

# The female image in calendar posters and advertisement posters in early twentieth century Shanghai

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**Abstract:** *Yuefenpai flourished in early 20th and beautiful young women were the core image of yuefenpai. Besides, there are many advertisement posters appeared as women images. This paper is designed to study the female image in calendar posters and advertisement posters in early twentieth century Shanghai and explore the social recognition of female image and how female image reflect the reality. Apart from satisfying consumer's needs, it is necessary to study female images based on social background. I think the effects female advertisement on reality still has some room to study, not only change people's notion by advertisement but also can influence social recognition of female image, consumer behavior and cultural value.*

**Keywords:** *female image, social recognition, the reflection of reality, commodities, cultural value*

## 1. Introduction and Research questions

*Yuefenpai flourished in early 20<sup>th</sup> and beautiful young women were the core image of yuefenpai. Besides, there are many advertisement posters appeared as women images. I want to study the theme of The female image in calendar posters and advertisement posters in early twentieth century Shanghai.*

In this essay, I analyze materials related with the female image in calendar posters(yuefenpai) and advertisement posters in early twentieth century Shanghai to find out some question:

- (1) What the background of arising of the female image on calendar posters and advertisement posters?
- (2) What female images look like?
- (3) How to look at female?
- (4) Do they reflect reality?

## 2. Background

### 2.1 Shanghai's modernity and its abundant resources

In *selling modernity*, Wu Yongmei analyses the factors contributing to the birth of the modern city Shanghai and its consumer society, which was background of the flourish of yuefenpai. After Opium Wars' failure, Shanghai became a port city opening to foreign trade and many foreigners from Germany, Italy, Japan and other nations came there to live and trade. Banks, trading companies, commodity stores established in Shanghai and international settlement centered on the Bund and Nanjing Road. Many religious Chinese business men also took part in establishing Western-style general stores like clothing stores, teahouses, brothels and theaters. These shifted the Shanghai people from living based on traditional farming and handicrafts to business activities. And Shanghai became the financial center of Asia.

### 2.2 Women's revolution and battles

After abolition of foot-binding in 1919, as Dal Lago describes, later reforms were related with women's education and the first time woman was allowed to attend to Peking University. While, Kazuko argues that the women's desire for suffrage was failure because of the denial of women's political right of the "Provisional Constitution", leading women to take radical actions such as rushing to the senate to

require Sun to attend the council again to discuss women's political rights. Later in May Fourth Movement, As Kazuko's describe, women also participated in the struggle against imperialism and feudalism, during this process, people gradually overcame the consciousness of the differences social identity of male and female, which deepened the concept of women liberation.

### **3. What female images look like**

#### **3.1 Identity**

During 1920s and 1930s, there were typical four types modern women in calendar posters, newspaper and magazine advertisement, which assessed by Wu Yongmei. The four kinds of women were female student who wore qipao as their uniform, working female such as "film actresses, singers, dancers, and stewardesses", "upper-middle-class housewives and daughters of noble families in Chinese dresses are shown to be elegant", "graceful and wealthy".

##### **3.1.1 Student**

The assessment of the female student portrayed by *yuefenpai* from Wu Yongmei is that they are depicted as delightful, innocent and elegant. One of Zheng's work for Nanyang Brothers Tobacco Company, he painted a female student who with short hair dressed in short-sleeved shirt with lapel plate buttons and the black with white grid knee skirt, put her feet dangling in the garden railings, placed her left hand on the chest holding a book and use right hand to support railing. At that time, female students represented for knowledge and romance and they stand for the direction of the development of the time and modernity. And even prostitutions dressed themselves up as students to attract guests.

##### **3.1.2 Career Women**

Wu classifies professional working women in the 1920s and 1930s into bank clerks, copywriters, secretaries, accounting clerks, telephone operators, teachers, etc. And she narrates a female pilot named Lee Ya-Ching who became one of the first female Chinese pilots after training in the Boeing School of Aeronautics. However, Wu argues that professional working women were very few in 1930s Shanghai and only 2% or 6777 women were engaged in white-collar jobs. Those women were mainly working as movie and theater actresses, dancers, waitresses at tea houses and restaurants. Therefore, Wu does not focus on describing the image of career women.

