



Nora in the Kitchen

A Study on the Correlation of Food Writing in Ladies' Journal (Funü Zazhi) and Feminism from 1915 to 1930

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Abstract. “Nora”, serving as a cultural symbol for exploring the way out of the traditional home for women in modern China, has become the typical image of modern Chinese women for many male enlighteners. The numerous exoduses and return of “Nora” in modern Chinese history symbolize the complex interplay of traditional and modern culture and customs. Ladies’ journal, an important journal on modern Chinese women’s studies, has published multiple women’s daily experiences and gender issues in the context of social salvation and survival, reflecting the variation of Nora in different periods of Chinese modern history. This article draws attention to specific food writing, and further analyses its influence in Ladies’ journal towards the promotion and development of feminism, as well as the social discussion of women’s social and domestic responsibilities through the illustration of food discourses in the implication of characteristics and symbolisms gender-related topics in different editorial philosophies affected by ideological trends over time.

Keywords: Modern Chinese women · Food writing · Ladies’ journal · Editorial philosophy · Gender discourses

1 Introduction

Food is a factor for the fulfilment of humans’ basic needs. In fact, it plays a huge role in the composition of traditional Chinese culture. In China, the record of food and drink can be traced back to the pre-Qin period. *Liji*, for example, as the ancient code of conduct, has led the daily diet to meet the requirements of the ritual system. “Food making is aligned with four seasons. Food should be warm like the springtime, soup should be hot like the summertime, sauce should be cool like the autumntime, and drink should be cold like the wintertime. (凡食齊視春時。羹齊視夏時。醬齊視秋時。飲齊視冬時)” suggests the Chinese traditional cosmic concept of the unity of heaven and man [1].

Food writing in the pre-Qin period was mostly for the record for religious sacrifices. *Shijing Xiaoya* has recorded a scene where people washed cattle and sheep, skinned and cooked them, and dedicated them to the gods (濟濟跼跼，絜爾牛羊，以往烝嘗。或剝或亨，或肆或將) [2]. In the 6th century A.D., *Qimin Yaoshu* first introduced the methods of

selecting, cooking and storing food from a practical point of view. Subsequently, *Wushi Zhonghuilu.*, written by Wu, a female resident in coastal China, recorded a famous Song Dynasty recipe that has successfully demonstrated her mastery of culinary [3]. All these historical proceedings tied in to the discussion of the relationship between food, politics, composition of society, and roles of genders.

In 1915, many feminis-related publications fell into bankruptcy due to Yuan Shikai's strict laws on opinion suppression and ban on women's participation in politics [4]. Yet, in the same year, *Ladies' journal* was launched with women being its main target audience. Based on the philosophy proposed by Liang Qichao and his followers for the feminist movement, the magazine was dedicated to creating "virtuous wives and mothers (Xianqi Liangmu)" for the realization of patriotic goal of "saving the country and preserving the seeds for the future (Qiangguo Baozhong)" [5]. The prologue of its first release mentioned that the magazine would "support the development of women's education, deliver news to women, and exchange knowledge in women's community" [6]. Food-making at that time, as a daily household affair in family life, was expected to be taken charge by women in the context of the salvation and survival of the country. Thus, food writing in the form of recipes, also took the role of promoting scientific knowledge of food hygiene and guidelines for women to serve their families.

The May 4th Movement in 1919 brought profound impact on the field of family and women's liberation. *Ladies' journal*, which advocated "virtuous wives and mothers" as its main editorial philosophy, was criticized as being so-called progressives at that time. In 1920, Zhang Xichen was appointed as the new editor-in-chief of the magazine. Since then, *Ladies' journal* demolished its old tune of "advocating three obedience and four virtues, specializing in cooking and sewing" [7], and replaced with an intense discussion on feminism. In 1925, with Du Jiutian as editor-in-chief, the magazine shifted its emphasis to the role of women in the family, and articles related to food writing came back [8].

2 Three Different Periods of Food Writing in Ladies' Journal

This article selects "recipe", "cooking", "diet", "food" and "eating" as keywords to search *Ladies' journal* (1915–1930) and compiled the following table to show the fluctuation of the number of articles related to women and food writing with the changes of editorial theories (Table 1).

