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SPECIAL ISSUE: SOCIAL CHANGE AND CHINESE WOMEN

A Semiotic Analysis of Female Images in Chinese Women's Magazines¹

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本研究采用符号学分析法,分析了《中国妇女》、《家庭》、《女友》、《时尚·Cosmopolitan》四本中国女性杂志刊载的五个当代中国女性人物故事,得出铁姑娘、贤内助、时尚女三种女性形象类型。检视这三类女性形象的深层意义,可以发现它们事实上蕴含了传统父权社会对女性片面价值观的社会迷思;同时,它们也在鼓励女性参与父权体制建构的消费主义意识形态。

关键词: 中国大陆传媒 女性杂志 女性形象

This study conducts a semiotic analysis of five stories about contemporary Chinese women presented in four women's magazines, namely *Women of China*, *Family*, *Girlfriend* and *Trends Cosmopolitan*, and identifies three images of women: iron girl, understanding wife and stylish woman. A closer examination of these three images will reveal that they actually contain prejudicial social myths of women held by traditional patriarchal society and that they play an important role in encouraging women to practice the consumerist ideology constructed by the patriarchal system.

Keywords: Chinese mainland media, women's magazines, female image

I. Motivation and Purpose of This Study

Rather than being an independent feminist movement, the women's liberation movement in twentieth century China was merely a part of the democratic revolution of the Chinese people. In other words, what Chinese women fought against in the course of their liberation was not powerful masculine hegemony in the political, economic and cultural domains, but

1 This thesis is an abbreviated version of the article originally entitled "Iron Girl, Understanding Wife and Stylish Woman—How Chinese Women's Magazines Construct Images of women" (铁姑娘、贤内助、时尚女——中国女性杂志建构的女性形象), *China Media Report* [中国传媒报告], 2009, no. 1. ISSN 0252-9203

imperialism, feudalism and bureaucratic capitalism, which were denounced as “three big mountains crushing the Chinese people.” Therefore, Chinese women’s liberation movement was, ironically, not led by Chinese women themselves but by the opposite gender—Chinese men.²

Women of China is a magazine first published by the Council of the Women’s Movement of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in Yan’an in 1939. It provides a detailed, kaleidoscopic record of the course of Chinese women’s emancipation and changes in the image of women spanning the period from the war between the CPC and KMT to the founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949. Its cover pictures and content show that the “new women” of the PRC, who had boldly stepped into areas previously dominated by men, were portrayed as “degendered” (in other words, masculinized); that is, the stereotypical image of women was that of a Hua Mulan, the fictional heroine who disguised herself as a man and took on masculine identity.

With the initiation of reform and opening up in 1978, Chinese women gave up their ability to “hold up half the sky” in the military, industrial and agricultural fields and gradually reassumed their long-suppressed gender role. Post-reform changes in the status of “new women” have drawn increasing media attention. Since the Fourth UN World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, Chinese media and gender studies have made obvious progress thanks to the introduction of Western feminist theory, the setting up of the NGO media forum of the World Conference on Women, the research program on “women’s image in the media” initiated by the Women’s Studies Institute of the All-China Women’s Federation, the creation of the Media Monitoring Network of the Women Journalists Association of Beijing, and the extensive coverage of gender studies in such media organs as *Chinese Women Daily*. Consequently, issues about and images of Chinese women have become a high-profile concern.³

Recent years have seen considerable research by mainland academics on images of women constructed by newspapers, magazines, advertisements and other media channels. These studies have largely adopted the content analysis approach, focusing on post-reform changes in women’s images; they rarely provide a structuralist semiotic analysis of the social myths and ideologies underlying these texts.

Among the numerous media outlets, women’s magazines are assumed be produced for women and to have content that directly addresses women’s issues. At the same time, they are seen as products of pop culture which keep pace with women’s life experiences.⁴

2 Bao Xiaolan, ed., *Evaluation of the Studies of Western Feminism*, p. 262.

3 Sun Lu, “Evolution of Female Stereotypes in Modern Mass Media,” p. 2.

4 Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women*.

