

Woman as the Trope: Perceiving the Altering Conceptions of Chinese Modernity from Females' Posters before and during Mao's Era

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Woman as a political trope had been essential to the Chinese Communist Party's state vision of socialist modernization after the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949. The Party valued women's labor and devoted to emancipating it from the domestic realm so that women could be mobilized to actively participate in the collective socialist construction. Associating the figure of women with modernity is not an unprecedented strategy, for during the early twentieth century the "Modern Girl" embodying the essence of Chinese modernity had already become a conspicuous cultural icon in various kinds of visual cultural products. This paper investigates the ways in which females' public visual images were consciously constructed in the two different historical periods in order to cater to particular political or commercial schemes. It argues that while those images objectively capture the reality of social modernity to some extents, they also imply the artists' imaginary of an ideal vision of modernization. By registering female figures as the center for presentation, they were inscribed with males' desires through envisioning desirable female images that would correspond to their expectations of the concreteness of modernity.

Keywords: calendar posters, propaganda posters, modernity, female image

Introduction

Woman as a political trope had been essential to the Chinese Communist Party's state vision of socialist modernization after the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949. The Party valued women's labor and devoted to emancipating it from the domestic realm so that women could be mobilized to actively participate in the collective socialist construction. Adhering to Mao Zedong's advocacy that men and women were equal to each other, the Party endeavored to configure a brand-new image of women as indispensable contributors to the construction of socialist modernity through the mass-circulation of visual representations of women. Associating the figure of women with modernity is not an unprecedented strategy, for during the early twentieth century the "Modern Girl" embodying the essence of Chinese modernity had already become a conspicuous cultural icon in various kinds of visual cultural products. In this paper, I intend to investigate the ways in which females' public visual images were consciously constructed in the two different historical

periods in order to cater to particular political or commercial schemes. I argue that while those images objectively capture the reality of social modernity to some extents, they also imply the artists' imaginary of an ideal vision of modernization. By registering female figures as the center for presentation, they were inscribed with males' desires through envisioning desirable female images that would correspond to their expectations of the concreteness of modernity. I will first compare the differences between the adopted principles of constructing women's public image during the Maoist socialist period and that during the pre-socialist period, through conducting visual analysis on Maoist propaganda posters of women workers, tractors girls and women peasants, and on Republican calendar posters featuring stylish women in westernized modern appearances, investigating what aspects of modern social features are reflected from those visual works. When indicating that Maoist visual construction of women emphasized on imposing masculine qualities on female figures while degrading traditional feminine traits as bourgeois characteristics, I will then argue that the features of femininity were not completely eliminated from the Maoist propagandist products, and that the hierarchy between the two sexes still dominated some of the propaganda posters, through exploring the discrepancies embedded in those visual representations of the ideal image of socialist women, intending to discover the problematic Maoist policies toward women.

According to the Eurocentric definition, the word "modernity" refers to the paradigmatic social regimes cultivated by the development of capitalist economy in Western countries, implying the Western cultural hegemony achieved by the world-wide expansion of Christian values as well as institutions, and the modern science and technologies (Kim, 2011). Owing to the significant role that capitalism played at the establishment of modern Western civilizations, it can be safely concluded that "modernity," in the context dominated by Western culture, is usually analogous to the prosperity of economy, or more specifically, capitalist modernity. Modernity and the process of modernization are closely entangled, whose practices involved fluctuations of various aspects of the social reality. China's modernity from the 1910s to 1970s was mostly comprised of two contradictory modes of modernization, one was led by capitalist modernity, which occurred in large urban cities such as Shanghai during the Republic era. Such a kind of modernity was achieved by the conduct of westernization and commercialization, and it conformed to the notion of "modernity" conceptualized by Western capitalist ideologies. The other is socialist modernity, which was primarily carried out by large-scale of industrialization and mechanization. Apparently, Chinese modernity was composed of abundant and complicated concepts as well as contents, but in this paper, I will mainly focus on two aspects: people's daily lifestyles associated with the advancement of modern technologies, and women's status within the society.

The Calendar Poster Girls in the Early Twentieth Century Shanghai

With the intrusion of Western imperial power into China since the late 19th century, Shanghai as the most important treaty port soon emerged as the cosmopolitan city where numerous domestic and foreign companies and financial institutions settled. The imported Western ideologies and modern technological products permeated throughout almost every corner of the city, transforming the once traditional city landscape and people's ways of life. In the early 20th century, the gradually fierce competitions among various commercial enterprises entailed the need to explore an effective way to promote their services and products, and consequently, advertising agencies and the productions of printed advertisements began to enjoy rapid progress

