Encoding and decoding women's magazines: femininity construction in contemporary China

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Encoding and Decoding Women's Magazines:
Femininity Construction in Contemporary China

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Ph.D. Thesis

Hong Kong Baptist University
2015
Encoding and Decoding Women's Magazines:
Femininity Construction in Contemporary China

LU Nan

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

Principal Supervisor: Professor Colin Sparks
Hong Kong Baptist University
September 2015
DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis represents my own work which has been done after registration for the degree of PhD at Hong Kong Baptist University, and has not been previously included in a thesis, dissertation submitted to this or other institution for a degree, diploma, or other qualification.

Signature:

Date:
ABSTRACT

This study discusses how Chinese young women relate their reading women’s magazines to their self-representation and their self-construction of a feminine identity. The question is explored from two related perspectives: femininity as represented by the major international women’s magazine titles China and Chinese young women’s interpretation of those magazines.

The study first examines the construction of femininity encoding in ten major titles of international women’s magazines in mainland China through a quantitative content analysis of their covers and qualitative semiotic analysis, including both western-style and Japanese-style women’s’ magazines. Generally speaking, international women’s magazines provide an ordinary yet feminine femininity through their covers. All of them put great emphasis on fashion, providing resources for the external construction of femininity. The western style magazines also provide content related to the internal construction of femininity through resources. These are seldom mentioned in the Japanese style ones.

Examined through themes of body, fashion and feminism, the study reveals that in general, western style magazines present a more mature and sophisticated version of femininity. They represent a picture of women who are more confident with their body, and who adopt diverse strategies for managing their appearance. These women are endowed with a “can-do” nature and the ability to make decisions and take action independently. Women in Japanese style magazines, in contrast, are represented in a manner that is more childlike, innocent, and obedient.
This study further provides an alternative way to categorize international women’s magazines in China with regard to the femininity they presented to reveal individual differences among the major titles.

The interpretation from the readers is collected through in-depth interviews with Chinese young women. In general there are two types of users. One type of users has acute awareness of the existence of the external resources for femininity construction in whatever form. These users were willing and able to identify, mobilize, and utilize those resources for their femininity construction. The second type of users displays no interest in women’s magazines or alternative resources, and depends on their connections with information collectors to acquire the resources they needed for femininity construction.

However, most of the interviewees reveal a strong tendency to maintain a strong consistency in their self-presentation and self-identity as women, which is the identity-based decoding proposed in this study. The ideal of femininity defined by the interviewees concentrates on the internal qualities, such as individuality, competitiveness and activeness. Although they do indeed pay attention to the content of women’s magazines related to such issues in order to locate resources for their self-presentation, the external feminine traits deployed by the magazines, are considered as non-essential and rejected as markers of their own femininity by most of the interviewees. The version of Chinese femininity reflected in this study, briefly speaking, is the de-feminization on the external level, and internalization of “can-do” and “doing” on the internal level.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Gender, Femininity, and Media

In media and communication studies, gender in most cases is seen as a demographic attribute or a control variable. However, when we take this basic demographic attribute for granted or discuss the differences between genders in media and communication studies, do we really understand gender? It is widely recognized that gender is not solely the product of nature but also of nurture. However, we understand less about how gender is socially constructed or about the intrinsic relationship between “nature” and “nurture.” It seems that these issues of gender and gender construction have fallen outside of the realm of media and communication studies. At the same time, if we turn gender into the key theoretical focus of a study rather than a simple variable, we can see that media and communication studies can shed light on the properties of gender, particularly because the living world and everyday life of ordinary people has become deeply immersed in all kinds of media. Media are not only the “storytellers” in the modern world, but also provide symbolic resources for the cognition, exploration, and construction of the experiences of everyday life.

This multidisciplinary study is designed to review gender through the lens of media studies. The study grows out of some basic but important questions concerning gender: As social individuals, regardless of whether one is male or female, how do we understand our gender? How do we present our gender to
anonymous others? Do we have choices in how we present gender? How do we live according to a certain gender role? All of these questions actually lead to the exploration of the social construction of gender. Placing this study within the context of contemporary mainland China, I examine femininity and mass media materials related to the construction of femininity in response to these questions about gender.

Women analyzed in this study were all born after 1980, when China started to open up and when political feverish started to fade, as indicated in Chapter 3. When Chinese people finally were allowed to look back into their life, what they could see is a almost ruined everyday life. Therefore, for women in this study, even they live in a metropolitan as Shanghai with comparatively better economy in China and abundant material resources, all the questions about gender are indeed in question. These questions cannot be answered by their mothers, teachers or the government of the country, but these young women themselves. They are worth looking into not because of their comparative better-off social-economic status (though reported in this study), or what they have already got either: The study is about what they are constructing with regard to gender issues and how they answer the gender questions with the help from resources embedded in mass media. The process of exploring gender and being women practiced by women in this study can further reflect how individual (no matter man or women), in an ever-changing, modernizing/westernizing society (no matter China or other developing countries), pick up and construct their identities (no matter gender
identities or other parts of identities).

In Chapter 2, I first offer basic definitions of sex, gender, and femininity. For this study, I conceptualize femininity as a multi-layered phenomenon, referring not only to one’s feminine appearance, but also to one’s thoughts or beliefs related to the meanings of being a woman. In effect, the construction of femininity consists of both external and internal dimensions.

I also investigate the relationship between women and media through the basic elements of gender theories. While Chapter 2 shows how women are presented in mass media, the goal of this study is to discover what women do with the mass media, what gender identity means for Chinese women, and how they externalize their gender identity by managing their appearance. Accordingly, I use international women’s magazines as the starting point to identify the providers of symbolic resources for the construction of femininity. The broad theoretical framework of encoding and decoding can be used to uncover at least part of the mechanism of femininity construction in the interaction between encoding in mass media and decoding by women. In this study, the encoding-decoding mechanism is not constrained by the identification of dominant, negotiated, or resistant positions. Rather, the framework incorporates theories from semiotic studies and academic discussions of self-identity in order to identify how symbolic resources for the construction of femininity are embedded in women’s magazines and how readers use these resources for their identity-construction projects as women. Before diving into the study, the two major subjects of the study need to be
explicated: international women’s magazines and ordinary Chinese women.

1.2 International Women’s Magazines and Women Readers

International women’s magazines share some common properties; they are produced by international publishing houses, using superior copperplate paper to print leading content on fashion, beauty, and other aspects of a glamorous life. *Elle*, *Vogue*, and *Cosmopolitan* are the big, global names among them, while *Ray* and *Mina* are famous titles within Asia. These types of magazines can be called fashion magazines, women’s or men’s magazines, lifestyle magazines, or simply consumer magazines. Hence, it is necessary to clarify these categorizations in light of the main objectives of this particular study.

These classifications are usually used in an uncritical way in most empirical studies. The term “women’s magazines” is constantly used in reception studies and studies on the genre because it points directly to women as the main readers (Hermes, 1995; Sakamoto, 1999). The internal logic of this classification is to define the medium by the gender of its major users. The word magazine, originated from the meaning of “warehouse”, implies a highly diversified composition in terms of its content and a more specific segmentation of its readership (Holmes, 2007). Compared to magazines, other traditional types of media are less likely to be classified according to the gender of their users. Similarly, magazines can be classified according to the readers’ lifestyle, which is based on their attitudes, interests, and opinions about life (Plummer, 1974). Lifestyle magazines can cover a much broader range of topics, including hobbies
(e.g., gardening and photography), which are generally not sensitive to gender. Furthermore, since the notion of a lifestyle magazine is mainly utilized as a marketing strategy, it does not exactly fit with the kinds of magazines studied in this research.

In Li’s study (2011) of glossy international magazines in China, she used the term ‘consumer magazines’ to describe the magazines’ content orientation, which is mainly to provide guidance to readers on their consumer behaviors. The term ‘fashion magazine’ is also a classification based on content. *Vogue* is usually considered to be a typical fashion magazine because it covers the latest trends in the fashion industry irrespective of gender. Nevertheless, *Vogue* still portrays women as the primary participants in the fashion industry. In other words, the concrete forms of fashion are embodied when they are actually put on women’s bodies (Crane, 1999). Because of this emphasis, *Vogue* has always been seen as a women’s magazine as well.

It is clear that categorizations based on content tend to be more complicated with unavoidable overlaps. This is because the magazine is a genre that is defined by how it organizes content rather than by the content itself (Holmes, 2007). Nevertheless, each type of classification is acceptable as long as it can serve the specific purpose of the given study. Since this study examines the role of magazines in the identity construction of Chinese women, a classification according to reader segmentation is most appropriate, and therefore the term ‘women’s magazine’ will be used throughout the study. This term indicates that
these magazines are consumer magazines that target female readers. While they do cover content related to fashion, beauty, and other relevant aspects of women’s life, they are prepared for women to consume. Therefore, adopting the term ‘women’s magazine’ best reflects the nature of the subjects in the study.

To provide a general background for the study, Chapter 3 traces the development of women’s magazines in China and the reasons for choosing international women’s magazines over local ones. In Chapter 4, I describe the methodology used, choice of specific titles, and analytical tools in detail. Based on the clarification of what a women’s magazine is, we can further ask whether every woman is the target of such magazines. The Meihua website is a platform that media companies can use to describe their readership to potential advertisers.

*Elle* magazine describes its readers in this way:

> Our readers are active and optimistic modern women. They believe they have the ability to determine the direction of their life. They are acute, innovative and passionate to fresh creations. They are young and rich, looking forward to the best life, daring to demonstrate their uniqueness. They are enthusiastic about consumption, since their economic and social independence enable them to pursue happy and quality lives. They like famous brands and expensive products and they are happy to be attractive because of their taste and feminine traits.

Looking past the exaggerated wording aimed at advertisers, we can find some important indications of the kinds of women targeted by the international women’s magazines included in this study. Regardless of whether these women are active or innovative, they first and foremost have to be independent women with their own income. Yet, this description does not indicate how women can achieve this independence. Another magazine *Mina*’s description expresses
openly that these women have to be “well-educated” and “able to act.” From these two descriptions, we can infer that to be a reader of international women’s magazines, women need to have obtained a certain social position through education, work, and income, all of which define an independent woman in modern society. In effect, not all women are targeted by international women’s magazines, and not all women are drawn to this type of magazine.

In fact, no matter how elaborate and unrealistic the readership descriptions of these international women’s magazines may be, both these magazines and their readers are defined through women’s social existence in a modern society, at the intersection where the construction of femininity meets the construction of self-identity. In effect, the meaning of being a woman is an essential part of the questions of who a woman is and how she can exist in the modern world. Ignoring the superficial adjectives contained in the readership descriptions, in this study, I adopt a micro perspective to talk to women living in Shanghai. I considered them as ordinary women using media in everyday life. I use the term “ordinary with the framework developed by de Certeau (1984). In his account, everyday life is composed by practices in everyday life such as reading and shopping and people who conduct these practices are ordinary people who are the “weak” within a structure. These people cannot make changes on the structural level but can make room from them within the structure and generate meanings through flexible and calculated tactics.

In this way, these women I interviewed in this study are the ordinary weak,
since they are born and brought up in a patriarchal structure and are not making any conscious effort to overthrow it. However, they do practice in the space provided by the structure. On the structural level, these women are provided rights to survive, to receive education and to work. Meanwhile they made their active move and perform well at being or transforming into independent social agents. They had received or would receive bachelor’s degree or above and most of them were working in different careers with a decent income and standard of living. In this study, these “successful” women are still considered to be ordinary because of the nature of their practice is ordinary without special privileges coming from extraordinary amount of power or fortune. In the process of becoming independent social agents, these women were more or less aware of the need to construct and manage their identities as women—from their external appearances to their ideas—and the need for symbolic resources with which to conduct such a project.

However, it should be noted that these women’s “ordinariness” dose derive from their social-economic status. These young women, aged form 18 to 32, were born in a country where women’s basic rights of survive, education and work are guaranteed on structural level and families where their rights were actually brought into life practices. That is, in urban Chinese families, under the one-child policy, these women’s parents had the willingness and ability to support their education, thus endowing them possibilities to study in universities, work in knowledge-intensive (i.e. doctor, teacher and etc.) rather than labor-intensive
industries (i.e. farmer, worker, waitress and etc.) with independent income, and possibilities for upward-mobility in the society. With all the possibilities generally realized by these women’s endeavor, their roles as social agents are consolidated, making them into a group of women who have the space, resources and choices to practice, a group of women are entitled to be “ordinary” by some pre-existed social-economic conditions. The details of the interviewees and the interviews are discussed in detail in Chapter 4.

Based on the mutual relationship between international women’s magazines and urban women as independent social agents, in Chapter 5, I demonstrate that international women’s magazines are actually ordinary cultural products embedded in women’s everyday life. This is not only because the content of the magazines are directly related to women’s lives, but also because they tend to present feminine, but not sexualized or bizarre, images of women. In effect, international women’s magazines manage to maintain a presence in women’s lives by providing relevant content and feminine yet acceptable images of women. The content analysis shows how both external and internal femininity are constructed through the international women’s magazines of different origins (i.e., Western-style or Japanese-style). Four versions of femininity are described in detail in Chapter 5. The dominant version among these is an ideal femininity characterized by independence, activeness, and competitiveness in the workplace, while maintaining a feminine appearance.

In a way, the ideal type of femininity that is depicted in the international
women’s magazines in China reflects changes in the standards of the ideal woman. Women are not merely defined by the gazing value assigned to them by men or because of their productiveness; these values are only important when women belong to men or men’s families. Rather, in international women’s magazines, women are defined based on their social attributes, which makes women’s efforts and resources devoted in femininity construction in self-identity becoming crucial if they would like to achieve the perfectness defined by women’s magazines. However, women have different choices of women’s magazines and decode ideal femininity in different ways, as discussed in Chapters 6 and 7.

In Chapter 6, I note that women who are working or completing their education do not treat women’s magazines as frivolous. In fact, many of the women interviewed were aware of how they used women’s magazines and other alternative resources to construct their own femininity, especially their external femininity. Based on their active roles in selectivity of resources, women’s decoding power is further demonstrated in their optional attitude toward objects that project an ideal feminine image, such as a one-piece dress or high-heels, and their non-optional insistence on achieving a balance between work and family. This dynamic is revealed in the interviewees’ overwhelming recognition of women’s role as independent social agents.

It should be noted that a basic assumption of the whole study is the acknowledgment of women as independent social agents who have the ability to survive in modern society and interpret their life stories as women. As such,
comparatively less attention is paid to women as consumers. Although international women’s magazines tend to portray women as rich shopaholics, in this study, I treat consumption as a necessary tool with which women acquire material resources for the construction of their external femininity. Their identity as a consumer is intrinsically attached to their identity as an independent woman. This study reveals women’s flexibility in consumption and their comparatively objective attitude toward the consumption of luxuries. I adopt the term ‘women’s magazine’ to focus on the ways in which ordinary women use these magazines to construct their femininity, rather than to examine the constrained relationship between magazines and women in the context of consumption. Consumption in this study is implicit in the discussion of the construction of self-identity as women.

1.3 The Construction of Femininity in China

There is another question that has yet to be clarified in the context of this study, namely, why look into the relationship between international women’s magazines as providers of symbolic resources and women as independent social agents? What makes the magazines, women and their interaction worthy discussing? It seems that women’s magazines are always criticized for making women aspire to unreal and ideal images, causing them to be dissatisfied with their physical appearance and inducing their self-objectification. However, these accusations towards women’s magazines are easy to make when no specific social context provided. That is, the reality is usually more complicated. Therefore, in
this study, the context of contemporary China is extremely important to the discussion of the relationship between women’s magazines and women, since I will face the complexity directly.

As elaborated in Chapter 4, the interviewees in the study, the so-called post-1980 and post-1990 generations, face a world their mothers did not experience when growing up. It is a world that is undergoing rapid economic development and opening, bringing about abundant material and symbolic resources. It is a world in which there is less and less state intervention into people’s everyday lives. It is a world in which women do not need to fight for basic rights for survival, education, or work, at least in urban areas, since these basic rights are mainstreamed at the state level. For the young women who participated in this study, they had the opportunities, social spaces, and resources to build their personal lifestyles and construct their own versions of femininity. Unlike women living in pre-modern societies whose femininity was regulated by their families, their fathers, their husbands, and their sons, or their mother’s generation whose femininity was attached to the motherland’s requirements of them as laborers and shaped by the elimination of individuality and gender differences, the young women in this study are individuals who are responsible for their own gender identity. In a world in which gender construction is a project with uncertainties, the internal support from family and mothers are limited for these young women, and international women’s magazines, in this context, play the role of introducing existing symbolic resources to them.
By emphasizing the context of China, I do not mean to generalize the findings of this study to women in all provinces and across all social economic statuses in China. The value of context in this study is that it provides an opportunity to observe how newly independent individuals interact with external symbolic resources accumulated almost from nothing. Adopting a micro-level media studies perspective, this study re-examines the relationship between individuals and the media, exploring the possibilities of what people can do with media and revisiting the idea of active audiences. On a macro level, the ultimate concern of the study is how individuals act within the pre-existing structure. For young Chinese women, the structure is informed by the pre-existing patriarchal order, traditional values, state-level regulation, the competitive mechanism of capitalism, mass mediated symbolic environments, and so on.

This study is not designed to criticize the system on a structural level. That is, from such a point of view, the study is not critical enough. On the contrary, the whole study is conducted through the perspective of the life world of individuals. This study focuses on individuals’ activeness and flexible tactics in enacting micro resistance in their everyday lives. The critical value of this study lies in the realization of the limitations of merely turning the microscope on the defects of the structure. At least in terms of the issues of women and gender equality, some women’s rights can be achieved through social movements and regulatory reforms, but some can only be achieved through repeated, plain, and ordinary everyday practices. These young women in China are now performing new versions of
femininity through what they wear, the work they do, the relationships and marriages they manage, and the lives they live.
CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Women and Media

In this chapter, I construct a general theoretical framework for the study—from the definition of some of its most basic concepts to the discussion of the relationship between women and the media. Moreover, I explore the role of self-identity in decoding and the construction of femininity as self-identity. Embedded in the context of late modernity, the central theoretical concern of this study is how women as social agents demonstrate and understand themselves as women through the interaction with symbolic resources disseminated by mass media. Therefore, in this chapter, by delineating the debates about sex and gender, and the debates over different versions of Western feminism, I provide a more comprehensive and multilayered definition of femininity. This concept of femininity is examined through discrete dimensions, such as the appearances women present and the meanings they attach to their identities as women. At the same time, this concept is always treated as a complex narration or story produced by women and an essential part of women’s self-identity. In this way, the definition of femininity in this study is rather inclusive: “appearances” are not only limited to stereotypical images of women, while “meanings” are not only evaluated through the norms of certain feminist ideas. In this study, theories of sex, gender, and femininity are not adopted as a mold to shape our understanding of women and the construction of femininity in China, but as a torch to perhaps shed
light on new possibilities in the theoretical exploration of gender and media and the femininity construction per se in the context of contemporary China.

Although a section in this chapter is devoted to outlining studies of how mass media represent women, I pay more attention to what women do with mass media. Tracing the theoretical discussions regarding active audiences, I use the framework of encoding-decoding theory to explore women’s activeness and negotiation power when facing mass media. In the context of this study, I consider the decoding process to be the practices of everyday life, rather than an isolated process. As such, decoding can be incorporated into an individual’s identity construction, giving rise to self-identity-based decoding. Bridged by the theory of self-identity, women’s decoding of materials from mass media is connected to their construction of femininity. This relationship informs the general theoretical framework of the entire study.

2.1.1 Sex, Gender, Femininity

Before any meaningful discussion about femininity and femininity in women’s magazines can be carried out, some basic assumptions about sex and gender should be clarified. First, sex is considered to be “the reproductive capacity of sex organs” (Money, 1996, p. 14) that naturally lead to differences between male and female human beings. In effect, we accept sex as a fundamental biological differentiation between human beings and do not question whether sex itself is something constructed or whether we should categorize human beings by the color of their eyes. At the same time, gender is considered to be related to
one’s biological sex, but not determined by it. Even with this clear distinction, there are always debates about the relationship between sex and gender.

According to Money (1972), the relationship between sex and gender is not relevant at all: sex is based on biology, but gender is composed of sets of roles and functions, ways of thinking, and social interactions. Other scholars, however, have argued that gender is not independent of sex, but flows directly from it (Warnke, 2011). Feminist scholars have bypassed the struggle of “which determines which,” placing more emphasis on how the sex–gender relationship positions women as an inferior group to men. As de Beauvoir famously stated, “One is not born, but rather becomes a woman” (1949/2012, p. 281). In The Second Sex, de Beauvoir implied that biological females are socially constructed as women. Possessing a feminine gender is the process to “acquire, learn and adopt” (de Beauvoir, 1949/2012, p. 5). Rubin (1975) expressed more explicitly that gender pertains to people’s roles and functions in the societies and cultures they are a part of. Regardless of cultural differences, according to Rubin, women tend to become “domesticated women” or the workhorses of men. This situation is not the result of differences in sex, but the result of a history, culture, society, and economy that favors male dominance. De Beauvoir and Rubin, in general, indicated that human beings begin with sex and then acquire gender as a way of organizing biological features related to sex as “raw materials” based on social institutions and cultural conventions.

Butler offered a rather different view of the sex–gender relationship. In her
work *Gender Trouble* (1990), she denied that gender is constructed based on the biological attributes contributing to the concept of sex. That is, Butler conceived of gender as something that is constructed through one’s “performance,” fluid and changeable, behind which there is no such thing as gender identity.

Even if scholars have taken different perspectives on the relationship between sex and gender, their conceptualizations share some common ground. That is, gender is not something people are born with, but something that is socially constructed. In this study, I adopted a more conservative and modern understanding of sex and gender, comparing with the more radical and post-modern arguments proposed by Butler. That is, I still acknowledge the existence of gender identity and the assumption that gender as a social individual’s identity, inherently endowed with the potential to be the basis for social division, can be obtained through differentiation. The next question then is how differentiation, as a strategy for constructing gender identities, might play out in practice in modern society. In reality, we do not display our sex directly through our naked bodies, but depend on gender cues (Bornstein, 1992, 2013), such as physical cues (body, skin, hair, etc.), behavioral cues (manners and deportment), or, as indicated in Money’s definition (1972) of gender, cues from social roles or ways of thinking related to gender.

In this way, the main focus of this study, femininity (in the context of women’s magazines), can be understood as a combination of certain gender cues, which are commonly accepted in society as symbols of being a woman. Since
gender cues can be derived from many aspects, this study only focuses on two facets: (a) physical cues, which mainly deal with women’s appearance, and (b) ways of thinking, which is what women think about the meaning of being a woman. In Baxter’s (2009) study on the television series *Sex and the City*, she proposes two levels of femininity construction: the feminine level and the feminism level. This conceptualization also inspires the structure of this study. The feminine level refers to women’s presentation of typical feminine traits in their appearance, while the feminism level refers to whether women’s self-interpretation of being women reflects a feminist ethos. Neither the feminine traits nor the feminist ethos have a definite, unified, or standardized version. In different cultures, different versions of typical feminine traits are displayed. Baxter suggested that the women in *Sex and the City*, with long, curly hair, makeup, dresses, and high heels, represented a typical Western urban female image. The feminist ethos of the show also pointed to a sophisticated existence.

Generally speaking, there have been three streams of feminism: liberal feminism, radical feminism, and socialist feminism. The central concern of liberal feminism is the unequal opportunities between genders, according to which women cannot enjoy the same rights as men do, especially in the public sphere. The main strategy for liberal feminism is for women to assimilate into the world that used to be dominated by men. Radical feminism takes this a step further to criticize social institutions for being biased toward men. In light of this male domination, the only way to improve women’s status is through social
restructuring and the establishment of women-centered institutions. Socialist feminism accuses the private property system and the obligation to reproduce for the oppression of women. Therefore, in the socialist feminist view, the abolition of private property and the collectivization of household labor can liberate women (Lindsey, 1994).

In addition to the three streams of feminism, the discussion of post-feminism has been gaining more attention. There are three commonly used definitions of the concept (Yang, 2007): (a) the current context we are facing after the second wave¹ feminist movement; (b) the backlash against feminism; and (c) a useful conceptual frame of reference encompassing the intersection of feminism with a number of other anti-foundationalist movements including postmodernism, post-structuralism, and post-colonialism. Compared with the first three streams of feminism, the notion of post-feminism exhibits some inconsistency: it encompasses the achievements of previous feminist movements, along with the doubts, criticisms, or even rebellions against them at the same time. Nevertheless, post-feminism is actually open to more in-depth discussions on women’s issues beyond the need for any self-categorization:

Femininity is increasingly figured as a bodily property; a shift from objectification to subjectification in the ways that (some) women are represented; an emphasis upon self-surveillance, monitoring and discipline; a focus upon individualism, choice and empowerment; the dominance of a “makeover paradigm”; a resurgence of ideas of natural sexual difference; the marked “resexualization” of women’s

¹ Second-wave feminism is a period of feminist activity that first began in the early 1960s in the United States, and eventually spread throughout the Western world. In the United States, the movement was initially called the Women's Liberation Movement and lasted through the early 1980s. The main appeals of the movement reflect the concerns of liberal feminism.
bodies; and an emphasis upon consumerism and the commodification of difference. (Gill & Scharff, 2011)

There is another way to examine the chaotic yet dynamic picture of post-feminism. In her study on women’s magazine in Taiwan, Yang (2007) provided a categorization of feminisms: “liberal feminism” and “cultural feminism.” The definition of liberal feminism from this perspective can be viewed as a contextualized version of the original definition of liberal feminism. The core spirit of liberal feminism is women’s rights to equal participation as men in the public sphere (e.g., equal voting right or equal rights in the workplace). To achieve gender equality, women must adopt men’s traits and learn men’s rules, which tends to obscure gender differences. Cultural feminism, on the other hand, emphasizes the differences between women and men, valuing essential female traits. This directly refers to women’s aspirations to be trendy and beautiful (Yang, 2007). It should be noted that liberal feminism does not aim at the annihilation of gender difference. Rather, it emphasizes that women and men should have the same rights, not be exactly “the same.” Cultural feminism, on the other hand, values gender difference, but does not underestimate the importance of women’s rights. The juxtaposition of these two versions to some extent reflects the picture of post-feminism and the reality that “being a woman” cannot be reduced to a one-dimensional narrative according to a single version of feminism. In this study, therefore, I will not avoid the complicated situation of post-feminism. In fact, this picture—complete with hybridity and conflict—happens to be the focus of my study, since it implies the possibility of polysemy in the symbolic struggle over
media representation and the diverse interpretation of women.

