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Empower or disempower? The Cunning Patriarchal Consumerism and Female Representation in the Chinese Online Shopping Festival "Queen's Day"

Xiaohan Huang

Department of Media and Communication Studies, Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University, Renai Street, Suzhou, China
hxhjasper@163.com

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Abstract: Chinese online shopping festival has become increasingly important to research on cultural and societal issues related to gender. This paper focuses on the Chinese online shopping festival "3.8 Queen's Day", investigates the relationship between female empowerment and patriarchal consumerism power embedded in "Queen's Day" in context of Chinese society. This paper analyses the reason of the popularity of "Queen's Day" through the historical and societal perspective, and by critical discourse analysis of the advertisements and slogans in "Queen's Day", the patriarchal power presented by dominant male aesthetics and patriarchal discourse have been found. Then, through renaming "Women's Day" and the word "Women" ("妇女" in Chinese) to "Queen", it can be seen that patriarchal consumerism discourse has done alienation towards female by deconstructing the historical and societal meaning of the "Women's Day". This paper uncovers the cunning of patriarchal consumerism as inconspicuous male power seemingly empowers but actually disempowers female through ads that advocate "female independence".

1. Introduction

The sales volume of the Chinese online shopping festival, "3.8 Queen's Day", showed a more than 100% year-on-year increase in 2020 [1]. In the recently passed "Queen's Day" of 2021, the total sales volume produced by live streamers who sell products on Taobao, the most popular online shopping platform in China, was up to 5 billion RMB [2]. Various data have shown that "3.8 Queen's Day" has become one of the most popular online shopping "carnivals" in China, similar to the "Double Eleven Festival". In 2009, Taobao for the first time made 11.11 an "online shopping festival", in which customers could gain special discounts [3]. Due to the sharp rise of e-commerce platforms in the last decade, more dates had been redefined as "shopping festivals" and made huge profits for e-commerce companies.

The research related to the social impact of Chinese shopping festivals is little. Meng and Huang (2017) discussed the national ideology within the "Double Eleven Festival" which intersects with gender [4]. Chen and Cheung (2020) and Hu and Luo (2016) used semiotic analysis and discourse analysis to examine the advertisements of "Double Eleven Festival" [5][6]. However, since the main

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consumers of online shopping festivals are the female, it is important to consider the social impact that festivals bring to female. Compared with the existing literature on Chinses online festivals which mainly focus on “Double Eleven Festival”, this paper pays special attention to “3.8 Queen’s Day”, the shopping festival which precisely targets at female. “3.8 Women's Festival” was originally launched by Taobao in 2015 as a new shopping carnival, which targeted at female consumers. In 2017, Taobao renamed it "3.8 Queen's Day" and proposed the slogan “Live your own beauty” [3]. “Queen’s Day” is now widely used by almost all e-commerce platforms to create “shopping carnivals” on Women’s Day. Thus, Women’s Day in China has a more special meaning.

The reason why “Queen’s Day” is so popular among Chinese female is because of its specialized publicity. From the slogan of the whole “Queen’s Day” to the advertising text of every item which targets at women, the discourses of “Queen’s Day” put emphasis on “female power” which makes women feel being “empowered”. This is considerably connected to the increasing economic power of female and the awakening of Chinese female’s self-consciousness.

However, if paying close attention to the advertising texts under the certain social context, the answer could be quite different. Chinese female not only have not been empowered, but are disempowered and alienated, in the context of “Queen’s Day” which shows dominant patriarchal consumerism ideology, in which the patriarchal consumerism strengthens male gaze towards the gender norm of female.

Then, by reading the rename of “Queen’s Day” from a more historical and societal perspective, it can be seen that “Queen’s Day” weakens the female power by deconstructing the original meaning of Women’s Day and reconstructing female as “independent” consumers who meet the expectations of dominant patriarchal ideology.

This paper will use three main parts to argue the patriarchal consumerism have strengthened male gaze power and done alienation to female by the seeming “empowering” ads and slogans. Firstly, this paper will analyse the reason for the emergence and popularity of “Queen’s Day”. Secondly, by doing the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of the advertising texts and slogans of “Queen’s Day”, the ideological force which exists in the discourse of “Queen’s Day” and the socio-cultural context in China will be examined. The last part is the analysis of the rename of Women’s Day, which reflects the stigmatization of the word “Women” (“Fu Nv” in Chinese) and the deconstruction of the historical and social significance of Women’s Day.

