Pow-éRhuà: the Beijing “Smooth Operator” Variable and Sexual Modernity in a Chinese Web Series

Andrew Wesley Ting

University of Colorado at Boulder, bcpro13@gmail.com

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POW-ÉRHUA: THE BEIJING “SMOOTH OPERATOR” VARIABLE
AND SEXUAL MODERNITY IN A CHINESE WEB SERIES

by

ANDREW WESLEY TING

B.A., University of California, Santa Barbara, 2017

A thesis submitted to the
Faculty of the Graduate School of the
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This thesis entitled:
Pow-érhuà: The Beijing “Smooth Operator” Variable
and Sexual Modernity in a Chinese Web Series

written by Andrew Wesley Ting
has been approved for the Department of Linguistics

_____________________________
Kira Hall

_____________________________
Rebecca Scarborough

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Jeremy Calder

15 April 2019

The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.
This thesis explores features of the rhotacized Beijing “Smooth Operator” variable and its use in the popular 2015 Chinese web series “Counterattack!” (逆襲之愛上情敵). In her work on sociolinguistic variation among Chinese professionals in Beijing, Qing Zhang (2005, 2008) identifies Beijing rhotacization (a phonological process involving the r-coloring of syllable codas) as indexing a local male persona that has historically been linked to fluidity of conversation. In “Counterattack!,” however, notable for its success in Mainland China despite its inclusion of overt homosexuality, rhotacization is used somewhat differently. This thesis analyzes when characters use this rhotic variable in the web series, examining the discursive contexts that motivate their linguistic choices and style. My analysis suggests that these motivations are strongly driven by sociocultural practices related to gender and performance. Specifically, I connect the “Smooth Operator” variable’s attributes of savoir-faire and urban versatility to what I view as a new use in this series, by which these imbued meanings are stylistically incorporated into other practices to form a new social persona (Agha 2003, Eckert 2008): the “Sexual Modern.” I argue that the use of this variable directly correlates to a character’s expression of sexual knowledge. Characters in the series use the Beijing “Smooth Operator” variable to evaluate the sexual knowledge (Hall forthcoming) and behaviors of other characters as well as their own. The thesis suggests that this variable—previously discussed as indexing a local urban male persona—has now also become indexical of sexual modernity.
Acknowledgments

I would especially like to thank my advisors Kira Hall, Rebecca Scarborough, and Jeremy Calder for all their input, insight, and guidance, as well as my Mandarin consultants Evan Coles-Harris and Anrui Ding, and my dear colleagues, friends, and family for all their help and support throughout this process.
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Introduction

“Counterattack! Web Series” (逆襲之愛上情敵) was adapted from a fan-fiction originally written by Chái Jídàn (a pseudonym) and published online before being adapted into a live-action series. Released August 9, 2015, and produced by Chái Jídàn Studio (the author as screenwriter) and the Beijing Cuǐcàn Bàyè Culture Media Company, Ltd., the series comprises eight episodes and a ninth special release (Baidu 2017). In the first four weeks following the series’ release on QQLive (a Chinese video media platform), the series exceeded twenty million hits (Baidu 2017) and rapidly garnered a large fan base, especially within the tóngzhì community, a Chinese term referring to homosexual men and women (Wong and Zhang 2001). The story follows Wú Suǒ-wèi, a man whose seven-year relationship with his girlfriend Yuè-yuè (the antagonist) ends at the beginning of the series when she leaves him. After she begins pursuing Chí-chěng, a man with a reputation for being a “player,” Suǒ-wèi and his friend decide that the best plan for exacting his revenge on Yuè-yuè for rejecting him is to seduce her new boyfriend (Chí-chěng) for himself, and then to eventually abandon him, thus breaking both of their hearts. However, as the series progresses, Suǒ-wèi realizes that he is actually beginning to fall for Chí-chěng.

The capital of China for centuries, Beijing remains a historically important city. Beijing Mandarin (BM) continues to hold a unique prestige status in Mainland China “because of its tremendous cultural prominence” (Q. Zhang 2005: 440), so much so that the phonology of Standard Mandarin is based on BM phonology (Z. Zhang 2005). Nonetheless, there are several features that distinguish the two varieties from each other as well as from other Mandarin varieties. One of the most unique and distinguishing features of BM is érhuà (兒化; lit. “ér-change”), a phonological process where syllable codas are rhotacized. Syllable-final vowels
become r-colored, and syllable-final consonants are elided and replaced with rhotic consonants, resulting in phonological neutralization (Lee 2005). Though this feature is shared by other Northern varieties of Mandarin, érhuà “is especially prominent in Beijing Mandarin” (Lee 2005: 1096), so much so that it is a stereotypical feature of BM (Q. Zhang 2006). While there are several other phonological features that differentiate BM, including but not limited to “complex prosodic, lexical, and rhetorical features” (Q. Zhang 2005: 440), such as different tone contours and other types of consonant elision, érhuà specifically is one of the most significant features in that it is strongly associated with the locally recognized Beijing “Smooth Operator” persona. This persona is derived from the jīng yóuzi literary character, which I will discuss later,¹ a cultural icon of Beijing people. In her work investigating the social meaning of érhuà, Qing Zhang (2008) observes that this persona is not the embodiment of a “singular, fixed personality trait, but a cluster of attributes ranging from manners to interactional styles” (216). As such, rhotacization does not only mean “smoothness”; rather, it has a “constellation of social meanings based in ideological construals of Beijing and its people” (216). I suggest that it is through the process of recontextualization that the meanings and ideologies associated with the “Smooth Operator” variable reveal another star in the system: sexual modernity.

The characters’ positioning as sexual moderns entails two attributes: being modern, and being sexually knowledgeable. In the discourse I examine in this thesis, these two positions are mutually implicating: to be modern is to be sexually knowledgeable and to be sexually knowledgeable is to be modern. Modernity, as Hall (forthcoming) conceptualizes it in an article outlining its materialization in joking routines involving a genre of ethnic jokes in Delhi, is “a depiction of place-time-and-personhood that is forwarded in interaction as progress over

¹ The term “Smooth Operator” is Zhang’s English term for jīng yóuzi.
competing depictions” (13). Her analysis focuses on formulaic jokes incorporating a stereotyped Sikh figure of personhood—the “Sardarji”—that create a “dominant narrative of progress that temporalizes certain subjectivities as more advanced than others” (5). In these jokes, the Sardarji is temporalized as only accidentally modern. The punch lines expose the Sardarji’s adherence to tradition and thus his place outside of modernity. The lesbian and transgender youth that Hall worked with in Delhi’s expanding middle classes deploy this genre of humor to distinguish themselves as sexual experts, and thus, as sexual moderns. In this way, demonstrations of sexual expertise serve to elevate one’s status in the social hierarchy by emphasizing social distance from groups stereotypically viewed as not having this expertise; it is thus a type of distinction, in Bourdieu’s (1984) terminology. As I demonstrate in this thesis, érhuà is similarly employed in the “Counterattack!” series to convey social distance in the field of sexual expertise. One of the common situations in which érhuà surfaces is in characters’ dialogue when they evaluate each other’s sexual knowledge. I argue that characters’ use of rhotacization draws from the variable’s previously imbued meanings of conversational dexterity and manipulation to establish a new meaning that is suggestive of sexual modernity.

