

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Women on and Behind Chinese Entertainment Television: De/Constructing the Female Authorship of *National Treasure*

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*Women have been enjoying new forms of visibility in post-2010 Chinese entertainment television, not just onscreen, but also in paratextual discourses about women as content producers. By focusing on the promotional and reception materials about a female director/producer, Yu Lei, and her authorship in National Treasure (NT), a current Chinese variety show, this article analyzes how extratextual material operates in relation to female authorship in Chinese television. By examining how gender politics are incorporated in the construction of female authorship, we identify the problematic aspects of how Yu Lei's authorship is framed, which serve to promote neoliberal postfeminist ideas of women's empowerment and are bound up with current iterations of official neonationalist ideology. While acknowledging its limitations, we argue that Yu Lei's position as a woman in a male-dominated industry who has substantial visibility in media and enjoys some authority over a TV production still constitutes noteworthy if only partial agency.*

**Keywords:** Female Authorship, Chinese TV, *National Treasure (NT)*, Postfeminism, Gender Representation, Neonationalism, Chinese Communist Party (CCP)

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In December 2017, *National Treasure* ([*NT*] also known as *The Nation's Greatest Treasures*; 国家宝藏), a new Chinese variety television show that tells the stories of prestigious cultural relics selected from top Chinese museums, premiered on China's state broadcaster, China Central Television (CCTV). Combining short

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historical stage dramas played by A-list Chinese celebrities and documentary interviews with museum curators as well as vivid behind-the-scenes stories introduced by ordinary Chinese people, the program fostered innovative visual storytelling and became an unprecedented success, especially among young Chinese people (Cong, 2017). It was not only seen as subverting “the stereotypical impression of China’s creative industries’ lack of creativity” (Peng, 2021, p. 3), but was also nationalistically celebrated by China’s mainstream media as “a unique TV show that can only be produced by Chinese people” (“Promoting National Treasures,” 2019). Importantly, *NT*’s great success in innovation and creativity was attributed to Yu Lei, the chief director and producer of the show, who won praise for her creation of “a new form of Chinese documentary-style variety show” with female storytelling that makes cold cultural relics alive and warm again (Liu, 2018; Zhang, 2018).

With the popularity of the show in China, Yu Lei (who, as discussed below, is referred to as the “author” of *NT*), appeared on the cover page of *Women of China*, one of the most influential national women’s magazines in China. Established by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in the 1930s, *Women of China* is one of the key official outreach magazines of the All-China Women’s Federation (ACWF), the largest women’s rights organization in China that plays “the function of both NGO and national policy mechanism” (Zhang, 2001, p. 173). As stated on its website, the magazine acts as “the headquarters of the party’s women’s advocacy,” promoting Chinese women’s success stories and leading public opinion on the women’s movement in China. In this cover story, Yu Lei and her female team members’ professionalism, creativity, and hard work were repeatedly highlighted (Liu, 2018). One year later, when *NT*’s second season premiered on CCTV, the magazine featured another story about Yu Lei entitled “The ‘detachment of women’ behind *National Treasure*.” This is a visual account of the predominantly female production team, including directors, writers, camerawomen, coordinators, etc., behind the program. The group portrait of *NT*’s female production team highlights a rise of female professionals in the Chinese television industry, which challenges previous assumptions of Chinese television as a male-dominated domain both on-screen and in production (e.g., Allen, 2020; Yau, 2020).

The new focus on female television production, female authorship, and the cultural legitimation of women and their stories on Chinese television invites consideration about several interrelated issues around the processes of paratextual construction of media authors, and of female authorship in particular; the ideologies that inform such constructions; and the extent to which a female producer like Yu Lei can exercise meaningful agency. To address these questions, we combine a textual analysis of *NT* (CCTV, seasons 1–3, 2017–2020)—a female-authored Chinese cultural variety show—with a critical feminist analysis of its promotional paratexts, including production and reception discourses.<sup>1</sup> This approach is inspired by the feminist film scholarship of Grant (2001), who argues that the examination of female authorship should move beyond a formal analysis of the “primary text” (e.g., a film or a television program) and contextualize the discussions within production,

distribution, and reception discourses. We analyze 68 interview articles between 2017 and 2021 in Chinese mainstream media, including *China Daily*, China News Service, *Shanghai Observer*, *Beijing News*, *Guangming Daily*, *Women of China*, *Women Voice*, Xinhua News Agency, etc. These articles comprise prestigious media discourses that contribute to the cultural legitimation of a television text. In examining these discourses, which work as a cultural barometer for *NT* and similar programs, this article presents a critical feminist analysis of female authorship that includes representations of women in television texts and the cultural framing of female creators and their productions.

