

# The Image of Modern Women in Shanghai According to *The Young Companion* (1926-1945)

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## ABSTRACT

With the rapid development of the economy and society, Shanghai has changed into a modest port city in China with the introduction of western material and spiritual civilization and has become the largest metropolis in the far east since the 1920s. The pictorial magazine, *The Young Companion*(1926-1945), is the most popular fashion magazine in Shanghai. As a representative of concession culture and the important carrier of female discourse, *The Young Companion* has played a significant role in the construction of modern women. This essay will firstly discuss the diversity of cover girls in terms of identity and aesthetics. Following this, it will explain that the female consciousness and female self-identity are awakenings with development in Shanghai during the period of social transformation. Finally, it will look at the rapid conversion of the image of modern women and the female gaze.

**Keywords:** *The Young Companion*, modern women, female consciousness, Shanghai

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Shanghai, a city without darkness, has developed from an ordinary coastal county town to the largest port and trading port in China, becoming the most modern 'first prosperous commercial port' in China. And in the 1930s, it became an international metropolis that kept pace with London, Paris, New York, known as the 'Paris of the East'. Within the concession were banks and office buildings, restaurants, churches, clubs, cinemas, cafes, restaurants, luxury apartments, and racetracks, which became geographical markers and concrete symbols of Western material civilization. Under the background of living together between Chinese and foreigners, as an external modern small society, the concession is the first place to receive Western-style information and material.

In this city, the Western culture values material pleasure, rationality, laws, science, high efficiency, and expansionism, while the Chinese culture emphasizes simplicity, tradition, sensibility, idealism, dominance, inefficient, and closed-minded came together. Interestingly, although the two civilizations meet, Shanghai is a place where neither of the two prevails. In the early 20th century, it was known as one of the vilest cities in the world. For foreigners, Shanghai is a place of alienation, free from the influence and jurisdiction of their cultural knowledge. Everyone goes their own way but can quickly join in with local vices and feel no guilt.

In Shanghai, morality is an irrelevant or meaningless term, an atmosphere that even an uninvited guest can appreciate. Shanghai is also a port of call and a naval base, and seafarers often make up most of the foreign population. For them, Shanghai is a colorful and inspiring place that cannot be overstated on a tourist map[1].

For these travelers from across the ocean, Shanghai is a dreamland. For the Chinese, Shanghai is also unrestricted. Those who chose to come here for a new life (such as businessmen) were cut off from traditional China and the moral restraints it exercised because of the factual situation of indulgence in real life. Others wandered into urban areas during famine or war, were abducted from the countryside to serve as private servants, and lost their family ties. In traditional China, this situation is likely to lead to a life without food and clothing and moral corruption. Not surprisingly, many of these men joined gangs, and many women became prostitutes. By 1934, newspaper figures estimated that Shanghai was at the forefront of the world's cities regarding prostitution as a feature[2].

It is quite interesting to see whether it is imaginary or real, whether it is foreigners or Chinese, oriental prostitutes or unidentified night girls in 'Night Shanghai'. Mentioning Shanghai is always associated with women, intentionally or not. Furthermore, in the change of time and space, Shanghai has been unknowingly replaced by

a woman, a woman with the characteristics of the times, an image accepted by the public, an indispensable landscape. These urban women in Shanghai have gradually become the masters of telling stories about Shanghai after filtering through time, and the female images in the city have thus become a carrier of Shanghai's modern culture.

**2. THE COVER GIRLS ARE DIVERSIFIED IN TERMS OF IDENTITY AND AESTHETICS.**

As Susan Sontag says, Images are more real than anyone could have supposed[3]. Compared with women in history, one of the 'unique' aspects of women in the 20th century is that they were born with the invention of photography, a modern technology. Because of the invention of photography, their faces are saved from oblivion, and their joys, sorrows, and joys are recorded intuitively, not just by the description of words and the speculation of readers. The appearance of Chinese female images in the camera lens occurred almost simultaneously with the introduction of photography in China. That is to say; in the past 100 years, there have been countless female photographic images scattered in the long river of history, providing a lot of actual materials for the research on the change of female image. Thus, choosing materials becomes the key to studying the female image.

