Summary description:

With the spread of nationalism from Europe to Asia in the 19th century, both Europeans and Asians began to see the news media as mighty tools able to solve (or create) many of the problems facing a state, its government, and its people. Even today, the (paper) bullets of the press (and other media forms) are attributed with enormous and universal powers: they are said to represent public opinion, to promote the formation of a (not always rational) public sphere; they are said to be able to stir up emotions and mobilize citizens and to create values, identities and nationalist (and separatist) feelings. The media are considered empowering and empowered agenda-setters. It is assumed that they are able to instigate change, even to make revolutions. At least since Carlyle and Macaulay established the Fourth Estate as a respectable and mighty institution in the early 19th century, these contentions have been repeated so often that they have become almost axiomatic. Quite accordingly, the media have been seen as an indispensable ingredient of modernity, a global “modernity-in-common,” as Carol Gluck would call it, evident in China as well as elsewhere.

But how, really, have media impacted on the world and its transcultural entanglements? How powerful are they in instigating change? How empowering can they be and for whom? Are they more a reflection of circumstances, memories or are they actually able to manipulate these, or even to create their own realities? Are they followers or leaders, do they reinforce or challenge conventional wisdom and conceptual models? (How) do they and their contents inscribe themselves into something one could call cultural memory? In short: (to what extent) do the media have agency, really?

In this book, I will approach the question of how media have impacted on the world and how powerful they are in instigating (transcultural) change by using a specific set of media, Chinese women’s magazines in the long 20th century. I will study the ways they have changed over time: their contents, formats, and functions. The book will argue that the women’s journal which first appeared as a new medium in China around the turn of the twentieth century, began to dominate contemporary discourse rapidly to become a critical site for the production of knowledge and culture (not just for women).

The book will trace the historical development of women’s magazines in China, their global interactions as circulating media constantly reproducing from other media, and their translations into action by and through the opening up of new media formats. It will discuss in particular, their powers in the making and the remaking of a particular trope, the figure of the New (Wo)Man, and its inscription into Chinese cultural memory.

Why study women’s magazines—something so ephemeral, so seemingly marginal? Because women’s magazines rule the world. Newspaper stands from Delhi to Changsha, from London to Vladivostok sell them. These journals claim to disseminate particular knowledge “appropriate” to women, they provide women with a (reading and writing) space of their own, at least nominally, and in this space, they propagate ever new versions of the “New (Wo)Man.” While diversity is a striking element in the production, the dissemination and the consumption of these journals around the world, there is much that is shared by them no matter whether they appear in 18th century England or in 21st century China (if only for their perennial interest in fashion and beauty, or cooking, cleaning and caring). It is not the arrival of franchise magazines and their “global conquest” in the second half of the 20th century, then, which triggers the formation of a common “language” (including images and specific genres of text) in (wo)men’s

1 I must admit that I am not a regular reader of women’s magazines at all. I understood very well, therefore, why the bookstore in China which our institute’s library cooperates with, first refused to answer to our large order of contemporary women’s magazines. It took quite a while to convince them that the magazines were actually ordered for research.
magazines around the world. The “Feminist Internationale” in the early 20th century, which focused on women’s education, women’s equality and economic independence, women’s public rights and women’s private health, to highlight but a few important topics, already marks the beginnings of international and intercultural exchanges between “(wo)men circles” and their reflection on the pages of the world’s (wo)men’s magazines. In short: the book will attempt a systematic examination of the Chinese women’s press as a means of transforming our understanding of the profound changes China experienced during the long 20th century—especially with regard to gender relations.

This is a book, then, about the role that women’s magazines played in the crafting of gender roles (the New Men and New Women of an ever New China) in the making of legacies and opportunities of womanhood and manhood over the last and in the coming century. Intentionally, it is a book about intersections between society and media, nation state and gender, and about discursive and actual behaviour. It asks: How does one read a women’s magazine? And why? It is my contention that reading women’s magazines from their beginnings in 1898 and to the present day, is a way of tracing the formation of visual and discursive mindmaps, and thus of understanding how women and men and their relationship to each other have been (re)conceived and (re-)conceptualized in China over time. The book thus seeks to read women’s magazines as a specimen which allows us to study the mentalities of a particular time by contextualizing and historicizing their contents.