This study has selected data from four Chinese women's magazines: *Women of China* (中国妇女), *Family* (家庭), *Girlfriend* (女友) and *Trends Cosmopolitan* (时尚·Cosmopolitan). These four magazines, aimed at different audiences, are representative of different periods. The study aims to investigate the way Chinese women's gender identity was concealed by ideology and degendered (masculinized) in the pre-reform period and the way this long-suppressed identity was revived in the post-reform period. We attempt to see what kind of social myths underlie the different images of women and what ideologies they construct.

II. Methodology

In recent years there have been a number of studies of the images of women constructed by Chinese media.⁵ Broadly speaking, these studies adopt a content analysis approach, as it works well in processing a large amount of sample data, offers a systematic understanding and analysis of what the media actually say, and enables investigation of the images of people portrayed in the media and of social trends and values.

Yet this approach has some limitations. Van Zoonen has pointed out that content analysis tends to focus on surface media content, which is a serious limitation because researchers cannot read between the lines to excavate meanings beyond the surface level or discuss hidden content and other related meanings. Only actual signs appearing in media texts, such as words, sentences, texts, images, etc. can be included in such analysis.⁶

Another researcher, A. McRobbie, has argued that semiotics yields more than traditional content analysis, since it concerns itself not only with the surface data presented in media content but also with the underlying information.⁷

The American pragmatist philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce and the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure have been hailed as the co-founders of modern semiotic studies, while the Italian semiotic scholar Umberto Eco and French scholar Roland Barthes are considered the most important pioneers in the application of semiotic theory to analyses of social phenomena and popular culture.⁸

Semiotics emphasizes that the meaning of a sign is rooted in some deep socio-cultural context; surface information is not sufficient to understand how meaning is produced. John

5 See, for example, Luo Yunjuan and Hao Xiaoming, "Shaping Women's Image in Media and The Social revolution – An Empirical Study of the Cover Figure's Image from *Women of China*"; Sun Lu, *op. cit.*; Chen Guiqin, "Female Images in Women's Fashion Magazines."

6 Liesbet Van Zoonen, *Feminist Media Studies*, pp. 97-98.

7 A. McRobbie, *Feminism and Youth Culture*, p. 91.

8 Chang Chinhua and Ke Yonghui, *Women in Media/Women's Media*, p. 16.

Fiske, a media scholar, suggested three levels of meaning for signs on the basis of Barthes' analysis of meaning:

First, surface meaning, or the relationship between the signifier and the signified or between a sign and its external referent. Barthes calls this denotation, that is, the common sense or obvious meaning of a sign.⁹

Second, social myth. According to Barthes' theories, a sign produces meanings in three ways, one of which is through myth. Barthes held that the main way myth operates is to "naturalize" history; in other words, since a myth is originally the product of a particular social class that has gained dominance in a specific historical period, the meaning transmitted by myths is inevitably related to this historical context. However, the operation of myths tends to deny such a relationship and to present meaning as a natural formation rather than as a historically based or socialized product. By mystifying or veiling their origins, myths manage to hide their political and social meanings.¹⁰

Third, ideology. Signs do not become obsolete unless their users stop using them; in other words, the myths of a culture and their hidden values can be maintained only when there is agreement between users' communications and their signs. The relationship existing between sign users and signs on the one hand and myth and meaning on the other is precisely an ideological one.¹¹

III. Discussion

This study has selected for analysis a special report from *Women of China* on Ms Zuo Chengqin, seventh president of the Dasheng Textile (Group) Company and delegate at the seventeenth CPC National Congress. The analysis uses Fiske's theory of the three layers of semiotic meaning, with view to analyzing the social myths hidden behind the narrative structure of the text and the ideology that it seeks to construct.

We attempt to find whether some social myths involving values prejudicial to women in a traditional patriarchal society are hidden behind the narrative structure of *Women of China's* reportage about "model female figures" and the patriarchal ideology within the state discourse system.

