

# Figuring Modernity: Four Types of Women Images in Chinese Women Writing

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**Abstract** This article aims to explore four types of cultural images of women in Chinese literature—"the New Woman" from the Republican China (1911-1949), "the Strong Woman" in the Mao era (1949-1976), "the Feminine Woman" in the 1980s and "the Bad Girl" in the 1990s—to illustrate how the status of women is a significant indication of the development of modernity discourse. By exploring the four types of women images in the linear development of Chinese women writing, this essay argues that the idea of Chinese modernity is a historically specific structure in association with some distinct women images. In other words, the New Woman image signifies one dimension of modernity—a rejection of tradition and a break from the past, whereas the Strong Woman becomes the "national resources" during the Mao era's pursuit of modernity with the creation of Feminine Woman as a counter response to the dominant Maoist discourse, and the Bad Girl image turns into the "consumer resources" in a consumer culture.

**Key Words** Chinese modernity; Women Images; Women Writers

The word "modernity" has been used by scholars in so many different ways that it is necessary to be clear as to what the term is meant in this essay. A very authoritative explanation of the term given by Anthony Giddens is that

at its simplest, modernity is a shorthand term for modern society or industrial civilization. Portrayed in more detail, it is associated with (1) a certain set of attitudes towards the world, the idea of the world as open to transformation by human intervention; (2) a certain range of political institutions, including the nation-state and mass democracy. Largely as a result of these characteristics, modernity is vastly more dynamic than any previous type of social order. It is a society—more technically, a complex of institutions—which unlike any preceding culture lives the future rather than the past. (Giddens 94)

In this sociological thought, Giddens seems to emphasize more on the objective conditions that help produce modernity, but in my view, modernity can not only be seen as a set of economic, political and social conditions that help liberate humankind from ignorance and irrationality, but also a kind of “representation, a way of talking about the world in which temporal transformations of the society are occurring” (Chin 491). I agree with Sheldon Lu’s argument that “Chinese modernity, from the mid-nineteenth century to the twenty-first century, is necessarily multifarious and open to many possibilities of narration. We may enumerate a series of successive or overlapping ‘modern’ moments: incipient modernity in Late Qing, May Fourth Bourgeois modernity, capitalist semi-colonial modernity in Shanghai-Nanjing in the Republican era, communist revolutionary modernity, socialist modernity (1950s -1970s), the modernity of the new enlightenment in the New period (1980s), and postsocialist modernity in the post-New period from 1989 to the present” (Lu 1). China’s continuous striving for modernization in different historical periods has unleashed many sensitive writers’ reflections on some specific problems revolving around the process of pursuing modernity. This paper examines the literary representations of Chinese women by Chinese women writers since women’s issues and women writers’ own voices have always constituted a major part of Chinese modern experiences. Chinese women writers provide various imaginations about what it means to be “a modern woman”, forming an important part of the forces that question different modernization projects and their consequences. Using the work of women writers as my research materials, I hope to analyze the different types of responses women writers have towards the prevailing dominant view of gender relations in different historical contexts and the entanglement between nationalism and feminism so as to arrive at a certain understanding of the lives of women in contemporary China.

### **New Woman Image and Positive View of Linear Modernity**

The word “modern” is used whenever “the consciousness of a new epoch formed itself through a renewed relationship to the ancients”(Habermas 3). Modern Chinese women’s literature is generally dated from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, during which time there was a range of activities carried out by different social groups advocating the need to change women’s lives and social positions. Many reformers in republican China contributed China’s weakness to the inferior status of Chinese women; consequently, they promoted women’s rights as a means of strengthening the nation. Searching for women’s equal rights has become a signifier of Chinese modernity. Influenced predominantly by the western thoughts, some male intellectuals such as

Liang Qichao (梁启超) and Kang Youwei (康有为) believed that the inhumane treatment of the female body in the traditional practice of foot binding was the cause of China's weakness. Since the bound feet thwarted the development of a healthy body and healthy offspring, foot-binding practice could only endanger the strength of the whole nation. Thus those reform-minded intellectuals strongly advocated a reformation of Chinese female body as one of the solutions to build a strong future China. They also advocate women's education as a way of China's salvation. This advocacy of anti-traditional, newly educated woman is always linked to the positive views of linear modernity. The New Woman symbolizes the vision of a strong future nation. Influenced by those male intellectuals, some women intellectuals such as Qiu Jin (秋瑾 1879-1907) began to publish articles in some newly emerging women's magazines, trying to awaken their fellow female Chinese to their own social status and its entanglement with the national crisis that China was facing.

