SHANGHAI(ED) BABIES

Geopolitics, biopolitics and the global chick lit

Eva Chen

Chick lit's emphasis on choice, agency and conspicuous consumption has been linked to the impact of Anglo-American neoliberalism. This paper argues that the similarly themed global chick lit, springing up in developing countries and ex-communist countries in recent years, works in tandem with the economic policies of global capitalism that breaks down national/geographical borders and promises a desirable world order of universalized choice and freedom. More than just the Western commodities and Western-defined and locally endorsed values of beauty and femininity, the global chick lit propagates the idea of a neoliberal, global sisterhood of chic, empowered, consumerist and individualistically minded women who find freedom through consumption and progress in following Western commodities and values. Here geopolitics and biopolitics combine together to aid the expansion of Anglo-American neoliberal ideas. This paper uses Shanghai Baby *as an example of the global chick lit in China, a hitherto unexplored market. Set in China's most Westernized city, this novel portrays a new generation of young, urban, professional Chinese women who celebrate material pleasure and increased sexual agency in the context of China's market liberalization and the influx of global capital. While reflecting the impact of neoliberalism, the global chick lit also hints at the gaps between the local and the Western and the uneven nature of economic development, thus setting into greater relief the inherent race and class hierarchies and exclusions behind the neoliberal rhetoric of universalized choice and freedom.*

KEYWORDS chick lit; neoliberalism; transnationalism

> Today's young women are different and emancipated. They belong to a new generation that has more freedom than women of fifty years ago, more beauty than women of thirty years ago, and a greater variety of sexual orgasm than women of ten years ago. (Weihui Zhou 1999, P. 118)

Much critical attention has been paid in recent years to chick lit[1] and its role in fostering popular postfeminist ideas[2] as well as a neoliberal form of governmentality (Stephanie Genz & Benjamin A. Barbon 2009; Rosalind Gill 2007; Rosalind Gill & Jane Arthurs 2006). This article seeks to point out that the chick lit genre has now gone global, and that its influence has expanded beyond the borders of the UK and the US into similar women's writings in other corners of the world. In these new types of women's romance, the neoliberal subjectivity constructed and exemplified in contemporary Western chick lit has taken on transnational traits, and works in tandem with the concomitant expansion of

Feminist Media Studies, Vol. 12, No. 2, 2012
ISSN 1468-0777 print/ISSN 1471-5902 online/12/020214-228
 http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2011.597102

global capitalism in developing and ex-communist countries, so that the increasing dominance of Anglo-American neoliberal economic and social values is fortified.

These global chick lit works, springing up in Latin America, Asia and Eastern Europe,[3] generally feature young urban women who pursue Western-style, individualistic pleasure and greater degrees of sexual freedom in an expanding urban commodity culture, often against a more constraining local tradition. More than just the Western brand-name commodities and Western-defined and locally endorsed values of beauty and femininity, these global chick lit novels also propagate the idea of a neoliberal, global sisterhood of chic, empowered, consumerist and individualistically minded women who find freedom through consumption and progress in following Western commodities and values. This article argues that chick lit has also been exerting its impact on China, a hitherto unexplored market. Using the example of the 1999 bestseller *Shanghai Baby* by Weihui Zhou, whose huge success has since spawned a number of copycat series including *Canton Baby*, *Chengdu Baby*, and the "Pink-collared Beauty" novels featuring glamorous working girls in other Chinese cities,[4] this paper points out that these novels reflect changes in China's gender politics two decades into the country's embrace of a market economy, changes that showcase the increasing influence of global commodity capitalism in China and particularly of a neoliberal market rationality that touts the values of individual freedom and active choice.

In his seminal *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, David Harvey (2005) cites China along with the US and UK as the first economies in the 1980s to adopt neoliberalism as a social and economic policy.[5] China's localized version of neoliberalism, exemplified in its "Open Door" reform policy of economic development at all costs since the early 1980s and its gradual scaling back of welfare and state intervention, marked the country as the first economy in the socialist block to embrace market liberalization, which helped trigger the later 1989 collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and elsewhere. Though China has since stuck to a nominal form of socialism, and state intervention is never entirely absent from the scene, the country's embrace of market capitalism has been ruthless and determined. China's developing status and its long, pre-communist tradition of female subjugation also means that the chick lit genre there may contain elements that showcase not just similar ones from ex-communist countries but also from other developing countries. An examination of chick lit in China thus offers a good starting point to understand the representation of neoliberal governmentality and of feminism and postfeminism in the global chick lit.

