

香港華商百利家有限公司

Sandy Ng

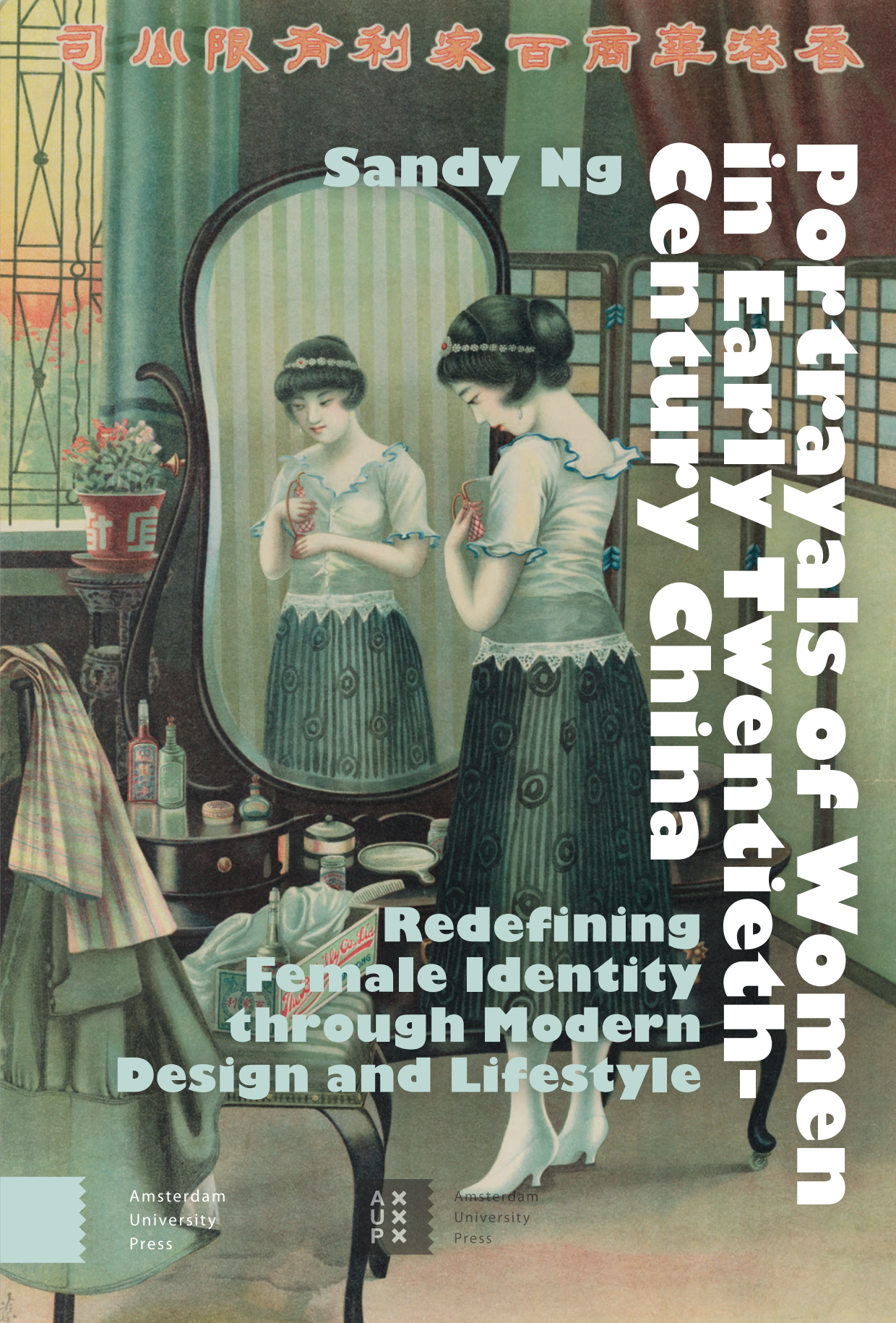
Portrayals of Women
in Early Twentieth-
Century China

Redefining
Female Identity
through Modern
Design and Lifestyle

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*Redefining Female Identity through
Modern Design and Lifestyle*

Sandy Ng

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	7
List of Illustrations	9
1 Introduction	15
2 Traditional Material Culture and Lifestyles in the Age of Modernity	35
3 Femininity and Social Changes as Seen through <i>Meiren Hua</i> and Advertising Posters	65
4 The Idealized Woman and the Tasteful Consumer	89
5 Female Subjectivity	115
6 Epilogue	143
Bibliography per Chapter	149
Bibliography	155
Index	161





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List of Illustrations

Figure 1	Domestic scene-conversation between host and guest in a Chinese export painting album (c.1801-1850). Copyright © The Trustees of the British Museum	38
Figure 2	Front of the great temple (Ma Kok Temple) of Macao painted by Auguste Borget (1842). Copyright © Hong Kong Museum of Art Collection. Permission granted by museum.	39
Figure 3	Portraits of members of a Manchu family (1644–1911). Credit Line: Anonymous Gift, 1952 (Public Domain)	40
Figure 4	Porcelain vase painted in overglaze polychrome enamels in Qing dynasty (1644–1911). Credit Line: Purchase by subscription, 1879 (Public Domain)	41
Figure 5	The bed chamber painted in the 19th Century. Copyright © Hong Kong Museum of Art Collection. Permission granted by museum.	42
Figure 6	18th century table-top dressing chest. Copyright © Liang Yi Museum, Hong Kong. Permission granted by museum.	42
Figure 7	17th century side table. Copyright © Liang Yi Museum, Hong Kong. Permission granted by museum.	43
Figure 8	A woman with flowers, in a Chinese export painting album (c.1801-1850). Copyright © The Trustees of the British Museum	45
Figure 9	Low scroll table from early 18th century. Copyright © Liang Yi Museum, Hong Kong. Permission granted by museum.	45
Figure 10	A woman dancing, from a Chinese export painting album (c.1801-1850). Copyright © The Trustees of the British Museum	46
Figure 11	A pair of lounge chair with retractable footrest from 19th century. Copyright © Liang Yi Museum, Hong Kong. Permission granted by museum.	46
Figure 12	20th century lounge chair. Copyright © Liang Yi Museum, Hong Kong. Permission granted by museum.	46
Figure 13	Low table with vases painted in the 19th century. The Elisha Whittelsey Collection, The Elisha Whittelsey Fund, 1967. (Public Domain)	47