9 John Fiske, *Introduction to Communication Studies*, pp. 115-133.

10 John Fiske, *op.cit.*

11 John Fiske, *op.cit.*, pp. 217-247.

1. Loving country and family, enthusiastic about labor: the iron girls

(1) Surface narrative structure

Title	Feminine grace of a woman delegate at the seventeenth CPC National Congress Ms Zuo Chengqin carries on the legend of a hundred year old brand
Subtitle	In 1895 a Qing dynasty scholar who had topped the imperial examination system, Zhang Jian, opened the Dasheng Textile Plant. In 1970, Zuo Chengqin, then a nineteen year old girl, entered the plant as a textile worker. Many years later, she became the seventh president of the hundred year old enterprise, now renamed Dasheng Textile Group.
Main narrative	<p>1. Ms Zuo entered the plant along with her younger sister. As the older one, she was nicknamed Big Zuo, while her sister was Little Zuo. A short time before being interviewed for this story, she was chosen as one of only two delegates to the Seventeenth CPC National Conference from Nantong City. She has collected a number of titles: National March Eighth Red Banner Pacesetter, one of China's Hundred Top Businesswomen, delegate to the Tenth National People's Congress, etc. Over the last ten years, she has managed to restructure, acquire and merge more than ten factories employing over ten thousand workers.</p> <p>2. Being an "iron girl" who could compete with men was what most young female workers wanted when Zuo started working at the plant in 1970. She was tall, strong and enthusiastic. With two hands, she could carry six sliver cans weighing more than five kilos each when other workers could lift only four. When a sewage drain was clogged, she would roll up her sleeves to clear it. Once she led the plant's young vanguard troops in scraping clean 480,000 old bricks from demolished houses to build a dining hall.</p> <p>3. Her husband retired several years ago. She could have handed over the bulk of the housework to him, but she still gets up at six o'clock every morning to prepare breakfast for the whole family, and helps her granddaughter get dressed if she has time. She often says, "Women are women, housework comes easy to us, that's the natural division of labor."</p> <p>4. Now she feels very happy. She's never failed in business. She has a good, supportive family behind the lines to back up her frontline work—a nice husband, son and daughter-in-law (whom she treats tolerantly as a child). Zuo is known for her saying "Work can be put off till tomorrow, but you only have one father, one mother, one husband and one child."</p>
Picture data	The story comes with two photos. One is of a smiling Zuo Chengqin sitting at a desk, wearing a dark striped blouse, captioned: Big Zuo says, "I've got broad shoulders." The other is of a building site where Zuo, in a light brown jacket, is talking to four male workers in front of a blueprint while two others stand behind them. The caption is: It's good working with Zuo.
Data source	<i>Women of China</i> , 2007, no. 8, pp.14-15.

(2) Social myths

(a) A career woman owes her success to a supportive family.

The text shows that Zuo Chengqin is very successful in her career. Over the past ten years, she has managed to achieve the restructuring, acquisition and merger of ten factories, giving jobs to thousands of people. However, she insists that she owes her success to her “behind the lines back-up”—her family. Obviously, successful career woman though she is, she like most Chinese women is still seized with the social myth that “Successful career women owe their success to a supportive family.”

(b) Women are naturally good at housework.

As we can see from the text, Zuo could have given up her housework burden after her husband retired a few years ago; however, she still held that “Women are women, housework comes easy to us, that’s the natural division of labor.” Her view suggests that she is unable to reject the social myth that “women are naturally better at housework than men,” which in turn helps to consolidate the superiority of the middle class male.

(3) Ideology

The text shows that Zuo, who has made a great contribution to Dasheng Textile Plant, has received many accolades from the state including National March Eighth Red Banner Pacesetter, one of China’s Hundred Top Businesswomen, National Model Worker in the Textile Industry, delegate to the Tenth National People’s Congress, delegate to the Seventeenth CPC National Congress, etc., all of which indicate the state’s recognition of her hard work. Her success is not only evident in market competition but and more importantly, is affirmed in the form of recognition by the state. In addition, the depiction of the young Zuo as a degendered (or more exactly, masculine) iron girl during her early years in the plant and the two photos showing a short-haired Zuo in dark clothing reveals the attempt of the All-China Women’s Federation, sponsor of *Women of China*, to revive the image of the “iron girls,” with its male garb and identification with male standards, from the bygone era when “women could hold up half the sky.”

