masculine subject. Through close readings of You Are My Glory and Will Love in Spring, I argue that these dramas modernize socialist masculinity by blending traditional collectivist virtues—such as self-sacrifice and non-consumerism—with cosmopolitan and entrepreneurial traits. By redefining morality and reallocating social rewards like romantic success, the state seeks to align individual desires with national objectives. However, audience reception of Fireworks of My Heart reveals significant resistance, as viewers negotiate state-mediated ideals through a continued preference for metropolitan, entrepreneurial masculinities.

KEYWORDS: Neo-socialist governmentality, Chinese idol dramas, Socialist masculinity, Subjectivity, Audience reception

1. INTRODUCTION

Under Xi Jinping, China's governance model has undergone significant transformation, particularly in the realm of ideological control. Consequently, media representations of masculinity have become a major focus of state intervention. Since 2018, Chinese authorities have actively problematised the so-called *niangpao* (sissy men) phenomenon in the media, framing this feminised aesthetic as a threat to adolescents' moral and physical development and, by extension, to national strength (Song, 2022a). In response, the National Radio and Television Administration (NRTA) issued directives in 2021 to eliminate feminised portrayals of men from literary and artistic programming (General Office of the National Radio and Television Administration, 2021). Following these policies, many male idols publicly adjusted their appearance and performance styles; some were banned from domestic media platforms, and related film and television productions sought overseas markets. Moreover, since 2020, Chinese idol dramas have increasingly promoted the masculinity embodied by male public servants as a state-engineered ideal of manhood. In contrast to the entrepreneurial masculinity embodied by urban male leads that previously dominated such dramas, the revived socialist masculinity reflects a deliberate state effort to reassert ideological control over gender norms and to reshape young audiences' subjectivity.

As a dominant medium of representation and discourse, television occupies a crucial position in cultivating self-disciplined and self-governing citizens in modern societies. Scholars in media and cultural studies have long demonstrated television's role as an apparatus of governmentality in Western contexts (Ouellette, 2013; Stauff, 2010; Norman et al., 2016; Hughes, 2010). Since China's reform and opening-up, neoliberal governance technologies have been selectively incorporated into the country's authoritarian political framework, resulting in a hybrid model of governance (Harvey, 2005; Ho, 2015; Nonini, 2008; Pieke, 2009; Sigley, 2006). Within this framework, television functions as an essential tool for producing citizens who are simultaneously loyal to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and useful to the neoliberal global market (Keane, 2005; Luo, 2017; Song, 2022b, 2023a, 2023b; Xu & Yang, 2021; Yu, 2011). Building upon existing studies of television and governmentality in the Chinese context, this essay examines the relationship between China's recent governance shifts and the emergence of socialist masculinity in contemporary television dramas.

This study examines the emerging male public servant portrayals in recent Chinese idol dramas through the lens of "neo-socialist governmentality" (Palmer and Winiger, 2019). I begin by outlining the theoretical framework of neo-socialist governmentality and the formation of subjectivity in post-reform China, focusing on how the configuration of neo-socialist subjectivity has been rearticulated in contemporary Chinese television. I then conduct close readings of two recent idol dramas – *You Are My Glory (Ni shi wode rongyao)* and *Will Love in Spring (Chunse ji qingren)* – to analyse how these dramas render socialist masculinity desirable in contemporary China. Finally, the discussion turns to the controversy surrounding another popular idol drama, *Fireworks of My Heart (Wo de renjian yanhuo),* to illustrate audience reception towards this new masculine archetype. I argue that these idol dramas construct a new model of socialist manhood and, through processes of modernisation and hegemonisation, reframe it as a desirable ideal within a globalised, market-oriented China. As a result, they reconfigure neo-socialist subjectivity—from a market-oriented synthesis towards a socialism-oriented one. However, audiences are not passive recipients of these state-mediated ideals. Rather, empowered by their identities as media consumers and the affordances of digital technologies and platforms, they actively articulate resistance to the state's promotion of socialist and traditional masculine norms. This tension between state governance strategies and individual expressions of subjectivity reveals the shifting dynamics of ideological control and citizenship in contemporary China.

Neo-socialist Governmentality and Subjectivity in China

Governmentality, as conceptualised by Michel Foucault as the 'conduct of conduct' (Foucault, 2007, p. 389), refers to a mode of power through which the modern state seeks to govern by shaping individuals' behaviour, encouraging them to regulate themselves according to normative goals and rationalities disseminated through institutions, experts, and cultural intermediaries (Foucault et al., 1991). Rather than suppressing freedom, governmentality operates by fostering freedom and mobilising individuals' desires, aspirations, and capacities for self-governance (Rose, 1999). For example, in neoliberal society, people internalise the logic of the market and become "entrepreneurs of the self" — managing their lives, productivity, and emotions as if they were economic assets (Hamann, 2009). Subjectivity thus

becomes the battleground where the state's techniques of governance and individual practices of self-formation intersect. Moreover, Foucault contends that "where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power" (Foucault, 1978, p. 95). In his later work, he turns to the ancient Greek and Roman practices of "care of the self," framing them as ethical technologies through which individuals engage in self-formation while simultaneously negotiating, adapting to, and at times resisting governmental techniques (Dilts, 2011). Consequently, the concept of governmentality offers a productive analytical lens for examining the complex interplay of power between the state and the individual in modern society.

