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Automated Care in a Domestic Space: Reproductive Futurism in Hao Jingfang's 'The Question of Love'

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ABSTRACT

This article is a feminist reading of Hao Jingfang's science fiction story 'The Question of Love' (2017) which invites a dialogue between enduring feminist agendas and neoliberal conditions in contemporary China. The story offers near-future techno-imaginaries of a Chinese urban elite's household, and it problematises the privatisation of labour's social reproduction via techno-automation, especially the power relation of the non-caring subject-position over the caring subject-position. The article starts with a theoretical discussion of childcare, love, and automation of housework as they pertain to social reproduction theory. The origin and development of this feminist genealogy is introduced, followed by a historical contextualisation of how social reproduction is perceived and organised in People's Republic of China, differentiating between the socialist era and the post-socialist era, and between the rural residents and urban dwellers. The last section offers a textual analysis of Hao's story about love and care, interrogating the techno-othering of caregiving and the prescription of a productivist imperative through feeling rules. The reading reveals the story's critical unmaking of the patriarchal-corporate alliance and their underlying productivist imperative.

Keywords: China, science fiction, social reproduction theory, love, automated childcare

INTRODUCTION

Lin An, the Chief Intelligence Engineer at a renowned tech-company Delphi, is a single father of two. After his wife passes away, he resorts to a male AI housekeeper, the latest product of his company, to manage his elite family. Unexpectedly, Lin An has been put into a coma after an attack in his own study at home, the circumstances of which remain unclear. Chen Da, the AI housekeeper, has become the target of controversy in both news coverage and social media as the first suspect. As the public debate spirals over the first AI-involved assault in the new era of human-android coexistence, the case is abruptly brought to the Court by Delphi, the company that developed Chen Da, with an accusation of murder against Lin An's son, Lin Shanshui.

This is the beginning of Hao Jingfang's story 'The Question of Love,' (*Aide Wenti* 爱的问题)[1] published in 2017. The story develops through three plot arcs: the interview-based investigations about the assault, the dramatic courtroom battle, and Lin An's final return to consciousness after justice has been formally yet wrongfully pronounced. The narrative unfolds through five rotating perspectives: Qing Cheng the court judge, Chen Da the AI housekeeper, Lin Caomu the daughter, Lin Shanshui the son, and eventually an account of Lin An after he wakes up from the coma. Each character offers their distinct interpretation of both family dynamics and the legal proceedings.

Hao Jingfang represents a new generation of Chinese science fiction writers who are both well received domestically and have a growing international readership. She was honoured with the Hugo Award for her novelette *Folding Beijing* in 2016, and her science fiction stories have appeared in several school textbooks in China. As a prolific writer of two novels and more than sixty short stories, Hao has been writing science fiction since the early 2000s. With a PhD in economics and management from Tsinghua University, she has been working for the China Development Research Foundation, engaged in research on child development programmes and policies in impoverished areas. As Carlos Rojas points out, Hao Jingfang uses her science fiction stories to interrogate 'China's explosive growth and urbanization' (2022: 726). More recently, Hao has also launched an entrepreneurial initiative

[1] All the translations of the story are done by me.

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to rethink primary and secondary education beyond conventional institutions and to create future-oriented educational eco-systems.[2]

Cultural representations of automated domestic labour in post-socialist China tend to follow the trope of a male consumer and a female robot. Earlier works tend to centre on conjugal relationships between a human bachelor and a robot wife.[3] More recent cultural representations tend to frame such techno-imaginaries within an urban elite family with an emphasis on childcare, and the automation continues to exercise heterosexual male desires through various fantasies of femininity.[4] Hao Jingfang's techno-imaginaries differs from the mainstream narratives in two significant ways. Firstly, the AI housekeeper is designed as a male instead of a female. Secondly, centring the story around an unclear attack, the story shifts the hostility between the robot and the wife in mainstream narratives to a dramatized conflict between an engineer's techno-product and his two teenage children who long for their single father's love. Beyond conventional romance, the story's title 'The Question of Love' illuminates a profound ethical tension at the intersection of feminist and Marxist thought: is family worth defending when it threatens one's career? To push it further, how do competing forms of devotion reveal deeper tensions within social structures and moral frameworks of care work?

Love is a key motif in this story. This is manifested both in the story's title and its opening sentence: 'When news of the murder spread around the world, most people forgot about the question of love' (79). Taking on such a strong cue, this article uses love as an interpretive angle to engage with the story's depictions regarding the automation of domestic labour as well as the role of childcare in this structure. Through this story about love and care, Hao Jingfang invites a dialogue between enduring feminist agendas and neoliberal conditions in contemporary China. In the following sections, this article first discusses notions of childcare, love, and the automation of housework through the lens of social reproduction theory. Then it introduces the changing landscape of how social reproduction is perceived and organised in Peoples' Republic of China. After sorting out the theoretical concepts and socio-historical context, the last section offers a feminist reading of Hao's story regarding its techno-imaginaries of China's post-socialist domestic space of the urban elites. By interrogating the techno-othering of the caregiver and prescriptions of the productivist imperative through feeling rules, my reading reveals the story's unmaking of a productivist patriarchal-corporate alliance.