Chick Lit and Neoliberal Consumerist Agency

In his 1978–1979 lectures entitled *The Birth of Biopolitics*, Foucault discusses the postwar rise of neoliberalism as a new form of political governance that expands market rationality beyond economic dimensions into all social and cultural areas of human life.[6] Neoliberalism entails a form of subject construction whereby the individual as *homo economicus* freely deliberates every action based on a rational and cost–benefit calculation. Morality or ethics is now seen to reside in the responsibility which the individual must shoulder for his/her own marketized choices. Instead of direct disciplinary power from the state, the individual is interpellated as the actively choosing and self-responsible consumer/entrepreneur who is motivated by economic self-interest to ceaselessly build up human capital[7] and to willingly engage in self-improvement and self-governance (Michel Foucault 2008, pp. 12, 139, 226).

Neoliberalism reached its apotheosis as the hegemonic economic, political and social policy of the West with the election of Margaret Thatcher in the UK in 1979 and Ronald Reagan in the US in 1980. Privatization, deregulation, globalization of markets and capital and the scaling back of social welfare and state power became the hallmarks of policies in these countries and increasingly elsewhere, as aggressive tides of global capitalism and free trade swept the world and broke down national borders in the last decades of the twentieth century. In commenting on the spread of neoliberalism into social and cultural spheres, and particularly across a variety of contemporary Western popular cultural forms, critics like Rosalind Gill, Yvonne Tasker, Diane Negra and Angela McRobbie have linked the neoliberal emphasis on an actively choosing individual of marketized rationality with similar celebrations of the empowered, pleasure-seeking, "have-it-all" women of sexual and financial agency widely seen in a number of popular, postfeminist women's genres like chick lit, TV sit-coms, advertising and makeover shows. Though each genre has its own distinct conventions, the women characters presented largely share a similar trait in that their rhetoric of choice, power and freedom is predominantly measured in terms of consumerist pleasure and solipsistic individualism, rather than the feminist ideal of collective action and social change.

Arising in the mid-1990s in the UK and the US, chick lit as one such neoliberal-inflected genre carries on the preoccupation with heterosexual romance in traditional women's romance but also marks a departure by stressing its heroines' sexual and professional independence. Unlike the passive, virginal and domesticated heroines of traditional romance who are fixated on their own private romance and wait patiently for marriage with the one dominant male (Tania Modleski 1982, p. 21),[8] chick lit protagonists actively go through a succession of relationships in a fashionable cosmopolitan scene and try to find a balance between love and career. Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* (1996) is often credited as having inaugurated the genre, closely followed by Candace Bushnell's *Sex and the City* (1996), both then adapted into hugely popular movies.

The consumerist pleasure and individual choice celebrated in chick lit and in its many TV and movie adaptations helped to spread its influence around the world as global commodity capitalism increasingly infiltrates to ever more corners. Aided by globe-straddling Anglo-American media conglomerations, chick lit novels like *Bridget Jones's Diary* and its sequel *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason* (Helen Fielding 2000), for instance, were published in forty countries and sold over fifteen million copies by 2003,[9] and the TV series of *Sex and the City*,[10] first aired on HBO on 6 June, 1998, and subsequently regularly repeated, proved wildly popular among HBO subscribers in Asia, Australia and New Zealand, the whole of Europe and Canada (Kim Akass & Janet McCabe 2004, p. 2). As Rachel Donadio claims in her *New York Times* article, chick lit has now become a "pandemic," and there are global chick lit pieces like *Piece of Cake* and *Girl Alone* in India, *The Diary of Luisa Lozhkina* in Moscow, *Stop, Mamma Teresa!* in Hungary and *Never to Paris* in Poland (Rachel Donadio 2006, p. 13).[11] As diverse as their locations are, these global chick lit novels especially flourish in countries that have newly opened their markets to global capitalism[12] and, with it, the neoliberal values of consumerist freedom. The economic boom has brought more channels for employment and consumption for certain groups of young, educated women in emerging big cities, and allows them to aspire toward love and career prospects drastically different from other local women or from women of earlier generations. There are, of course, important differences from the Anglo-American chick lit. Sexual explicitness, for instance, is drastically played down in favor of an approach that

emphasizes a young woman's own choice of love rather than the traditional family arrangement. The force of tradition is much stronger and family ties are more greatly emphasized. Yet still, local traditional standards on gender roles tend to be seen as constraining and increasingly obsolete, from which the young women recoil to embrace a Western-style cosmopolitan lifestyle coded as progress, empowerment and freedom.

It is not new for countries around the world to be exposed to US-led values and influences, but whereas in the Cold War years such influences tended to focus on the areas of democracy and political/social freedom, in the global chick lit novels of the late 1990s and early years of the new millennium, to be more Westernized and to stand on the side of perceived progress and modernity is particularly linked with material consumption and with one's ability to participate in the expanding urban commodity culture. A new female biopolitical subjectivity of agency, of pleasure and of the ability of active choice is being advocated here that amounts to a localized version of the neoliberal *homo economicus*, who is responsible for producing their own individual pleasure and own human capital. By touting such a new female subjectivity celebrated for its affinity to the Western model, the global chick lit works in tandem with the economic policies of global neoliberal capitalism to construct a desirable world order where the values of materialistic individualism reigns supreme. It is thus an ideal medium where the biopolitical dimensions of neoliberalism combine closely with its geopolitical dimensions.