(Laing, 2004, p. 3). Owing to its vivid representation and explicit delivery of intended messages, *Yuefenpai* 月份牌, or calendar posters, featured by visual advertising paintings, stood out as the most popular form for the manufactured promotion. They promoted an array of products including tobacco, alcohol, cosmetics, pharmaceuticals, and textiles, and were usually distributed for free as the gift for the product that the company was selling. Regarded as the earliest commercial posters, calendar posters were first introduced into China by foreign merchants at the dawn of the 20th century, and were soon widely adopted by many other enterprises (Bong et al., 1996, p. 8). At the early stage of its development, calendar posters absorbed essential elements from the traditional Chinese New Year picture in order to appeal to the public taste. For example, early calendar posters usually adopted themes related to traditional Chinese legends and folk stories, which were familiar and easy to be appreciated by ordinary people (Bong et al., 1996, p. 8). However, advertising companies soon discovered that these elements were no longer adaptable to the public aesthetic that was cultivated by the burgeoning urban society. It was against this backdrop that traditional Chinese painting skills merged with themes situated in westernized settings and then gave birth to a new version of calendar posters, *meinu yuefenpai* 美女月份牌 ('beautiful lady' calendar posters). This new kind of calendar posters usually featured young women in fashionable appearances that corresponded to the communal imagination of the "Modern Girl"—a good-looking young lady with demure expression, delicate make-up, faddish hairstyle, and neat while trendy clothing. Surrounding the attractive female figure were usually various settings featured by modern items, ranging from indoor households furnished in westernized style, to bright dance halls and spacious golf yard. On the sides of calendar posters were lunar and solar calendars, while the name of the company was printed on the top or the bottom along with the advertised commodities, although in many cases calendars would be omitted. In fact, when artists first adorned calendar posters with women's figures, they were still inclined to depict those figures in the way that conformed to people's conventional perception of women, though combined apparently with some much modern features. In *Girl with Fan*, the advertisement calendar poster created by Zheng Manto for Nanyang Brothers' Tobacco Company in 1924 (Figure 1), the young girl, who was posited as the central object in the poster, was obviously with a traditional outlook. Her hairstyle accorded with the typical style adopted by most females in the late Qing period, with her facial expression exempted from evident sentiments but was rather approximated to placidity and even woodenness, which thus seemed to exclude sexual enticement from the visual representation. Both her clothes and the fan she was holding on her hand were products that conveyed traditional Chinese cultural messages, and the flower patterns on them were also vintage. However, despite her much conservative appearances, the indoor settings around her were quite modern looking. The sofa on which the girl was sitting, the lamp standing behind her, and the white cabinet next to the lamp, were all westernized modern furniture. It is noteworthy that the products that were advertised, the tobaccos, were posited on the right top of the calendar poster, a comparatively marginalized place. In addition, there was no direct interaction between the selling products and the female figure, which resulted in a sense of alienation between the two.



Figure 1. Zheng Mantuo, Girl with Fan, advertisement calendar poster for Nanyang Brothers' Tobacco Company, 1924.

Such a separation between the advertised commodity and the central figure was not uncommon in the early stage of the development of calendar posters, which denoted the immaturity of the artists' skill of creating a perfectly harmonious advertising poster. In the advertisement poster for Murray & Lanman (Figure 2), the advertised products, Lin wen perfume, were displayed on the sides of the poster, while in the painting featuring a young woman there was no perfume product to be found. Therefore, the products and central figure were clearly marked off. Although the commodity was from abroad, the advertising poster was in typical Chinese style. The woman figure was dressed in a traditional Chinese attire, sharing a similar facial and deportment outlook of the young girl in Zheng Mantuo's poster painting. The background of the painting was the combination of a typical southern China garden landscape and a conventionally decorated study accompanied with ancient books on the classical style bookshelf. It is apparent that the whole piece of the calendar poster was designed in a way that accorded with traditional Chinese paintings, except for the modern foreign commodities that were posited as the products for commercial promotion. The situation slightly changed in the calendar poster for Shanghai Palmolive Company created by Zhiying studio (Figure 3). The two women featured in the poster were in conservative long dresses which almost covered the shape of their bodies, and their faces as well as hairstyles were still orthodoxly depicted. However, their deportments were much more dynamic than the female figures in the two previously discussed posters, and the interaction between the presented figures and the targeted commodities had come into being. On the modernly designed dressing table, there placed several palmolive oil bottles, which are exactly the products that the calendar poster aimed to advertise. Placed inside the environment where the women figures are situated and having become part of the

component of that environment, the advertised commodities are no longer marginalized or separated from the central figures. One of the young women is raising her hand and slightly touching her own face, suggesting that she felt her skin smooth after using the palmolive oil placed besides her. The other woman is looking at the mirror on her hand, revealing her satisfaction with the products through her self-appreciation activity. With themselves closely posited with the products that were to be advertised, the two women's gestures can easily indicate the desirable efficacy of the promoted commodities.



Figure 2. Xie Zhiguang, advertisement poster for Murray & Lanman, 1927.



Figure 3. Zhiying Studio, advertisement poster for The Shanghai Palmolive Company, mid-1920s.