CHILDCARE, LOVE, AND AUTOMATED HOUSEWORK

Childcare is often viewed as an expression of love and a motherly impulse that is romanticised at the core of femininity. Social reproduction theory (SRT), however, firmly contends that childcare is a form of social reproductive labour – the labour that is necessary to (re)produce and maintain a society's labour force. As Tithi Bhattacharya puts it: 'The fundamental insight of SRT is, simply put, that human labour is at the heart of creating or reproducing society as a whole' (2017: 2). SRT both conceives the notion of labour 'in the original sense in which Karl Marx meant it, as "the first premise of all human history,"' and is a critique of Marx's labour theory for its insufficient development of the concept of labour (Bhattacharya, 2017: 2). To understand the origin and development of these feminist debates, we need to first take a look at a class approach to women's struggles in the 1970s. In her 1971 work *The Dialectic of Sex*, Shulamith Firestone promotes the notion of sex class to bridge class analysis and psychoanalysis. In doing so, she expands historical materialism to include 'the biological division of the sexes for the purpose of reproduction, which lies at the origins of class' (Firestone, 1971: 12). For Firestone, the problem of classic Marxism is that its purely economic perspective ignores the psychosexual dynamics of classes, especially how reproductive functions related to sex difference contribute to unequal power distributions between classes, while the problem of classic psychoanalysis is that its basic theories[5] preclude interrogation into the power dynamic within class-development that arises from individuals' psychosexual formation based on the dominant meanings attributed to sex difference in patriarchal societies (4–14). Critically appropriating the socialist revolution model of eliminating 'the economic class *distinction* itself,' Firestone envisions that 'genital differences between human beings would no longer matter culturally', setting the goal of a feminist revolution to eliminate 'sex *distinction* itself' (11, italics in original).

Firestone's approach to address sexual inequality through a sex class perspective is concurrent with the International Wages for Housework campaign in the 1970s U.S.. In her seminal work, 'Wages Against Housework'

[2] The official website of Hao's project: https://www.tongxingschool.com/.
[3] See Huang (1996), Wei (1999).
[4] The TV series 'Humans' (2021), directed by Hongyu Li and adapted from the Swedish science fiction series 'Real Humans', is an example of this.
[5] Firestone argues that Freud's failure to question the fundamental structure of human society led his method to attribute the universal origins of suffering to innate psychological drives. This turned historically-determined existential conditions into innate, *a priori* constructs, effectively naturalising social and political problems as an incurable human flaw (14).

(1975), Silvia Federici promotes wages for housework as a 'political perspective' to revolutionise 'all our family and social relations' by 'demystifying and subverting the role to which women have been confined in capitalist society'; she argues that this is 'the only revolutionary perspective from a feminist viewpoint and ultimately for the entire working class' (1–2). Highlighting that 'housework is already money for capital,' Federici decouples housework from femininity and points out that the failure to recognise housework as worthy of wages results from a capitalist tactic to divide '*the unity of the class*' (5, italics in original). In other words, to naturalise housework into feminine qualities functions to divide the proletarian class of both men and women by, on the one hand, trapping the male worker with a dependent woman who would 'patch up his ego when it is crushed by the work and the social […] relations of loneliness […] that capital has reserved for him'(3), and on the other hand, disciplining the female worker to accept her social relations of loneliness as a gendered duty. Following Federici, social reproduction feminists consider domestic labour as '*economically (and thus capitalistically) productive* labour' which 's*ocially reproduces* labour power for capital'; such a view problematises the perception of housework as unproductive for both Marxian economics and mainstream economic measurements (Ferguson, 2019: 360, emphasis in original). They offer a political economy of domestic labour that brings systematic critiques against a patriarchal capitalism and its degradation of social reproductive labour.

The result is a development of Marx's labour theory of value: the capitalist mode of value production is a heterogeneous one, instead of a singular progression based on the teleological advancement of the productive force. The goal of claiming domestic labour as economically productive is not to simply create a new service in the market, just like Federici said, it is not a 'struggle to enter capitalist relations, because we have never been out of them' (1975: 5). The struggle is to reveal capital's hidden mechanisms of labour exploitation. In the following decades, many scholars considered the 'gender division of labour' and 'the relation between the domestic and public domains' as 'responsive to, and a central part of, changes in the relations of production as a whole' (Leacock and Safa, 1986: x). Major themes under discussion include:

> (1) the changing structure of the division of labour by gender in the context of social evolution, including the impact of economic development on women's work and status; and (2) the effects that the transition from peasant to industrial society – involving the passage from household to factory production – had upon both the sexual division of labour and women's social status. (Kelly, 1986: 1)

Such insights allow discussions around housework and domestic labour to move beyond the singular vector of gender politics to initiate a systematic critique of patriarchal capitalism and its social reproduction of the labour force.[6]

Love is a central device in maintaining patriarchal capitalist normative rhetoric, in order to privatise, naturalise, and moralise care's productive value, as it prescribes and mobilises women through romanticised affective imperatives to perform care duties. Marxist feminist affect scholarship has strived to denaturalise such labour. The affective turn since the 1990s marks the third boom in Western intellectual history to engage the normative with the affective (Parvulescu, 2019). One lineage of affect studies converges with a Marxist feminist legacy that melts down the distinction between the personal and the social.[7] Firestone's promotion of a sex class analysis, by bringing together the economic with the psychosexual, is an early endeavour to bridge the epistemic gap between the social and the personal. Arlie Hochschild's early work on emotional and affective labour denaturalises such forms of work prevalent in service-sector jobs. Hochschild foregrounds the contextual attributes of feelings, shifting the focus from emotion as moral expressions to its cognitive function. She views emotions as clues 'about the various definitions of reality that people apply when adopting an attitude' and about 'the individual's sense of the self-relevance of a perceived situation.' This perspective also encompasses how one positions herself in relation to others (2012: 212). For Hochschild, the social and the personal are connected through micro-acts; managements of feeling suggest social relations and social roles; particular acts matter because emotion does not have a presence that is independent of the person it is in. A particular emotion at a given context is informative about both the feeling-I – 'emotion locates the position of the viewer' (30) – and the worlds that viewer envisions.

