

“Power Femininity” and Popular Women’s Magazines in China

EVA CHEN

National Chengchi University, Taiwan

Western women’s glossy magazines (“glossies”) have made increasing inroads in the Chinese market and advocate a “power femininity,” which celebrates women’s assertive individualism and power as consumerist agency. While this power femininity has global neoliberal resonances, it also taps into the unique postsocialist Chinese context, where the liberation of individual desires, including the material and the sexual, is linked with a strongly felt need to undo a past socialist wrong that repressed people and deprived them of what should be an inalienable human right. This concept departs from the caregiving, self-sacrificial, and family-oriented “natural femininity” promoted in local women’s magazines in terms of aspiration, assertiveness, and a nativist-versus-international divide, yet ultimately both the Western and local women’s magazines are united by a shared stress on the need to cultivate a distinct Chineseness in the feminine ideal and to position women’s magazines as an integral part of the Chinese nationalist project of modernization and progress.

Keywords: Chinese femininity, Chineseness, neoliberalism, women’s magazines

Contemporary women’s magazines in China are no longer politicized Party tools of the socialist era and instead are market driven and highly popular among women from all walks of life. Since China’s 2001 accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO), Western women’s glossies like *Elle*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Vogue*, *Marie Clair*, and *Bazaar* have made increasing inroads in the Chinese market and shaken up the women’s magazine industry in almost everything from marketing and advertising to magazine format and contents.¹ Though underselling the cheap local women’s titles, the Western glossies take up a lion’s share

Eva Chen: evachen@nccu.edu.tw

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¹ This study focuses on Western magazines and not on Japanese and Korean magazines, which are also popular in China. The methodology used is that of content analysis. *Cosmopolitan China* and *Vogue China* were chosen for their large circulation and advertising revenue, while *Modern Family* was used to represent the local titles. Four issues of each magazine from 2012 and 2013 were chosen for relevancy to the topics discussed here. Note that though more local fashion and beauty magazines are starting to appear, the market is still dominated by Western glossies, while bestselling local titles remain story heavy and use few visual elements or ads (see Frith & Feng, 2009, p. 166). Finally, the inaugural issues of *Women’s Studies Paper* (1898) and *Ladies’ Journal* (1915), as well as two 1958 issues of *Women of China*,

of advertising revenue. *Cosmopolitan China* alone, for instance, claimed a 5% share of total magazine advertising expenditure in China in 2007 (Feng & Frith, 2008, p. 6). These expensive, ad-packed, hyper-visual glossies not only look different from the story-based local titles, they also advocate a "power femininity," which celebrates women's assertive individualism, their power as consumerist agency, and a glamorous, increasingly globalized lifestyle.² Power femininity is a new concept in China and departs from the caregiving, self-sacrificial, and family-oriented "natural femininity" promoted as the feminine norm in local women's magazines. This article argues that while this power femininity reflects the working of an accelerating global, neoliberal commodity culture and its cultivation of a new type of female subject, who finds empowerment and freedom in material success and conspicuous consumption, it also taps into the unique postsocialist Chinese context, where the liberation of individual desires, including the material and the sexual, is linked with a strongly felt need to undo a past socialist wrong that repressed and shackled people and deprived them of what should be an inalienable human right. This adds complexity to criticism, as this neoliberal-inflected power femininity now converges in the postsocialist Chinese context with a long-felt need to restore and liberate the natural "free" human self. This article also argues that though this power femininity is often constructed to differ from natural femininity in terms of aspiration, assertiveness and a nativist-versus-international divide, ultimately both the Western and local women's magazines in China are united by a shared stress on the need to cultivate a distinct Chineseness in the feminine ideal and to position women's magazines as an integral part of the Chinese nationalist project of modernization and progress.

Femininity and Chinese Women's Magazines

Women's magazines, with their emphasis on seemingly inconsequential topics such as beauty, love, and the pleasures of domesticity, are complex sites of polysemic meanings. While serving the ideological function of instigating normative femininity and interpellating women to acquiesce in the patriarchal status quo, they also present an image of femininity as unstable and heterogeneous. Such a femininity is both assumed as given and inherent and at the same time seen as still to be achieved and needing to be constantly worked on (Gough-Yates, 2003, p. 2). In the Chinese scene, this Western idea of femininity as an essentialized gender identity was introduced almost at the same time as the first women's magazine, in the late 19th century and early 20th century. This was a time when national humiliations at the hands of imperial powers drove many elite Chinese to emulate Western ideas and distance themselves from the Confucian patrilineal heritage. The idea of woman (*nüxing*) as based, not on Confucian kinship roles, but on physiology, and couched in the rhetoric of Western sex and eugenics theory, was a new concept propagated among elite circles. This concept imagined a link between social or racial evolution and women's liberation as a free heterosexual person (Barlow, 2004, p. 64). Modernization for China overlapped with the emancipation of the individual from Confucian kinship roles (Tsai, 2010, p. 41), and

the premier magazine published by the All China Women's Federation, were also examined for background information.