The pre-May Fourth production of the "New Woman" as image was soon turned into real experiences during the May Fourth period. More elite women began to unbind their feet, attend school to receive education, and became more open-minded. This emancipation of Chinese women from the traditional Confucian beliefs was in accordance with male intellectuals' imagination of a strong new China. That is to say, the process of national invention and the struggle to create a new gender ideology still occurred simultaneously in China. May Fourth intellectuals, like their Qing precursors, also believed that the emancipation of the Chinese women can lead to China's strong future, but they shifted from Qing reformers' focus on the physical transformation of the people to the ideological transformation. Only by abandoning the Confucian doctrines and by adopting Western individualism could China become equal to the west. May Fourth Movement's radical emphasis on cultural transformation led to the emergence of a generation of "New Women", who believed that the traditional role of "good wife and wise mother" is less attractive than having a career and being economically independent. These "New Women" became zealous supporters of the male intellectuals' efforts to liberate Chinese women. Under such kind of cultural context, some major women writers such as Ling Shuhua (凌叔华), Ding Ling (丁玲), Xiao Hong (萧红), and Chen Xuezhao (陈学昭) create a series of literary female images to reflect on the concurrent emergence of "New Women". Their works deal with the emotional changes that were occurring in the lives of women, especially how some women raised in a traditional Confucian ideology were transformed into the new, educated urban women whose new demands and inspirations clash with the traditional values from time to time.

One specific example of a literary New Woman in women's literature is Meilin (美琳) in Ding Ling's "Shanghai, Spring 1930" (《1930年春, 上海》).

Ding Ling's literary works shift from the early exploration of female subjectivity and sexuality to the later emphasis on class and revolutionary struggle. "Shanghai, Spring 1930" belongs to the latter category of her works. Part one of "Shanghai, Spring 1930" tells the story of a male revolutionary Ruoquan (若泉), his bourgeois writer friend Zibin (子彬), and Zibin's lover Meilin. At the beginning of the story, Meilin is a passive elite woman who has simple charm and delicate beauty. Meilin's personality is largely shaped by the influence of her lover Zibin, who proudly keeps her in an expensive lifestyle, but through contact with Ruoquan and his new ideas about political and class struggle, Meilin begins to realize that her life is frivolous and needs a radical change. She is dissatisfied with her life and wants to be with the masses, try to understand the society and work for it. Towards this aim, she joins the Communist Party and participates in a mass May Day Movement. Thus Meilin is finally transformed into a New Woman who has discovered the key to self-fulfillment in a larger political cause. She represents "the optimism associated with belief in the linear process of modern nation" (Stevens 89). Ding Ling's handling of the heroine seems to support the idea that women's transformation into New Women can finally lead to the salvation of China. We can say that the emergence of the "New Woman" in early twentieth century China is wholly of and in modernity in the sense that these new women had to be confronted with the conflicts between tradition and newness. Since modernity in the May Fourth period largely means a break from tradition, the "new woman" is a woman who possesses the attribute of newness and she is the one who is in the process of remaking herself new.

Ding Ling's representative work *Miss Sophia's Diary* (《莎菲女士的日记》) depicts Sophia as a quintessentially modern woman struggling between self-loathing and self-love, between traditional expectations and modern freedom. Confined by tuberculosis, Miss Sophia narrates her thoughts and feelings in her diary while encountering with various friends and visitors. One visitor, Weidi (苇弟), is a puppy-like admirer who dotes on Sophia, which is much to her irritation. She tries every means to torment Weidi and at the same time also spends a lot of time dwelling on thoughts of Ling Jishi (凌吉士), another male visitor who is both handsome and repugnant. Miss Sophia is clearly preoccupied with the search for self-identity, swaying between taking pleasure in expressing herself and feeling pressured to conform to social norms. She is emotional, depressed, obsessive, and bewildered by her anxieties. She torments Weidi because of some deep-seated feelings of self-hatred, confusion and disgust for her life. By depicting Miss Sophia as a character who is experiencing a crisis in subjectivity, Ding Ling reveals her anxieties about modernity.

The 1950s and 1960s witnessed more examples of the dedicated revolutionary heroines who sacrifice herself for the greater national good. These new archetypal

heroines sometimes function to lead the male into proper conformity with the political order, but generally speaking, the significance of gender is downplayed in order to call for the creation of a strong nation and posit a progressive and linear notion of the modern project.