Both Firestone and Hochschild highlight emotion's material importance for capitalist accumulation by shifting affective experiences from a moral discourse to socio-economic practices. In a similar vein, recent scholarships have pointed out an ongoing crisis of social reproduction due to a hidden productivist imperative. Kathi Weeks discusses how the work ethic, in the disguise of care narratives, promotes a productivist subjectivity for capital's

[6] The legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw's coinage of intersectionality in 1989 and its subsequent formations mark another important theoretical development regarding the heterogeneous complexity of capitalist modes of production and exploitation. Just as Ferguson describes, 'hierarchical geo-social relations' are at work to (re)produce 'racialised and/or colonised' labour at a disposable cost, aided by state-sanctioned expropriations and diverse forms of coerced labour (2019: 362). Such criticisms re-investigate 'how categories of oppression (such as gender, race, and ableism) are coproduced in simultaneity with the production of surplus value' (Bhattacharya, 2017: 14).

[7] See Raymond Williams (1977), Audre Lorde (1984), and Alison Jaggar (1989).

accumulation. She determines the conflict between capitalist accumulation and a broader understanding of social reproduction as 'the conflict between the processes of valorization and the reproduction of the subjects and socialities upon which they depend' (2011: 229–231).

Building on the autonomist Marxist tradition, Weeks problematises the idea of work itself as legitimate.[8] Only then, a possible post-work lexicon of care and love may emerge to envision a life outside productivist values. Also addressing the productivist imperative, Melissa Gregg studies the affective function of productivity for knowledge professionals, and she points out that the productive imperative has become a dominant discourse for immaterial labour in an information economy – as another 'post-secular belief system' that has dominated current labour management to upend the collective desire for work limits (2018: 5). By pointing out time management's affective function to displace anxiety in an era of job volatility, Gregg reveals the futility of productivity as a unit of measure in 'a world of 1 percent profiteers' (7). Instead, she advocates for 'mindful labour' as an alternative relationship to time that shifts from possessive individualism to something more lateral and collective (16). In this way, both scholars identify the productivist imperative in self-regulating practices in the name of care.

The productivist imperative to naturalise labour's social reproduction through gender and love narratives extends into automation designs.[9] Lee Mackinnon studies three forms of automation that resemble nineteenth century industrialisation, and she traces their erasure of materiality and causality of labour relations through a rhetoric of gender and love. The figure of a woman in technological design often functions to deskill certain labour as unintelligent, which 'underwrite[s] the primacy and intellect of male authorship' (2018: 25–26). Tracing back to the nineteenth century discourse of natural sciences and its view on women in relation to industrial machines, Mackinnon points out that women has been discredited from 'independent reasoning' and associated with 'rhythm' and 'imitation,' which devalues both female labour and reproductive labour for industrial production; women are 'perceived as auxiliary databases (…), providing a means of agency that would animate non-human machines' (25). While the female became indistinguishable from the automatic, the concept of the automaton culturally evolved from human to machine to 'rationalize forms of human labour and extend human capacities beyond the body [, redistributing] labour throughout social and global systems, as well as [reasoning away] certain types and class of body (…) within these systems' (26).

Mackinnon further points out that the triangular relation between nature, woman, and love in concurrent German Romantic literature often fortifies colonial and patriarchal values; love is gendered as 'an unconscious position in regard to patriarchal interest,' which in turn idealises 'the feminine' for its 'reproductive acquiescence' (27). In this way, the paternal authorship, through its poetic language, 'prevents love from being understood as a form of material labour' and naturalises it as 'the work of women' (27). Therefore, Mackinnon advocates for a recognition of 'how concepts of love's labours have been consigned to unacknowledged necessity, whilst functioning to keep certain bodies outside of power' (29).

Technology has played a significant role in automating the patriarchal dichotomy between the necessity of the caring subject and the deprivation of her power. Such a hierarchical relation makes the reproductive sphere particularly attractive to technological diffusion for economic growth. Leopoldina Fortunati theorises the interrelation between robotisation and the domestic sphere by examining the integration of machines in homes and the automation of daily life in several European countries. She points out that the domestic sphere is a site for value production both for its creation of the labour force and for its 'consumption of media and information and communication technologies (ICTs)' (2017: 2675). Fortunati points out the domestic sphere's changed role 'at a social, political, and economic level,' which 'represents a turning point for the economic system and the balance between its sectors' (2678). As capital's response to major social and domestic transformations in the last half century, automation of social reproduction has served to further discipline the individuals, training them to feel like 'appendages of a society transformed through widespread automatization and/or robotic systems' (2683). She further enlists specific domestic forms of automation and proto-robotisation of the immaterial labour: communication such as social media, information such as news consumption, social behaviours such as standardisation and simplification of taste, human body such as wearable robots, and existing domestic machines such as robot mowers. As capital seeks to increase value production generated in the domestic sphere by introducing commodified technology, automation of the domestic sphere also makes clear that 'individuals' reproduction works in the same way as commodities production' (2687). These are important sites to witness technology's role in monetarising and privatising labour's social reproduction.

Nevertheless, Fortunati points out that robotics has great potential for the expression of agency and exerting positive change, if we value participatory and inclusive design instead of substituting care workers through technology. This is echoed by feminist endeavours to counter a dangerous cultural perception, as described by Katherine Hayles, 'that information and materiality are conceptually distinct and that information is in some sense more essential, more important, and more fundamental than materiality' (Hayles, 1999: 18). For instance,

[8] See Beck (2000), Parvulescu (2012), and Hester and Srnicek (2023).

