

# From Passive to Controlled: The Car Reshapes the Gender Temperament of Chinese Women a Consumer Sociological Perspective

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## ABSTRACT

In the consumer society, the automobile as a new way of gender practice has a very important impact on the reshaping of women's gender temperament. While cars help people to achieve spatial movement, they will also affect people's temperament judgment of the car operator. Through the study, it was found that the car not only helps women to expand the range of activities in the spatial dimension, but also plays an important role in changing the stereotype of gender temperament.

**Keywords:** *Automobile, Gender temperament, Sociology of Consumption*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

As for gender role, there is such a definition: gender role is a social role associated with women or men. On the one hand, it is based on congenital or physiological factors such as blood relationship and heredity, but on the other hand, its connotation changes with personal understanding, cultural background and the development of the times. Words like Shuai and Chao seem to be blurring gender distinctions. But at the same time, gender roles have a set of norms and behavior patterns of rights and obligations, as well as specific behavior expectations, which have left a deep mark in our social life. The most well-known is "men are in charge of the outside and women are in charge of the inside". In the family, men are often given the important task of supporting the family economy. When men lose their jobs and participate in more domestic activities such as taking care of children, cleaning and three meals a day, such "family cook" is often difficult to be accepted.

Gender temperament is not born this way, nor is it immutable, gender temperament is not determined by the physiology of men and women, but completely constructed by culture and society, so it will change with the times and changes in society.

## 2. THE QUESTION IS RAISED: HOW THE CAR CHANGES THE GENDER TEMPERAMENT OF WOMEN

In the cultures of countries all over the world, most traditional societies make strict distinctions between men's and women's temperament. Masculinity and femininity are considered to be two opposite temperament. For example, men should be masculine and women should be feminine; Men should be natural and unrestrained, women should be graceful; Men are responsible for leadership, women are responsible for obedience, and so on. The car is closely connected with masculinity at the beginning of production. On the one hand, because the price is relatively high, and the family is often dominated by men's income, and the manipulation of cars is not very flexible, the consumer audience is almost men; On the other hand, car advertising is also constantly linking driving behavior with masculinity such as "conquering, dominating and chasing risks". Men are always inseparable from driving. Men like to discuss the performance and power of cars together and look forward to automobile manufacturers constantly manufacturing new models. In the pursuit of cars, it also reposes men's pursuit of career and life, dreams and the realization of dreams. However, with the advent of the era of consumption and the continuous improvement of women's purchasing power, the relationship between cars and women is becoming closer

and closer. According to the data released by the Ministry of public security, the number of motor vehicle drivers in China reached 445 million in 2020, of which 148 million were women, accounting for 32.5%. The proportion of women in car users is increasing, so women's gender temperament is also changing under the influence of cars.

In the past, the sociological research on automobile mostly focused on the symbolic value of automobile, the mobility practice of automobile and the space practice, while the impact of automobile use on women's gender temperament needs to be further discussed by the academic community. In view of this, this paper intends to analyze the changes of gender temperament of Chinese women in the process of automobile consumption and use from the perspective of consumer sociology.

### **3. THE TRADITIONAL IMPRESSION OF "GENDER TEMPERAMENT."**

The study of "gender temperament" can be traced back to the gender role theory in the early 20th century. Under the impact of the second wave of feminism in the middle of the 20th century, the way of thinking of "male feminism" was formed. Biological determinism holds that gender and its characteristics are completely separated, and female characteristics are absolutely summarized as physical, irrational, gentle, maternal, dependent, emotional, subjective and lack of abstract thinking ability; Male characteristics are summarized as spiritual, rational, brave, aggressive, objective and good at abstract thinking[1]. Thomas Lacker once pointed out in the book "the formation of gender" that the gender model was gradually established in the 17th century, and men and women were classified into each other's distinctive sexual bodies. The "gender image" determined by gender characteristics basically runs through such a dichotomy. "Gender represents the basic form of social differentiation in a society". Ancient China paid attention to the etiquette system. "There are differences between inside and outside" means that men are required to engage in politics, war, farming, hunting and business outside, while women are in charge of housework, silkworm weaving, giving birth to children and serving their parents-in-law. Men are always associated with movement, while women are always associated with stillness. Cars are considered in popular culture to be associated with fluid masculinity. Looking back at the characteristics of early human socialization, it is not difficult to find that boys are often allowed to have a larger space for activities, affected by gender characteristics, their toys are usually cars, tanks and other machines, and the stereotype of gender is to associate nurturing sex with women, so girls' activity controls are mostly at home, and toys are usually dolls. Mellstroem (2004), who conducted anthropological studies in Malaysia and Sweden respectively, concluded that men's love of cars did not arise naturally from masculinity, but