After an overview of Chinese television in transition and its relationship to women, this article examines how Yu Lei's female authorship has been constructed by *NT*'s paratexts, looking at both the promotional materials and the reception discourses. It then turns to the problematic aspects of how this female authorship is framed, arguing that the framing serves to promote neoliberal postfeminist ideas of women's empowerment, frequently invoking notions of individual empowerment, autonomy, and personal agency (Evans, 2008; Thornham & Feng, 2010; Yang, 2011; Yang, 2020). Furthermore, the paratexts around Yu Lei and *NT* are bound up with current iterations of official neonationalist ideology. At the same time, through a critical examination of the female representations on the show, we argue that Yu Lei's position as a woman in a male-dominated industry who has substantial visibility in Chinese mainstream media and enjoys some authority over a TV production still constitutes noteworthy if only partial agency.

### Chinese TV in Transition and Female Authorship

Chinese television has experienced several crucial reforms since it was first introduced in the 1950s, which have not only modernized the industry, but have also gradually impacted content creation, production processes, and the financing of television programs (Bai, 2015; Keane & Zhang, 2017; Luo & Sun, 2015; Peng, 2021; Sun, 2007). Originally, emerging in the context of a socialist system that completely regulated all aspects of cultural production, the Chinese television industry was "intended to function as a propaganda weapon" (Wang & Mihelj, 2019, p. 40). Keane (2005) identified the early period (from the mid-1950s to the mid-1980s) of Chinese television as "the industrial era," in which "writers, playwrights and scriptwriters were responsible for providing guidance laced with political theory" (p. 85).

After the reform and opening-up policy was adopted by the CCP in 1978, Chinese television came into "the market era," when Chinese broadcasters changed from being state-subsidized to business entities whose daily operations now needed to respond to audience demographics and commercial advertisers (Keane, 2005, p. 85). With the entrance of private capital in the late 1990s, the industry pivoted to embrace a profit-oriented logic, which aimed to attract wider audiences in the crowded market (Keane & Zhang, 2017). However, the marketization and commercialization of the Chinese TV industry did not mean that production could be

completely released from the CCP's political control and censorship (Zhao & Guo, 2010). The National Radio and Television Administration (NRTA, formerly known as the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television or SARFT) acts as administrative machinery to censor and regulate all aspects of television programs within mainland China (Ng & Li, 2020). Therefore, Chinese TV producers face significant challenges in finding the balance between “the commercial imperative of audience expectation” and the “public duty of characterizing good socialists” to make content that is both competitive in the media market and deemed to serve the Party's agenda (Keane, 2005, p. 86). Under the dual burdens of the “market's demands and the CCP's administration,” especially when the two do not “always harmonize well,” many TV productions were commercial failures, and “contributed to the stereotypical impression of China's creative industries' lack of creativity” (Peng, 2021, p. 3).

Since the early 1990s, Chinese television dramas, in which “central female characters were written to appeal to female viewers” who might have similar struggles to those portrayed, have gained popularity (Wang & Mihelj, 2019, p. 42). Women in such 1990s Chinese TV dramas were classifiable as either “self-sacrificing housewives yearning for family or marital stability” or “divorced women seeking to re-adapt to a fast-changing society,” exemplified by series such as *Yearnings* (CCTV, 1990) and  *Holding Hands* (CCTV, 1999), which “tackled controversial issues such as divorce, extramarital affairs, and unemployment” (Wang & Mihelj, 2019, p. 42). The 21st century witnessed a boom of female-oriented Chinese television programs mainly focused on a “celebration of modern lifestyles and consumer culture,” started by the popularity of the so-called “pink dramas” that put urban Chinese women's romantic and personal lives on the center stage (Keane, 2005, p. 82).

Post-2010 Chinese television foregrounds more complicated, and even contradictory, forms of femininity. Women in traditional family roles still exist, but “more modern, individualized, independent, and liberal-minded” women are also presented, foregrounding “consumption as a key feature of modern Chinese femininity” (Wang & Mihelj, 2019, p. 42). In addition, rebellious narratives of powerful women in “big heroine dramas” disturb the hegemonic narratives of romance, marriage, and family (Sun & Yang, 2020; Zheng, 2020), even as the discriminatory construction of “leftover women”—“educated, unmarried women over the age of 27”—has flooded into dramas and entertainment shows (Feldshuh, 2018, p. 38). Young and masculine “tomboy” (T) female celebrities such as Li Yuchun, Han Hong, and Song Yin were idolized and celebrated as “women's gender role-playing and feminist expressions” in Chinese entertainment shows, yet “certain T identities and subjectivities” still face discrimination and are “demonized in both mainstream and queer cultures,” further obscuring “the existence, visibility, and voice of local masculine lesbians” (Zhao, 2021, p. 6). As this article will discuss, Yu Lei's authorship of *NT* and how it is framed in Chinese media also illustrate key contestations around women's roles in contemporary China.