2.1.2 Women in the Symbolic World

Femininity, according to Gill (2012), is a way of highlighting the social production and construction of gender. The gender cues involved in this process of production and construction have already been discussed. The next question is how can women access these gender cues? For example, how is a woman aware that certain types of attire can help her to indicate her gender as a woman and avoid wrong interpretations? A reasonable assumption is that there is a social mechanism that facilitates the production and dissemination of gender cues, thus providing the necessary resources for the construction of femininity or masculinity.

It seems that, for our era, mass media is the obvious answer. However, it is still useful to question why mass media play a role in the production of gender cues and how this process works in practice. In fact, the reason why we take mass media as an almost certain answer is deeply rooted in the society we live in, which can be described as the “late modern age” according to Giddens (1991). A very important feature of late modernity is its disembedding mechanisms that “lift” social relations out of their local contexts and rearticulate them across indefinite tracts of time and space (Giddens, 1991). The indefinite nature of modern society is further described by Bauman’s (2005) definition of “liquid modernity.” By this, Bauman refers to a society in which the conditions under which its members act change faster than it takes ways of action to consolidate into habits and routines.
Our age, as Giddens and Bauman have indicated, is characterized by rapid and unpredictable change, which leaves no room for static convention.

Therefore, in the face of this flux, the role of tradition has changed. Traditional culture is presented as “integrated, normative and involving inflexible social bonds and belief systems” (Featherstone, 2007, p. 153). In effect, the traditions of pre-modern times are not only reliable, but to certain extent compulsory. Under such circumstances, being a woman is quite a simple project, since every little girl can just imitate her mother or the limited number of women she comes in contact with. There are two possible outcomes of this imitation model. First, this level of stability helps to retain the patriarchal order for thousands of years, keeping women in the dominated position. Second, the production of gender cues is confined to a relatively private sphere wherein those experiences can be handed down from generation to generation through spoken language or limited print materials. However, in the modern world, tradition can become an alternative source of knowledge, values, and morality (Giddens, 1998). When the human experience mediated through tradition is fragmented, the modern world needs a proper mechanism to mediate experience. For Giddens, the answer is mass media (1991), which provide the space for the tremendous mediation of experience.

Through different genres, from fictional television series to non-fictional hard news, the media become important symbol generators in the production of gender cues. Mass media mostly provide gender cues with regard to women’s
images, namely their looks and appearances, and social roles, to some extent reflecting how the society interprets the meaning of being a woman. The feminism ideas can also be more or less reflected in the production of gender cues. However, these gender cues only belong to the symbolic world which do not reflect how women in real world think, so such cues cannot be solely responsible for constructing femininity. In this way, for researchers, traces embedded in mass media are rich resources for capturing and studying gender cues, but women’s interpretations are equally important. For this reason, in this study, I analyze the symbolic world alongside individuals’ interpretations in order to provide a more comprehensive picture of the femininity construction in China.

The study of women in the news began in the 1970s, and in 1978, Gaye Tuchman introduced the concept of “symbolic annihilation,” suggesting that women are “symbolized as child-like adornments who need to be protected or they are dismissed to the protective confines of the home” (1978, p. 8). Studies of the visual image of women portrayed in advertisements and women’s magazines also began in the 1970s, revealing women as “mother, housewife, sexually attractive women” (Winship, 1980, p. 218), “commodity-object and as a negative sign in a male-dominated culture” (Butcher, 1974, p. 33). More recent studies have continued the investigation of the image of women as wife and mother in mass media (Carlin & Winfrey, 2009; Lauzen, Dozier, & Horan, 2008).

The studies mentioned above have mainly focused on women’s position in society according to which they are restricted to the private sphere and dependent
on patriarchal dominance. Another major category of studying women in the media has been the analysis of the disseminated images. Recent studies (D’Enbeau, 2009; Felix & Garza, 2012) have accused women’s magazines of promoting a particular ideology of the essential women as defined by patriarchal norms of femininity and the pressure of consumerism. A study by Singletary (2009) revealed the “symbolic exclusion” (p.2) of the feminine ideal by examining women’s fashion magazines. In doing so, Singletary identified the conflicts between Black beauty and a standardized, lauded White beauty. A similar study conducted in Singapore (Firth, 2008) indicated that White women with classic beauty, meaning an elegant, glamorous, and sophisticated look, occupy the dominant position in advertisements in women’s magazines. Women’s magazines also reinforce the ideal of women’s bodies being thin (Pomper & Koenig, 2004).

According to these studies, the women’s image being circulated is typically related to fair skin and a slim body. At the same time, soft and feminine personalities are still valued (Bissell & Chung, 2009). The evidence of this not only exists in Western contexts, but also in East Asia (Kim & Cha, 2008). Kim and Cha’s (2008) study revealed that most models featured in advertisements in women’s magazines in South Korea have a dignified and elegant look, and are not heavily accessorized. Actually, much research on women in media has revealed the inclination toward homogenization, not only in women’s social positions and images, but also in these studies themselves. These studies have tended to take gender stereotypes as givens, and in their repeated discovery of these stereotypes,
have merely reinforced them. According to these studies, women are unproblematically portrayed as beautiful, domesticated, and dependent in the symbolic world with no evidence of conflicts. However, it is necessary to ask to what extent these stereotypical images reflect women’s representations in the symbolic world.

Gauntlett (2008) pointed out that representations of gender today are more complex and less stereotypical than in the past. For example, in television dramas or movies, women and men are seen working side by side, and heroines can even dominate the plot. In advertisements, women’s images are also more diversified. They are more likely to be portrayed as sexy professionals than pretty housewives (Gauntlett, 2008). In women’s magazines, the picture is similarly more complicated. In the 1980s, Winship (1987) noticed a certain inconsistency in the themes embedded in *Cosmopolitan*, for example, that women should be satisfied with their bodies, but keep slim; marriage can sometimes be portrayed as good, but other times as bad; fashion is sometimes important, while other times it is not important. These contradictions indicate that there might be no uniform definition of femininity.

Luther, McMahan, and Shoop’s (2008) recent study on domestic Japanese magazines’ depictions of women showed that, although women are still presented as sexual beings, they are also likely to exude confidence and occupy a position of dominance in romantic relationships. In Chang’s (2004) analysis of the Taiwanese edition of *Cosmopolitan*, she found that the physical features of women
demonstrate a more Western version of femininity, conforming to “stereotypical feminine pleasures.” At the same time, in the content, these women are depicted as independent and confident, aspiring to pursue advanced education. Looking back to Baxter’s (2009) study of *Sex and the City*, she also found a clear “return” to the stereotypical feminine pleasures of dress, fashion, cosmetics, sexiness, and visual display; yet, the women were professional and independent at the same time.

All of the studies mentioned in this section point to the fact that the representation of women, regardless of social position or image, is widely disseminated throughout society by mass media, making women visible in the symbolic world. No matter whether they are portrayed as housewives or professional women, no matter whether they look beautiful or sexy, no matter how contradictory their representation might be, mass media is producing many possibilities for women to obtain gender cues. We might assume that all these types of representation in the symbolic world only help to confirm male dominance, but on the other hand, we should ask whether women play an active role in utilizing these resources in the symbolic world in order to create their own versions of femininity. After all, femininity is no longer something that is locked deep in the private sphere, but something that can be constructed by the interaction between the individual woman and the almost unlimited symbolic resources available in the modern world.

2.1.3 Can Women Negotiate?
Although women’s activeness toward mass media is a basic assumption of this study, many scholars actually consider that women can be dominated and manipulated by mass media. Back in 1972, in his study of Western fine art, Berger gave the famous quote:

Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself in to an object – and most particularly an object of vision: a sight. (1972, p. 47)

In 1975, Mulvey’s film study offered a similar argument. Mulvey argued that women are traditionally there to be looked at by men. When watching movies, male viewers take an active role in turning the female characters into the object of their desiring gaze. Female viewers, meanwhile, do not have their own point of view and can only participate in the pleasure of men looking at women.

Women’s passiveness and lack of subjectivity have also been echoed in studies on women’s self-objectification within the psychological field. According to objectification theory, women are taught to define themselves in terms of how their body appears to others, rather than what their body can do or how it feels (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Mass media facilitate women’s self-objectification by displaying the sexualized bodies of women, which are implied as being representative of women (Bartky, 1990). An empirical study by Aubrey, Henson, Hopper, and Smith (2009) showed that the exposure to sexualized women’s bodies can engender women’s self-objectification. The idealized, thin body promoted by mass media can also affect women in other ways, causing weight-related
appearance anxiety, negative moods, body dissatisfaction (Ferguson, 2013; Harper & Tiggemann, 2008), and even the approval of surgical body alteration (Harrison, 2003).

Feminist scholars also take a pessimistic point of view when criticizing women’s magazines. Winship (1978) pointed out that women’s pleasure in its cultural forms is always constructed on the basis of men’s fantasies and desires. When women look at the cover models in women’s magazines, they are actually looking at a “man’s woman.” In her study of the teenage girl’s magazine Jackie, Angela McRobbie (2000) defined women’s magazines as a system of messages—a signifying system and a bearer of ideology—that serves to sustain a pattern of male domination. Even though women’s magazines are relatively free of direct state interference, all that “freedom”, according to McRobbie, is under question.

Western women’s magazines are inevitably related to feminist critiques. When women’s magazines first came into being in the late 19th century along with women’s burgeoning self-awareness, they were not involved with any conscious feminist discourse. Rather, in their early stages, women’s magazines in the United States were the products of women’s sense of community (Aronson, 2010). Most of the content at that time was contributed by readers, who provided their thoughts, feelings, and stories about their lives. Gradually, the women’s magazines became professionalized and more politically oriented. The articles were mainly written by the editors, and the political agendas of gender equality
became injected into the genre. When women’s magazines met the feminist movement, they became a platform embodying liberal feminism. Feminists believed that the issues of gender equality had to be solved through social activities in which women were unified in the fight against the patriarchal order. However, when advertisers discovered women’s magazines, their commercial influence was exerted through the prevalence of the individualization agenda in women’s magazines: Women were told to tackle their problems through self-improvement and self-adjustment, and possibly, through the purchase of a particular product.

This trend toward individualization and commercialization has become more and more obvious in women’s magazines over the past 40 years, not only in the Western world, but also in East Asia. When Western titles first began to influence Japanese women’s magazines in the 1970s, they had already shifted their focus from collective feminist activism to women’s individual everyday lives. At that time, more and more Japanese women were going to college, finding jobs, and living alone, thereby constructing an identity as a ‘single woman,’ independent from her family or her husband’s family (Sakamoto, 1999). The most popular magazines of the time, An’an, Non’ no, and More, all had Western names, which had no meaning in Japanese. An’an and More also had cooperation relationships with Elle and Cosmopolitan. These magazines individualized feminist issues into the realm of daily life, using articles about travel to indicate that women could use such an ‘uncommon activity’ to fight against male prejudice; interior design
articles to reconfirm women’s independent identity; and fashion articles to encourage young women to wear ready-made clothes to create their own image, instead of spending a great amount of time making clothes. Articles directly related to political movements or debates on gender equality have almost entirely disappeared from women’s magazines globally. At the same time, more and more space is provided for contents on almost every aspect of women’s personal life.

However, it not fair to say that women have already surrendered to the patriarchal order based on this developmental trend in women’s magazines. Rather, this trend is consistent with the more complicated and plural representations of women in the symbolic world and the post-feminist picture. Stuart (as cited by McRobbie, 2004) used the “new popular feminism” to conceptualize the current version of feminism being circulated in the media via soap operas, television dramas, advertisements, women’s magazines, and popular fiction. This feminism is grounded in consumption as play, it is knowing and ironic, and it celebrates individuality not collective action—pleasure not politics.

In a way, the new popular feminism has actually helped to disseminate liberal feminist thinking (McRobbie, 2004). However, the disharmony and contradiction between the two versions of feminisms has intensified. Liberal feminist discourses embedded in women’s magazines have facilitated the “feminist success” through which young women are now more geared toward capacity, success, attainment, enjoyment, entitlement, social mobility, and participation (McRobbie, 2007).
McRobbie used the concept of “Top Girls wearing post-feminist masquerade” to express her worries:

I want to propose that the post-feminist masquerade is a strategy or device for the re-securing of patriarchal law and masculine hegemony. The masquerade exists as a mode of feminine inscription, an interpretative device, at work and highly visible across the commercial domain as a familiar (even nostalgic), light hearted (unserious), refrain of femininity. It has recently been re-instated into the repertoire of femininity ironically. (2007, p. 723)

These meritocratic “Top Girls” enjoy the benefits of the previous feminist movement because of the “feminine inscription” and consumer culture, but they are still the victims of patriarchal law and masculine hegemony. The women’s magazines have been blamed for the backlash of feminism:

Such publications trap their readers into cycles of anxiety, self-loathing and misery that have become a standard mark of modern womanhood. “Normative discontent”… becomes all encompassing, invading the space of other interests and other activities. The girl becomes a harshly self-judging person. (McRobbie, 2005)

Gill (2007) also added that a sexy body becomes a woman’s source of power. As such, it requires constant self-monitoring, surveillance, discipline, and remodeling. Meanwhile, even though women are more individualized, they also internalize the socially constructed, mass-mediated ideals of beauty. The consequence is that women may appear to be active, desiring social subjects, but they are actually under hostile surveillance and can only present their actions as freely chosen (Gill, 2007).

From a contemporary perspective, Berger’s (1972) and Mulvey’s (1975)
theories have their limits. Berger was mainly concerned with the gazing relationship in the context of Western fine art, especially oil paintings. When it comes to mass circulated media products, the relationship may not be the same. Mulvey’s argument, on the other hand, is closely related to the dark and closed cinema environment of watching movies, and should not be generalized to other contexts. The central problem of psychologically oriented studies is that they have attempted to build certain causal relationships between isolated media use and women’s behavior or recognition, which is almost impossible. The more recent criticisms of women’s magazines have not directly reflected such generalizations or methodological problems, but revealed a certain anxiety over the context of post-feminism.

When feminism becomes feminisms, when women’s representation in the symbolic world becomes more diversified and contradictory, what does “being a woman” mean in late modern society? The underlying assumption of women’s passivity and weakness in the face of the patriarchal order, which is embedded in the feminists’ critique, can be seen as a reaction to uncertainty, i.e., we have difficulties in grasping clear picture of the construction of femininity in this world, and so we make the most critical arguments to prevent women from falling into the trap of patriarchy. However, even the critical arguments should not keep us from constant questioning how women themselves understand the complex picture and how they give meaning to “being a woman.”
2.2 Audience Power and Media Power

2.2.1 Women as Active Audiences

From the perspective of the study of media and mass communication, any study that assumes that women are weak and vulnerable is grounded in an even more fundamental premise: the audience is powerless in the face of mass media. In effect, the audience is passive. The word *audience* originated from the Latin word *audentia*, meaning *to hear*. In the modern context, the word refers to a general public that is interested in a source of information or entertainment. The debates and discussions about whether audiences are active or passive have persisted throughout the development of the field of media and mass communication studies. There are two routes to understanding the debate: one is through the “stimulate-react” model developed in the field of social psychology, and the other is through the structuralist point of view.

In the early stages of audience studies, the magic bullet theory and the hypodermic model represented the typical notion of the passive audience though the “stimulate-react” model. Both theories stated that mass media could manipulate audiences and inject repressive ideologies directly into the consciousness of masses (Baran & Davis, 2009; Morley, 1992). The audience was considered to be an “atomistic mass,” which was prepared to receive the message, and the message was conceived of as a direct and powerful stimulus to act, which would elicit immediate response (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). Lazarsfeld (1968) later proposed a two-step flow model to refine the original understanding of mass
communication. He found that during elections voters were more easily influenced by the opinion leaders around them than by mass media directly. This model introduced more mediating factors between the media and the audience, and placed some faith in the rationality of individuals and their ability to evaluate the content received. However, even in the two-step flow model, the audience was not innately active, since the main premise was still one of media does what to audience (Morley, 1992), rather than what audiences do to media.

In the social psychological tradition, the use and gratification theory can be seen as the first theory focusing on what audiences do to media. Herzog (1944), who is often cited as the originator of the use and gratification theory, conducted a study on daily serial listeners and identified three major types of gratification: emotional release, the opportunities for wishful thinking, and advice. This theory explored audiences’ communication behavior in terms of their direct experiences with media, viewing members of the audience as active users of media content, rather than passive receptors (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009). The use and gratification theory set a paradigm for studying at least one type of active audience: the active audience that makes choices. The main focus of this paradigm was to explore the factors influencing the audiences’ choices. However, this type of active audience seeks gratification in a psychological sense, rather than producing meaning in a sociological sense. The audience members exert their activities onto the media product, instead of the text carried by the mass media.

If we examine the relationship of the audience to mass media from the
perspective of structuralism, the importance of text and meaning comes to the fore.

By structure, we are referring to the structure of a functional system in which “individual elements are arranged for a purpose in a relation of inter-dependence” (Robey, 1973, p.2). Therefore, the system in its entirety is more important than its parts and its parts should be understood in reference to the system. Language, further developed into text, in whatever form, is structural. When that structure is valued and the text is deeply analyzed, individuals’ subjectivity tends to be underestimated. Thus, we see another type of passive audience with no ability to negotiate or even confront the text; the audience can only surrender itself to the structural power of the text. Women who adopt the male gaze to look at themselves, and women who indulge in the pleasure of women’s magazines dominated by a patriarchal order, all belong to this type of passive audience. Mulvey’s (1975) study on cinema and McRobbie’s criticism of women’s magazines reflect the influence of structuralism. Therefore, their common limitation in theory building lies in their over-emphasis of textual analysis, for which they have been criticized by later scholars like Gauntlett (2008, p.219):

From McRobbie’s perspective, the feminine building is more frequently related with the uneven self-surveillance for woman and male domination. The construction of feminine traits, in this way, is framed as a direct threat to women’s liberation. When this approach is applied to the concrete study on women’s magazines, it is easy to revert to the one-dimensional model of evil media empires versus female victims.

Frazer (1987) also pointed out that McRobbie’s work wrongly assumed that ideology works in a mechanical, even automatic kind of way. Frazer introduced
group discussion in her study in order to examine readers’ responses toward women’s magazines. Rather than absorbing the values in the stories, Frazer found that the readers laughed at them and criticized them as unrealistic fictions. Nevertheless, Frazer could not prove that the girls were not influenced by the women’s magazines. Currie’s (1999) study revealed a more complicated picture of women’s magazines with regard to their readership. The girls interviewed in the study found that women’s magazines were actually attractive to them. They also considered them to be useful and pleasant. The girls wanted to take the advice offered in the magazines and be honest with themselves.

It is not difficult to identify the shadow of Stuart Hall’s “encoding-decoding” model in these studies. Hall assumed that media power is gained from a “code”—a system of meaning relating ideological positions—according to which a cultural order is either legitimized or contested (Philo, 2008). The nature of the code can contribute to the constitution of a dominant cultural order that exerts taken for granted knowledge of social structures on the people (Hall, 1980). Hall’s main concern was to figure out whether the dominant ideology could really “dominate” the understanding of audiences that were not necessarily in the “ruling class” (e.g., the lower classes in British society). He found that although a preferred reading was implied in the text, the ways of decoding still varied. Hall placed these ways of decoding into three categories: (a) the dominant hegemonic position whereby the audiences just follow the same way of encoding to understand the text; (b) the negotiated position whereby the audience partly
follows the dominant ideology and partly not; and (c) the oppositional position whereby the audience decodes the text in a globally contrary way.

In Hall’s theory, both text and audience belong to a macro social structure or “cultural frame.” Thus, neither the production of a text nor the interpretation of the audience can be understood from an isolated perspective. Within the basic social structure, there is a micro “text–audience” structure whereby the audience faces the text directly and generates meanings. In studies related to gender or women, the universal “dominant ideology” might be patriarchy. However, if a study only focuses on text, it may seem that women are hopelessly dominated by a patriarchal order without any space to negotiate. Conversely, if only the audience’s interpretation is valued, the structural influence will be neglected. An important inspiration from Hall’s encoding-decoding model is not only to identify the dominant ideology or what audiences say, but also to juxtapose both and examine the ways in which they differ. In this model, we can observe both the characteristics of the structure and the subjectivity of the audience, rather than trapping ourselves by focusing on certain explicit and deterministic causal relationships.

2.2.2 Encoding-Decoding: From the Collective Level to the Individual Level

As inspiring it is, the encoding-decoding model has its limitations because of several basic assumptions. Rooted in modern British society, Hall proposed this model from a grand and abstract perspective, where there is a generally accepted dominant ideology — capitalism or more specifically at that time Thatcherism —
and a comparatively clear class stratification (i.e., dominant elite and working class). Hall developed his study centered on ideology in the particular context of these social conditions. Therefore, if the context changes, the encoding-decoding model should also be revisited. That is, we should ask if anything else can be “encoded” besides ideology and if any other ways of decoding can be accepted beyond the relationship with a certain ideology.

Fiske (1986, 1987), whose research focused on television and popular culture, in a way extended the range of meanings that could be loaded into the text through the concept of ‘polysemy.’ Polysemy is the possibilities embedded in the text along with the possible dominant ideology, which waits for the audience to activate it based on their personal background. Fiske (1988) believed in the possibility of multiple meanings in a text, but did not deny the limits of such possibilities. Although Fiske may have overemphasized the polysemy of text and the activeness of the audience, his conceptualization was consistent with his research context, as he faced a more uncertain and complicated picture of popular culture in United States. In that context, dominant ideology alone may not work.

Similarly, in this particular study of women’s magazines, I admit the existence of a patriarchal order, but do not identify it as the only dominant ideology. The complex representations of women in the symbolic world suggest that patriarchy may not be the whole picture. If scholars try too hard to identify only one dominant ideology in women’s magazines, they may overlook other important meanings that are encoded. When examining the encoding process, the
multiple possibilities of meaning should be acknowledged. In effect, we should consider encoding as a more inclusive and comprehensive process instead of an exclusive and decisive one.

On the decoding side, Morley (1980) conducted an empirical study to test the relationship between the existing cultural framework and the audiences’ decoding of the British news program *Nationwide*. In the study, the group characteristics were operationalized as the audiences’ occupations, from business managers to apprentices across the upper, middle, and lower classes. Through his analysis, Morley found that, in general, most groups engaged in a negotiated reading, followed by the oppositional reading. The business managers and apprentices only accounted for a rather small proportion, but represented the dominant decoding strategy. Morley’s study revealed that class is not a determining factor in the ways of decoding. The data from the *Nationwide* audiences were later re-analyzed by Kim (2004), who further distinguished between the separate determining effects of class, ethnicity, race, gender, and generation that influence the decoding process. Both Morley’s and Kim’s studies placed the main emphasis on group factors when examining the decoding process. Similarly, Liebes and Katz’s (1993) research of decoding *Dallas*, a popular American television drama, also focused on the influence of ethnic identities on the decoding of popular culture materials.

In Hall’s original encoding-decoding model, the active audience displays its activeness on a collective level. The dominant ideology condensed in the media, although usually elusive and abstract, comprises the raw material for decoding.
The dominant ideology is also the structural power embedded in the text. When one assumes that decoding is based on certain collective characteristics, one makes an even more fundamental assumption that individuals within a structure make meaning through unconscious or conscious reference to that structure. Therefore, the three forms of decoding are compliance, rejection, or negotiation with the structural power. We can see the possibility for unconscious obedience, but less so the possibility of unconscious rejection or negotiation. According to Morley’s (1980) study, however, most audiences adopt the decoding strategy of negotiation. If we assume that these audiences are engaging their activeness, in doing so, they must assess their own social economic status or group affiliation, such as class, gender, or other differentiated subgroups, and relate them to the reality of the macro structure. This process may happen in some groups of people some of the time, but it cannot be assumed that it will happen with all people all of the time, because decoding on collective level is demanding on the audience’s ability and willingness to reflect.

In such cases, another level of activeness or another form of decoding should be considered: the decoding on the individual level, which is more unpredictable, chaotic, and dynamic. In this context, people’s attitudes and behaviors toward media content tend to be individualized and personalized according to their habits and the very concrete situations in their everyday lives at a certain point of time. The audiences’ activeness is unveiled through their flexible adjustment and tactics for dealing holistically with media as symbolic worlds or cultural products.
Therefore, being an active audience member on the individual level does not require individuals to consider their relationship with the structure, but demands that they be sensitive to their everyday practices and lifestyle choices. The most important difference between decoding on the individual level and decoding on the collective level is that audiences usually cannot avoid engaging their activeness on the individual level, just as they cannot escape from life itself. The internal motive for this level of activeness is isomorphic with the internal logic of everyday life.