When calendar posters enjoyed its highest prosperity in the 1930s, however, both the representation of female figures and the relationship between figures and advertised products experienced drastic transformations. In Xie Zhiguang's advertisement poster for Ken-I-Kochojo Tablets (Figure 4), the beautiful young woman featured at the center is no longer a traditional looking woman with restraining expression and gesture. Instead, she is wearing delicate make-up, with her eyes revealing enticement and her lips on red lipstick, which together convey a sense of seduction. Her hair is curled in a stylish way, and the clothes she is dressed in is a glamorous *qipao*. One of her hands, wearing luxurious jewelries, is depicted with slender fingers and in a tantalizing pose, while on the another hand there is the tablet that the poster intended to promote. In this regard, the woman figure has developed a direct contact with the advertised commodity, with the two merging with each other harmoniously. The background of the poster is situated in a splendid western living room furnished with costly furniture and gorgeous decorations, in which no signs of traditional Chinese elements can be found. The tactic of the depiction of women presented in this poster was the most typical and popular kind during the

culmination of the prosperity of calendar posters in the 1930s Shanghai. Commodities were positioned directly on the hold of the painted attractive young ladies, and without providing a large portion of textual instructions and explanations of product related information, the ideal effects of the targeted commercial products were usually implicitly or explicitly conveyed through the positive visual presentations of female figures together with a carefully designed scenery. The alluring women image was capable of capturing the viewer's eye instantly and greatly increasing the efficiency of the promotion of commodities. Another analogous example is the advertisement poster for Earth Brand Fly & Insect Spray (Figure 5). In the poster, one of the two elegant young women is holding a Japanese insecticide, and surrounding her are many dead insects which are apparently killed by the insecticide. Both of the young women look delightful and content, implying that their satisfactory life is attributed to the powerful insecticide which assists them eliminate the disturbance from vicious insects. Likewise, Ming Sheng's poster designed for the promotion of The Zhao Tai Fire and Flood Insurance Company in 1932 (Figure 6) also adopted such a kind of advertising strategy. The poster features a fashionable young mother with two kids, with some texts beneath the picture describing introductions and policies of the insurance company. The mother is delineated as graceful and decent, wearing bright jewelry earrings as well as intricate make-up and dressed in splendid attire adorned with smooth fur. Additionally, the robustness and ruddy cheeks of the two little kids are emphasized, which, together with the representation of the mother figure, suggest the wealthy and pleasurable life condition of the family. It seems to convey a message that under the protection of the insurance, the domestic welfare and happiness can be guaranteed.



Figure 4. Xie Zhiguang, advertisement calendar poster for Ken-I-Kochojo Tablets (for digestive disorders), 1931.



Figure 5. Artist unknown, advertisement poster for Earth Brand Fly & Insect Spray, mid-1930s.



Figure 6. Ming Sheng, advertisement poster for The Zhao Tai Fire and Flood Insurance Company, 1932.



Figure 7. Zhiying Studio, advertisement poster for Fung Kenos Rubber Manufactory, mid-1930s.

Social changes could be easily discerned in calendar posters. The various commercial products promoted in advertising calendar posters often crystalized the flourish of the business economy in the early twentieth Shanghai. Visible drastic changes of ordinary people's lifestyles in modern China engendered by the prosperous commercial development and the import of western modern technologies were reflected in those posters. Those advertised commodities were placed as indispensable parts within people's daily lives, which were about to evoke considerable impacts in different aspects of their personal experiences. In addition, behind those charming young women figures and various new products were usually luxurious home furnishings, yards and gardens, radios, dance floors, golf courts, and other commercial dreamscapes. Apart from the meticulously portrayed fashionable young ladies, calendar posters displayed a wealth of images that mirrored part of the prosperous modernized society and part of the imaginary presentation of the aspirations of a growing middle class aroused by the rapid development of urbanization in Chinese cities. Even though in many cases,

those artistic works were merely an envisagement of quite unattainable Western urban lifestyles instead of an honest and objective depiction of the real social situation, they vividly manifested people's desire for prosperity and their concrete conceptualizations of westernized modernity. For instance, the advertisement poster for Fung Kenos Rubber Manufactory, produced by Zhiying Studio (Figure 7), is aimed at promoting the rubber shoes manufactured by the company. The central figure of the poster is a typical calendar poster woman wearing trendy hairstyle and seductive attire. Her legs are crossing, developing an element while also alluring gesture, in which way the rubber that she is wearing can be successfully accentuated. It is noteworthy that she is sitting before a hanging telephone, with her right hand holding the receiver. The telephone, an undoubtedly modern technological product, along with its user's adept application, has been portrayed as the natural component of the modern woman's life.