The Neoliberal Female Subject in China

In the late 1990s, two decades into China's Open Door reform policy, a new school of urban female writing emerged that differs drastically from earlier female literature in its distinctly cosmopolitan ambience and its depiction of young professional women who pursue an active, empowering form of material and sexual pleasure. Dubbed "body writing" by some local critics unhappy over its preoccupation with female bodily and sexual experiences, this new type of women's literature nevertheless proved hugely popular with readers, especially young, educated, urban women.[13] Chinese literature of the pre-Reform communist era focused heavily on a rural life of material hardship and political consciousness-raising. Chinese women, perceived to have been liberated from the pre-communist, feudal forms of female subjugation which included ancient practices of female foot-binding, were emphasized for their collectivist, social and political participation and for a puritanical, almost "androgynized" image (Harriet Evans 1997, pp. 134–136) that erased all signs of individual female sexuality. By the late 1990s, however, with the escalating influx of Western capital and the metamorphosis of a few Chinese coastal cities, particularly Shanghai, into emerging global megacities, a booming urban commodity culture provided unprecedented opportunities of material consumption for an increasing number of the Chinese population. Among them, a young generation of educated professional women celebrating this new-found material pleasure and individualistic aspirations begins to figure prominently in women's literature. This new type of financially successful and sexually confident, "me-first" Chinese woman departs radically from the socialist-era gender-neutral "androgyne" as well as the traditional, submissive Chinese women of the pre-communist era. The 1999 semi-autobiographical novel *Shanghai Baby* by Weihui Zhou is a good example of this emerging new genre, which bears remarkable similarities to Anglo-American chick lit.

Like the typical big-city settings of the Anglo-American chick lit, *Shanghai Baby* is set in the most cosmopolitan Chinese city of Shanghai, which boasts "the most fashionable and

Westernized lifestyle" (Zhou 1999, p. 3) by Chinese standards. Written in a first-person, diary-like, confessional format and covering the fashionable sectors (media, fashion and movies) of metropolitan Shanghai, it features the love and professional life of a Shanghai journalist/writer Coco, who is a graduate of a prestigious university in Shanghai and is currently writing her second book, after her first, rather risqué book on the Shanghai dating scene made her famous among young urban women readers. Coco views herself as the new woman, whose generational differences from Chinese women of the past are predicated on two key points: financial success and sexual confidence. As if modeled on the American television program *Sex and the City*,[14] Coco converses daily with her female friends while commenting wryly on their love lives as well as her own. One friend, a cousin, is a Charlotte-type, straight-laced bank executive named Zhu Sha, and the other a Samantha-type, sexually assertive young widow named Madonna who is "not at all lagging behind men in the way she quickly changes sex partners and is always desiring after new flames" (Zhou 1999, p. 300). All three are well-off and economically independent, and none desires marriage or finds it working. Still, the three women go through relationships in search of sexual satisfaction on a par with the material pleasure they parade as privileged participants in Shanghai's booming commodity culture.

The novel's title and content centralize the role of Shanghai in the late 1990s, when its participation in the sweeping tide of transnational globalization and cultural interaction reached a new pinnacle. In its colonial, pre-socialist heyday in the 1930s, Shanghai was dubbed the "Paris of the East" and was the most internationalized city of the Far East (Danyan Chen 1999, p. 34), but it languished as an industrial production center tightly controlled by the state during the socialist era. The city was only given a new lease of life in 1990 when the central government announced the development of Pudong New Area specifically for Western investment on favorable terms. An enormous influx of foreign capital poured into the city's infrastructure and real estate development, triggering a process of re-globalization and turning the city—which municipal leaders consciously model after such global cities as New York, Tokyo and Hong Kong—into a window for China's open policy, a Manhattanized cityscape of skyscrapers, shop-lined streets and billboards for multinational products.[15]

In the same way that Shanghai leads other Chinese cities in its "Westernized" image and its integration with the global economy, Shanghai women are also constructed to have a unique sense of glamour, sexiness, fashion and sophistication derived from their knowledge of and exposure to Western lifestyle and commodities. References to Shanghai women's superiority over other Chinese women litter the pages. Coco, for instance, prides herself on her ability to wear her make-up without at all showing it, the ability to be both classy yet also crushingly sexy, a "skill full of delicate nuances that only a Shanghai woman could master to the perfect pitch" (Zhou 1999, p. 129). This clearly sets her apart from the more "masculine" women of the North and from the "vulgar" and flashy women of the South (p. 162).