- Figure 14 Faces of China-A cycle of a mandarin's life, from an album of 84 drawings drew by Kwan Luen-cheung (1850s). Copyright © Hong Kong Museum of Art Collection. Permission granted by museum. 47
- Figure 15 Wash basin stand. Copyright © Liang Yi Museum, Hong Kong. Permission granted by museum. 48
- Figure 16 17th century Luohan bed. Copyright © Liang Yi Museum, Hong Kong. Permission granted by museum. 49
- Figure 17 Chinese family painted in Qing dynasty (18th century). Copyright © Collection of the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum. Permission granted by museum. 50
- Figure 18 A Chinese Family Playing Cards (c.1840s). Copyright © HSBC Holdings plc (HSBC Archives) 2023 52
- Figure 19 18th century square table. Copyright © Liang Yi Museum, Hong Kong. Permission granted by museum. 53
- Figure 20 A pair of 17th century stools. Copyright © Liang Yi Museum, Hong Kong. Permission granted by museum. 53
- Figure 21 Living room in western style. Copyright © The Collection of the Hong Kong Museum of History. Permission granted by museum. 55
- Figure 22 Watch maker painted in about 1825. Courtesy of the Peabody Essex Museum. Permission granted by museum. 55
- Figure 23 Living room in Chinese style. Copyright © The Collection of the Hong Kong Museum of History. Permission granted by museum. 58
- Figure 24 A Street Outside a Temple (c.1830s). Copyright © HSBC Holdings plc (HSBC Archives) 2023 59
- Figure 25 Old China Street, Canton (c.1839). Copyright © Hong Kong Museum of Art Collection. Permission granted by museum. 60
- Figure 26 China Street with Part of the Foreign Factories in Guangzhou (19th Century). Copyright © Hong Kong Museum of Art Collection. Permission granted by museum. 61
- Figure 27 Porcelain shop, Canton (c.1825). Copyright © Hong Kong Museum of Art Collection. Permission granted by museum. 62
- Figure 28 Cake shop, Canton (c.1825). Copyright © Hong Kong Museum of Art Collection. Permission granted by museum. 62



- Figure 29 Cake seller (Late 19th Century). Copyright © Hong Kong Museum of Art Collection. Permission granted by museum. 63
- Figure 30 Lady Seated on a Bamboo Chair, by Zheng Kunyu (18th/19th century). Courtesy of Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, Canada. ©ROM 68
- Figure 31 Chinese Lady Embroidering (1644–1911). Courtesy of Nelson-Atkins Media Services. 69
- Figure 32 Woman Resting from Reading (18th Century). Copyright © The Trustees of the British Museum 70
- Figure 33 Lady Writing a Letter (18th century). Courtesy of the Peabody Essex Museum. Permission granted by museum. 71
- Figure 34 Faces of China-Ladies at various occupations (c.1855) drew by Kwan Luen-cheung. Copyright © Hong Kong Museum of Art Collection. Permission granted by museum. 73
- Figure 35 Lady Reading a Book (1721) by Leng Mei. Courtesy of Eskenazi Limited. Permission granted by organisation. 74
- Figure 36 Ladies Reading in the West Wing (Mid 19th Century). Copyright © Hong Kong Museum of Art Collection. Permission granted by museum. 74
- Figure 37 Advertisement for Central Automobile Company in Shun Pao newspaper (1924). Shun Pao newspaper 1924.4.20 (Public Domain) 83
- Figure 38 Calendar Poster for Fengtian Sino-Russian Tobacco Co. (1910s-1920s). Copyright © Collection of the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum. Permission granted by museum. 85
- Figure 39 Poster for Gande Price & Co., LTD. (1933) By Kwan Cho-mou. Copyright © Collection of Hong Kong Heritage Museum 85
- Figure 40 French advertising poster promoting Rosinette absinthe, printed by Camis (c. 1900). (Public Domain) 85
- Figure 41 Calendar Poster for Shanghai Fire & Marine Insurance Co. (1925) by Hang Zhiying/Zhiying Studio Copyright © Collection of the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum. Permission granted by museum. 87
- Figure 42 Calendar Poster for Nanyang Brothers Tobacco Co. by Zhou Baisheng. Copyright © Collection of the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum. Permission granted by museum. 87



- Figure 43 Calendar Poster for Shanghai Sanyou Co. (1910s-1920s) by Zheng Mantuo. Copyright © Collection of the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum. Permission granted by museum. 88
- Figure 44 Calendar Poster for Arnhold & Co. (1924). Copyright © Collection of the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum. Permission granted by museum. 88
- Figure 45 Poster of the Bakilly Co., Ltd. (1920 – 1939) by Kwan Wai-nung. Copyright © The Collection of Hong Kong Heritage Museum 94
- Figure 46 Calendar Poster for Wuzhou Pharmacy (1920-1930s) by Hang Zhiying/Zhiying Studio. Copyright © Collection of the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum. Permission granted by museum. 95
- Figure 47 Calendar Poster for Yuan Yuan Hat Co. by Zheng Mantuo. Copyright © Collection of the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum. Permission granted by museum. 96
- Figure 48 Calendar Poster for Shanghai Huiming Electric Light and Battery Factory (1920-1930s) by Hang Zhiying / Zhiying studio. Copyright © Collection of the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum. Permission granted by museum. 100
- Figure 49 Calendar Poster: Lady with Pink Scarf (1930s) by Hang Zhiying / Zhiying studio. Copyright © Collection of the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum. Permission granted by museum. 100
- Figure 50 Calendar Poster for Fengtian Sino-Russian Tobacco Co. (1920-1930s) by Hang Zhiying / Zhiying studio. Copyright © Collection of the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum. Permission granted by museum. 101
- Figure 51 Woman admiring herself in the mirror, seated on a dressing table chair. Copyright © The Collection of the Hong Kong Museum of History. Permission granted by museum. 103
- Figure 52 Calendar Poster for E.I. du Pont de Nemours & Co. (1920-1930s) by Hang Zhiying / Zhiying studio. Copyright © Collection of the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum. Permission granted by museum. 105
- Figure 53 Calendar Poster for Yuehua Newspaper (1925). Copyright © Collection of the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum. Permission granted by museum. 107