² "Agency" and "empowerment" are words constantly used in these Western glossies and their beauty and fashion ads. This will be discussed further later in the article. The term "power femininity" was first used by Michelle M. Lazar in her 2006 study on Singapore beauty ads, "Discover the Power of Femininity!"

women's liberation from traditional subjugation was a particularly powerful symbol for Chinese national rejuvenation.

In 1898, the first women's magazine, *Women's Studies Paper* (Figure 1), was founded in Shanghai by a small group of upper-class women who had received a modern, Western-style education, with the aim of encouraging education and abolishing foot binding among Chinese women (Fang, 2011).



Figure 1. Women's Studies Paper, 1898 (inaugural issue).

Other, more commercially oriented magazines followed in the next 30 years, mostly in Shanghai, Beijing, and the larger coastal cities with Western concessions. These included *Ladies' Journal* (1915–1932) (Figure 2) and *Linglong* (1931–1937), both based in Shanghai, which provided general knowledge as well as entertainment and homemaking tips to a small but burgeoning urban female readership. This readership was addressed as modern, educated, and open to a Westernized lifestyle but also retaining the virtues of a caregiving, family-oriented Chinese woman (Li, 1915, p. 11; Wang, 2011, p. 245).³ These early women's magazines constructed an image of the modern Chinese woman as an essentialized female subject, who was, however, not celebrated on her own merit but more as a discursive trope for a nationalist project of modernization. At the same time she was viewed primarily as the binarized other of a Westernized, masculinist human self that needed to be cultivated to "upend" Confucian kinship categories (Barlow, 1994, p. 266).

³ Here the term *family-oriented* refers to a modern, Westernized idea of *jiating*, a contemporary nuclear domestic unit formed in part as a reaction to the quite different Confucian *jia*, a patrilineal family of kin (see Barlow, 1994, p. 278, n. 1). In this sense, women's modern education and family roles in *jiating* are complementary and part of a reform movement working toward modernization.



Figure 2. The Ladies' Journal, 1915, no. 1.

Because this idea of femininity originates in a Western humanist tradition of essentialized human nature and in a Victorian sexual binary where femininity is only stressed as the inferior other of the masculine norm, in the socialist era it was criticized as bourgeois. When Maoist state socialism swept into power in 1949, a new statist concept of woman (*funü*) based, not on sexual difference but on collectivist public roles, was promoted, along with other statist categories like the worker and the proletariat. Women's magazines became political organs affiliated with the Communist Party and exclusively published by the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF). These showcased the state's political and social policies of gender parity, and they advanced a collectivist, socialist femininity that erased all signs of sexual difference. The typical woman was the hard-working, androgynous worker who pledged allegiance to the Party over the family (Evans, 1997, p. 2). The January 1958 issue of *Women of China* (*Zhongguo Funü*) (Figure 3), for instance, reports how a politically minded peasant girl contributes more than her share of crops to the collective commune by scrimping on her own food ("Women Doing Their Share for Socialism," 1958) and how a textile worker reports to the Party her fiancé's "bourgeois" act of buying clothes from Shanghai to sell at a higher price in the countryside ("A Couple Just Engaged," 1958).



Figure 3. Women of China, 1958, no. 13, and 1958, no. 14

It is against this background that the postsocialist call for a return to natural femininity is to be understood, because socialist femininity was criticized as distorting a "natural" and gendered human self and its many emotions, desires, and individual needs. In literary and social discourses written since the market reforms of the 1980s, a refeminized, emotive woman recurred as a favorite trope for celebrating emotion and an unshackled human nature, as women were linked with irrationality and irrepressible nature (Barlow, 1994, p. 277). In women's magazines, a similar image of the highly feminine, private, emotionally caring, and family-oriented woman predominated, pointing to a marked shift away from politics toward the private area of family and marriage and away from a public-spirited, androgynous socialist femininity to the traditional caring, family-oriented femininity. Johansson quoted a discussion in the pages of *Women of China* in 1991 and 1992 on the topic of what constituted an ideal modern Chinese woman. While reader responses varied, there was an overwhelming shared aversion to the "manlike," unfeminine, "strong woman," who was blamed as a legacy from the socialist era, a woman whose devotion to work had made her forget "she is first a woman, a wife and a mother" (as cited in Johansson, 2001, p. 107). New magazines that cropped up in this period adopted titles like *Family (Jiating)* (since 1982), *Bosom Friend (Zhiyin)* (since 1985), and *Modern Family (Xiandai Jiating)* (since 1985; Figure 4) to reflect the new focus on family and private emotion. They were packed with tear-jerking stories about ordinary women going through extraordinary trials and tribulations in family and marriage, who ultimately triumphed because of their loving patience and self-sacrifice.

This complex postsocialist gender scene in China would make criticism difficult and even legitimizes to some extent the return of sexist gender categories and the blatant commodification of a refeminized, resexualized woman in mass media and a burgeoning commodity culture, because this "natural" femininity as gendered difference is also inextricably linked with a postsocialist desire to undo a perceived socialist wrong of "unnatural" distortion and repression, a desire to reinstitute a "natural"

human nature that would relaunch China into a globalized modernity of shared universal values. The evolution of the idea of femininity and its construction in women's magazines in China thus claims a unique dimension that adds complexity to criticism.