Finally, the comment in the text that Zuo owes her success to family support suggests that successful career women who have lived through “the old days” still have to be grateful to their families. While seemingly displaying subjective female consciousness, they have unconsciously abandoned their role of “holding up half the sky” to once again become appendages of men. The logic binding these texts reveals that *Women of China* is trying to construct a traditional patriarchal society’s set of norms for women.

2. “*Understanding wife*” embraces the values of traditional marriage

Since reform and opening up, Chinese women have been reviving the gender identity previously concealed by class consciousness. Giving up the role of “holding up half the sky,” they have begun to appear as women who have to balance career, family and emotional life.

Magazines like *Women of China*, *Family*, and *Girlfriend* have started to focus on women's problems, such as how to manage emotions, how to maintain family happiness, what to do about an affair outside marriage, how to rebuild a marriage, what becomes of women who have an affair, etc. These reports have helped to construct a new post-reform image of Chinese women.

Selecting three reports from *Women of China*, *Family*, and *Girlfriend*, and applying Fiske's three layers of semiotic meaning, this study aims to present an analysis of the social myths beneath the surface narrative structure of the text and the ideology that they attempt to construct.

Story 1: Tolerant and understanding wife

(1) Surface narrative structure

Title	Too Many Demands Nearly Scare Husband Away
Column	Save Your Marriage
Story	<p>1. Lu Wei was a full-time housewife whose husband was appointed sales manager. He was so busy that he often left home very early in the morning and came back late at night, working overtime or entertaining clients. Lu laid down the law and insisted he had to spend one night a week at home so the three of them could have dinner together, to keep up a family atmosphere. However, as time went on, her husband cared less and less for her though he didn't disobey orders.</p> <p>2. Later, Lu was told that her husband was seeing a divorced woman at the woman's place after work. The two had a showdown. Her husband confessed that he was always under enormous pressure in the office and so wanted to relax after work. Lu made him hurry home to cook and have dinner, and he was often in a fix when he had to choose between going home and meeting an unexpected client. He said the other woman was an classmate. He could relax totally over a family-style meal with her after work while they chatted freely. When Lu learned this, she said to her husband, "I can do whatever your old classmate does for you. Now I know I was neither understanding nor considerate; I didn't care for your feelings. That's my fault. Shall we try again before deciding on divorce? That won't be very long, only one year. I promise I won't interfere between you and your old classmate during that time."</p> <p>3. But the trial lasted less than a month since Lu Wei managed to restore closeness with her husband. She felt she should have adjusted mentally to the changes in family life brought about by her husband's work, rather than making him meet her demands; in this way their conflicts could have been easily resolved.</p>
Picture data	A cartoon showing a struggle between husband and wife: a huge woman is wringing drops of sweat out of a writhing man with a painfully distorted face.
Data source	<i>Women of China</i> , 2007, no. 8, pp. 20-21.

(2) Social myths

(a) Men have affairs because their wives are not considerate.

Lu Wei ends up believing that faced with her husband's love affair, she can regain his love not by fighting with him but by convincing him that she can do better than his lover. The reason he had an affair is that she was inconsiderate and wanted too much of him. The story does not mention that as a housewife, Lu Wei is financially disadvantaged. As she cannot

afford to break up with her husband, she has no choice but to address the problem with the formula “I can do whatever your lover does for you.” Her choice falls under the social myth that “Men have affairs because their wives are not considerate.”

(b) While men are struggling to make a living outside, women should play the good wife at home.

Lu realizes it is difficult for her husband to balance home and work when he in a competitive environment at work; therefore, as his wife, she should be more understanding and considerate, realizing that he often can’t get out of entertaining clients. She should let him relax totally at home if she wants him to go on competing at work. With this realization, Lu puts into practice the social myth “While men are pursuing their careers outside, women should play the good wife at home.”

Story 2: Woman gives birth to child at the cost of her own life to continue her husband’s family line.

