

# May-Fourth Feminism and Consumerist Pseudo-Feminism: Subjects and Comparison

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## ABSTRACT

May-Fourth Feminist and the Consumerist Pseudo-feminism are two feminist waves with high similarity in China. By reviewing 19 academic pieces of literature and further analyzing them, the paper does a comparison between the May-Fourth Feminist and the Consumerist Pseudo-feminism. The paper analyzes the common natures of these two waves and find the common reasons for their failure. Because of the divisions within gender, the participants in both movements, the small group of elite females, are too weak compared to the patriarchal society as a whole. Therefore, they have to show submissive to the patriarchal norms to some extent and alienate their original views and practices. This finding can be an alarm of the further feminist waves in China.

**Keywords:** *Feminism, Consumerism, May-Fourth Movement, Consumerist Pseudo-Feminism, Gender Study*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Gender, different from sex, is a social construct that relates to how society thinks of people and how people think of themselves. Over a long period of time, the female gender is perceived as more vulnerable and weaker than the male gender. In western world, the idea of feminism that pursues more rights for females developed rapidly since the Enlightenment movement. By the 20<sup>th</sup> century, those western feminist approaches began to spread to China on a large scale. Both the May-Fourth Feminism and the Consumerist Pseudo-feminism are the adaption of western liberal feminist ideals in China. Previous researches already have detailed discussions on their properties, causes, and effects. However, their similarities are ignored to some extent.

Both of them show the alienation of feminist values, highly consist in a small group of elite women, and affected by Chinese traditional patriarchal norms. In this paper, by analyzing and comparing these two feminist waves from different perspectives, their shared natures and reasons for failures can be revealed. With "May-Fourth Feminism" and "Consumerist Pseudo-Feminism" as keywords, this paper searched articles from 2000 to present on Google Scholar and other platforms, and a total of 19 articles were selected into the research scope of this study.

## 2. RELATED WORKS

According to the difference in the research subject, the paper split the exist works into two categories, see Table 1.

**Table 1.** Analysis of 19 papers about May-Fourth Feminism and Consumerist Pseudo-Feminism

No. of papers	Categories of papers	References
9	Papers related to May-Fourth Feminism	[1],[2],[3],[4],[5],[6],[7],[8],[9]
10	Papers related to Consumerist Pseudo-Feminism	[10],[11],[12],[13],[14],[15],[16],[17],[18],[19]

### 2.1. May-Fourth Movement Feminism

As an influential social and cultural reform, the May-Fourth Movement aims to overthrow the traditional order

and feudalism in China. The May-Fourth thinkers, who focus on the westernization of China, also make a reform about feminism, a typical example of the feudal backward society.

### 2.1.1. Newspapers and Journals

In the May-Fourth era, the newspaper and journal are the major platforms of ideas. Chang gives a general evaluation of the discussion of feminism in some journals [1]. In her work, she affirms the positive effects of those journals. She points out that the discussion on the female issue is a powerful blow against the old orders, and it contributes to the liberation of females. This general analysis is too brief and contains big bias. Liu further analyzes the limitation of the ideas conveyed by two influential journals in the 1910s-1920s, the "Female Journal" and the "LA JEUNESSE" [2]. She indicates that the feminist discourse on these two journals is not very ahead of this time. Their overall view is still shackled to ideas of the early Enlightenment. The basic proof is that the essays of those two journals still propagandize the idea that two genders have different natures. In Liu's next year work, she further indicates that the May-Fourth feminism is basically the deconstruction of feminism by male discourse [3]. It is the imagination of feminism based on male subjectivity. This explains why the main editors of the "Female Journal" and "LA JEUNESSE", such as Zhang Xichen, advocate the importance of the freedom of love. They less focus on equality in legal status, social status, or employment than their western counterparts. They think that males and females have different natures, and females should try to achieve the freedom of females, which is different from the freedom of males. They disagree with the progressive feminism ideas, which they consider will create a group of the third gender, the female who want to become male. The group of people, as they describe, will not only lose the important nature of female but also cannot achieve their goal. Therefore, in their opinion, the freedom of love is the only way that can get rid of the accessory status of women while keeping their unique nature. Due to the limitation of the era, people who speak for women in influential journals, such as "LA JEUNESSE" are often males. Thus, he male subjectivity still dominates the discourse about feminism, highly confines it in to the topic of free love, and maintains the view of different nature between genders.