The difference of the modern Shanghai women is primarily seen in their economic and sexual confidence. It is emphasized that all three female characters in the novel depend on themselves for their love of consumption. Of course Chinese women in the communist era have always enjoyed much wider prospects of employment than in the pre-communist, feudal era, yet in this novel the emphasis is particularly on these women's much greater opportunities for material consumption as a result of their capacity to respond to and participate in Shanghai's recent exposure to global capitalism. Zhu Sha, a model-student-turned-yuppie, is a member of the local elite because her high-paying job at a multinational

bank entitles her to a condominium, an expensive wardrobe and exotic holidays abroad. Coco, who leads a bourgeois life of parties, boutique shops and visits to the shrink, writes bestsellers of a lucratively transgressive nature and is currently finishing a novel for which several publishers are trying to outbid each other. She also successfully goes "global" by targeting the Western market interested in anything transgressive in China[16]—a German reporter has already promised to arrange a book tour for her in Germany the following year. Even Madonna, who doesn't have to work but holds lavish parties for local elites and foreign expatriates, accrues her wealth by her own efforts, albeit in a morally suspect fashion, by working as a high-class consort in her early days in the southern province of Guangdong, the first Chinese province to benefit from the reform policy and from the influx of overseas capital and investment, mostly from nearby Hong Kong.

All three women live by themselves or only with their current partners, away from traditional family ties, a situation that was inconceivable two decades ago. In the communist era, the state acted as the employer for everyone, covering also such areas as housing and health care. General social regimentation and traditional Chinese emphasis on family values also discouraged social mobility, and extended families often lived under the same roof; but with the waning of state influence and the acceleration of the market economy since the 1980s, rising employment prospects on the basis of merit in the expanding private sector have led to greater social mobility and an influx of professionals as well as migrant workers to the coastal regions. The booming market culture has made it possible for young, single women to live alone in the city and become economically independent. Though the female protagonists in *Shanghai Baby* are among the privileged few with their moneyed access to the consumerist pleasures of an increasingly Westernized commodity culture, the novel's construction of such a new type of what Angela McRobbie, quoting from Anthony Giddens, calls the "disembedded women" of the chick lit genre (Angela McRobbie 2007, p. 35), who are alone in the city and away from traditional family or community ties where gender roles are more fixed, still appeals to a wide local female audience including even the vast number of female migrant workers from the inland who are now living alone in Shanghai or other coastal cities. The idea of the single, independent woman who is active, enterprising, self-sufficient, free from traditional cultural or familiar pressure, and working to maximize her own capital and pleasure, taps well into the aspirations of a new generation of young Chinese women.

This emphasis on greater freedom as a result of female participation in a Western-style market economy is also seen in other global chick lit. The Hungarian version, for instance, describes a similar post-communist phenomenon of the unmarried single woman paying for her own city flat away from family, a phenomenon accredited to the economic "earthquake" (Nora Sellei 2006, p. 184) brought about by the collapse of communism. In the Indian context where family and community values are much more entrenched, the heroines may not be living away from home but are already turning away from tradition as a result of their new economic independence. One heroine has a job in a five-star international hotel and dates an Indian who works for McKinsey & Co in New York. The others are all twenty-something working women in the city who put their careers first and ridicule arranged marriage, still a predominant practice in India (Rama Lakshmi 2007). Calling sari the "strangling folds," these women wear Reeboks and stilettos underneath, Western commodities they buy with their own money. They all desire to be "a liberated Indian woman" (Lakshmi 2007), and such "liberation" is generally coded in market terms of consumerist pleasure and choice.

It must be noted that in such global chick lit the emphasis is not just on the women's enhanced economic ability. What is more important is that a new female subjectivity of agency, of pleasure and of the ability of active choice is being advocated. The women protagonists find empowerment and consumerist pleasure by participating in an increasingly Westernized commodity culture, and they are emphasized as demonstrating a sense of cleverness, confidence, knowledge and of active control. In *Shanghai Baby*, for instance, the modern Shanghai women stand out in their competition with other Chinese women because they can better manage the Western commodities and better utilize knowledge to produce their own distinct look, distinct style and hence distinct identity. This is achieved not just because of their greater exposure to Western commodities and greater ability toward conspicuous consumption, but more because they are able to construct a more agentic female subjectivity expressed in consumerist terms of choice and empowerment.