Figure 4. Modern Family, 2013, no. 3.

Power Femininity and Consumerist Agency

When the Western women's glossies entered the Chinese market in the last years of the 20th century, further complications were introduced with their new brand of power femininity. *Elle China* was the first to publish a Chinese version in 1988, followed by *Cosmopolitan China* in 1993 (Figure 5), but both experienced initial problems over "regulatory, operational, distribution and network restrictions" (Chang, p 2011, para. 18). *Elle China* was even assigned an employee from the Communist Party to sit in its editorial room.



Figure 5. Cosmopolitan China, 2012, no. 8.

It was in the first decade of the 21st century, after the WTO liberalization, that international glossies really took off. *Harper's Bazaar China* (since 2001), *Marie Claire* (since 2002), *Vogue China* (since 2005), and a host of other major Western and Japanese women's magazines were founded in Beijing and Shanghai, almost all operating through joint adventures or licensing agreements (Feng & Frith, 2008, p. 1). Though costing up to 20 RMB a copy, six times the cover price of the local women's titles, *Cosmopolitan China* and *Elle China* reached a circulation of over 500,000 copies each in 2006, one-fifth of the top-selling local title *Family*. In 2013, the numbers increased exponentially when *Vogue China* sold 1.7 million copies and *Cosmopolitan China* sold 9.5 million copies, as compared with *Family's* 3.6 million.⁴ The rapid expansion of Western glossies has particularly benefited from two things—the explosive growth of luxury consumption in China, and the magazines' symbiotic relationship with global luxury companies, which still choose to advertise mainly in Western glossies. Luxury consumption in China rose from US\$3 billion in 2001 to US\$10.7 billion in 2011 ("World's Luxury," 2012), and advertising in Western glossies

⁴These figures are posted in http://www.allchina.cn/magazine/magazine_default.html. *Bosom Friend's* official website claims a current circulation of over 6 million ("About *Bosom Friend*," 2013). *Family's* website contains no circulation number but one 2008 source lists a national magazine bestseller list that puts *Bosom Friend* at number three, with 4.23 million copies, and *Family* at number six, with 3.5 million ("Bestselling List," 2008). As there is no independent audit of magazine circulation in China, these figures could be overstated.

also escalated. Bvlgari, for instance, increased its ad spending on women's glossies in China from slightly over .1 million yuan (\$17,263) in 2010 to 22 million *yuan* (\$3,619,254) in 2011 (Burkitt, 2011).

The Western glossies use expensive art paper, high-definition photo ads, stylized models, and picture-led texts and advertorials and are basically magazines for viewing, with visual materials outweighing editorials by a ratio of at least two to one. At 300 pages and three times the thickness of the local titles, they often come with free gifts or sample products whose values far exceed the magazine cover price. This heavy reliance on big-budget advertising and close association with the global fashion business turn the Western glossies into a dazzling commodity spectacle, which uses the visual to stimulate desires of consumption. The local titles, by comparison, are much less visual and predominately story based. The celebrity-featuring cover is usually the only glossy part of the magazine, while drab ads for household products appear on the inside front, inside back, and back covers. Until 2003, when the Shanghai-based *Modern Family* first changed to color printing for all editorial contents, followed quickly by others, black-and-white printing was still the norm ("Understanding *Modern Family*," 2010). In terms of management and editorial contents, local titles, relying substantially on freelance submissions for editorial contents, are also dwarfed by international glossies, which benefit from their global scale and share pictures and texts across subsidiaries in different nations. For example, over a quarter of *Cosmopolitan China's* editorial articles are procured from the magazine's French, U.K., U.S., or Australian editions (Frith & Feng, 2009, 2009, p. 165). Their local editorial teams also come up with local materials (mostly celebrity interviews) and prune the international contents to fit with local cultural standards (Saraswati, 2010, p. 22).

The Western glossies are the first women's magazines in China to specifically focus on fashion, beauty, and love. They sell a fantasy, a glamorous dream populated by celebrities and high-end fashion and beauty products, and address a readership of mostly young, urban, professional women with increasing consuming power and materialistic aspirations. Hearst Magazines, which has agreements to publish 22 titles in China including *Elle* and *Harper's Bazaar*, reported that their typical reader had an average age of 29.5, was single, and worked in urban offices (Haughney & Landreth, 2012). *Cosmopolitan China* claims on its website that 82% of its readers have a college degree, while 30.2% are under the age of 24 and 48.6% are aged between 25 and 34 ("*Cosmopolitan*," n.d.).