(1) Surface narrative structure

Title	An angelic wife passes on the baton of marriage as she dies in childbirth
Editorial	Zhao Yuan was diagnosed as having breast cancer when she was pregnant, but decided to have her baby regardless of all dissuasion. When the little girl’s first cry was heard in the labor room, Zhao was silently making heart-rending arrangements for her beloved husband and daughter—she wanted her husband to remarry his ex-wife so that they could live happily together, bringing up her little daughter.
Main Narrative	<p>1. Zhao Yuan was a flower-shop owner in Qingdao when she met Ge Jun, a newly divorced high school teacher who was the only male descendant in three generations of his family. His ex-wife, Ding Susu, had decided to leave him as she was unable to conceive due to congenital blocked Fallopian tubes.</p> <p>2. Zhao and Ge married and Zhao fell pregnant the following year, but six months later she was diagnosed as having breast cancer. She refused chemotherapy for fear that fetal development would be affected. She knew her days were numbered; in order that her baby would not be motherless, after the birth she persuaded her husband to remarry his ex-wife, hoping to provide her husband with the love of his former wife and give her daughter a bright future.</p> <p>3. After Zhao’s death, Ge and Ding were remarried. They said they would cherish what they had all the more after such a heart-breaking experience, because it had been given them by a beautiful, kind young woman. As for the baby, Ding promised that she would treat her as her own; she said the baby and her mother were both angels sent by Heaven.</p>
Picture data	A photoshopped picture showing a baby sound asleep with some beautiful flowers at her side.
Data source	<i>Family</i> , 2007, no. 8, pp.10-12.

(2) Social myth: continuing the family line is a woman’s bounden duty.

As can be seen from the text, Zhao Yuan’s husband Ge Jun was the only male descendant in three generations of his family. His ex-wife left him of her own accord after finding she could not have children, and his new wife, Zhao Yuan, was found to have breast cancer during pregnancy. In order to continue her husband’s line of descent, Zhao refused

chemotherapy and died. The story, with its dramatic twists and turns, reveals the social myth that traditional Chinese women tend to internalize: the belief that continuing the family line is women's bounden duty. For the sake of her baby daughter, Zhao encourages her husband to remarry his former wife. On the surface, Zhao is sacrificing herself to preserve her husband's lineage, but in fact she is helping to maintain the continuation of familial lineage in a patriarchal society.

Story 3: A May and December romance

(1) Surface narrative structure

Title	Gai Maosen: I've only got one life to live.
Subtitles	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Gai said: If you love her, you should express your love, and let her see or feel you really love her. The age difference is no problem. No matter how old you are, once you fall in love, you're in the seventh heaven. 2. Love means you never look down upon each other, but just feel happy to live and work together. 3. Don't hesitate or doubt your feelings if you really love a person. It's just like painting, you can't expect to sketch out every detail before you start. Nothing's perfect; as long as one part's beautiful, that's enough.
Editorial	According to <i>Girlfriend</i> , the love between couples with an age gap (usually with an older husband) is no different from the love of ordinary couples. If there is anything special about such relationships, it may be that they usually have more moving love stories, richer life experiences and more passionate emotional lives. Love knows no rules or restrictions. Where there is love, there is everything; age difference is irrelevant to love.
Story	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Gai, a 66-year-old artist in Nanjing, married Wang Dan, a supermarket supervisor, who was forty-one years younger than he was. He had always held that an artist should not only bring pleasure to other people but also make himself happy. He felt that a painter's work couldn't present beauty and make it appreciated unless the artist was able to feel what beauty really is. 2. On Valentine's Day 2006, a piano concert "Korean Style" was held in Nanjing. To create a romantic atmosphere for Wang, Gai paid the huge sum of 9,999 <i>yuan</i> for the most expensive set of gold foil tickets. 3. Gai told Wang people looked down on young girls who chose to marry older men because they thought they were gold-diggers. He encouraged her to go into the clothing business, saying "People will respect you if you are doing well." 4. Gai Huining, son of Gai Maosen, told the reporter that he planned the entire wedding for his father and sent out all the wedding invitations. He said that as an artist, his father liked to be with young people, so it was quite understandable that he'd chosen Miss Wang as his wife. A younger wife would be better able to take care of his father; that would be a load off the children's minds.
Picture data	A photo on the first page of the story shows Gai and Wang holding a red heart with the Chinese character "love" written on it. Two photos on the second page show the couple's wedding in Beijing, while the third and fourth pages have three photos of the couple against different backgrounds.
Data source	<i>Girlfriend</i> , 2007, no. 305, pp.10-13.