The pictorial *The Young Companion* was founded by Cantonese Wu Liande in Shanghai. The first issue was officially published in February 1926 and ran until 1945, closed in October. In the past two decades, from monthly to bimonthly, as well as the suspension and resumption of publications caused by the war, this pictorial has gone through many twists and turns and vicissitudes of life. In the 172 issues of the pictorial, the editors used more than 30,000 pictures and interspersed words to show us a golden age of Chinese modernity development from political, economic, military, cultural, artistic, entertainment and other aspects. *The Young Companion*, due to its large audience and wide distribution, at that time became the second most popular magazine in Shanghai after Life Weekly[4].

With the development and popularization of photography technology, photos are obviously more real than paintings, vividly reflecting real life, and the content presented by the pictorial covers almost all aspects of social life, making it the first large-scale comprehensive pictorial in China. It can be said that the appearance of *The Young Companion* is an important symbol of the continuous improvement of printing technology and photographic technology, and an important symbol of modernity, and the content of the pictorial that keeps pace with the times, whether intentionally or not, is constantly showing people's perception of 'modernity'. The pursuit and imagination of renewal.



**Figure 1** Cover girl of No 16. Several decorations of female's foot. There are different fashionable kinds of high heels

The cover girls of *The Young Companion* are diversified in terms of identity and aesthetics. The cover girls of the magazine are mostly beautiful females, or modern women, including film stars, singing stars, schoolgirls, socialites, celebrities and female soldiers. The total number of cover girl in *The Young Companion* is 162. However, the Identifiable cover girl is only 52, whose proportion is less than a third. Most cover girls are anonymous or just know their family names (like Miss Huang, Madam Wang). The reason for them to remain nameless is that showing a female's face in public was a brave and controversial act for most females at that time. A female, especially a young girl, must stay inside traditional Chinese society, revealing their name is too radical for her and her family. Despite the limitation of certain social and time factors, the covers with so many females are still meaningful progress. It is different from traditional privacy, which is passive and defensive; portraiture right is the first step toward the body right of women.

**Table 1[5].** The Identity of Cover Girl

Identity	Quantity
Film stars and singing stars	32
Schoolgirls	9
Socialites and Celebrities	7
Female athletes	2
Painter	3
Total	52

For these 52 identifiable cover girls, their costumes (film stars and singing stars in particular) lead the fashion trend in Shanghai and even the whole of China. Before the 1920s, the modern female usually means schoolgirls, representing progressive and the better-educated, wearing the uniform and clothing shoes. However, since the 1920s, the meaning of modern females has become fashionable, beautiful women with popular hairstyles wearing chi-pao

and high-heeled shoes. An example here is the cover girls of the No.16 *The young comparison* (As shown in Figure 1). In the past decades, through the evolution of the female image, we can also see its expression of modernity.

### 3. THE CLEAR CHANGE OF ARTISTIC STYLE AND ATTITUDE OF COVER GIRLS FROM THE 1920S TO 1930S.

Generally speaking, hairstyles and clothing best reflect a person's level of fashion. In the *The Young Companion*, you can see the evolution of women's fashion trends in different eras over time. The cover girl of the 1st issue of *The Young Companion* is the famous movie star Ms. Hu Die, who was named the "Queen of Movies" in 1933. Although Hu Die was a fashion trendsetter at that time, her hairstyle was still relatively simple and simple. The Figure 2 and 3 illustrate that most cover girls were shy and dignified in the 1920s.

The hairstyle on the cover was the same as that of most women in daily life. There was a bunch of bangs on the forehead that were not covered in full, and the rest of the hair. It was neatly gathered behind the head and combed into a low bun below, which looked very gentle and traditional.

In addition to hairstyles, the evolution of clothing also has to be mentioned. At that time, chi-pao was the most fashionable clothing for Chinese women, and *The Young Companion* also showed the graceful posture of women wearing chi-pao more than once. However, it is quite interesting that in the second issue of *The Young Companion*, Sun Chuanfang also wrote a short article hoping to ban women from wearing chi-pao. In his opinion, "women's clothes, long robes with large sleeves, and a dignified appearance", bare chest and arms are indecent. But obviously, such "raising arms and shouting" has no practical effect, and the style of chi-pao has produced more fashion sense in the changing times. According to issue 4, as can be seen in the group photo of "Women's Clothing and Fashion", the women's chi-pao in the 1920s was still relatively traditional. The long sleeves covered most of the arms, the cuffs were wide and large, and the length of the skirt also covered the ankles. The clothes are looser and do not focus on showing the female figure, which is very subtle[6].