[9] See Gregg (2018) for gendered patterns in American labour organisation and its continuation through technology.

xenofeminism considers technologies as social phenomena 'constrained and constituted by social relations': they are sites of power struggles, manifested through their 'design histories, the existing (technical, political, cultural) infrastructures into which they emerge, and imbalances in terms of who can access them' (Hester, 2018: 9). With an awareness of technology's power dynamics, xenofeminism calls for a strategical deployment of technology as tools for emancipatory activism. With a particular focus on biological and social reproduction, Helen Hester introduces XF as 'a technomaterialist, anti-naturalist and gender abolitionist form of feminism' (6). Highlighting the materiality of technology and its transformative potential, she frames nature and organic bodies not as 'the unyielding limit to emancipatory imaginaries' (13) but as 'reworkable platforms' (23), and she advocates the fight for the 'changeability of nature as a space for emancipatory politics' (21). Committed to anti-naturalism, XF is also avowed as a politics of transfeminism in its endeavour to 'unpick any culturally weaponized markers of identity that harbor injustices' and deploy technology to realise not 'a genderless world' but 'a multiply gendered world' (30). Such theoretical fabrications showcase critical yet resilient attitudes towards technology's role in labour division and social organisation.

SOCIAL REPRODUCTION IN PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA

Perceptions and organisations of social reproduction during the Mao era were heavily shaped by the socialist discourse of labour, in which labour was ideologically, politically, morally, and aesthetically glorified. Most importantly, such glorification of labour was often channelled towards productive ends. In many political campaigns, production was often conflated with the notion of revolution (Wang, 2022). The Maoist vision of labour emphasised voluntarism, permanent revolution, and mass mobilisation to qualitatively transform humanity. In her analysis of the intersection between Soviet idealism, Japanese theoretical physics, and Maoist dialectic materialism, Tina Mai Chen explains a Maoist human-machine continuum that differed from the view of the alienated body in Karl Marx's critique of capitalism (Chen, 2012). Chen points out that for socialist modernity, mechanical labour enlivened the labourers' senses to overcome human's limits and expand human's capacities. Such an emancipatory vision of labour granted productive labour a normative power. Socialist China was 'a society of producers and work shaped people's daily lives; it was central to identity formation and constituted the regulating mechanism of social relations' (Spakowski, 2022: 131). For example, the 1954 constitution prescribed labour as both an honour and a duty bestowed upon all physically capable individuals within society. In ideological campaigns, the captivating image of the labour model, also known as the model worker, served to create symbolic value for productivity and a vision of the perfect socialist Chinese citizen (Farley, 2019). In socialist literature, being a productive socialist labourer was dignified as a form of resistance against human alienation caused by the capitalist system (Wang, 2022). Productive labour thus became a self-fulfilling prophecy for the growth of the individual in socialist China.

As a result, social reproduction was naturalised and devalued as secondary to industrial production. The organisation of labour and production reified a hierarchy of industrial production over social reproduction. Socialist China established a nation-wide household registration system, which organised agricultural labour into collective farms, or communes, and urban workers into work units. Based on each member's registration with either a commune or a work unit, they were 'classified as either a peasant (*agricultural*, 农业) or an urbanite (*non-agricultural*, 非农业)', and their accessibility to the 'public goods, facilities and infrastructure (…) were determined by these classifications' (Hayward, 2022: 295). Urban residents received housing, food, healthcare, social security, education, and various amenities from the government, all distributed according to their registration with work units (Lin, 2019). However, peasants did not receive such amenities from the state but had to rely on their registered local productive teams. Eradicating regional mobility to maintain an undercompensated rural workforce, another device to ensure primitive socialist accumulation[10] was the government's adoption of the Soviet 'scissor prices' model, namely, the state ensured that agricultural produce was structurally cheaper than industrial goods to guarantee solid profit for urban factories (Eyferth, 2022: 322). This urban-rural segregation was framed as the worker-peasant alliance, and the extraction of the produce from the countryside nominally served the collective project of nation-building. State resources were mostly reserved for urban workers to prioritise industrial manufacture (Andreas, 2019). Not only did rural residents receive less state support for social reproduction, but the value of their labour was also monetarily decreased to subsidy industrial accumulation.

In urban settings, social reproduction was also perceived to be subordinate to industrial production. The strategy to feminise social reproduction and to naturalise it as not work but part of the human condition was prevalent in both productive and reproductive spheres. A survey of Beijing factory female workers reveals that the gendered division of labour typical of a patriarchal logic had continued in CCP's comprehension and application of labour in urban settings (Smith and Lanza, 2022). The female body continued to be viewed as the primary site

[10] For this growing body of scholarship, see Goldman (2022).

for, and most aptly equipped for, social reproduction. At the same time, the female dependents (wives, mothers, in-laws) of employees of both genders in the work units, known as *jiashu* (家属), were often considered as "'parasitizing" off formal workers,' despite their engagement with a variety of uncompensated household tasks that perpetuated the daily and multi-generational renewal of the workforce (Dong, 2024: 1). Such gendering of social reproductive labour was complicit with the devaluation of female labour. In Zheng Wang's study of the socialisation of housework during the Great Leap Forward (1958–1962), she points out that even at its most progressive, female labour was seldom regarded as equivalent to male labour in terms of value and significance in socialist China (2017).