Hermes’s study on reading women’s magazines (1984) provided an extremely individualized study of the decoding process. Inspired by de Certeau’s philosophy of everyday life, Hermes looked for the meaning generated in the context of everyday media use. By meaningful, Hermes meant the process of making sense of a text by recognizing and comprehending it, assigning it related signification, and giving it a place in one’s knowledge and views of the world (Hermes, 1995). However, what Hermes found was the phenomenon called the “fallacy of meaningfulness,” which suggests that women read women’s magazines for relaxation and because they are easy to put down. These magazines can only offer women transient fantasized control over their lives as they encounter the text. Although Hermes used the word “fallacy,” the connotation of “meaning” is revised in the process, dragging it down from the ideological level to the life world. The fallacy of meaningfulness is only in the system world, but the media still mean something to the readers in their real lives.
Reviewing the encoding-decoding model from the individual level, in fact, leads to more fundamental questions: What is mass media’s role in modern society? What is the relationship between mass media and ordinary people? In the eyes of scholars of media effect in its early stages and the encoding-decoding model, mass media are tools of power. No matter whether or not audiences have the activeness to resist, mass media are utilized by political or economic elites to manipulate or dominate audiences with certain ideologies, although some such “manipulation” is labeled as for the good of ordinary people. Therefore, the relationship between mass media and audiences is in a way hostile because it involves a confrontational assumption. Giddens (1991), however, provided a comparatively neutral way of reviewing the relationship between media and ordinary people. From his perspective, one important role of mass media is to provide experiences. These experiences can be good or bad, beneficial or harmful. In any case, the nature of the experiences is not decided by media messages alone, but depends on the meanings generated by the recipients of the experiences.

Further developing the idea of mass-mediated experience in this study of femininity, I assume that mass media can be regarded as a container of symbolic resources for gender identity construction. At the same time, I also assume an open attitude toward the relationship between audience and mass media as carriers of symbolic resources. The symbolic resources in this study should be understood in two ways. First, the concept “symbolic” is opposed to the concept of “material.” Symbolic resources in mass media do have carriers, such as paper for newspapers
and magazines, or various types of terminals for Internet content. However, when I refer to symbolic resources, I articulate the clear notion that the value of the resources does not depend on their materiality, but on their potential to be decoded into meanings by users. Second, I define symbolic resources through the scope of semiology, exploring their meaning-generating nature. According to the most basic semiological theory of Roland Barthes (1978), there are different levels of codes composed of signifiers and signifieds embedded in the mass media. These codes contain “certain culture of the society receiving the message” (Barthes, 1978) and can contribute to a semiotic apparatus facilitating the communication of the modern world (Eco, 1973).

Mass media as carriers of symbolic resources, therefore, should be understood as immaterial resources constituted by semiotic codes with the potential to produce meanings. Considering women’s magazines as the main source of symbolic resources in this study, I do not adopt a presupposed critical point of view. Rather, I treat these magazines as a symbolic system, and, as such, before any judgement can be exerted on these magazines, I must first identify the gender cues and internal meanings constructed by the text and images in the women’s magazines. I want to explore what version of femininity is constructed in the symbolic world of women’s magazines and, more importantly, what decoding tactics individuals use.

In this study, I place the audience in an active position when confronting mass media with the potential to demonstrate numerous possible variances in
decoding on both the collective and individual levels. However, it is important to note that these two levels of decoding do not stand in conflict with each other. Rather, they should be seen as part of a spectrum that spans from a totally structural way of decoding to a totally individual way of decoding. As researchers, we should ask what kind of people in what kind of context would adopt which level of decoding. In this particular study, the central issue is the construction of femininity, which can be explored on both collective level such as women’s group identification and individual level as women’s life projects. I place more emphasis on decoding on the individual level since the issue is less explored in the field. Therefore, I propose a self-identity based decoding strategy, meaning that individuals in modern society are in need of a relatively stable self-identity. Whatever level of decoding is adopted, it will serve their identity construction. I explore the ideas of self-identity and self-identity based decoding further in the next section.

2.2.3 Construction of Femininity on the Individual Level

This study is contextualized by what Giddens (1991) calls the disembedding of modern society, which releases social relationships from their specific contexts and rearrange them in a much broader context. Social relations are re-set in the globalized and fragmented structure of time and space and endowed with new meanings. Through this mechanism, individuals are produced and pushed to the front stage of this unpredictable and ever-changing modernity. It is one of the major reasons that, in this study, I pay special attention to women as individuals
and their decoding of women’s magazines on the individual level. However, as a key concept of this study, the notion of the individual should not be used in an uncritical way, but needs to be clearly defined. According to Bauman (2005), the individual originates from the meaning of indivisibility, implying that individuals are the smallest units of a society. Being an individual, as Bauman indicated, is not a status of being, but “a task set for its members by the society of individuals” (2005, p. 15). Based on this basic assumption, Bauman gave a comprehensive definition of individual:

Individual refers to a complex, heterogeneous structure with elements eminently separable and held together in precarious and fragile unity by a combination of graviton and repulsion, of centripetal and centrifugal forces – in a dynamic, shifting and perpetually vulnerable balance. (2005, p. 19)

This definition emphasizes the uncertainty of being an individual in a structure. To reduce this uncertainty, individuality, to some extent, requires autonomy from social members. In other words, to be an individual, one has to be responsible for his or her choices and their consequences (Bauman, 2005). Individuality is not totally determined by one’s own will, but also required by the structure. The definition of a social individual shares some similarity with the concept of reflexive social agency in Giddens’s theory, which also focuses on social members’ ability to reflect and monitor their experiences (Tucker, 1998). However, for Bauman, being individual is a passive burden, and individuals are forced to shoulder the responsibilities. For Giddens, under the framework of structuration, exerting reflection is the individual’s choice to adapt to the
disembedded modern world. As such, it is a more active process. Based on the theoretical definitions of Giddens and Bauman, in this study, I define the individual firstly, as an independent social member, and secondly, as a social member who is willing and able to manage and reflect on his or her life experiences.

Accepting the idea that society is composed of individuals, scholars have further explored a related question: How can these individuals be in public with each other without “anxiety and fear” (Scannell, 2007)? Goffman’s (1959) theory about the strategies of presentation of self provides an answer on the micro scale. Goffman suggested that a person might adjust their verbal and facial expressions, posture, or clothing to suit a particular situation. Goffman’s concern was with the interaction among co-present individuals who are mainly strangers. Due to the inherent confrontational character of the interaction, individuals need access to certain resources, which can ensure respect and consideration for one another (Giddens, 1987). The particular resource applied by individuals in a particular situation contributes to the concept of consensus in Goffman’s theory, according to which “normal people” are willing to and able to acquire and apply such resources in their daily interactions. Therefore, in this context, we can see the importance of the consensus or common sense in being-with-others in public.

Goffman’s theory focuses on the micro level of interpersonal communication. However, in terms of this study, the consensus on masculinity or femininity on a comparatively macro level is also a vital pre-condition of the common social
world and normal daily interactions (Scannell, 2007). Goffman’s study revealed competitiveness and individuality as the cultural characteristics of Americans’ middle-class life, but Giddens considered that the co-presence of interaction may connect to the broader ritual occasions of a macro structure (Giddens, 1987). In Goffman’s theory, self is the backstage of individual, and everyone presents a performance that makes the normal interaction between individuals possible. Despite the differences in the presented roles of self according to the situation, the self in Goffman’s theory is not fragmented and isomeric. Goffman’s focus is anchored on the performance and presentation of the self in certain specific situations of everyday interaction, while Giddens places more emphasis on the construction of self and expression of self in a long-term and accumulative way.

Self and identity are two different concepts. Compared to self, identity is a more specific term, which can be narrowly conceived of as “our sense of who we are, which can be translated into labels with which we can identify ourselves or others” (Jackson & Scott, 2010, p. 122). Self, on the other hand, is a more inclusive concept. In Giddens’s view,

The self consists in an awareness of identity which simultaneously transcends specific roles and provides an integrating means of relating them to personal biography; and furnished a set of dispositions for managing the transaction between motives and expectations scripted by particular roles. (1987, p. 118)

In short, the self is internally constructed, while identity is connected to external expression. In this way, Giddens proposed self-identity as a particular narrative elaborated by an individual creatively and continuously, which requires
constant self-reflection and the absorption of external events into the ongoing
story-making about the self. As Giddens put it,

What to do? How to act? Who to be? There are focal questions for
everyone living in the circumstance of late modernity and ones
which, on some level or another, all of us answer, either discursively
or through day-to-day behavior. (1991, p. 70)

The most important feature of self-identity is that it should be stable and ongoing,
melting into the practice of everyday convention. The construction of self and
identification is a combined unit in Giddens’s theory, and the constant and stable
identification of self contribute to the individual’s lifestyle. Therefore, lifestyle
and the continuous construction of lifestyle becomes an unavoidable theme of
identity construction in modern society, since lifestyle in fact is the externalized or
materialized version of self-identity. Lifestyle is the aggregation of the
individual’s unified practice, providing the individual with a constant sense of
security and connecting the internal self-narrative to a visible external form
(Giddens, 1991).

In late modern society, lifestyle is wildly mediated by mass media, and the
representation of lifestyle is now becoming the resource for self-identity
construction. If an individual wants to identify him/herself as belonging to a
certain community, or several individuals want to identify themselves as a certain
group, they must begin the project by identifying their private and special
commonalities in terms of lifestyle: what to eat, what to wear, or what kinds of
books to read. With the power of tradition fading, this identification cannot be
achieved simply through interpersonal communication, but through
mass-mediated communication. These elements form personal preferences and
tastes that constitute a publicly observable lifestyle in mass media, setting an
ever-expanding well of resources for people’s construction of their individual
self-identities.

In the discussion of the construction of self-identity, the importance of
resources is mentioned repeatedly. Whether it is Goffman’s self-presentation or
Giddens’s construction of self-identity, this is a complicated project for all social
individuals, and no one is born with the ability to accomplish such a project.
Therefore, the individualization that occurs in the acquisition of self-identity is “a
cultural process involving differentiation from others and differential access to
resources” (Skeggs, 2013, p. 53). Resources, however, are never evenly
distributed, and the individual’s willingness and ability to make use of the
available resources to facilitate the construction of their self-identity also varies.
Giddens’s theory has been criticized by scholars for considering individuals to be
equally rational and risk-calculating, which has been labeled the “traditional
masculine fantasy” (Skeggs, 2013, p. 58). No individual has access to all of the
resources for self-identity building. Even if we assume that at least a group of
individuals have similar access to certain resources, especially the resources in
mass media, their choices of whether to use them or not, their tactics for using
them, the different meanings generated from them can still vary. All of these
aspects influence the individual’s self-identity construction. We have to admit that
access to a limited number of resources means limited choices of lifestyles for the
individual. However, Giddens was at least right about one thing: no matter how limited the choices, self-identity and lifestyle building are the choices all individuals have to make.

In this study, I analyze the construction of femininity on the individual level from a self-identity based perspective. That is, I consider gender identity to be part of self-identity in general. Accordingly, women’s magazines are seen as the mass medium that provides the cultural resources in the symbolic world. Magazine as a medium is a form of mélange. This basic property of the magazine implies that it has a high potential for diversity and low requirement for uniformity. Therefore, the magazine becomes a proper and convenient medium through which to provide resources for identity construction. In other words, magazines can provide resources to guide readers on “what to be” and “how to act” in externalizing their identities through lifestyle choices. It is women’s magazines that come to existence providing according resources for femininity as self-identity is not a random incident, but induced by the diversified nature of magazines. Accordingly, in this study, I not only question what kinds of resources are provided by women’s magazines, but also explore how these resources are used by women, how women make meaning out of these resources, and how they integrate these resources into their femininity construction through the decoding process.

Femininity is defined as the combination of feminine traits and feminist ideas in this study. Under the framework of Giddens’s theory, the construction of femininity means that a woman has her own story about being a woman and she
must learn how to adopt the corresponding lifestyle in order to present her self-identity publicly. Lifestyle, in this context, can be understood as a series of practices related to feminine traits, e.g., What kind of dress does a woman choose? Does the woman wear makeup or not? Does a woman wear high heels? In fact, fashion is part of the lifestyle choice for women. A study by Crane (1999) showed that women did not appreciate the innovative, weird, and postmodern style presented in the women’s magazines, but favored a modern “normal look.” The study revealed that postmodernist fashion encourages women to be role-players, experimenting with clothes and products to project different images of themselves. At the same time, postmodern fashion is not welcomed by women because it is unable to offer them a specific identity. Though the study did not make a link between women’s fashion choices and specific self-identities articulated, it showed the possible relationship between self-identity and the decoding of media messages.

2.3 Summary

Within the framework of a comprehensive theoretical discussion of women, feminine traits, feminist ideas, and the construction of femininity, the central concern of the study is fixed on women’s activeness in using mass media and how their self-identity based decoding informs their femininity construction. Therefore, in this chapter, I reviewed the concept of active audience from different theoretical traditions. In the tradition of use and gratification (U&G), audiences’ activeness is demonstrated through their individual ability to identify motive, make selection
and gain psychological satisfaction, while the whole process has nothing to do with meaning making. The encoding-decoding model is all about generating meaning, and the meaning making process requires identification of group affiliation, as discussed in this chapter. Comparing U&G with the encoding-decoding model, we can identify the distinctive active audiences from the perspective of media use and meaning making, and activeness on individual level and collective level. In this way, active women audiences in Hermes’s study of reading women's magazines can be seen an alternative form of the active audience on media use and individual level. Meanwhile, Fiske amplified the complexity of the negotiated decoding and broke down the audience as group into audiences as individuals.

As proposed in this study, self-identity based decoding is shaped in the theoretical framework of the encoding-decoding model, but also inspired by the conceptualization of active audience from individual level in both Hermes and Fiske’s theories. Therefore, self-identity based decoding can be seen as a theoretical hybridization, in which audiences demonstrate activeness in meaning making on the individual level, as Table 1 indicated. That is, in this study, I assumed that texts contain definite resources which audiences can use to construct meanings on the basis of their own experiences. Furthermore, they construct these meanings in terms of their own life projects.
Table 1. Categorization of Active Audience

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Individual level</th>
<th>Collective level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Media use</strong></td>
<td>Goal directed audiences who select to meet their need</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Active audience embedding media use into everyday life</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Meaning making</strong></td>
<td>Meaning making audience decoding based on individual’s self-identity construction and practice of everyday life</td>
<td>Meaning making audience decoding based on class or other forms of group affiliations</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Based on the understanding of active audience in general, we can see that self-identity based decoding is a highly individualized and unpredictable process. According to de Certeau’s (1984) point of view, the nature of self-identity based decoding is that ordinary people adopt different tactics when facing the existing structure. That is, in this study, women’s activeness is analyzed through the scope of self-identity based decoding, which does not mean that they are not situated in the absolute freedom without any structuring power, but contextualized in the structure of the pre-existing text in the form of women’s magazines, and the pre-existing social structure. Therefore, this study actually contains analysis of the text and the analysis of women’s activeness also covers both dimension of media use and meaning making.

Meanwhile, I was fully aware most parts of the world are still male dominated, and China is no exception. The international women’s magazines and
young women in this study are also shaped by the unique social reality in China. Since the general theoretical framework is borrowed from the Western context, it is necessary to introduce the history and background of Chinese society and the basic situation of Chinese women. Re-contextualizing the theoretical framework of this study within the Chinese context will build a more comprehensive picture of the construction of femininity in contemporary China.
3.1 Feminism and the Construction of Femininity in China

As mentioned in Chapter 2, in studying issues about China, I use Western theories as tools rather than as molds. The decision to construct the theoretical framework from Western theories of gender, feminism, and self-identity is not because of their absolute advantage or even academic hegemony, but due to the fact that there are not enough local theoretical resources that can be utilized to explore these research questions. Even so, applying Western theories to the Chinese reality is always problematic due to the drastically different history and reality between western countries and China. Therefore, in this chapter, I offer a brief background of women’s issues and women’s magazines in China. I would like to re-emphasize that the theoretical framework proposed in Chapter 2 should be seen as torch in this study; the torch itself is important, and the light it produces is also important, but what is “enlightened ” is the most valuable part of the whole study.

By revisiting the historical trajectory of women’s issues in China in the 20th century, I show how the construction of femininity was first a social phenomenon, then became a state-dominated issue, and then went back to individual women; and how the resources for femininity construction started to emerge, then disappeared, and then re-emerged. In this way, I explain how gender difference has been endowed with new meanings in the contemporary Chinese context and
why international women’s magazines have become important providers of symbolic resources in China. Related studies on international women’s magazines in China are also covered in this chapter.

3.1.1 Feminism and the Construction of Femininity: From the 1900s to the 1930s

Examining the modern history of China, it is difficult to identify feminist movements similar to those in the Western world; however, this does not mean that women’s issues were not discussed or that feminist ideas were not disseminated throughout the 20th century in China. Chinese society holds traditional beliefs in women’s inferiority to men due to the deeply ingrained Confucianism. However, by the late Qing Dynasty, intellectuals, such as Liang Qichao, had already begun to realize that women are not biologically inferior to men and that women should also be educated and “improved” to become working women or qualified mothers.

The word “Nv Quan (女权)” was introduced into China around 1902–1903 through the translation of Western feminist literatures. In the Chinese context, “Nv Quan” literally translates as “rights of woman,” referring to women’s social, political, and educational rights being equal to those of men. The concept itself was imported from Western culture and was thus loaded with cultural dichotomies in light of the traditional Chinese understanding of women. During the Revolution from 1902 to 1911, various feminist discourses came to surface in Chinese society (Spence, 1982). Qiu Jin, a famous female revolutionary, believed that
women should shoulder “the same” obligations as men, participating in the revolution and contributing to the development of the country. At the same time, Zhang Zhujun, a female doctor, placed more emphasis on women’s independence and individuality. She argued that women and men were free individuals who should explore their own roles in society. At that time, although women’s education had started to develop and the number of women’s military or Red Cross medical groups had mushroomed, women’s condition in general had not observably improved. However, it was an undeniable fact that women’s issues and feminist ideas were entering into public discourse.

From the 1911 Revolution to the 1930s (before the Second Sino-Japanese War), the discussion on women issues in Chinese society became even more diversified. On the one hand, conservative voices defined women’s roles within the family and advocated that women’s priority should be to become a “smart wife and loving mother (賢妻良母).” On the other hand, with the rise of mass media, the image of the “new women” was gradually constructed. The Ladies’ Journal (婦女雜誌) was first published in 1915 in Shanghai. In its early days, the magazine promoted the image of the ideal women as a qualified wife and mother; women’s education should be designed to help women fulfill their family role (Wang, 2011). After the May Fourth Movement in 1919, the magazine began to frame the main purpose of women’s education as the basic foundation for women’s pursuit of independence and liberation (Wang, 2011). From the 1920s to the 1930s, women’s romantic relationships, marriage, and sexuality were more
openly discussed in the magazine (Liu, 2007). The magazine also provided women with information serving their everyday lives, encouraging them to adopt a hygienic and healthy lifestyle (Wang, 2011).

Women’s bodies and fashion were also included in the discussion of women’s magazines. An athletic body of a female swimmer was published in *The Ladies’ Journal* to promote the aesthetic appeal of a strong and healthy body (Wang, 2011). Woman’s bodies, in that context, were closely connected to their health and hygiene, rather than their sexuality and attractiveness. Another women’s magazine, *Linglong*, established later in 1931 in Shanghai (Kong, 2011), published articles arguing that real feminine beauty is built upon health (Wang, 2011). Also in Shanghai, a major newspaper *Shun Pao* published articles talking about women’s fashion and advertisements of women’s dresses, such as Qi Pao, skin products, or even toothpaste (Wang, 2011).

Based on the materials from mass media, we see that the version of the “new woman” articulated through the mass media was usually educated, independent, healthy, and fashionable. However, such women only existed in metropolitan areas such as Shanghai, and therefore the image could not represent the whole situation of women in China. It is also questionable whether these “new women” were able to acquire social or political equality. However, a more important value of the construction of “new women” in women’s magazines is that the magazines proved that not only could women’s issues be wildly discussed on public platforms, despite conflicts and contradictions, but also information on all aspects
of women’s lives could be manufactured and injected into the symbolic world as resources. The construction of femininity thus became an active social process at that time.

Socialist China was founded by the Communist Party of China (CPC) after nearly 10 years of the Sino-Japanese War and the national war in 1949. The party unified women’s issues under its own discipline of Marxism, rather than continuing the discussion. Following the principles of Marxist feminist theory, women's subordination and oppression were actually rooted in private ownership and the class system (Chow, 2004). Since the roots of gender inequality had theoretically been eliminated by the ruling party, women’s problems were also claimed to have been solved through the political path toward national liberation. Women’s liberation in socialist China became a top-down institutional exercise to realize equal rights between genders in the domains of education, working opportunities, and marriage freedom. China established an official community, the All-China Women’s Federation, to manage women’s issues and founded a magazine, *Women of China*, to produce official discourse about women.

The CPC’s discourse on women is deeply rooted in revolution and struggle, which can partly explain why formal gender equality without gender difference is enshrined by the party, reflected in Mao Zedong’s famous statement “women can hold up half the sky” (Zhou, 2008). In the wake of the victory of revolution and national war, and the construction and development of the new China, the CPC encouraged women to participate and contribute as much as men do.
Consequently, women in China have achieved liberation on the structural level. In effect, on the state level, no obstacles stop them from receiving education and joining the labor force. However, in their everyday lives, women are still constrained by traditional gender roles (as wife and mother) and encounter discrimination and specific difficulties (Zhou, 2008). It would seem that the endeavor to achieve gender equality in China has not come from the self-awareness of women, but from the official order imposed by state authority. In this way, gender discourse has emerged as part of the dominant official ideology in China, under the surveillance of the state and party apparatus.

3.1.2 Feminism and the Construction of Femininity: After 1949

After 1949, the influence of the individual and society in the construction of femininity declines, while the party and state’s intervention dominated the process. Looking back at the construction of femininity in the 1920s and 1930s, it is clear that this project had a space for discussion on public platforms, such as newspapers and women’s magazines. Meanwhile, symbolic resources were produced for individuals to construct their own femininity, at least in urban areas, and women as individuals were allowed express their identity as women with the resources available. However, the room for both symbolic resource production and individuals’ identification was squeezed by the state-dominated discourse of formal equality. Under this discourse, feminine features embodied in either body or fashion became stigmatized or even annihilated along with the claimed annihilation of gender inequality. Therefore, from 1949 to 1978, women in China
did not usually have salient identities as woman or demonstrate feminine traits because of the lack of social space for identification and the almost non-existent production of related resources, both material and symbolic.

During the Cultural Revolution from 19660 to 1976, national control and intervention in individuals’ everyday lives achieved an extremely high level. According to Sun’s study (2013) on people’s clothing in Guangzhou during the Cultural Revolution, clothing at that time became politicized, under close surveillance of the revolutionary movement, and representing people’s political identities rather than their own self-identities. In this context, feminine features became political taboos connoting “capitalism and feudalism,” which were considered threats to the Cultural Revolution. Consequently, women, comprising an equal part of the labor force, demonstrated no difference in their daily clothing style. However, Sun also found that, even in the extremely unified and de-feminized environment, women still explored ways to display their femininity. Newly married women used pink collars under their olive or gray coats in order to identify themselves as brides (Sun, 2013). Various minute modifications to collars and sleeves were the most common techniques among women to resist the annihilation of external femininity in their everyday lives.

After several decades of de-feminization, the reconstruction of femininity in China began after the reform and open up policy in 1978, when the political fever of the Cultural Revolution waned and people were finally able to return to their individual everyday lives. Strictly speaking, the construction of femininity in socialist China did not totally cease in the
first 30 years, but its oppression at the structural level did impede its development due to the extreme lack of both material and symbolic resources. The shortage of material resources was improved by the transformation from a planned economy to a market economy accompanied with economic development and upgrades to productivity. Enriching the symbolic resources, on the other hand, relied on a cultural opening up. From the late 1970s through the 1980s, various cultural products from Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, and Western countries such as US were introduced into China, including movies, television drama, and pop music. In the late 1980s, women’s magazines also made an appearance. At that time, China was embarking on a trajectory of globalization, not only economically but also culturally. Therefore, the new phase of femininity construction in China was not only a local phenomenon, but also the product of global cultural collision and hybridization. Since 1978, Western feminist ideas have been gradually disseminated through scholars and women’s organizations, including the All China Women’s Federation (Zhou, 2008). Together with the state-alleged gender equality and pre-existing traditional values, the social and cultural background of femininity construction for Chinese women is settled in a hybridized manner.

From a historical perspective, the contribution of the state to women’s development cannot be denied. Compared to the three waves of Western feminist movements, contemporary China has achieved some of the goals of the first and second waves, especially in terms of women’s rights to education and work. According to the Global Gender Gap Report (World Economic Forum, 2014), the rate of Chinese women’s participation in the labor force is 70%, the highest among East Asian countries sharing the Confucius tradition; the literacy rate for women is 93%, and 28% of Chinese women are receiving tertiary
education which is even 3% higher than that of men. Because of reinforcement at the state level, the notion that women should go to school and work has generally been internalized by ordinary people in China. Despite uneven regional development across the country, a large number of Chinese women have now been born with equal rights to education and work, enabling them to place more emphasis on their self-development. These women, mainly those born post-1980 and post-1990, usually have more chances to achieve undergraduate degrees or above, and to have a promising or successful career than their parents’ generation. They look forward to establishing their own identity as women in modern society. Unlike their parents’ generation, these women have the chance to develop a more individualized and self-actualizing femininity using vigorously produced symbolic resources. Femininity construction can also become a personal project, even a personal burden, requiring these women to devote their attention and efforts.