(2) Social myths

(a) An old husband with a young wife is a touching romantic story.

Gai, a local artist, married Wang, who was young enough to be his granddaughter. Both of them emphasize that an age gap is no barrier to love. As Gai says, an artist can display beauty with his paintings only when he is able to feel the presence of beauty; hence their marriage is in a sense an extension of Gai's artistic activity. In addition, as his son says, a young wife can take better care of his father, a sentiment that reflects the idea of patriarchal society that young women are substantially "instrumental." However, the magazine packages the whole story as a romance, removing the moral burden from Gai by employing the social myth that May-December relationships are romantic.

(b) "Rich husband, happy wife."

Gai is a painter with deep pockets while Wang is a supermarket supervisor. It is easy to see the social and economic difference between them. On the one hand, Gai has won Wang's heart by spending a large amount of money to assure the girl that he loves her deeply. On the other, he encourages her to keep working so that people around her will not get the impression that she's a gold-digger. But the fact that he is providing Wang with financial support endorses the social myth that "a woman's happiness is assured if she marries a rich man."

(3) The ideology behind these three stories

Althusser has pointed out that rather than being a set of ideas instilled by one class into another, ideology is a kind of persistent and pervasive practice. The fact that all classes are involved in a practice does not mean that it no longer serves the dominant class; on the contrary, most practices are conducted for them.

The three new types of Chinese women constructed in the texts under study demonstrate that regardless of their education, marital status, age, and whether they are housewives or career women, new Chinese women are invariably immersed in one or another of the patriarchy's myths in dealing with gender relationships. For instance, "Men have affairs because their wives are not considerate," "While men are struggling to make a living outside, women should play the good wife at home," "Continuing the family line is a woman's bounden duty," "May-December marriages are romantic" and "A woman's happiness is assured if she marries a rich man," etc.

Barthes pointed out that the myths operate in a way that "naturalizes" or mystifies their history, obscuring the fact that they are originally historical products manufactured by the male dominant class, so that female readers wrongly assume them to be natural when reading such texts.

Meanwhile women readers are also engaged in the practice of the patriarchal ideology. As they are repeatedly exposed to the female signs set out in these women's magazines (for example: "A considerate wife shows tolerance to a busy husband," "A woman gladly gives up her life to carry on her husband's family line," or "A young woman's happiness at marrying an old man"), they unconsciously categorize themselves and other women as belonging to these types, and thus become constructed as subjects by this ideology, leading to their voluntary compliance with the corresponding standards and requirements for the way they speak and behave.

The patriarchy is reproduced continuously with the aid of such ideologies so that men are empowered and dominant in the "public domain," while women are confined to the "private

domain,” ready to serve as man’s helpmeet and as the “instrument” for preserving the family line. In this way the whole patriarchal system is ceaselessly strengthened.

3. “Stylish women” advocate independence and consumerism

Generally speaking, the mid-1990s was a time when the building of socialism with Chinese characteristics was well under way in China. On the one hand, the state kept a grip on the major industries (telecommunications, the petrochemical industry, etc.), though the production of state-owned enterprises accounted for less than fifty per cent of gross industrial output. On the other hand, the government allowed more and more foreign and local capital to set up private businesses on the mainland.

The production and operation of Chinese magazines have been shaped by the resultant social and economic changes. Women’s magazines are no exception. The effect of the operation of capital can be felt in each step of their publication, from production and distribution to consumption. Yet the state’s role in the magazine industry has not been completely weakened; it remains highly influential.