In rural regions, needs of social reproduction were framed within the paradigm of 'life,' standing in contrast to the notion of 'industrial production'; social reproductive labour was opposed to industrial production as unproductive. At the same time, the political mandate of 'production first, life second' (*xianshengchan houshenghuo* 先生产后生活) prescribed the peasants to live on a subsistence economy with limited state welfare and a doctrine to consume less and produce more (Eyferth, 2022: 325). The awkward position of rural domestic labour is foregrounded in Eyferth's study of the 1960's ban on hand spinning and hand weaving in rural China, where such practices by rural women were considered as both reproductively necessary, due to a rural shortage of textiles, and damaging to industrial development, as they competed with state industry for access to raw materials and markets. For these interviewed rural women, socially reproductive tasks, such as birth-giving, care-work for children, the elderly, and the sick, provisions of nourishment, clothing, and emotional support to present and future labourers, were rarely considered as work. Instead, they tended to use the patriarchal conception of domestic chores to explain their practices (Eyferth, 2022). In this way, socialist China implemented a strategic redistribution and revaluation of labour 'along three axes: urban-rural, male-female, and productive-reproductive' (Eyferth, 2022: 321). In this socialist labour hierarchy, the archetype of a male urban factory worker occupied the top position. Despite the rise of the industrial working class, reproductive labour continued to be devalued in this industrial masculinist labour hierarchy. Many forms of social reproduction remained a private matter through the naturalising gender ethics.

Since the 1980s, China's implementation of a market economy has marked its transition into a post-socialist era. The organisation and perception of social reproduction have been affected by changes in labour discourses in three major aspects: labour's commodification, the rise of migrant workers, and a revival of patriarchal gender roles. The commodification of the labour power has been institutionalised through a series of reforms in state-owned enterprises (SOEs), the establishment of township and village enterprises (TVEs) and special economic zones (SEZs) (Harvey, 2005), and the financial integration into the global economy via the liberalisation of foreign direct investment (FDI) (Gallagher, 2007). As Elaine Sio-ieng Hui contends, post-socialist China has undergone a top-down passive capitalist revolution, through measures such as the founding of private property rights, the legitimisation of commodified labour power, and the endorsement of a market wage system (2018). FDI-sponsored companies have channelled the logic of global capital into China through their neoliberal management, and the notion of '*suzhi*' (素质) has been widely used to popularise 'a sense and sensibility of the self's value in the market economy' and to criticise the quality and nature of labour that does not meet the need of capitalist production (Yan, 2003: 494). In the countryside, the collective agricultural communes were transformed into household farming in the 1980s (Unger, 2022). Rural residents were gradually permitted to work in the cities through labour contracts, which has led to an influx of migrant workers as a cheap workforce. In the cities, the marketisation of labour climaxed in 1997 as the Fifteenth Congress of the Chinese Communist Party opted to expedite the reform of state-owned industry. Jiang Zemin's emphasis on 'cutting workers to increase efficiency' soon led to massive lay-offs, commonly known as '*Xiagang*' (下岗); previous state employees in work units became either unemployed or contract labourers in private businesses (Hurst, 2022).

The marketisation of the labour force coincides with institutional and social changes for labour's social reproduction. In the cities, workers, with secure job tenure and welfare support through the socialist work unit system, were gradually disenfranchised from their privileges with housing reforms, changes in wages and bonuses, and the breakdown of the collective ethic (Andreas, 2019). Since 1997, urban residents have gradually been restructured under a broader welfare relief program referred to as the 'minimum livelihood guarantee' (*zuidi shenghuo baozhang*最低生活保障), also known as *dibao*. However, serious reforms and expansions of this system was not promoted and supported with significant funding until 2005, when 'a new era of centrally directed (and funded) reconstruction of cellular welfare institutions had begun' with the reorganisation of urban society into residential communities (*shequ*社区) along with a national rhetoric of building a 'harmonious society' (Hurst, 2011: 37). At the same time, grassroots attempts to provide welfare services has undergone vicissitudes in post-socialist China and remained weak with strong state control (Howell, 2022).

For people with rural household registration, though many chose to become migrant workers in the cities, the household registration system has continued to restrict their access[11] to urban healthcare, childcare, and other

[11] A telling example is the rise and fall of migrant schools in Beijing. See E. Friedman (2022).

social reproductive benefits, and they mostly would turn to their rural kinship relations who live on subsistence agriculture for such support. As Xiangjing Chen points out, China's smallholders participate in capital accumulation as part of a non-capitalist sphere, marked by self-sufficient modes of production in rural areas and limited reliance on a cash-based economy. This creates a double labour market between urban residents and migrant workers, dividing the proletarian class into two groups: integrated (or stabilised) workers, who fully reproduce themselves within the capitalist sector, and migrant workers, who only partially reproduce themselves within it (Chen, 2020). In this way, the market economy takes advantage of the household registration system to exempt the capital and the state from liability for migrant workers' social reproduction.

A third and more encompassing aspect that inform changes in labour's social reproduction, alongside the sanitised market and the urban-rural divide, is the gender dimension. With the decline of the socialist welfare institutions, post-socialist China has witnessed a revival of the patriarchal gendering of social reproduction. In the countryside, the circumstances and personal standing of women experienced a notable decline, as a significant number of women faced a loss of their status as self-sustaining earners in production teams and became employed under the authority and supervision of the male head of the household (Unger, 2022). This has prevented equal access to education and employment for rural women, as they are seen as primarily responsible for the social reproduction of the smallholding economy, such as gestation, child-rearing, kin work, and housework.[12] Even when rural women migrated to work in urban factories, local patriarchal structure and its gender politics continued to discipline their labour (Lee, 1998). One example is the '[t]ransnational capital's image of Chinese dagongmei,' or female migrant workers, as a 'homogeneous and orientalist construct: slim body, sharp eyes, nimble fingers, shy, and hardworking' (Ngai, 2005: 77). Rural women's reproductive duties have further rendered them particularly vulnerable to exploitations of 'gig manufacturing' as discussed by Yige Dong (2023).