2. The Reason for the Emergence and Popularity of “Queen’s Day”

2.1. Historical Perspective—Confucianism

The reason that why Queen's Day came into being can be viewed from a historical perspective. In the patriarchal structure under the traditional Chinese Confucian ideology which lasted for thousands of years, women had always had low social status. The Confucianism constrained women throughout the whole feudal dynasty era. Dong Zhongshu, a Confucian scholar in the Han Dynasty, equated the relationship between husband and wife with "monarch-subject relationship” and “father-son relationship”. Thus, the gender difference between men and women developed into a hierarchical difference [7].

One of the most famous Confucianism related to the female is that women should comply with "feminine ethics", so called “Three Obediences and Four Virtues (“三从四德”San Cong Si De)”. The Three Obediences require the female to “obey the father before the marriage, obey the husband after marriage, and obey the first son after the death of husband”. The Four Virtues are “(sexual) morality, proper speech, modest manner, and diligent work” [8]. In addition, the female had no rights to inheritance because they were considered as the temporary members in the family [9]. It can be seen that women were subordinate to men in traditional Confucianism. A qualified woman cannot have

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her own independent personality, who needs to be submissive and humble to the men around her throughout her life. In the Confucian ethical system, women had always been deeply rooted in the "inside" of the family and their social relations were infinitely simplified [10]. It is worth noting that "diligent work" mentioned in the four virtues refers to housework or needlework rather than working outside and making money. Confucianism believes that women should not go out to "show their face" and should not be given jobs that have contact with the outside world, not to mention participating in political affairs [8]. Therefore, in Confucianism context, the moral character of women is far more important than their intelligence and they were regarded as unworthy of receiving education [9]. This also reflects the patriarchal society's control over women in the spiritual level.

At the same time, Female's chastity was emphasized by Confucianism. The idea of "following the same husband throughout the life" ("从一而终"Cong Yi Er Zhong) was proposed in the Later Han Dynasty and became the dominant ideology. The chaste and virginal women who chose to die with her husband rather than remarrying were greatly praised, and widows were considered to fit the image of women [7]. Such a requirement for women's virginity (not for men) reflected the idea in the patriarchal society that ideal women should essentially be pure in order to ensure the inviolability of male rights [7].

The obedience and purity are the characters of ideal female images shaped by Confucianism, in which the subservience of women to men was natural. Women could not control their destiny and were "severely oppressed under the social and moral hierarchy of sexual relations in traditional China" [9]. This kind of patriarchal ideology's expectation and controls towards female gender roles have been consistently reflected in the media up to now. According to Kang (1997, p.972) and Luo and Hao (2007), research found that women are often underestimated as passive, submissive and dependent images and stereotyped as "sex object, housewife or occupations like secretary or airline stewardess" [11][12]. Chen (2013, p.7) found that the female images in Chinese advertisements are often "stereotypical, subordinate, objectified, commercialized and pornographic" [13]. These role stereotypes consistently develop and present as a function of cultural norms [11].

2.2. The Rise of Female Self-awareness and Female Power

The turning point came in the 1980s and 1990s, when the one-child policy was introduced. Most Chinese women born in cities during the two decades were the only children in the families. They had access to all the resources of the family and experienced almost no explicit gender bias in their childhoods. However, when entering the schools or the workplace, the equal opportunity and equal treatment began to unravel as both of which were significantly skewed toward men [14]. According to *South China Morning Post* (1995), "63% of employees laid off by state enterprises in 1995 were women, and that they had only a one-in-three chance of finding a new job" [9]. Thus, Chinese female's gender awareness and aversion to gender inequality have been cultivated and they began to pursue a more independent lifestyle (both economically and spiritually), which forms the special "made-in-China feminism" [14].

At the same time, female images constructed by media have changed with the feminist movement and broader socioeconomic changes [12]. With the development of market economy, consumerism has gradually invaded and affected the image representation of women in society. The research done by [11] of women images in advertisements showed that advertisements for cosmetic products associated with the sexiest female images began to feature more powerful and independent female images.