Semiotic Processes and Practices

Several processes and practices contribute to rhotacization’s acquisition of an additional social meaning of sexual modernity. These include enregisterment (how variables are unified into a repertoire that becomes socially recognizable as a register), indexicality (the social meanings of linguistic variables), and style (how people employ these variables or repertoires and local ideologies). As I demonstrate here, these processes build upon previous indexical links and ideologies to connect érhuà to sexual modernity.
Enregisterment, “a process through which a linguistic repertoire becomes differentiable within a language as a recognized register of forms” (Agha 2003: 231), also contributes to the development of social personae. In his article, “The social life of cultural value,” Asif Agha (2003) documents the enregisterment of British Received Pronunciation (RP). He observes that metadiscursive labels for language varieties personify speech, and they connect sound patterns to attributes of speakers. Thus, the “metadiscursive labels themselves impose social classifications onto phonetic repertoires” (234), linking repertoires to an imagined character or persona. Zhang (2008) notes that the creation of the “Smooth Operator” social persona parallels the British RP situation in many ways. For instance, just as the British RP register is now recognizable far beyond the local, érhuà is recognizable not only in Beijing or even only by Mandarin speakers, but by speakers of diverse Chinese dialects as indexing Beijing locality.

BM, like British RP, has a sizable body of literature that has contributed to the enregisterment of érhuà as a distinct feature of BM. A case in point is jīng wèi wénxué, ‘Beijing-flavor literature,’ a literary genre from the late 20th century that is written in Beijing vernacular and invokes Beijing culture of the time (Q. Zhang 2008). This genre, which is constructed around accent metadiscourse, features literary characters that, as they become popularized, evolve into characterological figures, “[images] of personhood that [are] performable through a semiotic display or enactment” (Agha 2007: 177). These in turn develop into social personae, “[ways] of being and acting associated not just with a social identity in an abstract sense, but with its embodiment in a character, imagined or actually performed” (Johnstone 283), and come to be available as resources for the everyday production of styles and identities. Zhang discusses several literary characters of this genre—businessmen, descendants of the Manchurian aristocracy (after the collapse of the Qing Dynasty), entertainers and artists, and intellectuals—
that contribute to the solidification of the jīng yóuzi characterological figure. These characters come from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, but all share “characterological attributes centering on worldly wisdom, street smarts, slickness, remarkable urban versatility, and savoir faire” (213).

The literary characters in this genre entrench indexical associations of oiliness and smoothness (somewhat similar to the English expressions ‘silver-tongued’ or ‘smooth talker’) to the jīng yóuzi social persona, who is slick, street-smart, and has the gift of gab. Zhang also includes metalinguistic commentary taken from interviews, where her participants consistently described oiliness and smoothness of speech as characteristic of èrhuà and of Beijing locals. This smoothness also connects the “Smooth Operator” persona to a calm and unflappable demeanor, as Zhang explains below.

“The person who speaks such melodious and smooth Beijing speech can never act violently to others. Naturally, you probably would not expect him to rebel abruptly, either, because he is so refined, cultivated, and smart” (Q. Zhang 2008: 215).

Note that refinement and intelligence are all linked to rhotacization, but unlike British RP, where the association is made with the aristocracy and upper-classes, Beijing èrhuà is linked to a more urban setting, focusing on being worldly and street-smart. Not all of the previously mentioned literary characters are of high status or socioeconomic class; rather, as Zhang clarifies, they are urban characters of diverse class backgrounds who have come across hard times and use their

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2 The “Smooth Operator” appears to be both a characterological figure as well as a social persona; I will henceforth refer to it as a social persona.
speech to maneuver and navigate difficult situations. Their speech is thus their means of navigating through the hardships presented to them.

Agha (2003) discusses speech chains as a mechanism that further transmits sociocultural associations of a language variety across social space. This transmission can be accomplished by conversational interaction or by the circulation and reproduction of media. These speech chains motivate heightened public awareness of indexical links between semiotic form and social meaning, such as between rhotacization and the “Smooth Operator” (Zhang 2008). This is an important tenet to consider, as maintaining these personae and characters are, as Zhang (2005) describes, “the orchestration of a stylistic ensemble based on a limited set of existing resources” (457). It is this orchestration that “establishes the basis or common ground for recognition and identification by both group members and outsiders” (457) and makes the stylistic incorporation of a social persona legible to speakers and their audiences. As a social persona becomes legible, speakers can then associate themselves with that persona and capitalize on its linguistic resources and their imbued social meanings. In this web series, characters in “Counterattack!” who associate with the “Smooth Operator” persona use rhotacization in social situations in which they desire to access its imbued social meanings (savoir-faire, refinement, gift of gab) to express a modern positionality dependent on sexual expertise. This pushes érhuà into a new territory, thus allowing it to acquire new indexical links.

Indexicality, “[a concept involving] the creation of semiotic links between linguistic forms and social meanings” (Bucholtz and Hall 2005b: 594), is “the semiotic operation of juxtaposition, whereby one entity or event points to another” (378). This concept explains how érhuà points to the “Smooth Operator” and “Sexual Modern” personae. Michael Silverstein’s (2003) concept of indexical order further explains how both of these personae may have come to
be associated with the same variable, as there are always several “different ways to say ‘the same’ thing” (212). Over time, a linguistic variable acquires social meanings as well as contexts in which its usage is considered appropriate, leading to an essentialization of the variable’s use. But because of speakers’ and listeners’ own ideologies, there is always the possibility for creative effect as they interact with the variable and use it in new contexts. I follow Silverstein (2003) in suggesting that the rhotacized “Sexual Modern” is an “$n+1\text{st}$-order” indexicality that “depends on the existence of a cultural schema of enregisterment of forms perceived to be involved in $n$-th-order indexical meaningfulness” (212). In this case, the enregisterment of the “Smooth Operator” allows for stylistic incorporation of the variable into new contexts, which subsequently allows the “Sexual Modern” to emerge as a new persona.

Style, which refers to the bundling of practices that convey specific social meanings, is a system constructed of linguistic and other semiotic resources (such as variables and the social meanings attached to them) that is incorporated into a social persona and thus becomes legible to an audience as a performance of this persona. This performance is one method in which speakers accomplish identity, here viewed as the “outcome of cultural semiotics that is accomplished through the production of contextually relevant sociopolitical relations of similarity and difference” (Bucholtz and Hall 2005a: 382). As Bucholtz and Hall establish, identity involves culturally motivated practices that individuals perform in order to align with or distance themselves from other people; it is not built of static, inherent traits, but of practices that individuals must constantly maintain and reproduce. The incorporation of a social persona into one’s stylistic performance is an example of such practices that accomplish identity. Speakers may stylistically manipulate variables in order to accomplish identity, for different ways of
saying the same thing will signal different ways of being (Eckert 2008). Style is thus the system of variables that enables categorization and contributes to the development of social personae.