Describing her cousin Zhu Sha's beauty, Coco compares her to a "model stepping forward from a Paris Printemps billboard" (Zhou 1999, p. 133). In another scene, Coco equates her own confident beauty to "a credit card with a high credit limit that can be used for a very long time without having to worry about the bill" (p. 253). She commands unrivaled sexiness, for "none of the dazzling street neon lights could outshine me"; "nor is the ATM machine as rich as me" (p. 253). Beneath the surface of blatant commodification, a sense of me-first, assertive individualism is clearly detectible. As Coco describes the new generation of Shanghai women,

> [T]hey demand perfection and the highest standards in their career, but have also high expectations in their private life. They strive hard toward the ideal of the modern, independent new woman, a woman who is confident, well-off and sexually attractive. They have *much greater freedom in independently choosing how to live their own life*, and they love the words in the new Ericsson cell-phone ad—"everything is under control". The diamond-ring-flashing, confidently smiling, professional woman in the De Beers ads speaks to their hearts, and so does the ad message—"shining with confidence and sexual attraction." (Zhou 1999, p. 256; emphasis added)

Here we could obviously detect the working of the neoliberal ideology not just in the economic but also in the social and cultural dimensions of subject-making, as Wendy Brown and Rosalind Gill have so eloquently argued (Wendy Brown 2003; Gill 2007). Since the embrace by the Chinese state in the 1980s of the neoliberal economic policy of development at all costs, the Chinese economy, with its vast supply of cheap and trained labor, has benefitted enormously from international circulation of capital and distribution of labor. Yet at the same time, social justice and welfare considerations are consistently scaled back, and the Chinese citizen is urged by the state to be self-responsible and self-caring and to take his/her own wellbeing into his/her own hands (Lisa Rofel 2007). Rather than direct state discipline, individuals are now subject to a new form of self-governmentality and self-discipline.

In *Shanghai Baby*, the new Shanghai woman of empowerment is not just able to pay her own way but is also endowed with active "freedom," making her own "independent" choices about "how to live their lives." As self-reliant and confident consumers/navigators in Shanghai's commodified cityscape, Coco and her female friends are thus constructed as a biopolitical subject of knowledge, agency and individual choice that particularly resonates with the Anglo-American pop women's genres, through a shared reflection of the neoliberal

subject-making. The comparison with the De Beers woman suggests that this consumerist discourse of female empowerment seems able to transcend national borders and address, as it were, a global sisterhood of financially and sexually confident cosmopolitan women who are increasingly conforming to Western defined standards of what it means to be a liberated, confident and sexually attractive woman, a meaning predicated on a seemingly pervasive and universally shared consumerist discourse of freedom of choice and individual consumption.

Greater Sexual Freedom

Such a new agentic female subjectivity is emphasized for its emancipating potential, and for its generational contrast with and departure from women of the past who are dismissed as inhibited and passive. Coco, for instance, proudly and self-consciously claims that "today's [Shanghai] women are different and emancipated"; they are "confident, financially successful and sexually attractive" (Zhou 1999, p. 256). Compared with their grandmothers' generation, who lived in the pre-socialist, feudal China, they have "more freedom than women of fifty years ago"; compared with their mothers, they have "more beauty than women of thirty years ago"; and compared with their elder sisters they have "a greater variety of sexual orgasm than women of ten years ago" (p. 118).

Though portrayals of sexual experiences are much tamer by comparison with the Anglo-American model (like *Sex and the City*, for instance), in the global chick lit greater sexual freedom is definitely another area where this new empowered female subjectivity demonstrates itself. In the Hungarian version, for instance, the freedom the new singleton has in entering and leaving relationships and particularly in choosing not to marry is ruffling many conservative feathers and leading to accusations of decadence and of the dangerous invasion of evil, "imported" ideas (Sellei 2006, p. 184). In Indian chick lit, the increasingly confident young urban women enjoy the heterosocial scene of "rock bands, bar-hopping and bed-hopping" (Neelam Raaj 2008), often with great disapproval from their mothers. The restraining influence of traditional taboos, especially in areas of sex and gender, is still powerfully felt in the global chick lit, something that the Anglo-American heroines do not usually have to deal with, but its presentation and treatment is already very candid by local standards, and helps to give legitimacy and a voice to the sexual desires of the female characters.

In the Chinese context, *Shanghai Baby* is notorious for its sexual explicitness which led to its nominal ban by the government in 1999 on the grounds of its "unhealthy and obscene contents" (Weiping Tan 2000).[17] The publisher, Chunfeng Art Publishing, was ordered to suspend its publishing activity for three months and its manager relieved of his duties. However, rampant pirating ensured that the nominal ban only boosted its sales to several million, while millions of visits were paid to the book's Internet website. A high-profile controversy involving plagiarism charges by another young female writer against Weihui was gleefully headlined in the popular press, generally boosting the fame and marketability of both writers. Weihui herself came out unscathed and even more prosperous, as the ban and skyrocketing black-market sales made her an instant tabloid celebrity. She was allowed to pay several overseas visits to promote her book in America and Europe and to write regular columns on love and sex for a Hong Kong tabloid. More than thirty countries bought the copyright to publish the book one year into the ban, making Weihui one of the richest Chinese writers (Yanjun Shao 2005, pp. 20–21). This certainly suggests the increasing trend

of commodification in Chinese society in the 1990s, even where it concerns subjects which used to guarantee political controversy and persecution. The explicitness of *Shanghai Baby* must thus be contextualized in what is seen as the general eroticization and commodification of the female body in popular commercials and the mass media in China in that decade (Mayfair Yang 1999, p. 57). In the communist era, the sexualized woman had been suppressed to advance an androgynous image of the female peasant or worker on a par with men, but she came back with a vengeance in the post-communist market economy, as waning state influence led to a recurrence of traditional gender standards and increased commodification of the female body.

