

A Study of the Conversion of Shanghai Women's Role in the 1930s

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Abstract: It is Approximately More Than Eighty Years Away from Today, It Seems Impossible to Find Women Living At That Period of Time to Be the Research Objects. Therefore, the Research Data Collected by the Researcher Was Mainly Focused on Some Magazines, Novels and Films in the 1930s, Especially the "Ling Long" Magazine, "the Young Companion" Pictorial, and One Typical Film Named "New Women" and Several Famous Novels with Female Themes. the Analysis of women's Role At That Time Largely Depended on Photos, Texts, Advertisements, and Films with Female Topics That Present to the Public from Both External and Internal Changes of Them. from This Research, women's Role Began to Change from the Traditional Image That Oppressed by Feudal Ethics, to Women with New Ideology in the 1930s. They Received Western Pattern of Life and Changed in Both Appearance and Psychology.

1. Introduction

Shanghai Was a Semi Colonial City and It Was Also the Concession of Many Western Countries. Although Concession is the Product of the Unequal Treaties and the Bridge for Some Western Capitalism Countries in China's Economic Plunder and Military Aggression, Undoubtedly, the Free Air in the Concession City Provides Free Discourse Space for New Culture and the Development of New Literature, and a Collision between Chinese and Western Cultural Exchange. It Formed a Buffer and Distributing Zone of Colonizing Context of Western Culture, and Also Became the Front Strip of the Modern Transformation of China's Culture (Gandelsonas, 2002).

The significant and obvious distinction is presented by the conversion of women's role in 1930s' Shanghai. Ebrey (1996) highlights that for a long time past, the role of Chinese feminine is described as women lived under the durance of feudal ethics and rites, which is gradually changed in getting rid of all sorts of fetters in the concession city Shanghai. With the open of the trade port of Shanghai, new ideas and new concepts about feminine always first spread from the city, attempted by Shanghai women, and then gradually circulated among people in other part of China. Gao claims that masses of women gradually break away from the traditional concept of "male superiority" and "the three obedience and the four virtues" (namely three obedience means in ancient China a woman was required to obey her father before marriage, and her husband during married life and her sons in widowhood, and four virtues can be understood as fidelity, physical charm, propriety in speech and efficiency in needle work) that inherited from ancient China and seek for the independence of their own and ask for the equal right as men's (Gao 2000, p.30-39).

In the 1930s, due to the awake of women's role in striking off shackles of the feudal ideas, a large amount of women went to school to learn new patterns of knowledge that spread from western countries, such as English, music, sports and so on. Some of the graduated female students entered the society to seek for independent life, and increasingly women break through the traditional family role and step into the public space. The so called "new women" appeared in many areas of occupation, for example, hairdressers, baby-sisters, teachers, bank staffs, and so on. The independence of women and the prosperous of the commerce had given Shanghai women certain material conditions to pursue "modern". Besides, the mass media also played a role in fueling "new women", and some change of the social criteria of women's role had taken place (Lee, 1999). Modern commerce began to use women's gender role in their business, and female characters appeared in more and more commercial advertisements. These female images in commercial business lead social consumption, which also make women in various classes play a more complex

role in the progress of urban secularization and commercialization. On the one hand, they rely on the professional role to obtain individual survival; on the other hand, they have to meet the social demand in public consumption and entertainment with their gender roles.

2. Methodology

2.1 Qualitative Method.

To be more specific, the text analysis approach, which is regarded as one of the most popular methodologies in qualitative research, is used in this study. The author collects two hundred and ninety-eight “Ling Long” magazine from 1931 to 1937, five hundred and sixty-seven pictures from “*The Young Companion*” pictorial, twenty novels by famous writers and twelve films in the 1930s, and investigates the different images of Shanghai women that depicted in the magazine and novels through the interpretation of its discourse structure, including text and pictures, in order to find out the change of their roles at that time. Assuredly, no matter the description of women’s image in magazines or in literature works presented to the public, there may be strategies or skills or even bias in the representation of a certain image. The isolated analysis in texts will inevitably lead to dissent. Furthermore, after searching for the data that collected by the author, it shows that the linguistic information is only one component of the content, and there may be other intentions or hidden meanings when the authors reuse a certain way of expression or repeat a theme. Hence, this project will probably connect the texts with historical background and culture, to explore the conversion of women’s role in some texts.

2.2 Semiotics Approach.

Semiotics can be used in the analysis of the utilization of various verbal and visual signs, and this essay will apply this method to find out the presentation of women’s role in the 1930s in those pictures, advertisements and films. The author takes the view that semiotics cannot solely be considered as an approach, but also a way of thinking that exposes a certain sign.