The stylistic use of a variable in new contexts may not only create new indexical orders, it can also create new indexicalities within an indexical field. As Eckert (2008) explains, indexical fields are systems of meaning linked to a single variable: “Meanings of variables are not precise or fixed but rather constitute a field of potential meanings – an indexical field, or constellation of ideologically related meanings, any one of which can be activated in the situated use of the variable” (453). Indexical fields allow certain variables to be incorporated into several different styles, sometimes with conflicting values. The different contexts are what enable the activation of different meanings, which are then understood by the audience as a specific style indexing the “Smooth Operator” or “Sexual Modern.” Figure 1 proposes an indexical field for Beijing rhotacization, illustrating how different social meanings might interact with each other.

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**Figure 1: Indexical field of érhuà**

The primary meaning that links the two personae together is savoir-faire; this meaning in turn is ideologically linked to worldly wisdom and oiliness in the “Smooth Operator” and sexual expertise and modernity in the “Sexual Modern.” Context can activate certain meanings, and the
incorporation of a social persona (like the “Smooth Operator”) into one’s own style along with the use of the variable in new contexts is what imbues new social meanings that build off previously established meanings, allowing for a new persona (the “Sexual Modern”) to emerge. This is not to suggest that these personae are mutually exclusive; indeed, some characters appear to stylistically incorporate both personae in certain contexts. But it is not simply the social environment of an interaction that comprises context; the speakers, specifically their appearance and bodies, also contribute. Calder (2017) states:

“The body is an integral part of the stylistic context that facilitates the retrieval of a certain social meaning from the indexical field… the potential range of meanings that can be retrieved by a certain linguistic variable in the indexical field can be widened or narrowed depending on the body producing that variable” (Calder 2017: 11).

According to Zhang, the “Smooth Operator” persona is ideologically male; consequently, èrhuà has an ideological link to masculinity (and, as I argue, heterosexual masculinity). However, the characters that I analyze here are not all heterosexual men; most of them are either heterosexual women or homosexual men.3 Their bodies (and consequently, their embodied performances of gender and sexuality) become part of the stylistic context and influence the possible meanings that arise from the indexical field of rhotacization. In these cases, the bodily recontextualization of rhotacization broadens the variable’s indexical potential. The very use of èrhuà by these characters cannot simply be discussed as “Smooth Operator” because their gender and sexuality interact with the variable. The characters may capitalize on the previously established meanings

3 The series does not explicitly address Suǒ-wèi and Chi-chêng’s sexual orientations; they appear to be bisexual, but their sexualities are not defined (compared to other male characters whose homosexuality is mentioned).
of Beijing rhotacization, but by using ěrhùà in a new bodily context, they also create new indexical links. In other words, they participate in stylistic bricolage, where “individual resources (in this case, variables) can be interpreted and combined with other resources to construct a more complex meaningful entity” (Eckert 2008: 456-457).

Thus, by recontextualizing a linguistic feature (by gender, sexuality, body, or social situation), not only does the variable change, but the context of the variable (specifically, the other variables around it) changes as well. Similarly, a person using ěrhùà to access the “Smooth Operator” persona in a unique context (the social situation, the body, and its gendered ideals) changes not only the meanings of the “Smooth Operator” (meanings like having savoir-faire, being non-violent, and having urban versatility), but also isolates rhotacization as a resource in the style of sexual modernity, which the characters of “Counterattack!” deploy throughout the series. By using the “Smooth Operator” variable in new contexts, the characters engage in complex semiotic practices of stylistic bricolage, indexicality, and identity to display sexual modernity.

Notes on Data Collection

All nine episodes (eight of the series and one additional special episode) were collected in their release format, including title and ending credits as well as subtitles embedded into the episodes (comprising a total of three hours and six minutes). Because the subtitles were provided in Standard Mandarin, they did not exactly represent the actors’ speech, so, to prepare the episodes for analysis, eighteen scenes\(^4\) with especially frequent uses of rhotacization (based on impressionistic analysis) were selected, and interlinear texts were subsequently created using

\(^4\) Many more than eighteen scenes included frequent use of rhotacization; I chose to select scenes that included the three main characters (Chí-chêng, Suō-wèi, and Yuè-yuè), and Jiā-li.
Elan (examples provided in the thesis are reductions of these). The data was transcribed using a slightly modified form of Pinyin (the official Mandarin romanization system in China); this transcription spells closer to actual pronunciation rather than following Pinyin orthographic convention. For example, the common phrases 什麼 ‘what’ and 怎麼 ‘how’ (shénme and zěnme in conventional Pinyin) are represented as shémme and zěmme where pronounced as such. Pinyin conventions prefer to represent érhuà with -r appended onto the rhotacized syllable, thus 今兒 ‘today (Beijing dialect)’ is represented as jinr, but pronounced as [tɕiə] (J. Zhang 2017); my transcriptions follow this convention. Érhuà is represented in the English free translations according to the format Qing Zhang has used in her work, with [r] affixed to the English word or phrase corresponding to the Mandarin rhotacized phrases.

Of the eighteen selected scenes, several presented cases where the use of rhotacization was not clearly indicative of the “Sexual Modern” persona. The following analyzed excerpts share unique factors of performance of gender or sexuality as well as situational context that appeared to show the emergence of the “Sexual Modern.”

**Rejection, Seduction, and Admonition**

The “Smooth Operator” and “Sexual Modern” are both personae with social meanings that people access when they adopt rhotacization in their speech, thus adopting the ideologies attached to the variable and incorporating them into their style. In “Counterattack!” Yuè-yuè employs rhotacization to convey social distance in the very first scene of the series. While both Suǒ-wèi and Yuè-yuè use features characteristic of BM (such as the previously mentioned elision and Beijing tone contours), only Yuè-yuè uses érhuà at the end of the scene, as shown in the following example, in which she tells Suǒ-wèi that their relationship is over.
Ex. 1 (Ep. 1, 03:09–03:25)

01 Yuè-yuè  
Mèng jiàn záliǎ zhījiǎn yǒu xiào sā le. Bù mán nǐ shuō a, wǒ méi dōu xiào zhe xǐng de.
‘In my dream, I saw a third person between us (I saw myself with another man). I won’t hide it from you, every time I still laugh myself awake.’

02 (looks away from Suǒ-wèi)  
Píng wǒ Yuè-yuè de róngrào.
‘With my “Yuè-yuè looks,”’

03 nà zhǎo gè gāofūshuài, bù jìu fènzhōng de shì mà?  
‘looking for a “Mr. Perfect,” won’t it simply be a matter of minutes?’

04 (looks over her shoulder at Suǒ-wèi)  
Ni ya, jiù hǎozìwéizhī ba.  
‘(As for) you, go fend for yourself/you’re on your own now.’

Here, Yuè-yuè’s use of érhuà is a practice (a series of linguistic actions) motivated by Beijing rhotacization’s sociocultural association with conversational dexterity: the “Smooth Operator” persona is strongly linked to ideologies of the “gift of gab,” reservation (specifically being unflappable), and the ability to talk oneself out of any situation. Yuè-yuè accesses these to create social distance from her interlocutor and to convey her confidence and power in the situation—traits that support the action of ending her relationship with her boyfriend of seven years.