Academic discussions of women and Chinese television frequently attend to various televisual representations of women in China and their socio-political

meanings (e.g., Feldshuh, 2018; Peng, 2021; Wang & Mihelj, 2019; Yang, 2020), and part of this article examines key representations of women on *NT*. However, the analysis focuses on the shifting roles of women not only on the television screen but also behind it, identifying the emergence of female authorship in the context of post-2010 Chinese entertainment television and how a specific case of it—Yu Lei’s role in producing *NT*—has been constructed through relevant paratextual content. To do so, 68 interview articles from both Chinese mainstream print and online media between 2017 and 2021 were collected and critically analyzed to map out the discursive networks surrounding Yu Lei and her show *NT*. Our approach is consonant with the work of television scholars, including Newman and Levine (2012) and Mittell (2015), who argue that authorship in post-millennial television is discursively constructed, drawing upon French philosopher Michel Foucault’s ([1969] 1984) conceptualization of authorship. According to Foucault ([1969] 1984, p. 113), the phenomenon of authorship is not “purely and simply” associated with “a real individual,” but also with reader beliefs or assumptions concerning the production, circulation, classification, and consumption of texts. In this vein, the author of a television text is a fictional creation constructed by promotion and reception discourses, which operate as an interpretive code for audiences. While the promotion materials establish an author figure for a television production, the reception discourses reaffirm the author’s authority over the television text. They consequently distinguish between the “author” as a real individual and the author persona constructed discursively.

Such extratextual materials have become a crucial part of television consumption in the 21st century. As Mittell (2015) observes, contemporary television programs are “not treated as stand-alone, self-contained works (. . .) but rather exist in a media landscape where online paratexts are always part of a viewer’s potential intertextual flow” (p. 262). In line with Gray (2010), Newman and Levine (2012), and Mittell (2015) whose research focuses exclusively on the U.S. context, Chinese television scholars, including Berry (2009) and Qian (2008) also highlight the importance of extratextual material in understanding Chinese television in transition. For example, Berry (2009) highlights “a shift in Chinese television away from being a pedagogical tool of the party-state apparatus to interacting more complexly with the market economy and ideas of public participation” (p. 71). As a result, Chinese journalists “have a certain power of their own—programming cannot be produced without their work,” and Chinese viewers also have more authority because “unless they watch, television has no product to be sold to advertisers and no viewer-pupils to be taught the lesson the party and state wish them to learn” (Berry, 2009, p. 72). Such discursive networks can therefore engage with TV programs (and their producers) “as long as they operate within the protocols established by the hegemony of the party-state apparatus and the marketplace” (Berry, 2009, p. 73).

As Staiger (2003) argues, authorship “matters especially to those in nondominant positions in which asserting even a partial agency may seem to be important for day-to-day survival” (p. 27). And, discussing authorship and agency in women’s

film, Grant (2001) points out that female authors are agents because “female subjects (...) have direct and reflexive, if obviously not completely ‘intentional’ or determining, relationships to the cultural products they help to produce, as well as to their reception” (p. 124). Therefore, by analyzing the promotional and reception materials about Yu Lei, her author persona and her authorship in *NT*, we consider how such extratextual material operates in relation to female authorship in Chinese television, how gender politics are incorporated in the construction of female authorship, and what roles women inhabit in contemporary Chinese television. Crucially, while these paratexts celebrate the success of both *NT* and Yu Lei, they replicate particular neoliberal postfeminist discourses of women’s empowerment that gloss over continuing structural inequalities in Chinese society (Evans, 2008; Yang, 2011; Yang, 2020). In addition, much of the official commentary about *NT* frames its value in nationalist terms, with which the construction of Yu Lei’s authorship of the show is also entwined.

Still, given the continuing male dominance in the industry, particularly behind the scenes, the position of Yu Lei (and other female television producers/directors such as Yan Fang, director of the CCTV game show *The Chinese Poetry Congress* 中国诗词大会, 2016–2022) is a significant political intervention, even with its problematic elements. While more research is needed to better understand how much freedom and authority women such as Yu Lei have in their roles as producers/directors and to what extent their creative decisions are determined by the “hegemony of the party-state apparatus and the marketplace” (Berry, 2009, p. 73), this article argues that female authors in Chinese entertainment television can create a space that celebrates women’s professional accomplishments and independence in ways that partly challenge normative gender discourses.

