

BOOK REVIEW

Portrayals of Women in Early Twentieth-century China: Redefining Female Identity through Modern Design and Lifestyle

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The emergence of women from the “inner chambers” to take part in public life as students, workers and shoppers is one of the most remarkable features of social change in China in the early 20th century. Normatively, men belonged outside, women inside, except for the poor and labouring classes. When they moved outside, women from genteel or “proper” families (*liangjia*) had to reinvent themselves, and in some cases had new selves invented for them.

This process has been studied from various perspectives over a long period of time and continues to be a matter of scholarly interest. In *Portrayals of Women in Early Twentieth-century China*, Sandy Ng draws on the work of Susan Mann, Joan Judge, Dorothy Ko, Tani Barlow, Louise Edwards and others to provide the background to the portraits that are her main scholarly concern. The book follows a broadly chronological path. Four substantive chapters take the reader from generic images of women in early 19th-century export painting (chapter two) to photographs of prominent women in Nationalist China featured in a 1942 edition of *Vogue* (chapter five). There is some backtracking in chapter three to 17th- and 18th-century portraits of “beauties,” where the author draws fruitfully on the work of James Cahill. Chapter four focuses almost exclusively on calendar posters – a popular form of advertisement in the Republican era and probably the most famous of any medium for the dissemination of images of women in this era.

The author makes it clear early on that her problematic is not gender. In other words, she takes as given the fact of women as socially constructed beings. The closest she comes to dealing with terms of analysis is to clarify her use of the term “modern woman,” which she uses in preference to the term New Woman. She distinguishes the “modern woman” – educated, progressive, respectable – from the hedonistic, anxiety-producing Modern Girl who flourished in the same period. Her stated interest in these social types is the critical role played by images of women in their production. “Female identity,” she asserts, “was reproduced through imagery, which in turn helped define modern womanhood” (p. 19). Consumption was central to this process. Female consumers “actively consumed commodities but were themselves passively consumed through visual display” (p.112) – especially in the form of advertising posters. These are not overtly controversial points and are not closely argued by her. Instead, she provides evidence for them through a historical comparative study of graphic images in broader social and material settings.

Ng begins with a survey of household furnishings and other objects of everyday life in, mostly, the 19th century, using actual surviving examples (tables, chairs, a washstand, a vase) alongside paintings and photographs to evoke a picture of material life in the late Qing. Hong Kong museum collections provided much of her material and together with her utilization of export paintings produced by artists working in Canton show that this chapter is substantially concerned with southern China. In this context, a portrait of two Manchu women (p. 40), used to illustrate social status in relation to chair styles, raises the question of the differences, regional and ethnic, within the late

empire. In *A Fashionable Century: Textile Artistry and Commerce in the Late Qing* (University of Washington Press, 2020) – a surprising omission from the bibliography of the present book – Rachel Silberstein addresses exactly this question, arguing that “ethnicity and place were critical to determining women’s engagement with fashion” (p. 44). Not only fashion, but the economic roles and social status of women showed variation across the empire.

Ng’s premise for generalizing from the particular appears to be the assumption that “a shared sense of urban community characterized Chinese society in its early modern era” (p. 70). It follows that both the “paintings of beauties” of the Ming–Qing era and the famous calendar posters of the first half of the 20th century can be considered relevant to Chinese society at large. In comparing the two genres, in chapter three, the author is concerned to emphasize recognizable continuities in composition, in this way providing the foundations for a view of modern femininity, formed in a Westernizing context, as a hybridized rather than alien form. Many of the compositional elements of calendar posters, she shows, are identical to those in “paintings of beauties.” Integrating new commodities into familiar domestic contexts, calendar posters, even in their risqué iterations, were essentially conservative in terms of social values. In chapter four, thematically centred on consumption, she identifies features of this new commodity culture that went into the making of the modern woman. Calendar posters themselves, while advertising tobacco, cloth, pharmaceuticals and other products, fostered a new regime of spectatorship, helping women to “participate in the unfamiliar and adopt for themselves the changes they were seeing around them” (p. 105).

The last substantive chapter, on female subjectivity, is centred on photographic portrayals, which she finds, like images in calendar posters, to be consistent with “traditional values” albeit maintained “amidst the demands of modernity” (p. 128). A footnote in an earlier chapter refers the reader to Joan Judge’s work on photography and women in early 20th-century China. This could with advantage have been incorporated into the main text and its implications for the author’s own work discussed. As it is, the author takes a rather unmediated approach to her subject. The photographs are mostly undated and the people in them unidentified, as she notes. Resulting problems of interpretation are not always successfully resolved. It is unclear, for instance, what the author understands by “ideas of tradition” in reference to the clothing of a young woman in obviously contemporary dress (p. 120) or by “formal outfits” in reference to a man wearing long gown and jacket (*changpao magua*) (p. 125), an outfit that was technically informal (*bianfu*) in state protocols of the time. Given a visual culture that was historically rich in individual portraits of women – as shown in her own examples of “beauty paintings” – it is confusing to find a photograph of a woman presented as evidence that “individuality was important in female portrayal” (p.125).

She is on stronger ground in the concluding section of the chapter, centred on the eight “modern cultural ambassadors” featured in the 1942 edition of *Vogue*. These were well-educated women from privileged backgrounds. Befitting representatives of the Nationalist era, they combined social poise and educational attainments with traditional virtues. Their visibility made them models for emulation. The author does not state where the photographs were taken, or by whom, but is able to argue persuasively that they collectively show “a subtle balance between femininity and cultivation” (p. 139). These women’s intellectual pursuits are never allowed to “overshadow” their feminine charm. They embody conservative modernity, not a term used in this book but perhaps its strongest recurring theme.

For a book about female subjectivity, this one is surprisingly innocent of any reference to what women have had to say about their view of themselves. In the case of the eight cultural ambassadors – probably all of whom have left written records of some form or other – this was an opportunity forgone. Oei Hui-lan (Madame Wellington Koo), one of the eight, wrote not one but two autobiographies in which she had some sharp words to say about other women as well as, naturally, much to say about herself.

Overall, Ng stays focused on pictures rather than words. The exuberant visual culture of Republican-era China has attracted great interest from scholars, who have drawn on its products

variously to illustrate and to explore social and cultural issues in early 20th-century China. In this nicely produced book with its accessible text, many of these issues are touched on because they bear on the shifting parameters of womanhood in the first half of the 20th century. The book's main focus, however, is on "images of, and for, women." In the interaction between viewed and viewer, spectacle and spectator, it finds its *raison d'être*: a way of imagining the process by which female identity in early 20th-century China was redefined.