Neo-socialist governmentality explains how neoliberal rationalities and technologies operate within illiberal socialist regimes. Palmer and Winiger (2019) noted that neo-socialist governmentality, which first emerged in China following the economic reforms initiated in the 1980s, outlines a project of subject formation that seeks to synthesise three distinct modes of subjectivity: socialist subjectivity loyal to the authority of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP); market subjectivity capable of autonomous participation in the neoliberal global market economy; and civilised Chinese subjectivity grounded in traditional cultural virtues and national pride. Despite incorporating certain neoliberal techniques, governance in contemporary China remains rooted in socialism, aiming to produce individuals who willingly participate in the Party's project of national rejuvenation and the preservation of its authority. Therefore, the synthesis of neo-socialist subjectivity involves the simultaneous cultivation of citizens who are politically loyal, economically competent, and culturally grounded. Individuals are expected to internalise Party ideals, adopt market-oriented skills and behaviours, and embody culturally valorised norms of nationalism.

While Palmer and Winiger (2019) emphasise how the Chinese Communist Party coordinates potentially conflicting modes of subjectivity through its propaganda apparatus, I argue that this very capacity reflects the resilience and adaptability of neo-socialist governmentality. The configuration of this synthesis can be adjusted in response to historical and social conditions, as well as the Party's shifting political objectives. For instance, during the early stages of China's market reforms, suzhi (quality) discourse was deployed to address social stratification and cultivate neoliberal subjects capable of participating in economic development (e.g. Kipnis, 2007; Jacka, 2009; Lin, 2017). Forty years after Deng Xiaoping's economic reform policy, Xi Jinping's era appears to mark a partial reversal of these market-oriented and globalising trajectories. The CCP has reasserted its supremacy through renewed ideological orthodoxy, expanded state control over the economy, intensified surveillance of public discourse, and tighter restrictions on civil and cultural life (Minzner, 2015; Holbig, 2018). This shift entails a reconfiguration of neo-socialist subjectivity, recentering it from market-oriented individualism towards a socialism-centred model of subject formation. Notably, this reconfiguration is reflected in contemporary Chinese idol dramas, where media representations actively mediate and reinforce the Party's reassertion of socialist masculine ideals and moral-political norms.

The Transformation of Masculinity in Chinese Idol Dramas

Chinese idol dramas constitute a television genre rooted in East Asian popular convergence (Deppman, 2009; Lee, 2004; Iwabuchi, 2005). Primarily targeting young female audiences with urban romance narratives, this genre provides a rare cultural space in which female desire is acknowledged, inviting a 'female gaze' (Goddard, 2000) through the objectification of the male body and the imagination of alternative masculinities. Idol dramas, emerging from China's media marketisation, operate within neo-socialist governmentality, establishing a strategic power dynamic among the state, female desire (notably media-represented masculinities), and young women.

The pre-2020 phase of idol dramas centred on two dominant masculine archetypes, both ultimately reinforcing a neoliberal-patriarchal order. The first archetype features the upper-class entrepreneurial man, whose cross-class romance with an ordinary woman offers emotional compensation for economic insecurity while reinforcing neoliberal ideals of self-improvement. For example, in *Boss and Me (Shanshan laile)*, the female protagonist's "positive energy"—a state-sanctioned moral virtue—embodies the ideals of neoliberal self-improvement that legitimise her romantic reward. Nevertheless, traditional gender norms endure, as the heroine ultimately returns to the domestic sphere, thereby reaffirming upward mobility within the patriarchal social hierarchy (Song, 2023a). In subsequent years, male leads displaying delicate or feminine traits—labelled 'little fresh meat' (xiao xianrou) or 'milky puppy' (*xiao naigou*)—rose to prominence, often in 'older woman

and younger man' narratives reflecting growing female autonomy. However, Chinese productions typically avoid excessive effeminacy, reaffirming traditional masculinity through the male lead's eventual career success. Song (2023b) observes that such conclusions enable the realisation of love within a neoliberal framework while ultimately maintaining the patriarchal gender order. Nevertheless, these effeminate forms of masculinity have been subject to criticism, triggering what has been described as a masculinity crisis in Chinese society. Official discourse, in response, has called for the revival of more traditional and masculine ideals (Song, 2022a).

The studies discussed above demonstrate that idol dramas play a central role in producing neoliberal subjects who nonetheless conform to traditional gender norms. This phenomenon is consistent with other television programming from the same era. For example, Luo's (2017) analysis of the dating show *If You Are the One* confirms that state media, operating within a marketised framework, constructed a hegemonic masculinity aligned with both neoliberal and patriarchal norms. In this context, the configuration of neo-socialist subjectivity during this period was largely market-oriented, embodying values such as self-improvement and personal responsibility, while traditional values served to ensure loyalty to the Party amid the decline of socialist ideology after 1989 (Guo, 2019; Li, 2012; Wang & Karl, 2004).

Since 2020, idol dramas featuring male protagonists who work in the public sector have been popular in China. Yu Xian Tan (2023) examines the 'steely exterior but gentle internally' archetype of militarised masculinity in *You Are My Hero* (2021). This figure, which incorporates traits typical of K-drama, is both a desirable romantic partner and a reflection of official discourse promoting militarised masculinity, supporting the state's projection of national strength and addressing the perceived 'decline of masculinity'. Guo (2025) analyses the masculinity of an aerospace engineer in You Are My Glory (2021), agreeing with Yu Xian Tan that this archetype blends socialist model worker traits with those of the cosmopolitan elite. Moreover, Guo contends that this figure prioritises scientific knowledge, collective ethos, and patriotism over material gain, gaining cultural resonance by problemising entrepreneurial masculinity, reshaping socialist male ideals, and constructing a neo-socialist woman. Guo's insightful analysis highlights a crucial shift in representations of ideal manhood in Chinese idol dramas. However, I contend that such representations do not merely constitute a neo-socialist female subject but rather a reconfigured one.