##### **3.1.3 Housewife**

As described by Liang, 1927-1937 during so called Nanking Decade, Jiang Jieshi took action of his New Life Movement in order to refresh Chinese society. As Wu's analysis, those women who had received middle-level and higher education did not need to chase after for a career, instead, the majority of them preferred to be a good wife and mother in their family. An advertisement for Jian Wei Gu Chang Wan illustrates a modern-looking housewife who is responsible for deciding on the furniture and home decoration of the rooms and to make them cozy. The second responsibility of housewives in the modern families was housekeeping. Thirdly, which is the most important emphasized by Wu, it is housewives' responsibilities to raise their child based on scientific child-rearing methods and home education in order to ensure children's happiness and the development of nation.

##### **3.1.4 Sport women**

As Liang's narrate, another important thing publicized by New Life Movement is that Chinese male and female need to be strong, build up healthy bodies through physical fitness. There were tiny athletic action shown in posters and female were appeared like standing next to a bicycle with one foot on a pedal, holding a tennis racket while sitting in the country-club garden, or standing next to the horse. One poster called *Beautiful Athlete* is one of the few posters that show woman are performing athletic activity.

##### **3.1.5 Ancient female or maid**

The image of ancient female and maid were frequently appeared in *yuefenpai* before the time of flourishing modern female images, which Liang narrates in her book with a lot of pictures. Notably, during the period of 1930s when Japan invaded China, Liang highlights that the military heroine Hua Mulan was popular in advertising posters. *Mulan Strings her bow* was painted in one anonymous advertising poster. As Liang's narrate, in two other pictures, Mulan is depicted returning home with victory. In a pictures cooperated by ten artists, including Xie Zhiguang, Mulan was riding a white steed, leading troops to hometown after war. In a version made by Xie Zhiguang, she returns to her family home

and appears to be a female. In front of the mirror, Mulan is putting on make-up, and in the background, her troops are astonished to see she's changing from a commander to a maiden. Assessed by Liang, all of these images show the clear evident that China get victory after wars.

### 3.2 Body

#### 3.2.1 Clothes

As Wu Yongmei's narrate, affected by the western modern department stores and the development of mass media, the "traditional" Confucian concept of forbidding women to expose their body was break and the western style aesthetic criteria for female beauty were accepted in Shanghai in the 1920s. This gave birth to a new Chinese costume—*qipao*, which is "a high-collared dress with slits up either side of the hem to show the legs, and buttons running from the neck across the chest and down the right side."

#### 3.2.2 Postures

One advertisement for cold-cream-and-toilet-water company made by Xie Zhiguang shows an attractive girl holds a mirror and right hand wipes the fragrance on the back of neck. This posture arm raising behind the head suggests the traditional erotic gesture becoming popular print advertisement type. Dal Lago emphasize the poses of women's legs to make supplement of Liang's view. Apart from sexual availability, Lago argue that this type of *yuefenpai* female also suggest the modernity at the same time. The prototype crossed-legged *yuefenpai* female were made by Zheng Maotuo in the early 1920s. Lago analyzes the flowers in Zheng Maotuo' crossed-legs female pictures which are related to the term of "Hua Guniang" referring to those prostitute or women of the demimonde, and he adds that the female next to brunches of flowers is associated with sexual imagery because "the color and the carnal sensuousness of the flowers". Lago also describes a figure in one of Xie Zhiguang's picture who can be considered as a more western posture and raises her arm with a self-confident gaze, which illustrate the female' beauty and confidence.

## 4. How to look at women

### 4.1 Consumer or Commodities

To Wu's argument, business enterprises and advertisement posters painters use the image of beautiful social butterflies active in society and sexual appeal of courtesans in posters to arouse consumers' purchasing desires. The images of traditional Chinese easy women who looks "western-inspired casual positions" create a special sense of modern sexual availability. Lago emphasizes why the images of fashionable and accessible women described in advertisement posters were most effective ways of promoting sales in Chinese context, because they were both "reminiscent of and distinct from traditional Chinese women's representation" and they satisfied society's "scophylic expectations". When a man smokes a cigarette, he may associate his action with "visually consuming" the beautiful woman and this increase his pleasure feelings.