Another more representative example will be Hwa Tung Tobacco Company's advertising poster (Figure 8). The featured elegant and tasteful young woman is sitting in a western-style fancy garden. On the blue sky behind her there is a flying plane, which denotes the high-tech development. It is worth noticing that the beautiful young lady who sits quietly in the garden is reading a book entitled *Aviation Technique*. Considering the extraordinarily feminine traits exhibited by the female figure, from her tantalizing smiling face, enticing hand gestures, and the attracted body lines delineated by the close-fitting dress, it can be quite a conspicuously contradictory scene that she is holding a book whose content is associated with masculinity. In this sense, another valuable aspect of modernity conveyed through calendar posters is evident, that is, the elevation of women's status within the society. Pondering over the hidden message of this poster, it can be speculated that the accelerating Japanese imperialist intrusion during the mid-1930s had propelled the nation-wide tension and anxiety on nationalist warfare. Therefore, the reinforcement of military forces became a pressing issue. The poster may reflect the patriotic theme and imply that women's learning for technological knowledge is necessary for facilitating themselves to become qualified patriotic fighters who could sacrifice bravely for the country just as their male counterparts. Judging from this, the information about the artist's embracement of gender equality and women's self-empowerment is exposed. Similar interpretation can also be applied to another poster designed for the same company (Figure 9). The background of the poster is set in a racecourse, with a fashionable and graceful young lady in a blue flower-patterned *qipao* accompanying a vigorous lady jockey riding on a horse. It is eye-catching that the lady jockey is dressed in sports suits with an emblem of the Republic of China on her sweater. Additionally, she is portrayed in a comparatively man-like way. Apparently, the poster was also a response to the patriotic appeal among the nation. It accentuated the masculine representation of the female figure and depicted her as robust and energetic, implying that women were also capable of making contributions to the national affairs.



Figure 8. Zhiying Studio, advertisement poster for Hwa Tung Tobacco Company, mid-1930s.



Figure 9. Zhiying Studio, advertisement poster for Hwa Sung Tobacco Company, mid-1930s.

The advocacy for the emancipation of women was a pivotal issue which had been frequently addressed by different intellectuals and politicians since the late 19th century China. Associated with the foreign capital's straightway access into China's ports, Western ideologies which championed the equality between the two sexes were introduced into China, and modern educational institutions intended for young women soon enjoyed gradual process which were first intuited by the endeavor of missionaries (Bong et al., 1996, p. 14). Subsumed under the large discursive framework of nationalism, women were designated as the key to national salvation and thus their liberation and self-fulfillment were enthusiastically supported, which had significantly helped to promote women's social status and granted them brand-new social identities. Calendar posters successfully captured the characteristics of an era replete with fluctuations and transformations. In them, gorgeously dressed young women were no longer confined within the household, but rather became increasingly visible in the public sphere. They frequented various public venues such as cinema, shopping malls, cafeterias, and dance halls. With various new commodities on hold, they were also presented as being equipped with adequate knowledge and authority of using the advanced modern commercial products. Even though these advertising materials turned women into objects that served both commercial and titillating purposes, the genre as whole nonetheless was supported by others as artistic reflections of the demands of women's emancipation. Instead of treating females as non-entities as Confucian orthodox had prescribed, calendar posters non only showed but also presented them as women with self-confidence. What's more, the less rigid and more relaxed body gestures exhibited by those female figures, as Jie Gao argued, demonstrated a loosen restrictions from the conservative moral codes (Gao, 2018). In this sense, advertisement posters served as the vehicle for the

reflection of “shifts in Chinese politics, the economy and the values of the nation,” and the record of “a gradual move towards women’s liberation in the first half of the 20th century” (Gao, 2018, p. 251)

The Propagandist Female Images during the Maoist Socialist Period

With the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, both the theory and practice of the Chinese advertising industry had to encounter huge transformations. The artists of the commercial calendars, who were adept at designing attractive visual products that were advantageous for commercial profits, were quickly incorporated into the state institutions and organizations devoted to the production of propaganda poster. “Under the new regime, those who once made their living designing advertisements for commodities or services now drafted posters promoting socialist ideology” (Laing, 2004, p. 224). Maoist propaganda posters were powerful didactic mediums for the dissemination of political ideologies and idealized social behaviors, and “they had to educate the people in what was considered right and wrong at any one time” (Min et al., 2003, p. 16). They also provided definite visual interpretations of different policies formulated by the Party, and therefore was “a method of visualizing abstract ideas” (Min et al., 2003, p. 16). They were a form of direct communication between the state government and the mass of people who were to be infused with specific political messages.