This social distance is created through Yuè-yuè’s emphasis in this scene of her differences from Suǒ-wèi: she positions herself as a very desirable partner, someone who can very easily find gāofūshuài, a “Mr. Perfect.” The term gāofūshuài literally means ‘tall, rich, handsome’ and is similar to “Mr. Right” in English, yet it places more emphasis on social status rather than on ideal romance. The term’s origin in Chinese internet slang further positions Yuè-yuè as a person situated in modernity, as well as her agentive self-description of finding a “Mr. Perfect” (as opposed to passively being found by him). Using this phrase does three actions: first,
it tells Suŏ-wèi that he is none of the three characteristics found in a ‘Mr. Perfect’; second, it positions Yuè-yuè as a uniquely modern woman who is well-versed and updated in current slang; and third, it suggests that she is the type of woman who is capable of securing such a man for herself (and in fact, in “only a matter of minutes,” as she states). Her specific use of slang and érhuà all play a part in constructing herself as a very unique kind of woman, one who knows that she is very beautiful and takes great pride in it (note where she mentions her “Yuè-yuè looks” as one of her assets in line 2). Her embodied linguistic actions in lines 2-4 also reflect a disparity between herself and Suŏ-wèi. Before line 2 (‘With my “Yuè-yuè looks…”’), she had been speaking at a conversationally typical level of intensity and speech rate; however, at line 2, she raises her voice, speaking both louder and slower, conveying a more “rehearsed” type of performance (indicated in the above transcription by underlined text). Significantly, she also turns her body away from Suŏ-wèi during this performance. When she turns her head back towards him in line 4, she says over her shoulder ‘(As for) you, go fend for yourself/you’re on your own now.’ Yuè-yuè’s use of hǎozìwéizhī ‘fend for oneself/be on one’s own’ is an example of a chéngyǔ, four-character idioms (many of historical origins) that usually follow Classical Chinese grammar. By giving advice to Suŏ-wèi through a chéngyǔ, Yuè-yuè suggests that he is still situated in an ancient time where such idioms originated. In this stylized farewell to Suŏ-wèi, Yuè-yuè turns back before walking away, signifying a physical manifestation of a timeline of progress in which she, as a modern person, moves forward, while people like Suŏ-wèi remain behind and stagnant.

All of these practices serve to differentiate Yuè-yuè from Suŏ-wèi. The scene establishes Suŏ-wèi as her character’s opposite: he is boring, ordinary, not rich, and not physically attractive. Later in the series, Suŏ-wèi gets a makeover, but at this point in the series’ beginning, he has
given up on life and ceased taking care of his appearance or searching for a better job. His name, Wú Suǒ-wèi, a homophone of wúsuǒwèi ‘to be indifferent, to not care,’ is a reflection of this. Thus, Yuè-yuè performs social distance as she ends her relationship with Suǒ-wèi to emphasize their incompatibility. This incompatibility likewise reflects a broader tension backgrounding the series regarding neoliberal values. While Yuè-yuè performs the aspiring individualist self-care that scholars such as Ilana Gershon (2011) associate with neoliberal identity, Suǒ-wèi rejects all engagement with upward mobility, even abandoning his pursuit of better employment. In this way, too, Yuè-yuè is relationally positioned as a modern individual.

Highlighting this disparity has the additional benefit of making Yuè-yuè appear more reasonable (as in, not simply ending the relationship for flippant reasons). It likewise places the failure of the relationship onto Suǒ-wèi, who is unable to give her the modernity she requires. Applying Bucholtz and Hall’s (2005a) definition of identity to this scene, we can see that the sexually modern identity projected by Yuè-yuè is here the contextualized outcome of her linguistic practices (e.g., internet slang and érhuà). Her identity emerges from the differences of modernity, gender, and socioeconomic class that she performs to justify her rejection of Suǒ-wèi.

Yuè-yuè’s use of rhotacization combines all of these meanings. She frankly and openly discusses her sexuality and how she intends to use it to attract men of high status; likewise, she takes complete control over her choice of rejecting Suǒ-wèi. These actions reveal the conversational control and manipulation that the “Smooth Operator” persona is celebrated for. Her use of érhuà, her gender, and this social situation all set the contextual stage for her “Sexual Modern” style, which she achieves through stylistic bricolage. Because the “Smooth Operator” variable is most often associated with an urban male persona, Yuè-yuè’s gendered performance,

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8 Towards the end of the series, this comparison is reversed, where Suǒ-wèi emerges as a more neoliberal individual than Yuè-yuè.
both linguistic and embodied, transforms former masculinized meanings of the “Smooth Operator” person into a rebelliously gendered “Sexual Modern.” She is a driven woman with agency who can reject her boyfriend and use sexuality to her advantage in seducing men—in direct contrast to Suǒ-wèi’s passivity and aimless sense of direction. All of these distinctions are emblematized by her use of rhotacization, a variable densely indexical of masculinity.

Sexual modernity also surfaces towards the end of the first episode. After leaving a nightclub with a new boyfriend, Yuè-yuè passes by Chí-chēng, a young man from an elite family with a playboy reputation. She quickly abandons her newest boyfriend in order to seduce Chí-chēng, ultimately leaving the nightclub with him in an intimate embrace. In the example below, Yuè-yuè is heard speaking the first lines as an echo through edited audio, a sound effect meant to simulate Yuè-yuè’s inner voice talking to herself, like an internal monologue. It is not until after she sits down that she actually speaks to Chí-chēng:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ex. 2 (Ep. 1, 17:39–18:38)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>05</td>
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<tr>
<td>06</td>
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<td>07</td>
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<td>08</td>
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</tbody>
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9 Text enclosed in degree symbols represents edited audio simulating an “internal monologue.”
10 Shào is a title that can be translated as ‘young man’ or ‘young master of a rich family.’
11 This (lit. ‘first shot’) colloquially means “big playboy” (of unusual promiscuity and prowess).
12 Shuāigē is used as a proper noun, similar to English “Hey, Handsome.”
As in the previous example, Yuè-yuè also frequently employs rhotacization; nearly every sentence in this exchange contains an instance. Certainly in this scene Yuè-yuè is acting as a seductress, but her use of the variable comes out of the behind-the-scenes control she wields in the situation. Yuè-yuè’s method of seduction is not impulsive; in her monologue, she reveals that she has visited the bar before, taken note of when Chí-chêng usually arrives, and observed him often enough to understand his habits without being noticed by him. Her plan is patient and careful, and while she is surprised by his unexpected absence, she nevertheless speaks confidently when she decides he will show up soon. In her inner monologue, rhotacization is used to convey a self-assuredness that incorporates the oiliness and smoothness of the “Smooth Operator” (her plan is slick, and she continues to go with the flow despite unexpected surprises), as well as its meanings of being unflappable and worldly (she is unphased by Chí-chêng’s absence). Yet graphed onto these meanings is that of sexual modernity: her expertise in the ways of courtship, backed by days of stealthily watching Chí-chêng, leads her to predict what will happen next.