Taylor and Willis suggest that communication scholars divided message into three levels: first, the surface meaning, which cannot be influenced by cultural difference; second, the social myth, namely the meaning of signs that given by culture; third, ideology, which refers to the power structure that hidden behind each myth (Taylor & Willis, 1999). For example, a picture shows a woman in the kitchen. The surface meaning of this picture is a scene of a woman in the kitchen, and people aware that women should be the image of a virtuous housewife, which refers to the social myth, and the support of this myth can be probably the ideology, namely the patriarchal ideology.

2.3 Social Gender Analysis.

Social gender analysis refers to the methodology that using gender as the theoretical framework of the main category in analyzing. It pays attention to women as the main body, and concentrates on the change of women’s subordinate and marginal role. This method also combines gender with the social system, race, and class, sex orientation and so on, specific analyzing the circumstance of female of different class, race and sex orientation.

Generally speaking, the gender analysis follows such a path: first, how social gender present during a certain period, in a specific region, and about a concrete phenomenon; second, the reasons of the gender in society; third, what kind of social relationship that the gender reflect; fourth, how gender relate to the economy, politics and culture; fifth, how it influence our daily life. For a long time, the domestic modern research plays less attention on the perspective of social gender. This research follows the path of the above method, analyzing the social gender in the modernization of the 1930s, examining how the social process constructs the social gender and the power behind the gender.

2.4 Data Collection.

The author collects two hundred and ninety-eight “*Ling Long*” magazine that converse from 1931 to 1937, five hundred and sixty-seven pictures from “*The Young Companion*” pictorial,

twenty novels by famous writers and twelve films in the 1930s, which results to the pool of three hundred texts, seven hundred and thirty three images, one hundred and fifty six advertisements, nine novels and one film due to the energy and time limitations. The texts, pictures and films that the author chose are all the female newspapers and periodicals, which consider the women as the target readers. These newspapers and periodicals include special women's magazines, columns of female topics in the general press, as well as all kinds of journals and newspapers in girls schools, which help to study female issues to reflect women's life. The pictures that the author chose in this research are not only from cover pages, but also inside the pictorial and magazine, together with some advertisements. These pictures are mainly about women in different scene of life.

However, they may not cover every aspect of women's life in 1930s but some typical images that can reflect the change of their roles. Moreover, the aim of choosing films is because the Chinese film had influenced a lot by western films at the beginning of its birth, especially Hollywood films, which transferred a modern life style to Chinese people. Films offer the space for Chinese people's modern imagination, especially people in Shanghai. Screen performance will stimulate China's modernization to some extent; meanwhile influence people's life details. Therefore, female images in films may be presented more vividly and typically. Because of the time limitation and large amount of materials, the selected data may not express the theme comprehensively, the author just chose some typical examples to reveal the conversion of women's role in that time.

3. Factors That Improve Women's Conversion.

3.1 The Concession Civilization

In order to understand the conversion of Shanghai women's role, it is inseparable from the special cultural environment of Shanghai, which is a modern city with the prosperity that results in its concession. The invasion of western culture to China brought the largest influence to concessions due to their geographical convenience as main port. After that, the combined culture of western life style and traditional Chinese life style is called concession civilization. In other words, the concession civilization is the product of the collision of both Chinese and western culture, and also the mixture of Chinese and western life style. Thus, it is a special culture style in the Chinese culture history, which is born in Chinese traditional culture, and received baptism of the western culture. The concession civilization played an significant role in concession city people's behavior, life style and way of thinking, especially to some port cities like Shanghai. For a long time, Chinese women were deeply influenced by feudal ethical code. However, part of women lived in concession cities first awakened gradually in the role awareness.

As time goes by, the conflicts of culture of ancient and modern, Chinese and western, urban and rural, loud and elegant, new and old, sense and sensibility happens frequently, and gradually change to convergence, which not only directly affects the behavior and basic necessities people's life in Shanghai, but also brings great impact to their characters. To be specific, western-styled, introverted and arrogant are the main description of Shanghai women's character. First of all, Shanghai women are the first fashion leaders in China. They possess the process of awakening conscious of independent, fashion, and petty bourgeoisie. For instance, Yip (1995) shows that in 1931, the Shanghai government opened up a bathing place in Gao Qiao. When most of women in other places were still having their feet bounded, Shanghai women had already taken swimming in the bathing place as a kind of fashion. Besides, they are fortunately to become the students of foreign schools instead of students from private schools for their parents immigrated from southern part of Shanghai, and had both financial ability and foresight to support their daughters studying in foreign schools. Meanwhile, the most important thing is the parents implanted the traditional rules to them. The foreign schools which are the representation of western civilization and traditional Chinese rules were fermented in Shanghai that improved the shaping of the unequal features of Shanghai women's character of western-styled, gentle, virtuous, elegant and refined, which can almost be found in the concession civilization.