This is a segment previously unexplored in China, as local magazines are mostly family oriented and address a variety of topics, including marriage, child rearing, health, and family relationships to women of many age levels. This market segmentation reflects a global trend, as women's magazines since the 1990s have generally sought to target what Winship earlier called the "New Woman" (1987, p. 15), a young professional woman with upmarket aspirations who has benefited from feminist struggles for parity in education and employment (Gough-Yates, 2003, p. 110). Reflected in their international editions, a similar targeting is made to a segment of the local readership that has better economic means, is less attached to national or regional tradition, and is more responsive to a global consumerist lifestyle (Gough-Yates, 2003, p. 101). In the Chinese scene, this New Woman readership comprises mostly young, white-collar women who have reaped the most reward from the much-enhanced education and employment opportunities brought about by the postsocialist reform policies. They also benefit from China's one-child policy, whereby the young woman would be supported by six people, her parents and both sets of

grandparents (Haughney & Landreth, 2012). These New Woman readers often translate into consumers of luxury goods in China, constituting more than half the luxury consumers in China, who are already much younger in average age than in the West. Statistics show that those under the age of 35 comprise 45% of the luxury consumers in China, as opposed to 28% in the West (Atsmon, Ducarme, Magni, & Wu, 2012, p. 17; "China's Luxury Consumers," 2011).

What is most significant about the Western glossies is that they also advance a new mode of power femininity constructed as the polar opposite of the natural femininity promoted in the domestic titles. Local magazines often aim for tear-jerking sentimentalism with stories like "Rag-picking for Three Years to Pay Off Brother's Million Yuan Debt" (2013), "A Young Mother's Bountiful Love: Content to Slave for Her Sextuplets" (2012), and "Strong Mother Helps Son Out of the Shadow of Murderer Father" (2012). These outrageous stories offer emotional catharsis for readers, who may recognize similar anxieties, though of a more mundane level, in their own life, and they also promote a caring, self-sacrificial, and family-serving mode of femininity that puts the interests of the family above the woman's own. Many of the women characters featured are not the peasants or grassroots factory workers of the socialist era but, increasingly, urban residents or low-level professionals, who are addressed primarily as affectionate mothers, wives, or daughters. Stories like "A Moth to Fire: Shanghai Girl's Love" in the March 2013 issue of *Modern Family* feature a woman office worker who borrows from loan sharks in order to support her boyfriend in his overseas study; in "Girl Disfigured for Love Lives Like a Hermit in a Remote Village" (2013), in the same issue, a female college graduate is seriously burned while trying to save her boyfriend from a fire. These stories encourage women to cultivate qualities of self-sacrifice and self-effacement that prepare them well for the role of the family-oriented wife.

By comparison, the Western glossies celebrate freedom, pleasure, and individual assertiveness completely untethered or weighed down by family or duties. With the distinctly young age of their readers and their primarily urban, white-collar status, the Western magazines display a pervading tone of upward aspiration, solipsistic desires, and "striving for success" (*fen dou*). *Cosmopolitan China*, for instance, celebrates a "fun, fearless, fabulous" female image of "empowerment," a headline splashed across all its 2013 issues' contents pages to mark the magazine's twentieth anniversary in China. Women are urged to be happy, which, rather than to be realized through one's self-sacrifice for the family, is now equated with independence, self-realization, and not repressing oneself. All the Chinese editorials impart a message of emancipation by stressing the celebrity interviewees' rebelliousness, their desire to be different and stand out from the crowd, and their ongoing journey of ceaseless change and progression after shedding a previous image of reservation and conformity. When asked how to be desirable to men, the actress Gao Yuan Yuan, in her feature interview, advises the reader to "just be yourself" instead of trying to please men ("Gao Yuan Yuan," 2013, p. 97). Other interviewees, standing tall in various poses of empowerment and staring right at the camera, urge women to abandon their dream of waiting for the prince on a white horse; instead, women should strive, in effect, to own a horse of their own and control their own destiny (p. 106). "Be your own shelter," "decide your own road," "please yourself," and "do what you want," typify the advice that is offered (pp. 108-123). In the glamorous ad photos, young, beautiful, direct-looking Caucasian women carrying global luxury products impart an image of strength and female confidence, quite different from the more traditional ads in local media, which feature more demure Chinese women.

This emancipated and self-assertive power femininity is a new concept in China and departs drastically from the traditional model of forbearance and nurturing care. In addressing Chinese women as individuals in their own right instead of as discursive tropes or the inferior other of a masculinized norm, it presupposes greater empowerment for a Chinese female readership perceived to have active individual desires and dissatisfied with sacrifices and family obligations. Yet this is not a return to socialist notions of the strong or liberated woman "holding up half of the sky" (Evans, 1997, p. 1), notions now linked with state control and a distortion of human nature. Instead, this human nature is now given a consumerist twist, with self-assertion and individual fulfillment to be achieved primarily through individual acts of consumption and choice. Female empowerment is measured in terms of material consumption, particularly of Western beauty and fashion brands, and while such consumption still adheres to traditional patriarchal standards of feminine beauty and the eroticization of the female body, this is now imbued with a feminist rhetoric of agency and freedom, and it is urged on the female reader, not so she can cater to the male gaze, but entirely for the benefit of female emancipation, self-determination, and inner worth.