was gradually defined in cultural societies[3]. It can be seen that it is not gender temperament that defines culture, but culture that shapes gender temperament.

Cars are considered to be associated with mobile masculinity in mass culture. Looking back at the characteristics of early human socialization, it is not difficult to find that boys are often allowed to have more activity space. Influenced by gender characteristics, their toys are usually cars, tanks and other machines, while the stereotyped gender impression is to associate feeding with women. Therefore, girls' activity controls are mostly at home, and toys are usually dolls. Mellstroem (2004), after conducting anthropological research in Malaysia and Sweden respectively, believes that men's love for cars does not naturally come from masculinity, but is gradually defined in the cultural society[3]. It can be seen that it is not gender temperament that defines culture, but culture that shapes gender temperament.

### **4. THE INFLUENCE OF THE CAR ON THE GENDER TEMPERAMENT OF WOMEN**

#### ***4.1 From restriction to Freedom: Liberation in space***

Doreen Massey once pointed out when studying feminist geography that women's living space has always been more constrained and restricted than men. In traditional China, women can't go out at will. Their activities can only be in their own rooms and yards. That's why they are called "ladies of the family", which refers to the women in the boudoir. Staying at home is also a symbol of status. If an ancient woman says that she can get lost in the street at the door of her home once she leaves home, it shows that she has a good family background, good family education and innocent reputation. In terms of vertical mobility, in ancient times, most women were not allowed to go to school. The more affluent would invite private teachers to teach them piano, chess, calligraphy and painting at home. In addition, in ancient times, women did not need to go out to work. The expectation of society for women was to tidy up the housework and teach their husband and children. Women who went out frequently would be regarded as misconduct. After the founding of new China, although women were allowed to go out to work, study and live, the scope of mobility was still small. Therefore, social mobility in China almost refers to the mobility of men, and women are often associated with stillness. The application of automobile is to replace the body with technology, thus expanding the radius of women's life. The reachable range of women's activities has been greatly improved and is no longer limited to a certain field. The following is a statement of a forum female car owner after buying a car: When I didn't buy a car, I usually took a taxi or bus. Since I got the car, I feel close

everywhere. Where did you go before? It took 30 or 40 minutes by bus. Generally, I felt it was quite far away. It's usually very crowded. If you catch the rush hour, it will be crowded and really uncomfortable. You have to wait for the bus to take the bus at the station. Now that I have a car, the time is not a problem. It's also an hour or so to arrive after 100 kilometers. I still feel very comfortable. The car is parked downstairs. It can leave at any time you want. It's so casual. Even the trunk is used as a cloakroom and shoe cabinet

Technology eliminates physical inequality between men and women. From this statement, it is not difficult to find that cars make women's free movement no longer bound by time and technology, greatly enhance their mobility and give their bodies greater freedom. While the car helps women move in space, the car itself has also become an exclusive space for women. Women's gender temperament gradually began to include mobility, freedom and so on.

#### ***4.2. From Obedience to Initiative: Empowering Women***

In the past, men were considered to be the masters of the car, and women mostly appeared as followers in the co-pilot of the car, and the car became a physical tool for men, so the consumption behavior of women to buy a car was a major challenge to the traditional gender order[4]. Automobile consumption is different from women's conventional consumption such as clothes. Although they belong to consumption behavior, the latter strengthens the traditional femininity, while the former may break the opposition between gender temperament and gender order. Automobile consumption means that women have the right to use mobile technology and the autonomy to move towards open space. Scharff, an American scholar, opened up the discussion topic of the relationship between cars and women in his Book *Mastering the steering wheel: women and the upcoming automobile age*. In his research, Scharff combed the relationship between women and cars from the first car produced by German Carl Benz and Gottlieb Daimler in 1886 to 1929, and showed how driving cars gave women independence, freedom and power.