### The Paratextual Construction of the Female Author of *National Treasure*

Premiering on CCTV in December 2017, *NT* was a major hit after only four episodes, becoming “the most popular mainland Chinese variety show” on Douban, a popular interest-based Chinese social media platform that provides credible public ratings. Shortly after that, it won one of the most prestigious Chinese television awards, namely the 2018 Shanghai Television Festival award for the “Best Seasonal Variety Show.” The *Guangming Daily*, an official newspaper of the CCP, praised the program as “heralding the era of Chinese traditional cultural variety shows” (“Baiyulanjiang Hua Luo Guojia Baozang,” 2018). Thus, the construction of Yu Lei as the *NT*’s author is particularly significant, given the show’s mainstream prominence.

With Chinese television programs typically involving a multi-person structure of control, Yu Lei was one of several key individuals in the production of *NT*: officially, Yu Lei was the chief director/producer, Yu Xinling was the chief writer, and Zhu Tong and Lu Yitao acted as the presenter and the supervising producer, respectively. Yet it was Yu Lei who carried out most tasks—she made authorial choices in

terms of writing, shooting, directing, and editing, supervised the production process and selected the production team—and therefore, has the qualities of a television author discussed by scholars, such as [Mittell \(2015\)](#), [Newman and Levine \(2012\)](#), and [Pearson \(2005\)](#). To present the best stories to the audiences, Yu Lei fulfilled both management and creative duties on the set of *NT*, including doing considerable academic research, as the program worked together with the major museums in mainland China to showcase Chinese history and cultural heritage. Yu Lei was also responsible for finding the right stars to bring the characters in the show to life, as *NT* focused on visual storytelling to revitalize public interest in Chinese culture and history, versus earlier Chinese cultural/historic exploration variety shows that focused on the economic value of antiques.

Yu Lei and her production team started to work on the program in 2015, two years before *NT*'s debut on CCTV. At that point, Yu Lei was already an established name in the Chinese television industry, having served as the chief writer and producer of several CCTV variety shows, including *Super Star Ding Dong* (CCTV, 2013–2022; 开门大吉), a popular music game television program. She was also the first female chief writer (2012–2014) for the CCTV *Spring Festival Gala* (春晚), an annual variety show broadcast on Chinese Lunar New Year's Eve that enjoys the largest audience of any entertainment show in the world. Due to her overarching involvement, Yu Lei has come to prominence in *NT*'s reception materials. Nevertheless, it is important to note that it was not until 2018 that Yu Lei began to receive substantial attention in these paratexts. To elevate the program's cultural status, the pre-premiere promotion foregrounded not Yu Lei but the show's host Zhang Guoli, one of the most influential actors and directors in China, who could potentially attract viewers. Zhang's involvement was widely advertised, and worked to provide cultural legitimation as well as an "authoritative" and "masculine" background ("*Guojia Baozang* Jiangyu 12 Yue," 2017).

However, with the quick success of the show, Yu Lei was thereafter highlighted as the author of *NT* in various promotional materials and reception discourses. Between 2018 and 2021, Chinese mainstream media gradually established Yu Lei's author brand and legitimated her role as a female creator by asserting her personal agency, individual empowerment, and creative authority in the production and development processes.

Soon after *NT*'s debut, Yu Lei's authority over the program was framed through the official behind-the-scenes features entitled "I Have a Date with *National Treasure*" (2021; 我和国宝有个约会) created by CCTV, where she spoke for the whole production team about the show. More specific key media and cultural forums in which Yu Lei performed her authorship include an international academic conference on China's cultural economy organized by Tsinghua University ([Xu, 2018](#)), a round-table discussion on Chinese variety shows organized by *Beijing News* ([Yang & Liu, 2021](#)), and press events and panels on various domestic media and cultural heritage festivals such as the 2018 Shanghai Television Festival ("*Baiyulanjiang Hua Luo Guojia Baozang*," 2018), the 2020 Feitian and Xingguang

Television Festival and Awards (Zhai & Ren, 2020), and the 2020 International Museum Day Chinese Celebration (“Guoji Bowuguan Ri”, 2020). Additional industrial paratexts such as *Inside the Episode* (iQiyi, 2018–2019; 国家宝藏片场纪事) also presented Yu Lei’s commentary on the show and on the sidelights of every single episode, further establishing her creative authority.