When she goes over to sit next to Chí-chêng and begins seducing him, she continues using rhotacization; her use of the variable here is primarily to convey her similarities to Chí-chêng. Her use of ěrhuà in this instance appears to express refinement as well as locality, demonstrating that she is just as sophisticated as he is while also communicating to him that she is from Beijing, like he is. Here she constructs her identity around their sameness, in contrast to her interaction with Suǒ-wèi. Yet in her interactions with both men, Yuè-yuè is by far the dominant speaker; in fact, in this example, Chí-chêng does not say even a single word. She adeptly directs the conversation to the romantic goal she desires—with Suǒ-wèi, an ended relationship, and with Chí-chêng, a successful seduction.
Pursuit and seduction surface in a third scene at Chí-chêng’s favorite nightclub, where a male waiter recognizes him and then comes over to sit on his lap.

Ex. 3 (Ep. 3, 03:30–04:25)

| 09 | Waiter | Chí-gê, ní zêmmé lài le? (straddles Chí-chêng) Chí-gê, ní dōu hâojiû méi lài le. ‘Chí-gê, why’ve you come? Chí-gê, it’s been so long since you came.’ |
| 10 | Chí-chêng | Wô jî bû lái zhào nî ne. ‘I didn’t come today[1] to look for you.’ |
| 12 | Chí-chêng | Béng guànn wô zhàô shéi, xiâng cóng shèn xiàqu. ‘Never mind who I’m looking for, first get off me.’ |
| 13 | Waiter | Wô bû a. Wô yâoshi xiàqu le, nî yóu diânn le biârén zêmmé bân a? ‘I won’t. If I get off, (and) you make an appointment with someone else again, what’ll I do?’ |
| 14 | Chí-chêng | (taking money out of his pocket) Qián gêi nî a, râng wô xiāotingxiâoting. ‘(This) money’s for you; let me calm down for a bit/while.’ |
| 15 | Waiter | Wô bû yào qián. Wô jiù yào nî a. ‘I don’t want money. I just want you.’ |
| 16 | Chí-chêng | Nî shì duâojiû méi rang rèn diâo[13] le? ‘How long has it been since you let someone fuck you?’ |
| 17 | Waiter | Tiântiânn dôu rèn diâo wô. Jiûshî méiyôu gên nî shuâng a. ‘Every day there’re still people fucking me. It’s just not as pleasurable as it is with you.’ |
| 18 | Chí-chêng | Tîng huà, xiâng zhào biârén chêngbûchêng? ‘Listen up; look for someone else first, okay?’ |
| 20 | Chí-chêng | Tâmen lài zhèr shî wêile xiâofêî wô. Èr wô shì zhênxùn xîhuân nî. ‘(When) they come here[1], it’s for them to use me. But I truly like you.’ |

In this example, despite their obviously homosexual relationship, both men settle into heteronormative performances. The waiter adopts more behaviors stereotypically associated with feminine homosexuality (e.g., higher voice, wider pitch range, more exaggerated tone contours, 13 Diăo is a slang borrowing from Cantonese.)
consistent use of creaky voice), while Chí-chêng’s voice is relationally positioned as normatively masculine. I suggest that these characters’ use of the rhotacization variable can be described as a negotiation of sexual knowledge. Chí-chêng first begins using rhotacization to indicate to the waiter that he was not the reason for his coming to the nightclub, displaying greater sexual power in his ability to reject the waiter’s advances. But the waiter counters this assertion with his own use of rhotacization in line 11, where he predicts the object of Chí-chêng’s desire and then informs him that he will not find her there, demonstrating that he has specialized knowledge regarding Chí-chêng’s sexual preferences and desires. The lines that follow lack rhotacization until the waiter’s very last sentence, an absence that appears to index a failure of desire. Chí-chêng attempts to reject the waiter’s advances (first verbally and then with offers of money) are refused. Similarly, the waiter doesn’t know yet how to persuade Chí-chêng to stay. As a result, neither character can demonstrate sexual expertise due to the uncertainty of the situation. It is not until the end of the scene (lines 19-20), when the waiter discusses how different Chí-chêng is from everyone else, that the waiter finally wins the conflict. In this description, the waiter positions himself as a sexual expert, as someone who has had sexual experiences with many men and thus knows that Chí-chêng is special. He thus marks this final line with rhotacization, establishing himself as a sexually modern—and knowledgeable—interlocutor.

This power negotiation between Chí-chêng and the waiter surfaces in other interactions, most especially those concerning Chí-chêng’s older sister Jiā-lì, who often travels outside of China. In the seventh episode, Yuè-yuè is invited to meet Chí-chêng’s family for the first time and have lunch, and her attempts to be friendly with Jiā-lì are unsuccessful.
This scene highlights the tension between Yuè-yuè and Jiā-li, setting the stage for the following scene, in which Jiā-li speaks to her parents and voices her opinions of her parent’s quick acceptance of Yuè-yuè into the Chěng family. Example 4 provides the audience with much information about who Jiā-li is: she is an observant and smart woman who won’t be fooled by anyone, especially not Yuè-yuè. The short exchange is obviously uncomfortable for Yuè-yuè, but Jiā-li is not threatened. She knows that Yuè-yuè is seeking the approval of Chí-chēng’s family, and, having won over both parents, she is now concerned with impressing her. Thus, Yuè-yuè, in contrast to the performance we saw in Example 1, here lacks the “ease” or “relaxation of tension” (Bourdieu 1984) demonstrated by Jiā-li.

During the scene, Jiā-li does not make eye contact with Yuè-yuè. After Yuè-yuè claims that she has paid a lot of attention to Chí-chēng (line 21), mentioning his sister, Jiā-li sees through the lie and challenges her. Previous episodes have shown that Chí-chēng avoids discussing his family and has a strained relationship with his parents; he was very reluctant to bring Yuè-yuè to meet his family. Jiā-li, finding it unlikely that Chí-chēng would have discussed her with Yuè-yuè, challenges Yuè-yuè’s claim (line 22). Yuè-yuè laughs uncomfortably and moves on, asking about Jiā-li’s travels. Jiā-li’s response to Yuè-yuè’s second question yields one
instance of rhotacization; she answers Yuè-yuè ambiguously (still not looking directly at her and instead concentrating on eating). The inclusion of rhotacization here may be arbitrary, but it could also index Jiā-li confidence in her evaluation of Yuè-yuè as a liar, instancing a form of expertise (i.e., of reading people).

After lunch, Jiā-li confronts her father, Yuǎn-duān, and mother, Wén-yù, over how quickly they accepted Yuè-yuè into the family, warning them that Yuè-yuè may be trying to exploit their family’s elite status for her own gain.