### **Mainstream Discourse and Strong Woman Image**

The mainstream discourse on Chinese women in the Maoist era tends to masculinize women. As Meng Yue and Dai Jinhua notes, “The Maoist ideology of gender equality camouflaged a socialist impasse that did not so emancipate as masculinize women” (Meng & Dai 32). This is partly because Chinese official discourse wants to tout the values of the public good of society in the process of modernization. As a result, images of energetic, hard-working female farm-hands, factory workers, soldiers, or cadres become propagandized. In order to realize the so-called “Four Modernizations”, the robust female factory workers and oilfield workers were highly praised of. “Since time is different, men and women are the same” or “Women can hold up half the sky” ideology produced the sexless “iron girl” models in all kinds of walks in this period of China. The Maoist emphasis on the sameness of women and men constitutes part of socialist modernity, but the slogans such as “Women can do whatever men can do” and “Time is different, men and women make no difference” show that Mao’s gender equality is still male-centered in that women are measured according to men’s standards. Chinese women in this period did not exist as women in their own right; instead, they were the national tropes that help build the socialist discourse. They had no distinct feminine features but were only sexless images strengthening the socialist discourse. Under such kind of dominant gender discourse, Chinese women’s self-formation was largely forged through the new political aspirations of the nation and Chairman Mao’s famous slogan “Girls love armed attire instead of silk and satin”(不爱红装爱武装) became a unique historical phenomenon among Chinese women in Maoist era.

Since the writings of women have been at the forefront of literary innovation mainly in Post-Mao China and what I’m specifically interested here is how women writers’ works are related to the socially accepted gender discourse in the process of modernization, I’d like to focus mainly on the analysis of some prominent women writers in post-Mao era. Women writers in post-Mao era began to make efforts to deconstruct Maoist gender discourse. They try to demythologize Maoist women’s liberation with a feminist critique. The “iron girl” or the strong woman image was questioned in women’s writing. Shen Rong ( 谌容 ) in her *At Middle Age* (《人到中年》), creates such a strong woman image. Lu Wenting ( 陆文婷 ), a devoted ophthalmologist whose dedication to work takes over all her time and

energy, eventually becomes seriously ill and dies because of her long years of full concentration on work and extremely bad material circumstances; however, while in the hospital, Lu Wenting feels terribly guilty about her husband and children because she believes she has neglected them because of busy work although she has always been a good wife and good mother in others' eyes. On the one hand, by telling the plight of middle-aged intellectual who lived in cramped living space with low salary, the story attempts to highlight the new role of Chinese intellectuals in China's new modernization program and point out their selfless dedication to China's modernization, but on the other hand, the author clearly questions the Maoist strong woman ideology and set the readers thinking about the status of Chinese women who are struggling in their efforts to balance the double roles both at home and at work. It is this emphasis on both her role as a modern professional woman and on the traditional role of wife and mother that makes Lu Wenting stand out as an ideal character. But such an ideal woman suffers too much and has to die in the end.

### **Heterodoxy and Feminine Woman Image**

In order to let "real woman" surface onto the historical horizon, women writers in the 1980s began to question the so-called "state feminism" which is characterized by a lack of attention to women's own identity. Cultural images of Strong Woman produced in the Mao era such as cadres, "iron girls" and successful professional women are questioned, ridiculed and negated. In return, an emphasis on gender differentiation in dress and social roles become the hallmarks of the 1980s and marked a discourse of femininity in post-Mao China. Women writers in this period want to reclaim their naturalized sexual identity that had been denied during the Maoist era. Countless novels published in the 1980s introduce themes of love, romance, marriage, divorce and sexuality with an emphasis on women's biologically determined sexual differences from men. Women writers such as Zhang Jie (张洁), Zhang Xinxin (张辛欣), Wang Anyi (王安忆) and Tie Ning (铁凝) examined these issues in their works, addressing gender dilemmas in this particular period.

Zhang Jie and Zhang Xinxin are two contemporary Chinese women writers who are widely recognized for their fictional depiction of the problems of urban intellectual women confronting conflicts in their careers and personal relationships. Zhang Jie, for instance, in her representative work *The Ark* (《方舟》), made the three female protagonists realize that the virtues socialist society expected of them have no necessary connection with their well-being. In order to depict them as individuals, the author removed them from the family (all are divorced or separated) and put them together in one living space in which the female characters have spiritual bonds and solidarity. They are no longer under the restrictions gender difference imposed within

the family.