Moreover, Yu Lei has been frequently interviewed by different Chinese mainstream media outlets to discuss the show, its production process, and the featured actors and cultural relics, underlining her creative authority and management control as chief producer and director of the program. In some interviews, Yu Lei elaborates on why certain cultural relics were selected to be presented on the screen (Liu, 2018; Niu, 2017), while in others, she justifies her choice of guest celebrities (“Guojia Baozang Cheng Wanghong,” 2018) and shed light on the production process (Gu, 2018; Lei, Wang, & Chen, 2018; Liu, 2019). For example, Duan Yihong, a top Chinese actor who played “the Sword of the King of Yue” (an ancient bronze sword), a very popular character in the first season of the program, claimed that when he was invited to be cast in *NT*, he was initially very unsure about the role offer. It was Yu Lei who “valued his prodigious acting skills” and insisted that “Duan is perfectly matched with the role” (“Guojia Baozang Cheng Wanghong,” 2018). Additionally, Yu Lei has always referred to the production team as “my team” and stressed her involvement in the production process with the phrase “my team and I” in the interviews to express her authority behind the scenes of the program (Liu, 2018). By continually establishing Yu Lei as the author figure of *NT*, these paratexts demonstrate how authorship and the concept of an individual author persona can be discursively constructed.

In addition to her extensive domestic media exposure, Yu Lei has also promoted the program in global entertainment and media events, substantially contributing to the global construction of her public persona and further highlighting her authorial position. In 2018, for example, Yu Lei was invited to discuss *NT* at a special conference organized by the International Market of TV Programs (MIPTV), one of the largest global television program trade shows held in Cannes, France. This featured the first showcase organized by MIPTV for television programs produced in China (“Promoting National Treasures to the World,” 2019). At the conference, Yu Lei introduced *NT* to the global audiences in English, performing her authorship on an international stage. Chinese mainstream media celebrated this, with commentary such as “Yu Lei is making *National Treasure* go global” (Lei, Wang, & Chen, 2018). In 2019, Yu Lei was awarded one of the ten “2019 National March 8th Red-Banner Pacesetters” by the ACWF, China’s most prestigious award honoring outstanding women, and she gave her acceptance speech at The Great Hall of the People, home to the highest organ of state power, the National People’s Congress. Thus, this award and Yu Lei’s acceptance of it bestowed her with great social and cultural capital, as well as professional recognition, reflecting and enhancing her “star” persona and public profile, as well as legitimation as a female author.



These public discourses construct Yu Lei as enjoying limitless creative autonomy, freedom of choice, and independence as chief producer and director. However, her position as a woman in the media industry and within Chinese society more generally invites further analysis, in the context of historical and current structures on women's agency. In addition, given the show's focus on Chinese cultural "treasures," paratexts around *NT* have also been bound up with the wave of nationalist discourses concerning popular media, an additional layer to the discursive production of Yu Lei's authorial identity, as the next section discusses.

### Deconstructing Yu Lei's Female Authorship: Neoliberal Postfeminism and Neonationalist Elements

Numerous as the paratexts around *NT* are, few acknowledge the predominantly female production team of *NT* or Yu Lei's achievement and visibility as a woman in the male-dominated Chinese television industry. A cover story of Yu Lei entitled "Burnishing National Treasure to Brighten Chinese History and Culture" by *Women of China* was an exception. The story quoted Yu Lei as downplaying the gender oppression and discrimination that persists in China, as she noted:

(...) in contemporary society, there is no big gender difference in the workplace. There were many legendary heroines in ancient China (...) and therefore, we shouldn't judge someone's achievement according to gender in modern society (...) my team is full of heroines. (Liu, 2018)

In another interview with the ACWF, Yu Lei argued that "the new era provides everyone with opportunities to fulfil his/her dreams, as long as he/she works hard" ("Qianli Zhuimeng Zaigua Yunfan," 2019), propagating the neoliberal ideology that contemporary Chinese society provides the possibility of self-actualization for anyone who tries hard enough, thus ignoring "men's absolute dominance in the distribution of political and financial power" (Yang, 2020, p. 4). The same rhetorics are exemplified in mainstream media coverage emphasizing Yu Lei's self-determination, professionalism, and extraordinary work ethic. For example, one described the work of Yu Lei's team thus:

Yu and her colleagues wrote draft plans, which they revised and polished—again and again. They invited thousands of experts and scholars to read the plans and give feedback. During the busiest preparation period, Yu slept a mere two to three hours a day. In the daytime, she watched rehearsals at the television studio. Late in the evening, she supervised the editing of films in the computer room. ("Promoting National Treasures to the World," 2019)