Under this social context, it is not surprising that "Queen's Day" has been so popular among female consumers. Differing from other online shopping festivals, one of the most important characteristics of "Queen's Day" is that it targets at the female, especially the "modern independent female". With the female awareness of independence entered China, Chinese female use "Queen" to describe the

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female who do not need to rely on the male but show independence in their lives. This emergence and popularity of "Queen's Day" largely related to the dominant female values in China recent years.

For example, this poster was for the publicity of the 2017 (the first) Taobao "Queen's Day". it emphasized the word "Queen's Day" in both Chinese and English, and designed a crown on the Chinese character "Jie" (means "festival"). The slogan below wrote "Live Your Own Beauty", and the background picture is a girl holding a pair of high-heeled shoes, her face looks beautiful and confident. The picture and these words give the female a sense of empowerment that makes them feel independent, confident, and worthy of the best.



Figure 1: Poster of the first Taobao "Queen's Day"

This kind of texts and images can be seen throughout the whole online shopping platform during the "Queen's Day". Next, I will closely examine some advertising texts of the 2021 Taobao "Queen's Day" and explain why these advertisements and the ideology behind them are disempowering the female in an inconspicuous way.

3. Critical Discourse Analysis: The Advertisements of "Queen's Day"

3.1. Advertisements and Critical Discourse Analysis

The most distinctive feature of "Queen's Day" is that from the publicity of the carnival itself to the advertising words used by every merchant, are full of strong feminism characteristics. They make the female feel their "power" and the so-called "sense of control" by the straightforward words. However, if analysing the meaning behind these advertising slogans, we can find the trap made by consumerism under patriarchal ideology, which is hid under the cloak of "female independence".

Advertising has been referred to "the privileged discourse for the circulation of messages and social cues about the interplay between persons and objects" [15]. The "objects", in the patriarchal society, could be referred to the female, as they usually present as sexual objects being "seen" by the male. Male aesthetics has dominated the social standards on women in patriarchal society for thousands of years. However, this male aesthetic dominated by patriarchal discourse has not disappeared with the era development, but packaged in the "independence" of modern women and sold by consumerism. Consumerism make us accept the norms and values and the texts embodied in the dominant ideology was absorbed by the audience as naturalized, common sense [16][17]. According to Curran, Gurevitch & Woollacott (1982, p. 26), the role of media is to "disseminate and legitimate ruling ideology through the production of false consciousness" [12]. Thus, "advertising

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must be considered in light of cultural expectations" [11]. Through expectations of patriarchal ideology, the "ideal" women are "stereotyped through visual and textual aspects of the advertisements" and it makes the stereotypes "non-ideological," "natural," and "normal" [18][12].

Fairclough (1989) states that CDA is used to reveal the relationship between language, power and ideology [19]. The primary focus in CDA is to examine "how the power relations entwined with language and visuals and uncover the ideology underlying in the social-cultural context" [19]. In this part, critical discourse analysis (CDA) will be used to uncover the power and ideology behind the advertisements in "Queen's Day".

3.2. Apple and Armani: Patriarchal Discourse



Figure 2: The poster of Apple in 2021 "Queen's Day"

In this poster, Apple promotes "Queen's Day" and its products. In the screens of Apple products, various images of women are presented, and such clear visual images can make women feel a sense of identity and engagement. The bold text wrote that "Queen's Day is approaching. It's your turn to dote on yourself." The word "dote" (Chong) in Chinese originally means "pet", it generally used to describe the attitude of people to pets and adults to children. The ancient emperor's favorite concubine called "Chong Fei" (means the concubine who gained most of emperor's love). In recent years, "Chong" is often used to refer to men's attitude towards women, which is kind of a reflection of the up-down patriarchal structure. In this text, women may feel a sense of empowerment through the key words "Queen's Day" and "dote on yourself" as they felt the connotation behind the sentence: be your own queen. I can love myself without a male. However, the discourse of this advertisement is problematic. Firstly, the logic of consumerism equals "Chong" to buying apple products. Through the meaning construction, consumerism culture is implanted into women's mind, making the only way of "love yourself" as consumption unwittingly. Secondly, the words "approaching" and "your turn", reflects the ideology of patriarchal consumerism. Women can only "dote on themselves" by consuming certain goods and at the time when "Queen's Day" is coming, which shows the "requirements" of the arrogant patriarchy structure.