Existing research on the new militarised and socialist modes of masculinity in idol dramas since 2020 has primarily relied on textual analysis, focusing on television's role in constructing masculine ideals. Crucially, such studies tend to overlook the processes of production, circulation, and consumption. I argue that the recent socialist male figures in idol dramas are direct products of state involvement in media production, reflecting shifts in the state's governance agenda. Situated within the framework of television and governmentality in the Chinese context, this study examines representations of male public servants to demonstrate how the synthesis of neo-socialist subjectivity has been reconfigured, and how individuals respond to and negotiate this reconfiguration. In doing so, it extends the analysis of idol dramas beyond representation and gender roles to encompass the broader dynamics of state governance and the power relations between the state and the individual.

Socialist Masculinity in You Are My Glory and Will Love in Spring

This section analyses the construction of socialist masculinity in idol drams within the contemporary Chinese context, drawing on two prominent cases: *You Are My Glory* (hereafter *Glory*) and *Will Love in Spring* (hereafter *Spring*). The male protagonists in both series are employed within the Party-state system, and their occupational choices and lifestyles exemplify the ideal masculine traits of collectivism, self-sacrifice, and a non-consumerist lifestyle.

The production of both dramas is demonstrably linked to national policy and ideological guidance, highlighting the active participation of state institutions in content creation. *You Are My Glory*, adapted from Gu Man's novel and produced by Tencent Penguin Pictures, follows Yu Tu (played by Yang Yang), an aerospace engineer, and Qiao Jingjing (played by Dilraba Dilmurat), a celebrity, as they rekindle a romance founded on mutual respect for each other's careers. Its central narrative revolves around China's national aerospace programme, which is deeply intertwined with the vision of the "Chinese Dream". The series was the first idol drama selected for the 2020 'Project Bank for Online Films and Serial Dramas with Major Themes' (Zheng, 2020), an initiative designed to enhance state guidance and ensure that online media content adheres to official ideologies. This involvement was made evident when the deputy chief designer personally attended the premiere press conference,

confirming professional guidance from aerospace authorities during filming. *Will Love in Spring* tells the story of Chen Maidong (played by Li Xiang), an embalmer in the rural town of Nanping, and Zhuang Jie (played by Zhou Yutong), a medical sales representative from Shanghai, who reconnect and heal from past traumas. Adapted from Shemusi's novel, it was produced by China Central Television (CCTV), a key state media mouthpiece, and premiered simultaneously on CCTV-8 and Tencent Video. The plot focuses on local development and the rural revitalisation strategy, a crucial component in the realisation of socialist 'common prosperity' (Weihe, 2023). Its filming location was actively promoted by the local government (Chen, 2025), indicating substantial state involvement. The protagonists' professional roles thus function as significant vehicles for national narratives in these idol dramas.

The employment of the protagonists within the party-state system serves as a crucial locus for the formation of socialist masculinity. Yu Tu, in *Glory*, is an aerospace engineer at a state-owned institute under the China Aerospace Science and Technology Corporation. Chen Maidong, in *Spring*, is an embalmer at a government-affiliated funeral home. As Connell has argued, institutions are key sites for the construction of masculinity (Connell, 2005). Working in socially valued yet economically undervalued sectors, these two characters represent socialist labourers whose devotion to collective goals outweighs material concerns. Both men reject opportunities for more lucrative careers and materially comfortable lives, choosing instead to dedicate themselves to national and public causes. Yu Tu, who majored in both finance and aerospace engineering, declined an offer from a prestigious investment bank to pursue his master's and doctoral studies in aerospace engineering, ultimately joining a state research institute. Similarly, Chen Maidong left his position at a major funeral home in Beijing to return to his hometown of Nanping, both to care for his grandmother and to contribute to local development. They thus embody an idealised form of masculinity rooted in socialist China—politicised, self-sacrificing, and resonant with the spirit of socialist heroes such as Wang Jinxi (Hird, 2019, p. 356).

Both narratives prioritise the collective good over individual ambition, directly challenging the hegemonic masculine ideal of the economically successful "able-responsible man" (Wong, 2020). Yu Tu contemplates resigning from his poorly paid aerospace job to enter investment banking, motivated by a desire to fulfil his filial and financial obligations following his mother's secret medical treatment. He expresses regret that his current profession prevents him from meeting the established masculine ideal of economic provision. Crucially, the drama resolves this internal conflict not through assimilation into entrepreneurial success, but through his ultimate rejection of the lucrative financial role and his return to aerospace (episode 15). His successful deep-space launch is subsequently celebrated, symbolising national pride and embedding his personal value within collective achievement and national honour. Chen Maidong is depicted as a model participant in China's rural revitalisation strategy. When his grandmother urges him to leave Nanping for Shanghai with his partner, Zhuang Jie, in pursuit of personal happiness, Chen resolutely refuses. His refusal is grounded in a profound sense of responsibility, stating that bereaved families find comfort in his care. He remains unwavering in his commitment to public service, willingly sacrificing personal happiness for the greater communal good.

The protagonists' lifestyles and sartorial choices embody a non-consumerist model of masculinity, reflecting the subordination of personal interests to the public good and addressing social concerns regarding effeminate male figures. Yu Tu's socialist masculinity is constructed in stark contrast to the consumer-driven masculinity of financial professionals. While finance men are depicted in tailored suits frequenting high-end venues, Yu Tu wears understated, monochrome clothing or a standardised uniform, effectively suppressing individual desire. His modest consumption patterns, such as choosing affordable local dishes, and his residence on the outskirts of Shanghai—away from the central financial district—spatially represent this economic disparity and restraint. Chen Maidong's consumption and clothing choices mirror this pattern of modesty and practicality, aligning with socialist values that discourage consumerism and prioritise collective well-being.