This new generation of women in contemporary China shares some commonalities with the “Top Girls” discussed by McRobbie (2007). They enjoy basic gender equality without the need to fight or struggle. In contrast to the liberal feminist idea that gender differences are over-emphasized, forcing women to pay undue attention to their bodies and appearance, the new generation of young Chinese women needs these differences. For young Chinese women, the normalization of “no differences” between genders in the mainstream has become their obstacle to building their identity as women as something distinct from men. Hence, it is possible that what they are looking for in international women’s magazines are resources to construct lifestyles and a new women’s identity, which they cannot inherit from the older generations. In this context, the main content of international women’s magazines, such as
fashion, skin care, cosmetics, relationships, marriage, and careers, and the beautiful or sexy images of women can generate totally different meanings among these Chinese young women, despite the fact that many Western scholars have criticized these magazines for advocating consumerism and reinforcing patriarchal aesthetic tastes.

Examining the historical background of the 20th century for both Chinese women’s magazines and Chinese young women, one can identify three dimensions that had to be negotiated in the construction of femininity: women discourses on the state level, pre-existing traditional values, and the different waves of Western feminism. There is a possibility that all of these dimensions are embedded in international women’s magazines in China, which can generate both tension and cooperation among them. In such a complicated context, the gender identity construction for Chinese new women can be an uncertain proposition. Therefore, this study is designed to clarify the process of negotiation in detail, incorporating all of the dimensions both on the symbolic level and on the identity level through the individual’s reflexivity. The Chinese young women are the major focus of the study, as I analyze their reflection on and interpretation of their use of women’s magazines in the construction of their femininity.

The Chinese construction or reconstruction of femininity should be understood against an even more macro background: Chinese society is undergoing drastic changes on the social and cultural levels, or a “structural transformation.” We can see that China is on its way to economic modernization with its rapid GDP growth and aggregate economic expansion. However, the modernization of China on the social and cultural levels remains a mystery. Using words such as “femininity” or “identity” assumes that China is in a particular position
within a certain version of modernity, but unfortunately we have no idea which version is unfolding in China. I noted that the major theoretical framework of this study is based on the theories developed in typical capitalist countries such as the United Kingdom and the United States, which are now in late modernity. Following the original path from simple modernity to reflexive modernity (Giddens & Pierson, 1998), these countries have developed comparatively stable social conventions and value systems, even in the disjuncture and complexity of globalization (Appadurai, 1990). China’s situation, however, is quite different, not only because China is still a developing country with a unique authoritarian political system, but also because China is still on this path to modernity, albeit a rather unpredictable one. The global configuration has changed tremendously, and China cannot duplicate any known version of modernity. In light of this, Western theories are borrowed in this study not as enshrined truths, but as tools to help us understand modern Chinese society and femininity construction within it.

3.2 International Women’s Magazines in China

Magazines tend to be considered as carriers of culture (Holmes, 2007). Compared to the newspaper industry, the market for magazines is usually smaller and more fragmented due to magazines’ diverse and complex nature (Holmes, 2007). According to Holmes (2007), compared to around 10 national newspapers in the United Kingdom, there are 9,000 magazines, and almost 19,000 periodicals in the United States. However, the share of ad spending on magazines in the media industry is usually less than 10% globally (FIPP, 2012). In developing markets such as China, the ad spending on magazines is still growing (FIPP, 2012).
There are 9,884 periodicals in China (FIPP, 2011), which is more than 10 times the number in 1978 (Li, 2010). Only 12% of periodicals are consumer magazines serving ordinary readers, whereas most magazines are business to business (B2B) magazines that serve particular branches of trade, service industries, and professions (FIPP, 2012). At the same time, the consumer magazines contribute to the majority of both the ad revenue and circulation revenue of the industry (FIPP, 2013). Few consumer magazines in China have more than 1 million readers (Strube, 2010). In general, the Chinese magazine market is still developing and improving, and it is still comparatively small in scale and number of active market players.

There are three main categories of women’s magazines in China: national, local, and international. The most important national women’s magazine is Women of China, established in Yan’an in 1939. It was appointed as the official journal of the All-China Women’s Federation after 1949, serving as the main propaganda tool of the CPC on women’s issues (Wang, 2011). This magazine also expanded its market by establishing a more popular women’s magazine Marriage and Family in 1985, and later cooperating with an international publication group to publish an international title Self in 2007. In the 1980s, local unofficial magazines came into exist, such as Family (1983) and Zhiyin (1985), which were the early market players in the Chinese women’s magazine market. These magazines have also been labeled “circulation driven” magazines (Li, 2010), because they usually cost less than 5 RMB (less than 1 USD). These magazines mainly provide
sentimental narratives on romantic relationship and love affairs, thus attracting a
great number of readers from lower income groups.

The introduction of international magazines started in the early 1980s. According to government regulations, foreign investors are forbidden from engaging in businesses such as book and magazine publishing, wholesale, and imports. Nor can they enter into the publication field in the name of book distribution, printing, advertising, or cultural facility reconstruction. Yet, foreign investors can build Chinese–foreign cooperative enterprises and Chinese–foreign joint ventures in printing, book and magazine distribution, and artwork sales. But the Chinese partner’s investment ratio in these joint ventures must be greater than 51%, and the Chinese side should take the leading role. Moreover, the percentage of editorials directly translated from the original foreign version in women’s magazines should be limited to 50% (Li, 2008). Elle, the first international women’s magazine, was introduced into China in 1988 through the collaboration of Hachette Filippacchi Media and Shanghai Translation Publishing House (Li, 2008). Over the next 20 years, many globally influential women’s magazines, such as Cosmopolitan, Marie Claire, and Vogue, and leading regional ones, such as Rayli and Mina originating in Japan, have entered the Chinese market (Li, 2010).

Unlike the local ones, international titles are information-oriented, since they mainly provide information on women’s appearance management and self-development. The main income of these magazines comes from advertising
by transnational corporations, such as P&G, Unilever, and L’Oreal (FIPP, 2012). With a higher cover price of around 20 RMB (3.26 USD), these magazines attract a more exclusive group of readers with better income (Li, 2010). The international magazines have achieved success in the Chinese market. Behind all of the major titles are international publishing houses with rich experience, extensive resources, and strong financial backing, which enable them to produce content of high quality. In 2012, Elle China increased its publication frequency from monthly to biweekly, while Cosmopolitan started to publish two books for every single issue. The significant growth of women’s and fashion magazines, fuelled by the high-end luxury and cosmetic brands that still consider magazines to be the best vehicle for generating consumer engagement (FIPP, 2013), has placed women’s magazines in the spotlight of the magazine industry in China. Women’s magazines in China are developing more rapidly and expanding in scale.

The competition between the Western-style women’s magazines and the Japanese-style ones is a unique feature of the Chinese market for women’s magazines. Well-known international publishers usually produce Western-style women’s magazines with global influence (Firth & Feng, 2009; Karan & Feng, 2009). Closely attached to the high-end fashion industry, Western-style women’s magazines provide the latest trends in fashion for women with higher incomes and social status. Japanese-style women’s magazines have a more regional influence, providing practical tips on affordable fashion and aiming to attract a younger generation of female readers.
The international women’s magazines have been selected as the main subject of this study because they occupy a missing space in women’s everyday lives in China. Among the three categories of women’s magazines in China, only Women of China serves the purpose of constructing official discourse, and thus barely has ordinary readers; the local ones treat female readers as objects and attempt to fulfill their emotional needs through sensationalized fictions that do not touch on real issues in women’s lives. The international ones, however, are directly involved in the project of femininity construction in China, both on the feminine level and on the feminist level. At the same time, these magazines are active market players, facing Chinese readers directly and competing for their attention. The international women’s magazines in China have already been de-politicized and highly commercialized within the context of globalization and the expansion of transnational corporations. In China, however, they are active producers of symbolic resources for the versions of femininity constructed in women’s everyday lives. Even if these international magazines are sometimes criticized for reinforcing patriarchal dominance and impeding the construction of public discourse on gender issues, for Chinese women, international women’s magazines expand the social space and resources for the construction of femininity. From the perspective of resources providers, international women’s magazines mark the difference of “there is” and “there is not” in Chinese society.

3.3 Study of International Women’s Magazines in China

Accepting that international women’s magazines provide an alternative platform
and resources for women, it is reasonable to question that what kinds of femininity they produce, rather than simply pointing to a dichotomy between Western-style and Japanese-style. In fact, many different versions of femininity are constructed in China through these international women’s magazines. Therefore, we first need to identify these versions of femininity, and then question what Chinese women think of these versions and how they construct their own version on the individual level. However, Chinese studies on women’s magazines have mainly concentrated on critical analysis, while empirical studies on both content and readership have been comparatively limited. In terms of critical analysis, criticism on consumerism from a postmodernist theoretical perspective appears to have been the dominant discourse, followed by class analysis and discussions on gender issues. In contrast to Western studies on women’s magazines, the direct feminist critique has been almost absent among recent studies in China.

The advocating of consumerism has been considered the ultimate hidden agenda of all international women’s magazines in China by some scholars. All other agendas, such as fashion, gender identity, or class stratification, have generally been absorbed into the narrative of consumerism. Mei and Li’s study (2005) pointed out that these magazines have provided a class distinction strategy for newly emerging white-collar women through consumption. At the same time, the differences between femininity and masculinity have been mediated by the consumer culture in the women’s magazines for consumers with ambiguous
gender identities (Liu & Liu, 2012). A study (Sun, 2010) has even accused the magazines of being the direct cause of conspicuous consumption among youth, although no reliable statistics were provided to support the causality. The approach of these studies reveals the obvious negative attitude toward the women’s magazines because of the consumerist values reflected.

Building on the critique of consumerism, other studies have categorized the emerging middle class as an “illusory group” that can only identify themselves through the consumption of symbolic goods. Women’s magazines, in this way, have bridged the gap between products and symbolic values (Wang, 2009). Liu (2006) made the argument that there were no clear boundaries, collective pursuits, or recognizable lifestyles for middle-class Chinese women. The women’s magazines have only presented an imaginary middle-class identity for lower-class women to aspire to. A few studies, such as Xiong’s study (2009) on the magazine Self, have acknowledged the productive nature of consumption and its empowerment of women, although they have simultaneously criticized the Westernized version of middle-class women’s lifestyle and identity. Bai (2010) also criticized these magazines for assuming its readership to be mature, Western middle-class women and instilling in them improper consumer values. In this way, it is clear that the notion of the middle-class being intrinsically connected to Western values and consumerism is also reflected in studies on Chinese women’s magazines.

When it comes to issues of gender, Foucault’s concept of the docile body has
been constantly mentioned in these studies. Scholars (Bai, 2010; Liu & Qi, 2006) have pointed out the women in these magazines are portrayed as objects of the male gaze and male consumption. Women have disciplined themselves to suit men’s aesthetic tastes (Yang, 2001). The display of women’s sexuality or sexual desire has been given negative connotations (Liu & Qi, 2006) or even directly seen as immoral and vulgar behavior (Zhang, 2008). Women’s magazines, in this context, are not considered platforms for advocating women’s rights or carriers of femininity in everyday life, but exhibitions of distorted images of women that are not socially desirable. Feminist issues, liberal or cultural, have been avoided in these studies, while women’s subjectivity and identity construction have also been missing in this field.

Chinese scholars have received women’s magazines hostilely and one-sidedly as an imported genre, embodying various streams of Western values. On the one hand, these scholars have inherited the elitist heritage of the Frankfurt School, assuming that women will be corrupted by the hyper-consumerist lifestyle pictured in these magazines. On the other hand, they have also been very alert to the identifiable Western ideology reflected in the glossy books and the possibility that this might pose an uncertain threat to the dominant ideology of post-socialist China. Therefore, these studies have seemed to serve certain presuppositions, rather than to examine the real properties of this new genre or its impact on ordinary women in China.

Through a limited number of empirical studies, a general trend in femininity
construction can be observed: from the collective level to the individual level and from de-feminization to re-feminization. Through a content analysis of *Women of China*, Wang (2011) found that women’s images have transformed from strong and masculine “model worker” to beautiful and fashionable “star.” A more detailed study by Luo and Hao (2007) showed that from 1956 to 1966, women were usually “plain looking, casually dressed, engaging in agriculture or industrial production” (p. 287), but began to be shown as business persons and professionals in the period from 1993 to 2003. Women in the magazine were also brightened up with fashionable clothes in light or bright colors. Although this magazine is an official one, this shift implies a tolerance for change at the national level. A study (Chen & Machin, 2013) on *Rayli*, a Japanese-style women’s magazine, revealed that the magazine has provided women with a world in which they can act strategically and fashionably as individuals. This individualism, however, has been consumer-based. A critical discourse analysis (Chen & Machin, 2014) of the same magazine showed that it offers young Chinese women a version of freedom based on duty and responsibility, but it still cannot avoid the influence of consumer capitalism.

The studies focusing on content have suggested that an individualized and feminized femininity construction is closely intertwined with consumption behavior. A study by Fung (2002) on readers of women’s magazines in Hong Kong pointed out that women can easily internalize consumption in their daily lives through the identification with the fashionable and stylish community, and
with commodities. Therefore, their identities reflect a degree of “fragility, superficiality and submission to patriarchal dominance” (Fung, 2002, p. 333). Sue and Feng’s study (2010) on Chinese college students and international women’s magazines showed that young women have the desire to become the glorious women in the magazines one day: the daydream of fantasy. In light of this, they concluded that Chinese femininity is constructed based on essentialized sexual difference and Western-style consumerism.

3.4 Summary

Overall, we have explored the development of women’s magazines in China and related studies. These studies suggest that some degree of femininity construction occurs both on a content level and on an individual level through women’s magazines in China. However, it is important to note that most of these studies, in China and internationally, have adopted two critical perspectives. First, the pursuit of fashion and its related consumption behavior always leads to the dominance of capitalism, and second, the pursuit of feminine traits always leads to the dominance of patriarchy. In other words, women’s individualization and feminization is just another form of male domination.

In this study, I would like to put these two perspectives aside, and take a fresh look at these international women’s magazines in contemporary Chinese society. I start by asking several basic questions: What do these magazines look like? What types of content do they cover? How do they present women’s images? Based on the descriptive evidence of the international women’s magazines, I then
further explore some fundamental theoretical assumptions. For example, what kind of fashion is constructed in these magazines? How are feminine traits defined in the magazines and among female readers? More importantly, I interview young Chinese women in order to understand how they make use of these symbolic resources and how they understand fashion, feminine traits, and femininity. Having collected all this information, I seek to develop perhaps another way to critique the international women’s magazines in China and to understand the construction of femininity among young Chinese women. In the next chapter, I explore different ways of answering the research questions raised with a discussion of qualitative-quantitative inquiry in everyday life.
CHAPTER 4

METHODOLOGY

4.1 Qualitative-Quantitative Inquiry in Everyday Life

The central issue of this study is how international women’s magazines as symbolic resources participate in Chinese women’s construction of femininity within the framework of encoding-decoding. The discussion of the basic configuration of international women’s magazines in China in Chapter 3 elucidated the rapid and vigorous development of this genre of mass media in China and the dichotomized categorization of Western-style and Japanese-style magazines. The discussion also touched on concerns that these magazines might lure women under the control of consumerism and capitalism. Instead of presuming a model of dominance and resistance, however, I base the interpretations and arguments of this study on a comprehensive understanding of international women’s magazines in China and young women’s readings. To do so, I asked some simple and fundamental questions: What versions of femininity are constructed as symbolic resources in international women’s magazines? How do Chinese young women incorporate these magazines into their lives and make meanings out of them? Based on these two questions, I also wanted to know what version of femininity is constructed on the individual level by these young women.

Due to the research questions proposed in this study, I adopted a qualitative-quantitative inquiry in everyday life as the main research approach. By
qualitative-quantitative inquiry, I mean that I did not stick to the dichotomy of using either qualitative or quantitative research methods. Instead, I maintained a rather flexible attitude toward the methods adopted, depending on the “research questions, the type of data, the type of analysis as well as the point in time one is looking” (Newman, 1998, p. 111). Newman further pointed out that the qualitative-quantitative inquiry can be understood as an interactive continuum—one end of which is inductive in nature, producing detailed descriptions and motivated by the purpose of theory building, while the other end is deductive in nature, producing repeatable facts and motivated by the purpose of theory testing (Newman, 1998). Since the main purpose of this particular study is theory building, qualitative methods played a dominant role in the overall research design. However, this theory building requires evidence derived from quantitative analysis, which was also conducted in the study.

The perspective of research in the context of everyday life is also embedded in the design of the study. According to Brinkmann (2012), everyday life can be understood as the private or public regular routines of individuals in late modern society, but can also refer to “the life world, the ubiquitous interaction order or immortal ordinary society” (p. 17). Although it is very difficult to define everyday life, it is still the paramount reality for most ordinary people, including researchers. Therefore, researchers are not observers of everyday life, but participants in it. As such, researchers begin the theory-building process by questioning the situations and events in their everyday life (Brinkmann, 2012). In this research on femininity,
I, as the main researcher, do not deny the existence of my own identity; I am also a woman, a reader of women’s magazines, and an individual who struggles with her identity in contemporary China. This study, to some extent, is inspired by my own everyday life, experiences, and reflections, so I do not deny the subjectivity embedded in the study.

As a study built on everyday life and reflection, it was even more important to collect good quality data through proper data collection methods (Newman, 1998). There were two main concerns to study: the femininity revealed in the international women’s magazines in China and the readers’ adoption of these resources in constructing their identities as women. The first concern could be addressed through textual analysis, including quantitative content analysis and semiological analysis; the former provided the general picture, while the latter elicited various meanings in specific cases. The second concern could be investigated through in-depth interviews, which gave women the opportunity to make their voices heard with regard to their femininity construction. It is very important to note that the study of both text and women was not designed to produce a causal relationship. Instead, it was designed to provide context with which to understand both femininity in a symbolic world and on the individual level. The juxtaposition was aimed at providing a more comprehensive understanding of the main issue of this study.
4.2 Textual Analysis

4.2.1 Quantitative Content Analysis

A major problem affecting our understanding of women’s readings of women’s magazines has been that we actually do not know much about the women’s magazines themselves. In previous studies mentioned in Chapter 3, one or two very specific women’s magazines have been selected for analysis or used only as the context to explore other concepts. We know even less about women’s magazines in China, even though they have been flourishing for years. Therefore, the quantitative content analysis in this study can be seen as a solid background analysis, since it provides a general picture of international women’s magazines in China and the femininity constructed, and helps us to interpret readers’ reactions in a meaningful context.

The reason why quantitative content analysis can provide this general picture is because it is an empirically grounded method that helps to explore trends, patterns, and differences in a body of communication materials (Krippendorff, 2012). This content analysis can be conducted through the classification, tabulation, and evaluation of symbols and themes in the text in order to explore the embedded meanings (Krippendorff, 2012). In this study, the patterns and differences in the international women’s magazines in China is the central focus. By patterns, I wanted to explore the general features of the magazines as media products and the features of femininity constructed through the magazines. By differences, I followed previous studies in identifying the distinctions between
Western- and Japanese-style women’s magazines and then uncovered more nuanced differences between the titles.

The front covers of the international women’s magazines were selected for analysis because the front cover of a magazine is the first thing readers see, and the place editors’ intentions clearly announced (McDonell, 2003). The cover defines the identity of a magazine and conveys the key message highlighted for the readers. Therefore, the covers of the international women’s magazines can be used as subjects to explore the features of the magazines and the femininity they intend to construct. A two-step purposive sampling was used for the content analysis. First, I identified the magazines for the study and then chose the specific issues. In this study, I selected 10 major international women’s magazines for analysis: *Elle, Marie Claire, Vogue, Self, Bazaar, Cosmopolitan, Mina, Vivi, Rayli,* and *Oggi*. I selected these magazines on the basis of two considerations: Before formally conducting the study, I conducted several rounds of informal pilot interview studies at which time many magazine titles were proposed and discussed by the interviewees. In addition, a report in *World Magazine Trend* (FIPP, 2012, 2013) provided a list of important women’s magazines in China. By cross-referencing the two lists, 10 major titles were generated for the purposes of this study. They were all active players in the realm of women’s magazines in China and all available to female readers. A detailed list with basic information of these ten titles, including their titles in English and Chinese, parent publishers, countries of origin, year entered China, cover prices and slogans is provided as
below in Table 2. I have to clarify that by origin I mean the original country where the magazine was first established. Therefore, Elle though originated in France and owed by Hachette Filipacchi Media, but Chinese Edition of Elle is owned by Hearst, an American media group. Self is also a special case because as it belongs to Condé Nast, it an international women's magazine established in Chinese market. Its style is close to another women’s magazine Glamour in Condé Nast which has not a Chinese version yet.

Table 2. Basic information of International Women’s Magazines

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title (English)</th>
<th>Country of origin</th>
<th>Parent publisher</th>
<th>Title (Chinese)</th>
<th>Year entered China</th>
<th>Cover price (RMB)</th>
<th>Slogan</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elle</td>
<td>France</td>
<td>Hearst</td>
<td>世界時裝之苑</td>
<td>1988</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>精緻風格,引領優雅生活 Exquisite style, leading elegant life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marie Claire</td>
<td>France</td>
<td>Hearst</td>
<td>嘉人</td>
<td>1988</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>紛享世界風格有我 My style, sharing with the world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vogue</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>Condé Nast</td>
<td>服飾與美容</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>潮流領袖時尚寶典 Leader in trend and fashion bible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>Condé Nast</td>
<td>悅己</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>快樂由自己美麗身心靈 Happy self, Beautiful body and mind</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
According to the slogans of these magazines, we can develop a very general understanding of the editorial strategy of them. For example, *Vogue*, as a western-style women’s magazines, has the slogan goes as “leader in trend and fashion bible”, which clearly puts latest fashion as the main selling point, thus perhaps attracting women who have special interest in fashion or professionals work in fashion. Compared with *Vogue*, *Elle* demonstrates a combined editorial strategy by combing fashion with women’s life through its slogan “exquisite style, leading elegant life”, which
may be attractive for sophisticated women who are not that into fashion but require more comprehensive information. Rayli, on the other hand, is a Japanese style one, with the slogan “practical fashion”, clearly put practicability as the main feature of the magazine.

Since this study was not designed to study changes and trends, the influence of time was controlled for. Therefore, I set a particular time range from October 2011 to September 2013, and collected all of the issues of the 10 major magazines published during that time period. This contributed to a sample of 290 magazine covers. Magazine covers can be considered a multi-modal genre, combining both visual and verbal elements into a packaged message (Held, 2005). Therefore, the content analysis also included both text and visual presentation. A study on a famous Japanese magazine Non-no (Darling-Wolf, 2006) emphasized the importance of analyzing both text and image. Referring to previous studies (Luo & Hao, 2007; Morris & Nichols, 2013), the coding of the textual message is mainly about the content orientation of the magazine, the theme mentioned, and cultural indicators. The visual presentation focuses on the features of the cover model, including their dress style, hairstyle, makeup style, and bodily characteristics.

Two major features informed the coding design of this study. On the textual level, I coded the latent themes of the article titles in a detailed way. For example, women’s magazines contain content on fashion or cosmetics, but similar content can be framed by different themes, such as “be fashionable and trendy” on the literal level, or under a compulsory theme, telling women “you have to.” In this study, themes do not only reflect the meanings designed to be emphasized by certain magazines, but also imply a relationship with
the female readers. Thus, the analysis of both themes and content orientations could produce more comprehensive knowledge of the features of these women’s magazines. On the visual level, I designed the coding scheme to minimize the tendency to judge the images of the cover models through codes such as “sexy” or “elegant,” as in previous studies. Instead, I broke these judgments into manifest units that could be directly observed. For example, I tried to capture cover models’ bodily features and what they were wearing, rather than simply whether they were sexy or not. In this way, these units helped me to identify the observable elements that made women look feminine through an inductive approach. A complete coding sheet and instructions are attached in the appendices of this thesis.

Since the study was designed as a qualitative-quantitative inquiry, the coding process was relatively active. The coding process in this study was not only a process of data collection, but also a chance to explore potential cases for qualitative analysis. The patterns and differences generated by the quantitative content analysis could generate the big picture, but they could not reveal the internal meaning construction among textual and visual elements within a single cover or a set of related covers. Moreover, some important cases rich in meaning could have easily been buried under the numbers. Through exposure to all of the covers, I as the researcher was able to identify several noteworthy cases for further semiological analysis.

**4.2.2 Semiological Analysis**

Within the framework of the qualitative-quantitative inquiry, semiological analysis can be seen as the qualitative part of the textual analysis. Cultural studies, while embracing a wide variety of methods, has a tradition of valuing “text” (Ezzy,
2002). The related studies conducted by McRobbie and Winship have followed this tradition, and semiological analysis was one of their choices for dealing with text. Semiological analysis proceeds by isolating sets of codes around which the message is constructed (McRobbie, 2000). The analysis can be conducted on different levels of visual displays and narrative texts, since semiology is concerned with the internal structuring of a text or signifying system—what Barthes called “immanent analysis” (1967, p. 96):

> The relevance shown by semiological research centers by definition round the signification of the objects analyzed: they are examined only in relation to the meaning which is theirs…The principle of relevance evidently has a consequence for the analyst, a situation of immanence; one observe a given system from the inside.

In this study, I see women’s magazines as symbolic resources with the possibility to produce meaning. Therefore, one major task for the study was to decode these meanings on the researcher’s level before decoding them on the interviewees’ level. Following the tradition of cultural studies, the “coding” of text or the “data analysis” is not enough; researchers are required to read and interpret the text within a broader social and cultural process (Ezzy, 2002). In this study, I was not satisfied with only mapping the features of international women’s magazines in China with regard to their content focus and visual presentation. I was more eager to uncover their meanings in the particular context of China, as discussed in Chapter 3. Semiological analysis, in this way, became an indispensable component of this study.