- Figure 54 Calendar Poster for Hatamen Brand Tobacco (1920-1930s) by Hang Zhiying / Zhiying studio. Copyright © Collection of the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum. Permission granted by museum. 111
- Figure 55 Photograph of a lady wearing high-heel shoes, holding a fan (Early 20th century). Copyright © The Collection of the Hong Kong Museum of History. Permission granted by museum. 120
- Figure 56 Photograph of a lady with short hair holding a book (Early 20th century). Copyright © The Collection of the Hong Kong Museum of History. Permission granted by museum. 121
- Figure 57 Photograph of a lady with short hair holding a book in a living room setting (Early 20th century). Copyright © The Collection of the Hong Kong Museum of History. Permission granted by museum. 122
- Figure 58 Photograph of Italian carved oak chair (c. 1863). Copyright © Victoria and Albert Museum, London. 122
- Figure 59 Photograph of a woman with a chair (Early 20th century). Copyright © The Collection of the Hong Kong Museum of History. Permission granted by museum. 123
- Figure 60 Photograph of a couple in formal outfits (Early 20th century). Copyright © The Collection of the Hong Kong Museum of History. Permission granted by museum. 125
- Figure 61 Photograph of a woman looking at a mirror seated on a dressing table chair (Early 20th century). Copyright © The Collection of the Hong Kong Museum of History. Permission granted by museum. 126
- Figure 62 Photograph of a woman looking at a mirror seated on a dressing table chair (Early 20th century). Copyright © The Collection of the Hong Kong Museum of History. Permission granted by museum. 127
- Figure 63 Photo of Mrs. Wellington Koo (1942). Vogue © Condé Nast 136
- Figure 64 Photo of Mrs. Ung-yu Yen (1942). Vogue © Condé Nast 137
- Figure 65 Photo of Mrs. Nai-chi Chang (1942). Vogue © Condé Nast 138

1 Introduction

Abstract

This chapter provides the context for, and establishes the parameters of, an exploration of the main issues in the book, including the idea of the modern woman, modernity, consumption, visual culture, and design in China in the early twentieth century in thriving urban cities. It introduces the overall structure of the content, methodological and empirical perspectives, and research objectives within the book.

Keywords: Design, Modern Woman, Modernity, Visual Culture

This book has been, as they say, a long time coming. The conventional trajectory for a PhD graduate is for her research to be refined into a publishable manuscript, which was my intent, but which never happened—for various reasons. It took much contemplation, research, and further learning, much of it through my role as a teacher, for this project to be realized—one which derives from my interest in understanding the role women play in modern society. As it stands, the final version is imperfect, eschewing a detailed analysis of gender issues within the complexities of modernity, to allow for a focus on the criticality of images of, and for, women as China began to modernize in the Republican era. This project was inspired by a number of seminal works, which offer a critical context for the issues it explores.

These works start with Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle*, where he proclaims that the spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relationship among people, mediated by images.¹ This view has influenced my thinking about female representation, which, as this book will detail, I do not see as merely a means to objectify women. The representations of women in modern China, to the contrary, generated a system of visual signs that articulated the changes taking place in daily public and civic

1 Debord, Guy. *The Society of the Spectacle*. Detroit: Black & Red, 1983.

life, which women were increasingly becoming a part of and, concurrently, influencing in significant ways.

A number of issues need to be addressed in an analysis of the “Modern Woman,” which is the term I prefer over “New Woman” and “Modern Girl.” The two latter terminologies imply the “older” version is outdated and the word “girl” infantilizes women and undermines the role they play in modern society. In the literature I have reviewed, “Modern Woman” refers to the conscientious woman, whereas “Modern Girl” has the undesirable connotation of a frivolous woman who forgets her family and social duties. Her choices and expressions of taste are challenged. Her appearances are questioned; she is regarded as shallow if she beautifies herself, and unfeminine if she focuses on work and study.

The ideal modern woman as China began to modernize in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was an educated homemaker who used her knowledge to make wise consumer choices to take care of her family, while preserving traditional heritage and fostering a sense of national pride. Ideas of good taste in the modern era enabled women to redefine their identities and their social status, establishing new forms of heritage that were unconnected to those relating to birth right, and traditionally associated with men. Exploring these modern representations of women led me to the traditional portrayals of beauty in the Chinese artistic tradition, known as *meiren hua*. It is generally believed that those paintings put women on a par with the objects also depicted in these works, dividing the women depicted into particular types. I found myself wondering if women had been able to express any sense of individuality at all in the past. Dorothy Ko’s research on how commercialization fostered a culture of reading and publication, for and by women, enriching their lives and furthering their education, gave me new insights, which strengthened the view that individuality and self-awareness existed before the age of consumerism.²

I believe that modern images of women in China helped women in that era to assert their own individual identities. The models in advertising posters, the sitters in photographs, and actresses in films bolstered this, giving Republican-era women ideals to strive for. An obvious example can be seen in how women constructed their identities through the poses and props used in studio photographs to convey the social status they wished to be identified with. The act of being photographed is itself an act of assertion. Representations of fashionable and confident women had an impact on the female psyche in

2 Ko, Dorothy, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers: Women and Culture in Seventeenth-Century China*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1994.



society. It encouraged women to advance themselves by exercising greater self-awareness, increasing their visibility and affirming their identity. Urban women practised modernization informed by how they saw themselves portrayed in advertisements, magazines, films and, most importantly, by taking up place in the public sphere—both in the workforce and as consumers or shoppers. Rural women likely wanted to modernize too but were limited by a lack of opportunity and by poverty. Modern women owed their self-determination, in large part, to the images reproduced in those newly commercialized times, which were constantly visible in public. In this book, I argue that the modern woman was not simply objectified but, in fact, possessed a self-awareness that made her visible and a “spectacle” in public, in Debord’s sense of this word.³ Consumption gave women a new freedom from the domestic setting and the ability to make their own choices and to form social relationships outside of the family unit—it also led to them being blamed when society became commercialized and materialistic. I argue here that women bore both a burden of consumption and the social responsibility of modernization.

This book explores how consumption altered Chinese society, and how new consumption patterns and changes in design interacted with tradition. This interaction, it is argued, led to a specific Chinese experience in the context of visibility and modernity which inspired hybridized designs and lifestyles with women at the centre of this transformation. The popular visual culture of Republican China, including the influx of modern designs and products, became essential components in the production of female identity—even as images of women were instrumentalized to ease in these trappings of modernity and new ways of living for society as a whole. This book focuses on urban women whose participation in modernity is most critical and misunderstood. It discusses consumption from the point of view of the social and cultural impact of purchases, rather than the actual monetary exchanges. Taste is discussed in the context of design and lifestyle, and not in philosophical terms.

Modern Woman in China

The first part of the book looks at how woman’s identity had in the past been defined by preordained designations at birth and at how the arrival

3 Debord defines the “spectacle” as the everyday manifestation of capitalist-driven phenomena, including advertising, television, film, and celebrity. The Modern Woman is regarded as a spectacle in the context of this book as her formation is part of this phenomena.

of modernity redefined this identity through visual representations and a greater participation in public.

Woman's identity had been fought over when China struggled with its own national identity at the close of the Qing dynasty (1644-1911). The political messages that stemmed initially from the Republican revolution that saw out the Qing dynasty were gradually replaced by a new commercialism, which heralded the modern era in China, and this was when images of the modern woman appeared with increasing frequency in advertisements.