The predominantly plain, dark clothing and neatly cropped hair worn by both characters actively serve to diminish the feminisation of the male body often associated with the female gaze in idol dramas. This stylistic choice, combined with the actors' backgrounds (Yang Yang as a former soldier; Li Xian as a fitness instructor), helps to restore a sense of physical strength and traditional masculinity. This aesthetic is a deliberate response to the prominent public debates surrounding "sissy pants" *(niangpao*), in which official media equated androgynous fashion

with moral and national decline (Song, 2022a). Thus, the protagonists' restrained consumption patterns and costume design align with the state's implicit agenda to promote a traditional, collective-oriented form of masculinity. Their identity is expressed not through consumption, but through dedication and commitment to the nation and public service. Therefore, in both *You are My Glory* and *Will Love in Spring*, professional devotion, moral restraint, and modest consumption collectively reconstruct a socialist masculinity—an ideological construct that promotes men's identification with socialist values such as collectivism, discipline, self-sacrifice, and loyalty to the Party and the nation.

Modernising Socialist Masculinity

This section examines how the dramas strategically blend ideological appeal with sexual desire, thereby producing a modernised form of socialist masculinity that remains politically correct while resonating with contemporary young female audiences. The dramas appeal to the sexual and emotional desires of female viewers by presenting a sanitised form of socialist masculinity that upholds ideological integrity while competing within a market-oriented Chinese society.

A key strategy involves casting male idol actors in the roles of socialist labourers, effectively enhancing the sexual appeal of socialist masculinity. While youth idols typically perform soft or metrosexual forms of masculinity (Kim, 2023), their embodiment of disciplined, collectivist labour enables socialist masculinity to be experienced as both sexually attractive and ideologically exemplary. In the narratives, the protagonists' physical attractiveness is repeatedly emphasised; for instance, Yu Tu in *Glory* immediately captures the attention of Qiao Jingjing's manager, who expresses a desire to sign him as an artist. In *Spring*, the development of Chen Maidong and Zhuang Jie's relationship is even interwoven with kissing scenes, which showcase the male protagonist's sexual appeal. This positioning successfully reconciles erotic desire with political correctness in contemporary China, a context heavily shaped by globalisation and market forces.

Both dramas feature emotionally intelligent and gentle male leads who appeal to the modern aspirations of professional women—often labelled as 'leftover' for remaining unmarried after the age of 27 (Sargeson, 2014). The male leads exhibit traits traditionally associated with femininity, temporarily assuming nurturing and supportive roles within the division of labour. In *Glory*, Yu Tu temporarily assumes the role of Qiao Jingjing's gaming coach and takes on domestic responsibilities while she works, including buying breakfast, performing household repairs, and assisting with her fitness regimen. He demonstrates deep respect for her professional achievements and expresses pride in her work. In *Spring*, Chen Maidong excels in domestic tasks such as cooking and crafting, while also providing significant emotional support and showing respect for Zhuang Jie. Notably, he meticulously accommodates her disability resulting from the loss of her right leg by procuring effective medication, improving mobility aids in the bathroom, implementing anti-slip measures, and learning to assist with her prosthetic use. Guo (2025) argues that these gender practices produce a cosmopolitan sensibility that renders socialist model workers, such as Yu Tu, desirable romantic partners in contemporary China. Through these portrayals, the dramas construct an alternative masculinity that is both emotionally supportive and ideologically sound, appealing to a new generation of female professionals.

A further strategy for modernising socialist masculinity involves the deliberate incorporation of entrepreneurial traits into the protagonists' profiles. Although both male leads embody socialist worker ideals, they are emphatically not portrayed as failures within the neoliberal global market economy. Rather, they possess the skills and competitiveness required to succeed within it, thereby reinforcing their inherent market value. Yu Tu is depicted as an academic prodigy with exceptional intellectual ability, holding dual degrees from Tsinghua University as well as a PhD. As an educational elite, Yu Tu exemplifies the outcomes of China's neoliberal reforms, in which academic achievement is directly linked to competitiveness in the market economy (Adams et al., 2004). His recurring job offers from leading financial institutions—even after a ten-year absence from the finance sector—further reinforce his market worth. Despite choosing aerospace, Yu Tu demonstrates traits of entrepreneurial self-governance: discipline, continuous self-improvement, and personal accountability.

Similarly, Chen Maidong, although not an educational elite, demonstrates exceptional professional competence. Having worked at a major funeral home in Beijing, he continues to receive invitations to Shanghai as a trainer and competition judge, reflecting his high professional standing. His commitment to continually refining his technical skills and actively seeking opportunities for local economic development reflects an entrepreneurial

drive. Furthermore, his estranged father is a highly successful and wealthy entrepreneur, making it difficult to regard Chen Maidong as a genuine member of the working class. Both men thus embody what may be termed 'socialist entrepreneurs of the self': individuals capable of succeeding in the neoliberal market yet choosing to devote their superior talents to higher collective and national causes. By incorporating traits of metrosexual, cosmopolitan, and entrepreneurial masculinities—qualities typically associated with desirability in contemporary China—these figures modernise socialist mode of manhood.