Shanghai Baby seems to have self-consciously sought this market commodification to maximize its sales;[18] yet the novel is also more than that, particularly as it utilizes a quasi-feminist rhetoric of female sexual empowerment and active agency. Coco is portrayed as a modern woman not afraid to explore her sexual desire or to take initiatives in sexual relationships, thereby reversing the gender roles traditionally attributed to male and female characters. This highlighting of an uninhibited, almost masculinized, "bad girl" sexuality is probably the biggest reason for its great popularity among women readers, particularly "university-educated professional women" (Zhou 1999, p. 251). The novel mentions that many female colleagues in Zhu Sha's multinational bank who have read one of Coco's earlier love stories complain to her about the story's rather tame ending. That story features a man and a woman who always travel on the same metro train on their way to work; though they secretly like each other, neither dares to make the first move and both end up in their respective apartments, languishing alone. Zhu Sha's female colleagues profess extreme disappointment and want "complete uninhibited passion" as a better conclusion (pp. 251–256).

Coco herself may not be as unconventional as her friend Madonna, but the book stresses that she is drastically different from her mother, who embodies a curious mixture of both socialist, gender-erasing puritanism and traditional, pre-communist female subordination. Coco's mother disapproves of her daughter's rebelliousness, could not countenance pre-marital sex, and is especially condemning of young girls wearing tight T-shirts without bras. On the other hand she is also rather traditional and is known not to have a job. "Soft and haggard-looking" and always taking the second seat in the family, she has "spent her whole life ironing shirts for her husband and finding happiness for her daughter" (p. 25).

The metamorphosis of Coco's cousin Zhu Sha is even more telling. Tired of her sexless marriage, the straight-laced Zhu Sha astonishes everyone by divorcing her husband and moving in with an artist lover ten years her junior. Whether the relationship, "extremely satisfying sexually" (p. 175), will end in future marriage or even last a while no longer concerns her;

> she has given it a good thought and is quite at ease; she'll just take whatever comes. She doesn't have to rely on anyone; she has a good job and good brains. There is just a new generation of mentally and materially independent and well-educated women like herself in this city. (Zhou 1999, p. 175)

This emphasis on women's refusal of traditional roles of sexual passivity seems to point to affinities with feminist concerns, but in *Shanghai Baby* as well as in many other global chick lit novels the credit is unmistakably due to Western-style commodity culture and its emphasis on individual pleasure through gratification of personal desires. Where the

local tradition is coded as backward and conservative and the Westernized lifestyle as progressive and liberating, it is significant that feminism does not come into the picture, or where it does, only in a negative light. In developing countries like India, for instance, feminist work to improve women's political and legal rights has been conducted mostly at the grassroots level and by charities and local organizations that lack the national focus and impact of Anglo-American feminist activism. Consequently, participation in Western-style commodity culture of the late 1990s, even by a small number of urban middle-class women, seems to allow them to bypass feminism altogether and enjoy what Mallory Young calls the postfeminist joys of consumerism and sexual independence directly (quoted in Donadio 2006).

In ex-communist countries, feminism faces a different approach. With the collapse of communism, feminism as part of the communist state policy is considered as one of the repressive, collectivist forces of the past that erases the individual and needs thus to be discarded (Sellei 2006, p. 184; Yang 1999, p. 58). In the case of *Shanghai Baby*, for instance, Coco, as a university literature graduate, is familiar with feminist ideas and professes no patience with men who treat women like "a brainless Barbie doll" (Zhou 1999, p. 236); but both she and her friends always hasten to add that they are not feminists themselves (p. 164), just like the Anglo-American chick lit heroines. More often feminism is experienced as a forbidding, moralizing force that Coco views with indifference, a tired sense of boredom and even criticism and resentment. This is especially obvious in the area of female sexual pleasure, where Coco, in the midst of her orgasm while together with her German lover, mentally dares feminism to explain this "crack" in women, this inability to resist the "mesmerizing power of sex" (pp. 326–327).

It is thus significant that in the global chick lit, the promised consumerist freedom and individual agency seems to offer a more genuine means of progress and liberation for its global women readers. Participation in Western-style commodity culture and enjoyment of the solipsistic pleasures of consumption and sexuality is the new way forward for contemporary women worldwide. So, in the end, a message of women's economic and sexual independence, which could have directed energy toward feminist social action for women as a whole and to change the status quo, is instead appropriated to fortify the economic and cultural values of Western capitalism.

Something More . . .