Anxieties over the ideals of womanhood surfaced at the same time as tensions grew over modernity. Two kinds of women emerged: The New Woman—or “Modern Woman,” which is the term I use to address her in this book—who was educated, respectable, nationalistic, and eager to achieve modernity; and The Modern Girl who lived a luxurious life and cared only about how she advanced herself. Her cosmopolitan image echoes the fears and vulnerability associated with modernity. These two perceptions of woman in early twentieth-century China portrayed the struggle between the conflicting aspects of modernity. The modern woman embodied its positive aspects, highlighting the advantages of a progressive society. Her search for female subjectivity is pursued with socially progressive ideals. The Modern Girl, on the other hand, symbolized the conflicts and misgivings that were felt with the onset of modernity. She embodied ideas of alienation and the anxieties attached to the loss of tradition in the wake of the cultural changes created by new urban lifestyle. The Modern Girl's fondness of material goods, nightlife, pleasure, and the new freedoms of urban or city life were countered by conservative elements in modern society who found such pleasure-seeking to be decadent and corrupting. The speed of change was too fast for the traditionalists who were unprepared for the culture of the “talented woman” (*cainu*), which has long existed in China, to be interpolated into social and cultural codes regarding woman's freedom, agency, and identity.⁴

The new visibility that articulated modern femininity and its optimism defined the modern woman through self-transformation and social desirability. Associations of the feminine with representation became closer through mechanically reproduced means such as motion pictures, prints, and photographs. The dissemination of images of the modern women actualized her modern identity by an independent affirmation of her visibility. The camera offered a new formation of subjectivity to the modern woman and spectators because the process of producing such images was more collaborative than traditional representations such as paintings. Identity

4 Edward, *Citizen of Beauty-Drawing Democratic Dreams in Republican China*, 33.



formation was constructed through urbanity, the technological capturing of images associated with this, and its associated commodity culture, which situated women in an urban social landscape as modern performative subjects. Female identity was reproduced through imagery, which in turn helped define modern womanhood.

Women's increased visibility through such means did not merely render them as objects but was crucial in their cultural and social representation, and led to an emancipated ideal of the modern woman. The ambivalence about feminine visibility, shared by writers, critics, and theorists in the twentieth century resonated the traditionalists' fear of the rapid changes generated by modernity. Prejudicial attitudes confined how women were perceived within society. While artists created idealized images of the modern woman in advertisements, fashion drawings, and film, they critiqued her in their cartoons, where they expressed their fantasies of, and ambivalences towards, modernity, which they saw as embodied by the modern woman. It is ironic that modern women were constantly criticized for their interest in fashion and consumption, despite the fact that modernity and commercialization went hand in hand with consumerism.

Women as consumers were instrumental in the growth of modernity and the assertion of female identity in modern society. The increased visibility of consumer culture in urban centres gave them an empowering presence that was essential in their emancipation from domestic confinement. The activities and psychological impacts generated by new patterns of consumption resulted partly from the increased and widely distributed visual representations of the consumerist pleasures on offer. These images, in fact, mediated the fluid and unstable conditions created by modernity. Western female role models enriched Chinese women's concepts of universal womanhood, which strengthened their own cultivation of a cultural and social consciousness.⁵ Urban centres in China were sites for consumption and spectacle where, traditionalists notwithstanding, modern woman embodied positive aspects of modernity such as better education opportunities.

Advertising, a critical part of the new consumer culture, exhibited the dual connotations of woman in consumer culture; her image became an object of desire but it was also the woman at whom the advertisement was targeted. Confident women were both objectified and empowered in equal measure by advertising that featured female models. Images of women in this context constituted a complex structure of identification and pleasure that permitted modernity to be desired and fantasized about, depending on the

5 Ibid., 34.



social and visual context in which these images appeared. Modern designs and new commodities, alongside the image of a woman, indicated an imported modernity that propagated ideas of the “aestheticization of everyday life.”⁶

Society’s ambivalence towards the modern woman is articulated through German philosopher Walter Benjamin’s (1892–1940) perception of mass culture through the metaphorical figure of a woman standing for modernity and its unfulfilled nature.⁷ He is concerned with the fragmentation of the modern feminine that has no essence, yet her reproduced image is treated as her modern identity. Conversely, Rita Felski in her studies on gender proclaims that the modern feminine challenges the desire to fulfil; she observes, “through its very artificiality, femininity was to become the privileged marker of the instability and mobility of modern gender identity.”⁸ Modern female identity is created with the help of visual representations of it, which caused Benjamin to distrust the artificial and changeable nature of female identity. Gender theorist Judith Butler perceives gender as a performative act, which resonates with Rita Felski’s elucidation, “Gender is a continual process, an identity that is performed and actualized over time within given social constraints.”⁹ The modern Chinese woman retained both old and new, Chinese and Western values, which enabled her to bridge tradition and modernity, and mediate the fluidity and uncertainties of modernity that were unique to her culture. Different types of women, ranging from housemaids, educated debutantes, and professional women, epitomized complex reactions to feminized conceptions of modernity. The examples discussed in this book illustrate how women’s identity materialized, in large part, because of the increased visibility of women through visual representations that were continually reproduced and disseminated.

Modernity and Visual Culture in Early Twentieth-Century China

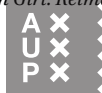
The second research objective is to understand modernity in the Chinese context. Its formation rested on a redefinition of identity in the metropolitan

6 Tamari, “Rise of the Department Store and The Aestheticization of Everyday Life in Early 20th Century Japan,” 99–118.

7 Conor, *The Spectacular Modern Woman: Feminine Visibility in the 1920s*, 81–2.
See also Petro, Patrice. *Joyless Street: Women and Melodramatic Representation in Weimar Germany*, 57–64.

8 Conor, *The Spectacular Modern Woman: Feminine Visibility in the 1920s*, 81–2.
See also Felski, Rita. *The Gender of Modernity*, 95.

9 Patterson, *Beyond the Gibson Girl: Reimagining the American New Woman 1895–1915*, 16.



centres of Republican-era China that stemmed from the cultural and social transformations and technological advancements of that time. These changes were composed of a hybrid reinvention of cultural tradition with characteristics of Eurocentrism.¹⁰

In late-nineteenth-century China, social, economic, and technological changes nurtured a new print culture that informed the public in urban centres such as Shanghai and Guangzhou, about what modern life looked like and how to comprehend and participate in it. In this way, the production and dissemination of representation was instrumental in the development of modernity. The visuals within this widely disseminated print media were instructive in making sense of the rapid changes, including the availability of new commodities that generated desire and consumption. Female representation, the focus of this book, propagated less familiar concepts of consumption that ushered in new notions of individuality, pleasure, and modern identity, which became critical cultural characteristics of modernity. Modernity permeated China through a novel visual discourse, expressing a distinctive formation of representation and experience. Advertisements promoted local and foreign commodities that in turn generated the desire to possess them and encouraged fantasies of self-improvement. Photography recorded this new urban modernity where local people went about their lives among the Western-style architecture and design that came to define modernity. Advertising and photographic representations blurred social hierarchies, ranks, and traditional markers of distinction, while highlighting social ambivalence and articulating technological modernity.

