

# *Visual Analysis of Female Images in Advertisements*

## *--Taking Advertisements in the Republic of China as Examples*

Shangxuan Zhang<sup>1,a,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Arts & Humanities, King's College London, London, United Kingdom

a. K22038334@kcl.ac.uk

\*corresponding author

**Abstract:** The period of the Republic of China is an important period in Chinese history. It started from the 1911 Revolution when the Republic of China was established and continued until the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949. During this period, although there were some efforts to improve the status of women, the status of women was not fully improved and was still limited by many traditional concepts and social structures. In the early years of the Republic of China, advertising flourished in China. At that time many advertisements used images of women Especially, when female images appear in some commercial advertising, they may contain some stereotypes of women. In addition, the female characters in these advertisements will subtly shape or define women in society. This article will collect typical commercial advertisements of the Republic of China that contain female images in China and interpret these advertisements from two levels composition and image expression. Moreover, this paper finds that when advertisements were popular in the Republic of China, the image of women in domestic advertisements have a positive image of independent women and a negative image of women as a vulnerable group appeared. The research on the images of women in the advertisements of the Republic of China is conducive to a comprehensive exploration of the factors that caused the images of Chinese women in society during this period and the impact of these images of women on society.

**Keywords:** feminism, Republic of China, female image

## 1. Introduction

Since the 1980s, under the call of women's studies and gender studies, independent female images have begun to enter the public eye, and women are no longer accessories of men [1]. With the popularization of education and the development of the era, women's gender awareness is enhanced, and the independent new women characters improve their social status gradually so that they are gradually equal to men. The positioning of female images in traditional advertisements, such as gentleness, conservativeness, husband and child, etc., these default femininities are also slowly broken. Feminism began to rise, and the image of women was maintained. Women have gained a greater impact in thought, which has stimulated women's awareness of maintaining feminism and made women more self-improving.

Studying the image of women in the period of the Republic of China helps us understand the root of gender inequality and the process of historical evolution. Beyond this, the depiction of female figures in culture and art reflected the aesthetics and social relations between men and women of the time. Therefore, this research understands how the advertising format of the time influenced and shaped society's perception of women. Many scholars have conducted in-depth research on the images of women printed on the monthly cards and newspapers during the Republic of China period, and the content has expanded to the fields of feminism and the women's liberation movement. Scholars Yongliang Liu and Liping Wang studied the relationship between female images and consumption from an economic point of view and concluded that during the period of the Republic of China, the shaping of female images in advertisements was very important to drive mass consumption [2]. In addition, many studies have focused on the image of "modern" women in the Republic of China. However, not all the female images presented in the advertisements during the Republic of China were fashionable, and some advertisements still did not get rid of the feudal society's image constraints on women.

Therefore, this article will discuss the types of female images in the advertisements of the Republic of China, and divide the female images of the Republic of China into three parts (completely conservative feudalism, not completely free from the influence of feudal society, and more independent women in the new era) for research.

## **2. Female Image and Social Relations**

The image of women and social relations is a complex topic involving gender, culture, social structure, and historical traditions. Women's images and social relationships may vary greatly in different social and cultural contexts, but in general, women's images and their status in society have always been issues that have received widespread attention.

In many societies, women are given specific gender roles and social expectations, and they are usually more required than men to take care of the family, take care of children, and pass on cultural responsibilities [3]. These expectations may limit women's opportunities in education, employment, and politics, resulting in their lower status in society compared to men. And society's expectations and standards for women may affect their self-judgment and identification. Women may face social and family pressure, and they may change their appearance and behavior because of these pressures, making themselves more in line with the public's definition of a "good woman". Although the advertisements in the period of the Republic of China were already at a fork in the road, they did not completely remove the image of women in the feudal era.

### **2.1. The Embodiment of Female Image Characteristics in the Traditional Society**

In traditional Chinese society, women are a bound and restricted group. Ancient China was a patriarchal society in which men had absolute majority dominance, and women's social status was relatively low. In ancient China, men could show their faces in business and politics, but women, were required to abide by the "Three Obediences and Four Virtues" [3]. Since the development process of our country is dominated by a patrilineal society, the status and role of men in society are significantly higher than that of women [4], but society has far more requirements for women than men. Therefore, under the background and era of traditional Chinese feudal culture, the image characteristics of women are obviously inferior to men in terms of family status. And they usually play the role of servants in society and family, so they are easy to be stared at by men.