Ex. 5 (Ep. 7, 11:36–12:44)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Line</th>
<th>Character</th>
<th>Text</th>
<th>Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Jiā-li</td>
<td>Wǒ shuō bà mā, nǐmen shìbùshì yīzhāo bēi shé yào, shǐniàn pā jǐngshér a?</td>
<td>‘I say, Dad and Mom, are you once bitten, twice shy[r]?’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td></td>
<td>Wǒ dì hé Wāng-shuò de shì dōu guò le liùnián le. Tā bù jiù zǒuguò yīcǐ wāilù ma?</td>
<td>‘My brother and Wāng-shuò’s matter all passed six years ago. Didn’t he only cross over to the slanted road once?’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 27   |          | Nǐmen zhìyú pà chéng zhè yàng cr ma? | ‘Are you so afraid of looking[r] like this?’ (lit. ‘becoming this appearance[r]’)
| 28   |          | Suísuíbiànbiàn yīgè nùrén jiù gǎn diǎntóu. Néngbùnéng bié zhème zuòjian zìjǐ de érzi a? | ‘You dare nod your head indifferently at any one woman. Can you not humiliate/degrade your own son like this?’ |
| 29   | Yuǎn-duān | Wǒmen shì zhīchí tā liàn’ài, dàn méi chěshàng tánhūnlúnjià. | ‘We are supporting his relationship/love affair, but he hasn’t talked about getting married.’ |
| 30   |          | Tā ya, néng zhǎodào nǚpèngyǒu jiù búcùo le. Zhěngtiān zhā zài shéwōr lǐ, shěi lèyì gēn tā ya? | ‘(For) him, being able to find a girlfriend’s already not bad/pretty good. Staying in the snake’s nest[r] all day, who would be willing to go with him?’ |
| 31   | Wén-yù   | Jiùshī a, wǒ qiáo zhè gǔniáng yē búcùo. | ‘It’s just, I find this young lady not bad/pretty good, also.’ |
| 32   |          | Suīrán jiā lǐ tiáojiàn yībān, kěrén tǐng jīlìng, mǔyàngr yē búcùo. | ‘Although the conditions/circumstances of (her) home/family are ordinary/common, (She’s) pleasant, quick-witted/clever, (and her) appearance[r] is also not bad/pretty good.’ |

14 This is an idiomatic expression (lit. ‘once bitten by a snake, ten years afraid of a well rope[r]’).
15 Wāng-shuò is Chi-chēng’s ex-boyfriend; he never appears in the series.
16 Tánhūnlúnjià is an idiom referring to the conversation children and parents have to prepare for marriage.
17 Búcùo literally means ‘not wrong,’ but can be translated as ‘not bad’ or ‘pretty good.’
Nǐ shuō zhè míngróng shì bùshǎo, kě nǐ dìdì bù yuànyì ya.
‘You say these young ladies from prestigious families are many, but your younger brother isn’t willing.’

Jiā-li
Gēnběn jiù bǔshì tiáojiǎn de shír. Tā yào zhānghǎi gè pǔshì de núhái yě jiù hǎo le.
‘Fundamentally, it isn’t a matter of conditions/circumstances. It’d be just fine if she were a genuine/down-to-earth girl.’

Nǐ qiáoqiáo tā nà yī liǎn shìsú de yàngr.
‘Look at that worldly appearance of her face.’

Jiù chàzài náoménrshàng xiě jīgè dàzì, ‘Wǒ yào pān’gāozhī le.’
‘Might as well just write some big characters on (her) forehead, “I want to climb to a higher branch.”’

Wén-yù
Aiyōu, nǐ bié luānshùō. Nǐ cái jiàndào rénjiā yìmiànr, nǐ néng kànchū shénme lái ya?
‘Oh my, you shouldn’t speak so carelessly. You’ve only seen one face of this person; can you make out what’ll come?’

Jiā-li
Yòu. Bù xìn zán zǒuzheqīào.
‘(I) can. If you don’t trust me, we’ll (just) wait and see (who is right).’

Here, Jiā-li capitalizes on all the possible meanings of Beijing rhotacization; the entire constellation is shining. Her use of the variable combines indexicalities of the “Smooth Operator” and “Sexual Modern” personae as she positions herself as knowledgeable compared to her naïve parents, especially with respect to ‘worldly’ people and their behaviors. In this way, she channels the “Smooth Operator” meanings of being street-smart and having urban versatility to perform sexual expertise. The discursive context of the conversation—i.e., she is discussing Chí-chèng’s relationship and the possibility of his getting married to Yuè-yuè—pushes Jiā-li’s use of rhotacization into the realm of sexual modernity, combining the two personae’s meanings.

Jiā-li starts the scene by confronting her parents and questioning their swift acceptance of Yuè-yuè: ‘are you once bitten, twice shy?’ Then she asks ‘Are you so afraid of looking like this?’ One can assume that she is referring to her parents’ fear of the social consequences of

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18 This chéngyǔ literally means ‘famous-door-hope-clan.’
19 This idiom (including the rhotacization) means ‘to play up to people of higher social status.’
20 Rénjiā is a non-specific third-person pronoun that implies social distance.
having an openly homosexual son, and she expresses the observation that her parents’ fear has blinded them into accepting any woman into the family without careful consideration. Moreover, their behavior, according to her, is humiliating to Chí-chêng, suggesting that they do not have confidence in his dating life or his independence as a grown man. Her use of rhotacization here expresses that she is more knowledgeable than her parents, who have not realized how destructive their behavior is.

Jiă-li’s parents then explain their reasoning. By saying ‘(For) him, being able to find a girlfriend’s already not bad/pretty good,’ Yuăn-duăn suggests that he and his wife are glad that anyone has chosen to date Chí-chêng. His use of rhotacization (‘Staying in the snake’s nest[r] all day, who would be willing to go with him?’) can be interpreted as initiating a power negotiation between him and Jiă-li over who has more sexual knowledge regarding Chí-chêng’s dating situation.

Yuăn-duăn also expresses his anxiety over Chí-chêng’s lack of discussion regarding marriage, justifying his and his wife’s behavior by alluding to the pressures in Chinese society for children to marry young. Wén-yù contributes her own explanation to the discussion; she tells her daughter that her acceptance of Yuè-yuè is in fact not at all blind or indifferent. She recognizes that Yuè-yuè comes from a more common background compared to their family’s elite status, yet still finds her to have many positive qualities (namely, pleasantness, cleverness, and appearance[r], which she marks with rhotacization). Like her husband, Wén-yù appears to deploy rhotacization to express her possession of more sexual knowledge than her daughter; specifically, she knows more about her own reasoning behind accepting Yuè-yuè as a suitable daughter-in-law. Moreover, Wén-yù explains the difficult situation that she and her husband are in. Chí-chêng does not find the women of other elite families to be suitable, which provides
another additional problem in the parental quest to get their only son married. Thus, both parents employ rhotacization to position themselves as more knowledgeable in the sexual domain of matchmaking for their son.

Jiā-li’s response to her parents’ defense exhibits strong rhotacization, again displaying a combination of both the “Smooth Operator” and “Sexual Modern” personae. At line 34 she corrects her mother, saying that her judgment of Yuè-yuè is not about her common origins but rather her personality (she is not a ‘genuine/down-to-earth girl’). Jiā-li warns her parents of Yuè-yuè’s ‘worldly appearance,’ indicating her familiarity and expertise with “worldly” people and their behaviors and motives. Interestingly, she rhotacizes yàng ‘appearance,’ just like her mother did when she mentioned Yuè-yuè’s “pleasantness, cleverness, and appearance.”

Through this rhotic one-upmanship, Jiā-li positions herself as being the more knowledgeable of the two; what her mother sees as good is a red flag for Jiā-li. And what Jiā-li sees is that Yuè-yuè is trying to climb the social ladder by dating Chí-chêng. Her parents claim expertise in this matchmaking problem, but Jiā-li uses èrhuà to challenge that expertise. She expresses her awareness about the aspirations of young “worldly” people like Yuè-yuè: “Might as well just write some big characters on (her) forehead, “I want to climb to a higher branch.””

