

Shaping the Image of the Chinese “New Woman” (1949–1966)

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Abstract

As the media aims to promote social values, it has some influence on shaping societal values. This paper took a new perspective to examine recent Chinese social history. Similar to the effect of celebrity images on young people today, the Chinese media has profoundly affected people’s thinking and ideology. From an analysis of 68 covers sampled from Women of China, the official magazine of All-China Women’s Federation from 1949 to 1966, this paper explored the image of the new women and assessed the influence the media’s role model method had on shaping ideology and guiding the public to recognize the new woman image. It was found that over the 17 years examined in this study, the Women of China magazine showed women being actively engaged in social labor, pursuing equal political status, and through special photographic techniques, degenderized the new woman in terms of background, occupation, and expression. The new woman images on these covers disseminated the core values to the public that Chinese women should take the initiative to be part of social labor and politics.

Keywords

The shaping of media images; Chinese Women’s Liberation Movement; Magazine cover; New women; Role model method.

1. Introduction

The People’s Republic of China was founded in 1949, after which an unprecedented Women’s Liberation Movement began. To build his New China, Mao Zedong, the leader of the Communist Party of China (CPC), announced the slogan “women hold up half the sky.” [1] Since that time, women have become indispensable to China’s social workforce. The essence of the Women’s Liberation Movement in China was its focus on spiritual liberation. The first 17 years after the founding of New China was a crucial stage in reshaping the ideologies and morals of the Chinese people. As Engels argued, “the first condition for women’s liberation is to bring the whole of the female sex back into the public industry.” [2] This period witnessed a narrowing of the gender differences, with the image of the model New China woman being gradually shaped as a heroine and an iron lady. Obviously, the media played a major role in promoting the new woman on the basis of the assumption that “the masses employ the knowledge and images constructed by the media to perceive the world and cognize the real life they have experienced.” [3]

Founded in 1939 by the All-China Women’s Federation (ACWF) of the CPC Central Committee, the Women of China was the first national women’s magazine. It was renamed the New Women of China in 1949 but was then changed back to Women of China in 1956. In the 17 years, from 1949 to 1966, it was known as the Women’s Encyclopedia because it adhered to its original aspiration of “promoting the role of women to society.” In 1955, the Women of China reached a circulation of over 500,000 copies per issue, with the third issue in 1957 having a circulation as high as 840,000 copies [4]. The magazine was underpinned by the CPC and in 1966, Mao Zedong, the leader of the CPC, even wrote a poem for the publication: “women are on a par with men. The joint forces are invincible like a rising sun.” [5] Due to its significant influence, Women of China became an essential medium for Chinese women’s self-imaging, with each cover particularly exemplifying the overall style in the magazine. In a bid to investigate such

influences and exemplification, this paper analyzed the cover images on the Women of China magazine over a 17 year period to investigate how public values and beliefs could be influenced and shaped by specific materials, such as magazine covers.

The background to this paper was the Women's Liberation Movement after the founding of the People's Republic of China, which has been studied in-depth by several researchers. For instance, Duan (2017) discussed Marx and Engels' view of the Women's Liberation Movement as well as the Chinese government's policies to promote the Women's Liberation Movement and also mentioned that during the Women's Liberation Movement, the government encouraged the elevation of female education levels, equal pay for equal work, equal legitimate rights, and the establishment of the ACWF [6]. Different from previous studies, this paper focused on how Women of China used its covers to shape the public's ideology to support the Chinese Women's Liberation Movement from 1949 to 1966.

On the basis of these research objectives, this paper randomly sampled the covers of the Women of China magazine from 1949 to 1966, from which 68 covers were finally selected as the core materials for the analysis of the images, such as working women, political women, and intellectual women. This paper took a media studies perspective and referenced role model method theory. Yu [7] stated that the role model method was a theoretical technique frequently used by the media in Chinese history to create examples on the basis of the needs of the times to direct and influence public values and/or ideologies. The Women of China covers successfully utilized this theory to shape the image of model woman in New China.

2. Media and Public Ideology

The media spreads information through the shaping of media images, which is defined to be "the sum of the various impressions, feelings and cognitive evaluations generated by the public, including non-audiences, audiences, and potential audiences, during its contact with the media in a certain period and context" [8]. Different media apply different ways to shape its images. For example, as magazine covers give the first impression of the magazine to the public, they are an integral part of the media image shaping process.

By shaping mainstream ideology, the government sought to reflect the collective interests of society, establish exemplary norms as to how citizens should behave, and unify the society's ideological concepts [9]. The official media, which is under state control, has the responsibility to spread ideology by helping the audience understand and accept the ideas and concepts being promoted by the government.

The Women of China magazine was an official media publication that used its covers to promote the government's ideology. Its covers displayed the images of model New China women, such as working women and intellectual women, to the public in the first 17 years following the founding of the People's Republic of China. These new female images were modeled on the mainstream values being advocated by the CPC, China's ruling party.