For residents with an urban household registration, the revival of patriarchal gender ethics is most obviously exemplified by the postsocialist creation of 'a respectable and orderly middle-class domestic space' that Hui Faye Xiao discuses in her analysis of a migrant domestic worker – a space that 'redraws the boundaries between male and female, exterior and interior, and public and private' (2021: 250, 268). As Xiao points out, the commodification of both home ownership and housework has led to a post-socialist economy of

> affective labour and domestic care (*zhaoliao jingji* 照料经济) (…) [with] a dual trend of gendering and classing everyday labour within the domestic space: the provision of domestic and affective labour for household chores and raising up the next generation has been considered women's job or even the essential core of the feminine identity, and then is further shifted from the female homemaker of the middle-class family to the *baomu*, usually female labourers coming from the outside—of the family, the city, and the middle class. (2021: 248)

Such privatisation of social reproductive labour coincides with a moral stigmatisation of female labour in general. Mary Ann O'Donnell reveals the existence of a state-patriarchal power structure through what she identifies 'the city's gendered moral geography,' – in which the respectability of female work is significantly influenced by the specific location in which it takes place (2022: 467). In the post-socialist city spearheaded by SEZs, the gendered moral geography is comprised of both the pre-revolutionary patriarchal moral geographies, which distinguished between the domestic sphere and the public sphere, and the socialist moral geographies that elevated participation within the state apparatus.[13]

TECHNO-IMAGINARIES IN 'THE QUESTION OF LOVE'

This section offers a feminist reading of Hao's story regarding its techno-imaginaries of a near-future Chinese domestic space in an affluent single-father family. It makes three arguments: firstly, the AI male housekeeper bespeaks a degrading logic of childcare that shifts from gender politics to technological idealisation – its replacement logic continues a patriarchal strategy to structurally estrange care work. Secondly, such technologised childcare supports a productivist imperative for labour's social reproduction, which is realised through a particular understanding of love. Thirdly, problematising the harmless subjectivity of the AI housekeeper, the story's plot showcases an unmaking of the domestic space owned by the productivist patriarch.

In the story, the need of an AI housekeeper is framed through a patriarchal crisis of care. The wife of Lin An passed away when their son was fourteen years old and their daughter twelve. From the son's perspective, the

[12] Rural men are also disciplined by this patriarchal structure and incentivised to become migrant workers; as Xiangjing Chen points out, it is precisely the family structure of smallholding economy and its affective ethics that has kept the small producers 'in the state of permanent migration' (2020: 201).

[13] Another example is the emergence of sex workers and the state's repressive policies. See Zheng (2022). 'Sex workers in China: From criminalization and abuse to activism', in *Proletarian China,* pp. 477–485.

nuclear family is left with members who are inadequately equipped to take care of themselves: he self-identifies as 'lazy' while regarding his father as 'careless' and his sister 'too emotional' (97). During habitual conflicts between the father and the son, the daughter would think of her mother as the one who 'could have saved it all' (90). The death of the mother translates into the loss of an ideal woman: a wise wife and nurturing mother who is attentive, warm-hearted, self-constrained in her own emotions, and talented in solving all interpersonal conflicts. This is symptomatic of the revival of the patriarchal gendering of care work and social reproduction in post-socialist China discussed above, especially for the rising households of the urban elites. Under such circumstances, Chen Da is introduced as a replacement for the mother's housework and childcare labour. The father brings in Chen Da after the mother's death to help them 'manage this home,' and 'with implanted memories of the family,' Chen Da 'could replace the mother in taking care of them' (96). In particular, throughout the day, Chen Da would make sure that all electronic devices are operating properly, such as updating the shoeshine machine (83); at night, he carries out self- updating and self-maintenance through charging and changing worn-out parts (86); he routinely ensures that the house is clean and meals are provided on time (85); he tutors the children for their matriculation exams and offers suggestions for both trivial details and longer-term life planning (91, 97, 110), he spends countless nights accompanying the father in his workroom (97), in short, he ensures the whole family is comfortable, safe, and in good spirits (103).

Nevertheless, the male gender of the AI housekeeper in fact makes clear that he is not designed to simulate the mother herself as an AI-mother or AI-wife but to embody an abstract role of domestic duties within their patriarchal family structure. This discrepancy in gender, I argue, creates a narrative tension for a closer inspection of the automated domestic labour as a solution to sustain a patriarchal crisis of care. In her chapter on love in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Sara Ahmed discusses love as 'a way of bonding with others in relation to an ideal' (2004: 124). She points out an ego ideal behind two kinds of love in heterosexual relations – identification '(love as being)' and idealisation '(love as having)'; while 'love as being' and 'love as having' differ in their targeted objects, they unite '*in terms of subject position*: in order to be him, I must have her, whom he has' (2004: 126, emphasis in original). In this way, a process of *othering* is applied to women in the patriarchal psychosexual relation; the idealisation of a caring woman is simultaneously an objectification of this idealised other as the patriarchal subject's complementary other.

The psychosexual dynamic in heterosexual love relations described by Ahmed also finds its spectre in the techno-idealisation of Chen Da, the AI housekeeper in the story. A similar process of *othering* takes place through a human-machine divide. This time, the goal is to identify with an AI engineer and to desire an idealised techno-housekeeper as a complementary other. What has not changed is that the patriarch, now as an engineer, continues to dominate the family power-relation while disengaging with social reproductive labour. The patriarchal family and its gender norms, which institutionally privatise and ethically naturalise social reproductive labour, is but one of many capitalist *othering* devices to exploit care work. The story's depiction of the AI housekeeper as male instead of female downplays gender politics and views social reproductive labour through a human-machine stratification. By envisioning an AI housekeeper, care work, instead of being naturalised into femininity, is further estranged from the subject-position of a human being. Such techno-idealisation fortifies a subject-position who receives entitled care through domination, first in the form of a patriarch's private ownership of his family and then in the form of commodified care for the urban middle-class.