The statistics in the table highlighted the interdisciplinary propaganda of food writing for the promotion of belief "virtuous wife and mother", as well as the editorial purpose of "saving the country and protecting the seeds for the future" in early publications of *Ladies' journal*. However, after May 4th when Zhang Xichen, an advocate on women's liberation, took in charge, the number of related was halved, and mostly replaced with commercial food advertisements. In September 1925, in order to meet the demand of female readers for "more discussion on how to raise a 'virtuous wife and mother'", [10] the number of family food writing articles increased back to fulfil its initial editorial philosophy of "focus on women's cultivation... to raise a sound society and family" [11].

The three editorial periods also reflect different concerns in terms of the specific content of the food writing.

Table 1. Fluctuations in quantities of articles related to women and food writing with the change of editorial theories (Retrieval tool: Database of Modern Women's Periodicals, Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica, Taiwan [9])

Periods	1915–1919 (Edited by Wang Yunzhang)	1920–1925.8 (Edited by Zhang Xichen)	1925.9–1930.6 (Edited by Du Jiutian)
Quantity (Articles related to women and food writing)	78	39 (Of which 27 advertisements)	66 (Of which 46 advertisements)

Before May 4th, when Wang Yunzhang was editor-in-chief, the food writings in Ladies' journal composed of a mixture of Chinese and Western culture, with a practical focus on modern knowledge about nutrition and hygiene:

First, the magazine translated and introduced many Western recipes, such as *Western Recipes (Cont.)* (1918) and *New Recipes (Cont.)* (1918), which introduced Chinese demographic to the emergence of Western food culture. In addition, it used Western dietary habits as benchmarks, such as *Vegetarianism is good for health* (1915), that invoked Darwin's theory of evolution and advocated the popular vegetarianism in the West. Besides Western recipes, the selection of Chinese recipes across nine consecutive issues, being mostly traditional Chinese cuisine such as *Emaciated Recipes* (1918), advocated the reflection and critique on extravagant diet of later generations. The choice of the ingredients in those nine recipes was economical, which fully reflects the pragmatic intent of the Ladies' journal before the May 4th Movement.

Secondly, food writing systematically introduced the concept of nutrition. Publications such as *The Health of Diet* (1915) and *The Chemistry Compounds of Food* (1916), popularized the nutritional composition and preservation methods of food from the perspective of modern chemistry. Also, as an element of good health, food writing publications suggested that diet should not be taken in excess, which corresponds to the traditional Chinese middle way perspective. From the selection of nutritious ingredients to cooking and storage food, women's role on maintaining good "hygiene" of the family diet was advocated, and parallelly, the modern concept of "hygiene" was introduced to China, which requires people to be sterile and clean in their daily food, clothing, and housing [12]. Women have become indispensable guardians and controllers of family hygiene, and was responsible for the health of the whole family [13].

Third, the magazine introduced the readers to the medicinal or health-care value of food, such as *The Medicinal Effectiveness of Vegetables* (1917), *Fasting and Mono-foodism for Stomach Diseases* (1917) and *On Dieting* (1917), etc., which promoted the healing effects of special dietary practices to readers, and demonstrated the magazine's aim to pursue health through diet in order to ultimately realize the concept of strengthening the body and saving the nation.

Adhering to the radical idea of liberating women during the May 4th period when Zhang Xichen served as the editor-in-chief of Ladies' journal, no recipes were published

in the magazine, and the content of food writing was relatively monotonous and theoretical, such as *The Laboratory Method of Daily Food* (1920) and *Principles of Cooking Food* (1923). By August 1925, when *Ladies'* journal asked for readers' opinions on innovation, feedback reflected the lack of interest in these contents and felt "pressured by the excessive discussion of women's liberation issues" having the mindset of wives and mothers being virtuous [14].

The relationship between the sharp decline in food writing and content reform was clearly demonstrated to be in relation with readers' views and social atmosphere. During the May 4th period, when new advocations conflicted with existing propaganda on gender issues on the social restraint and stifling of feminism, academics stepped up on putting up the discussion of women's liberation, making it a hot topic in society. Many male supporters participated in the movement through promoting through a scientific perspective in role of "Mr. Sai" (Science) in magazines for the sake of public education and the image reconstruction of modern Chinese women [15]. Cooking, as a skill of the "old" era, was placed in opposition to the mainstream discourse. Scientific and political articles in regards to gender role, though popularised, seldom took involvement in the discussion of the role of housewives – instead, the topic of gender roles through the discussion of an ideal progressive woman was portrayed from a male's perspective, and attracted a large amount of young male academic subscribers [4]. At the same time, there was a significant increase in food advertisements, with seven Quaker Oats advertisements, stating that Quaker Oats was "the best in children's food" [16]. The editorial philosophy of the advertisements clearly demonstrated the rapidly growing concern for children's nutrition and the commercialization of the magazine.