When the Chinese woman is validated as an individual in her own right, with her own needs and not subsumed under her family, she will be like the L'Oréal model, the actress Gong Li, who mouths "because you are worth it" while touting the facial cream. A group interview of six successful women in *Cosmopolitan China* tells the reader in its introduction that "every woman has the right to decide her own way of life in this age of individualism," but it goes on to elaborate that this independence is the choice of any one of six makeup colors and fashion styles for each woman to make a unique statement about herself ("Color Me Happy," 2013, p. 111). Another editorial urges women to be self-confident and assertive but values the quality in commodity terms. "A woman's self-confidence is her best accessory," according to the title of the editorial; and this quality is best epitomized by the "right fashion taste" and the "ability to wear something from a street vendor as if it is a luxury brand" ("Poor Plain Girl's Springtime," 2013, p. 30). A fashion-related website enthuses over the emergence of a new type of young, independent, nonconformist, and self-loving New Woman in China, but it equates these qualities explicitly with rejecting mass fashion for the one-and-only dress, deciding on a hairstyle or makeup that shocks one's parents, or spending a fortune on a pair of custom-made shoes just to pamper oneself ("New Definition," 2005).

The "success" and empowerment these magazines advocate takes foremost the form of material consumption and is intricately linked to Western brands-mediated ideals of femininity and bodily adornment that conform to patriarchal norms. This form of power femininity has global resonances and shares similarities with a rising global tide of popular postfeminism apparent since the 1990s, which is manifested in many forms of popular women's culture, including women's magazines and advertising. Departing from women's traditional image of passivity and subordination, this new tide appropriates feminist terms of female emancipation and freedom of choice, but it resignifies them to convey an idea of an autonomous, empowered woman who actively chooses to embrace patriarchal heterosexuality and commodity culture. Critics have pointed out that such appropriation only serves to reinforce the patriarchal status quo and empties the terms of political and social significance (Budgeon & Currie, 1995, p. 180; Goldman, 1992, p. 123). This does not intend to bring social change or eliminate gender inequality but appeals instead to individual consumerist pleasures, which ultimately serve to rationalize patriarchal capitalism. More recent critics have further linked this commodified form of postfeminism to the rise of

global neoliberalism and its construction of a new type of subject as *homo economicus*, who actively marketizes all concerns and freely deliberates every action based on a rational cost-benefit calculation (Gill, 2007; Gill & Arthurs, 2006). Thus, rather than women being manipulated by scheming capitalists or victimized by patriarchal norms, the new neoliberal subject shoulders all responsibility for her own marketized choices and seeks to solve all unsatisfactory situations, not through structural changes but rather through the individual continually improving her own competitiveness in a ceaseless project of the self, whether involving her hairstyle, makeup, body image, or work promotion (Chen, 2013, p. 446).

In this sense, shopaholic behavior is no longer evidence of capitalist oppression of the consumer and is instead an active choice made to improve one's competitive edge in a marketized arena of dating and working. Participation in commodity culture is celebrated because it contributes to the accumulated human capital of the economic subject, who as a consumer is her own entrepreneur, her own producer of satisfaction and pleasure, and eventually the bearer of her own responsibility. In the Chinese postsocialist scene, this equation of consumption with freedom and agency would be a radical departure from the message of earlier socialist-era magazines, which typically touted the virtues of frugality and viewed conspicuous consumption, not only as pollution from Western capitalism, but also as disruptive of the socialist policy of egalitarianism (Hooper, 1998, p. 168). Even in the early years of the postsocialist reform era, when the return of market values led to an increasingly materialistic outlook, reservations against mindless consumption and a celebration of frugality as a virtue somehow inherent in traditional Chinese culture could still be perceived in local women's magazines (Hung, Li, & Belk, 2005, p. 353). But for the New Woman readers of contemporary Western women's magazines, luxury consumption even beyond one's means does not denote the evils of reckless spending. It is instead the result of the active choice of the consumer, who calculates her own risks and benefits, and who chooses to enhance her own competitive edge and her own human capital.

This neoliberal-inflected power femininity has been very effective and widely embraced in popular women's culture including chick lit and flicks, fashion and beauty advertising, pop music and TV makeup programs. It is difficult, however, to criticize this as a case of simple deception. Neoliberalism no longer works by direct disciplinary power from the outside but rather entails a form of self-governance that follows self-interest and marketized cost-benefit calculations as its only guiding principle. Out of self-interest, the neoliberal subject would willingly choose to follow the path that is most cost-effective, which often turns out to be the normative one. This would make criticism difficult, as women are no longer passive dupes being oppressed from the outside but have become active, entrepreneurialized subjects who can now best serve themselves by willingly choosing the normative line.