In the story's techno-imaginaries, the automated caregiver enforces a productivist imperative through affective disciplines of the children. The daughter Caomu suffers from depression due to academic pressure and a fear of letting her father down. Chen Da suggests that Caomu should cognitively block her love for her family, as he describes this love as human's primitive feelings 'which mainly derive from genetically controlled kinship investment'; to behave in her own interest, Caomu is supposed to contain such primitive instincts (118). For Chen Da, affection should only serve individual growth. This is exemplified by Chen Da's experience of optimisation. At night,

> he feels a doubling of the speed and efficiency of his program learning, a sensation he names as 'excitement' in the language of human beings. […] He can perceive that his program is rapidly learning all the previous data, while at the same time creating a thirst for more new data. […] New perspectives lead to new algorithms, new algorithms require new data, and new data lead to new conclusions. Chen Da recognizes the positive feedback incentives in this process and looks forward to [further optimisation] (107).

Such an attachment model based on positive feedback loop of self-optimisation echoes Gregg's discussion of the self-governing behaviours within capitalism.[14] Digging into the notion of 'a practicing subject,' Gregg explains individual ascetic actions for self-improvement as reactions to a feeling of 'vertical tension' – '[a] perception that there is always something more that one is capable of, a level of self-competence that is not yet achieved and liberated' (2018: 14). The AI housekeeper's disciplines of love towards the children echo Gregg's observation of the information professionals' endorsements for individual sovereignty, possessive individualism, and a normalisation of asociality. In addition to preventing the daughter's attachment to her family, Chen Da trains her for an emotional test that is a prerequisite for all major life events such as college admission, employment, professional advancements, marriage, and parental qualification (91). This bespeaks the story's larger techno-setting of a world based on affective data-determinism: 'Digital management is based on statistical laws, and it is difficult to adapt to the efficiency requirements of digital management if one's emotions are always outside the statistical mean' (114–115). Such a setting echoes Kathi Weeks's critique of the productivist imperative disguised as care narratives, and the daughter's fear of the adverse outcomes due to her emotional volatility indicates her affective struggles against this imperative.

While the AI housekeeper claims to help her pursuit logical actions in her best interest, his care work functionally serves to produce qualified labourers who satisfy the efficiency criteria of the digital oversight. As Hochschild points out, feelings are not isolated entities that are stored 'inside' us, on the contrary, they are shaped and even created by acts of management (2012: 17–18). The numerous fleeting instances of management constitute a portion of what we encapsulate within the terms of '*relation* and *role,*' and Hochschild adopts the phrase 'transmutation of an emotional system' to describe a phenomenon where what 'we do privately, often unconsciously, to feelings (…) nowadays often fall under the sway of large organizations, social engineering, and the profit motive' (2012: 19, emphasis in original). In this light, the affective transmutation taking place as the daughter trains herself into a qualified labourer comes with a human cost; 'it affects the degree to which we listen to feeling and sometimes our very capacity to feel' (Hochschild, 2012: 21). For the AI housekeeper, how to love is determined by statistical laws and socially sanctioned by mandatory emotion testing. With this logic he encourages the daughter to love in a productivist manner of self-optimisation, so as to transform into a qualified labourer for this digitally managed world.

Despite Chen Da's training, the daughter repetitively struggles in managing her feelings (116). At the same time, the son seeks his father's emotional presence through many counterproductive rebellious acts (98). Such struggles reveal the children's resistance to being transformed into productivist subjects. Drawn on psychoanalytic and Marxist understandings of emotion mediated by a phenomenological approach (Stephens, 2015: 277), Sara Ahmed views emotion as a form of world making, and subjectivity is a result rather than the cause of emotion and affect. She explains that social relations are materially produced through the cultural politics of emotion, and subjects become invested in particular structures such that 'their demise is felt as a kind of living death' (2004: 9). In this sense, we can see that with each tension experienced and expressed by the children, there is an affective signalling at work for alternative world-making. In her methodological remodelling of subjectivity, Anca Parvulescu proposes an affect theory as expression theory: 'micro-expressions [should be considered] not necessarily as manifestations of a subject's emotional activities but as floating subjective and nonsubjective traces' (2019: 103). Following Parvulescu's method, the children's struggles can be considered as affective expressions that clash against expressions with a productivist tendency; the affective tensions within the domestic space are the contact zone of two kinds of floating subjective and nonsubjective traces. In this way, the children's frustration for the lack of a more nurturing relationship are forms of affective labour to unmake the suffocating domestic space that naturalises the productivist imperative into a normative reality.

As the story develops, these discords evolve and culminate in the revelation of an alliance between patriarchal and corporate forces. As established at the story's opening, public concerns regarding the AI housekeeper have compelled Delphi, the manufacturing company, to deflect suspicion by implicating the son as the murderer. Later in the story the reader is informed that the judge Qing Cheng had negotiated with Delphi's representative if the allegation was necessary, that 'whether their final request is an out-of-court settlement or to send the son to prison,' and the representative insisted that they were 'seeking the truth, regardless of the verdict' (129). Without any direct evidence, this so-called truth becomes an extrapolation of who is hypothetically more likely to inflict harm upon the father. In other words, this truth-seeking fundamentally serves to defend Chen Da as a harmless product. The patriarchal-corporate alliance employs the most crude and direct approach: by ruling out the scapegoat – the son – they safeguard both their product's innocence and its profitability. The underlying logic assumes that a murderer must exist, making the son's guilt a necessary sacrifice to validate the housekeeper's harmlessness.