The expression pān’gāozhīr ‘climb the social ladder’ (lit. ‘climb to a higher branch’) has rhotacization built into it. The phrase has many negative connotations, including ‘kissing up’ to one’s superiors or using dubious means to get to the higher ranks. It also suggests inauthenticity. A person who climbs to the higher branches may reach their destination yet never fully belong there, which shows in their behaviors. All of these meanings come together in Jiā-li’s scathing assessment of Yuè-yuè. Her expression of sexual modernity in this instance parallels the use of Sardarji jokes by Delhi youth that Hall (forthcoming) discusses, where the traditional
Sardarji is invoked as a foil for the expression of sexual modernity. Here, Yuè-yuè becomes the foil for Jiā-li’s expression of modernity. Although Jiā-li focuses on the class differences between her family and Yuè-yuè, she makes clear that the problem is actually Yuè-yuè’s worldliness and aspiration, which in her view exposes her as an inauthentic social climber.

In Episode 8, Chí-chěng and Yuè-yuè break up, but Yuè-yuè lies to Wén-yù, saying that she and Chí-chěng are still together. Meanwhile, Suō-wěi conspires with one of Yuè-yuè’s friends to slide Chí-chěng’s credit card into her purse, knowing Yuè-yuè will not resist the temptation to use it. Jiā-li later finds out about Yuè-yuè’s spending, and she brings the receipts to Wén-yù. The example below shows Jiā-li’s revelation to Wén-yù of Yuè-yuè’s lies: Yuè-yuè has gone on an excessive shopping spree, lied about her relationship status with Chí-chěng, and used his money to buy gifts for Wén-yù. The omitted portion between 11:26–11:56 is Wén-yù’s phone call to Chí-chěng, where she confirms that he and Yuè-yuè have truly broken up and that Yuè-yuè has been lying about their relationship.

Ex. 6 (Ep. 8, 10:34–12:25)

39  Jiā-li  Mā, nín zīgēr kànkān. (gives Wén-yù a handful of receipts)
‘Mom, have a look yourself[FRM].’

40  Wén-yù  (looks at receipts)  Nǐ zhèchù qù yītàng. Zěnme huā zhème duō qián ya?
‘You’ve gone out this one trip. How’d (you) spend so much money?’

41  Jiā-li  Nín zài hǎohǎo qiàōqiāo zhěqián shì shéi huā de.
‘You (FRM) take another proper[FRM] look at who spent this money.’

42  Wén-yù  (looks at receipts again)  Zhè, nǐ zhè shì cóng nǎ nòng lái de?
‘This, where did you get this from?’

43  Jiā-li  Zhè jiùshì nín měi zhǔnr xīfūr. Chūqù yī xiàwǔ huā le èrshísānwàn lǐqiān duō.
‘This is your (FRM) undependable[FRM] daughter-in-law[FRM]. One afternoon (she) went out and spent over 236,000 (yuan; about 38,500 USD).’

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21 Mandarin has two second-person singular pronouns differentiated by formality; FRM is an abbreviation of ‘formal.’ Here, ‘yourself’ is made of two parts, nín (2SG.FRM) and zīgēr ‘self[FRM].’
Nín zhīdào shuā le shì shéi de kǎ ma? Nín érzi de.
‘Do you (FRM) know whose card (she) swiped? Your (FRM) son’s.’

Nín gǎnjǐn cāliàng nín nà shuāng láohuàyǎn
tā de qián zhème zǎo.
‘You (FRM) polish (off) those readers without delay and take a proper [r] look.’

Tā yǐjīng hé Chí-chèng fēnshǒu le. Hái gǎn ná zhe tā de qián zhème zǎo.
‘She’s already broken up with Chí-chèng. (She) still dares to hold onto his money (from) so long ago.’

Zài yīqǐ de shíhòu, bù zhīdào dōu shēchǐ chéng shénme yàng.
‘When they were together, who knows what sort of extravagance she reached?’

Mā, zhèyàng de érxífù qǔ huíjiā, yòngbùliǎo liǎngnián, zánmenjiā dōuděi tāokōng le, mā.
‘Mom, bringing this kind of daughter-in-law back home, in less than two years, (she’ll) for sure clean out our entire family, Mom.’

… (11:26–11:52) …

Jiā-lì
Mā, jiù nín nà pījiān, gēn bāobèi shì de shèbūděi chuān.
‘Mom, this shawl of yours, it’s so precious, (you) can’t bear wearing it.’

Shuō rénjia huā le yìgè yuè gōngzī gěi nǐ mǎi de.
‘That person said (she) spent one month’s salary to buy it for you.’

Tā yǐjīng hào jīgè yuè méi shàngbān le. Nǎ lái de gōngzī a?
‘She already hasn’t been working [r] for several months. Where’s (her) salary coming from?’

Wǒde qīnmā ya, tā jiù huā le nín érzi zhànghùshàng nàdiǎn língtōu gěi nǐ mǎi de.
‘My dear mother, she spent scraps from your (FRM) son’s bank account to buy it for you (FRM).’

Shèngchījiānyòng. Ye jiù néng nǐ xiāngxīn tā nà guīhuà le.
‘How thrifty. Also, you were able to believe in her nonsense.’

Tā shǎo mǎi yìgè bāo, shìtíāo pījiān dōu chūlái le, mā.
‘(If) she buys one less bag, ten shawls will all come out, Mom.’ (If she buys one less bag, you can buy ten more shawls, Mom.)

Wén-yù (shocked, under her breath) Zhēn méijiǎn guò zhème bǐyuàoliǎn de.
‘(I’ve) truly never seen such shamelessness.’

Jiā-lì employs many linguistic strategies in this example to create social distance between herself and both her mother and Yuè-yuè. First, she addresses her mother with the formal ‘you,’ which indicates respect but also a perceived social distance. She also avoids referring to Yuè-yuè

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22 ‘Readers’ here refers to reading glasses. Láohuàyǎn can either mean ‘age-related farsightedness,’ or glasses that treat the condition.
23 Shàngbān specifically refers to shift work (in Mandarin, there are also phrases for physical or office work).
24 Shèngchījiānyòng is another idiom.
by name, instead calling her xífū (daughter-in-law), ‘your (FRM) daughter-in-law[\text{r}] to-be[\text{r}]’ (to Wén-yù), and rénjìā, a non-specific third-person pronoun indicating social distance. Jiā-lì’s use of rhotacization is frequent in this scene, coinciding with the expert status she assumes in explaining Yuè-yuè’s lies and schemes to Wén-yù. She metaphorically extends Wén-yù’s impaired vision (“polish off those readers”) to her failure to see Yuè-yuè’s faults, emphasizing her own youthful modernity in contrast to Wén-yù’s seniority and traditional values. By exposing the truth, Jiā-lì assumes a more knowledgeable and authoritative role; she is the wiser one in having seen through Yuè-yuè’s lies.