On a technical level, semiological analysis as a research method is suited to
the multi-modal nature of women’s magazine covers, because it has the capacity to analyze linguistic messages, images, and their relationships. Barthes (1978) pointed out that all images are endowed with polysemy, with a floating chain of signifieds, which may lead to the dysfunction of communication. Linguistic messages, however, can function as the anchor, fixing the floating chain. If a study only focuses on women’s images on magazine covers, it is easy to come to the conclusion that women are overwhelmingly feminized and objectified. But, if the titles on the covers are analyzed along with those images, they may provide contextual clues for interpreting the meaning of the images. Although the quantitative content analysis can handle both textual and visual texts, it cannot reflect on the internal interaction between text and image and the meanings generated. That is why I designed this study in a hybridized manner to include both quantitative content analysis on all the samples and semiological analysis on specially identified cases.

The data from the textual analyses were processed in an interactive way. Based on the whole picture provided by the quantitative content analysis, the main body of the data analysis in next Chapter is structured by themes derived from semiological analysis and filled with the evidence generated from quantitative content analysis. The three major themes in this study are concerned with femininity construction: body, fashion, and feminist ideas. Empirical evidence and semiological interpretations intertwined with these three themes. In effect, the textual analyses, through these two distinct methods, were integrated in the data
analysis process to comprehensively respond to the research questions of the study.

The design of this study acknowledged the tradition of cultural studies through the emphasis of textual analysis, but still attempted to avoid a textually determinist model. Nevertheless, I held to the notion that “textual meanings do not reside in the texts themselves” (Ang, 1996, p. 38). Therefore, I knew it was important to talk to women in this study. The textual analysis equipped me with ample knowledge and understanding about the topics under consideration in order to generate more effective interactions with the interviewees and to collect rich and deep materials.

4.3 In-Depth Interviews

In Chapter 2, I discussed the limitations of solely ideological based decoding. To extend and refine the “encoding-decoding” model, the interviewees in this study were assumed to be individual social agents who were reflexive, able to monitor their experiences, and able to provide reasoning (Tucker, 1998). This definition implies that the active audience in this context is not atomized, but immersed in the social milieu characterized by modernity. These active audience members are also conscious of their own subjectivity. The assumption of social agency offers legitimacy to my choice of adopting in-depth interviews as an important method for this study.

In-depth interviews typically proceed inductively (Frey, 2000). In the process, the researcher should play an active role to enable interviewees to talk about their thoughts, feelings, and experiences (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). In-depth interviews
have been frequently used in studies related to gender issues. Feminist interviewing is considered to be more reflexive and interactive (Ritchie & Lewis, 2013). According to Ritchie and Lewis (2013), in-depth interviews can help to “combine flexibility and structure” (p. 141). With a prepared list of questions, the researcher can also be exposed to many related issues raised by the interviewees during the interviews. This helps the researcher to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the issue being explored. Due to the interactive nature of the in-depth interview, the interviewees’ initial responses at the surface level can be guided into deeper reflection through follow-up questions. In the process of interviewing, especially for a study in which interviewees are invited to reflect on their gender identity, the researcher helps the interviewees to dive “down to avenues of thoughts they have not explored before” (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003, p. 142).

The target population for this study was young women living in urban China at the time of the interviews, with “now-ness” emphasized. Therefore, the sampling was conducted starting with an age control: women between the ages of 18 and 34. Considering the target audience of women’s magazines and the potential opportunity for self-reflection influenced by the available cultural resources, the sample frame was narrowed down to include young women who were college students or already had a bachelor’s degree or above. According to these two basic requirements, I was able to achieve a diverse population in terms of the women’s majors, careers, and life stages. The major field for the interviews
was Shanghai for several reasons. Shanghai is a well-developed metropolitan area and a main target market of international women’s magazines. Shanghai’s population is quite diverse, creating the potential for finding interviewees with more diversified backgrounds. A further practical consideration was that I would have better face-to-face access to interviewees in the city I grew up in, especially with limited research resources. I conducted two rounds of interviews, since the preliminary analysis of the first round interviews indicated that saturation had not been achieved and thus interviewees could still provide something new (Ezzy, 2002). After the second round of interviews, saturation was achieved. In general, the sampling for the interview can be described as theoretical sampling, aided by convenience and snowball sampling.

I conducted the interviews after I had analyzed the data from the textual study, which meant that, when I faced the interviewees, I had already developed a reliable understanding of the women’s magazines. The interviews were semi-structured and in-depth, requiring the interviewees to first fill out a questionnaire with their basic demographic information and their basic usage pattern with respect to women’s magazines (e.g., their preferred titles and content, and purchase frequency). This questionnaire was not designed merely to collect information, but to open the conversation. I prepared three sets of questions for the interview. The first set was about media use; the second set focused on the understanding of external femininity; and the third one focused on the understanding of internal femininity. The requirement for reflection increased
across the three sets of questions. Therefore, the interview was conducted through the same sequence—from superficial to in-depth.

In most cases, I observed that the interviewee calmed down, and the interactive conversation gradually enabled her to dive into her reflections on her experiences of everyday life and to generate rich interpretations on the issues under consideration. The interview process itself proved that these women were in fact meaning-generating social agents. Some of the interviewees even expressed their gratitude after the interview, because they felt that the interview had helped them to explore some of the basic questions in their life. In the course of the interviews, I encountered some interviewees who were not readers of women’s magazines. Based on the openness to flexibility and complexity of the study design, I kept the interview records. In the data analysis stage, these records provided rich materials on alternative resources used and highlighted some special cases, adding to the completeness of the study.

I conducted 42 interviews for this study and the detailed list of interviewees and demographic facts could be seen in Appendix 3. Among the 42 interviewees, three age cohorts emerged. Cohort one consisted of women aged 18 to 22 who were mainly university students \( (n = 16) \). Cohort two included women from 23 to 29 who were still in graduate school or in the early stages of their career \( (n = 21) \). Cohort three was comprised of women over 30 who were not only in a more mature stage of their careers, but also married or even mothers \( (n = 5) \). Twenty-seven interviewees had or would have a bachelor’s degree; 13 had a
master’s degree; and 2 had a doctoral degree. Some of them had overseas experiences in different countries, including South Korea, Japan, and the United Kingdom. Interviewees were in different life stages. Eight interviewees were married and six of them had young children, while 12 interviewees were in a relationship, and the remaining 22 were single at the time of the interviews. Nine of them reported their monthly income as over 10,000 RMB, but most of the working interviewees had incomes over 5,000 RMB per month. Students usually had a 1,000 to 2,000 RMB monthly allowance from their family, although a few of them had part-time jobs with income. Interviewees worked in various fields, including medicine, IT, marketing, accounting, media, education, and architecture.

According to Tucker (1998), individuals can give interpretations on three different levels: discursive consciousness, practical consciousness, and the unconscious:

The discursive consciousness is embodied in people’s conscious reasons people give to explain their behaviors and motives. The practical one refers to the beliefs and knowledge related to the social situation. The third one is about the people’s basic seeking for trust and security. (p. 81)

The three levels are not fixed or segmented. They can change with different social contexts and with different media genres among different active audiences. Among the three levels, the first and third level of interpretation relate to self-identity, while the second one resonates with decoding on the collective level. Based on this categorization of interpretation, I analyzed the interview materials
in two steps: In the first step, based on the age cohort, I examined their use patterns of women’s magazines and other alternative resources related to femininity construction (the third level). In the second step, I looked into their understanding of being a woman through the scope of their media use pattern (the first and probably second level). All of the coding and analysis was conducted using the qualitative analysis software Nvivo.

4.4 Limitations and Reflections on the Methodology

The key concern with any methodology is whether the design of the research can help to answer the research questions. Although there have been many studies about women’s magazines, femininity construction, and related issues, there have been few studies bridging the symbolic world and contextualized individual interpretations. Therefore, this study is a comparatively innovative one without many precedents. Two guidelines influenced the methodological design of this study: efficacy and practicability. That is, the methods adopted should help me to access comprehensive materials and practical at the same time.

Negotiating with these two guidelines, the study was not confined to the dichotomy of quantitative or qualitative studies, but was designed in a flexible way to meet the specific needs. The sample sizes for both the content analysis and the interviews were not very large, but manageable since I was the sole researcher for this project. However, with the pursuit of comprehensiveness comes the sacrifice of details. The textual analysis was only conducted on the magazine covers and not on articles or the visual presentation of the inner pages. In a way,
the understanding of these magazines is still centered on their covers. Overall, this
design served the purpose of generating the whole picture, but reduced the
richness of the semiological analysis in the process.

The major limitation related to the interview process was that the sampling.
Due to the design of the research was to looking into the femininity construction
through international women’s magazines, the possible reader profile of these
magazines led to the comparatively homogeneous group of interviewees who
were heterosexual, urban, well-educated, with decent careers, and the site was
chosen in Shanghai due to the researcher’s own limitations. Obliviously, this
group of women, though they were described as ordinary in Chapter 1, cannot
represent the femininity of Chinese women, while China itself is a heterogeneous
entity with huge internal disparities. Therefore, the meaning generated by these
women can only contribute to a version of femininity in China: the version
constructed by urban, active and can-do women. The scope of the research did not
include a comparison between women of different generations and geographic
locations. However, this does not mean that women in comparatively smaller
cities or rural areas or other generation of women are outside of the discourse on
femininity construction. Rather, their femininity construction should be explored
in future studies.
CHAPTER 5
FEMININITY CONSTRUCTED THROUGH INTERNATIONAL WOMEN’S MAGAZINES IN CHINA

5.1 Overview of International Women’s Magazines in China

As mentioned in Chapter 3, many studies of international women’s magazines in China have developed their arguments without forming a comprehensive understanding of these magazines. Therefore, in this chapter, the first task is to demonstrate a more complete picture of the international women’s magazines in China through a quantitative content analysis. Studying the textual and visual elements on the magazine covers can reveal the general situation of international women’s magazines in China. From the textual elements, we can identify the major content and themes conveyed through the magazine covers, while the visual elements can reveal the graphic features of the cover models. Based on the descriptive evidence, I delve deeper into some cases using a qualitative inquiry to explore how different versions of femininity are constructed in these women’s magazines. The focus is set on the body–fashion relationship and the feminist ideas embedded in the texts and images. This focus follows the original categorization of Western- and Japanese-style women’s magazines. In addition, we pay special attention to the role of Chinese cultural elements in the process of femininity construction. Finally, a new categorization will be introduced toward the end of the chapter, which indicates a new way of understanding international women’s magazines in China through the versions of femininity constructed. All
data provided in this chapter are descriptive, which aims at achieving a comprehensive analysis, rather than jumping directly to causal relationships and conclusions.

5.1.1 What are in These Magazines?

On average, 8.53 titles ($SD = 2.675$) were presented on one magazine cover. Usually, two articles covered one type of content ($M = 2.0627$, $SD = 0.9659$). Fashion and beauty comprised the main content of all 10 major titles selected. Articles on fashion appeared on 89.7% of the covers, while articles on beauty (including skin care and makeup) appeared on 84.1% of covers. Next came articles on celebrities and entertainment (79%), relationships and marriage (38.3%), and psychological and physical self-improvement (36.9%). Of the articles, 24.1% talked about women’s career development, and 22.4% focused on lifestyle, such as cooking and home decoration. Sexual activities and pleasure seeking were seldom mentioned in the international women’s magazines in China, with a percentage of 7.6%. In addition to the common topics of women’s magazines, articles on non-traditional content, such as art, traveling, charity, or even environmental protection, showed up on the magazine covers from time to time.

The selling title, which is usually printed in the largest font and positioned at the bottom of magazine cover, is the most conspicuous textual element on a magazine cover. Examining the selling titles, 55.5% were about fashion—31.4% on the latest fashion trends and 24.1% on tips for daily dressing; 8.3% were about
self-improvement, 6.6% were on relationships and marriage, and 5.2% were on beauty. Looking at this set of data, fashion comprised the most important content in the international women’s magazines in China, accounting for the largest proportion of cover titles and frequently appearing in the most significant position on magazines covers. Additionally, 16% of selling titles were about non-traditional content, meaning that non-traditional content is sometimes emphasized. This suggests that these women’s magazines in China are now exploring diversity in their content. In general, women’s appearance management techniques are the core content of these women’s magazines in China, along with content on women’s daily lives, such as work, relationships, or self-improvement.

In addition to the explicit content of the titles on the magazine covers, I also coded the themes, i.e., the key messages embedded in the expression of these titles. The most frequent theme was asking women to pursue improvement or even perfection, which appeared on 72.5% of all the covers. The next most common theme was “be fashionable and trendy” (66.2%), followed by “be strong women who make choices and take actions” (59.3%). In addition, 36.9% of the covers contained titles requiring women to follow certain instructions or advice, i.e., they have to do something to achieve certain goal. Women were less frequently encouraged to be sexy (16.2%) and to cherish their youth (28.6%). They were also not encouraged very often to be unusual or special (24.1%). The pursuit of luxury goods or lifestyle was only mentioned on 8.6% of the covers.

I also examined the cultural attributes displayed on these magazine covers, as
they were all cross-cultural products. However, I found that, in general, the covers were not very culturally specific. All of the magazines had both Chinese and English names; on over half the covers (57.6%), the Chinese title was positioned in a more prominent way, with larger font and brighter colors; on 32.4% of the covers, the Chinese and English titles were given equal prominence, while on 10% of the covers, the English title was more conspicuous. As for the foreign language presented elsewhere on the covers, English was the language most frequently used. In 75.5% of the covers, Chinese and English appeared simultaneously. Japanese showed up in 5.2% of the covers, and 19% of the covers did not include any foreign language. Locations or general geographical references were seldom mentioned in the titles. Only 18.3% of the covers mentioned China or places in China, and 37.6% of them mentioned other locations, including Japan (7.9%), France (5.2%), the United States (4.1%), and the United Kingdom (3.4%). On 3.8% of the covers, the word “oriental (東方)” was used, while 2.4% of them included “European and American (歐美).” The words “global (全球)” or “international (國際)” were mentioned on 13.4% of the covers. Overall, an international perspective was offered, but not emphasized in the magazines.

5.1.2 How Do Cover Models Look on the Magazine Covers?

We sometimes call the models on the cover of magazines “cover girls” because they are usually women. In this sample of magazine covers, 95.5% of the covers had cover girls, 3.8% of them had a combination of both women and men, and 0.7% of them had just male models. Most of the people featured on the covers
were actresses or singers (69.3%), and the rest were professional models. Most of
the people on the covers were Chinese (63.1%), along with 23.1% Japanese, 12.8%
European or Americans, and only 1% Korean figures. Overall, East Asian faces
(87.2%) accounted for the majority of the magazine cover models. Consistent
with this percentage, over 90% of the people featured had black or brown pupils,
and over 80% of them had black or brown hair. Meanwhile, only 8.3% of the
cover models had blue pupils, and 10% of them had blond hair.

In most cases, the women on the magazine covers wore normal makeup,
which would be suitable for everyday life (70%); 22.4% of them wore bizarre
makeup unsuitable for daily life, and 7.6% of them wore childlike makeup with
big eyes, chubby, pink checks, and glossy lips. Looking from the specific makeup
techniques, 34.5% of the cover models wore very light makeup with no specific
emphasis on the eyes or lips, 35.2% of them wore makeup highlighting the eyes
(i.e., using eye makeup to give strong definition to the eyes), and 18.3%
highlighted the lips (i.e., using bright, shiny lip colors to focus attention on the
lips). Only 12.1% of the cover models wore heavy makeup emphasizing both eyes
and lips. Nearly 80% of the women had long hair, and over half kept their hair
long and curly. Among all the visual elements defining the cover figures (e.g.,
textile patterns, accessories, and props), the feminine elements used most often
were crystals and diamonds (36.2%), flowers (23.8%), and pearls (13.4%). But, in
general, the women on the covers of international women’s magazines were not
heavily accessorized. Specific visual elements related to a certain culture were
seldom displayed (around 5%).

Cover models were usually dressed in professional or formal clothing, such as a dress or suit (70.7%); 47.9% of them were in a one-piece dress. Only 34.8% of the cover models wore clothes that highlighted the contours of their body, while more than 60% obscured their body shape. Arms (73.1%) and shoulders (40%) were the most frequently exposed body parts; 19.3% of the covers showed cleavage, and 21% of them showed the figure’s thighs.

5.1.3 What is the Whole Picture?

From the descriptive data provided, we can see that as a genre of imported media products, international women’s magazines in China are in cooperative relationship with foreign counterparts, they are not merely copycats of them. That is, these magazines have already been localized and hybridized. According to Kraidy’s definition (2005), hybridity involves the fusion of two relatively distinct forms, styles, or cultural boundaries, often across national borders and cultural boundaries. “Hybridity is not a mere summation of difference whereby eclectic symbolic elements cohabitate, but a dialogical re-inscription of various codes and discourse in a spatial-temporal zone of signification (Kraidy, 1999, p. 472)”.

In the hybridization of International women’s magazines in China, the production of local contents is a central part. As introduced in Chapter 3, these magazines in cooperation with their foreign counterparts are required to put more than 50% of locally produced content. In this way, the editorial autonomy of these women’s magazines becomes an influential factor in the hybridization of foreign
cultural products. In fact, Chinese versions of international women’s magazines do enjoy editorial autonomy at different levels among different titles. As Ma’s study (2013) indicated, the production of Cosmopolitan in China was under direct and strict management from American head office. The editors have to face harsh comments from the HQ if their editorial practices, such as changing cover figures, are not satisfied by their foreign colleagues.

Another study on Mina (Lu, 2015) revealed that editors there enjoyed high level of autonomy, since the Japanese part only exerted a loose quality control over the production of the foreign edition, rather than directly intervened into the practices of local editors. The editor of Mina clearly expressed that she was fully aware that she edited a Japanese originated women’s magazine and she would like to keep the style of locally produced contents consistent with Japanese version. However, with the editorial autonomy, the editors can still decide the topics of the magazines and develop cooperation with local advertisers. Gradually, as hybridized cultural products with foreign lineage, these women’s magazines are slightly oriented toward emphasizing their local identity, but their foreign identities are not still kept and demonstrated.

According to the evidence from this particular study, Chinese titles can foster a feeling of closeness and familiarity for local readers, while the use of foreign languages gently reminds readers of the magazines’ hybridity. A more obvious indicator is that Chinese models and entertainers account for the majority of the faces on the magazine covers. Meanwhile, cover figures of other nationalities are
not absent. Other cultural indicators, such as locations and visual elements, are not frequently used on the magazine covers. Having been in the Chinese market for 10 to 20 years, these magazines have managed to merge with the local symbolic context. Therefore, rather than positioning themselves as foreign and novel, and continually reminding readers of their identity as outsiders, these magazines have adopted a strategy of “cultural vagueness.”

Accordingly, the cover figures on international women’s magazines are generally presented in ways visible and acceptable in everyday urban life, making them look “ordinary”. A large proportion of them display some basic feminine traits, such as one-piece dress, long, curly hair, and light, everyday makeup. The magazines do not usually present “sexy kittens” or outlandish fashion “spectacles.” Their key message is straightforward and clear: They represent ordinary women. They target ordinary female readers. Even though many of the cover figures are popular celebrities, their identities as women are the focus when they are on the cover of a women’s magazine. These magazines use their popularity to talk to general female readers. In this way, these celebrities do not need to demonstrate elements related to sex, which would be commonly appreciated by men, nor do they need to be wrapped up in mysterious high fashion, usually appreciated by professionals. They only need to be women, normal and pleasant.

The structure of the content in these magazines is also a strong indicator of how they target women. As mentioned in previous studies, the core content of women’s magazines is related to women’s appearance management (e.g., fashion
and beauty), which participates in the construction of femininity. Meanwhile, the internal construction of femininity is not ignored. The content and wording of the titles examined offered many possibilities for feminist ideas to be embedded. From the key messages revealed in the cover titles, it is clear that being a fashionable and trendy woman is one of the most important themes conveyed. At the same time, this goal is based on women’s endeavor to achieve a better status through their own decisions and actions. Comparatively, to be an obedient, sexy, and young woman is a less prominent theme embedded in these magazine covers.

The most important implication of the general picture of international women’s magazines in China is that they are common components in the symbolic world, serving the purpose of femininity construction in everyday life. They are not extraordinary or avant-garde media products only aimed at attracting specific elites, subcultural or minority groups. They are ordinary mass media products participating in the construction of ordinary femininity, talking to ordinary women. This character has been demonstrated clearly by the descriptive content analysis. It is important to clarify that, when using the word “ordinary,” I do not assume that these magazines provide a normative standard for women to follow. Actually, at this point I am not able to argue definitively whether these magazines can trigger women’s identification with these cover models. At the very least, I can infer that Chinese readers will probably not experience serious culture shock when confronting these magazines. Moreover, I do not assume that these magazines are homogeneous. In next section, I explore the differences
among these magazines, categorized by their origin. I attempt to explain what I am talking about when I refer to “Japanese-style” and “Western-style” women’s magazines.

5.2 Categorization Based on Origin: Japanese-style and Western-style

As imported and hybridized cultural products, international women’s magazines in China have two main origins: Western countries (mainly France and the United States) and Japan. Among the titles selected for this study, *Elle* and *Marie Claire* originate from France, whereas *Vogue*, *Cosmopolitan*, and *Bazaar* are from the United States. *Oggi, Mina, Vivi*, and *Rayli* are all Japanese magazines. *Self* is a special case because it was established by Condé Nast only in China, so it is still categorized as a Western-style magazine. The Western magazines usually have developed branches all around the world, and have a comparatively longer history than the Japanese magazines, which are influential only in East Asia. As mentioned in Chapter 3, scholars use these geographical labels to categorize these women’s magazines and to identify some features of each style. For example, it has been argued that Western-style magazines provide the latest fashion trends for women with higher incomes and social status, whereas Japanese-style women’s magazines are designed for a younger generation of female readers, offering practical tips on affordable fashion. In this section, these hypotheses will be discussed through a qualitative content analysis. In addition to providing descriptions of content features and positioning strategies, I determine whether these two styles of women’s magazines actually present different versions of
5.2.1 Body

In Chapter 2, I discussed the relationship between sex and gender, and noted how people use gender cues, including physical cues (body, skin, hair, etc.) and cues grounded in social roles or ways of thinking related to gender, rather than exposing their naked bodies or sex organs to the public to identify their gender. Therefore, when we aspire to know what versions of femininity are constructed in Western- or Japanese-style women’s magazines in China, it is useful to start by examining the basic physical cues, among which body is the most essential indicator. By using the term “essential indicator”, I did not mean that body can determine one’s gender identity. In the realm of everyday life experience, female and male bodies are constructed differently in a biological sense, the body can reveal gender identity by itself, that is, without human intervention, such as clothing or physical training. Within this context, I posed two questions to all of the covers analyzed: Is the body used to construct femininity? If so, how is the body used to construct femininity?

Throughout the history of Western culture, there has been a dichotomy between mind and body; the body has always been considered able to reflect something “within” (Thompson & Hirschman, 1995). Therefore, exerting control over the body is thought to reflect a person’s control over his or her life (Thompson & Hirschman, 1995). In contemporary Western society, body is related to health, beauty, youth, and sexiness in such a way that individuals are
required to take responsibility for how their bodies look (Featherstone, 1991), and the standards for women tend to be stricter (Thompson & Hirschman, 1995). In this way, the body can be a vehicle for pleasure and expression (Featherstone, 1991), or it can be mobilized for self-reflection (Gauntlett, 2008). In effect, the body in modern Western culture is a type of resource that can be openly utilized for different purposes, including the definition of one’s gender identity. As such, the body should play a vital role in the construction and expression of femininity.

In East Asia, where Confucianism prevails, the female body has been subject to protection and concealment (Kim, 2009) for a long history. In this tradition, the female body is valued most for its reproductive ability, which is inextricable from the patriarchal family. But, the woman herself is not valued in the same way. The female body should be hidden by clothing. Not only should her flesh be invisible, but her bodily curves should also be rendered imperceptible. Because of the connection between the concealment of women’s bodies and the traditional patriarchal order, in the early twentieth century, when the New Women in both China (Ferry, 2003) and Japan (Chaplin, 2001) declared their visibility in public life, they demonstrated with their bodies. In China, the modern/Western view of the body prevailed in the 1920s and 1930s in major cities such as Shanghai. At that time, advertisements for Qi-pao, a form of one-piece dress that fully showed a woman’s curves, were published in mainstream mass media, such as Shun Pao (see Chapter 3). Women’s bodies became invisible again after 1949, as the discourse of feminism shifted toward “formal equality.” During the Great Cultural
Revolution, at puberty, women used bra to flatten their breasts, rather than to support them. This was done so that they would look exactly the same as young men. In the late 1970s, however, some women used more “fitted” clothing to resist the uncompromising commonality and de-feminization (Sun, 2013). In this context, when the international women’s magazines were introduced into China, to some extent, they re-introduced the modern version of the female body back into China. However, considering the tradition of Confucianism and the residual influence of formal gender equality, young Chinese women’s use of the body in femininity construction requires a closer look.

In light of these historical influences, it is important to not assume that the construction of femininity is necessarily related to the presentation of feminized women’s bodies in China. In fact, when examining the shooting scale of the cover images for the two styles of women’s magazines, I found that 13.4% of the Western-style magazines and 26.2% of the Japanese-style magazines used close-ups, only showing the cover model from the chest up. In other words, the face was the main focus, while the body was actually excluded from presentation. Compared to the Western-style magazines, the Japanese-style ones tended to depict fewer cover models with their body showing, \( \chi^2 (1, N=290) = 7.446, p = .006 \). Although the body is a simple, straightforward and easy-to-use gender cue for women, it is not the only choice and only vehicle for femininity construction, especially in East Asian culture.