It does so by tracing the genealogy of two figures which I have chosen to call the “New Woman” and, by analogy, the “New Man” as their special, innovative, even scandalous qualities are often highlighted on the pages of women’s magazines (if not only there). The book will probe into women’s magazines’ powers in creating tropes of this New (Wo)man in Chinese cultural memory by drawing on texts and images in this medium and by questioning how these texts became to form discursive patterns and the images visual mindmaps inscribing themselves into cultural memory. I try to see what shapes these tropes take in a particular period of time and what functions they fulfill in particular sets of magazines.

Throughout the book, I address the complexity of the women’s magazine in relation to its special form (a magazine) and its gendered nature (catering for women) and to the dynamic between these two factors. This is why, in the first part, I begin with an examination of genre and language (levels) and their possibilities of manipulating and restricting the reading of text, thus tracing evidence for the (peculiar) presence of women as readers within the text of women’s magazines from the late Qing and into the Republic (Part I: Form and Content—Fair-Sexing It, Chapter 1 “New (Wo)men and Old Scandals—Making News, Mixing Genres and Gendering the Fictional and the Factual in Chinese Women’s Magazines” & Chapter 2 “History and Herstory—New Men and New Women and the Language of Women’s Magazines in late Qing and Republican China”).

Next, I turn, in the second part of the book, to the contents of the women’s magazine as a particular, “fair-sexed” genre that was prescribing roles to the “fair sex” as well as to her counterpart (Part II: Content and Form—Creating Types, Chapter 3 “The Student, the Soldier and the Good Wife—Cooking, Cleaning and Caring in late Qing and early Republican Magazines”; Chapter 4 “The Beauty and the Beast—Modernity and Satire in Linglong (Elegance) and other Republican Magazines”; Chapter 5 “The Spendthrift and the Miser—New (Wo)Men and Money in China’s Republican (and Contemporary) News-Media”). I will show that, as the text selects its audience, and as the implied audience in the text in turn provides a normatizing code for the real audience, the inclusion of women as an implied readership served certain ideological purposes: first a particular type of woman would be advocated and prescribed to those who were able to read and tell it to women, and second a reevaluation of the male reader (and writer) of newspapers would take place: to write for and to women, and to read and talk about women was to be fashionable and modern. Even women involved in the process of writing women’s magazines and thus creating images of women as implied readers would
go by these (male) formative standards. Finally in PART III: Frames and Contexts: Manufacturing Realities (Chapter 6 “Debating the Other, Creating the Self—Foreigners on the Pages of China’s Women’s Magazines;” Chapter 7 “Feeling Matters—Gender Interactions and the making of Cultural Memory in China’s Vernacular Media, 1900s-2000s”), I will evaluate the pervasive qualities and powers not only in creating cultural memories of gender tropes in the formation of gender relations throughout China’s long 20th century but also in reflecting upon and affecting tangible realities in space and time in the third part of the book.

The book will study, then, on the one hand, the making of a genre that appears as a new medium to the China of the 20th century, that lived and thrived for several decades before falling into comparative oblivion after the founding of the People’s Republic of China, and question its power, on the other: the first four chapters of the book deal with women’s magazines from the early period of growth (chapter 1-4). The second set of chapters (chapter 5-7) also incorporates women’s magazines (and other media) since after 1949 while it discusses different types of women’s magazines, those sponsored officially by the League of Women (such as Zhongguo Funü and Nongjianü baishitong) and later foreign-financed franchise journals (such as Elle and Vogue), taking into consideration that since the late 1980s, the market for women’s magazines had recovered, and since the 1990s we see another publishing and diversification boom—a sign, perhaps, of the powers attributed to these media as well.