Furthermore, because of the fermentation of western and traditional culture, the characters of Shanghai women are the fusion of western-styled and introversion that it is seldom to see the emotion change on their faces. Shanghai is the veteran of commercial metropolis, which makes the business atmosphere and the character of the merchant settled in this city and at the same time, most of the ordinary people influenced a lot from that. Modern businessmen present themselves not for their shrewd character but good at hiding themselves, which made Shanghai women; especially single women present this feature. Introversion is either a kind of character or *vorstellung*, which presents their emptiness inside and the rich inner. Shanghai women's character is undoubtedly belongs to the latter. When there is tremendous contrast between their character and females of geographical differences for the diversity of cultural background, Shanghai women always imply their inner exclusion with the *vorstellung* of the introversion feature, which is the reason why they leave a negative impression to others as arrogant and indifference.

Additionally, Shanghai women are regarded as not enthusiastic as people from other places. Generally speaking, they care nothing about issues that not relate to themselves, and when get along with other people. Shanghai women distinguish the benefit with others clearly. As a matter of fact, owing to the fast-paced lifestyle in Shanghai, they had to pay much attention to efficiency, and simplify interpersonal relationships. The superior material condition in Shanghai and the big gap between the rich and the poor made Shanghai women be indifferent to reject the dependence on others. Besides, they also feel inhospitable to the frequent interpersonal interaction because of the small living space in Shanghai. The main reasons of Shanghai women's character lie in two aspects. First, the western-styled history in Shanghai happened in the last century, and the earlier establishment of female schools makes Shanghai women receive more western civilization. Second, with the social progress in Shanghai, no matter in the family or working places, Shanghai women's state and life style has already profoundly changed, and their personalities are sufficiently respected and unassertive.

3.2 The Propaganda of the Media.

In the 1930s, Shanghai was both the biggest commercial metropolis and the center of culture. Apart from its convenient traffic, frequent trade, large immigration and consumption, the establishment of news agencies and publishing companies promoted the development of Shanghai media industry. Female images and abundant pictures and texts about women's lives in magazines vividly present the social life of Shanghai women, and they played a guiding role in women's role conversion. First, taking *"The Young Companion"* for example, at the start of its found, except for several military and political figures in the Anti-Japanese War, other images on the cover pages were mainly female movie stars, female students, ladies and sport women. The original cover images of women are mostly implicit with little smile or contemplating quietly while the later part of the images are integrated with more modern life elements of women wearing fashionable clothes, having their hair permed, walking on the beach or boating on the river. These women's pictures that close to the daily life are full of visual impact on readers, which play a subtle role in the change of their aesthetics, lifestyle and role awareness.

Moreover, the magazines also opened up a lot of sections that related to women's lives, such as the introduction of fashionable dress, family life, beauty skills, and fitness guidance and so on. The special section named "Women's Sky" recommended the images of female students and ladies from upper class to the public. In addition, women's images that appeared in some advertisements changed the consumption concept of the public, and take effect in the conversion of women's modern roles. For example, some most famous cigarette advertisements are generally use female images for endorsement. The ads of White Dragon cigarette in the eight fifth issue of *"The Young Companion"* in the 1934, is designed as a beautiful women reading books with a cigarette in her mouth. The words under this picture are "White Dragon cigarette, the domestic leader". It implicates that beautiful women are deserved to enjoy this cigarette that are regarded as the domestic leader.

In a word, the images that illustrated in *"The Young Companion"* are graceful, talented and

tasted. The pictorial recommends the modern life style to the readers depended on publishing modern women's pictures and reporting their news, which unleashes the tides of fashion and provides a modern model for Shanghai women. At the end of Qing dynasty, only some women with special identity could read newspaper and access to the public space and their dressing style reflected the aesthetic standards at that time. However, in the 1930s, women appeared in public places were mainly female with good education background instead, and people's aesthetics and comments on women were changed gradually.

Except for the change of their appearance and modern ideology, Shanghai women also began to stick up for their own rights, and the typical example of improving their behavior can be seen in the "Ling Long" magazine. It actively advocated women's rights, and became the mouthpiece in the women's liberation. Many articles in "Ling Long" encourage women to work out of family for the economic independence, and request for equal rights as men in all fields. Furthermore, it provided support to protect female group through solving problems that women met in daily life. The "Legal Advisor" section in the magazine offers legal assistance for women through answering questions. In the 1930s, the guarantee of marriages right, inheritance right and right of petition in the Republic Legislation became a powerful tool in solving women's difficulties. Meanwhile, the "Ling Long" magazine reposted legal cases for readers as the references, and led women to take legal action to solve problems. It provided legal assistance for the oppressed women that also met the social needs at that time, and in every issue, it published at least dozens of letters from women who need help.