The urban citizens of China viewed Western culture and modernity as objects of curiosity, desire, and consumption, and it is through examining the historical and cultural nuances of changing situations that the complexity of modernity emerges. Judging from material cultural evidence, ordinary people and everyday living and activities were intertwined with changes that came with modernity. For example, domestic spaces became defined differently in the early twentieth century. While privacy was not an issue in the design of traditional houses, the modern home became more concerned with it, particularly in apartments in the city where people were less likely to know their neighbours. Modern citizens acquired new domestic objects that were on offer in the local marketplace, and these were reflected in their altered interiors and their familiarity with foreign goods and technology. Small flats in multi-levelled buildings became popular with professionals,

10 For a concise understanding of modern China, refer to Mitter, Rana. *Modern China: A Very Short Introduction*. Cary: Oxford University Press, 2008.



and new-style apartment buildings with elevators, cinemas, and shops on the ground floor provided modern conveniences.¹¹ Domestic interiors were equipped with gas stoves, boilers, refrigerators, bathrooms, and even sun porches. As younger populations from remote towns or the countryside migrated to the city seeking new opportunities, the small apartments allowed independent living for singletons and nuclear families who had relocated to the city and were living for the first time without their family or in-laws. Privacy became paramount for the modern urban citizen, and it became important for them to close their doors to the outside world. These new ways of living were in marked contrast to the ideal family life of the past, which consisted of several generations living together. Independent women living on their own were almost unheard of in the past, unless these women were social outcasts or destitute, but they were not at all uncommon in the early twentieth century, especially when it came to educated women who earned good salaries. Shanghai, as an emergent and dynamic city, exemplified these rapid changes but this new prosperity was not confined to the cities, and immigrants who originated from rural areas or from provinces away from these urban centres would go back to their villages to build European-style houses to display their new wealth and social status. While they were away from their hometowns, they would regularly send money home from their place of work, which could also be abroad, including from the United States, helping to modernize different geographic areas of China.

As social hierarchies became less strictly defined due in part to increased urbanization and higher levels of education, modernity gave people the opportunity to assert their individuality. Identities were formed by choice rather than dictated by birth.

Modernity provided a set of cultural conditions that stimulated new negotiations between imported and indigenous cultural and social practices. People practised hybrid styles of living, mixing the old and the new, the indigenous and the foreign. The adaptation of new ideas and objects made better sense when they were integrated with the familiar, both for practical purposes and for the sake of comfort. Some habits were difficult to change; for instance, people preferred sleeping on traditional hard bedding rather than the softer mattresses common in European cultures. Urban citizens'

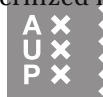
11 Elevators were available in urban Chinese cities in the early 20th century. For example, an elevator installed in a hotel in 1903 in Harbin city in China still operates. "Century-old elevator still operational in Harbin," CGTN, 13 March 2018, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/30416a4d796b7a6333566d54/index.html>.



participation in public life included looking at an advertisement or seeing a film, and in so doing they interacted with the materials of modernity itself. Simultaneously, the promises inherent in the imagery of advertising, such as, for example, an idealized version of the viewer, helped them navigate the new uncertainties in their environment, giving them a steer in the face of the new social and cultural conflicts generated by the hybridized modernity that was beginning to define the changing conditions of their everyday life.

The idea of the subjective dimension of seeing is important in understanding a new visual culture because the spectator is constantly trying to make sense of a shifting reality, which itself further intensifies the changes in visual culture. It would be naive to assume that spectators' experiences of modernity in Republican China were simply passive. Modernity brought the potential of visualizing the Chinese self through visual culture, making the transition from the traditional perception of the self to the modern realization of individuality even more complex. The desire to be part of modern society and to come to terms with a new sense of identity underpinned the new pictorial culture of that time. This new pictorial world, with people's everyday reality embodied in visual representations such as film, studio photography and advertisements, reflected their subjectivity through processing the newness and uncertainties associated with modern living. Modernity was in this context not only about transformation but also about stabilizing these changes in order to create new social spaces.

We identify something as modern because of its relationship with the technological advancements that brought about cultural and social changes specific to their time, with historically attributed meanings. Trading, the monetization of the economy, urbanization, the popularity of luxury goods, and the formation of new tastes were part of the determining factors for these new meanings. Objects became paramount in expressing people's social status. Imported furniture, for example, which became popular in the Republican era, signified an openness to the world, displaying cultural advancement, particularly in government institutions where modernized interiors were seen as important for receiving foreign dignitaries. Carpets, piano, cutlery, Western teapots and teacups were all part of the material presentation of a modern household. To complete the ensemble, Chinese antiques were displayed alongside photographs, advertisements, and new full-length mirrors. Successful merchants were keen to modernize their homes, especially after viewing photographs of other affluent businessmen and their families that were featured in local and foreign newspapers. These families spared no expense in furnishing their residences with luxurious convenient features: modernized interiors included the convenience of



showers and flush toilets, the comfort of sofas and radios on which to listen to musical programmes. The style of the American parlour became a desirable element of the domestic interior because its spatial design exemplified an orderly, hygienic, and civilized environment that expressed good taste, while phonographs brought more music and an extra touch of sophistication.

The abundance and circulation of new commodities transformed ways of living and also the symbolic meaning of objects. Indistinct boundaries between ordinary and luxury consumption led to a shifting of social signifiers that created a gradual loss of the traditional means of determining an individual or a family's social or class distinction. The popularity of consumption created a new culture of appearance—new ways of dressing represented the new system of values that emphasized display and performance as a dominant form of sociability. This theatricalization of the society and the individual came to embody a commercialization of culture where almost everything could be purchased. Men and women adorned themselves for instance with a great variety of jewellery designs crafted with different materials, ranging from precious stones, pearls, and coral. Women decorated their bodies with hairpins, earrings, bracelets, and rings. Imported jewels were popular in Shanghai and Guangzhou where one could find specialized shops offering a wide range of designs. Self-presentation was clearly important in asserting identity and social status in early twentieth-century China and visual representation coupled with consumption was instrumental in the cultural making of modernity.