### 2.1.2. Convergence of Conflicts

In general, the May-Fourth Movement is a reform against old orders. This theme is also reflected in feminism. Yang explains the two dimensions of May-Fourth Feminism by the idea of two important May-Fourth thinkers, Lu Xun, and Hu Shi [4]. The first dimension is that feminism merges and succumbs to the confrontation between the new and the old. The biggest sign of this convergence is the adaptation of "A Doll's House", a play created by Ibsen. The play is translated to Chinese by Hu Shi and caused huge influence. Nora becomes the model of Chinese youth as a sign of freedom. Later, "The Marriage", an adaptation of "A Doll's House"

by Hu Shi caught on in China, and the focus of the theme shifted. In "A Doll's House", Ibsen mainly illustrates the inequality between genders, but in "The Marriage", Hu Shi focuses on revealing the suppression of individual by patriarchy in traditional patriarchal families. The adaptation of the play can represent the overall localization of feminism in the May-Fourth era. Women's liberation was unified into the "human liberation". The discovery of humans leads to the discovery of females [5]. The Gender conflict in "A Doll's House" is replaced by generational conflict, which in turn represents the contradiction between "tradition" and "modernity". However, the conflict of gender still exists. In the second dimension of the May-Fourth Feminism, Lu Xun asks a sharp question in his speech: What happens after Nora's gone [6]? This question reveals a problem that was further analyzed by Yang in her next year's work: the contradiction between free thought and social weakness and low social status [7]. The discussion about Feminism on the journals did not reflect on whether the freedom of love could eliminate the shadow of patriarchy and the tragedy of women. The fact is that the new females ran away from their original patriarchal family and went into the new patriarchal family of their husbands. Lu Xun's answer to his question is that Nora can either degenerate or come back. While individualism is reduced to the "new" and "old" conflicts between youth and old age, individuals and family (and society), the power relations between genders in the new cultural community are ignored. Due to the traditional weakness of females, by choosing love for one person, new females have to give up all qualifications for a "normal" life in their father's family and society. This conflict has not and cannot be solved by the May-Fourth Feminism.

### 2.1.3. Education

The education of females is generally agreed upon by May-Fourth thinkers. Female's equality in education has made great progress in the May-Fourth Movement. They strive for more educational opportunities through part-time work, studying abroad, coeducation, and the development of female education [8]. However, the overall portion of educated females is much less than educated males. This situation causes the internal split of females between the elite class and the old female. The Chinese female can be generally divided into two groups after the May-Fourth Movement [9]. The first group was those who had received the new education, subdividing into the woman who study abroad and who receive a certain degree of western education in China. The second group, the majority of Chinese females, are women with little or no education. These two groups are completely separated. While the first group of women seeks freedom of love, the second group of women still practice the old patriarchal family order.

#### 2.1.4. Summary

The May-Fourth Feminism is the first major attempt of achieving western liberal feminism in China [1]. By promoting the public social contact between genders and equal education opportunities, the May-Fourth Feminism contributes to gender equality in a certain degree. However, because of the affection of the traditional culture and the male subjectivity, the May-Fourth Feminism, which is highly limited both theoretically and realistically, partially becomes the desire of freedom of the love of the elicited class and partially convergent to the conflict between modernity and tradition.

### 2.2. Consumerist Pseudo-Feminist Movement

After the 1980s, accompanied by Deng's Economic Reform, a new wave of feminism arose in China. Because of the incoming of western ideals caused by Economic Reform, the new wave of feminism is highly affected by western feminist thought in 1960-the 1970s [10]. The name Consumerist Pseudo-Feminist Movement comes from the work of Yang Fan. In her analysis, while preserving the relationship with western Post-Feminism, the name also represents the cultural context and the alienation of the wave [11].

#### 2.2.1. Professional and Political Weakness

During the era of economic reform, the incoming western feminist ideals separate the female's liberation from the class struggle. However, a consequence of the market economy is the reduction of egalitarian protection from the government. Before the reform and opening up, under the guidance of Marxist Philosophy and the slogan "women can hold up half of the sky", the "equal pay for equal work" policy does protect female employees, especially government staff, from professional discrimination. Whereas, as private companies become prevalent in the market economy system, income discrimination rises again. Women often find themselves caught in the "double burden" of work and housework. Women with the same level of education, skills, and work experience still earn less than men [12]. One reason for these circumstances is that, due to the lack of control of the government, private business owners, usually males who support patriarchal norms, can redesign the rules of the workplace. New rules of the workplace reinforce patriarchal norms which are latent in previous decades. Tang analyzes this inequality from the perspective of workplace authority, which is highly correlated with income but not exactly. The workplace authority is the judgment on decision-making power and sanction power. In his analysis, women are harder than men to hold complete power, and women are more likely to be the deputy head of a department. In the field of sanction authority, men are three times more likely than women to have this right. The power differential in the workplace is

the result of gender inequality. Since rules of the workplace are decided by people who own workplace authority, this differential will maintain gender inequality in long run [13]. Furthermore, to analyze professional gender inequality, Wu uses the concept of occupational gender segregation. It means that female employees are consisted in several professions with relatively low pay and are segregated from traditionally male jobs [14]. This situation shows that many women unconsciously or subconsciously accept gender inequality in the workplace. Government officials are the other group that reflects the resurgence of patriarchal norms. Due to the reform and opening-up policy, the proportion of women members in the CPPCC National Committee has been hovering around 12 to 18 percent, and the proportion of women members in the CPPCC Standing Committee is even lower, at about 10 percent, less than one-tenth of that of men. This data indicates the low-ranked justice of contemporary Chinese women's participation in politics. The status of Chinese women's political participation in the international community has been declining, from the upper-middle level in the early 1990s to the lower-middle level now [15].