The "Ling Long" magazine paid much attention to the communication with readers, and offers a platform for women's voice, which not limited to women's own lives, but also about their comments to a specific piece of news. They could express their own opinions and criticized the inequity in the society about dealing with male and female issues. "Ling Long" helps women discuss and analyze problems, and finally proposed a solution, which showed the independent consciousness to some extent. In short, "Ling Long" emphasized on encouraging an improved life style to enlighten the awakening of women's consciousness, and actively express women's voice in pursuing the equal rights between male and female. For women belong to the vulnerable group, the "Ling Long" magazine focuses on giving some realistic and targeted assistance. At the same time, the platform that "Ling Long" offered for women to give opinions or comments showed that although some of the suggestions from them lacked in depth, it is clearly to see their interaction and participate in the society.

When Shanghai women frequently appeared in public places and turned into the now favorite of the media and became the consumer representatives in the 1930s, another way of leisure and entertainment that related to consumption provides the modern life model for the urban women, which is the introduction of movies. Under the influence of the development of the world movie industry, the number of cinemas in some big cities like Shanghai increased dramatically. At the end of the 1930s, there were approximately thirty six cinemas, including Nanjing Movie Theater which was regarded as the "Roxy" (the most luxurious cinema in America at that time) in the Asia, and the New Bright Cinema which was invested more than one million RMB to renovation, and many other top movie theaters, which made Shanghai the paradise of films with advanced equipments. Then movies from other countries were imported to these cinemas with exotic customs (Zhang, 1999). These films were probably considered as the demonstration teaching material together with the consumption style for the audiences that play a significant part in improving the development of the modern city.

As a kind of fashionable art and entertainment style, movies not only satisfy people's curiosity, but also become the best tool to propaganda modern life style. Many fashion elements are imported to the domestic field through films. Apart from those Hollywood movies that brought the inspiration and imitative models for modern women in their role shaping, some Chinese domestic films also play a certain role for them. Lee states that the 1930s is possibly regarded as the developing period of the Chinese movie industry, some important film companies like Tian Yi, Ming Xing and Lian Hua were established one after another. It is particularly significant that with the intensifying of the urbanization process, some movie companies broke the perennial passion of

swordsmen films and costume movies of the moviedom, and move to a new field of shooting urban films (Lee, 1999). Topics of these movies are mostly focus on the urban life and women to meet the interest of audiences that set off a heat wave of urban topic films, which transmit a new way of life and expose some social problems from various perspectives, such as the movie “New Women” mentioned above. Ideas of the pursuit of freedom of marriage, the helpless to the society as a woman of the protagonist and Doctor Wang as a negative role all well represent the social situation of people that belong to different classes at that time.

No matter Hollywood female movie stars or Chinese domestic film stars, they all presented the body charm on the screen. Taking Chinese movies stars for example, their images appeared in films like Hu Die and Ruan Lingyu, were mostly combined with both traditional Chinese style and western items. Kuo notes that their intentional imitation and pursuit of the latest western fashion became one of the components of their reputation to some extent. The most famous female movie stars in China were called “The Eastern Joan Crawford (a prominent female movie star in Hollywood)” (Kuo, 2007). Actually, to a large extent, the figures of these stars were established from their daily life such as attention to fashionable dress, hairstyle, jewelry and entertainment, which are the result of advocating western fashion. The same as these famous stars, various kinds of female audiences were encouraged from them and become the fashion pursuer. The dissemination of film made both of these movie stars and female audiences who worshiped the western lifestyle become a beautiful scenery in Shanghai.

4. Conclusions

Shanghai, the modern city rose in its history as a concession city that gave birth to the colorful urban culture and humanities provided living and cultural space for women. The superior geographic position made Shanghai the first city to receive western products and ideology. Culture in Shanghai was not solely with traditional Chinese features, but also mixed with some western elements. Women’s role under this context was redefined by using the extension of the urban secular awareness of equality and the relationship between two sexes, and then pushed to the fore of urban literature and artistic works and became the focus of city culture.

Media types of materials were the excellent sources that help to understand women’s roles in the 1930s Shanghai. To be specific, the author finds out that their images in these materials were the best presentation of the conversion of women’s role. The readers of “Ling Long” magazine and “The Young Companion” were mainly female, their desire of purchasing and consuming the products that provided by the magazines made them popular in the market. The film “New Women” and some novels depicted women’s images in various ways, in order to show their differences from traditional Chinese women. What the author reemphasizes is the influence of the western culture in both external and internal aspects of Shanghai women, as well as their reaction.

Apart from the content analysis, the semiotic analysis and gender analysis were presented in the study of women’s role in 1930s Shanghai. Through this analysis, the author finds out that there are several reasons that improved women’s conversion, and she may highlight the two main reason of the concession civilization and the influence of the media. The special environment provided superior material condition for women in Shanghai, and made them the first receiver of western ideology and culture. The propaganda of media in diverse forms were reference object for women’s daily life that influence their life style in one way or another. To some extent, women’s images in these materials played a significant role in Shanghai women’s conversion in the 1930s.

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