Despite this picture of the global chick lit as an ideal medium for the geopolitical expansion of Western values, the genre still has something new to offer and helps shed light on its Anglo-American model. Though it promises a global sisterhood of like-minded women following Western standards of consumerist freedom that transcends national borders, a promise that echoes the similar rhetoric of universalized democracy and freedom in Anglo-American chick lit, the global chick lit contains a distinct transnational setting and an added dimension of race (and also class) that better reveals the many exclusions and hierarchical differences behind that promise.

The fact that only a small section of the local women with privileged access are emphasized to have that agentic pleasure exposes the very unequal paces of development and prosperity in these countries after their exposure to global capitalism, a situation that has dire class consequences. In *Shanghai Baby*, even among Shanghai women, a not-so-subtle hierarchy opens up based on one's ability (or lack of) to adapt to the changed,

market-oriented world of the new, global Shanghai. The novel mentions in passing the laid-off female workers of Shanghai's inefficient state-owned textile factories who are displaced by multinational corporations and real estate developments and forced to move to the outlying suburbs where they make do with what little they still have (Zhou 1999, pp. 75–76). These women are "rejected by the young and fashionable" (p. 76) and certainly excluded from the type of freely choosing, active women Coco and her friends celebrate.

Even with the chic Coco and her two friends, a further hierarchy opens up between them and the more privileged Western women who have greater purchasing power and thus greater "freedom." This is seen when Coco and her chic friends, young, smartly dressed and representing the success of New Shanghai, are driven away from an expensively-maintained lawn in an up-town area by an American old lady, tenant of a villa nearby who complains that the picnicking young people have violated the tranquility and exclusivity she pays US$25,000 for every month (pp. 113–114). Humiliation and resentment plague the young people as memories of Shanghai's old colonial days come back and they realize that the same hegemonic forces of Western power are behind the prosperity of today's Shanghai (p. 114). Coco and her friends may flaunt their ability to move with ease in the glamorized and globalized cityscape of the New Shanghai, but she is also forcefully reminded that such a cityscape buttressed by Western capital and frequented by Westerners does not really belong to the locals.

This added race and class dimension is set to greater relief by the transnational setting of the global chick lit wherein an inherent awareness of distance from the Anglo-American model is never far off. It may direct the global chick lit reader into greater awareness of social inequality, something that the usually light-toned and humorous Anglo-American chick lit glosses over. The global chick lit may thus allow a stronger potential for debunking the neoliberal rhetoric of equality, universal access and freedom of choice, and for revealing the working of unequal power relations.

NOTES

1. For a discussion of the distinguishing traits of chick lit and its portrayal of a new type of femininity, see the special issue of *Feminist Media Studies* edited by Rosalind Gill and Jane Arthurs, vol. 6, no. 4, 2006. Imelda Whelehan writes that chick lit readers, trying to balance career and love, regard themselves as more sophisticated than readers of traditional romance. Chick lit provides a "post-feminist narrative of heterosex and romance for those who feel that they're too savvy to be duped by the most conventional romance narrative" (Imelda Whelehan 2005, p. 186). Feminists criticize the genre as commodifying and trivializing feminism, and as glossing over real social and political problems (see McRobbie 2007, p. 30; Imelda Whelehan 2000, p. 11).
2. Popular postfeminism as reflected in mainstream pop culture is different from academic postfeminism that uses a postmodern, poststructuralist approach to question the conventional definition of woman as an identity and subject. It appropriates the feminist terms of parity but views feminist activism as obsolete, advocating instead for individual gratification and empowerment through heterosexual and consumerist pleasure (see Naomi Wolf 1994; also see Stacy Gillis, Gillian Howie & Rebecca Munford 2007, pp. xxvii–xxviii).
3. For studies on chick lit in India, see Lakshmi (2007) and Raaj (2008). For an analysis of the genre in ex-communist East European countries like Hungary, see Sellei (2006). While these studies have importantly pointed out chick lit's role in reflecting changing attitudes toward

gender and commodity culture in these countries, they have not linked such changes to the global spread of neoliberalism as both an economic and socio-cultural ideology.