Although still no articles on recipes appeared during September 1925, when Du Jiutian was appointed as the chief of the magazine, food writing was more personal and more in line with the reading expectations of female readers. For example, *My Cooking Experience* (1929) discussed women's personal experiences in family life, *Cooking Tips* (1929) shared practical skills, and the MSG advertisements at the time used the slogan "Those who are good at cooking must use MSG" [17]. In 1927, "Family Research Volume" was specially set up. All of those have shown that the magazines of this period returned to the path of the everyday family. In addition, food writing was especially targeted at pregnant women and children as audience - *The Best Food for Babies* (1927) discussed the influence of human milk and dairy milk on the growth of infants and young children, and the hygienic problems of dairy milk in summer. Though this article perceived relatively unpleasant feedback on dairy milk for feeding, what is worth highlighting is that the author pointed out the use of dairy milk as an occasional alternative to human milk and the relationship between civilization rate and infant's ab lactate from human milk, that demonstrated the rise of scientific parenting at that time. It also hindered the shaping of modern mothers' image through the development of dairy nursing.

From the focus of the three periods of the food writing, it can be implied that *Ladies'* journal had a change in the issue of women and family, from shaping a "virtuous wife and mother" to calling on women to leave home, and finally to re-caring for women in the family. The transformation process of women and food writing reflected not only the change of the main editorial philosophy of this magazine, but also the intense debate

and dialectical thinking on the relationship between women and family, and the tension between traditional and modern culture in the modern Chinese society from 1910s to 1930s.

3 “Nora” Back to the Family?

In the 1910s, the concept of democracy and republicanism came into the public view in China, and academics used the magazine at that time as a forum to discuss political and social issues such as national salvation and the pursuit of modernity, striving to sink enlightenment ideas into the realm of urban civic culture. The magazine became a “public space” for criticism of current affairs, and the mass media showed democratic tendencies, reflecting the intellectuals’ efforts to build a “civil society” [18].

Ladies’ journal was a testing ground for the enlightenment of modern Chinese women. Joan Judge pointed out that Ladies’ journal imitated the highly successful Ladies’ Times (Funü Shibao) by transmitting new daily experiences to its female readers through pictures, inspiring and educating women to embrace modern education to better educate the nation’s next generation [19]. For example, the cover of the first volume of Ladies’ journal in 1915 featured a woman reviewing her lesson in the boudoir. Women’s education has become one of the missions of the times for national salvation.

After sorting out the social and cultural background of Ladies’ journal, this chapter tries to answer the following questions: Did the Ladies’ journal in its founding period (1915–1919) regard food writing as an important tool for the promotion of gender roles that was against the trend of the times, and encouraged women to stay at home? Was it really a diversion to the “old” moral ethics, as the critics of the May 4th period said? How much did the reform in food writing in Ladies’ journal during the time of Zhang’s editorship benefit women’s liberation? Was the return of the role of the domestic “cooking” wife during the period of Du’s editorship another historical regression? Finally, this chapter will explore what kind of “Nora” can be called a truly modern “exodus” for modern Chinese women.

Food is indeed a “domestic” topic, “In the past, when women were in charge of culinary, only wine and food were discussed” [20]. In traditional Chinese society, women’s education is based on the “Four Virtues” (Side), of which “women’s merits” (Fugong) includes presiding over family’s meals. Ban Zhao’s *Women’s Commandments: Women’s Actions* in the Later Han Dynasty stated that “cleaning and preparing the food and wine and serving guests is one of the women’s merits” [21]. Traditional women’s education is based on Confucian rituals, which required women to follow the ideas of “three obedience and four virtues” (Sancong Side) and “the husband is the wife’s rule” (Fuwei Qigang), and extinguish their own subjectivity under the traditional patriarchal system.