In the Chinese postsocialist scene, further complexity is added because this neoliberal power femininity is imbricated in the interplay of postsocialist politics, neoliberal commodity culture, and a Confucian gender heritage. While the Western idea of power femininity transmitted by the international women's glossies occurs in an ambience where feminism has been considered greatly successful and as a result is taken for granted (Thornham & Feng, 2010, p. 196), the postsocialist Chinese scene has just emerged from a socialist legacy that only instated nominal parity at the political level and is now largely associated with unnatural gender distortion (Jin, 2007, p. 188). The Western glossies' concept of power femininity works in a complex relationship with the natural femininity promoted by the local magazines, in

that it both departs from the latter in its apparent emphasis on individualism and consumerist pleasure and also works along with it in a shared emphasis on an unshackled, liberated, "natural" human nature and desires that should not be obstructed. The local magazines interpret female nature as an essentialized form of gendered difference exemplified predominantly in feminine qualities of emotion and care, while the neoliberal-inflected concept of power femininity embraces what Jason Read, citing Fredric Jameson, calls the idea that "the market is in human nature" (Read, 2009, p. 26), an entrepreneurialized and marketized form of individual choice based on cost-benefit calculation and maximized material gains for the self. This concept does not necessarily work against natural femininity, because in its emphasis on unleashing and liberating an inherent essence inside women, their true beauty, and their female confidence, which needs to be expressed particularly through the help and consumption of fashion and beauty products, it claims to excavate another facet of the female nature that may yet reside side by side with the nurturing, natural femininity. This is embodied in the modern woman who "has it all" by combining family with individual material success.

In this sense, power femininity may turn out to be a further commodification of the natural femininity promoted in the local magazines so as to reflect an ever-escalating neoliberal commodity culture in China. The role of the postsocialist state is also significant, for this liberation of "natural" and "free" human nature is not envisaged in opposition to a repressive state, as the popular people-versus-dictatorship rhetoric would have it, but is rather partially enabled and assisted by the postsocialist state. In its distancing of what it constructs as the socialist distortion of human nature and repression of natural needs and desires, the postsocialist state, embracing a neoliberal policy of privatization and economic developmentalism since the 1980s, has also encouraged, through public and intellectual discourse, the construction of a new type of Chinese citizens following their "natural" sexual and material needs, provided they are directed down consumerist routes (Rofel, 2007, p. 13). Thus, the power femininity involved in individual assertiveness does not necessarily presuppose a tension between the individual Chinese woman and the state, but rather a symbiosis in which the individual, as *homo economicus*, willingly chooses the normative line enabled by the state because this provides the best benefits and dovetails with her self-interest (Chen, 2013, p. 444). This would mean that both the power femininity promoted by the Western glossies and the natural femininity of the local magazines operate in a complicit relationship with the postsocialist state, a complicity that becomes harder to criticize because it resonates with a long-felt and justified urgency to undo the past socialist repression.

The Western glossies have been so successful in China that even local women's magazines, which have always prided themselves on their "intimate understanding of what Chinese readers really want" (Sun, par. 15, 2013) are changing rapidly. They have repeatedly insisted that it is the reader's heart, not her vanity, that should prove the key to a journal's long-standing success, but now they are going more upmarket, seeking higher advertising revenues and imitating the Western glossies' post-Fordist corporate structure by branching out into digital publishing, e-commerce, movie and TV production, and even the construction of family health and beauty resorts (Yang, 2007). The government's new policy, implemented since June 2003, to stop public sector subscription to periodicals with the exception of a small number of highly prominent Party publications, further pushed advertising, which had previously been denounced as capitalist and decadent in the socialist age (Hooper, 1998, p. 169), to a paramount importance for almost all magazines ("Newspaper Reform," 2003). Increasingly the ideal femininity constructed in these local

women's titles also veers ever closer to the consumerist power femininity of the Western glossies, suggesting a wider subscription in contemporary Chinese society to the neoliberal subjectivity of profitable norm-following camouflaging under the rhetoric of choice and freedom. This poses the danger that, rather than a movement toward the diversity of choice touted by the neoliberal rhetoric, a new conformity and normalizing process are well underway.

The Importance of Being Chinese

The power femininity promoted in the Western glossies celebrates what McRobbie calls "consumer global citizenship" (2007, p. 734), a global sisterhood of chic consumerist women finding freedom and empowerment through the consumption of mostly Western commodities. While neoliberal economic policies of global capitalism seek to break down national and geographic borders and promise a desirable world order predicated on the free flow of capital and people, Western glossies propagate a seemingly universalized consumerist discourse of freedom of choice and individual consumption. But because here Western glossies operate in a non-Western context like China, transnational elements and local differences inevitably come into play. This is freely acknowledged in the Western glossies themselves. Despite the connotation of Westernization inherent in the idea of power femininity, which seems to contrast sharply with the nativist Chineseness embedded in the natural femininity of the cheap local titles, Western glossies also make frequent references to a distinctly Chinese feminine ideal. One recurring phrase in their beauty ads is "designed for Asian skin" or "for Chinese beauties," and their advice columns lay particular emphasis on how Western products can highlight, rather than obstruct, a specifically Chinese type of beauty.