Hegemonising Socialist Masculinity

The two dramas under scrutiny move beyond merely reinventing socialist men to strategically constructing socialist masculinity as the new hegemonic ideal within a market-oriented Chinese context, displacing the previously dominant entrepreneurial form. In earlier Chinese idol dramas, entrepreneurial masculinity—embodying neoliberal values of self-enterprise, ambition, and material success—has consistently occupied the hegemonic position. This reflects broader social values in market-economy China, where men's attractiveness is largely measured by material wealth and professional achievement. By contrast, male characters employed in stable yet modestly paid public-sector roles have often been portrayed as the "second-best" romantic option for women. For example, in the 2013 television series *Let's Get Married (Zanmen jiehun ba),* the attractive female protagonist initially dismisses the male lead, who works in the Civil Affairs Bureau, as an unappealing match. However, as she becomes categorised as a 'leftover woman' in the marriage market due to her age, her perceived limitations in partner selection lead her to reconsider and eventually enter into a relationship with him (Peng, 2024). After marriage, the male protagonist resigns from his secure government position to start his own business, ultimately reaffirming the dominance and desirability of entrepreneurial masculinity for both men and women within the context of China's market economy. In contrast, *You Are My Glory* and *Will Love in Spring* attempt to reconstruct the gender order by positioning socialist masculinity as the new hegemonic ideal.

Two dramas hegemonize socialist masculinity through two interrelated processes: the redefinition of morality and the reallocation of social rewards. First, morality is central to securing consent and legitimising power (Donaldson, 1993, p. 645). In this context, morality functions as a legitimising framework for hegemonic masculinity, determining which male behaviours and attributes are socially sanctioned and desirable. Both *You Are My Glory* and *Will Love in Spring* intervene in existing moral hierarchies through narrative strategies: the former via the figure of a 'national father', Professor Zhang, and the latter through the transformation of spatial contexts.

In *Glory*, Professor Zhang embodies state authority and socialist ideals, rearticulating the moral framework by which Yu Tu's professional and marital choices are judged. As Yu Tu's academic mentor and one of the 'academicians'—the state's leading figures in science and technology—he personifies the authority of the state, a presence further reinforced by the national flag displayed in his office. In episode 9, Yu Tu, having resolved to resign from his research post and accept an offer from an investment bank, unexpectedly encounters Professor Zhang at a restaurant.

Zhang: You still planning to leave? What other reasons do you have?

Yu: Professor, I am leaving to earn money.

Zhang: I understand. Many have left over the years, and I can understand their choices. I'm just a little disappointed. Yu Tu, you have truly disappointed me. You were my most outstanding student. I thought… Well, let's not even speak of the older generation of aerospace scientists who started from nothing, in poverty. Take your colleague Guan Zai, for example—he gave up a high-paying job in the United States to return home. I always thought you were like him, that you too had your own faith and perseverance." (Episode 9)

In contrast to his explanation to Qiao Jingjing—that he resigned out of familial responsibility—Yu Tu tells Professor Zhang that his decision to leave the aerospace institute was solely motivated by financial reasons, omitting his mother's illness. Professor Zhang, representing the older generation of socialist collectivist values, reproaches him for prioritising personal gain over national service. Here, morality is redefined: the ideal man is no longer measured by material success or individual advancement, but by dedication to collective and national goals. Professor Zhang's intervention acts as a moral corrective, realigning Yu Tu with socialist ideals and legitimising his eventual return to the research institute. After this encounter, Yu Tu's temporary return to the institute to assist with an emergency project rekindles his passion and reaffirms his "faith and perseverance" in realising the national aerospace dream. He changes his mind once more and finally returns to his research position.

The mentor further applies this moral framework to Yu Tu's personal life, presenting professional competence and dedication to national service as sufficient grounds for romantic suitability, thereby rendering economic considerations irrelevant. In episode 15, when Yu Tu confesses to Professor Zhang that he rejected Qiao Jingjing's declaration of love because he feels "unqualified," Zhang reproaches him once again.

"*Your abilities aren't qualification enough? I truly don't understand. You graduated from a prestigious university and are expected to become the youngest chief designer at our research institute. What could be so wrong with marrying a celebrity? Is it about money again? Frankly, even if you earned millions a year, you could never make as much as she does. ... Remember, aerospace engineering is the most romantic profession. Don't you understand that yet? How could someone like you exist? Get out of my sight. You make me angry just by looking at you.*" (Episode 15)

Through this redefinition of morality, entrepreneurial masculinity is problematised. The series portrays entrepreneurs critically: Su Ye, Qiao Jingjing's ex-boyfriend, is depicted as self-centred and controlling, pressuring Qiao to abandon her career; Qu Ming, a college classmate from the finance school, mocks Yu Tu's financial situation at a social gathering. In contrast, Yu Tu's socialist masculinity, formally endorsed by the state, emerges as hegemonic, surpassing the market-oriented, entrepreneurial masculinities that previously dominated contemporary Chinese society.

In *Spring*, the morality of traditional gender roles and marital values is redefined through sexual liberalism, facilitated by a spatial and social shift—from the metropolis to a small town. Although the female protagonist, Zhuang Jie, works in Shanghai, the narrative primarily unfolds during her vacation in her hometown, Nanping, where gender norms are more conservative and collectivist values prevail over individualistic ones. In her professional life, Zhuang exemplifies what Xiao (2010) terms 'neoliberal womanhood', characterised by self-discipline, ambition, and a desire for upward mobility. She initially pursues personal freedom and hedonistic pleasure in her romantic life, initiating intimacy without commitment; for example, she takes the initiative to pursue Chen Maidong and even kisses him before their relationship is formalised (episode 5). Upon returning to the small-town environment, Zhuang's liberal approach to relationships becomes problematised. In episode 15, shortly after the death of Zhuang's stepfather, the family gathers for New Year's Eve dinner. When Zhuang informs her mother of her intention to meet friends (in fact, Chen Maidong) later that evening, her mother becomes furious, reproaching her for neglecting familial responsibilities and warning that "a girl who drinks and seeks fun will ultimately suffer the consequences." This confrontation reflects the collectivist family ethics and conservative gender norms of small-town China, sharply contrasting with Zhuang's metropolitan values and individualistic desires.