#### 2.2.2. Consumerism

Similar to western Post-Feminism, the Consumerist Pseudo-Feminism also emphasizes individualism. In modern China, two manifestations of individualism, self-empowerment, and self-identification, are highly represented by the consumerist culture. After the reform and opening-up policy, with the improvement of the national economic level, women's disposable income increase significantly. Meanwhile, the new middle-class females, so-called modern girls, show a strong yearning for Western luxury goods. Modern women's economic status is indeed more independent than before, and many of them can share a considerable part of their husbands' income. In Ai and Pang's work, they praise this circumstance as the representation of women's freedom of choice [16]. However, this interpretation is highly confined and biased. The increase in disposable money can be considered as a reason for the consumerist culture [17]. Whereas, consumerism is also a reflection of women's inability towards patriarchal society. Since the small elicited female realize that they cannot change either the professional discrimination or the traditional preference of males over females, they choose to use the purposeful propaganda carefully constructed to avoid problems. They believe in their strong purchasing power that is extravagantly celebrated by the market and create a light luxury temperament to achieve their self-identification [18]. One example is chick flick films. Chick flick is a type of light comedy that often presents the theme of "modern woman". After the 21st century, this type of film become very popular in China. The main content of chick flick films, such as "Sophie's Revenge", is Utopian fantasies of urban women. It depicts a grossly

inaccurate and over-glamorized version of female urban life [19]. Chick-flick films often naturalize the heroine's success and ignore institutional sexism in the workplace, such as the glass ceiling and unequal pay. Both the consumerism and the chick flick film represent a conscious submission. They are a normative force of patriarchal culture expressed by women.

### 2.2.3. Summary

After the reform and opening-up policy, the Consumerist Pseudo-Feminism, which has a similar approach as western post-feminism, arises in China. However, because of the power of females towards the patriarchal society, individualism is alienated into consumerism. The participants of the feminism wave, the new middle-class females, still show submission to the patriarchal society.

## 3. COMPARISON

The two feminism waves, the May-Fourth Feminism and the Consumerist Pseudo-Feminism share many traits. In the 1920s, only elite females can receive western education and learn feminist ideas. After the 1980s, only middle or upper-class women have enough money and time to pursue a sense of self-identification and self-empowerment. Thus, the participants of May-Fourth feminism are the educated female students, and the participants of the Consumerist Pseudo-Feminism are the new middle-class female in the economic reform era. The participants of those two waves can all be concluded into the middle or high class of society. Meanwhile, other females, the old women in the 1920s and lower-class females after 1902s, who constitute the vast majority of the female population are ignored by these two waves. This situation causes the differentiation within the sex, which separate the elite females from the other females, and it significantly diminishes the power of female since women cannot speak for themselves holistically. In the May-Fourth movement, Nora who leaves home cannot survive in the patriarchal society. In the economic reform era of China, women feel powerless towards professional discrimination. These two facts further indicate that a small group of elite females are too weak compare with the patriarchal society. In addition, the May-Fourth feminism alienates the equal right as freedom of love, and the Consumerist Pseudo-Feminism alienates individualism. Both of this alienation are affected by Chinese traditional patriarchal norms. Considering the complicated social context in China, it is impractical to replicate the western theory completely

## 4. CONCLUSION

Both the May-Fourth Feminism and Consumerist Pseudo-Feminism are the adoption of western liberal feminist ideals led by a small group of elite females.

Because of the differentiation within sex, the majority, of females, the lower class women, cannot participant in these two movements. This situation causes the lack of social power of women, which directly leads to the failure of those two movement. The failure of both May-Fourth Feminism and Consumerist Pseudo-Feminism proves that gender equality cannot be achieved by a small group of westernized elite females. To have enough power to change the patriarchal society, females of all classes should be united and speak for themselves. The approach to completely gender equality still needs to be explored, but the reasons of these failures can be a reminder of the further practice of feminism. Future researches in this area can focus on the comparison of social statue of women before and after 1980s. In this way, we can find out the effect of reform and opening-up policy on women. The change in social statue on women can be an important parameter of the view about elite group women in this paper.

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