The book will take advantage of the multi-genre format of the magazine, which includes diverse types of text and image and combinations thereof, in order to highlight particular models, in text and image: the contradictory figures of virtuous soldier and good housekeeper (chapter 3), beauty and beast (chapter 4), and spendthrift and miser (chapter 5). It will discuss images of (foreign) Other and (native) Self (chapter 6) as well as the intimate couple (chapter 7) all employed in creating the trope (and in pushing the reality) of the new (wo)man for the long 20th century. While throughout, the focus will be on Chinese women’s magazines, I will read these sources both against other contemporary Chinese print media and in a global context, in order to establish their particular vision of (wo)manhood for China and the world.

There are two points, I would like to make throughout this study: My first point will be to probe the significance of some of the tropes to be observed on the pages of these journals throughout an entire century: why and when do these come into being on the periodical page and, more importantly, what do they mean beyond that page? What, therefore, if the “real” experience of the past (and the present) is not at all about these iconic images which are the traces of the extraordinary only? What does the scandalous New Woman, the exceptional New Man whom we meet on the pages of these magazines tell us about the “real” experience of the past (and present)? Can such time-resistant tropes or icons epitomize the “new”? Can they help to “form or ‘picture’ a reality” or to “make belief/ve” at all? To what extent, then, do the media, women’s magazines just being one particular example, actually affect historical experiences and realities?

In tracing the genealogy of two figures which I have chosen to call the “New Woman” and the “New Man” I will present a seemingly counterpuntal reading: these icons appear in only slightly changed guise throughout the 20th century and if one were to trace further back, one would find similar spendthrifts and misers, beauties and beasts also in the classical lore. While it is my contention that we may want to continue to be extremely careful in assessing the realism as well as the reality effect of these constantly repeated tropes, it may be safe to read them as a mindmap of a society’s mentalities, if not a googlemap streetview of its lived realities. The age-old discourse of women as spendthrifts does not mean that women actually are spendthrifts but is intimately linked to their position as household bursars and the fears associated with that. The trope invokes an ethical position: women should be in charge of the finances, really, but they should do it well.
Throughout the book, then we will be able to see that far from spreading radically new thoughts and new ideas alone, Chinese women’s magazines take up on familiar (global) stereotypes and tropes about women. The introduction of women as relevant topics of public discourse and as implied readers of various kinds of news-media, a revolution that had taken place even before the first women’s magazines surfaced around the turn of the century in China, need not, however, be considered a revolution only half accomplished, even though the recurrence of familiar topics into the 21st century may suggest this at first sight. For this view can be significantly complicated by reading women’s magazines of later decades in conjunction with the earlier texts in a vertical reading: clearly, over time certain—sometimes rather astonishing—freedoms were opened up not just to certain groups of (elite) women, and while these freedoms could only be attained in negotiation with powerful forces of male circumscription clearly evident on the pages of the women’s press throughout the period under study here, the fact that they were won out in the end, may make us rethink whether and to what extent the making of cultural tropes, of discursive patterns and visual mindmaps that the first half of the 20th century created, on the pages of women’s magazines, among others, was crucial here.

China’s print media, I would argue, and women’s journals among them, in spite of being cast in ephemeral form, have a primary significance in circulating meaning: they obviously address their readers as consumers but more importantly as readers, not only in search of entertainment but also in need of instruction in their various and everchanging social roles. From the start, magazines which defined their readership as “women” took on, more or less overtly, the task of defining what it meant to be a “woman” (and, by relation, a “man” as well) or what it meant to be a particular kind of woman: a mother, a lady with time and money, a working (or peasant) woman, a New Woman a Chinese woman and so on and as hindsight shows, these definitions would later be translated into tangible realities.

And this is the second point, I would like to make in my book: I will show, that women’s magazines are not focussed on women alone, but perpetuated images of both sexes (a point which may also explain joint author- and readership). While the figure of the New Woman is perhaps more striking than that of the New Man, he is always implicitly and often even explicitly addressed in discussions of the New Woman as well. Essentially, the story of the New Woman on the pages of China’s women’s magazines and beyond is never just one of her, but of „he and she“ 她與她 (which, incidentally is the title of an influential and enormously popular caricature column published, among others, in Linglong —the images of which were derived from a now totally obscure American journal, Jim Jam Jems). It is my contention that we must pay more attention to this interaction of sexes rather than just focussing on one of them in our reading even of women’s journals, so explicitly addressed to just one and not the other.
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