From the perspective of family status, in traditional social concepts, women are generally expected to show the qualities of gentleness, kindness, consideration, and diligence [5]. This expectation may stem from the understanding of women's caregiving roles in the family and the

community, because women's roles in society are mainly wives, mothers, daughters, etc. As wives, they need to care for their husbands; as mothers, they need to raise offspring; daughters, they need to support their parents. All three roles are very important to family identities, so their qualities are often considered important factors in maintaining family stability.

Some advertisements during the Republic of China solidified the role of women can be seen in figure 1.



Figure 1: Hardman cigarettes and platinum dragon cigarettes advertisement [6].

These two cigarette advertisements show consumers a typical image of a good wife and mother in ancient China: a well-groomed wife contributes to the family without complaint. The woman in the first picture is knitting a sweater, and the woman in the second picture is respectfully delivering a cigarette to her husband. But looking back at the male characters in these two advertisements, one is playing with the child, and the other is sitting on the sofa with his legs up and reading the newspaper. They are all relaxed and relaxed, very comfortable. And they enjoy the services of their wives with peace of mind, which fully reflects their status and style as the heads of the family.

## 2.2. The Incomplete Improvement of Women's Status in the Republic of China

During the period of the Republic of China, although the advancement of women's status was slow, some positive changes and efforts took place, which laid the foundation for women to fight for equal rights and social status.

Some female images shown in some advertisements during the Republic of China reflect this point of view.



Figure 2: Tongfeng printing and dyeing company clothing advertisement [6].

The advertisement in figure 2 is for women's clothing. The slogan on the right side of the picture is "An able woman can do well both at home and out of home." This Chinese proverb is used to describe the hostess of a family. In feudal society, women in the family were bound by traditional morality, and they could only work in the kitchen and they had to do it well, especially in cooking, which was called the kitchen. However, they cannot meet guests in the hall. But after the liberation of the mind, many women broke through the constraints and came to the diplomatic ranks to receive guests. This is called entering the hall. Therefore, although the audience of this advertisement is women, it also constrains and defines their image, and believes that the best state of women is that they are very skilled in social and cooking. Judging from the content of the picture, the illustration in the first circle from top to bottom shows a woman wearing clothes of this brand and receiving respect and good treatment. It is undeniable that this image represents the advancement of women, because women can also appear in advertisements as served roles. However, the woman in the second picture is wearing new-style clothes and cooking in the kitchen with a beautiful bun, reincarnating the role of a server and asking for money for her husband and children, as if this can be defined as a good woman. So, the undeniable part of this picture is that it does realize that women's roles in society are not just serving others, but it also does not exactly help women to break out of fixed identities, women are still largely It is required to do a good job in receiving guests and taking care of the family.

In the concept of feudal society, women are often under the focus of men's gaze, and they are easily objectified and sexualized. The male gaze is when men put themselves in a dominant position when looking at everything, while women are usually watched by men [7]. As a result, the value of women is often limited to physical appearance and sexual attractiveness, rather than being seen as individuals with independent minds and abilities. In addition, there is a gendered power structure in society, and there are obvious differences in power between men and women: women usually play the role of submissive, and men play the dominant role [8]. This power structure enables men to



place women under their gaze. Some advertisements of the Republic of China reflect this point. Another advertisement can be seen in figure 3.



Figure 3: Commemorative cigarettes advertisement [9].

This is a cigarette advertisement. Judging from the picture in the ad, although women can smoke as well as men, the positions of the two in the picture are still not equal. The woman in the painting is dressed brightly, with exquisite hairstyle and makeup. She may be sitting with her body tilted, looking up at the man on the right. The man is wearing a suit, approaching the woman in a standing posture, with a cigarette in his mouth, and his eyes and demeanor are slightly contemptuous. The composition of the whole picture is that men are tall and women are low, and women seem to be trying to win the favor of men. Therefore, although the men are smoking the same brand of cigarettes in the painting, their status is still lower than that of men, and women are placed under the gaze of men. In addition, the content of the slogan next to the woman on the lower left of the picture is: “You love to smoke, and I love to smoke.” This sentence is described in a female tone. Therefore, the idea conveyed by the overall advertisement may be male-dominated.

Although the promotion of women’s status during the Republic of China was far from achieving complete equality, the efforts during this period laid the foundation for subsequent social reform and development. After the founding of the People’s Republic of China, the advancement of women’s status continued and more progress was made.

In general, the evolution of women’s images and social relationships is influenced by many factors, such as cultural traditions and moral concepts, and so on. Although women lost some power and status in the Republic of China, these rights and status are still not comparable to men. To guarantee women’s rights and social status, promoting gender equality and eliminating gender discrimination are key steps toward a more inclusive and just society.