As mentioned in the previous section, these women’s magazines did not
display hypersexualized images of women on their covers, exposing different body parts. In this respect (i.e., in terms of the number of exposed body parts), the Japanese-style and Western-style women’s magazines demonstrated no significant difference, although the mean for the Western-style ones was slightly higher ($M = 1.64$, $SD = 1.05$) than that of the Japanese-style ones ($M = 1.56$, $SD = 1.03$). An almost equal proportion of cover models in both the Western-style and Japanese-style women’s magazines did not expose any body parts (17.6% for Western-style/17.5% for Japanese-style). In Western-style women’s magazines, the most frequently exposed body parts were the arms, shoulders, cleavage, and thighs. In Japanese-style magazines, the order of importance was arms, shoulders, thighs, and cleavage. Among all the frequently exposed body parts, there was only a significant difference between the Western-style (25.1%) and Japanese-style (8.7%) magazines in terms of cleavage, $X^2 (1, N=290) = 11.459, p \leq .001$.

Cover models in the Western-style women’s magazines were moderately more sexualized, exposing more body parts and emphasizing their breasts. However, in terms of how women’s bodies were displayed, the major difference between Western-style and Japanese-style women’s magazines lay in their presentation of body shape. In the Western-style magazines, 44.4% of the cover figures had their body shape accentuated, meaning that their womanly curves were clearly demonstrated; only 17.5% of the figures on the Japanese-style covers showed their body curves, $X^2 (1, N=290) = 21.188, p < .001$. This different presentation of body curves was closely related to the cover models’ style of dress.
Nearly half of the women featured on the cover of the Japanese-style magazines dressed in a casual and leisurely way. Casual shirts, blouses, and sweaters were their usual choice. By contrast, more than 80% of the women in the Western-style magazines dressed professionally or formally; nearly 60% of them were in a one-piece dress. For the Japanese-style magazines, this number was only 27.2%.

The two covers shown in Figures 1 and 2 clearly demonstrate the different strategies of body presentation between the Japanese- and Western-style women’s magazines in China. On the cover of Rayli (Figure 1), the Japanese model is framed in a medium shot with only her arm exposed. She wears a casual and domestic checkered blouse with puffed sleeves. Her chest is subtly concealed by the waves of her hair, her forearm, and her sleeve. By contrast, the Chinese actress on the cover of Bazaar (Figure 2) is shot in full scale with her curves accentuated by the white one-piece dress. Her shoulders, arms, and cleavage are all uncovered.
Compared to the Japanese model, the Chinese actress in Bazaar uses her body as a resource to demonstrate more mature and sexier feminine traits. The Japanese model, on the other hand, looks like a little girl.

With the body remaining understated in Japanese-style women’s magazines, the face becomes a much more prominent vehicle for femininity construction. Upon closer examination, we can identify a special feature of the model on Rayli. The model’s makeup is designed to make her look very young with a chubby face, big eyes, and luscious lips. These features are usually realized through makeup techniques, such as extended eyeliner, curled false eyelashes, or pink blush on the apple of the cheeks, as illustrated by the model in Rayli. Among all the cover girls in the Japanese-style magazines, 21.4% of them were presented with this particular childlike makeup. This style of makeup was not shown in any of the Western-style magazines.

Despite these differences in body presentation, the ways of discussing the body also differed between the two styles of magazine. Generally speaking, less than 10% of the covers contained article titles about the body, almost all of which were Western-style ones. When body was mentioned, it was related to slimness in all of the titles. It is important to note that slimness or thinness was rarely mentioned along with other concepts, but framed as an essential “truth” without questioning why. Only in one title (Bazaar, 2013.7), slimness is connected to youth:
瘦出好身材，守住好青春

Keep the slim figure, keep the wonderful youth

In another title in *Elle* (2013.9-A), beautiful legs are mentioned in relation to sexiness:

21 天修煉性感美腿

Achieve sexy and beautiful legs in 21 days

Apart from these two titles, the rest of the titles mentioning the body conveyed a single message that women should keep their bodies slim, even while pregnant (*Elle*, 2012.-A). Women can achieve fitness through the strategies provided: diet (*Elle*, 2013.5-B), sports (*Elle*, 2013.6-A), or using apparatus (*Elle*, 2013.7-A). However, none of the titles encouraged women to reject food; it was more important to keep fit, as in one title in *Marie Claire* (2013.1):

吃到自然瘦，你也可以

You can also keeping eating too and naturally become slim

A similar title in *Rayli* (2012.1) also sends the same message to women:

選對不會胖的新年菜，還能甩肉 3 公斤

Choose the right food for New Year; you can even loose 3kg
Slimness was also mentioned in the Japanese-style women’s magazines, not in relation with the body, but in relation with dressing strategies. In *Mina*, the theme “appear to be slim” showed up in one-third of its covers, for example (2011.10):

顯瘦的基本搭配法則

The basic rules of matching to look slim

Another example reads (2012.12):

達成視覺顯瘦的顏色、風格、造型，全面解說

Color, style and modeling for visual slimness: a total tutorial

For the Japanese-style magazines, slimness seems to be only a visual effect with no real connection to the body; thus, they do not give advice to women to work out or to maintain a healthy diet in order to achieve the ideal body figure. Instead, they encourage women to learn the skills to create a superficial impression of being slim. Similar to the Western-style ones, slimness in Japanese-style magazines is also framed as a universal standard that every woman should take for granted. Therefore, slimness, especially in the Japanese-style magazines, becomes a floating signifier without either denotation or connotation. It does not refer to a fit woman’s body in the real world, nor does it point to any symbolic meanings. We can infer from these covers that slimness is positively affirmed, but we have no clue why it is good or how it should be conceived as
good.

In this part, I examined how the body, as the most basic, available gender cue, is utilized in both Western-style and Japanese-style women’s magazines in China. I found that the Western-style magazines tended to include a greater proportion of the bodies of the cover figures compared to the Japanese-style ones. The key point of using the body for femininity construction is whether the curves are emphasized, rather than how much of the body is exposed. Although the body was not frequently mentioned on the magazines covers, slimness was obviously the dominant theme. The articles in the Western-style magazines often referred to real body change, while the Japanese-style ones only focused on clothing strategies to “look slim.” The traditional relationship between the body and other aspirational virtues, such as youth, was rarely demonstrated in these magazines in China.

In this context, the body is endowed with a cultural polysemy: The meaning of the body is floating and ambiguous. In the next chapter, I discuss how women interpret the meaning of the body in their construction of femininity on an individual level. At this point, it is beginning to become clear that the differences in the presentation of the body can reveal different routes to femininity construction in the Western- and Japanese-style women’s magazines in China. For the Western-style ones, femininity is constructed based on women who have been through puberty and acquired all the secondary sex characteristics. The body can demonstrate differences, and that is why body matters. For the Japanese-style ones, femininity is developed based on girls whose childlike features are perhaps more
important. The child’s body is not a vehicle to express difference, so the body plays a less important role in the construction of femininity. The differences between these two routes will be further clarified in coming sections.

5.2.2 Fashion

In the previous section, I discussed how the concealment of women’s bodily curves is related to a casual clothing style, while a formal one-piece dress can be used to define the contours of a woman’s body. This may lead to a basic assumption that clothing and the woman’s body are inseparable. The female body in modern society can be seen as a vehicle for performing femininity (Kim, 2011). However, the body alone always leads to a certain level of ambiguity. Clothing, with the symbolic resources attached, can help to clarify that ambiguity, connecting the biological body to the social being (Wilson, 1987). Therefore, we still need to ask whether clothing is necessarily connected with fashion. Can we directly connect the body with fashion through clothing to examine the role of the body–fashion relationship in femininity construction? Before answering these questions, it is important to develop a proper definition of fashion. In previous studies, this word has frequently been used to describe properties of different styles of women’s magazines in China. In effect, differences in expression of “fashion” are key markers of Japanese-style and Western-style magazines. However, despite the fact that this word has ambiguous meanings, it has most often been used in a rather uncritical way. In this section, I would like to begin the discussion with a definition of fashion in the context of women’s magazines.
Fashion is considered to be a “trifling, fleeting, ‘contradictory’ object par excellence” (Lipovetsky, 1994, p. 111). It can also be seen as something completely random without any deeper grounding (Svendsen, 2006). Although fashion is now highly influential on a global scale, the gist of the concept is hard to grasp. However, historically speaking, there has always been one defining element of fashion: newness. From the 18th century onwards, fashion has been democratizing itself from the domain of a very small group of aristocrats to the general public. In this way, fashion shares a main characteristic with modernism: the break with tradition and an unceasing endeavor to reach “the new” (Svendsen, 2006, p. 14). From this point, in a very general sense, fashion can be conceived of as a mechanism that produces “the new” for the public. According to Simmel, fashion is a broad social phenomenon that applies to all social arenas (Svendsen, 2006). Since the focus of my study is on women’s magazines and the construction of femininity, I adopt a narrower definition of fashion as the producing of new styles in clothing and related areas, such as jewelry or handbags, at a given time. There is a famous quote from the movie *The Devil Wears Prada* (Frankel & McKenna, 2006) explaining how fashion works in the contemporary world. When an assistant to the chief editor of a fashion magazine calls fashion “this stuff,” the chief editor (“the devil”) gives this defense:

‘This... stuff’? Oh. Okay. I see. You think this has nothing to do with you. You go to your closet and you select... I don't know... that lumpy blue sweater, for instance because you're trying to tell the world that you take yourself too seriously to care about what you put on your back. But what you don't know is that that sweater is not just blue, it's not turquoise. It's not lapis. It's actually
cerulean. And you're also blithely unaware of the fact that in 2002, Oscar de la Renta did a collection of cerulean gowns. And then I think it was Yves Saint Laurent... wasn't it who showed cerulean military jackets... And then cerulean quickly showed up in the collections of eight different designers. And then it, uh, filtered down through the department stores and then trickled on down into some tragic Casual Corner where you, no doubt, fished it out of some clearance bin. However, that blue represents millions of dollars and countless jobs and it's sort of comical how you think that you've made a choice that exempts you from the fashion industry when, in fact, you're wearing the sweater that was selected for you by the people in this room from a pile of stuff.

The most important information conveyed through this quote is that no clothing is out of the realm of fashion. Most clothing styles in modern society, including silhouettes, colors, and composition techniques, are produced through the mechanism of fashion at a certain point of time. The difference of being fashionable or not is actually due to individual’s position on the pyramid of fashion. This position will depend on that person’s economic capability, social status, interest in fashion, willingness to pursue fashion, and so on. The second piece of information given by the quote is that fashion is constructed by a small group of people. This group of people, mainly designers, is involved in professional activities, which is essentially intellectual work. They use the logic of symbolic systems to produce both material products (a certain dress) and symbolic resources (colors, forms, etc.). Therefore, what we call fashion is fundamentally the creation of a group of professional people. Like other intellectual jobs, originality is vital for fashion. The third point made in the quote is that the world of fashion is hierarchical, with its centers undeniably located in the West. A certain version of the color blue (one form of “the new”) is originally
used by Oscar de la Renta (one top designer), followed by Yves Saint Laurent (another top designer) and another eight designers; finally, this color filters down to the department stores and ends up in clearance bins. This trajectory demonstrates how fashion moves from the top designers and top brands to ordinary producers and then to ordinary people.

Because fashion implies producing something new, change is the soul of fashion. It is reasonable, therefore, that scholars have argued that fashion is dress for which the key feature is a rapid and continual changing of styles (Wilson, 1987). At the same time, one cannot argue that whatever changes is fashion. Time is inseparable from the concept of change. Those who produce fashion must produce change within a certain period of time; those who follow fashion must have the ability to understand change. The amount of time they need to keep up with that change influences their position on the fashion pyramid. In any case, the dissemination of change in fashion requires the circulation of information (Featherstone, 2007), which can be achieved through private channels, such as word of mouth, and public channel, such as magazines.

When fashion comes into contact with mass media, it cannot keep its original face. Different women’s magazines have different ways of presenting their own versions of fashion. The works of designers can be photographed in countless ways, juxtaposed with other designers’ work. These designs can be analyzed, critiqued, and translated from the language of the runway to that of everyday life. Fashion in women’s magazines actually undergoes a recreation of meanings
through rhetoric strategies that, in Barthes’s words (1990, p. 300), “multipl[y] the signifieds of a single signifier and the signifiers of a single signified.” A single collection from a single designer contains an ordered system, but in the symbolic world with countless collections and items, that order is inevitably immersed in chaos. Fashion is an order made into a disorder (Barthes, 1990). Therefore, in this study, I do not intend to dig into the interwoven fashion system per se, but to examine the different ways of framing fashion in women’s magazines and to explore how these differences can be used as a basis to categorize these magazines.

Both Western-style and Japanese-style women’s magazines cover the issue of women’s appearance management—the external dimension of femininity construction. In the Japanese-style magazines, 97.1% of the covers contain fashion content focused on clothing, while 99% of them had articles about beauty, focusing on skin care and cosmetics. At the same time, 84.5% of the selling titles on Japanese-style magazines were about fashion. By comparison, less than 40% of the selling titles in the Western-style magazines were about fashion, \( \chi^2 (8, N=290) = 113.013, p < .001 \). This implies that Western-style women’s magazines depend less on fashion and beauty, although these remain the major portion of the content. Examining the selling titles closer, 33.2% of them in Western-style magazines focused on fashion trends, and 6.4% of them focused on fashion tips. The ratio of fashion trends and fashion tips in Western style magazines is 5.16:1. However, 56.3% of the selling titles in the Japanese-style magazines were about fashion tips, and 28.2% of them were about fashion trends and the ratio is 1:2.
Clearly, “fashion trends” is the key frame chosen by the Western-style women’s magazines, while “fashion tips” is the key frame for the Japanese-style ones.

The frame of fashion trends usually come in the form of reporting and analyzing, which is information-oriented. Similar to news reporting, reporting fashion trends pays attention to the latest dynamics in the fashion industry. Based on news-like information, fashion editors conduct analyses and sometimes predict trends. In this way, the titles sometimes gave specific names of certain trends, e.g., “Sport Chic” (Elle, 2013.6-A) or “High-tech Chic” (Elle, 2013.7-A), indicating that a sporty style or a style related to the digital age might become popular. Even more concrete fashion elements were included in the selling title, such as:

50年代/超大家廓/迷幻圖案/嬉皮年代

秋冬潮流密碼

1950s/ Oversized outline/ Psychedelic patterns/ Hippie age

Codes for fall/winter trend

In this simple title, the editors first tell readers the types of clothing on a material level, i.e., oversized and printed with psychedelic patterns. It also reveals the signified of these forms, which is the 1950s and the “hippie age.” This code is further labeled as a “trend,” thus constructing another layer of the symbolic system. Apart from these specific indicators of fashion trends, the messages in the titles can also be vague, only emphasizing “newness” and the connection with the
season:

新季誘惑 (Elle, 2013.9-A)

The temptation of new season

The words “new” and “season” clearly echo the importance of “change” and “time” in fashion. The following title from Vogue also reveals a similar key message:

身在盛夏，心已入秋

时装家族新鲜演绎秋季新潮流 (Vogue, 2012.7)

Looking forward to autumn in summer,

New trends demonstrated freshly by fashion icons

No matter whether the message is specific or vague, the selling titles related to fashion in the Western-style women’s magazines frequently demonstrate their attention to the latest fashion products. Fashion is frankly valued for its newness in this context. However, these titles do not indicate any connection between fashion and their readers’ everyday lives. These magazines give straightforward information and predictions for fashion and trends, but they do not usually tell their readers how they can make use of information provided. Through the messages encoded in these titles, it is difficult to identify the preferred decoding strategy for the readers. Without analyzing the interviews with readers, it is
difficult to make sense of this information.

The frame of “fashion trends” is not entirely missing from the Japanese-style women’s magazines in China. Strictly speaking, Japan does not occupy the top position in this hierarchical world of fashion, so they still need to acquire the information from the top brands and designers. However, in more cases than not, the Japanese-style magazine did not adopt the “report and analysis” style, but recoded fashion information into a more reader-friendly form, such as:

五件單品巧搭冬日時尚順風車宣言（Mina, 2012.1）

Smart match with five items to be fashionable in winter

This selling title uses the theme of “repetition” to guide women directly on how to look fashionable with limited items of clothing. The following title sets a specific scenario for women’s dressing strategy and gives women advice on proper dressing when going on a date.

幫你選必勝約會裝 加倍美麗（Rayli, 2012.2）

Help you to pick must-win clothing for dating to be twice as beautiful

It seems that the pursuit of “newness” is less important in Japanese-style women’s magazines, as they emphasize the practicality of everyday fashion through two routes: “repetition”, which encourages women to make different looks through mixing and matching several items, and “suitability of occasions,” which requires
women to dress properly for certain occasions, not only limited to dating, but also including scenarios of work, school, and excursions. In this way, the frame of “fashion tips” in Japanese-style women’s magazines is conceptualized as practical techniques for women to manage their clothing in order to achieve a proper look. Under the frame of “fashion tips,” Japanese-style women’s magazines indicate a comparatively clear decoding strategy: Women should learn from them and take their advice, since they have already prepared such ready-to-pick packages.

Comparing the frames of fashion in Western- and Japanese-style magazines, one can see that, although fashion mainly works through clothing, it does not equal clothing. Fashion is dominated by the mechanism of producing “the new,” while daily clothing practices are mediated by multiple factors in individuals’ everyday lives, such as income, occasion, available resources, willingness, and effort devoted to clothing. These daily practices are not necessarily compatible with “the new,” and can actually be less sensitive to “the new.” However, if there is no constant injection of new designs and fashion elements, the practices of clothing in everyday life will become constrained, since not enough resources can be utilized. In other words, the latest fashion must be integrated into the clothing practices of everyday life in some way when it comes into contact with ordinary people. In this context, the essential difference between the Western- and Japanese-style women’s magazines is who conducts this process: the magazines or the readers? The Western-style magazines adopt an “upward” strategy, accessing the latest fashion information and fashion trends directly and then presenting them
to their readers. However, they do not do the “translation” for the readers. Japanese-style magazines adopt a “downward” strategy, focusing on preparing ready-to-use advice for their readers. Even if a reader has no idea about fashion, as long as she follows the advice, she may present fashion elements in her daily clothing. As a result, Western-style magazines devote less effort to the “translation” of fashion, consequently setting a higher requirement for their readers: They must be more active and involved in their reading in order to understand and further make sense of the information provided. By contrast, readers of the Japanese-style magazines are treated to the magazines’ “ready-to-pick” nature. That is, when the word “affordable” is used to describe the fashion in Japanese-style magazines, it not only refers to the comparatively lower prices of items recommended, but also to their “accessibility” and “easy to use,” which may be more important to the readers.

Figure 7  Mina cover January 2013

Figure 8  Cosmopolitan cover March 2013, A
The two covers in Figures 3 and 4 offer good illustrations of the two different routes of femininity construction in the Japanese-style and Western-style women’s magazines. Similar to the example in the last section, the Chinese actress in black on the cover of *Mina* (Japanese-style), uses her arms to cover her body, while the Chinese actress in white on the cover of *Cosmopolitan* has her bodily curves fully on display. *Mina*’s cover model wears the typical cute makeup with big, round eyes, rosy lips, and an innocent facial expression. Since the importance of her body is minimized, the flower lace on her blouse, her dove-shaped ring, her fascinator decorated with pearls, and all other accessories, which are all stereotypical feminine symbols, dominate her identification as a woman. The selling title of this cover is about tips on how to mix and match for 60 days in order to achieve a practical “leisure style.” *Cosmopolitan*’s cover model uses her body to demonstrate her feminine traits, so she is less accessorized. Her makeup defines her facial contours simply and highlights her eyes and lips, making her look sophisticated and confident. The Chinese selling title talks about “upgrading attractive spring trend,” which is a general introduction to the new fashion of the season.

When the different versions of fashion are juxtaposed with the different presentation of bodies in the Western- and Japanese-style women’s magazines, this body–fashion relationship crystallizes in the contrasting routes to femininity construction. In this context, if femininity is seen as the signified, both body presentation and the frames of fashion can be seen as signifiers. Since body
presentation, as a visual image, is more ambiguous in the symbolic system, the frames of fashion can be further considered the anchors of the meaning. In Western-style magazines, mature women’s bodies are more frequently displayed, meanwhile these visual images of bodies are anchored by the information regarding the latest fashion, beckoning women to learn, to know, and to use the information provided. This indicates that the mature body is internally connected with the sophisticated mind. The Japanese-style magazines, on the other hand, mainly use child-like faces, rather than body, accompanied by daily dressing tips to be followed, leading to an innocent and obedient version of femininity of the “woman-child.”

5.2.3 Internal Construction of Femininity and Feminism

From the basic component of femininity construction (i.e., the body) to the additional enforcement of gender identity (i.e., fashion), I have mainly focused on the feminine level of construction, which involves mainly the visible elements in femininity construction. In this section, I discuss the internal construction of femininity, which primarily refers to the feminist ethos embedded in the content highlighted on the covers of the international women’s magazines. To examine these ideas, I first explore whether any space is provided for the expression of feminism in these magazines. Based on the answer to this question, I further identify what versions of feminism are embedded and how they are framed. Table 1 lists all of the titles on the covers of Mina (2013.1) and Cosmopolitan (2013.3-A):
Table 3. A List of the Titles on the Covers of Two Issues of International Women’s Magazines

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mina (2013.1)</th>
<th>Cosmopolitan (2013.3-A)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tips of repeated mix and match for 60 days to achieve “leisure style” (selling title)</td>
<td>Upgrading attractive spring trend(selling title)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From top to toe: the dreamy ways to take care of yourself through all the details</td>
<td>Liu Xiaoqing: women can only conquer men after conquering the world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tactics for Korean style</td>
<td>Geometry pattern: still in fashion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Five rules of dressing to look slim</td>
<td>1960s is coming back</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New items in 2013</td>
<td>People in fashion industry: rich or not</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keep your skin moisture: 24 hours</td>
<td>Must read in 2013: guidebook for “using” men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tactics for styling by sweaters</td>
<td>Ni Ni: taking “active” adventure in the “passive” world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fashionable elements of “cats”</td>
<td>Knallerfrauen: Martina Hill’s crazy counterattack</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fashionable one-piece dresses for winter</td>
<td>9 cm changes everything: view the world from high heels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plan your career: brighten up the future</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The titles listed in Table 1 reveal that almost all of the articles in Mina are about appearance management—from skin care to dressing tactics. Only one title indicates content about career development. However, at least three clusters of content are shown on the cover of Cosmopolitan. The first cluster is fashion, including fashion elements (geometric patterns and the 1960s, high heels) and an introduction to working in fashion. The second one is a series of interviews with actresses, including two famous Chinese actresses (Liu Xiaoqing and Ni Ni) and one German actress (Martina Hill). The third cluster has one article about how to “use” men, which has strong sexual connotations. Comparing these two covers, it is clear that Cosmopolitan has more diversified content than Mina, implying that
women indeed have more dimensions to their lives than simply maintaining their appearance.

In fact, more diversified content composition is a major difference between the Western-style women’s magazines and the Japanese-style ones. On average, the Japanese-style magazines contained 9.75 titles on their cover, which was significantly more than 7.86 on the Western-style ones, $t(288) = 6.084, p < .001$. However, most of the articles on the covers of the Japanese-style magazines were about fashion and beauty, barely touching on other topics. Content related to relationships and marriage or self-improvement—closely connected to internal femininity construction—were seldom mentioned on the covers, and even more rarely as selling titles (usually less than 10%). The topics of sex or sexual pleasure were completely absent from the covers of the Japanese-style magazines. For the Western-style magazines, more than 50% of the selling titles were not about women’s appearance. Accordingly, there was more space on the Western-style covers to display content on women’s career development, relationships, sex life, and self-improvement.

A “content density” calculation can give a general view of the difference in content diversity between the Japanese-style and Western-style women’s magazines:

$$\text{Content density} = \frac{\text{Item number}}{\text{number of types of content}}$$

If the value of content density is smaller, the content diversification of a certain style of magazine is higher. The content density value for the Western-style
magazines was 1.85, and for the Japanese-style ones, it was 2.44, meaning that the Western-style magazines did in fact contain a wider range of content than the Japanese-style ones, \( t(288) = 5.221, p < .001 \). Therefore, Western-style magazines, at least in theory, should have more space and potential for feminist ideas to be encoded. That space was already being used to indicate that women’s lives are not only limited to being fashionable and good-looking, but multi-faceted with many possibilities.

The themes of the titles on the magazine covers can also be indicators of encoded feminist ideas. The strongest indicator found was the different use of the theme “powerful” in the Western- and Japanese-style women’s magazines. This theme was identified through the use of verbs or adjectives to demonstrate women’s subjectivity. The subjectivity in this study has two levels of connotation: (a) women’s independence, meaning that women are not appendices of men or subjugated to the patriarchal order, and (b) women’s ability to take action and make decisions for themselves, in other words, the “can do” nature of women.

This “powerful” theme appeared on the covers of Western-style (72.2%) magazines much more frequently than on Japanese-style covers (35.9%), \( \chi^2(1, N = 290) = 26.205, p < .001 \). By contrast, Japanese-style women’s magazines used the theme “compulsory” (46.6%) more often than the Western-style ones (31%), indicating that women “should” or “have to” take advice or action based on a certain “authority,” usually the magazines themselves. This advice, according to the discussion in the previous section on fashion, is overwhelmingly concentrated
on women’s appearances. Consistently, the Japanese-style magazines placed a
greater emphasis on “be fashionable and trendy,” “achieve a better status,” and
“keep young and cute” than the Western-style ones.