Zhang Xinxin depicts the increasing competitiveness and individualism that has marked post-Mao urban China. The story of her *On the Same Horizon* (《在同一地平线上》) focuses on the conflict that arises in the relationship between the male and the female protagonists. The plot follows the changes that the female protagonist is making in her life. She falls in love and marries an artist, sacrificing her own last chance to enter university. In the beginning, she dedicates herself to caring for her husband's needs, but after a few years of marriage, she feels a deep sense of frustration and emptiness. Gradually they begin to grow apart and finally get divorce. She finally enters a film institute, specializing in directing. The novel focuses on the complex psychological and emotional trauma that the female protagonist must overcome before she can take the final decision to go her own way. *On the Same Horizon* does not directly relate to China's political and ideological aims, rather it focuses on the author's concern with the female's process of searching for a self-identity. Although feeling agonized, the female protagonist finally leaves her husband and chooses to have an abortion instead of settling down to motherhood. The fact that she is unwilling to be a source of comfort for her husband and chooses to fulfill her own demands from life shows that the attitudes of women have changed. The novel clearly rejects the making of women by the traditional gender discourse and depicts women's agonizing process of discovering a feminine self. The decision to escape the limits of tradition is not an easy one. The result is the kind of psychological ordeal that the female protagonist in the story undergoes. Whatever the consequences of her choice, she has entered a new phase in her life. Her decision reflects the demands of an educated urban woman who sees herself equal to her male counterparts, thus standing on the same horizon, as the title indicates. By depicting such kind of female protagonists, Zhang Xinxin tries to redefine what it means to be a real woman in modern China.

Since the 1980s, many women writers are very sensitive to the social changes with the development of China's economy. Lin Bai (林白)'s *Record of Women's Oral History* (《妇女闲聊录》), for instance, wrote in this book hundreds of hours of conversations with women in remote areas to tell the everyday life experiences of 154 women. These women's stories detail the desperate survival of women in rural communities, especially the degradations they suffer when they attempt to migrate to the city to find employment. The description of those marginalized migrant women presents an important picture of alternative Chinese modernity. As the commercialization and urbanization of Chinese society grow faster, women writers express their concern when Chinese women confront the pressures they feel as women and challenge the established hierarchy.

Women writers in the 1980s wrote works to critique the incomplete nature of Chinese women's liberation. They tend to desire a return to a female identity or female essence and are often critical of men for not being able to accept or deal with strong women with distinct individualities. We can see that their collective push for the desire of femininity is historically conditioned. It can be seen as a cultural critique of the de-emphasis of women's difference in the socialist gender policies. Ironically, those women writers' search for femininity was hijacked by the rapid development of consumerism in the 1990s. Weihui (卫慧)'s *Shanghai Baby* (《上海宝贝》) is a typical example of taking the issue of womanhood and femininity further and more daring into the domain of sexuality.

### Urban modernity and Bad Girl Image

Leo Lee (李欧梵) in his famous book *Shanghai Modern* (《上海摩登》) confidently declares the city to be the site of the Chinese modernity. The city was where Chinese modernity manifested itself in multiple forms and shapes. By identifying Shanghai as the "very embodiment of modernity" (Lee 5), Lee draws attention to the local experience. If we agree Leo Lee's wonderful analysis of Shanghai in the 1930s as one of the key sites of Chinese modernity, today's Shanghai can even more clearly reflect distinct Chinese modernity since it is one of the most prominent cities in China that experience the large scale urbanization. Different generations of female urban writers cultivated their literary and aesthetic sensibilities in this cultural matrix of Shanghai. Zhang Eileen (张爱玲 1920-1995) and Wang Anyi are two predominant writers who had the aesthetic sensibilities to depict the urban modernity in Shanghai. Zhang Ailing questioned the meaning of modern civilization and explored the impact of modernization upon human relationships. She began the concept of creating legends in daily life and described the fatality of people's lives. She once described her portrayal of common Shanghai people as "legends" since she argued that the mundane lives of the common people were "more legendary than legends" (David Wang 77). The contemporary woman writer Wang Anyi continued Zhang Aileen's approach, delved into the lives of common Shanghai people and explored their psyche when confronting various modern allurations.