Trends Cosmopolitan is a product of this era. In terms of management, it broke away from the various levels of the official Women’s Federation, with their obligatory propaganda duties, and started the process of internationalization by initiating copyright cooperation with the American women’s magazine *Cosmopolitan*. This study selects a story from *Trends Cosmopolitan* and analyzes its surface narrative structure to detect the social myths hidden within it and the ideology that they seek to construct by applying Fiske’s theory of three layers of semiotic meaning.

(1) Surface narrative structure

Title	Another side of luxury
Subtitle	For a successful career woman, does a quality lifestyle necessarily mean always buying the top brand-name goods? Ms Nie Haiyan, president of the Board of GT Holdings Ltd., has her answer. She is now head of an investment bank with capitalization of US\$25 billion on whom critical decisions depend. But in fact, despite her lofty status, she does not look as aggressive as might be expected. Sitting face-to-face, she impresses with her warmth, wisdom, beauty and gentleness. Closer observation shows that her low-key elegance comes from her superb taste. “Luxury goods have a soul; only those who know the truth of life can appreciate them”; her approving words highlight another side of luxury.
Story	1. Nie says, “I often have to show my professional image, so I prefer Giorgio Armani and Escada clothing, Ferragamo shoes and Chanel bags. Since I’m always busy, I choose the designs I like when the new season’s styles come in. I usually buy enough for one season. Also, jewelry is very important to me. I love diamonds and pearls. You know, top-quality stones have quite a different luster, cut and design. Cartier’s always my first choice for jewelry. As to skincare products, I’ve been using Lamer.” 2. Nie says that young girls don’t have to have luxury goods, but women over thirty can choose some if they can afford it, especially name brands, which are carefully made to underscore an image of elegance and sophistication. Good skincare products do wonders for a mature woman’s skin. Choosing the top brands can actually increase a woman’s self-confidence and assurance, which is essential to professional women.

Picture data	The text carries a full-page photo of Ms Nie standing against a wall and looking into the distance, with a hint of a smile on her face and the confidence typical of a professional woman. She is wearing a dark suit and has an expensive diamond wristwatch and earrings. There are also six photos of jewelry and skincare products; the heading says they're Nie's favorites, but in fact they're advertorials.
Data source	<i>Trends Cosmopolitan</i> , 2007, no. 8, pp. 128-129.

(2) Social myths

(a) High-quality goods can improve the self-confidence of professional women.

According to the text, Nie is one of the new professional women who appeared in Chinese business after the mid-1990s. At the time of the interview, she was head of an investment bank with capitalization of US\$25 billion. A capable career woman in a real sense, she is much more successful than the vast majority of Chinese men. Yet Nie still believes that choice of top brands can increase a woman's self-confidence in the workplace. Such a social myth caters to the way men view women in the patriarchal social system and conceals capitalists' plans to lure women into consumption through such commodities and thence entrap them in the consumerism constructed by the patriarchy.

(b) Products endorsed by women celebrities are the best.

The title of the story, "Another side of luxury," is clearly an attempt to justify consumerism. It has six photos of Nie's favorite jewelry and skincare products, as well as one of Nie wearing an expensive black suit and a top-of-the-range diamond watch and earrings. This is obviously what is termed "placement marketing," that is, an advertorial. This kind of arrangement is an insidious illustration of the social myth that "Products endorsed by women celebrities are undoubtedly the best."

(3) Ideology

Although she is at the top of the business world, Nie seems to be deeply immersed in the social myths about luxury goods developed by the patriarchal society: in the case of luxury commodities such as "High-quality goods can improve the self-confidence of professional women," "Products endorsed by women celebrities are the best," etc. In sticking to these myths about fashion, Nie is actually practicing the ideology of consumerism constructed by patriarchy. When constantly exposed to Nie's brand-name fashion myths, female readers will be likely to categorize themselves (and other women) as the Nie type; and along the same lines, they will be constructed as subjects by such ideology, and voluntarily make their speech and behavior conform to the corresponding standards and requirements.