This recognition of local and racial difference seems, at the first look, to work against the idea of a universalized power femininity, but upon closer analysis it only serves to reinforce the latter. In the same way that neoliberal-inflected popular culture seems to profess a more tolerant and liberal attitude toward deep, structural problems like the treatment of gay and lesbian people but ultimately empties these issues of their laden sociopolitical complications by viewing them simply as a diversity of choices and personal decisions, "just a label . . . like Gucci or Versace" or "Birkenstock" (Avril & Coulter, 2001), Western glossies' recognition of Chineseness does not really address sociopolitical issues of national difference or power but subsumes them under a rhetoric of diversity of lifestyles and consumerist choices. Local traits simply offer variety to a whole array of possible choices, while structural or political differences are glossed over under the all-absorbing domain of marketized self-choices.

Critics have pointed out that this is a business ploy widely employed in the international editions of Western women's glossies to flatter the local consumers into thinking they are unique and individually catered to by the fashion industry (Lazar, 2006, p. 514). Johansson quotes from Arjun Appadurai to argue that the homogenization brought about by globalization is often repatriated in local and national discourses as difference or heterogeneity, ultimately for the purpose of domesticating difference (Johansson, 2001, p. 269). In the Chinese context, a similar case of ultimate accommodation is certainly demonstrated, but one must also bear in mind that the Western glossies' appeal to Chineseness and their promotion of what it means to be an ideal Chinese woman tap into a long-standing Chinese legacy of national rejuvenation and modernization, where the idea of a nativist Chineseness vis-à-vis Westernization

has unique resonances across a wide array of issues. This distinct background adds poignancy to the universal and local dynamics of neoliberal power femininity.

Women's magazines in China have been, from their inception, inextricably linked with the mission of promoting the modern Chinese woman, and through that the national project of modernization. As modernization in China is linked with Westernization and often a partial rejection of nativist Chinese traditions, how Chineseness plays a part also impacts powerfully on the magazines' promotion of ideal femininity. Critics like Louisa Schein have pointed out that ambiguities and contradictions have saturated Chinese discourses about a distinct Chinese identity throughout the history of China's interaction with the West (1994, p. 150). Such discourses have often used the idea of the Chinese woman as a symbol, who is both in need of salvation from traditional feudal practices like foot binding, but also as the guardian of an essentialized national identity that could ward off complete domination by the West. This ambiguous approach disrupts the unproblematic equation of modernization with Westernization, but also holds at bay a complete identification with Chineseness. In the context of today's Western glossies in China, this same discourse is evoked and the same ambiguities are displayed, but a distinct point is that this now takes place at a time when nationalist pride in China's recent economic success has helped to further a more confident, rather than defensive, assertion of a unique Chineseness.

For its October 2012 issue, which featured the theme, "Fabulous China," *Vogue China* chose cover-girl actress Li Bingbing as "a perfect ambassador for modern Chinese women" ("An Ambassador," 2012, p. 339), interviews Chinese supermodels and designers about their international success, and devotes three stories on how top Western designers are now using Chinese elements in their designs. "As China raises its international profile . . . her influence is increasingly felt worldwide not just in economic development but also in popular culture and fashion worlds," claims the "Editor's letter" (2012, p. 92). The issue extolls actress Li Bingbing for exemplifying what it means to be "a modern Chinese woman . . . with beauty, industriousness and the astonishing ability of ceaseless self-improvement" ("An Ambassador," 2012, p. 341). Dubbed the "Aspirational Sister," she has successfully metamorphosed from a shy, awkward girl of from a troubled family to a confident, glamorous superstar shining in red-carpet photo shoots (p. 341). In the magazine's "Talking Back" column, under the heading, "Discover the New Chinese Beauty Ideal," in the November 2012 issue, letters and texts from *Vogue's* readers applauded the October "Fabulous China" theme, its choice of Li Bingbing as the quintessential modern Chinese woman, and its celebration of China's global ascendance. "When China becomes the focus of the world and confidently takes her place, Chinese elegance and exquisiteness will also doubtless compel the world," wrote one reader. Other readers defined the Chinese beauty ideal as natural, unaffected, more modest, and less flashy than the Western ideal. A Chinese beauty has "a unique Oriental essence" that is different from the Western ideal. She combines both "an unflashy, demure tenderness" and "a modern efficient independence" ("Discover," 2012, pp. 80, 81).



Figure 6. Vogue China, 2012, no. 10

Here the ideal Chinese woman does not aim for a complete replication of the Westernized power femininity but stresses the need to also retain a distinctly Chinese feminine ideal. *Vogue China's* readers may be young, well-educated urban professionals attuned to Western-style "modern efficient independence," but they insist on a racialized Chinese feminine ideal that is interpreted as restrained, delicate, tender, and in contrastive to the more flashy and assertive Western ideal. This ideal may sound perilously close to the "natural," traditional feminine qualities promoted by the bulk of the cheap local women's magazines, but ultimately Chineseness is not embraced to suggest a polar opposition to power femininity, with its inherent connotation of Westernization, but rather appropriated as a symbol of diversity of consumerist choice. The ambiguities inherent in the idea of Chineseness, which suggests a gesture of symbolic appropriation rather than complete identification, seems to lend itself particularly well to a translation into consumerist themes and tropes. The ads and editorial copy suggest that Chineseness is actually better highlighted and brought out by using Western products in empowered and confident acts of consumption. The *Vogue* cover featuring Li Bingbing may splash the headline "Chinese Radiance" in bold characters across its page and emphasize Li's embodiment of "Oriental flavor" by dressing her in the favorite Chinese color of red, with red traditional Chinese oiled-paper umbrellas over her head, but her "smoky-eye" makeup follows the most up-to-date catwalk style of international fashion shows and her red "Chinese" dress is revealed to be a Lanvin. Here Chineseness, reduced into stereotypical Chinoiserie elements of the color red and period umbrellas long out of use in contemporary urban China, is best served by Western fashion and beauty commodities.