Figure 2 Cover girl of No 2.



Figure 3 Cover girl of No 22.

With the passage of time in the 1930s, the popular elements of the West began to spread in Shanghai, and perm and curly hair became a trend. In the "Fashion Show" column of the 82nd issue of *The Young Companion*, the female stars wore all kinds of gorgeous chi-pao. At the same time, their hairstyles have also changed greatly: the bangs on the forehead are missing. Now, the buns of different shapes have turned into short hair full of ears, and the waves, large and small, are curled on them, showing a different kind of beauty. In the later period, waist-length hair and shawl curly hair are more and more refurbished. On the road of following the trend of European and American women, these modern girls never tire of it[7][8].

In the 1930s, the chi-pao gradually evolved from long-sleeved to sleeveless, and the height of the skirt continued to increase. The high-opening skirt made the thighs of women looming, and the tailoring close to the body showed the curves of women's bodies. As Figure 4 and Figure 5 present, self-confident beauty with a smile look directly into the camera. By showing skin, many

cover girls, including schoolgirls and female athletes, seem truly healthy and sexy[9].



Figure 4 Cover girl of No 93.



Figure 5 Cover girl of No 130.

#### 4. AWAKENING OF FEMALE CONSCIOUSNESS AND FEMALE GAZE

##### 4.1. Female body view, female sport and female recruits

###### 4.1.1 The movement in views on the female body and female sport

New family life and public discourse focus heavily on family health and hygiene. *The Young Companion* has been very clear at the beginning of its establishment. Each issue featured advertisements for Baohua dry milk in the initial few issues. The ad was highly provocative, but it also sparked a children's exercise and baby games.

In the sixth issue of *The Young Companion*, Baohua Dry Milk adopted a sales strategy to hold a baby competition to increase its popularity and expand sales. What is worth thinking about is not the cleverness of its sales method but its advertising slogan: "A strong country must first strengthen the people; strong people must first strengthen children." In this advertising slogan with strong nationalism, simple The drinking of milk is cleverly replaced by the need for a strong country to

protect the breed. In the next intensive baby competition, hundreds of pictures of children were published, and more importantly, in each issue, the pictures of children who entered the final. There is also an intimate photo of him (her) and his mother next to him. The mother and son or mother and daughter always look healthy, clean and full of vigor. The subtext in this is obvious: children are the hope of the country, and it is a mother's responsibility and honor to raise a strong child. To raise a strong child, the mother's physique should be healthy and vigorous[2].

In fact, this kind of language is not the original creation of *The Young Companion*. As early as the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, when China was stimulated by external shocks, women were already associated with the sacred goal of "strengthening the country and protecting the species" in the consciousness of the people who were concerned about the country's reform. "Women are the mothers of the nation. If you want to be ranked among the best in the country, you must first enter the race. The right of racial advancement is based on women. I would like to be a mother and wife. . ." These and other words have become the strongest voice of the times for a while. In the modern nation-state, when the family is still held as the carrier of national morality, the state is responsible for educating and "liberating" women because it is necessary to create biologically and culturally "well-educated" citizens. Efficient mother. Women's fitness is a matter of national prosperity. As a result, new developments such as women's education, women's sports, and women's social intercourse flourish and develop in such a social context[10].

The development of women's education has cultivated the female students of the May 4th period. After entering the society, they became educated women in the city, providing a new quality of way of thinking for good mothers. The development of women's sports not only provides physical health guarantees for good mothers in the society but also brings about the rise of a new social trend of thought and a change in women's discourse.

It is easy to think that in the early days of sports in China, it was also related to the country's prosperity and strength. Western sports have been vigorously promoted since they were introduced to China in the late Qing Dynasty. The reason why sports are related to women is not only because the new education will have sports. In addition to class, it was also related to the many sports meetings held in society. *The Young Companion* often published information about the sports world, and it spared no effort to report on large-scale sports events held in the society. Except for Shanghai, in addition to the inter-school games held by major schools, the Shanghai Games, the Far East Games, and the National Games[6].

#### 4.1.2 The popularity of female athletes and the appearance of female recruits

In 1930s Shanghai, what really brought a boom for women's sports and women's bodybuilding was the "mermaid" at that time. The girl in Figure 6 is Yang Xiuqiong, whose nickname is mermaid, a swimmer who won five national titles at the National Games in 1933.