In the past twenty years the growth of a market economy has dramatically changed China. The market economy and open door policy had greatly transformed Chinese people's way of thinking. In the 1990s, a very different group of urban-based writers offer new perspectives on contemporary Chinese women. Various images of modern feminine women are created with the basic elements of traditional feminine virtue and consumerism. The power to define women has been shifted from the state to market forces. Due to such change of historical context, young writers known as

beauty writers such as Wei Hui and Mian Mian (棉棉) wrote “Bad Girl” novels to depict the changing complexities of women’s lives in an increasingly globalizing, market-oriented China. Their candid, amoral portrayals of the heroine’s sexual experience and admiration of the hedonistic cosmopolitan lifestyle mark the great influence

Wei Hui’s semi-autobiographical novel *Shanghai Baby* (1999) presents a “simulacrum of Western modernity” (Schaffer & Song 24). The protagonist Ni Ke (倪可) is depicted as a babe yearning for bourgeois commodities and hedonistic lifestyles. Her sexualized performance of femininity and her self-fashioning as beauty objects both challenge and enhance phallogentric notions of woman as other. Roaming around coffee shops, bars and parties, Ni Ke fluctuates between her Chinese boy friend Tiantian (天天) who is sexually impotent and dying of a drug overdose and her virile German lover Mark. This explicit binary opposition between a Chinese man and a western man in terms of their sexuality is apparently too much for most of male readers. Layers of historical traumatic memory are stirred by this blatant contrast, because in a deeper sense, this sexual impotency hurts Chinese men’s dignity and compels them to think about China’s weak position in the past, thus arousing a wide spread negative male response.

*Shanghai Baby* echoes the American third wave feminism advocated by some young women who focus more on the realms of female desire and female expressions of sexuality. It apparently emphasizes female sexuality as the site of subversive female self-articulation, but this articulation has been co-opted by consumerism and the female body is turned again into the object of desire. Ni Ke’s free decision to choose her lover shows a pervasive rhetoric of female empowerment. In fact, Ni Ke states in the novel that today’s women are different from women in the past. They are a new generation that has “more freedom than women of fifty years ago, more beautiful than women of thirty years ago and have a greater variety of sexual orgasm than women of ten years ago” (Wei Hui118). The heroine’s unbridled, almost masculinized “Bad Girl” sexuality and her claims of agency and empowerment are extremely fragile and dangerous because the prioritizing of youth and beauty is always a central strategy employed by the patriarchy to reduce women to objects who are being gazed by male subjects. The confident, sexually assertive new type of Chinese woman Ni Ke represents is actually conforming to globally defined standards of what it means to be a modern women in the new age. The feminist critic Xueping Zhong, when discussing the ambivalent responses among Chinese intellectuals to *Shanghai Baby*, points out that “the gender politics of the 1990s have shown that the turn to sexual difference or sexuality in the post-Mao era has encountered its specter: women could be turned into national resources during the Mao era’s pursuit of modernity, they can also be turned

into commercial resources in a consumer culture” (Zhong 654) .

### **Conclusion**

May Fourth iconoclasm was not the only approach to modernity. As a result of recent debate on globalization and the postcolonial concern with “alternative modernities”, I also tend to think of Chinese modernity as different from western modernity. It is true that many Chinese intellectuals employ Western ideas to design a blueprint of a modern nation, but after a period of uncritical reception of Western models, Chinese intellectuals began to envision the nation state in more accordance with China’s situation. Thus a conceptualization of modernity as plural conditions is very necessary. Pluralism is emphasized not only because various visions of modernity coexist, but also because different groups participate in the modernization project. Chinese women writers in different historical periods aptly represent Chinese women who have had to confront a powerful array of both ancient and modern patriarchal traditions that include the enduring Confucian belief systems and more recent Communist ideologies, compounded by the influx of western ideas resulted from market economy and consumerism. Chinese women writers’ reflections on women’s position in Chinese society are formed according to the different historical, political and cultural conditions. They are important indications of the development of modernity discourse.

The series of women images of New Woman, Strong Woman, Feminine Woman and the Bad Girl in different historical times clearly show that women’s issues become a signifier of Chinese modernity. The New Woman image represents a positive view of linear modernity and hopes for a strong future China and the notion of a Strong Woman in the Mao era itself is a reflection of the Maoist ideology in the process of modernization. These two representations of Chinese women constitute the male-dominant modernity discourses, whereas the advocacy of a more “feminine” identity in the 1980s can be seen as a questioning of State feminism’s lack of attention to women’s own identity. When it comes to the beauty writing practised by such self-proclaimed feminist writers as Wei Hui in the 1990s, the new image of the narcissistic bad girls’ yearning for living hedonistic life styles reveals that they are totally overwhelmed by the lure of commodity fetishism and their blatant expression of female sexual desires and encounters shows some modern urban women’s desire to search for a cultural space of their own in the rapidly changing Chinese social-economic context. We can see that in China, modernity is never a complete westernization. The sedimentations of the past such as the traditional Confucian values, together with the mores Socialist China all form complex attitudes to what it means when talking about modernity in China.

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