4. See Linghan (2006) and Jing Xue (2008) for the "Pink-collar Beauty Series" and Taotanglangji (2009) for the Baby series.
5. Harvey devotes a special chapter, "Neoliberalism with Chinese Characteristics," to China as a representative Third World subscriber to the neoliberal ideology. The dissemination of market rationality to the political sphere and social policy, the pursuit of economic development at all costs and the increasing emphasis on the citizen as self-responsible, enterprising individuals are hallmarks of China's market reform policies initiated in the early 1980s, under the slogan "Development is Everything."
6. This does not mean that the economic principle, or the Marxian economic base, now determines everything including the superstructure, but rather that the economic principle is itself changed to take on the role of a mentality and a process of subjectification, so that the dichotomy between the economic base and the superstructure is more or less collapsed. As Jason Read (2009, p. 26) points out, neoliberalism is not just a transformation in ideology that results in a new ideology, but also a transformation of ideology, which situates the ideological and the material on the same plane of immanence. Foucault's lectures target two groups of neoliberal economists: the Ordoliberal school in postwar Germany and the Chicago School arising at mid-century in the US.
7. The neoliberal process of subject-making effaces the old Marxian conflict between labor and capital, or between consumer and entrepreneur. As the subject is now seen as being constituted as his/her own producer and investor, his/her labor becomes an activity and capital becomes the effect of that activity and of self-calculating investment. Every action (including consumption) in life becomes an act of labor and investment. For more, see Read (2009, p. 31).
8. It must be noted that since Modleski's analysis, "traditional" romance has itself been considerably changed to include greater sexual explicitness, partly as a response to the rise of chick lit and to the sexualization of popular culture in general.
9. See the article "Helen Fielding: beyond Bridget," in *The Independent* (2003).
10. *Sex and the City* first appeared as a series of columns by Bushnell in the *New York Observer* in 1994, and retained its short column format when published as a book in 1996. Various generic shifts may have occurred when it appeared respectively as newspaper columns, then a book, then the TV series and finally the movie version, but this paper deals primarily with the ideological underpinnings which inform all its various forms.
11. See *New York Times'* Sunday Book Review (Rachel Donadio 2006, p. 31). *The Washington Post* also published an article by Rama Lakshmi entitled "India's cheeky 'chick lit' finds an audience" (2007), which lists additional chick lit novels like *Almost Single*. This novel features the American-educated Kala, who works as a job trainer for a big hotel group in India and is witty, outspoken and enjoying her single status. Kala deals with an overbearing mother and traditional pressure to marry the family choice in a skillful and humorous way and manages to have fun and material enjoyment.
12. India may long boast grassroots-level democracy, but it is only in recent years that the country has been moving away from protectionist policies and embracing market liberalization (see Inderpal Grewal 2005, p. 83).

13. This new literature, also dubbed "70s and after" literature, is mostly penned by female writers born in and after the 1970s who are seen to be apolitical, materialistically oriented and preoccupied with individual desires and gratification (see Shao 2005, pp. 2–4).

14. *Sex and the City* as a novel has never been officially translated in China, nor has the TV series been broadcast on mainland Chinese TV or legally distributed on DVD, but pirated DVDs and online copies are very popular among China's college students and young professionals. The TV show has even inspired a thirty-two-episode Chinese series called "Really Really Want to be in Love" that appeared from 2004 to 2006, featuring four single, independent professional Chinese girls who yearn for romance. An indication of the popularity of the American show is seen in the fact that a number of magazine columnists and bloggers modeled themselves on Carrie Bradshaw, and that there was at least one bar in Beijing named after the show. See "*Sex and the City* Shanghai-style" (*BBC News* 2003), "*Sex and the City* Meme will not die" (Jeremy Goldkorn 2004), and "Chinese views of 'Sex and the City'" (*China Digital Times* 2009) listed in the reference section.

15. Fulong Wu (2000, p. 1359) writes that direct Western capital, including that from Hong Kong and overseas Chinese origin, totaling over US$15.96 billion by 1996, spilled over from Pudong into other urban areas of Shanghai, leading to massive redevelopment and expansion of the city. Urban governance and planning by the municipal government was geared in line with international practice, and aggressively sought Western expertise and media publicity in the designing and promotion of financial areas and high-end real estate. As pointed out by Yehua Dennis Wei, Chi Kin Leung and Jun Luo (2006), by 2002, 299 out of 500 global corporations had headquarters, offices or factories in Shanghai, making it the most heavily invested city in China.

16. This is seen, for instance, in the marketing process of *Shanghai Baby* in the US. The book's US version cover-page blares the words "deliciously naughty," "intoxicating cocktail of sex and love," "a shocking, sensual book" about a dark, "unacknowledged" China and a "people determined to break free" that "the Chinese Government does not want Westerners to read."

17. This is an example of what David Harvey calls China's localized version of neoliberalism, where state subscription to neoliberal market rationality is dominant but not complete. Direct state power is still seen in the several campaigns in the 1990s waged by the state against "Western decadence and corruption," campaigns that stressed Chinese "spiritual values" and aimed to limit the Western influence to the material level. Overall, however, the campaigns have proved to be not very effective (see Rofel 2007).

18. The author, Weihui Zhou, herself designed the book's cover which featured a revealing picture of herself as a Shanghai babe with the words "an alternative erotic novel set in the secret garden of Shanghai" pasted on her naked shoulders. Her nationwide book tour successfully grabbed tabloid attention when she was accused of using her own sexualized image to boost sales (see Shao 2005, p. 20).

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Eva Chen is Professor of English at National Cheng-Chi University in Taipei, Taiwan. She is the author of two books and more than twenty refereed journal papers on women and urban modernity. E-mail: evachen@nccu.edu.tw