Based on the evidence above, Western-style women’s magazines are more
worth looking into than the Japanese-style ones from the perspective of encoded
feminism. Looking back to the titles from Cosmopolitan (2013.3-A) listed in
Table 1, one can see that women’s subjectivity is elaborated in two ways:
women’s attitude toward themselves and their attitude toward men. In the
following two titles, strong words such as “adventure” and “counterattack” are
used to sketch the image of a powerful, capable, and confident woman.

倪妮：被動江湖，主動冒險

Ni Ni: taking “active” adventure in the “passive” world

屌絲女士專訪：瑪蒂娜・希爾的瘋狂逆襲

Knallerfrauen: Martina Hill’s crazy counterattack

Although it is impossible to infer what kind of “adventure” the actress Ni Ni
is facing, or why Martina Hill needs to “counterattack,” the key message sent
through the titles is that these women are both willing and able to face the world
on their own with an active posture. Obviously, the “world” here is not confined
to the domestic sphere, but refers to a public social context. The most fundamental
form of women’s participation in public life is through work. Therefore, it is not
surprising that titles about women’s professional lives and career development appeared on more than 30% of the covers of the Western-style magazines. The key argument about work and career is not organized around whether women should go to work or not, but discussed under an axiom that “women go to work.” Therefore, the titles usually indicated a detailed discussion of how women can have better development along their career paths, such as:

職場回頭草的 N 種吃法（Elle, 2012.1）

Several ways to jump back to your previous company

工資，前景，辦公室鬥爭：女性職場困惑大調查（Elle, 2013.4-B）

Salary, future, office politics: A survey on women’s confusions about career

In addition to the practical issues of the office, models are also set up for women in magazines. In Bazaar (2012.4), the stories of 12 female Chinese entrepreneurs were used as the selling title for that issue, telling women that they need wisdom and passion to get success. In Self (2011.10), the selling title was about eight women without family backgrounds who achieved success in their careers. The title also used rousing language, encouraging women to “fly.”

In addition, women’s appearance is sometimes connected to their career life:

30 个秘诀，让你在职场上美得更自信（Self, 2012.8）

Thirty secrets help you to be more beautiful and confidence in workplace
New career apparel: rules to be fashionable

The connection between women’s appearances and their careers can be interpreted as an “uneven” requirement for women compared with men (Gill, 2007). However, positively speaking, these titles do not encourage women to use their fashionable appearance to please anyone other than themselves, or to use it to compete in the workplace. On a practical level, since work provides the foundation for women’s independence, it happens to be one of the primary reasons that women need fashion. Women need to maintain a proper look in the workplace and to build their identity as career women. As such, they need constantly produced change. Therefore, there is no need to blame women’s magazines for providing women with relevant information. The connection between appearance, fashion, and career, to certain extent, proves that women can integrate their appearance management into their paths to self-development. They can keep “beautiful and confident” for their own good, rather than fit into others’ pleasure. Accordingly, the content related to career development clearly expresses the orientation that women in Western-style magazines are treated as individuals who can depend on themselves. Since these women have jobs and an income, their independence is not just a slogan, but economically supported.

Women’s participation in the workforce endows them with the status as independent social agents—a manifestation of women’s subjectivity encoded in
Western-style women’s magazines. As mentioned before, women’s independence and activeness can also be identified in their attitude toward men. Looking at the other two titles from Cosmopolitan (2013.3-A):

劉曉慶：女人只有征服世界才能征服男人

Liu Xiaoqing: women can only conquer men after conquering the world

2013 必讀：男人使用手冊

Must read in 2013: guidebook for “using” men

Regardless of whether the verb is “conquer” or “use,” or whether there is a sexual implication or not, men in this context are presented as “objects”—the targets of women’s action. Meanwhile, although men are framed as the object of women’s conquering, they are not women’s priority in their task list, since women should “conquer” the world first, according actress Liu Xiaoqing. In fact, treating men as objects is a common theme in the Western-style women’s magazines. There are two ways in which these magazines “objectify” men. One is presented in the two titles above: women initiate action with men as the target. The other is that women treat men as an object of investigation, for which they collect information regarding male facts or characteristics.

For the first approach, along with the verbs “conquer” and “use,” other verbs such as “hunt,” “choose,” “get,” among others are used in different contexts. For example:
我這樣獵到了男人 (Cosmopolitan, 2012.2-A)

I have hunted men in this way

贏取挑選男人的自由 (Cosmopolitan, 2012.9-A)

Win the freedom to choose a man

15 句話：第一次約會就拿下他 (Self; 2011.10)

15 sentences: Get him in the first date

Frankly speaking, these titles and the messages sent have not escaped from the typical heterosexual relationship between women and men. The axiom revealed here is that a woman does need a relationship. Although these titles do not give a clear indication of whether women should stay in a romantic relationship or get married, it is still women’s duty to find a man, not arranged by family or anyone else. Therefore, women are not advised to passively wait for Mr. Right, but rather to take action to find and secure their partner for a relationship. To achieve this goal, women need to understand men, both psychologically and biologically, so that they can make reasonable decisions and take effective action, as indicated in the following titles:

男人心不再是海底針：

突破他的 5 個心防，從此不再為愛流眼淚 (Self; 2012.2)
Men’s heart is not a needle in the hay any more

Break his five “heart defenses”, no more tears for love

男人的身體真相 (Cosmopolitan, 2012.8-B)

The truth about men’s bodies

The logic embedded in the narration of the woman–man relationship is actually consistent with that of the fashion in Western-style women’s magazines in China. These titles imply that women need to acquire certain types of information, process that information, and make decisions based on that information—whether it is for choosing a shirt for work or finding a man to live with. The possession of information or symbolic resources is not limited to the issues directly targeting men, but also extend to gender boundary-crossing practices in a variety of forms. The first level of boundary crossing is to take elements from men’s fashion, and the second is to take on internal characteristics and virtues typically associated with men. Vogue uses a set of double covers (2012.4) to elaborate these two levels (see Figure 5):
In the two covers, Fan Bingbing, one of the most famous Chinese actresses, displays both feminine and masculine features. In the selling title on the left cover, “女性美(feminine beautifulness)” is placed above “男性酷(masculine coolness),” the feminine traits of the actress take the dominant position on the cover. Her long straight hair, bodily curves, and earrings emphasize her identity as a woman, while the golden metal elements on her vest, eye shadow, and outstretched body language are responsible for the “cool” part. On the right cover, “男性酷(masculine coolness)” is placed above “女性美(feminine beautifulness)”. For this cover, a man’s suit and haircut are used to show masculine traits, while her red nail polish and inward elbow subtly reveal her feminine traits. This set of double covers looks like a perfect annotation of Butler’s gender performance theory as mentioned in Chapter 2, only it is not. The two lines of small words in the selling title read as:
The phenomenon of “Lord Fan” opens up a new area of “new powerful women”

The cover figure is known as “范爷(Lord Fan)” because she has achieved great success in her career in performance, fashion, and business, due to her hard work, generosity, and decisiveness, which are traditionally considered to be male virtues. Even with these “masculine” virtues and achievements, her identity as a woman is not shaken. That is, this actress does not “perform” the identity of man. She is recognized by the society as a woman, only more capable and powerful. Her successful career is only one aspect of her power. Through the two covers, her ability to claim both feminine and masculine symbolic resources and make them contribute to her unique charm is also an important component of her power. The so-called new powerful women, represented by Fan, can be seen as women who can cross gender boundaries on both levels, but still stick to their core identity as women.

The boundary-crossing practices can be embodied in more simple playful forms. Marie Claire (2012.5) used a cover figure in a man’s suit to elaborate a “pink and cool” fashion trend. Cosmopolitan (2013.2-A) also used a “boyish girl” as the selling title. Elle (2013.9-B) tried to find some inspiration for women’s makeup from men’s fashion week. Japanese-style magazines such as Mina and Vivi all contained titles introducing unisex fashion with cover girls wearing men’s apparel. In fact, if the gender boundary is crossed, women can utilize almost all of
the fashion elements ever produced. That means, if a woman is willing and able, she can present styles that run from extremely feminine to extremely masculine as she wishes or as the occasion dictates.

In sum, because of the different preferences in content, feminist ideas are more commonly encoded in the Western-style women’s magazines. Japanese-style ones put significant emphasis on women’s appearance management, leaving limited space for discussing other aspects of women’s life. This can constitute a simple and shallow text. Western-style magazines, on the other hand, present a more complicated or “multi-layered” text with the combination of women’s fashion and a discussion of women’s existence in society with men. This combination depicts a typical collage of post-feminism: Women should look good. They are summoned by the latest fashion, no matter whether it has been designed for women or men. They pursue a “better self,” which is not for pleasing others (usually men) within the domestic sphere, but for exploring the external world, mainly through embarking on a career path. They display their subjectivity as independent social agents. Therefore, men become women’s objects of action, but they are still more or less trapped in the orthodoxy of heterosexuality. In this picture of post-feminism, women are not born as equal to men, but need to do something to achieve that equality. They require information and the ability to use that information to build up their femininity with the help of fashion, to accomplish something in work, or to become the dominant and active player in a relationship. Only in this way can they can prove that they are not the “second
sex.”

5.3 Chinese Elements in International Women’s Magazines

The labels “Japanese-style” and “Western-style” have been used throughout this chapter to describe the international women’s magazines in China. Although these appear to be cultural labels, they are only a way to categorize these magazines. Rather than referring to specific national cultures, these labels are encoded with different versions of femininity existing in China. In effect, when I argue that Japanese-style women’s magazines depict a “woman-child” version of femininity, I do not mean that Japanese women are all cute and childlike. The same logic can be applied to the Western-style images, as well. Therefore, in this section, I do not intend to describe how Chinese women look like, or should look like in international women’s magazines, but to explore the role of Chinese cultural elements in the construction of femininity.

When it comes to culture, in the sense of a national or regional culture that reflects national or regional features through text or visual elements, as mentioned in Section 5.1.1, the international women’s magazines are in general culturally vague. Among all the cultural indicators examined in this study, the names of specific countries were barely mentioned, even countries such as France, the United States, and Japan, which are the main origins of these magazines. By comparison, general references to “global (全球)” or “international (国际)” were more frequently made. This tendency was much more common on the covers of Western-style magazines (18.7%) than on the covers of Japanese-style ones.
(3.9\%), \chi^2 (3, N = 290) = 24.094, p < .001. A more interesting fact is that, while the Western-style magazines demonstrate a clearer global perspective, they also pay more attention to China, where these magazines are produced and consumed. They not only mentioned “China” more often on their covers, but also displayed more visual elements related to Chinese culture.

The covers shown in Figures 6 and 7 have been selected to demonstrate how femininity construction can be associated with Chinese cultural elements. In these cases, Chinese elements comprise the key information on the cover as a whole. The two cover models are Chinese: Liu Wen on the cover of \textit{Elle} is a Chinese supermodel, gaining worldwide recognition, and Li Bingbing on the cover of \textit{Vogue} is a famous Chinese actress. The connection of the core information to “China” is directly declared in the selling titles:
In this chapter, body, fashion, and feminism have been placed in a framework to analyze the construction of femininity in international women’s magazines in China. Within this framework, we can see that women’s bodily curves are displayed on both covers (Figures 6 and 7), although the cover model on Elle exposes more skin than the woman on Vogue. Evidently, since Elle and Vogue are both Western-style magazines, they include the body when it comes to the construction of femininity directly labeled as “China” in selling titles. Both women’s bodies exist in the context of the “fashionalization” of traditional Chinese cultural elements. Strictly speaking, if a cultural element is considered to represent a certain national culture, it is resistant to change, and thus should be seen as an “anti-fashion” element. “Fashionalization,” however, is a mechanism that coverts traditional costumes into latest styles (Polheus & Proctor, 1978). The one-piece dresses on both cover models share similarities with Qi Pao, but reworked into a more fashionable style. “Chinese red” is also used on both women. On the cover of Elle, the lip color of the cover model is Chinese red, and the lip is the focal point of her makeup. Vogue, on the other hand, uses the color in large
scale on the dress and in traditional Chinese paper umbrellas to highlight the Chinese element.

In general, in terms of the body–fashion relationship, both covers present mature Chinese women who are sophisticated and confident enough to present Chinese fashion. Since most titles on the two covers are about Chinese fashion, there are almost no titles indicating the construction of internal femininity, except for one in *Vogue*:

李冰冰：今天的我，無可替代 (*Vogue*, 2012.10)

Li Bingbing: Today, I am irreplaceable

This title, similar to the examples listed in previous sections, shows women’s subjectivity. The word “irreplaceable” implies both the height of this woman’s achievement and her confidence in her uniqueness, which is consistent with the feminist orientation of the Western-style women’s magazines. It is important to note that the presentation of either Chinese fashion or “irreplaceable” Chinese women is not aimed at defining a version of “Chinese femininity,” but rather at exploring ways to include elements from Chinese culture in the symbolic pool for femininity construction.

**5.4 Summary: Re-categorization of International Women’s Magazines in China**

I selected 10 major titles of international women’s magazines for this study.
Although the discussion of the encoded femininity has been structured around the comparison between Western- and Japanese-style women’s magazines, all of these magazines actually display individual differences with regard to the type of femininity constructed. Based on the analysis described in this chapter, I propose two dimensions for the re-categorization of these 10 titles: a “Global based–Asian based” dimension and an “external–internal” dimension, which provide the coordinate axes. Under each dimension, there are seven indicators. Magazines are scored according to these indicators, thus building up a total score to determine their position along the coordinate axes.

The indicators included in the “Global based–Asian based” dimension are as follows: the origins of the magazine, the percentage of Western cover figures, the percentage of figures with blond hair and blue eyes, the percentage of covers with foreign languages used, the percentage of covers with “international” or “global” themes used, and the percentage of cover figures with their curves emphasized. In light of these indicators, we can see that the “Global based–Asian based” dimension is not only about the original lineage of the magazines, but closely related to the cultural and geographical proximity involved. That is, if a magazine is originally a Western one, but shows many Asian faces and barely adopts an international perspective in the cover titles, it can still be viewed as an Asian based one, and vice versa. Therefore, a magazine’s relative position on the coordinate axes is much more important than the individual scores it gets. The same logic can also be applied to the “external–internal” dimension, which is
mainly indicated by the percentage of specific content on the magazine covers: the percentage of covers with fashion and beauty titles, the percentage of covers with self-improvement, relationship and marriage, and career titles, and the percentage of selling titles about fashion trends, tips, and beauty. This dimension is designed to assess whether a magazine puts more emphasis on women’s external femininity construction or their internal femininity construction.

Figure 8. Categorization of international women’s magazines in China

From Figure 8, it is evident that all of the Japanese-style magazines fall into the “Asian based–external” quadrant, indicating that their main focus is women’s appearance and they present a strong Eastern cultural orientation. This finding is consistent with the discussion earlier in this chapter. Individual differences between the four Japanese-style magazines can also be seen in Figure 8. ViVi is
comparatively more “global” than the other Japanese-style magazines, while *Rayli* has a greater focus on internal femininity than the other three. *Mina* demonstrates the strongest “Asian based–external” orientation, heavily relying on fashion and beauty content with unambiguous Eastern feminine qualities.

The diversity of the Western-style magazines is much more distinct than the Japanese-style ones. *Vogue* and *Elle* fall into the “Global based–external” quadrant. They also focus on fashion—only a different version of fashion from that in the Japanese-style ones. These two magazines also have more space for internal femininity construction. In a way, *Vogue* and *Elle*, together with the four Japanese-style titles, can be categorized as women’s fashion magazines. *Marie Claire*, *Bazaar*, and *Self* all fall into the “Global based–internal” quadrant. *Marie Claire* is on the border between external and internal femininity construction, while *Self* is overwhelmingly concentrated on internal femininity construction. In fact, it is the most internal-oriented magazine among the 10 titles. *Cosmopolitan* falls into the “Asian based–internal” quadrant, making it a rather special case. As a magazine with Western origins, its localization has enabled it to show more Asian elements than the other Western-style magazines. In general, *Marie Claire*, *Bazaar*, *Self*, and *Cosmopolitan* can be seen as women’s life magazines.

In addition to offering a new way to categorize international women’s magazines in China, Figure 8 further illustrates that there are multiple players injecting different versions femininity into the symbolic world in China. Although they share some commonalities, these international women’s magazines are not
homogeneous. For the construction of femininity on the symbolic level, these magazines produce a large body of diversified resources for women, as their readers, to decode in the construction of their femininity on the individual level. Table 2 provides a summary of the types of femininity encoded in the international women’s magazines in China, organized according to the “Western–Eastern” and “external–internal” dimensions.
Table 4. Femininity construction in international women’s magazines in China

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Feminine level</th>
<th>Feminism level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fashion</td>
<td>Body</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian based—External</td>
<td>Practical fashion for everyday life is the core content of these magazines. The ready-to-pick package is less demanding for readers.</td>
<td>Body is not central to femininity construction. Body curves are not frequently emphasized.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Japanese-style: Mina, Vivi, Rayli, Oggi)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian based—Internal</td>
<td>Latest fashion trends are provided together with large number of internal femininity construction contents.</td>
<td>Body plays an important role in femininity construction. Women are more confident using their body to show their feminine traits.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Western-style: Cosmopolitan)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Global based—External</td>
<td>Latest fashion trends are always provided with no clear decoding strategy indicated.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Western-style: Vogue, Elle)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Global based—Internal</td>
<td>Latest fashion trends are provided together with large number of internal femininity construction contents.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Western-style: Marie Clair, Bazaar, Self)</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Through the discussion of Chapter 5, I have put together a clear picture of the current situation of international women’s magazines in China. Although the dichotomy of Western-style and Japanese-style women’s magazines reveals
different routes to femininity construction through the presentation of body (concealment/presentation), fashion (tips/trends), and feminist ideas (mentioned/not mentioned), the more detailed categorization of these magazines (Figure 8 and Table 2) also proves useful. Compared to the internal construction of femininity, in general, the international women’s magazines concentrate on providing resources for external femininity. They do so, however, with their own manner of presentation and choice of content. In next two chapters, I explore whether these existing resources can help women with their gender identity construction projects and whether women are aware of the individual differences between these magazines. This detailed content analysis has laid the foundation, so that when an interviewee mentions a certain title, the features of that title are already known. This will facilitate the process of interpreting the interviewees’ readings and femininity construction.
CHAPTER 6
CONSTRUCTION OF FEMININITY: MAKING USE OF
INTERNATIONAL WOMEN’S MAGAZINES

6.1 General Media Use Pattern

In Chapter 5, I used a descriptive content analysis and semiotic analysis to clarify how femininity is constructed in the international women’s magazines in China. In terms of external femininity construction, I found two routes presented in these 10 international women’s magazines: femininity featuring mature women’s body and the latest fashion, and femininity combining concealed women’s bodies with the fashion of everyday life. In terms of internal femininity, I found that women are considered to play a role in public life and are positioned as active players in their careers and relationships. I argue that the femininity in these magazines can be seen as symbolic resources encoded in mass media. Therefore, in Chapters 6 and 7, I shift attention to the decoding process. In this chapter, I focus on the interviewees’ general media use patterns of the international women’s magazines together with other forms of alternative resources, including their preferences and media use routines in their daily lives. In Chapter 7, I explore the interviewees’ interpretations of their self-presentation and self-identity as women, which directly relates to the meaning-making process.

Among all the interviewees, the 10 non-users who were not readers of international women’s magazines were mainly concentrated in the age cohort from 18 to 22—most of them below the age of 20. The remaining 32 interviewees
had all approached women’s magazines in their life, albeit in different forms. The participants included women who were either regular or irregular buyers of certain magazines, and those who had never paid for any of the magazines they read. It is important to note that the purchasing behavior of these women did not directly relate to their reading of these women’s magazines, since the magazines are widespread and readily available. Non-buyers could read their friends’ copies of the magazines, get free copies, or read them in public venues, such as libraries, cafes, or hair salons. There was no obvious regional difference in media exposure. Although all of the interviews were conducted in Shanghai, and all of the interviewees lived in Shanghai at the time of the interviews, some interviewees came from other metropolitan areas, such as Beijing and Guangzhou. Other interviewees came from second- or third-tier cities in provinces such as Jiangxi and Gansu. They all reported reading similar women’s magazines, such as Elle, Vogue, Mina, and Vivi—almost all of which were included in the 10 major titles analyzed in this study (with a couple of exceptions).

Based on their general use patterns of women’s magazines, I categorized the 32 interviewees as active users and passive users. This categorization was not determined by quantitative measurements, such as frequency of reading or purchasing magazines. The most important criterion was whether or not the interviewee revealed a conscious awareness of using the women’s magazines as an external resource for her femininity construction in her narration. The 17 active users usually had a specific preference in their choice of women’s magazine, but
this does not mean that they were only loyal to one title. Their reading habits sometimes changed for specific reasons. They also had specific and personal ways of making use of the magazines they bought. The 15 passive users, on the other hand, were exposed to women’s magazines at random. They sometimes could not remember magazines’ names and had no idea about the differences between these magazines. Cross-referencing these categories with the age cohorts, 11 active users fell into the second cohort aged 23 to 29, 5 were in the 18–22 cohort, and only 1 was over 30. The passive users were almost evenly distributed among all three age cohorts. In this chapter, I investigate how the active users chose magazines and how they made use of them in their own ways. For passive and non-users, the emphasis is placed on the reasons why they did not use women’s magazines. At the same time, I explore whether they had alternative resources for their femininity construction.

6.1.1 Choice of Magazines among Active Users

F25 and F12 were both 22 and still in graduate school. They were both typical active users with different preferences of magazines.

F25: I think *Vogue* is the top women’s magazine. They have the best ideas and latest trends. The top wisdom of the fashion industry is reflected through the magazine. I like fashion. I like all the best stuff even the best advertisements.

F12: I like to buy magazines like *Vivi* and *Rayli*. I want to read all the mix and match tips. Magazines like *Vogue* only focus on the ‘big brands’. It is meaningless to read stuff like that.

F25 was a loyal reader of *Vogue* (Western, external), while F12 was fond of Japanese-style magazines (Eastern, external). As active users, they both gave a
clear description of the features of each magazine and explained specifically what they look for in a magazine, i.e., why they chose a certain title. Passive users, on the other hand, had difficulties giving names of the magazines they read in some cases, or treated all women’s magazines the same, even if they could name a few titles. For example, F42, 26, a PhD candidate, described her impression of women’s magazines in this way:

F42: I only have a glance at these magazines, such as Vivi, Elle or Mina. All of them are the same for me. I just have a quick look at the pictures.

Because passive users had a random use pattern with respect to women’s magazines, their reading pattern was too vague to be captured. Active users, however, tended to have a more tangible reading trajectory. As a matter of fact, almost all the active users started their journey in women’s magazines from Japanese-style ones; eventually, half of them changed over to Western-style magazines, while the other half remained loyal to Mina, Rayli, Oggi, and Vivi, all of which belong to the Eastern–external dimension. These Japanese-style titles were also among the limited titles that passive users were able to recall. For the readers that kept reading the Japanese-style magazines, practicality was one of the reasons for their choice, as F12 stated. At the same time, the cultural proximity and cute childlike feminine traits were also reasons for their choice, as indicated by F21:

F21: I like these Japanese-style magazines. I think they fit me because they look cute and fresh. I think the Western-style does not fit Eastern women. We look so different from Westerners so I don’t think we can take their style.

Readers who transferred to the Western-style magazines, mostly externally
oriented ones, did so mainly for two reasons. One was that they were looking for a
different type of information, and the other was that they had started to reject the
Japanese-style childlike feminine traits. F6, 27, had become a reader of Elle. She
had overseas experience, studying in Japan for two years, and worked as an
electrical engineer.

F6: I kept buying Mina in high school until I went to college. For a
while I think tips from Mina fit my need at that age, but I stopped
buying them because I started to feel the stuff was too cute and too
naïve for me. There are only Japanese brands introduced, but I want
to read more about fashion shows and luxury brands. I think Mina
cannot satisfy girls after they go to college.

F11, 27, worked in the public relations department of a luxury brand.

F11: When I was in high school, I bought many Japanese-style
magazines. After going to college, I started to buy Elle and Vogue.
Japanese-style is so cute. It makes girls look younger, but when I
knew I would graduate one day and go to work, I cannot keep
looking cute.

From the interviews, it seems that F6 gave up Mina because she was more
eager for the latest fashion trends, while F11 made the same choice because she
wanted to have a more “grown-up” look when she entered the workplace. F7 was
26, married, and working as a product manager at a famous Internet company. She
also chose to change magazines in her history of reading women’s magazines.
Unlike F6 and F11, her transition was not only from a Japanese-style magazine to
a Western-style one, but also from an externally oriented magazine to an internally
oriented one.

F7: At first I bought Mina [Eastern, external] when I was in college,
not usually. Japanese-style magazines focus on mix and match tips.
They are worth referring to for Chinese girls, but I do not totally
copy the magazines’ style. I learned a little bit from them.
I also bought *Vogue* [Western, external] at that time. I thought it was a high-end magazine, which is very attractive to me. I thought the world in *Vogue* would be my world when I grew up. But when I really grow up, I know my world will never be like that. *Vogue* teaches me how to match items from LV or Chanel. It does not make any sense to me.

Later I started to read *Self* [Western, internal] until now. *Self* has some feminist ideas. These articles about women’s relationship and career fit my opinions. I will read them line by line. There are many articles about women’s jobs encouraging women to work.

F7 started reading women’s magazines after entering university. At first, *Vogue* and *Mina* competed for her attention, but practicality took priority in choosing a magazine with an external orientation. F7 later realized that she was more in need of resources for the construction of her internal femininity, so she turned to *Self*, which has the strongest internal orientation among all the magazines analyzed. A similar pattern of change also occurred with F18, but this trend was only limited to these two cases.