Figure 6 Cover girl of No 77.

Yang Xiuqiong became a blockbuster and became the most famous news personality in the country. News about her activities and various photos can be posted almost every day. Seen in the newspapers, the major pictorial even regarded her as the most fashionable cover girl. At that time, she was only 15 years old, but she was tall and strong, especially her face was beautiful. Her complexion was ruddy, healthy and beautiful; hence she got the nickname "Mermaid". At that time, many citizens watched swimming competitions. When she was still holding the mentality of "watching the big girl take a bath", whenever she appeared in the audience, she seemed very quiet, everyone's eyes were cast on her, and even the bald monks rushed to buy tickets to see her. When she presided over ribbon-cutting ceremonies for various swimming pools and raised funds for various reliefs, the autographed photos of the charity sale were always quickly robbed[10].

The comment of *The Young Companion* praises Yang to the skies: Her posture is very pretty, charming, and composed, and her manner is both dignified and graceful. The image of her beautiful and strong figure by the swimming pool injected new words into the healthy body of the woman at that time. After many years of healthy exercise, it is not enough to have a healthy body. Just like Yang Xiuqiong, women must have not only a healthy physique but also a healthy and beautiful body[2].

In the 110th issue, *The Young Companion* reported that swimmers such as sisters Yang Xiuqiong were the main successes. Based on the average physique survey of famous Chinese female athletes, the standard of Chinese women's bodybuilding has been announced. Of course,

not everyone can achieve the above-mentioned figure, but this set of data shows that Appreciation of the health and beauty of the body has become a public speaker, and the evaluation of the female body is no longer hidden and shameful thing. Obviously, these female athlete 'star' is as influential as film stars and singing stars. To be an accepted modern woman, women need either an athletic body or a fashionable appearance.

There are some notes, 'Chinese women in the new era'. After the July Seventh Incident of 1937, the Chinese nation comprehensive Anti-Japanese War started. From 1937 to 1939, due to the Anti-Japanese War, there were 11 cover men (most were general) during this period. And the cover girls also become cover female soldiers and nurses. It is a symbol that the modern women into the trend of the times as all the people do during the War of Resistance.

#### 4.2. Assertive femininity and equal relationship has gradually emerged

##### 4.1.1 The awakening of female consciousness and female gaze

The awakening of female consciousness and female gaze can be seen according to the advertising poster of cigarette in *The Young Companion*. The notes in Figure 7 say: The beautiful woman is lovely, and our cigarette is also lovable. It is the obvious prominent male consciousness and objectifying female image because it means beauty, such as a good cigarette and a competent servant for the head of the house. The notes in Figure 8 say: This is the most beautiful and purest cigarette in China. It is the typical kind of the male gaze. The beauty (maybe a dancing girl) in the dress waits for a good partner in the dance hall. The two posters set up men to watch the main body of the female as the object being seen.



Figure 7 Cover girl of No 2.



Figure 8 Cover girl of No 22.

As time enters the 1930s, it is quite different. Figure 9 shows a standing gentleman offering a lady sitting on the sofa a cigarette. The male hole and male gaze have just disappeared in Figure 10. Only three ladies are smoking, chatting with each other, and the notes 'The quality cigarette like good friends' express their friendship.



Figure 9 Cover girl of No 74.



Figure 10 Cover girl of No 150.

This assertive femininity can be said to be meaningful in the conceptual framework of gender opposition that still prevails in society: from social stars in social fields to good wives and mothers in nuclear families, from sports queens to naked girls, male gaze and desire, and from the objectification and commodification of female individuals to the transformation of male objects in the height of female desire. These images of urban women derived from pictorials have an obvious dual structure: on the one hand, it allows these women to identify with the wealthy urban class and their way of life in the individual's imagination; on the other hand, it acts as a kind of the popular image logo also instantly reflects itself as a fashion spokesperson. At the same time, the gap between the image and the text in the pictorial also brings a dual structure of "imaginary" on the one hand and "symbolic" on the other hand to the female image. In this case, we have to explore whether this "dual structure" has some connection with the female image in the real social context. Because for many Chinese women, it may be true that most of them show an ambiguous attitude toward the female discourse and female consciousness fostered by the media. It is neither willing to reject the female discourse cultivated by the media nor reluctant to identify with the images produced by the media. This double reluctance not only indicates an internal struggle but also involves the problem that, for them, the images of women produced by the media may be the possibility of a new identity, perhaps more likely. A value system that they do not want to be fully endorsed by[1].