Advertising in urban cities used modernist expressions to market commodities as both superseding old practices and as evolutionary vehicles for social progress. Material respectability became the key to modernity—acquiring products to improve health and hygiene, making household chores easier and contributing to the family's general comfort and happiness all became marks of a progressive lifestyle. After the Second World War (1939–1945), clocks, mirrors, photographs, bicycles, and radios became essentials in nearly every urban Chinese household. The rise of this new material culture even reached rural China where foreign products like mirrors, razors, and battery radios became commonplace, although a more substantial change in material culture was slower to take root. Amidst the intensified desire to purchase new products, particular ways of behaving that were perceived as honourable were highly valued and often subtly portrayed by elegant modern women in advertisements, which in turned embedded ideas in society of a respectable form of material modernity. Good manners, righteousness, honesty, and a sense of responsibility defined proper modern behaviour. Consumption was guided by the principles of



frugality, while shaped by social status and a consideration of age and rank. Respectable consumption and individual frugality became the means to mobilize the masses to spend for economic growth and to boost moral standards, creating a “frugal and ethical aesthetic of modernity.”¹²

Conspicuous consumption, indicative of desire and aspirations, encourages a self-fashioning that is an important characteristic of identity formation. Ideas of respectability were articulated through consuming with the intent of showing an individual's or a family's honourable status. This in turn was portrayed regularly through particular tropes displayed with images of women in advertisements and in the studio and press photographs of this period. Gentility was expressed through ideas of taste which were in turn conveyed through the display of modern, designed objects that offered comfort and convenience. This commercialization also produced a new form of femininity that focused on purchased products for the body, which created enormous social changes that situated women's visibility and people's individuality at the centre of modernization. Images of women have been a powerful presence in the making of modernity, and it was also predominantly women who were exposed to the selling techniques of advertisers and retailers.

Women now had access to the accoutrements of the modern, enabling them to assume a role in the visual regime. The correlation between commodity aesthetics and consumerist subjectivities created an interaction between imagery and spectators so that women were able to identify themselves as the subject when observing images of idealized women. Women from all walks of life, from the working class to the “elite,” used modes of self-presentation to mediate the dynamics of urban life, modern challenges, and cultural changes.

As modernity intensified the visual regime, it articulated women's visibility within it, which in turn meant that feminine subjectivity became increasingly staged within it. The conditions of modernity were articulated in particular visual genres, notably by the respectable but fashionable women seen in advertisements and periodicals. Through articulating a desirable lifestyle, the images used in advertising both deployed women, and aided female spectators in imagining their place in modernity. Women envisaged and projected themselves onto the fashionable confident models in the advertisement, affirming a new-found awareness of subjectivity. Women's visibility in public also became prominent through the mechanical reproduction of popular images of

12 Zanasi, “Frugal Modernity: Livelihood and Consumption in Republican China,” 406.

them that were generated by the new commodity or consumerist culture. These altered conditions of feminine visibility in modernity invited a new self-awareness in women that centred, and had an impact, on their own visual presentation, including self-apprehension in a mirror, venturing out in public or being photographed. Women became modern through performing their gendered identity within the modern visual rubric of everyday life. They were encouraged to articulate themselves as modern subjects by observing images with a sense of subjectivity. This was a dramatic historic shift in their ideas of self.

This mutability of female identity epitomized the complexity and conflicts of modernity. The French philosopher Louis Althusser's (1918–1990) notion of interpellation considers the process of internalization by individuals of social representations as a form of active engagement by the spectator.¹³ Hence, portrayals of women reaffirmed the mediated experience of images and commodities. The new feminine subjectivity emerged through consumption and production of the self as an image of a commodity, situating women as a key agent for modernity.

The phenomenon of consumerism is also closely associated with the rise of the urban middle class. The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002) refers to this new middle class as “new cultural intermediaries,” comparing them to artists and designers. New aesthetically aware ways of living demanded that people shape their own lives in ways that offered them visual enjoyment. The practical sensibilities of knowing what to buy, how to consume it, how to wear it, or how to include it in an ensemble with complementary commodities, required the effort needed to learn a new type of good taste.¹⁴ Bourdieu proposes that aesthetic judgements are divided between the pure aesthetic of the dominant elite class and the popular one of the working class. The dominant aesthetic constitutes various factors such as ideas of content, the immediacy of the experience, and a personal interest that informs the spectators' engagement with the objects. Aesthetics, judgements, and experiences must be socially and historically situated. The privileged social position achieved through a possession of economic capital keeps aesthetics from being a form of necessity. He asserts that the working class lacks economic capital; and so its taste is based on necessity and its cultural objects must offer value for money. They could only like what they

13 Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an investigation)”, 142–7, 166–76.

14 Tamari, *Rise of the Department Store and the Aestheticization of Everyday Life in Early 20th Century Japan*, 104.



could afford. The bourgeoisie's tastes, on the other hand, are based on luxury and the freedom enabled by economic and cultural capital. In this way, tastes distinguish different classes in society and this is further reinforced by his famed statement: "Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier."¹⁵ Images of fashionable women, as we will see in this book, offer "markers of class" whether they are portrayed in photographs or advertisements, they create aspirations in the viewer to gain the needed economic capital for gaining the featured cultural capital. Design is unique in that it can be easily disseminated through various styles in different price ranges. Even when a spectator cannot afford a particular desirable expensive design, she can purchase a look-alike and create a similar style that shows her expressing her taste for the latest trend. Advertisements play on this delicate balance between affordability and the expression of taste.

The experience of modernity depends on individual subjectivities and the context in which the experience takes place. The sense of novelty and excitement, conveyed through advertising, generated both fantasy and desire, while also representing ideas of modernity through different media that mutually condition one another. In this book, we see advertising deliver wondrous promises to promote consumption and self-awareness, photography articulating new visual representations of the self with modern technology, and the magic of cinematic experiences mediating representation and reality.