The immediately following scene shows Yuè-yuè’s final visit to the Chēng household, where Wén-yù confronts Yuè-yuè about her recent spending spree and warns her to never return to their home.

\begin{tabular}{l}
\textbf{Ex. 7 (Ep. 8, 12:40–13:32)}
\end{tabular}

(change of scene; Yuè-yuè comes to the Chēng household and knocks on the door. Wén-yù comes out, but does not look at Yuè-yuè)

\begin{tabular}{l}
56 Yuè-yuè \\
Āyí a, wǒ yòu lái zhǎo nín lái le. Yígè rén zài jiā shì wú liáo le. \\
‘Auntie, I’ve come again to look for you (FRM). Being home alone is indeed too boring.’
\end{tabular}

\begin{tabular}{l}
57 (links arms with Wén-yù) \\
Nín bù huí xiǎn wǒ fán ba. \\
‘You (FRM) won’t find me annoying.’
\end{tabular}

\begin{tabular}{l}
58 Wén-yù (pulls arm back) \\
Zhídào wǒ fán nǐ hái lái. \\
‘(Despite) knowing that I’m annoyed, you still came.’
\end{tabular}

\begin{tabular}{l}
59 Yuè-yuè \\
Āyí a, nǐ zěmme le ya? \\
‘Auntie, what’s happened with you?’
\end{tabular}

\begin{tabular}{l}
60 Wén-yù \\
Yǐhòu nǐ bié wǎng wǒmen zhè pǎo. \textsuperscript{25} Wǒ kàn nǐ ě xīn \\
‘From now on, don’t come running/crawling back to our place[\text{r}]. I find you nauseous/revolting.’
\end{tabular}

\begin{tabular}{l}
61 Yuè-yuè \\
Āyí a, wǒ dàodi cuò shěmme le ya? \\
‘Auntie, what have I actually done wrong?’
\end{tabular}

\textsuperscript{25} Pǎo means ‘run’ or ‘flee,’ but it also has another meaning of ‘paw at the ground (like an animal).’
(Wén-yù goes inside, then comes back out. She slaps the receipts into Yuè-yuè’s hands. Yuè-yuè reads them; her eyes widen and she uneasily looks back at Wén-yù)

Wén-yù  
Kànzhài rènshí yīchǎng defènshàng,26 wǒ fèngquàn nǐ yìjù.  ‘For the sake of[r] recognizing this bout (of spending), I offer you one word of advice.’

Nǚhái, yī pà lǎn, èr pà chán. Hǎo tānxiǎopiányí,27 zǎowǎn bā zǐjǐ péi jìnqù.  ‘A girl[r] (should) first fear laziness, second, fear greed. Being prone to coveting petty advantages, sooner or later, it’s yourself that (you’ll have to) compensate for losing.’

At the start of this interaction, Yuè-yuè uses a simpering tone with creaky voice, but as she links arms with Wén-yù, her voice lowers to a breathy whisper. Both actions minimize the social distance between herself and Wén-yù; she is trying to emphasize their bond as the women of the home, especially because her motivation is to maintain close ties with Wén-yù while she tries to repair her relationship with Chí-chěng and secure her marriage into a wealthy family. Her attempt at being intimate with Wén-yù is unsuccessful, however; Wén-yù unlinks their arms and turns away. Yuè-yuè’s tone of voice then changes quite drastically. When she asks, ‘Auntie, what have I actually done wrong?’ her voice has lost its simpering quality, and when she is shown the receipts evidencing her spending spree, she becomes more obviously anxious.

Then Wén-yù offers her final words to Yuè-yuè, which are again marked with rhotacization: ‘A girl[r] should first fear laziness, second, fear greed.’ Somewhat surprisingly, Wén-yù’s use of the rhotic variable in this short but important scene evokes tradition, as it is embedded in a rhyming structure typical of many Classical Chinese proverbs. Her use of the chéngyǔ (four-character Chinese idiom) tānxiǎopiányí ‘coveting petty advantages,’ further adds to the proverbial tone of her speech. And yet this use of rhotacization also asserts sexual expertise. For Wén-yù, modern dating practices mean nothing if they lack the traditional values

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26 Wényù has rhotacized inside the phrase Kànzhài...defènshàng, meaning ‘for the sake of considering.’
27 This is another chéngyǔ.
that a Chinese woman should have. This ‘trumping’ of modernity with tradition evokes a special use of the rhotic variable. With it, Wén-yù displays a kind of sexual knowledge that only she can share. Traditional virtues, she asserts, will outlast petty gains.

**Conclusion**

Despite the popularity of films depicting homosexuality within the tóngzhì community, the Chinese government has continued to take action towards censoring such content. In 2017, two years after the release of “Counterattack!,” the China Netcasting Services Association issued regulations working towards banning media representation of homosexual relationships (Shaw and Zhang 2018), reflecting sentiments preceding the series’ release. In April 2018, Sina Weibo, a popular Chinese microblogging platform, announced plans to delete or censor illegal content, including content associated with homosexuality. The subsequent backlash caused Sina Weibo to reverse their decision, but not after more than 56,000 posts had been removed (Chiu 2018).

Although homosexuality is legal in China, the government’s ambiguity regarding what type of online content may be deemed acceptable has presented numerous obstacles for tóngzhì filmmakers (Shaw and Zhang 2018), as well as for viewers and the tóngzhì community as a whole. The legality of homosexuality does not guarantee any governmental protection, and the government’s actions to censor the tóngzhì community have resulted in fear of visibility. Moreover, public discourse about homosexuality still paints tóngzhì in a negative light. Sina Weibo’s 2018 decision was intended to create a “harmonious environment” (Chiu 2018), and the specific targeting of homosexuality along with pornography and violence suggests that same-sex representation is disharmonious, offensive, and harmful. Perhaps in response to this positioning,
the characters of “Counterattack!” incorporate érhuà into their speech to index a Beijing-style normativity via the “Smooth Operator” persona. But in their continued use of the variable when discussing topics related to sexuality, they shift its meaning to a new indexical order in the “Sexual Modern.”

Rhotacization in Beijing Mandarin has held significant social meaning related to local identity and the construction of a “Smooth Operator” character, but its use in “Counterattack! Web Series” has created a new character type encompassing not only the traits of the “Smooth Operator” but also that of the “Sexual Modern.” The complicated relationship between the “Smooth Operator” and “Sexual Modern” personae is best explained through the semiotic processes that imbue both with social meaning over time—meanings that continue to shift as speakers and listeners adopt these personae into their individual styles in constructing identity.

In the “Counterattack! Web Series,” we have seen that characters use the “Smooth Operator” variable in discursive contexts that involve the expression of sexual expertise. As the characters voicing this expertise are often at odds with the ideologically expected masculinized gender of the “Smooth Operator,” the series establishes new indexicalities for the variable at a higher indexical order. The use of rhotacization by these characters may be motivated by a stylistic desire to incorporate meanings of savoir-faire and conversational dexterity, but the variable’s repeated appearance in contexts involving sexuality extends its meaning to the expression of sexual knowledge. It is in this way that the “Sexual Modern” emerges as a new social persona, even if expressed by a variable that has long indexed other meanings.
References


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