Within this moral framework, the legitimacy of marriage is also redefined. In episode 19, Chen Maidong's grandmother questions whether Zhuang's relationship is merely a romance or intended as a marriage, emphasising the enduring value of formal marital commitment.

"*I believe that when one meets the right person, one should marry. It is not old-fashioned, nor is it about pressuring you to have children. However, if a man and a woman seek only temporary pleasure – cohabiting or being together without leaving any lasting impression – it does not promote personal growth. Although maintaining a marriage, or going through a divorce, can be costly and may result in unpleasant experiences, these experiences are themselves meaningful. One must learn to suffer sincerely and to concede genuinely; otherwise, life is wasted.*" *(Episode 19)*

Under this redefined moral system, Zhuang, who initially sought only romantic enjoyment without intending to marry Chen, ultimately resolves to do so. Upon returning to Shanghai, she actively seeks opportunities that enable her to balance her professional ambitions with the possibility of returning to her hometown to marry Chen.

Simultaneously, the narrative problematises the entrepreneurial male archetype. Zhuang's former boyfriend and supervisor, Ji Tong, is portrayed negatively as selfish, arrogant, and calculating. He maintains an ambiguous relationship with Zhuang for three years without formal recognition and, when confronted, even requests a transfer to France. In episode 10, during a meeting in Nanping, he unilaterally demands that Zhuang conform to his expectations regarding her appearance and intellect, even suggesting she pursue further studies abroad, while remaining entirely silent on the subject of marriage. Fundamentally, he regards Zhuang Jie's physical disability as rendering her unfit to marry him. In contrast, Chen Maidong consistently respects and attentively cares for her disability, conducting their relationship with an implicit commitment to marriage. Through this narrative, *Will Love in Spring* elevates socialist masculinity to the status of a hegemonic masculine ideal by redefining the morality of traditional gender roles and marital values, contrasting metropolitan and small-town

norms, entrepreneurial and socialist male figures, and liberal individualism with collectivist cultural expectations.

The second mechanism for establishing the hegemony of socialist masculinity involves the strategic allocation of social rewards—namely, public recognition and romantic desirability. In both dramas, the male protagonists receive highly visible, state-sanctioned acknowledgement, supplanting material wealth as the principal marker of masculine status. In *Glory*, Yu Tu is publicly celebrated as the youngest chief designer following the successful deep-space launch, an achievement that transforms personal accomplishment into a collective national triumph. Similarly, in *Spring*, Chen Maidong is formally commended by the local government for his commitment to community development, positioning him as both a model worker and a moral exemplar. These instances of institutional recognition help consolidate the new criteria for hegemonic masculinity, which prioritise contributions to the collective and the nation over individual economic accumulation.

The dramas further utilise the romantic choices of professional, successful female protagonists to validate the desirability of socialist masculinity. Qiao Jingjing, a leading celebrity, and Zhuang Jie, a corporate executive, could conventionally select wealthier partners; instead, their decisions to engage with Yu Tu and Chen Maidong serve as a powerful narrative endorsement of socialist men. By portraying culturally and socially desirable women choosing socialist men, the texts assert that this form of masculinity is both ideologically sound and romantically preferable to neoliberal alternatives.

As Ward (2010) argues, this "gender labour"—the emotional and physical efforts to help others achieve their desired gender identity—is employed by the female lead to serve and elevate the socialist man. In *Glory*, Qiao Jingjing aligns her gender practices with traditional patriarchal expectations. Once Yu Tu and Qiao Jingjing formally enter a romantic relationship, the male experiences progressive professional advancement, while the female gradually adopts a household-oriented role. From episode 27 onwards, Qiao Jingjing relocates to Yu Tu's suburban apartment and assumes domestic responsibilities. She reduces her workload and high-income engagements to focus on acting and preparing for childbirth. While Yu Tu is promoted to chief designer, Qiao Jingjing provides domestic support for him and the team, successfully facilitating the launch of an exploratory device. The earlier gender reversal is revoked: even their wedding is held at Yu Tu's institute, with Professor Zhang, the 'national father', serving as the officiant. This narrative demonstrates how marriage to men embodying socialist masculinity reasserts its dominance in gender relations, solidifying its status as hegemonic.

In *Spring*, Zhuang Jie—who, due to her physical disability, has long aspired to establish herself and achieve success in Shanghai—is ultimately inspired by Chen Maidong to relocate her career to the small town of Nanping. In episode 21, Chen actively intervenes to advance the plan to designate Nanping as a pilot zone for medical tourism, prompting Zhuang Jie to integrate her Shanghai-based medical technology platform startup into Nanping's development project. When Zhuang presents her proposal, she explicitly acknowledges Chen for helping her realise the importance of contributing to the public good. In a pivotal moment, Chen Maidong reframes his commitment to Nanping:

"Don't see me as a professional talent; just see me as part of Nanping. Now, I genuinely want to do something for my hometown. It's entirely from the heart. I've come to realise that a broad horizon is not only geographical – it also refers to an abundant inner life. I want to contribute to Nanping's medical tourism pilot zone because it brings me closer to the people I love, not just in physical distance but in life's deeper meaning." (Episode 21)

In this way, Zhuang Jie—a neoliberal woman who relentlessly pursues economic success—is ultimately influenced by the romantic ideals of hegemonic socialist masculinity to withdraw from the global capitalist market, return to her conservative small town, and devote herself to the nation's socialist agenda. In summary, by redefining moral leadership through the prioritisation of socialist ethics and traditional gender norms over material gain, and by reallocating social rewards from economic wealth to public recognition and romantic fulfilment, *Glory* and *Spring* construct socialist masculinity as the newly exalted and state-sanctioned form of hegemonic manhood in contemporary China.