Such framing of Yu Lei's successes with *NT* as a result of her hard work is part of broader media discourses highlighting women's individual empowerment and personal agency. There are similar characteristics in a number of fictional narratives about female professionals on the Chinese screen, where depoliticized freedom-of-choice storylines about glamorous female professionals "naturalize the heroine's

individual success and ignores institutional sexism in the workplace, such as the glass ceiling and unequal pay” (Yang, 2020, p. 11). However, in reality, even though many individual women have achieved the social and economic status that their male counterparts attain, gender inequality, discrimination, and exploitation still endure in Chinese society (Evans, 2008; Yang, 2011). In China, many women’s physical, aesthetic, and emotional labor continue to be exploited by the beauty economy (Yang, 2011) and professional women are still the target of derogatory “leftover women” discourses that:

(...) ridicule them for their failures to fulfil traditional marital and maternal roles—roles that comprise the government’s ideologies of heterosexual marriage as central to social stability and hence national wellbeing—and blame the women’s individualistic scholarly and career pursuits or other personal choices. (Ng & Li, 2020, p. 483)

In this vein, Yu Lei’s hard work and consequent successes as a female author discursively function as “emblems of the individualist ideology of market opportunity and competition,” which, as Evans (2008) argues, fail to address the hierarchical relationships between men and women in China, and instead become “components of individual exploration, dissociated from the broader issues of power and injustice” (p. 378).

As Banet-Weiser, Gill, and Rottenberg (2020) argue in a critique of the neoliberal underpinnings of post-feminism, “simply becoming visible does not guarantee that identity categories will somehow be transformed, or will deeply challenge hegemonic power relations” (p. 10). Thus, even as women in the Chinese media industry continue to face problems such as gender stereotypes and a gender gap in leadership positions (Cui, 2006; Sun, 2015), the success story about Yu Lei and her female team suggests that gender equality in the industry has already been achieved.

It is also important to point out that Yu Lei’s production decisions are subject to limitations specific to the context of media regulation in China. To operate within the guidelines of China’s state broadcaster, Zhu Tong, the deputy editor-in-chief of CCTV, was assigned as the presenter (出品人) of the program, and assumed the role of monitor, censor, and supervisor in accordance with the regulations of the NRTA, China’s state media regulator. According to these regulations, the presenter is the legal representative and supervisor of a television program, who “ensures the program complies with laws, regulations, and policies of the state, and adhere to a correct public opinion orientation” (NRTA, 2002). Zhu Tong’s role consequently consists of assuring that *NT* conforms to the party-state ideology.

Zhu’s supervisory role was already evident in the pre-premiere promotion. In an interview with the CCP’s *China Daily* newspaper, he praised *NT* as “an innovative attempt by CCTV to shoulder the responsibility of the Chinese state broadcaster and keep abreast of the times” (“Yangshi Qidong *Guojia Baozang*,” 2017). Zhu also elaborated on the motivation for creating the program, explaining in an interview with the official Xinhua News Agency that “the passion for culture, as well as the

tradition and workmanship of the Chinese nation, has become a trend (. . .) which has inspired our resolve to better promote our fine culture” (“China Focus,” 2017). The involvement of Zhu (and other male leaders from the NRTA) in the official approval of the program’s content is a clear constraint on Yu Lei’s authorial freedom, exemplifying the overriding power of the NRTA and the CCP on television programming as well as their paratexts in China. This is reminiscent of Evans’ (2008) observation on the long influence of the CCP authority on women’s liberation in China—“the Party’s ‘bestowal’ of policies and practices defined as furthering women’s interests in their own liberation did not, fundamentally, construct women as agents of their own transformation” (p. 377).

Not surprisingly, the success of *NT* was celebrated by Chinese mainstream media in overtly patriotic tones, as it exemplified “telling China’s story well”—a call by President Xi Jinping to bolster China’s domestic cultural confidence and international soft power. It was also triumphantly endorsed by Chinese academic communities: the program was seen both as a bridge that connects ancient Chinese civilization with the advancements of contemporary China (Fang & Song, 2018), and as “a rousing jab” (醒脑针) reducing the influence of foreign cultures on Chinese youth (Pan & Yang, 2018, p. 67), both of which work to assert Chinese cultural power. In this vein, the construction of Yu Lei’s female authorship is best understood in the context of what Fung (2016) calls a rise of “neonationalism” in today’s China:

The state must continue to use the media and culture industries, if not to indoctrinate then to foster the new generation by promoting a nationalism that keeps the nation intact and harmonious. Given the increasing gap between wealth and poverty in China, inequalities among sectors, and differentials in regional development, the state faces an enormous number of dissident voices. Force and military strength cannot be used to mute these voices; instead, national-branding strategies can be used to penetrate the populace, particularly the new generation. (p. 3016)

Fung (2016) describes this neonationalism as promoted by the Chinese media and cultural industry, suggesting that “it is new not in its core ideology of patriotism and chauvinism but in its mode of propagation and intended outcomes” (p. 3016). Thus, as it is “subtle, mellow, and unobtrusive and appear[s] in a form that is not a campaign to brainwash citizens” (p. 3016) the consequences of such discourses tend to be less visible. Yu Lei’s paratextual comments about *NT* also comprise a valuable asset in promoting such ideologies. For instance, she insisted in an interview that “to arouse Chinese people’s passion about the great civilization of our country, and to enhance their willingness to promote the splendid culture of our country, that is the most important significance of producing such a program” (“Promoting National Treasures,” 2019). The (neo)nationalist and patriotic consciousness of such statements is clear, underlining her pride in Chinese culture and history, and more importantly, encouraging the viewers to feel the same.

Also worth noting is that, in public appearances, Yu Lei's attire is intentionally tied in appealing ways to traditional Chinese culture and aesthetics. For example, in her 2018 acceptance speech after receiving the "Best Seasonal Variety Show" award at the Shanghai Television Festival, Yu Lei wore a mazarine blue Chinese style jacquard robe with a white jade butterfly brooch on her right shoulder. This stylish dress featured strong Chinese elements, which was complimented by the festival host as "a crystallization of Chinese aesthetic tradition," and then lauded by China's state media as "the best dress with Chinese traditional literati aesthetic" ("[Baiyulanjiang Hua Luo Guojia Baozang](#)," 2018). As a result of such deliberate fashion choices, Yu Lei's mainstream visibility as a female author of Chinese television works in concert with the content of *NT* to support the Party's (neo)nationalist agenda.

### **A Partial Challenge to Normative Gender Discourses: Representations of Women on *National Treasure***

So far, this article has discussed how authorial power is typically overstated in the paratexts about Yu Lei's role in *NT*; the discourses in interviews and media commentary downplay the barriers that women in the media industry must confront, as well as obscure the regulatory power of the CCP. At the same time, several scholars have suggested looking at the media text itself to gain a broader understanding of authorship and agency (e.g., [Grant, 2001](#); [Wei, 2019](#)). In this vein, Yu Lei can be seen to be exercising agency in presenting certain representations of women on the show, and this final section thus examines two popular episodes of *NT* that challenge some of China's problematic gender discourses. To escape negative judgement, women on Chinese television are frequently required to both have a career while also taking good care of their family, as well as being "a rational consumer" to "sustain the state-managed consumer economy" ([Wang & Mihelj, 2019](#), p. 53). In these normative female images, then, women's professional abilities and achievements can never be independently assessed and praised, and the representations on *NT* are therefore noteworthy.

First, Yu Lei has tended to place female characters at center of the program as "independent agents," not "reduced to symbols or ornaments" ([Wei, 2019](#), p. 85). Since its beginning, the show has foregrounded independent women with fulfilling careers, in contrast to traditional female stereotypes often seen on Chinese TV. For example, in the premiere episode, four women were introduced to the audience as the so-called "real-life guardians," who all volunteered at the Palace Museum but also had full-time careers, including a manager of internationally funded hotels, an aircraft engine repairwoman, a doctoral candidate at Peking University, and a post-graduate student at the Communication University of China.

Professional women on Chinese television are often stereotypically depicted as having been "left alone by widowhood or [having] a failed relationship" ([Yang, 2020](#), p. 12). Therefore, while such characters are given "all-inclusive and all-accessible freedom of choice" in their lives, this freedom may be seen as threatening "masculinity in the

conventional gender hierarchy,” and thus, their “failures” in their personal lives suggest to viewers that they did not make the “right choice” (Yang, 2020, p. 12). In contrast, the portrayal of the four women in the *NT* episode positively highlights their independence, as well as their educated backgrounds and professional accomplishments. To be sure, their devotion to Chinese culture and heritage is arguably also recruited into neonationalist ideologies, recasting the women as ideal female citizens and perhaps thus making this type of partially transgressive female subjectivity more acceptable in today’s China. However, this does not fully negate the ways that the episode challenges dominant “leftover women” discourses.