Design in Modern China

While this book does not examine specific issues in design development in early twentieth-century China, it is useful to provide a concise understanding of how design was regarded in this period. Modern design was shaped by social changes in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, particularly in economically developed cities that had large-scale manufacturing industries in China. In 1867, Fuzhou Navy School in Fuzhou started to offer engineering drawing courses.¹⁶ In 1903, Liangjiang Normal School in Nanjing applied concepts from the Japanese teachers' college curriculum in its own design education. By 1905, in cities like Nanjing, the Jesuits had founded seven schools that offered arts and crafts courses.¹⁷ The development

15 Rocamora, "Pierre Bourdieu—The Field of Fashion," 241, 242.

16 Kwok, *The Birth of Modern Design in China*, 17.

17 Chen, *History of Chinese Modern Art design*, 26.

of modern design in China was initialized by this craft and design based education.¹⁸ However, China struggled to transform from an agrarian society into a predominantly industrial country before World War I (1914–1918).¹⁹ Design and industrial production started to take shape in the nineteenth century in European culture while China had no independent modern industry until the 1950s.²⁰ Political turmoil and wars further delayed any significant development. The modern design paradigm accompanied by a Western industrial structure rapidly overtook traditional Chinese design practice, which consisted of technical skills and handicrafts with creative thinking.²¹

Historically, *gongyi* was regarded as the term in the Chinese context that was the equivalent to “design” in English. *Gongyi* refers to the skills (*gong*= “techniques and technology”) and art (*yi*= “aesthetic and philosophy”) of making crafts.²² With the early development of industrialization in the twentieth century, Chinese industries were rapidly impacted by Western industrial culture; which also redefined *gongyi*. The concept of modern design began to spread to China after the May Fourth Movement in 1919.²³ Art and design took on a new significance in economically developed urban cities where large-scale manufacturing industries thrived. For instance, Shanghai operated thousands of factories, most of them in textiles, printing, and cosmetics.²⁴

Large-scale manufacturing in China produced assembled products that were different from traditional handicraft goods in terms of both their industrial processing and the division of labour. It also meant that the design process, including skilled drawing by artisans, became essential and an important step in product development and manufacturing to present specifications for constructing a product before the actual manufacturing began.²⁵ The traditional design process known as *gongyi* was replaced by

18 The development of modern Chinese design can be defined into five phases: first, the introduction of the concept of design education (1842–95); second, the emergence of design professions in China (1896–1918); third, the rise of science and democracy (1919–27); fourth, modern design styles in China (1928–37); and fifth, new design direction (1937–49). Kwok, *The Birth of Modern Design in China*, 4.

19 Liu, “Revisiting Hanyeping Company (1889–1908),” 62–73.

20 Wang, “Chinese Modern Design: A Retrospective,” 49–78.

21 Chen, *History of Chinese modern art design*, 7.

22 Wong, “Design History and Study in East Asia,” 376.

23 Chen, *History of Chinese Modern Art Design*, 6.

24 For a comprehensive discussion on the development of large-scale manufacturing industries in China, refer to Dao, Zhang, *Industrial Design Book*.

25 Kwok, *The Birth of Modern Design in China*, 11.



modern terms, such as *zhuangshi yishu* (“decorative arts”), *sheji* (she= “to arrange”; ji= “to calculate”), *yijiang* (yi= “idea”; jiang= “craftsman”), and *tuan* (tu= “drawing”; an= “record”). The newly developed terms emphasized ideas and conceptual practice by artisans and the industrial division of the design process in line with large-scale manufacturing rather than handicrafts. The term *tuan* was most widely used in China to refer to the modern concept of design during the Republican era.²⁶ It referred to the structured drawing of objects with specified colours, shapes, and functions and was a term imported from Japan. In 1873, the Meiji Revolution was in full flow in Japan and as Japan opened itself up to the outside world, Japanese designers were able to take in, and were impressed by, innovative industrial products created by European companies in the Great Exhibition in Vienna in 1873. Nafu Sukejiro (1844–1919), one of the Japanese representatives in this exhibition, encountered the term design from Western culture and introduced the counterpart term *tuan* to Japan.²⁷ During the Republican era, many Chinese students who went to Japan to study art and design borrowed the term *tuan* from Japanese *kanji*, introducing it to China.

With the spread of the concept of *tuan* in China, a modern design profession developed in the urban centres. Ideas of modern design became widely familiar in port cities such as Shanghai and Tianjin.²⁸ Before 1912, there was little in the way of locally produced design. Most textile factories in China bought graphic patterns from Japanese factories.²⁹ The lack of local designs for manufacture was resolved as an increased number of Chinese students began studying in Japan, including Chen Zhifo (1896–1962) who specialized in graphic design and brought design knowledge back to China. Chen launched the first graphic design firm *Shangmei Tuan Guan* in Shanghai in 1923. In 1934, the first professional design organization *Zhongguo Gongshang Meishu Zuoji Xiehui* (“Commercial Artists Association”) was established in Shanghai. Its aim was to steer modern design in China beyond Western design paradigms and more towards tropes that reflected China’s

26 Wong, “Design History and Study in East Asia,” 375–95.

27 Chen, “The Influence of Japan on Modern Art and Design Education,” 10. The name Nafu Sukejiro (纳富介次郎) was derived from a Chinese translation. Chen states that Nafu Sukejiro, the pioneer of Japanese craft education, translated the English word design into Japanese *kanji* (图按, デザイン in Japanese, 图案 *tu an* in Chinese) when participating in the Vienna World’s Fair in 1873. Yuan, *Study on the Development Course of Chinese Art Design Education*, 2. Yuan mentioned that the word *tu an* in Japanese was created to be equivalent to the concept of modern design.

28 Pan, “History of Chinese Design Education,” 5–6.

29 Kwok, *The Birth of Modern Design in China*, 8.

own national identity.³⁰ Chinese designers had begun to define their own profession.

Throughout the early twentieth century, however, female designers were scarce in China due to the limited access to design education. As demand for talent in design professions such as advertising and packaging grew, many factories and enterprises adopted the method of mentoring to cultivate local design talent.³¹ Such a teaching tradition was not open to Chinese women because of the preference for sons over daughters when it came to education because men were regarded as the income-earners in the family. Women from privileged and open-minded families who studied overseas, however, played an important role in the development of the design profession in China. Lin Huiyin (1904–1955) for example was one of the earliest Western-trained modern architects in China. She was its first modern female architect and a notable architectural historian with distinguished literary talent and sensibility.³² After 1949, professional institutions became more widespread and female designers in China educated in institutes such as Luxun Art School went on to establish their careers in nationally-owned design firms, such as *Shanghai Meishu Sheji Gongsi*.³³ Female designers went on to achieve a great deal in design, which deserves a more in-depth research which is outside the scope of this book.

A summary of this book

This book offers a particular perspective on modernity and design through an analysis of the visual representation of women in Republican China. Examples of such representation are contextualized with key concepts and arguments from relevant references including studies on gender, identity, and visual culture to illustrate ideas, strengthen debates, and mediate ambivalence. As modern art historian T.J. Clarke has argued, the spectacle is never an image “mounted securely and finally in place; it is always an account of the world competing with others, and meeting the resistance of different, sometimes tenacious forms of social practice.”³⁴ A reconsideration of the images of women in the public realm has the potential to alter

30 Wong, “Design History and Study in East Asia,” 375–395.

31 Kwok, *The Birth of Modern Design in China*, 9.

32 Song, “The Aesthetic versus the Political,” 61, 94.

33 Lei, “Female Designers in Shanghai’s State-Run Design Company System (1950–1990),” 1–6.

34 Mathur, *India by Design: Colonial History and Cultural Display*, xxiv.

our understanding and approach to the presumed innocence of female representation, by examining the identity of women as a formal objects of visual inquiry and resituating it as one process by which social and subjective identities are formed. The selection of images in this book is based on the principle that the material article, be it a craft object, a modern design, or a portrait of a woman, is a marker of difference and cultural authenticity. Visits to archives in Hong Kong, a research trip to the United Kingdom, and a research fellowship in the United States helped locate images in databases and offered me access to view many of these images in person. Constructive examples from reliable collections have been instrumental in elucidating the discussion throughout the text.