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Figure 3: Advertisements of Armani in 2021 “Queen’s Day”

The advertising of Armani's lipsticks in “Queen's Day” shows a similar feature. Beneath a large image of an Armani lipstick, the text wrote that "Legendary lip glaze, Queen must have one". "Must have" reflects the same discourse characteristic, which is the “regulation and requirement” of the public consciousness by the dominant ideology. Economically Independent women need to prove themselves in the society, and they long for such title like “Queen”. Then the consumerism tells them If a female wants to be a queen, she must have this lip glaze. Women feel empowered in the context of being "Queen", but in fact they still have no power to control what they can be like. Chinese female is "told" by consumerism what you need to do to be a queen. This kind of disempowerment but thought to be empowerment, is where consumerism and advertising are cunning.

3.3. Cosmetics and Skin Care Products--Male Gaze and Gender Norms

In addition, the patriarchal power still exists in the media, especially in the advertising, but with changes in its representation form. Foucault pointed out that modern society is a discipline society, and the power creates disciplined individuals. The object of discipline often points to the body, and women's body often becomes its target [20]. For instance, the aesthetics of “white, thin and young” are dominant in the eastern Asia as an expectation of male towards the female [21], which are presented in the advertising of “Queen’s Day”.

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Figure 4: Dior's skincare advertisement in 2021 "Queen's Day"



Figure 5: Fresh's skincare advertisement in 2021 "Queen's Day"

In the advertisement of Dior (Figure 4), beneath the name of the product, the advertiser uses bold text to emphasize keywords like "bright white" and "fair skin", which is consistent with the aesthetic orientation of traditional Chinese male. In Fresh's advertising (Figure 5), the slogan of this sleep mask is "Maintain the Queen's young state", which has very obvious connotations that "the Queen should be young" and "need to purchase skin care products to protect the skin". We can clearly find out the cunning of patriarchy consumerism. On the one hand, it calls women as the "Queen", which makes them feel that they were empowered; on the other hand, it uses advertising to define social norms to force women to "make" their choice.

After the popularity of women's movements worldwide, more cosmetics and skin care advertisements advocate empowering women through publicity of images, encouraging "power", "freedom" and "change" in advertisements [19]. For example, in Estee Lauder's 2021 latest "Queen's Day" advertising, they used the concept of "Beauty and Beautify Together" ("美美与共", Mei Mei Yu Gong) to promote. "Mei Mei Yu Gong" originally was a concept proposed in the 1990s by Fei Xiaotong, a Chinese sociologist, as a summary of the attitudes towards other cultures in the world, that people should appreciate the diversity of different cultures for the prosperity of human civilization [22]. In the context of Estee Lauder's advertising, "Mei Mei Yu Gong" has been reformed as a communicating medium that makes the female feel that by using their products, they can be as beautiful as the endorsers of the products. Therefore, the original meaning of this concept has been turned into the meaning that could stimulate consumption by advertising.

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Figure 6: Main poster of Estee Lauder's 2021 “Queen’s Day” advertising



Figure 7: Cream advertisement of Estee Lauder's 2021 “Queen’s Day”



Figure 8: Liquid Foundation advertisement of Estee Lauder's 2021 “Queen’s Day”

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In the main poster, Estee Lauder invited Chinese celebrity Zhang Yuqi as the endorser. Under the logo of Estee Lauder is the slogan “Mei Mei Yu Gong”. Zhang holds a bottle of eye cream and convey confidence through her expression. In the bottom left corner, there is a sentence writes that "Every woman can be beautiful!" in English. The slogan at the bottom writes "each determination that is not afraid of the future, with you, we experience it together". The keyword here is "not afraid", was also a make a woman feel power; "with you" uses the second person to let the consumer has a strong sense of participation and engagement; the implication of the word "together" is the female consumers and Zhang’s connection. Thus, this advertising discourse established a strong link between the endorser and the female audience, refers to a form that can make the female feel empowered.