3. Women of China covers and Women's Liberation Movement

On October 1, 1949, the Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China was established, ushering China into a new era. The founding of New China was a dismissal of the oppressive feudalism of the past and a celebration of the triumph of the new democratic revolution that allowed the people to "be the masters of the country". [10] At that time, the paramount issue driving the ruling party was the liberation of the people, which also included the crucial liberation of women. Engels claimed that "social progress can be accurately measured by women's social status" [11], which implied that women's liberation was a symbol of real social progress. Ideologically, the Marxist theory of women's liberation was highly

praised in China, with the government being strongly committed to achieving equality between men and women as evidenced by the series of focused measures that gradually broke down the stereotypical gender concepts. Under legal writing, the government granted women equal political status with men. Article 85, Section 3 of the Constitution of the People's Republic of China stipulates that "all citizens of the People's Republic of China are equal before the law" [12]; therefore, women were granted equal legal rights to men such as the right to vote, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, and freedom to demonstrate. Economically, the government supported female engagement in labor and encouraged their economic independence, as manifested by Mao Zedong's claim: "in production, men and women shall enjoy equal pay for equal work." [13] Organizationally, the government established the ACWF, establishing affiliations across the country to safeguard the rights and interests of women and represent women's groups in the political sphere.

The Women's Liberation Movement sought to ideologically liberate people. Only when the people subconsciously accepted the image of the new woman would the Women's Liberation Movement be seen as effective. The mass media shaped the image of new women to navigate mainstream values and promote ideological liberation.

The representational meaning in the images on the 68 Women in China covers selected as core materials were analyzed from six dimensions to explore how the media shaped the image of the new women in China from 1949 to 1966.

(1). Nationality

The analysis revealed that 84% of the randomly selected sample cover images showed Chinese women, 5% showed North Korean or Soviet women, and the remaining 11% were images/photos taken by Chinese citizens and foreign friends. In these group photos, some foreign women were visiting experts, politicians, artists, and Chinese working women to exhibit the international exchanges and cooperative ventures between women. The examples included the cover of the fourth issue in 1953, showing Soviet experts instructing textile women workers [14] and the seventh issue in 1955 showing an Indian dance performance troupe [15].

(2) Occupation

The analysis revealed that 47% of the women depicted on the covers were workers or farmers, 28% were soldiers, art or sports practitioners, business people, teaching faculty or government personnel, and the remainder were students, housewives, and other occupations. The scenes showed study, housework, and social construction; for example, the cover of the eighth issue in 1958 showed a housewife receiving a voter card [16], and the 10th issue in 1954 showed college students from a People's Democratic State studying at Lomonosov Moscow University [17].

(3) Clothes

Most of the women in the cover images were wearing work clothes, with only a few depicting nonwork clothes; however, all the clothes were plain and simple. For example, the fourth issue of 1963 showed an outstanding salesperson at the Tianqiao Department Store where the woman was wearing a white shirt with the word salesperson printed on it [18], and the 11th issue of 1964 showed the farmer Meng Fengming planting rice seedlings in the fields dressed in a white shirt [19].

(4) Photographic techniques

The analysis found that to display the expressions, actions, and overall image of the women on the sample covers in detail, the main photo angles used were low angle and close-up. Additionally, some of the long shots depicted the backgrounds and women in the pictures more clearly from a more macroperspective. For example, the eighth issue of 1954 depicted a woman worker working on a tower that was fully shown [20].

(5) Facial expressions

The analysis showed that most of the women on the covers had happy expressions, with the remainder being more serious and there were no pictures showing sadness or anger. The serious expressions were mainly in the work scenes, and the happy expressions were in both work and life scenes.

(6) Background

The analysis found that work backgrounds were the most frequent, followed by life scenes. Solid color backgrounds were rarely used to highlight close-up shots of the women. For example, the fourth issue of 1949 showed Song Ching Ling, the vice-chairman of the Central People's Government, against a solid color background [21].

The analysis of the 68 covers had the following three symbolic meanings:

(1) New women actively engaging in social labor

With President Mao Zedong's slogan "women hold up half the sky," women across the country were encouraged to adopt the new woman model and actively participate in social labor. Additionally, several women were encouraged to join the military or the public service to work in government departments. As claimed in the lyrics of the song *My Sister-In-Law*, "she is afraid of soiling her shoes and twisting her waist when doing work" [22], these women were rejected by the mainstream values as "Most women are aware of the glory of labor, holding that only by participating in labor can they be liberated" [23]. It was found that 75% of the cover images were focused on laboring work, and all the work images showed women dressed in plain work clothes. The early days of the founding of the People's Republic of China were a special period for economic development, with an emphasis on appearance and dress being linked to the criticized hedonism, which meant that plain clothes were the best choice. The women's happy and sometimes serious expressions symbolized enjoyment with work, a rigorous attitude, and recognition of and satisfaction with the government's decisions, that is, the image of hardworking but homespun working women the government was strongly advocating at that time.