Yu Lei’s ability to present alternative depictions of women on her show is further exemplified by *NT*’s notable stories about women in Chinese history as acted out in the weekly stage plays, which tend to foreground women who challenged traditional gender expectations in ancient China. For example, the first episode of *NT*’s third season focused on Wang Zhenyi (played by Zhang Zifeng), an outstanding female scientist in 18th-century China, and highlighted her significant contributions to scientific knowledge in astronomy, mathematics, geography, and medicine. More importantly, the stage play contained a crucial discussion that criticized the social prejudices against Wang Zhenyi as having “failed” to get married, instead devoting her life to science. Thus, as framed by *NT*, Wang Zhenyi illustrates how a Chinese woman can make contributions outside of the domestic sphere as an independent agent, not reduced to a subordinate or submissive role subject to patriarchal forces.

In sum, although the visibility of characters like the four ordinary Chinese women or Wang Zhenyi cannot be equated with full gender equality, these representations are still important. Not only does *NT* provide a narrative space where such stories can be told, but the program offers a prominent intervention in Chinese television by depicting Chinese women in non-traditional roles. Yu Lei’s agency as a female author, while imperfect and constrained, nevertheless has political value and the potential to at least partly challenge dominant ideologies. Thus, Yu Lei exemplifies what Staiger (2003) denotes as “rebellious or resistant authorship,” which can be understood as “the performative outcome of asserting agency against the normative” (p. 51).

## Conclusion

Women have been enjoying new forms of visibility in post-2010 Chinese entertainment television, not just onscreen, but also in paratextual discourses about women as content producers. This article has examined Yu Lei’s role for *NT*, particularly how promotional and reception materials construct her as a highly prominent female author in Chinese media. Media interviews and coverage about the show work to produce an illusion of Yu Lei’s absolute creative control, even as she is subject to the “hegemony of the party-state apparatus and the marketplace” (Berry, 2009, p. 73) and its neonationalist agenda (Fung, 2016).

While Yu Lei's status as a woman is significant within an entertainment industry dominated by male producers, her female authorial identity is substantially informed by neoliberal, postfeminist rhetoric reliant on notions of individual empowerment, autonomy, and agency. Thus, such discourses suggest structural changes in the Chinese television industry sufficient to have increased women's levels of autonomy across the board. More generally, by branding Yu Lei and other female creators as empowered subjects with the same opportunities as their male counterparts, the implication is that gender equality has been achieved and feminism is no longer needed in China. Therefore, Yu Lei's successful authorship of *NT* functions problematically as a "metaphor for social change" that is in fact far from complete, and which may, somewhat paradoxically, in fact provoke a "displacement of feminism as a political movement" (McRobbie, 2009, p. 15), serving instead as primarily a marketing and promotion strategy for Chinese television industry and the CCP.

On the other hand, Yu Lei has been able to present some depictions of Chinese women on *NT* that challenge a number of problematic gender stereotypes, particularly to do with well-educated professional women and assumptions about women's domestic responsibilities. This illustrates some agency in pushing back against dominant discourses and achieving her own goals, even as Yu Lei (and Chinese media producers as a whole) are subject to the authority of the NRTA and the CCP. As Yang (2011) critically points out, "the balance and manipulation of this agency, and resistance to it, are key to both women's empowerment and feminist activism" in China (p. 354).

We close this article by pointing to a number of directions for future research. One is an investigation of viewer reactions to the newly emergent female author figures in Chinese television, including for professional women who might see Yu Lei as an admirably successful figure amongst them. Nuanced studies of audience attitudes could also probe how viewers of *NT* understand the multiple discourses around women's roles as represented on the show and as presented in the show's paratexts about Yu Lei. Additional studies should be conducted on other series, including both shows with other female authors and those with male authors, comparisons of which would provide insight into the processes of paratextual construction of media authors more generally. Finally, it must be noted that, at the time of writing this article, the CCP has been exerting increasingly tighter control over the media industries, and it seems like a sea change is in motion; how this will affect television content and production, including for women both onscreen and behind the camera, will require new scrutiny.

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## Note

1. In line with Gray (2010) and Mittell (2015), we use the term “paratext” to refer to the supplementary material surrounding television productions, which can help audiences to make sense of a TV text. Mittell (2015) distinguishes between the official paratexts (e.g., interviews and trailers) and the unofficial, or viewer created, paratexts (e.g., blog posts, fan fiction, and reviews). Taken together, these paratexts frame the textual consumption of TV, and therefore, exemplify the intertextuality of different forms of textual data.

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