When clicking into the detailed advertising page, it is not surprising that other products under the series of “Mei Mei Yu Gong” use the similar forms as the publicity slogans. However, their discourses show more norms shaped by the patriarchal power.

In Figure 7, the cream advertisement invited famous model Karlie Kloss as the endorser, and the poster uses a close-up to show her delicate, flawless face. The same keyword "Yu Gong" (together) is combined with words "anti-aging" and "newborn", which allow the connected women to have an illusion that “I can be as young and beautiful as her through this product”. The following slogan is "no loose, not sag, and no wrinkle, freeze the young time". The three consecutive negative words pointed out its strong implication or connotation behind that face sagging is bad, wrinkles are bad, and women should use the product to stay young. Such a connotation reflects the aesthetics of “young” in the traditional male-dominated society, as well as the “regulation” and "interpretation" of women. As an aesthetic object, the judgment and interpretation right of female aesthetics is in the hands of men who control the social discourse power. Even in the advertisements that targets at women, the power of male gaze is still dominant.

Another product in the series of “Mei Mei Yu Gong”, the liquid foundation, invited the famous Chinese actress Yang Mi as the endorser. In figure 8, the words connected with the “Yu Gong” (together) are "exquisite flawless" and "charm"; the slogan below is "makeup makes you fearless". Connecting exquisite makeup (or buying this foundation) with women's confidence and fearlessness, this advertising text presents a strong patriarchal consumerism ideology that controls over women’s cognition.

Through these examples, it is clear that the advertising and publicity slogans in the “Queen’s Day” are used as functions to propagandize consumerism culture and dominant male aesthetics power and have an unconscious influence on the discipline of female images. By constructing the meaning of consumption into Queen’s characteristics such as “courage”, “independence” and “confidence” that Chinese female are keen on, the patriarchal consumerism ideology concealed male aesthetic cognitions and mainstream discourses under the consumeristic control logic and power relations in the society [20]. Women can only gain power through buying products that make them fit with male aesthetics—the recessive male gaze leads the female to accept the symbolized consumption in a way they enjoyed, thus, the prescribed female image maintains the existing gender inequality, in an inconspicuous, tricky way.

4. Renaming: The Stigmatization and Deconstruction of “Fu Nv”

The popularity of “Queen’s Day” makes Women’s Day in China has a special meaning, and the word “woman” (“妇女(Fu Nv)” in Chinese,) is gradually rejected by media and women themselves. Although the judicial interpretation of “Fu Nv” in China refers to the female age more than 14, the word in traditional Chinese context is usually used to refer to the female who are old, labouring or have already married. Therefore, with the dominant patriarchal aesthetic which prefers young, the digital media platforms and advertisers choose to rename “Women’s Day” (“妇女节”) into “Queen’s

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day". Although it seems that they want to empower the female, it actually reflects the rejection of aging.

One of the most popular live streamers in China, Li Jiaqi, who mainly sells cosmetics and skincare products on Taobao and produced more than 13 billion RMB sales volume in the second half of 2020 [2], was originally famous for his style. When doing his live streaming and tries to sell products, Li always calls his audience "all the girls" ("所有女生(Nv Sheng)" in Chinese). The meaning of "Nv Sheng" is similar to "girls", refers to very young female. Li's word choice represents that no matter how old the audiences are, they can be young girls in his live streaming room. Similarly, in all aspects of social lives, Chinese female consider "Fu Nv" as a derogatory term and feel ashamed of being called "Fu Nv". When talking about Women's Day, they use the word "Queen's Day" or "Girl's Day" to substitute.

The pursuit of "girl" and the reject of "Fu Nv" reflects the stigmatization of "Fu Nv" under the patriarchal social norms. As one of the expectations of patriarchy towards women is "young", the rename of "women" and "Women's Day" in the commercial consumer culture take advantage of the existing gender norms and further strengthen it, and support the national discourse and dominant patriarchal ideology [23].