The present chapter provides the context for this study and sets up parameters for the exploration of the main issues this book engages with, including the idea of the modern woman, modernity, consumption, visual culture, and design in China in the Republican era (1912–1949). My analysis is concerned particularly with life in thriving urban centres like Shanghai. This chapter introduces the overall structure of the content, methodological and empirical perspectives, and research objectives that are relevant in the book.

Chapter 2 focuses on how families portrayed their social status through imagery prior to commercially driven representations of lifestyle. This includes images depicting household designs, lifestyles, and women in painting albums and export paintings. Traditional portrayals of women, furniture, and domestic interiors were about displaying and reinforcing the social status of a family and of social and familial order. This chapter also examines the visual representations of street scenes and shop fronts created for European viewers. In these paintings, the imagery focuses on observing an increasingly hybridized culture including the presence of foreigners who played a significant part in the treaty ports and urban centres, and whose presence altered the cityscape and social interactions of that time. In pre-Republican traditional society, ideas of social status and a cultured persona were conveyed visually in paintings through indicators of education, literacy and an appreciation of craftsmanship. This latter indicator was often communicated through a family's furniture and representations of pieces of furniture often appear in visual depictions. Furniture was an important part of daily life particularly for women who spent most of their lives in the domestic environment. Families navigated their positions in society and women negotiated their positions within the family in accordance with Confucian doctrines and cultural pursuits. This included acquiring products of good craftsmanship and engaging (and being seen to engage)



in literary activities, rather than material consumer products. Women were instrumentalized in imagery to demonstrate the cultivation and social standing of a family (see the richly decorated bed chamber in Figure 5 in Chapter 2). They were essentially a form of cultural capital for their families and particular characteristics such as frugality and participating in appropriate activities, all pointed to in the visual representations of them during that era, enhanced their worth.

Chapters 3 and 4 explore the emergence of modernity which accompanied the commercialization and technological advances driven from overseas and a widely circulated print media that was part of the change associated with modernity. All these combined to disseminate ideas and replace traditional modes of negotiating social standing. Selected numbers of traditional *meiren hua* (“paintings of beauty”) are examined in some detail at the start of Chapter 3 to provide a context for the definition and representation of womanhood in China prior to the Republican era. Compositional details in these paintings enhanced the understanding of women’s cultural and social status. These elements were transformed and used in modern advertising posters to create a continuity of visual imagery for consumers and to use familiar formats for generating interest in the featured new designs and advertised products. As modernity was ushered into China, it became possible to achieve, or to aspire to, social mobility through consumption. Commodities rather than Confucian doctrine or cultural pursuits became important signifiers of social standing. Imagery in the public realm shifted towards creating aspirations that, far from reinforcing a social order, changed it unintentionally. This new imagery that accompanied the dawn of modernity in China allowed room for fantasy, it created envy, aspirations, and new possibilities for social mobility. Viewers were no longer passive receivers of imagery—representation had acquired a new purpose, emphasizing the capacity of images to encourage viewers to contemplate their own social positions and behaviours. Modern designs and the portrayal of confident women in the compositions of such posters reinforced the correlation between female identity and design, establishing a tasteful image of modernity for the Chinese viewer.

Tradition was instrumentalized in the service of transforming China to modern modes of living in the Republican era. Traditional furniture, *meiren hua*, visual motifs, and traditional lifestyles were used to this end by advertisers and the wider print media. Women, as symbols of tradition, were equally instrumentalized for this purpose. In this sense they served as objects in advertising. Women continued to perform as cultural capital for their families but this now took a different form. Their adaptation to



modern life and their acquisition of modern commodities and adoption of new ways of grooming helped propel the male heads of their nuclear families ahead in higher social circles and on to successful career paths. Women became the driving force for the social mobility of the family, rather than just an emblem of the family's social standing as they had been in the past (further discussed in Chapter 5). Through this change, women gained more agency in society, even as they conformed to new social standards on how they ought to behave.

While the home became a critical route through which modernity embedded itself in China, women conversely acquired space in the public realm through this process. They left domesticity and entered into social spaces as consumers of newly available foreign products for these homes, in order to facilitate modern lifestyles for their families. This made women the subjects for, as well as the objects in, advertising. This new subjectivity, in turn had an impact on both their awareness of self and their roles and identity in their family and in society. Female representation became an emblem of modernity and of modern identity formation.

This new sense of self-awareness materialized in studio photography, which is further examined in Chapter 5. Studios flourished as a result of this new commercially driven visual proliferation and became an expression of new social norms that were increasingly being adopted. Photography was often accompanied by objects of consumption, which participated in the formation of new identities. The dissemination of this sort of photography further advanced changes in social norms. Photographic portraits strengthened the sitters' subjectivity as they took an active role in how they wished to be portrayed through adopting particular postures and selecting the relevant props and backdrops. In both photography and advertising there was more possibility for the imagination or for fantasy at the individual level—of being able to fashion a new sense of self and imagining a life with a better social standing—and at the societal level of living as a citizen of a technologically advanced society. Studio photography enhanced individuality and affirmed social identity and relations in the modernization of the visual.

This possibility for fantasy and imagining did not exist in images that were created in the pre-Republican era. Just as the imagery around advertising the new goods on offer in shops were a hybrid blend of foreign and Chinese motifs and visual traditions, foreign commodities became hybridized by Chinese consumers for consumption in ways that matched Chinese cultural norms. This hybridization in both imagery and usage can also be interpreted as a form of cultural resistance by tradition to Westernization.



The epilogue, Chapter 6, summarizes the main arguments discussed in the preceding chapters that examine the roles modern women played in introducing modern designs and lifestyles to Chinese culture. It suggests that tradition was preserved through the hybridized usage and representation of foreign commodities in ways that appealed to and suited Chinese consumers. The same can be said of female identity and the images that emanated from the cultural and social changes of that time. Women could not live and behave as their ancestors had done and they had to transform and adapt to modern ways of living, which in turn redefined their identities and social roles.