

## ODE TO JOY

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IN THE SEASON TWO FINALE of the smash-hit sitcom *Ode to Joy* 欢乐颂, the character Fan Shengmei 樊胜美, who has struggled with financially needy parents continually pressuring her to marry, boldly declares her New Year's resolution: 'I am going to stay single and do whatever I want. I will be the fighter plane among the left-over women [*shengnü* 剩女]'

For over a decade, young Chinese women have been bludgeoned with the awful term *shengnü*, for which the closest equivalent in English is 'spinster', in state propaganda, film, and television. The message is: if you want to marry, do not be too educated or you will not be attractive to men. Marry by your mid-twenties (and marry up), be a mother at home, and a 'white collar beauty' 白领丽人 at work. It leaves

young women confronting a 'moralised female sexuality' that forces them to navigate between the extremes of the unsociable housewife, and the powerful woman 女强人 who achieves success at the expense of her feminine charm.<sup>7</sup>

*Ode to Joy* stars five unmarried, educated protagonists, aged from their early twenties to mid-thirties. This is a novel concept for Chinese TV. The *People's Daily* praised the show for its 'realism' 现实主义 in depicting the life pressures of urban women; the US-based news site SupChina called it a 'breath of fresh air' in a TV industry still dominated by propagandistic historical dramas and dynastic epics.<sup>8</sup> These still topped the 2017 TV rankings, followed by the anti-corruption drama *In the Name of the People* 人民的名义 (see

Forum ‘*In the Name of the People*’, p.155), which narrowly edged *Ode to Joy* into fifth place. But *Ode to Joy* was by far the most popular urban drama 都市剧, with the fifty-five episodes of season two garnering a total of twenty-two billion online views by the time of the 10 June finale.<sup>9</sup>

*Ode to Joy* broaches the taboo of young women remaining single in a blatant attempt to fan outrage on social media in between episodes. Each episode, in turn, is packed with enough product placement to drown out any pretense of meaningful social commentary. Products are the real stars of *Ode to Joy*: they stand for wealth, and, for those that can afford them, greater agency in love and marriage. The less wealthy characters are shown to have much less choice in such matters.

The eldest of the five neighbours is Andy 安迪, a Columbia-educated maths genius and CFO in a finance company. She is beautiful, ruthless in the boardroom, and a role model to her friends. She also drives a Porsche 911 (and numerous other luxury cars), and goes jogging in lululemon active-wear. In one episode, which gained the Sanitarium company unprecedented exposure in the Chinese market, she is seen eating imported Australian Weet-

Bix.<sup>10</sup> Andy feels no pressure to marry, but struggles in her relationships due to anxiety and fear of physical contact, resulting from an inherited mental illness. It is a confusing message, and not a particularly joyful one.

The admirable Qiu Yingying 邱莹莹, the youngest of the friends and the least well-off, lands a job at a local café and sets about revolutionising its business model through online sales. Her (affable, male) boss is delighted; her (catty, female) floor manager envious. Around the time she gets her own office, Qiu meets Ying Qin 应勤, an introverted but charming IT guy, and their relationship starts off like a dream come true. But in the most-discussed episode, Ying turns into a monster upon discovering that Qiu has lost her virginity: ‘that girl is a stain 污点’.

The two later reconcile and get engaged. In another controversial episode, Ying Qin’s traditional, middle-class parents browbeat Qiu’s laid-back working-class parents over the marriage arrangements. For this viewer, who wanted to see Ying Qin in a noose by this point, it was not a satisfying resolution.

If Qiu were wealthy, virginity would not be such an issue. It certainly is not for Qu Xiaoxiao 曲筱绡, an



**Ode to Joy 2**

Source: [dramafever.com](http://dramafever.com)

archetypal ‘young nouveau-riche’ 富二代 who flirts outrageously, works in her father’s company, and goes crying to him in his gated mansion whenever life does not go her way. By far the most loathed of *Ode to Joy*’s protagonists, she nonetheless wins the love of the dashing Dr Zhao 赵医生, and flaunts their love continually. While a discreet view of quivering bed sheets does not make *Ode to Joy* quite *Sex in the City*, to which it has been compared, the rich girl with means brings us as close as we get to material climax.

Then there is quiet, studious and hard-working Guan Ju’er 关雎尔. Despite her upper-middle class background, she has no yearning for handbags, only the right guy. This might well be Xie Tong 谢童, who has run away from a broken home to chase his dreams in Shanghai’s underground rock scene. ‘Everyone disapproves of us’, Guan tells her friends in the season finale, ‘but I know our love will survive all tests.’ If the show hopes to shake its derisive nickname, *Ode to Advertising* 广告颂, their love will be the test for season three.

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