It is thus clear that though the appeal to Chineseness in Western glossies takes on a particular poignancy because it taps into a long-cherished project of national rejuvenation, ultimately it still works to commodify Chineseness and seeks to subsume the latter seamlessly under the universalized rhetoric of consumerist agency promoted by power femininity. Yet it must also be noted that such efforts at accommodation may not always succeed, and that the complex layers of meanings and appropriations embedded in this interplay between China and the West may offer potential sources for criticism. In opening up and addressing local differences in the transnational context of postsocialist China, the Western glossies paradoxically offer a potential of divisiveness, whereby gaps and hierarchies are unveiled and fail to be bridged over.

This divisiveness is seen in the fact that despite the championing of empowered women, a gap still opens up between Western women, whose lifestyle and chicness the magazine ads implicitly suggest and celebrate, and the Chinese women readers trying to emulate them and catch up. The progressive fashionability and empowerment of these white-collar Chinese readers over the bulk of older, more traditional women readers of the cheap local titles is predicated on the former's closeness to the Western New Woman, but the Western women obviously enjoy greater purchasing power, and thus more agency and choice. Western glossies' power femininity promises a global sisterhood of like-minded women empowered by a consumerist freedom that transcends national borders, but Western models still dominate in the ads, as chicness, modern style, and empowerment are best embodied by Caucasian faces, which are viewed as a notch above Chinese models. This added race and class dimension exposes the many exclusions and hierarchical differences behind the universalized promise, as an inherent awareness of distance from the Western paradigm is never far off.

A similar hierarchy is opened up between the young, urban, successful women readers of the Western glossies and the older, traditional generations, which they do not target. Chineseness becomes chic and celebrated only when appropriated by the former, and it is shunned and viewed as backward when fully embodied by the latter, because the first case stands for diversity of consumerist choice, while in the second case choice does not exist. This is seen, for instance, in the same *Vogue China* issue featuring "Fabulous China." A whole section of photo shoots and editorial copy claims to "highlight our Chinese theme and showcase the astoundingly beautiful Chinese landscape," but it in fact finds that Chineseness in the hinterland of Inner Mongolia ("Nomadic Aspirations," 2012, p. 228), and in the tribal people's use of wool, fur, and leather. This suggests a subscription to the idea that genuine Chineseness can only be found in remote, rural areas untainted by modernization. The photos show two fashionably clad models staged side by side with traditionally costumed local rural people, ostensibly to establish a line of heritage for a distinct Chinese fashion style. But the ultimate effect underlines instead the sharp contrast between the models' pale, citified complexion, superior confidence, and expensive clothes, featuring fur, leather, and Mongolian riding hats, and the local folks' weather-beaten looks, rusticated clothes, and awkward, self-conscious posture. Chineseness may be one of the many fashion styles available to the urban elites addressed by the photos, but such diversity of choice is much less accessible for the rural people, who appear stuck in their traditional ways.

Here a further element of race is involved, as the obvious effort to address both the two models, who are of the dominant Han ethnic group, and the minority Mongolian people, as Chinese and to

big-spending consumers, but there is also a significant sector of the so-called petit bourgeoisie with much smaller wallets, who often feel they have to resort to fakes in order to catch up and to present a “competitive” face to the world. One reader of the Japanese *Rayli*, for instance, confessed that after consulting the magazine, she would frequent Shanghai’s notorious Xiangyang market for lookalike fakes or counterfeits because they were a fraction of the original price, allowing her to “not break the bank and still catch the international trend” (Himeda, 2002, para. 14). China’s counterfeiting business stands at a staggering \$16 billion annually, and in a society with a collectivist cultural tradition where to earn respect or face from others is of paramount significance, counterfeits are often the only choice for many consumers (Phau & Teah, 2009, p. 16). The need to earn respect means that many Chinese readers of the Western glossies are certainly less free or empowered than others, and more constrained in their exercise of consumerist agency and power femininity. They may tower above the older, less prosperous, often blue-collar or rural readers of the cheap local magazines, who are further denied that consumerist access, but ultimately the power femininity they emulate is far from universal, and instead is fluid, complex, and multileveled. In this sense, the Western glossies in China turn out to be a fruitful area in which a criticism of power femininity could be launched, because their transnational context offers a better means of addressing possible inner conflicts and opening up differences glossed over by neoliberal rhetoric.

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