However, in *The Distorting Mirror: Visual Modernity in China*, Pang makes supplement views to Wu and Lago's opinion. On one hand, Pang narrates the seductive women in advertisement posters are fetishized by men consumers. While on the other hand, he argues that these images also reviewed by women themselves. When men desires women (along with the commodities) as objects belonging to them, women also view and identify these images as their beauty, quality and status. Besides, the trendy women in posters and advertisements was beauty instruction, leading female readers and consumers to make them look "correct" modern look. From Wang Zhu's article, the beautiful women images in tobacco cards and *yuefenpai* create fashionable fairy tale which induces female consumers to purchase commodities. Conversely, in *Gendered Advertising in China: What History Do Images Tell?* Barbara Mittler argues that in Chinese Republican advertising, not only enables male (and female) to view women, but also allows male (and female) to view men in the same way. "Objectification works both ways". People can better understand the female images by watching male images. In the advertisements, women and men both do housework and male usually described as sick person who women should take care of.

### 4.2 The relationships with reality

Do these female images reflect reality? This question is discussed by many scholars and most of them argue that these images in advertisements could not directly correspond to reality using different

analytical aspects. In *The Distorting Mirror—Visual Modernity in China*, the female image has two concepts, first one is image as individual pictures or impression and the second popular concept is related with a group of people or objects which is relatively collective image compared with the first one. When using the image definition of second concept, it reflects social codes. As Laikwan Pang narrate, in general, if an individual image gains popularity and becomes dominant, it can turn to be the collective image. In the case of women images, advertisement turn appearances of individual female into a set of codified female stereotypes. Taking the men described as fetishism by Freud as example, Freud points out that despite the fact that the fetishist clearly knows the fictionality of the fetish, he chooses to displace his belief in the female phallus onto the fetish. Pang makes analogy of advertisement with fetish and points out that “if advertisement also functions as a form of fetish, the viewer does not equate the representation as the real object, but he or she still enjoys the advertisement a source of gratification on its own”. The presentation is that it equates ideology from Slavoj’s theory with the female images of advertisement, namely, the images of women also have distance with reality.

In the *Buying in: Advertising and the Sexy Modern Girl Icon in Shanghai in the 1920s and 1930s*, Tanie also argue that the women shown in advertisement posters did not reflect an existing reality, and he also use the same analogical method as Pang’s. But he analyzes his viewpoint from another aspect of consumption. These female in the advertisements aims to promote sales and increase the company’s profit, which also play fantasies. Zizek and Balibar use the concept of “other scenes of use value” to refer fantasies which is one of advertisements’ functions apart from commercial value. Zizek and Balibar defined the “other scene” to be a way of “thinking”. Tanie takes “other scene of politics” as example, narrating that destructive passions lead to the catastrophic politic issues reflected from massacre. Similarly, “other scene of use value” in advertisements refers to knowing how to use commodities on advertisements and erotic pleasure allowing people to image they are using the commodities. Tanie also emphasizes that advertisements did not cause personhood, nor represents existing subjects.

In a Chinese article *Analysis consumer culture of printed-calendar Advertising*, the argument from Han Sumei is that beautiful women in calendar posters successfully utilize the spreading culture phenomenon of “alternative satisfy”. The female image is manipulated rather than reality life and it also a picture of materialized hedonism life, which has its own charm resulting from the distance with reality. Although people knew the fantastic scene shown in *yuefenpai* which has far distance from their daily life, they still would like to purchase commodities appeared in advertisements. This is because people tried to believe the image was true faced with unrealistic life picture, which to some extent, shows people chase after the fantastic life.

Holding the opposite viewpoint from former scholars, Wu Yongmei argues that the image of modern female in advertisement show housewives who came from middle class and their daily life but also produced modern life in Shanghai. Namely, Wu thinks the women in advertisement can reflect the real life of middle-class housewives and their life. Besides, her opinion is that the modern life shown in advertisement can make people lead a similar modern life in reality, including purchasing commodities shown in advertisements, using modern commodities such as electric hot-pot and telephones, etc.

## 5. Conclusion

Apart from consumer need, the female image appeared in calendar posters and advertisement posters was related tightly to women’s revolution and social background at that time, which I think is still needed systematical study by scholars. This means scholar can study the development of female images in advertisement with time and social background, which may be more clear for people to find the tight relationships between image and society. Besides, I think the effects female advertisement on reality still has some room to study, not only change people’s notion by advertisement but may be other aspects like social culture, consumer behavior and even values.

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