Ever since the successful establishment of its legitimate governing power, the CCP had always been prone to extoll itself as the most active leading proponent for women’s liberation. Right from the start, the Party had kept striving to construct women’s suitable positions within the revolutionary process. Women’s labor and Woman as a metaphysical symbol were valued and subsumed to the construction of socialist modernity by the Party, with women being mobilized and configured as conscious and active participants in the enterprise of nation building (Hershatter, 2018, p. 219). Women, occupying almost half of the country’s population, were eulogized as “buttressing half of the sky,” and equated to men in terms of their laboring values. Propaganda posters since the 1950s thus championed women’s liberated splendor and emphasized their equal entrance into the public domain of production. Many campaigns were designed to address issues that were specific to the liberation of women, or the improvements of their political and social positions, with the productions of visual materials such as propaganda posters addressing females’ enthusiastic contributions to the large scale of socialist industrialization and mechanization. These posters, serving as explicit educational tools, often intended to show that women now had adequate accesses to new techniques and became responsible for various labor tasks. In addition, the conventional presentation tactics of feminine beauty for commercial advertising purposes underwent disavowals during the Maoist socialist period, which also manifested itself in the productions of propaganda posters. The Party considered expressions of exquisite femininity as demonstrations of bourgeois behavior and thus disparaged them. Out of the purpose for advocating the purity of socialist revolution, prototypical-masculinized women became the only permissible image representing traits of females at that time. It is widely accepted that during the socialist construction period, the prevailing ideological voices aimed to repress anything that pertained to sexuality and the attractiveness of the female body, resulting in the “socialist androgyny” and “gender-neutral representation” which “denotes the sense of empowerment that women with the possibilities represented by their new ‘image’” (Evans & Donald, 1999, p. 63). Women were supposed to work, dress and look like men in clothing that was not intended to reveal any female curves. They

were encouraged to participate in industrial and technical professions, which had to do with emancipation but also with the pressing need for labor that could be invested in the popular construction of socialist modernization. With their sturdy features, robust faces and shining eyes, they denoted revolutionary commitment, strength and enthusiasm. Zhou Lingjian's propaganda poster (Figure 10) produced in 1953 aimed at calling upon workers to inherit the battle spirit of tenacity of the Red Army during the Long March to conquer nature and contribute to the career of nation building. At the centre of the poster is a woman worker, who was magnified in size compared to her several other female counterparts behind her. It is obvious that the whole piece of the poster uses comparatively dark colors, mostly comprised of grey and blue, even if the central figure to be presented is a female. The central figure, the woman worker, is portrayed by thick and clear lines, with her face showing no extra expression or sentiment but only resolution and steadfastness. The shadow and hard lines applied to the portrait of her face emphasizes her masculine features while the redness on her cheek accentuates her robustness, energy and health. Her gesture of shouldering the working machine also denotes her strength and power, and her clothes have made her unable to be differentiated from men. Another propaganda poster designed by Ding Hao (Figure 11), also features a female worker's participation in the industrial field. The female worker, posited at the center and dressed in desexualized factory suites, is depicted as in a delight and proud mood, which suggests that females are capable and more than willing to become part of the national industrialization process.



Figure 10. Zhou Lingjian, 1953. "Study the battle spirit of the Red Army during the Long March, conquer nature, build up our nation."



Figure 11. Ding Hao, 1954. "We are proud of participating in the founding of our country's industrialization."

During the early and mid-1950s China, many female model workers were promoted through the mass circulation of popular media such as propaganda posters that featured relevant figures, prompting them function as “everyday icons” which served as the “the epitome of socialist China” (Chen, 2003). Since the Great Leap Movement, the trend of showing women taking on types of work generally associated with men was prevalent in propaganda posters of all kinds of themes. Female model workers in propaganda posters working in factories, construction sites, and wastelands with heavy machines that were not supposed to be handled by women in the past strived to convey the message that the CCP’s restless efforts had successfully emancipated Chinese women from the restraints of household and mobilized them to enjoy adequate autonomy and subjectivity in public careers. One kind of the representative female icons formulated by the CCP was the “*nujie diyi*” (female-kind-first) model workers, which refers to individual woman or groups of women that were recognized as the first prominent figure in their field among other same-sex colleagues, such as “the first female tractor driver,” “the first female train conductor,” “the first female streetcar driver,” and “the first female welder” (Chen, 2003). Their personal stories and experiences were widely spread through mass media associated with a large amount of relevant visual representations that were about to inspire other ordinary females to emulate and follow suits, while at the same time, those images of *nujie diyi* models also expected to convince the mass of people the effectiveness of the CCP’s leadership of the struggles of women’s liberation and those who stood out because of their absolute commitment and devotion to the career of socialist modernization would be well appreciated and respected. The series of “Model Women of New China” (*Xin zhongguo de funu mofan* 新中国的妇女模范) are a bunch of propaganda posters concentrating on the depictions and introductions of some model women worker in different fields, most of which were designed by Dong Tianye, and were produced by Shanghai huamei huapianshe (上海华美画片社) in 1953. For example, Figure 12 features the first female engine driver Tian Guiying. According to the introductory texts under the painting, Tian Guiying were originally an ordinary worker, but she later persuaded her parents to applied for the position of female engine driver in the Dalian Railway Bureaucracy, and soon mastered the theories and skills of engine driving, breaking away from the conventional view that women were unable to control a train. The painting portrays the young woman standing next to a train. Her body is depicted as strong and large dressed in gender-neutral attires. Her bright smile and quite casual gesture imply her self-confidence and pride for her capability of mastering the giant train which which she was exaggerated to be comparable in size. Figure 13 features another female model worker, Qi Guizhi, the first female lathe expert. Regardless of the opposition from her mother and the indifference of her male master who was unwilling to teach her, Qi Guizhi invested great efforts to learn the techniques of the operation of lathe and succeeded in becoming a skillful lathe worker only after six months. In the poster, the calm expression and the adept operating gestures of the female worker, form a sharp contrast with the heavy and complicated lathe machine. In this sense, the competence of the female worker is explicitly foregrounded.