### 2.3. The New Female Image in the Republic of China

The industrial revolution not only brought great development of productive forces but also promoted social progress, such as the independence of women and the rise of feminism [10]. With the economic independence of women and the improvement of their economic status, women's status in society has gradually changed from a vassal of men to an independent and conscious group. Especially since the 1950s, in a relatively peaceful environment, along with economic development and social progress, women's social status has been redefined. The most obvious change reflected in advertisements is that women generally appear in all kinds of advertisements, not limited to family life and beauty makeup, but have begun to penetrate into areas where only men were engaged in or were the main consumer groups in the past. The industry boundaries caused by gender have been greatly diluted in advertisements, and women appear in front of the public with images of wisdom, knowledge, and self-confidence in advertisements.

The following is an advertisement for the Republic of China. It can be seen in figure 4.



Figure 4: Advertisement for two sisters playing golf together [6].

The advertisement in the picture shows two women playing golf. In traditional society, most entertainment venues only allow men to enter, and the types of entertainment activities for women are very limited because Chinese women are generally forbidden to show their faces [11]. However, in this ad, two women dressed in cheongsams from the Republic of China appeared decently in entertainment venues. The patterns of their clothes look very delicate and fashionable, and the colors of the clothes are very bright, but not tacky. From this, it can see that during the period of the Republic of China, women began to pay attention to the management of personal image, and the beauty of women has also become an important part of social culture, which influenced popular culture at that time. Other than that, they were smiling and had a very natural look on their faces. It can be seen in figure 5. They hold golf clubs gently in their hands, showing their confidence and dignity, and it can be seen that it is not the first time for them to play golf. It can be seen from this

that society's attitude towards women's participation in recreational activities is gradually changing, and the status of women has been significantly improved.

Therefore, compared with traditional social concepts, the image of women in the Republic of China also showed a lot of changes. It can be said that the period of the Republic of China was very critical in the development of Chinese women, and the image and status of women have also been greatly improved.



Figure 5: Indanthrene-dyed cloth advertisement [6].

The woman on the left in this advertisement is wearing a new style of cheongsam, which is very delicate. The woman on the right is even wearing Western-style clothing with a tie and short hair that reaches the ears. This proves that many women's minds are no longer bound, and society has begun to allow women to have multiple appearances, not just to wear skirts and long hair. In addition, they have books in their hands. This means that women began to receive knowledge during the period of the Republic of China. Since Western culture was introduced into China, a group of educators and thinkers began to advocate the importance of knowledge and education. Under the influence of this trend of thought, women also began to vigorously improve their cultural quality, becoming an indispensable existence in social and cultural life. Some women also take an active part in the fields of education, science, literature, and art. This also means that they are no longer limited to traditional housework and marriage, have independent thinking and opinions on life, and show self-confidence and firm personality.

### 3. The Number of “Beauty Advertisements” Increased During the Republic of China

#### 3.1. Reasons for the Increase in “Beauty Advertisements”

During the period of the Republic of China, the reasons for the increase of “beauty advertisements” involved many factors such as history, society, culture, and business.

First of all, after the Opium War, China's national door was opened by the West. China's traditional rural civilization has received a strong impact from Western culture. Shanghai, Guangzhou, and other coastal open ports have begun to lead China's transformation from traditional rural culture to modern urban culture.

In terms of commerce, with the penetration of capitalism and the rise of the commodity economy, the advertising industry in modern China is particularly important in the fierce market competition.

The “beauty advertisement” in the period of the Republic of China was a product of China’s social transformation, and the commercial atmosphere it created could stimulate people’s desire for consumption. The period of the Republic of China was the initial stage of the development of commercial advertising in China, and many companies began to adopt advertising methods to promote products and attract consumers. Various media began to rise, such as newspapers, magazines, posters, etc., and these media became channels for advertising communication. The image of beauty advertisements is more likely to attract attention in these media, which helps to increase the exposure rate and communication effect of advertisements [12]. Moreover, due to the improvement of women’s status, some women began to participate in social and economic activities and actively participated in the workplace and business fields [12]. The appearance of these women may make advertisers regard women as potential buyers and consumers, thus using “beauty advertisements” as a means to attract women’s purchasing power [12].

In addition, during the period of the Republic of China, the society’s aesthetic concept of women gradually changed. The traditional feudal concept gradually weakened. Affected by the Opium War mentioned above, Western culture began to infiltrate, so society has different views on the presentation of female beauty. Some advertisers may believe that “beauty advertisements” are more in line with modern aesthetic standards and can attract more target audiences.