On the other hand, the rename of Women's Day is also a deconstruction of the historical and societal meaning of Women's Day, which further benefits to stabilize the patriarchal social structure. Research found that when in the Mao-era, women are portrayed as an important force in the construction of national economy and communist culture [12]. During the communism construction period, the slogan that "Women can hold up half of the sky" was one of the most popular ones [9]. The word "Fu Nv" at that time defined the gender roles of female as important, contributory individuals to the nation, rather than the delicate consumers or the objects that "being seen" be the male gaze.

Moreover, Women's Day was the commemoration of a series of major events of women's movement happened in many countries all over the world in the early 20th century, it represents the feminists' struggling for female's rights [24]. International Women's Day is celebrated for women to educate, review their strength and strengthen their unity [25]. Since 1924 that Chinese female for the first-time celebrated Women's Day, many non-governmental women's organizations took advantage of Women's Day to mobilize women to participate in the Women's Movement, and modern Chinese women's political participation have made an important step [24]. Women's Day reflects the struggling that the female made to fight for their own rights, while renaming Women's Day to "Queen's Day" is tantamount to simplify the connotation of Women's Day to the festival that "female love themselves" (by the consumption), which is the deconstruction of the political and societal meaning of Women's Day.

From the historical perspective, the words "Fu Nv" and "Fu Nv Jie" (Women's Day) both have significant historical and societal meaning for the female in China. They represent the power of female to work in the equal status as the male and the fighting for their rights in a patriarchal society. By stigmatizing the word "Fu Nv" and replacing the name of Women's Day with "Queen's Day", the patriarchal consumerism strengthens male gaze towards female's age and weakens the female power by deconstructing the original meaning of Women's Day. Female has been disciplined as consumers who meet the expectations of patriarchy.

5. Conclusion

In the modern Chinese society that consumer culture takes a large part of people's lives, it is important to reflect on the relationship between the female, the main online shopping consumers, and the ideological power which controls the representation of the female appellation, female images and even female themselves. This paper focuses on "Queen's Day", the recently arisen online shopping

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festival in China which targets at female customers, uncovers the cunning patriarchal consumerism ideology which hidden behind the surface of “female empowerment”.

Firstly, by analysing the reason why “Queen’s Day” could appear and become so popular from a historical perspective, it is clear that the constraint towards the female by traditional Confucianism which lasts for thousands of years has a huge impact on how the patriarchal society portrays female images. With the proposition of the one-child policy and the prosperity of feminism movements, Chinese female began to form the idea of “self” [9] and pursued the economically and spiritually independence. Meanwhile, with the invasion of consumerism, advertisers try to cater to the thoughts of modern Chinese female. Thus, the “Queen’s Day” appears and is welcomed by the female because they feel empowered by the title “Queen”.

Secondly, through the critical discourse analysis of the slogans and advertising texts in 2021 “Queen’s Day”, I argue that through the combined effect of patriarchal ideology and consumerism, these “Queen's Day” advertisements, on the one hand, associate women's pursuit of “I deserve the best” or “courage and confidence” with consumption of certain products, so that women’s empowerment is equal to false demand; on the other hand, these advertisements reflect the dominant male gaze on women which requires the female to be “young” and “white”, women are still the objects that “being seen”. It even makes it easier for women to accept by constructing symbolic meanings of goods beyond themselves and concealing the patriarchal ideology under the packaging of "female independence". The so called “cunning patriarchal consumerism” shapes the idea of “female” in a less obvious way.

Lastly, I discussed the stigmatization of the word “Fu Nv” and its connotation as the rejection of aging, which meets the dominant male aesthetic expectation. Then, by examining the historical and societal meaning of Women’s Day, the rename of Women’s Day reflects the conversion from the struggling for rights to the carnival of consumption and the deconstruction of the female power.

In conclusion, the name, context and discourse of the online shopping festival “Queen’s Day” reflect the irreconcilable but inconspicuous relationship between female empowerment and patriarchal consumerism which aims at disciplining the female and force them to be the primary force of consumption. The discipline towards female and strengthened patriarchal consumerism power have been covered by the female’s seeming “empowerment”.

“Queen’s Day”, as an important cultural event, has significant meaning when researching on the relationship between Chinese female and patriarchal power. This paper fills the gap that little research focuses on this event and its impact. Moreover, this paper also provides a new research direction for Chinese gender and cultural criticism.

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