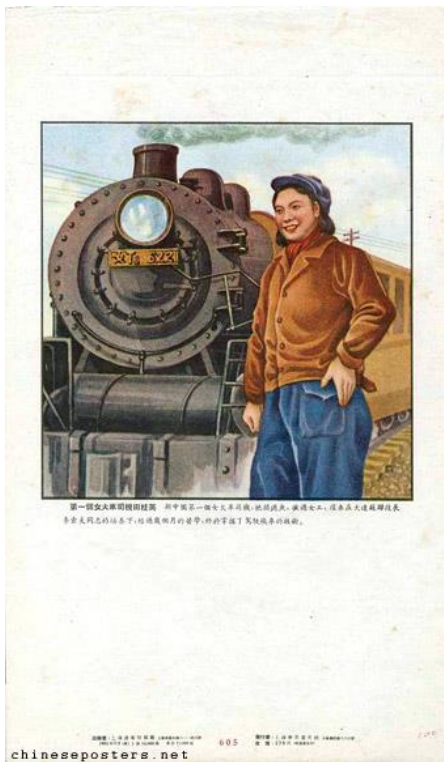


Figure 12. Dong Tianye, 1953. "The first female engine driver Tian Guiying."



Figure 13. Dong Tianye, 1953. "Female lathe expert Qi Guizhi."

From the early 1950s on, the image of female tractor driver was one of the most frequently seen examples of the *nujie diyi* icons, which were ideal emblems of Chinese socialist modernity. The Party's policies designed to mechanize agriculture resulted in more mechanized equipment becoming available in the real areas, and thus the tractor was gradually introduced in propaganda posters. Technology, the most essential constitution of modernity, no longer excluded women's participation, and the agricultural works which were previously inscribed with definite gender roles registering women and men with disparate agricultural machines had now blurred the long-existing gender boundaries (Du, 2017). Rural women were advocated to be modernized through getting equipped with necessary knowledge reserve to the mastery of advanced agricultural machineries and a strong physical body resembling their male counterparts. Propaganda posters often strived to justify that the modern heavy-duty equipment was adeptly operated by women. They illustrated both the improvement of the availability of farm machinery which was closely associated with the socialist modernization and attained by the Party's endeavor, and the ability of women to cooperate with the operation of those machines.



Figure 14. Ma Lequn, 1964. "Our tractor drivers."



Figure 15. Fang Dong, 1962. *Spring Plowing*.

The patterns and strategies of visual representations of tractor girls were easy to be perceived. First of all, the body of those tractor girls were deliberately strengthened, in order to make them physically qualified to handle the new type of work that were traditionally hard to be associated with women. In addition, when delineating the dynamics of their mastery of the equipment, there emerged a symbiotic relationship between the female body and the machine, through the expression of physical comfort and relaxing emotion of those female tractors. For instance, in the propaganda poster produced by Ma Lequn (Figure 14), the two tractor girls featured exhibit delightful and satisfied facial expressions. The girl at the front is placing one of her hands on the wheel of the tractor and the other on the seat at ease, which indicate her comfort and unconstraint when she is working with the heavy machine. The bright red and pink color applied to depict the sunset glow behind the two young females also imply their positive mood. Fang Dong's *Spring Plowing* (Figure 15) depicts a female driver on a tractor surrounded by several cheerful and enthusiastic children. It is noteworthy that the tractor is presented as extraordinarily gigantic, which results in the comparatively tininess of the female figure. In this way, the intense contrast between the size of the driver and the tractor actually reiterates the outstanding capability of women's machinery operation. What's more, the red star printed at the head of the tractor, which symbolizes the Party, alludes the nation's advancement in the self-production of modern technological equipment. Obviously, propaganda posters relocated those energetic tractor girls in the public working field and in close proximity to advanced agricultural equipment. They had successfully transformed themselves to autonomous worker by participating in training and mastering machinery, therefore getting liberated from the arduous domestic work and becoming a group of productive members of the modern socialist society.