Food writings in the founding period of Ladies’ journal are completely different from the ancient Chinese ethics of “women’s virtues”. First, in terms of content, practical skills were shared to equip women with basic knowledge of modern science and nutrition rather than traditional moral teachings; second, the importance of women in the issue of nationality was raised in terms of the editorial leading ideology. Chinese women were always aphasia and marginalized in ancient society, but in the modern food writing, women gained a place in the national discourse. Third, in terms of the target of caring,

while women in ancient times had to serve the whole family of their in-laws, the food writing in *Ladies' journal* focused on the “nuclear family” (Xiaojiating) in the Republican period. The idealized “nuclear family” was the product of free love between a man and a woman, and structurally, it was basically a family formed by a husband and wife and children, which was completely different from the “traditional family” of “parental order”. At that time, the Mandarin Butterfly School (Yuanyanghudiepai) also strongly advocated the Victorian model family, and established the role of women as “virtuous wives and mothers” in the new type of nuclear family [22].

Therefore, the magazine's stance of “virtuous wives and mothers” at that time was actually a reflection of old-fashioned belief on the deprivation of women's political participation during Yuan Shikai's dictatorship, and the magazine's efforts to create “republican women” who were open-minded, enthusiastic about national affairs, and pursued a new way of womanhood [19]. The readership of “virtuous wives and mothers” in the food writing was not subservient to traditional rituals; they became the key players in deciding “what to eat” in a country where “food is the god” (Minyishiweitian), with a modern concept of social division of labour, highlighting women's autonomy and subjectivity in the family.

The “kitchen”, as a private sphere within the family, has become the focus of discussion on gender issues in modern times, especially during the May 4th period, when many Chinese “Nora” began their exodus from the private sphere to the public display. From the perspective of those radical progressives, the image of the “virtuous wife and mother” cooking in the kitchen depicted in the food writing was in any case tainted with the old social stigmas. After Zhang Xichen took over as the editor-in-chief, he initiated the reform of the magazine, with the guiding ideology of “seeking the advancement of women's status and the reform of the family”, [23] and rushed towards the trend of women's liberation. However, from the changes in the readership analysed in the previous article, the impact of magazine reform through the intense discussion on feminism was appeared to be minimal.

Housework itself does not have the antagonistic factors of the traditional and modern culture. Modern food writing contains rich connotations of modernity and has a higher humanistic concern in the social division of labour in gender prospect. At the same time, women's liberation should be independently on their own for it is believed that advocacy from male authority in nature compromised the traditional patriarchal framework of male dependence. During Du's tenure as editor-in-chief, the return of family food writing was more like a declaration of emancipation for the female subjectivity. They expressed their reading preferences to the magazine by means of *letters from readers* column, manifesting their perception of the identity of the “gatekeepers” [24] of family diet.

“What to eat” and “What kind of food is really beneficial to people's livelihood?” These are what I am writing to dedicate to my compatriots who value “food” throughout the country, especially to our compatriots who are in charge of the food administration of a family. (Questions on Food, Ladies' journal, 1930)

The selection, cooking, and storage of family food are all handled by housewives. It is noticeable through the discussion of food that the flow of power in household shifted from traditional patriarchy to modern decisive roles for responsibility takers. The connotation of the modern power transcending was not a simple opposition between tradition and

modernity, nor a retrogression to the traditional society. Its modernity is based on the positive aspects of Chinese tradition, the recognition of power and responsibility from women themselves, and the self-identity of modern women.

4 Conclusion

Since 1918, when the Ibsen plays were proposed by the New Youth (Xinqingnian), “Nora” has been officially known to the Chinese public. Before the introduction of Nora into China, the women’s liberation movement had already taken shape in the late Qing Dynasty and early Republican period. Ladies’ journal, founded in 1915, conveyed the idea of enlightenment and the concept of women’s education to “save the country and preserve the seeds for the future” through food writing. Nora’s exodus was carried forward among the radical academics of the May 4th Movement. Then from the late 1920s to the early 1930s, academics began to care about the living conditions of Nora after she ran away from the traditional family, causing a wave of thinking to return to a new type of nuclear family. Food and drink, as a combination of private and public, demonstrates the interaction between the modern women’s liberation movement and the national crisis, as well as the tearing and tension between traditional ethics and modern theories. History is not a linear line of development. What we call traditional women’s morality is not entirely old-fashioned, and the realization of women’s liberation in the sense of true modernity does not require the total abandonment of past experiences and setting aside of women’s own identity. The argument of feminism by male academics in modern China was still the discipline of physical and social responsibility based on the patriarchal vested interest system.

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