4.2.2 The status of women in the family was on the rise, and the right to speak was increasing.

In the intercourse between the sexes, due to the enhancement of women's self-confidence and the objective restraint of men's so-called gentleman's behavior, the relationship between men and women is not only equal, but even the weight of death is tilted towards women.

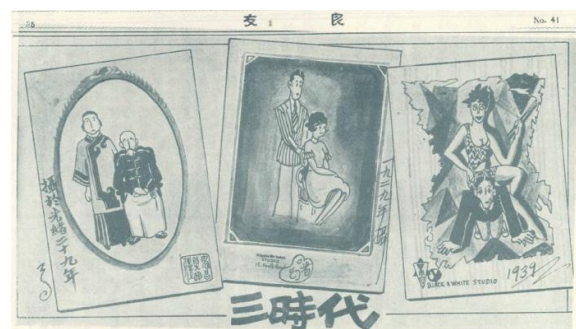


Figure 11 Three eras, 1903-1929-1939 The Figure was painted in April 1929.

In the 41st issue, Ma Guoliang, the editor-in-chief of *The Young Companion*, made a cartoon titled "Three Eras" (Figure 11), telling the relationship between men and women in a more vivid way. The

evolution of relationships between families in family status.

These are three hand-painted photos. The first photo was taken in 1903. Both men and women appeared in late Qing attire. The second photo was taken in 1929. The man was wearing a suit and leather shoes, and the woman was wearing a cheongsam. The biggest change was the position of the two in the photo. At this time, the woman was sitting on the chair, and the man was standing. After that, he put his hands on the back of the woman's chair, with a lot of intimacy and resignation in his demeanor; in the third photo, the time has changed to 1939, the men's clothing has not changed much, but the women's He has been dressed in mini-dresses that show off his chest and waist, and his perm hair has been cut short and flying. What is more interesting is that the man is made into a lap dog, and the woman is mounted on him. The woman not only sits on his back but also holds a cigarette[11].

Of course, the third picture was imagined in 1929 about the evolution of the relationship between men and women 10 years later. It may not be the same in reality after 10 years, but the first two pictures are those that can be seen every day in real life. Yes, the wedding photos of men and women often published in *The Young Companion* are indeed strikingly similar to the second photo. The change in the seat between men and women proves the change in the status of the two in the family and implies the change in the social gender role from the side. Ma illustrates the possibility of changing the status of the family relationship between the two sexes through such a display, breaking through the previous male-oriented concept of body and mind, breaking boundaries, breaking through constraints, and applying the values, aesthetics, and worldviews of urban women to Practical representation. In addition, the fashion change in clothing styles also implies a shift in gender power relations.

In the common social family model, women are generally considered to be more easily bound by marriage and family than men, but in Shanghai in the 1920s and 1930s, this usual relationship was often expressed as a gender role. The presentation of clothing through the medium of the body implies a different and even opposite gender power discourse from the past. The phenomenon of gender inversion began to exist in Shanghai. The social status of women in the family was on the rise, and the right to speak was gradually increasing in social concepts. Therefore, urban women's bodies are not only beautiful in appearance and beauty. There is a new trend. In social practice, the position of women's bodies has also undergone an unprecedented reversal, and they are no longer "accessories" of men. An equal relationship has gradually emerged between men and women, and the results are obvious[12].

## 5. CONCLUSION

The *Young Companion* has created a variety of female images, and it provides the majority of women with "different standards" of standard beauty. Ma Guoliang mentioned in his memory that the definition of these standard beauties is entirely subjectively determined by *The Young Companion*. To sum up, standard beauty has the characteristics of diversity, freedom and unity of subject and object. According to this, the function of *The Young Companion* in shaping standard beauty is obvious. By emphasizing and displaying women's bodies, it guides urban women's emancipation of mind and body and forms a consumption concept that meets the needs of modern life.

In one word, in term of the transformation of the society, as more and more people has diversified aesthetic values and liberal outlook in Shanghai, the awakening of female consciousness and the female gaze cause a booming evolution of the image of the modern female and their self-cognition.

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