Apparently, it had been propagated by the CCP that women should be posited in production, whether in the factory or in agriculture, which entailed their operation of heavy-duty machinery. By doing so, the Party firmly granted women a brand-new class identity, the proletariat. Moreover, they also indicated that leadership positions should be as open to women as to men. In reality and in practice, however, this largely remained merely utopian. As in industry and agriculture, the operation of tractors and other mechanized equipment by and large remained within the domain of the male workers. Women were confined to operating machines used for planting rice shoots and threshing, and to the machinery in textile factories. The urgency with which female participation in mechanization initially was represented gave way to an idealized reality where women operated

non-essential machines. Consequently, it can be said that the omnipotence and subjectivity of women tractor drivers as displayed in those propaganda posters were, in many cases, only a form of artistic imaginary of females' idealized position within the developing socialist modern society. In addition, in many literary and cinematic works, female tractor drivers were still situated within the new socialist patriarchy both in and out of the domestic realm, being regaled and led by either male tractor drivers cum husbands, or state and party officials (Du, 2017). Such a gender hierarchy which counters the advocacy of eliminating differences between the two sexes under the principle of desexualization is also easily discernible in many propaganda posters featuring different themes, which will be discussed in detail in the following part.

The Tenacity of Feminine Artistic Aesthetics and Gender Hierarchy

The old-fashioned artistic ideas about the representation of attractive feminine beauties once popular during the Republican era proved to be still tenacious and endured even after the CCP's taken power in 1949. The depiction of peasant or working women taking obvious pride in their work was championed since the early 1950s, but in some posters, these working women's faces and hands had been marked by unrelenting sunshine and hard labor. Such images seemed to lack verisimilitude, because it could be impossible for women doing laborious work in the villages or factories to look so glamorous and neat. Moreover, no woman dressed in the latest fashions was able to take part in hard physical labor while still looking as spic and span as the poster models did. For example, Xin Liliang's "New view in the rural village" (Figure 16) depicted the toil of peasants in the rice field. The central figure at the front of the poster is a good-looking young lady with stylish bobbed haircut and delicate make-up. Although dressed in the clothing of peasant, her bodily lines are depicted as fine and smooth, denoting a sense of graceful and tidiness, which is resemble to the modern girl figure in Shanghai calendar posters. Contrary to those propaganda posters featuring masculinized factory workers or tractor girls, this poster apparently adopts a different strategy of the construction of the female figure, which highlights the enticing and delicate characteristics of a beautiful young woman. In his another poster work, Xin Liliang portrays the happy workers' family of the early 1950s by depicting a new spacious home, a radio set, abundant and good food, and three healthy children (Figure 17). The mother figure is dressed in a trendy qipao that was once prevalent in Shanghai during the early twentieth China, which represents the prosperity of the commercial modernity during that time. As a result, it would be very ironic to have such a kind of depiction of females to appear in the propaganda poster during an era that embraced the masculine quality of women while degrading old-fashioned female beauties as bourgeois extravagance and degeneration. The artist once designed glamorous film posters during the 1930s, and the relevant techniques that he previously adopted apparently still endured. Similarly, when creating the poster entitled "Man works hard, flowers are fragrant" (Figure 18), Li Mubai and Jin Xuechen, two artists who were primary designers for calendar posters, also revealed their customary manners to depict females. In the poster, the girls' face looks exactly the same as those of fashionable pretty girls in calendar posters, although being situated in a different venue to laud her diligence. Surrounded by a sea of brilliant-color roses, the young girl is picking flowers while doing self-decoration with one piece of the roses. Her feminine traits are accentuated through the sophisticated delineation of her beautiful face. It is hard to imagine that this poster was produced in the early 1960s when the Maoist socialist regime had become so consolidated and powerful.



Figure 16. Xin Liliang, 1953. "New view in the rural village."



Figure 17. Xin Liliang, 1954. "Chairman Mao gives us a happy life."



Figure 18. Li Mubai, Jin Xuechen, 1962. "Man works hard, flowers are fragrant."

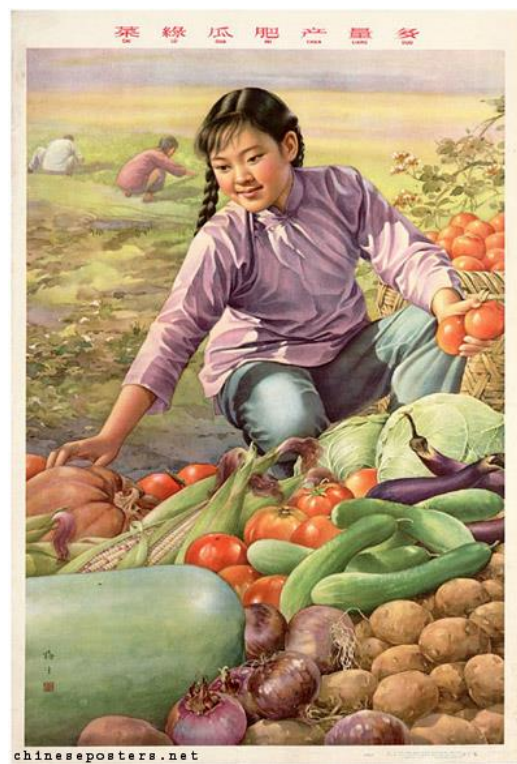


Figure 19. Jin Meisheng, 1959. "The vegetables are green, the cucumbers plumb, the yield is abundant."