(2) New women pursuing equal political status

The selected samples also sought to illustrate that women's political status was now equal to men. For example, the cover of the fourth issue of 1949 showed a portrait photograph of Soong Ching Ling of the Central People's Government [21] to illustrate that women could be leaders and women could participate in politics. The cover of the eighth issue of 1958 showed a housewife receiving a voter card [16], indicating that the new women had equal political status with men and were now voters and could actively exercise their political rights. In the cover images that depicted foreign friends, the Chinese representatives receiving these foreign friends were all women and the workers being guided by these foreign experts were also women, indicating that women could now be national representatives, establish friendly relations with foreign countries, and play a role in diplomacy.

(3) Degenderized female images

As these new women images became increasingly influential, the image of model women in New China was characterized via a degenderization. Different from the traditional images of an understanding wife and loving mother, the model women in New China were tall and strong, with the image of the feminine woman replaced by high-spirited iron ladies to emphasize their equality with men in terms of physical labor and social responsibility. For example, the cover of the 11th issue of 1964 showed a female farmer, Meng Fengming, planting rice seedlings alone, with her male comrades in the background doing the same job [19].

These symbolic images represented the new women of New China that the government was strongly advocating in the early days of the founding of the People's Republic of China, that is, a woman who actively engaged in social labor, pursued political equality, and was degenderized in society. As one of the most influential media sources at that time, the *Women of China*

magazine adopted a role model method to propagate this new image of the New China woman to affect and shape the public's values.

4. Role Model Method in Media Studies

The role model method used by the media sets an example for readers in the hope that they will emulate the model. This was a key method in the ideological and political education of the population in the early days of New China to influence self-value judgments and get the people involved in economic construction, army construction, and the spread of Marxism [24]. Psychological studies have found that this can be a very effective way of propagating a value to a wide audience. To influence and shape the audience's social values and to stimulate the audience to imitate these values, the media role model is generally the most idealized value model.⁷

Thus, the *Women of China* covers depicted female characters that were actively engaged in social labor, had equal political status, and were obviously degenderized. Through these images of female workers, peasants, and soldiers, the magazine expounded the core New China government values that women could actively participate in all walks of life, with the common working background underscoring the sense of satisfaction to be gained from work and labor. For instance, the background for the female farmer image was the farmland, and for the female worker was the factory; the female voter and national leader role models propagated the political equality between women and men; the life scenes and solid color backgrounds highlighted that political equality permeated life and the solid color backgrounds highlighted the importance of the female politicians. Through the presentation of the many strong and powerful images of women wearing neutral, simple, and plain clothes, a degenderized image was presented to change women's self-perception.

The flat and low-angle photographic techniques used on the covers also served to enhance the shaping of values. The low angle made the women appear to look tall, conveyed the photographer's reverence, and sought to express the grandeur in the model image, which would be more likely to motivate the audience to emulate the model. The flat angle shot balanced the composition and clearly revealed the actions and expressions of the women. Combined with the main close-up shooting method, the images of the women tend to occupy the majority of the frame, further enhancing the model image. The occasional long shots put the female characters amidst grand scenery to give a sense of an enhanced life to the audience.

During these first 17 years of New China, official media such as the *Women of China* magazine sought to propagate Mao's image of the model women using the role model method to influence public values and inspire Chinese women to participate in the Women's Liberation Movement. As shown by the example of the workers, peasants, and soldiers on the covers of the *Women of China*, Chinese women were being encouraged to engage in labor. In 1949, there were only 600,000 urban female workers in China, but between 1958 and 1959, the number soared to more than 7 million [25].

5. Conclusion

This paper examined the progress in the early history of New China from a new perspective. Similar to the influence people get from celebrity images today, the media profoundly affected thinking and ideology in the era after the 1949 Chinese revolution. Economically, the model of working women created by the media encouraged the women in Mao's New China to participate in construction to increase China's labor supply and contribute to its post-revolution economic development. At the same time, this participation increased female income and secured their place in the country's economic foundation. Politically, the concept of women being involved in politics was also presented to the public mind, resulting in an increase in the number of women

participating in Chinese politics each year. Culturally, the idea that men were superior to women was challenged, with society's expectations of women being transformed from images of traditional virtuous wives and mothers to images of self-reliant professional, revolutionary women imprinting the notion that equality between men and women was a part of the new Chinese culture.

Particularly, this paper explored the role of the media in shaping public ideology in the early days of New China from 1949 to 1966 using observational research to quantify the covers of the Women in China magazine and analyze its use of the role model method in its cover images. From multiple dimensional analysis that examined depictions of nationality, occupation, clothes, shooting angles, photographic techniques, background, and facial expressions, the symbolic meanings and the values of the new women were elucidated, such as the participation in social labor and equal political status. Different from previous studies, this paper not only analyzed the symbolic meanings in the media cover images but also explored how these images were shaped and the consequent social impacts.

As our society continues to evolve, the media has become more commercialized. During the 17 years following the founding of New China, the Women of China focused on spreading a national ideology; however, today, the magazine must balance commercial positioning and its role as the government's ideological mouthpiece. The cover images must address the country's expectations and also remain attractive to readers. Thus, striking this balance between attracting consumers and political propaganda is a new demand for the media, which poses a new challenge for magazine covers.

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