The special report on Nie actually conceals the reality that China's male-dominated discourse system is trying to construct a consumerist ideology. With the spreading of myths about brand-name luxury goods, women become eager to own them, thereby sustaining the operation of the entire patriarchal system.

IV. Concluding Remarks

This study has presented a semiotic analysis of five stories about Chinese women printed

in *Women of China*,¹² *Family*,¹³ *Girlfriend*¹⁴ and *Trends Cosmopolitan*,¹⁵ and summarized three female images of women: iron girl, considerate wife and stylish woman.

First, the analysis of the case story from *Women of China* reveals that the pre-reform image of the “iron girl” still survives there: a degendered (or masculinized) woman, who is hard working, patriotic and loves her family, and whose gender identity is obscured by ideology. Under the surface narrative structure of this story are hidden the social myths characteristic of a traditionalist patriarchal society, with their prejudicial values about women, and an ideology that seeks to construct the Chinese patriarchal system.

The case study shows that *Women of China*, though the oldest women’s magazine in China, has never stopped trying to create what is traditionally seen as the image of a “typical woman,” despite its extended coverage of women’s issues including employment, psychological advice and women’s health, and even, in the second half of each month, a supplement offering “Legal Help,” advertised as “your legal advisor or guide to preserving your rights.”

Second, a careful analysis of the three stories from *Women of China*, *Family* and *Girlfriend* suggests that the three types of “new Chinese women” described in the texts are all, despite their different backgrounds, steeped in the social myths concocted by patriarchal society when they deal with gender relationships, while at the same time participating in the practice of patriarchal ideology. Such a phenomenon indicates that since reform

12 *Women of China* (中国妇女), the earliest women’s magazine in China, is sponsored by the All-China Women’s Federation. Founded in Yan’an in 1939 to serve as a tool for the Communist Party to mobilize women as an important force in anti-Japanese propaganda, it has largely shifted its focus with the passage of time, but still values reporting about “exemplary characters.”

13 *Family* (家庭) was founded by the Guangdong Women’s Federation in 1981 when China began its reform and opening up process. Emerging as the first kaleidoscopic monthly dedicated to reporting and studying love affairs, marriage and family issues, *Family* symbolized women’s magazines’ first attempts to get rid of the long-standing instrumental role of official propaganda aimed at mobilizing women for national construction, and represented a call for a gradual return to traditional femininity.

14 *Girlfriend* (女友) is a monthly journal founded by the Shaanxi Women’s Federation in 1988. It was the first women’s magazine on the Chinese mainland to imitate the style of its counterparts in Hong Kong and Taiwan. *Girlfriend*, as the first magazine on the mainland printed in the larger 16mo format, had impressive covers and illustrations, holistic design and fine typography. It symbolized the way in which women’s magazines were refocusing their attention on family and women’s issues.

15 *Trends* (时尚) was founded in 1993 when China was restarting its rapid economic growth just a year after Deng Xiaoping gave his well-known southern tour speech. It is now sponsored by China Tourism Association and supervised by China National Tourism Administration. *Trends* is emblematic of the boom in women’s fashion magazines in China. More importantly, magazines of this kind are independent of the different levels of the official Women’s Federation. In January 1997, *Trends* became a monthly with two separate issues—*Ladies* and *Gentlemen*. In April 1998, *Fashion Ladies* was renamed *Trends Cosmopolitan* in a copyright cooperation with the well-known US women’s magazine *Cosmopolitan*. *Trends Cosmopolitan* marks a start in the internationalization of Chinese women’s magazines. It engages the attention of urban professional women with high-quality illustrations and production.

and opening up, new Chinese women, in their attempts to balance career and family, still need to thank their families for their support. They have consciously given up their role as “holding up half the sky” and once again become appendages to men. In other words, they have reassumed the image of “helpmeet” in accordance with the traditional values of marriage.

And third, with China’s further marketization after the mid-1990s, an increasing number of career women have appeared in the Chinese business world. That has given them unprecedented social and economic status. The report in *Trends Cosmopolitan* shows that in using quality products, these superwomen who appeared in the 1990s are actually involved in constructing consumerist ideology along with the patriarchy.

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