When looking at the practice of depicting women in these posters, it is safe to say that the “pretty girls” pictures continued to dominate the sphere of propaganda posters. The attractiveness of female beauty was used for political propaganda purposes in a manner very similar to commercial advertising in the earlier historical period. Apart from the erotic feminine beauties, other aspects of female qualities were also embedded in the propagandist visual representations of women. For instance, Jin Meisheng's poster portrays the good harvest of vegetables in the village field (Figure 19). A young girl positioned at the center of the propaganda poster is excitedly picking up the abundant vegetables in front of her. The association of female figure with the richness of agriculture seems to denote the reproduction meaning of the female body, which originates from the patriarchal definition of women's values.

The only exception was during the periods when high Maoism was the norm, especially during the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution which was launched in 1966. During this period, representation of exquisite feminine beauties went through harsh attacks and the masculinized body of women regain popularity and domination among the artistic productions, even in a more thorough and extreme way, out of the purpose of conducting fierce incessant class struggles and the violent and ruthless eliminations of all suspicious bourgeois or backward qualities that could hinder the career of socialist construction. Figure 20 portrays a woman textile worker standing at the front of a group of angry people, showing the powerfulness and strength of her muscled arm. The female figure is obviously deprived of all of the traditional feminine traits but infused with intense masculine characteristics manifested by the rigidity of the body. However, even during the historical period when the extremeness of gender equality was championed and practiced, the hierarchy between women and men still firmly rooted in the state's placement of females within the process of socialist modernization. For example, in “Nurturing the young seeding” (Figure 21), the three people depicted, seemingly in a harmonious interacting relationship, are in effect situated in implicit hierarchical order. The two young girls are delightfully staring at the young seeding which is apparently nurtured by themselves with some intricate high-tech equipment.



Figure 20. Revolutionary committee of the Shanghai national cotton factory Nr.21, 1971. “Thoroughly criticize the ‘theory of human nature’ of the landlord and capitalist classes.”



Figure 21. Artist unknown, early-1970s. "Nurture the young seeding."



Figure 22. Artist unknown, early-1970s. "The cadre should mix with the workers."

However, the presence of the elder male comrade, who is contently looking at the young girls, dissolves the possible independence and autonomy of the females. His age and implicit higher Party rank indicate that the success of the girls' scientific research can only succeed under the guidance of this man. In "The cadre should mix with the workers" (Figure 22), the message conveyed is similar. In the poster, a peasant-like young woman is staying with two other men, carefully listening to one of them, with a notebook and a pen on her hand taking down notes. The male figure on the left, holding a collected work of Mao Zedong, is patiently providing instructions to the woman and the other man next to her. The hierarchy expressed in this poster is evident that women are obedient, and receiver of the education and guidance offered by men leaders or counterparts. Just as Harriet Evans claims, the visual space of propaganda poster in which women were presented was actually a gendered space, where males' symbolic authority was pervasive and potent (Evans & Donald, 1999, p. 66).

Conclusion

The fashionable and attractive modern girls depicted in calendar posters during the early twentieth century China symbolized both the imaginary and realistic features of modernization made possible by the prosperity of modern commercial culture. Through fulfilling to the individual scopophilia desire by presenting the "Modern Girl" image to the public, the detailing of the satisfactory life condition displayed in calendar posters also implied the possible welfare and happiness that various modern commodities were able to bring about, thus envisioning an illusory material 'fact' to their viewers" (Tang, 2007, p. 166). However, the commercial culture experienced violent resistance under Maoist regime, and the associated tactics of constructing the visual images of females were also abandoned. Maoist propaganda posters concentrated on the narrative representation of women rather than depictions on material details as calendar posters did. Moreover, they also focused on the exhibition of energetic and powerful features of females in juxtaposition with advanced machinery and heavy equipment, so as to prove that women could be empowered by the CCP to actively participate in the construction of socialist modernity. The different strategies adopted by calendar posters and Maoist propaganda posters respectively are intended to cater to the materialization of two different modes of modernization. While those images objectively capture the reality of social modernity to some extents, they also imply the artists'

imaginary of an ideal vision of modernization. By registering female figures as the center for presentation, they were inscribed with males' desires through envisioning desirable female images that would correspond to their expectations of the concreteness of modernity, and were replete with abundant gender codes and sexual hierarchies.

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