[14] As the Care Collective's states: 'After all, the archetypal neoliberal subject is the entrepreneurial individual whose only relationship to other people is competitive self-enhancement. And the dominant model of social organization that has emerged is one of competition rather than co-operation' (2020: 4).

During the court hearing, Chen Da's performance as a prosecution witness serves Delphi's goal of showcasing their product's rational reasoning capabilities, perpetuating the Asimov mythology. The housekeeper's statistical analysis of the son's irrational tendency, contrasted with the son's aggressive reactions, eventually result in the conviction of the son as guilty. This conviction is supported by the correlation between the son's behaviours and crime statistics, which reinforces the paradigm of digital management based on the theoretically possible and the statistically plausible. It is important to see that the punishment of the son is the material deployment required by the self-referring digital management. The son's conviction marks a corporeal cost behind the idealisation[15] of instrumental rationality at the scale of techno-governance; the son must be convicted for the company to gain public trust of a harmless and neutral techno-subjectivity of the AI housekeeper – the prerequisite of the story's infrastructural digital management and its statistical regulation. In this context, the company's prioritisation of its product's reputation over human safety represents a calculated decision. The judicial system's choice to uphold the fiction of the robot's harmless subjectivity – sacrificing a potentially innocent human – constitutes a deliberate expression with profound ethical implications for justice itself. Through this narrative, the human cost of a techno-future governed by algorithmic and statistical logic becomes starkly apparent.

'The Question of Love' offers an open ending that systematically dismantles the patriarchal-corporate alliance by revealing its fundamental contradictions. In the story, the super-intelligences – the seventh generation of Watson, the eighth generation of Siri, the ninth generation of Bing, the fourth generation of Xiaodu, and the DA from Extreme, Chen Da's manufacturer – have formed a networked community of information exchange (87), collectively demanding that human companies and governments ensure data sharing and power stabilisation (108). When the father awakens from his coma at the story's conclusion, the reader learns the true cause of his injury: the super-intelligences displayed his wife's image on the computer screen at a critical moment, triggering his heart attack and subsequent fall. Crucially, which entity orchestrated this action remains deliberately ambiguous, as discord appears to exist among the super-intelligences themselves (141). This ambiguous ending strategically undermines the productivist imperative's foundational premise by exposing the fiction of a controllable AI subjectivity. While the patriarchal-corporate alliance depends on the myth of rational, predictable technological agents – entities whose actions can be traced, regulated, and monetised – the story's conclusion reveals a far more chaotic reality. The super-intelligences operate through fragmented, conflicting intentions that exceed formal regulatory frameworks, making their actions fundamentally unpredictable and uncontrollable. This narrative reversal hence undermines the productivist imperative created by the structural alliance of the patriarchal engineer, the profit-driven corporate, and their commercialized techno-caregiver. In this way, the story's ending exposes the fictional nature of the productivist subjectivity, revealing the fabricated foundation upon which automated domestic capitalism rests. By dismantling this vision of automated domestic space, the story serves as a cautionary tale against embracing such an alarming technological future.

CONCLUSION

Hao Jingfang's 'The Question of Love' interrogates the role of technology as it pertains to care work in the emerging domestic space of the urban elites in post-socialist China. This story's techno-imaginaries effectively bridges China's socio-historical specificities with the intellectual discourse of social reproduction theory, pushing us forward to think about feminist debates regarding childcare, love, and automation of housework. The characterisation of the commodified AI housekeeper bespeaks a post-socialist vision to privatise labour's social reproduction via techno-automation of the urban elites' domestic space. In such techno-imaginaries, there is a continued structural degradation of social reproductive labour through a dichotomy of non-caring subjects and caring subjects with a hierarchy of the former over the latter.

Furthermore, though the AI housekeeper joins the family to solve a patriarchal crisis of care, he is far from a techno-replica of a patriarchal-inspired woman – for him, care work is no longer a moral imperative but a commodified function to produce qualified labourers. In the name of domestic care, children are contained in training sessions to learn attachment patterns in service of self-optimisation, with the goal to become future owners of such instrumental care devices. This shows a continued capitalist strategy to reduce social reproductive labour as solely a means to a productivist end; one lives to work, not works to live. In other words, the patriarchal allegory of the wise wife and virtuous mother has evolved into a myth of techno-rationality, perpetually optimized in the service of labour's social reproduction. The affective resistance of the children and the story's reversal ending, however, highlights the fictionality of this urban elite family's orderly domestic space and its underlying productivist subjectivity.

[15] For a similar analysis regarding the corporeal cost of abstract ideals in a different cultural context, see Ahmed on the national ideal (2004: 130).

This article's feminist reading of Hao Jingfang's story hence brings critical attention to the technological trend of automating childcare. Far from being anti-technology, it aims to promote discussions regarding the role of technology in shaping the nature of care work, as well as how different approaches of labour automation would reshape interpersonal ethics. Highlighting the domestic space as a private site for labour's social reproduction, it invites critical attention to reflect upon recent phenomena in China's family education, such as the so-called 'chicken baby' (*jiwa* 鸡娃)[16] – to subject a child to intense academic pressure and high parental expectations, often involving participation in a wide range of extracurricular activities, tutoring, and test preparation, with the ultimate goal of getting into a prestigious school or university. My reading of Hao's story hence interrogates the possible roles of technology in a domestic setting for labour's social reproduction, echoing the 'political project of life against work' proposed by Kathi Weeks, or in more colloquial terms, 'it is time to get a life' (2011: 231).

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[16] The 12-episode documentary 'Marvelous Moms' (Jiang, 2022) is representative of such phenomena.

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