Reconfiguring and Negotiating Neo-socialist Subjectivity

This study examines how the idol dramas *You Are My Glory* and *Will Love in Spring* modernise and hegemonise socialist masculinity, reinstating its desirability over entrepreneurial masculinity in contemporary China. Through desiring and marrying socialist men, the two female protagonists ultimately redirect the skills and resources they have accumulated within the market economy towards the nation's aerospace industry and the collective goal of common prosperity, thereby constructing a

new configuration of neo-socialist subjectivity distinct from that found in earlier idol dramas.

While adhering to traditional gender roles, the neo-socialist female subject is no longer portrayed as participating in the market economy solely for the purpose of personal wealth accumulation and class mobility. Instead, individual efforts in production and consumption are reoriented towards the realisation of socialist national objectives and the enhancement of state power. In other words, although both embody a synthesis of socialist, market, and civilised Chinese subjectivities, the earlier model of neo-socialist subjectivity is predominantly market-oriented, whereas the new model is firmly grounded in socialism. Consequently, romantic love is no longer depicted as a neoliberal mechanism that drives individuals towards market participation and material gain—as exemplified by the female protagonist in *Boss and Me* (2014), who, in her pursuit of becoming a suitable partner for a corporate president, establishes her own jewellery company and advances from a junior financial assistant to a business owner before ultimately returning to domestic life (Song, 2023a). Rather, love is portrayed as a socialist instrument—as exemplified by Qiao Jingjing in *You Are My Glory* who supports Yu Tu during the deep-space probe launch by hosting the families of the project team and organising group tours, and by Zhuang Jie in *Will Love in Spring* who applies her entrepreneurial achievements she acquired in Shanghai directly to the development of Nanping Town. Individual desire is thereby redirected towards objectives that align with collective socialist ideals and national aspirations. The reconfiguration of neo-socialist subjectivity, shifting from a market-oriented to a socialism-centred framework, reinforces the ideological and moral preeminence of socialism. This transformation coincides with the Chinese Communist Party's renewed assertion of absolute authority, the strengthening of ideological orthodoxy, and the extension of state control over economic governance.

In response to the state's vigorous promotion of a new socialist subjectivity centred on socialist values, individual media consumers do not passively accept this ideological construction; rather, they negotiate with it through digital technologies and platforms. For example, the 2023 idol drama *Fireworks of My Heart (Nishi wode renjian yanhuo)* sparked significant online controversy when its portrayal of hegemonic socialist masculinity was met with widespread criticism from viewers. The series centres on the romantic relationship between Song Yan (played by Yang Yang, who also portrays Yu Tu in *You Are My Glory*), a fire station chief, and Xu Qin (played by Wang Churan), an emergency physician. Song Yan embodies the socialist masculine ideal—self-sacrificing, devoted to collective honour, and physically robust. Xu Qin, the female protagonist, is the adopted daughter of a wealthy businessman, who studied in the United States and later became a doctor. After a series of misunderstandings and obstacles, the two ultimately marry. Regarding character development, narrative pattern, and value transmission, this drama closely parallels the previously discussed two examples.

However, Song Yan's socialist model of masculinity provoked strong public criticism. According to online reviews and fan-made videos, viewers condemned his violent tendencies. He is portrayed as emotionally unstable, prone to anger, and lacking empathy or respect for others. In episode 5, when firefighter instructor Suo Jun requests a transfer due to family burdens and injuries, Song Yan reacts with extreme agitation, interpreting the decision as desertion and a betrayal of professional duty. Audiences also criticised Song Yan's disrespectful and domineering attitude towards Xu Qin. After their reunion, Xu Qin seeks reconciliation, but Song Yan often responds with indifference and resentment. Although his hostility partly stems from the fact that Xu Qin's adoptive mother caused their breakup, Yang Yang's acting does not effectively convey these intertwined emotions. Song Yan frequently addresses Xu Qin harshly and condescendingly—for instance, telling her, "Eat properly, don't act cute," or "Stop pretending to be sweet—you're not a girl anymore." Such authoritarian behaviour, coupled with Xu Qin's passivity, prevented viewers from forming a romantic identification with the couple. Consequently, audiences came to perceive Song Yan's model of socialist masculinity as an embodiment of patriarchal, violent, and domineering masculinity.

A more significant reason for the criticism of Song Yan's masculinity lies in the contrast with the second male lead, Meng Yancheng, whose entrepreneurial masculinity appears far more desirable. While the previous two dramas also featured entrepreneur characters, they did not develop love-triangle narratives, leaving these figures functionally marginal and narratively underexplored. *Fireworks of My Heart*, however, explicitly positions the male entrepreneur as the socialist hero's romantic rival, thereby foregrounding his desirability as a potential partner. In fact, the controversy originated when fan-

edited videos highlighting Meng Yancheng's character and storyline went viral on Bilibili (LexBurner, 2023), one of China's most influential video-sharing and fan community platforms. This drew public attention to the drama, which had initially aired with limited impact. As the audience expanded beyond the actors' existing fans, many viewers began to question Song Yan's masculinity. Meng Yancheng, portrayed as Xu Qin's adoptive brother and heir to a large business group, manages an investment company with strong leadership and decisiveness characteristic of a traditional dominant CEO. Yet, despite his authority, he harbours a restrained and enduring affection for Xu Qin, expressing care, respect, and emotional sensitivity towards her. The contrast between the two male figures reveals that contemporary young Chinese women tend to favour modernised masculine traits.