The process of women moving from the co pilot to the main driver is essentially the process of women's empowerment. The application of automobile enhances the social connection between gender, especially for women. Women are no longer limited by space and time. John Urry believes that society is formed in different communication activities, and communication requires various forms of flow. Imaginary and imaginary flow can not simply replace the flow of the body, because the intermittent common presence of the body is the basis for maintaining many social lives[5]. The application of automobile technology not only widens the life circle, but also makes women have more initiative in working away

from home, socializing, leisure and participating in public affairs.

#### ***4.3. From attachment to independence: the liberation of personality***

Traditional China has long been in a social environment in which men are superior to women, and women have long played a dependent role. Western radical feminism calls the society in which men are superior to women a "patriarchal" society, and the image of women's dependence is the gender order based on this social ideology. In the patriarchal society, the shaping of female images in early advertising works is strengthening the traditional stereotype, or stimulating the audience's consumption desire through the meaning of images and words, shaping "beauty" and "body" into a capital symbol symbolizing women. Many car brands will materialize women's bodies in advertising to promote the sales of their own cars, that is, the strategy of "fragrant car beauty". In the auto show, the most typical way of publicity is the same. Of course, the car is the focus of the display. However, the most eye-catching is the female model next to the car, which uses the female body to attract the attention of consumers, so that people can stop in their own exhibition hall and watch the show car carefully. This is the most popular way of auto publicity in the early stage and at present. The brand is anchored by mature male consumers[6]. In the early days of automobile consumption, cars and women seem to have become tools for men.

With the rise of women's spending power, women's sense of independence is also getting stronger and stronger, and automobile consumption has become one of the most emblems that can reflect women's independence[7]. More and more women can support themselves and no longer rely on men to buy cars, which in turn has spawned many car advertisements for women. Car culture began to metamorphose from the traditional impression of masculinity, and femininity was no longer as rigid as in the past, adding new meanings including "independence, initiative, and freedom".

With the rise of women's consumption ability, women's sense of independence is becoming stronger and stronger, and car consumption has become one of the symbols that can best reflect women's independence. More and more women can support themselves and no longer rely on men to buy cars, which has led to many car advertisements serving women. Recently, more and more female stars have begun to speak for automobile brands, and compared with the previous endorsement of female stars, they show more a diversified image of modern independent women. Mercedes Benz announced that song Qian was a close friend of the brand. The official publicity copy was "exquisite from the inside, no dead corner; appearance online, more C-bit curve; shining enough, enough confidence; starting steadily, full of

confidence; just coming out, she has held the whole audience", and different from the "car oriented perspective" in previous automobile advertisements, song Qian is more prominent in the process of driving the car, independent, confident Shining female image. Domestic brand Wuling Automobile also announced that "Sanjin movie queen" Zhou Xun officially became Wuling's global spokesperson. Zhou Xun is jokingly called "childe Zhou" by fans, giving people an independent and frank new female image.

Insiders said: female consumers are not only satisfied with sitting in the co pilot, they also have to pick up the steering wheel to master the direction. The growth of women's automobile market is only the beginning, and it is bound to continue to explode in the future. Many car companies are targeting this market. From the various publicity means of automobile enterprises, it can be seen that automobile culture began to change from the traditional impression of masculinity, and femininity is no longer as rigid as in the past, adding new meanings including "independence, initiative and freedom".

## 5. CONCLUSION

Femininity is the discourse created by the "patriarchal" social culture, which reflects women's identity and status. The social and cultural background of different times creates femininity culture with different cultural semantics.

The above author analyzes how the automobile as a new gender practice in modern society reshapes the gender temperament of women from three levels. The car not only changes the position of women in the geospatial dimension, but also reflects the different personality characteristics of women in the new era. Today, traditional femininity stereotypes, while slowly changing, are also producing new stereotypes, such as the stigmatized image of "female drivers." While shaping the gender temperament to the positive, we must also prevent mistakes such as female stigma and male gender temperament solidification, thereby exacerbating unreasonable gender temperament stereotypes.

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