Finally, the female images portrayed in the “beauty advertisements” during the Republic of China may also involve issues of sexism and objectification of women to a certain extent. From today’s perspective, society needs to look at these ads critically and advocate for gender equality and respectful images of women in advertising and media.

### **3.2. The Impact of the Increase in “Beauty Advertisements”**

The period of the Republic of China was a critical period when Chinese women began to liberate themselves. The increase in “beauty advertisements” had a variety of influences on society at that time.

First of all, these advertisements with different images of women have aroused society’s reflection on the images of women. Some intellectuals and social groups may begin to criticize and reflect on female gender stereotypes and sexism in advertisements. This kind of reflection may have pushed Chinese society at that time to pay more attention to the topics of gender equality and women’s rights. At the same time, these advertisements also to a certain extent changed women’s recognition of their own value and social role. They may begin to realize that they are more than mothers, wives, and daughters. They can also have their own hobbies and carry out their favorite recreational activities. This time, they gradually broke their fixed understanding of their social roles. Therefore, the increase in “beauty advertisements” means that women are beginning to be valued, and the social status of Chinese women has been partially improved.

But the emergence of these “beauty advertisements” also has some negative effects. They reinforce gender roles and body ideas. Many “beauty ads” tend to present women as objectified objects, using women merely as tools to attract attention and sell products. Emphasizing their appearance and physical attractiveness rather than their individual talents and abilities. This may reinforce the social perception of Stereotypes of gender roles and body perceptions have a negative impact on sexism. And in terms of commercial culture, “beauty advertisements” are often aimed at attracting attention, associating products with attractiveness. This may contribute to consumer culture and commodity ism, causing some people to be more influenced by the appearance and superficial characteristics when purchasing goods than real product quality or actual needs.



#### 4. Conclusion

All in all, although the images of women in the advertisements of the Republic of China were not completely open, they still made great contributions to helping Chinese women get rid of the shackles of feudal society and won more rights and interests for women oppressed by Chinese feudal society. Space for self-development.

Through these “beauty advertisements”, these brands are conveying to the public that their products are fashionable enough and high-end enough. It can be seen that the image of urban women occupied the vast majority during the period of the Republic of China. They are not only a remarkable symbol of bringing society into a new trend but also mean that the rights and status of Chinese women have begun to be valued.

Although it is difficult for feudal ideology to be completely liberated in the course of an era, as long as someone continues to pay attention to the unequal treatment women receive in society, women will gradually gain a higher status. The emergence and development of “beauty advertisements” in the Republic of China also helped women to break free from the shackles of traditional Chinese feudal culture.

#### References

- [1] Liming Z. (2007). *The woman is not The Moon*. Zhengzhou University.
- [2] *Female Image Consumption and Material Aesthetics in Visual Art in the Republic of China*. *Art Exploration*, 28, 04, 77-79+94.
- [3] Zimin T. (2019) *Traditional Chinese Women's Moral Views and Contemporary Views*. Xinjiang Normal University.
- [4] Honghui M. (2016). *Interpretation of women's role orientation from the perspective of traditional culture*. *Modern Communication*, 423, 01, 16-18.
- [5] Haitao H., Kai Z. (2016) *Looking back on the three ideal female personality models in traditional Chinese culture*. *Journal of Chengdu University of Technology (Social Science Edition)*, 24, 03, 34-39.
- [6] Wangshi.B. (2023). *There are so many female protagonists in the advertisements of the Republic of China: good wives and good mothers, entertainment and communication, everything*. <https://m.163.com/dy/article/HT002ISH05561H12.html>
- [7] Goldin, D. (2022). *A Male Glance at the 'Male Gaze'*. *Psychoanalytic Inquiry*, 42, 7, 601–610.
- [8] Hui H. (2009) *Power discourse and gender roles*. Zhejiang University.
- [9] Puxiang S. (2018). *More provocative than Victoria's Secret posters from the Republic of China*. [https://www.sohu.com/a/218106238\\_100723](https://www.sohu.com/a/218106238_100723)
- [10] Yangyang L. (2019) *On Feminism and Its Development Trend under the Background of the Industrial Revolution*. Yan'an University.
- [11] Juan Y. (2011). *Imprisonment and Transcendence in Chinese Traditional Women's Folklore*. *Literary Life: Late Issue* 11, 2.
- [12] Aijuan T, Yanheng G. (2013) *The initial development of Chinese posters and those beautiful models*. *Journal of Jiamusi Institute of Education*, 04, 57-58.