The controversy was initially confined to online debates within the fan communities of the three lead actors. However, it escalated and attracted wider public attention after the director openly expressed support for the male lead, and the original novel's author criticised fans' preference for Meng as a "worship of money and power" that was "harsh and demeaning towards ordinary people" (Jin, 2023). This debate revealed a divergence in focus between the production team and the audience. While viewers interpreted the core distinction between the two male characters in terms of gender relations, expressing a desire for egalitarian relationships in which women are respected, the creators framed the difference primarily in terms of class identity, explicitly expressing disdain for wealth and materialism. This observation serves to elucidate a significant point: for female audiences, the appeal of male public servants in idol dramas does not primarily reside in their 'noble morality'—characterised by a willingness to sacrifice personal interests for the nation and the public good—or in their integrity and professional ethics. Instead, it is found in the attractive appearance of the idol actors, their tenderness and respect towards women, and their exceptional competence, which surpasses that of ordinary men. This phenomenon also reflects both the general apathy of individual Chinese citizens towards politics and state governance, as well as the producers' increased awareness of, and sensitivity to, state ideological directives within a stringent system of content censorship. Although antagonism towards capital has grown among Chinese youth in recent years (Wang, 2021), upward mobility and economic capital remain key aspirations. Many viewers criticised the female protagonist, Xu Qin, for cutting ties with her wealthy adoptive family to be with the underpaid and emotionally unstable firefighter, Song Yan. Her choice was perceived as ungrateful (Entertainment Unicorn, 2023), with many viewers preferring a storyline in which she married Meng Yancheng instead. In other words, in contemporary Chinese society, the entrepreneurial masculinity associated with metropolitan elites continues to represent the dominant ideal of masculinity.

The debates surrounding *Fireworks of My Heart* reveal a widening gap between state-endorsed models of masculinity and audience preferences. The drama fails both to modernise and to establish the hegemony of socialist masculinity. Viewers' desire for, and identification with, entrepreneurial masculinity, coupled with their criticism of socialist masculinity and the female protagonist's passive subordination to it, signals individual resistance to the state's reconfiguration of neo-socialist subjectivity. The controversies surrounding the representation of socialist masculinity in contemporary idol dramas illustrate, on the one hand, that the CCP's ideological propagation has become less rigid and overtly didactic, increasingly adopting commercialised and genre-based narrative strategies that allow state ideology to permeate everyday life in more subtle and affective ways. On the other hand, these tensions reveal the difficulties and challenges the state faces in its attempt to reconfigure subjectivity after four decades of economic reform and globalisation.

2. CONCLUSION

Through an analysis of the representations of socialist masculinity in Chinese idol dramas, this study examines how the shift in China's governance strategies amid an era of heightened geopolitical tension is reflected in television narratives and audience reception. *You Are My Glory* and *Will Love in Spring* both reconstruct socialist masculinity by inheriting traits of socialist labour models and heroes from the Mao era—such as self-sacrifice for the nation and the public good, and a non-consumerist lifestyle—while simultaneously modernising it through the incorporation of metrosexual, cosmopolitan, and entrepreneurial qualities that restore male desirability in the post-socialist context. More importantly, both dramas elevate socialist masculinity to the position of hegemonic masculinity by redefining morality—through the reinforcement of socialist values and traditional gender norms—and by redistributing social rewards such as public recognition and marriage. Through these representational strategies, the dramas not only

construct neo-socialist subjects but also reconfigure neo-socialist subjectivity itself, shifting it from a market-oriented to a socialism-oriented paradigm. This study argues that the rise of socialist subjectivity in idol dramas is not a spontaneous cultural shift but a consequence of intensified state intervention in media production aimed at reinforcing ideological control. However, the reconfiguration of subjectivity should not be mistaken for a transformation of the state's fundamental mode of governance. Rather, it reflects a recalibration of priorities—from economic growth to ideological consolidation and national security—reshaping the balance among the socialist, market-oriented, and civilisational discourses of subjecthood.

It is important to recognise that the resurgence of socialist values is not confined to idol dramas. The state's intensified ideological authority has permeated China's broader cultural industry. The commercially successful blockbusters *The Battle at Lake Changjin* (2021) and the travel-reality programme *Divas Hit the Road: Silk Road Season* (2024) exemplify a hybridisation of mainstream ideology and major state strategies with market logic. As a creative strategy, this model blurs the previously distinct boundaries between state-sanctioned propaganda and commercial entertainment, embedding ideological messaging within an everyday format that subtly reshapes youth lifestyles and identities. However, audiences are not entirely passive. Young viewers engage in counter-subjectification through digital and social media platforms. The controversy between the producers and audiences surrounding *Fireworks of My Heart* illustrates the tensions between the state and individuals amid the transformation of governance strategies in contemporary China.

Drawing on governance theory and television studies, this article provides a nuanced account of recent shifts in Chinese television culture and society. By analysing the media representation of socialist masculinity, it illuminates the operational logic of neo-socialist governance, the reinforcement of traditional gender norms, and the evolving dynamics between the state and individual rights. This study proposes two directions for future research. First, the portrayal of social workers in serial dramas across Asia and the West. Comparative analysis could reveal both shared patterns and distinct constructions of masculinity, state power, and national identity. Second, costume idol dramas—although set in fictionalised pasts—often allegorise contemporary issues and reflect responses to intensified censorship. Despite their popularity, these dramas remain underexplored in scholarship on governance and television.

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