The active readers’ choice pattern was actually consistent with the features of the women’s magazines. As discussed, the Japanese-style women’s magazines present a more straightforward coded text, which is composed mainly of fashion and makeup guidance for immediate use. This contrasts with the Western-style ones, which focus on the latest fashion trends. This study does not aim to evaluate the quality of the two styles of women’s magazines, but rather to demonstrate the differences between them. In terms of the features of the text, Western-style magazines require more attention and involvement on the part of the readers to decode and make use of them. Therefore, Japanese-style magazines become more
reasonable choices for young women who are just beginning to dress themselves up. In fact, most users of women’s magazines in China start their journey with Japanese-style ones; some stay with this style, whereas others move onto Western-style ones. Users who have gone through this transition clearly consider Western-style magazines to offer more “advanced” resources, not only because they provide a wider range of information, but also because they incorporate more comprehensive information on internal femininity construction. In a way, Japanese-style magazines seem to have a greater influence, since they can be the conscious choice of active users, while also crossing the paths of passive users. Western-style magazines usually only enter the field of vision of active users when they become less interested in Japanese-style ones for whatever reason.

6.1.2 Making Use of Women’s Magazines

No matter what magazine was chosen, the interviewees’ major attention was concentrated on fashion and cosmetics content. This type of content is directly related to the external construction of femininity. In fact, all of the most frequently mentioned titles were congregated in the external orientation dimension, whether Eastern or Western. Generally speaking, despite the differences in choice of magazines, the interviewees’ content preferences were comparatively similar among both active and passive readers.

F12: I enjoy reading these match tips to figure out clothes most suitable for me. I do not work in the fashion industry so I don’t care about new trends of the season or the items in fashion. I only care about the whole style.

F4: I like reading the articles about skin care. I think they are much
more useful than fashion photography. I read these articles line by line.

F1: When I was in college, I would randomly buy some women’s magazines if I had some spare pocket money. I read the fashion and cosmetic parts.

F12, as mentioned above, was a reader of Japanese-style magazines. F4, 26, worked in a media company, and was a reader of Elle and Vogue. F1, 32, was a cardiologist. She was a passive user of women’s magazines, but still had an impression of the content she read. When these users faced the text directly, the relevance and practicality of the content in their daily lives were the common factors influencing their content preferences. In a word, although fashion tips are more practical than fashion trends, content on beauty was even more practical than content on fashion for these users. This type of content offered them pragmatic information based on their own personal requirements. However, F11’s choice of content provided an alternative reason for reading fashion: her aesthetic taste.

F11: I like fashion photography. I would like to see if they are beautiful. I want to know who the photographer is. I judge their matching of items and editor’s taste. I can see the taste of a magazine from fashion photography.

The pursuit of aesthetic perception and practical information are not mutually exclusive. F4 enjoyed reading skin care articles, but she was also impressed by the fashion photography inspired by “William Wordsworth’s poem or the novel The Great Gatsby.” F25 admitted that Vogue, as “the top women’s magazine,” could provide her with the latest fashion information she desired, but she also expressed
her appreciation for the design of the magazine, including the advertisements. In Chapter 5, I discussed how fashion and beauty were at the core of most of the women’s magazines analyzed. From the perspective of readers’ preferences, we can see how these focuses almost coincide.

However, the readers’ fondness for the core content did not mean that they totally ignored other topics in the women’s magazines. In choosing fashion and beauty content, the users’ perceptions of practicality and aesthetic taste played an intrinsic role; with other types of content, the users’ perception of “relevance” became an important indicator. For example, most student interviewees only perceived women’s magazines as a platform that provided them with resources for their personal style management. Thus, they tended not to gravitate toward resources that could help them to construct other social roles, such as being an employee.

However, interviewees such as F7 and F18, who had already changed their preference from externally oriented magazines to internally oriented ones, placed more emphasis on their role as working women. They expressed a more indifferent attitude toward fashion. F18 worked as an accountant in a consulting company.

F18: *Mina* tells me how to match clothes and how to do makeup but *Self* is mainly about career development and self-improvement. I am not a little girl who still enjoys these colorful clothes or cosmetics. I have already gone through that stage. I am less and less interested in fashion after starting to work.

F7: I only learned a few principles of dressing from magazines, so I do not need to keep reading them. I need basic knowledge, such as
you can not wear a tight top and pants at the same time.

These two interviewees’ quotes indicate that keeping a distance from fashion did not mean giving up on taking care of their appearance. Instead, information about fashion had reached a saturation point for them at that particular time in their lives. With no special interest in fashion per se, they chose not to keep up to date with “irrelevant information.”

F8 was an active user of Japanese-style magazines, working in a logistics company. Her quote is also illustrative of how these women chose content based on the principle of relevance.

F8: I do not care about articles on relationship or sex. I think relationship is only a very small part of my life. I can read about others’ lives, but I can never replicate them. But I read articles about careers. They are much more useful. My parents have their own business, so they cannot give me any advice on career development. I need to acquire some experience from magazines, or friends.

In fact, even though articles on relationships or career development are all essentially stories of other people’s lives, F8 considered the content on careers to be more useful because her work mattered more than a boyfriend in her everyday life. She was consciously seeking information related to her identity as a working woman, although it is impossible to infer how much information she could acquire from Japanese-style women’s magazines or how practical the information would be.

From the above quotes, we can obtain a basic understanding of users’, especially active users’ preferred content in international women’s magazines in China. In the cases of Chinese users, it is clear that not only were they aware of
their content preferences, but also they could provide reasons for their choices, namely, their perception of practicality, aesthetic taste, and relevance. Comparing these cases to the cases in Hermes’s study (1995), the Chinese women had specific agendas when approaching women’s magazines, rather than treating them as resources for relaxation or “time killers” to fill fragmented time slots in their lives with no clear purposes. At the same time, the Chinese users barely revealed any detectable emotion, attitude, or judgment when talking about their reading preferences. They usually provided rational explanations for their choices, with no special expression of how much they were attracted to the content or how much they loved what they chose. They did not describe the content in a derogatory or sarcastic way, as indicated in Currie’s study (1999). Therefore, I argue that, even before entering the encoding-decoding level, that is, before any meaning is generated, the active users have already demonstrated their subjectivity and activeness on the level of choice: They would like to make use of the magazines, rather than let the magazines exert an influence on them.

This subjectivity and activeness appeared even more clear when it came to how these users “used” women’s magazines as material media products. First of all, even among the active users, no one bought one particular magazine every month without fail. In fact, most active users bought women’s magazines on an irregular basis. Their purchasing behavior was not a routinized practice. F6 was a reader of Elle, but she decided whether or not to buy an issue of Elle based on the information on the cover. F13 bought Vogue every other month, but she also
bought *Mina* occasionally if the cover interested her. As mentioned before, loyalty to certain titles was not a criterion for defining active users. Active users, in this way, made assessments based on their need and interest when buying a new issue of a magazine, even if they defined themselves as regular readers of the magazine.

Second of all, active users usually “used” the magazines according to an arranged schedule. In effect, they did not just “pick up” a women’s magazine whenever or wherever they were free to do so, but tended to read them in comparatively fixed locations and time slots. F8 usually bought magazines during her lunch break and only kept the magazines at her workplace. F21 worked as a nurse; she kept most of her copies of *Mina* at the hospital and read them during her breaks. F4 enjoyed reading her magazines in bed after taking a shower. Generally speaking, users chose their usage patterns mainly because the volume and weight of the magazines have increased since their introduction into China. This has made them more difficult to move and carry around. Although I am not going to discuss the reasons behind the weight of the magazines in this chapter, I suggest that these magazines do not appear in these users’ lives as “companions” (to be with), but as “objects” (to act on), since the magazines are not flexible enough to be “easily picked up.” This scheduled pattern of usage also fits with the level attention users pay to searching for their preferred content. In effect, they read women’s magazines when they read women’s magazines, not when they do anything else.

Along with the scheduled pattern of usage, the repeated pattern of usage and
“clip and paste” further illustrated the active users’ attention toward women’s magazines. Women’s magazines are usually printed on copper plate paper of high quality; thus, they are originally designed for repeated use. F23 was a college student who was also a reader of *Elle*.

F23: I think print magazine is better, because I can enjoy reading it leisurely. Though I do not buy magazines that often, I still prefer print version. I can read them again and again. I keep all my back issues.

The repeated use is applicable for a single issue in the short term and for a collection of back issues over time. F21 could read one issue over and over and again for several weeks. F17 chose to read the most interesting parts first and then read the whole magazine again. F17 kept her back issues as well.

F17: Actually these clothes in back copies are not necessarily out of fashion. They can still be “in” sometimes, so I read these old magazines back home. I read them repeatedly.

Similarly, F6 kept her *Mina* from high school for several years and dug them out to look for “inspiration” from time to time. F8 collected her source of inspiration in a more organized way.

F8: For a while, I clipped and pasted clothes and shoes from magazines into a scrapbook. I read them again and again to filter out the ugly stuff and keep my favorite ones, and then I could find some inspiration. If I was too busy, I would tear off a whole page.

F11 and F14 shared the same experience, at least for a certain period of time in their history with women’s magazines. Compared to repeated reading, “clip and paste” requires stronger attention and commitment to carry out the information collection process. As a result, no active users maintained this habit with their women’s magazines over the long term. Actually, all three active users who used this technique were motivated to do so early in their usage, when they were more
eager for a certain type of information.

All of these strategies of making use of women magazines (mostly among active users) demonstrate a purposeful, but not involved attitude toward these international women’s magazines in China. These active users were indeed the initiators of “actions” upon women’s magazines. They did not randomly pick a magazine with which to spend their spare time, but consciously chose one or two based on their needs and preferred content. They only paid attention to the content they were interested in, mainly concentrated on fashion and beauty, but also scattered across other topics, such as career- and self-development. They liked content with practicality and relevance, but their fondness did not develop into emotional indulgence or dependence on a magazine or certain type of content. In a word, these active users treated women’s magazines as usable resources. They invited the magazines into their lives and made proper use of them.

6.2 Passive Users and Non-Users

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, I did not exclude interviewees who were passive users or non-users from the study. Whereas the analysis of active users brought to light their choices of women’s magazines and their usage patterns, with passive users and non-users, it is useful to explore whether they still desired the information provided in the women’s magazines, whether they were also interested in the content. If so, how did they collect this information?; if not, what reasons could they give for their lack of interest?

Most of the non-users were below the age of 20. At first, I hypothesized that
interviewees falling into this age cohort might not be active readers of women’s magazines in China mainly because they were born in the era of the Internet, and as such, simply did not use traditional media. However, throughout the interviews, I was able to see that new media use habits could only partially explain the non-users’ indifferent attitudes toward women’s magazines. The whole picture was actually more complicated. Analyzing the answers of all non-users across all age cohorts, I identified three reasons that women did not use women’s magazines: (a) they had aware of the existence of resources for external femininity construction but they were not interested; (b) they had strong alternative resources; and (c) they did not have the awareness to search for external resources for their femininity construction at all.

Examining the interviews, for the non-users over 20, “not interested” was the major answer given. F15, 25, worked in the IT industry and provided this typical quote.

F15: I know these magazines such as Rayli, but I have never bought one before. I read several newsweeklies, but not lifestyle or fashion ones, because I am born not interested in this stuff. These magazines tell me how to dress up but I think reading them is so tiring. I think this kind of stuff is far away from my life.

F15 actually had some hazy ideas about what women’s magazines were, but she chose not to read them. She was still a user of print magazines, but she could not perceive any practicality or relevance to these types of magazines because of her limited exposure. She simply excluded this genre of media product from her reading experience altogether.
For the non-users below 20 (and aged 20), all three reasons were mentioned. This age group was mainly composed of first- and second-year college students. In China, this is usually the age when young women are first allowed to take care of their own appearance on a daily basis after decades of wearing school uniforms. At this stage, many of them attempt to locate accessible resources. Therefore, with the exception of one interviewee who disclosed her indifferent attitude toward external femininity construction, the expression of the other two reasons reflected the kinds of recourses these young women had access to. F32, 20, was a sophomore majoring in psychology. She was a typical case of someone who had strong alternative resources.

F32: I started to think about my appearance in junior school. At that time, I went to shop with my Mum. She would give me advice. Sometimes she found something suitable for me, she would ask me to try them on. If I also liked them, she would buy them for me. Sometimes she let me choose, but if I cannot do it well, she will help me. I am quite dependent on my Mum. I am not very sensitive to latest fashion, but my Mum is very interested in it. She shows new styles to me from time to time.

My Mum also knows a fashion designer. She studies fashion in Japan. She sometimes designs some clothes for me based on my situation. I can depend on her and my Mum. They help me control the general style.

This quote reveals that F32’s mother was the hub of information for her with regard to her appearance management. Her mother gave her advice, was an active information collector and distributor, and had a connection with a person who worked in fashion. She could make this social capital serve her daughter’s need. At the same time, F32 depended on and trusted her mother, which meant that she relied almost totally on her mother’s help with her own external femininity
construction. In this mother–daughter system, F32’s appearance was not based on her individual decisions and activities, but was a collective project within the realm of the family. Therefore, F32 did not need any external symbolic resources outside of that mother–daughter relationship. For F32, the transformation of media consumption from traditional media to digital media had nothing to do with her not using women’s magazines. She actually enjoyed reading print books or periodicals about literature and philosophy. But it never came into her mind to buy a copy of a women’s magazine.

F32 was not the only interviewee who depended on her mother as the most important external resource. In fact, help from one’s mother was frequently mentioned among young non-users. F33 was also a sophomore majoring in English literature. She confessed that all of her clothes were still bought by her mother. She would be given the opportunity to pick several items from among what her mother had bought, and her mother would return the rest. F35 went shopping with her mother because her mother could stop her from “impetuous consumption.” Although the mother did not play such a vital role for all interviewees as in F32’s case, most non-users still considered their mother’s help as indispensable in their decisions on appearance management.

The advice from their mothers was not the only source of alternative support for non-users. These women still looked for information through other media channels. Their first choice was naturally to go to the Internet. Unlike the active users of women’s magazines, the non-users did not demonstrate same level of
activeness on the Internet with respect to choice of platform and content preference. When asked what kind of information they looked for on the Internet, the young interviewees’ first reaction was to take out their smartphones in order to recall the names of the accounts they followed on SNS platforms or related applications.

F35: I follow many accounts on Wechat. I just read whatever pops up if I am interested, but I do not check this content regularly. After checking her Wechat, F35 found out that she actually followed Self and Vogue, which she had no idea about before the interview. She was more interested in reading fashion tips. Sometimes she tried to memorize styles she liked. F36 recalled that she read reports from fashion weeks, which she acquired from fashion icons’ micro blogs. She also needed to check her Weibo account to find out their names. It seems that these non-users were still in need of the information covered in the women’s magazines, but their mothers’ guidance and the Internet met their requirements. As a result, they did not turn to print women’s magazines, which are neither portable nor free.

F31, 20, by contrast, illustrated a case of someone do not search for external resources for appearance management, but strongly self-reliant.

F31: I have never bought any women’s magazines. Why should I? I just go shopping for clothes by myself, sometimes shop online. I started to buy my own clothes in junior school when I was in a boarding school. My Mum and I do not live together because of her work. I guess my mother and her friends may read women’s magazines, but we are not together, so I cannot reach these magazines. There is no such ambiance for me to read women’s magazines, so I just do not have that kind of thought.

F31 was very independent in her appearance management project. She was so
independent that she did not even turn to other types of mass media for help (e.g., the Internet). She chose to accumulate her knowledge and ability to “look good” through her own practices and observations of other people’s style of dress.

For these women, international women’s magazines were not the only resource for women’s femininity construction, even for external construction alone. Most non-users did not read women’s magazines, not because they were not interested in managing their appearance or fashion, but because they had alternative resources and their own strategies of practice. Even though people in modern society are generally immersed in the symbolic world of mass media, this does not mean that people necessarily acquire all of their information from mass media. Women’s magazines, due to their commonality and accessibility (at least in urban areas), should be considered a composition of ordinary culture embedded in everyday life. If so, we should understand that this “ordinary” nature not only provides the possibility for active users to invite the magazines into their lives, but also contains the possibility for non-users to exclude them from their lives.

The situation for passive users was less complicated than for non-users, because they at least passively used the magazines, indicating that they paid attention to fashion and beauty content and that they considered mass media to be resources they could utilize. The reason for their passive usage pattern, then, was that they had different types of alternative resources. In general, passive users shared some commonalities with non-users with regard to alternative resources. However, since their interest in related content was higher than non-users, passive
users’ alternative resources were more diversified. In addition to the support of mothers, friends, and relatives, public accounts on SNS platforms, overseas and local online shopping websites, and Korean television programs were all considered to be the resources of external femininity construction. F2, 31, worked as a teacher at a local high school. She sometimes downloaded iPad versions of women’s magazines at random.

F2: Now overseas online shopping is very popular. I check these foreign department stores’ websites from time to time for the new arrivals, their mix and match styles and customer reviews. I think it is better than reading magazines. Sometimes I directly buy something on these websites, sometimes I just “window shop.”

Obviously, the online shopping websites’ primary mission is to facilitate purchasing behavior. However, in F2’s eyes, online shopping was only one of the choices. She treated these websites as informational resources for her interest in both the latest fashion trends and fashion tips. In this case, resources for external femininity construction do not always identify themselves directly; instead, they can be discovered by women who are looking for resources through their own practices. By splitting the functions of shopping and information, F2 transformed online shopping websites into her own “women’s magazines.” F3, 27, was majoring in Korean language at university and worked in the marketing department of a sport brand. She provided a similar case: After a short period of reading Japanese-style women’s magazines in her first two years at college, F3 chose Korean television programs, including television dramas, as her major resource for external femininity construction.

As these examples illustrate, some of the passive users of women’s magazines
were active users of alternative resources. At the same time, some passive users are more like non-users, in that, they were not active information seekers. The cases of F2 and F3 indicate that exploring alternative resources can actually be more demanding than sticking with traditional resources such as women’s magazines due to the following reason: Whether it is an online shopping website or a Korean television program, these resources are not primarily designed for femininity construction, despite having the potential to provide such resources. Thus, users need some basic skills, such as language skills, and a basic understanding of fashion in order to achieve entry-level access to these resources. In addition, they must bring an even higher level of activeness into play, decoding the messages in a way that fulfills their individual needs, rather than following the original path of encoding. In light of this, it is reasonable to argue that this group of “passive” users are even more active in seeking out and using the external resources they acquire.

The use of alternative resources was not exclusive to passive users and non-users. Active users also had alternative resources, although they demonstrated a higher level of activeness with women’s magazines. In addition to all the alternative resources mentioned above, F4 and F11 mentioned that they also read lifestyle magazines on a more comprehensive level than women’s magazines. These magazines usually target an even narrower readership and provide a wider range of content with a unisex sensibility. These two interviewees chose these magazines because they were looking for resources to help them to construct a
more special and unique type of femininity.

### 6.3 Summary

Throughout the analysis of this chapter, I highlighted the interviewees’ different preferences for symbolic resources related to their different levels of individualization. This is clearly reflected in the role played by some interviewees’ mothers in their appearance management, functioning as a key resource for their daughters’ external femininity construction. Although described as an alternative resource, the mother’s role is unique, since all other resources are external and mass mediated, derived from the relationship between the individual and the massive symbolic world of modern society. These resources are encoded as static media materials, waiting to be decoded and utilized by individuals. The mother’s role, on the other hand, is internal and dynamic, deeply rooted in the traditional order of family.

These interviewees’ mothers were mostly born in the 1950s and 1960s. In fact, there were two types of mother–daughter combinations in this study: the post-1980 participants with their post-1950 mothers, and the post-1990 participants with their post-1960 mothers. The post-1950 youth almost all grew up during the Great Cultural Revolution when the feminine expression was extremely strict. With limited resources and chances to dress up, this generation does not have enough experience to provide guidance to their daughters. Accordingly, the post-1980 daughters have a stronger motivation to explore the resources in the symbolic world of mass media, including women’s magazines. Many of the active
users of women’s magazines in this study were above 25. However, this did not mean that these active users pushed their individualism to the extreme, rebelling against their mothers in terms of how to dress. Although these participants rarely mentioned their mothers offering them advice, some of them revealed that they still went shopping with their mothers and exchanged information and views with them from time to time.

Mothers of the post-1990 women were usually born after 1960, meaning that their youth coincided with China’s period of reform and opening up. Therefore, these mothers suffered less from the oppression of their external femininity and their daughters can look to their experiences. Interviewees in this age cohort were students who still depended on their parents financially. This dependence can also partly explain their respect, obedience, and trust toward their mothers. Referring back to the resources generated in the traditional family order of the post-1990 women proves Giddens’ view (1998) that tradition can still generate knowledge and resources in the modern world. In this study, neither the post-1980 nor the post-1990 participants totally rejected conversations with their mothers on the issue of their appearance. Since the younger mothers were better prepared for this job, the post-1990 interviewees demonstrated stronger tendencies of dependency; the post-1980 interviewees managed their relationships with their mothers in a more independent yet interactive manner.

Due to the purposes of this particular study, active, passive, and non-users were defined in terms of their relationship with international women’s magazines.
However, examining all of the interviewees’ reports from a macro perspective, I found two types of users. One type of user had acute awareness of the existence of the external resources for femininity construction in whatever form. These users were willing and able to identify, mobilize, and utilize those resources. They were active information searchers on any media platform and explorers of the symbolic world. Femininity construction, especially external femininity, was a relatively individualized project for these users. The second type of user mostly depended on her mother or other people in her life. Femininity construction was a collaborative work. These users displayed no interest in women’s magazines or alternative resources, and depended on their connections with information collectors to acquire the resources they needed for femininity construction, mostly their external femininity. In this chapter, I only discussed the users’ choices and usage patterns of women’s magazines, as well as their alternative resources. Thus, we are still on the surface of the decoding process. In the next chapter, I further explore how interviewees construct both their external and internal femininity on the self-identity level through their interpretations of self-presentation and self-identity.
CHAPTER 7

CONSTRUCTION OF FEMININITY: SELF-PRESENTATION AND
SELF-IDENTITY

7.1 From Self-Presentation to Self-Identity

Users’ choices and usage patterns of women’s magazines, as well as their alternative resources contributed to the major focuses of Chapter 6. In the discussion of the last chapter, women’s magazines were treated as a type of media product available for selection and strategic use. Although these users have already demonstrated a certain level of activeness in their behaviors, the whole process is still a precursor to decoding, since activeness in choosing differs from activeness in meaning making. In fact, the discussion in Chapter 6 depicted the active audience as similar to that in the use and gratification theory: their main actions are to choose and to make use of the symbolic resources in order to fulfill their needs. In this chapter, I look into the real decoding process, as users make meanings from the messages encoded in the media products. To be more specific, since the messages analyzed in this study are related to both the external and internal construction of femininity, I focus on women’s interpretation of their self-presentation and self-identity as women.

7.1.1 Body, Fashion, and Ideal Feminine Traits

In Chapter 5, I identified some typical feminine traits through the analysis of the magazine covers. The dominant images on the covers suggested that a feminine woman should have long, curly hair, wear light makeup, dress in a
one-piece dress, and wear high heels. She should not be bizarre, hypersexualized, or heavily accessorized. It comes as no surprise that, when asked about ideal feminine traits, most interviewees’ descriptions—whether they were active users, passive users, or non-users—were generally close to what was presented on the magazine covers, although the interviewees provided more detail.

Taking a closer look at the interviewees’ responses, I found three sets of ideal feminine traits mentioned. The first set was composed of regular feminine traits, which most closely resembled the feminine traits depicted in the women’s magazines. These were frequently reported by active users and some of the passive users. By order of frequency, the one-piece dress, makeup, and long, curly hair were the most recognized feminine traits in this group. High heels and accessories were also reported by the interviewees. The second set was composed of the more sexy feminine traits rarely presented on the covers. These traits were added by several passive users who felt that the ideal feminine woman should expose her body parts, wear tight outfits or mini skirts with bright colors, or decorated with lace. The third set was technically not composed of traits, but rather preconditions of the ideal femininity. Interviewees felt that women needed to mature and gain experience in order to be feminine. In other words, they needed to be “old” enough. According to the interviewees who were mostly college students and non-users, women had to be at least over 25 to qualify as being feminine. These interviewees did not deny that a one-piece dress or high heels could make a woman feminine, but they thought that age was the
compulsory condition. This age factor was a unique contribution from the interviewees, since it was impossible to identify the age of the cover models directly through the content analysis.

As mentioned in Chapter 5, body is one of the basic gender cues in everyday life experience, but woman’s body does not attract the attention one might expect in the context of the women’s magazines, especially in the Japanese-style ones. In Chapter 5, I found that, visually, women’s curves were more frequently emphasized in the Western-style women’s magazines than in the Japanese-style ones. In addition to the visual presentation, the text on the magazine covers set “slimness” as the most prominent theme when discussing women’s bodies. Slimness, almost enshrined as doxa, is actually an under-interpreted notion, since it is rarely connected to any other attributes of the woman to justify its appropriateness. Accordingly, in the world of international women’s magazines in China, women are advised to keep slim without being given a reason.

Interestingly, the topic of the body was also under-discussed in the interviews; when asked questions about women’s appearances and self-presentations, no interviewees brought up body issues in the context of ideal feminine traits. Consequently, all of the quotes about the body in this study were generated through specific follow-up questions exploring the issue. Furthermore, most of the quotes tended to be concise and straightforward, lacking a concrete interpretation. In general, interviewees were less articulate when it came to talking about the body than when it came to discussing other topics of the interview.
Consistent with the encoded messages in women’s magazines, interviewees saw slimness and body curves as the major elements of the ideal woman’s body, with slimness being more important than curves. In the interviews, slimness was mentioned much more frequently, and always mentioned as a confirmative requirement for the ideal woman’s body. Women’s curves were usually mentioned in a more questioning manner, as indicated by following quotes:

F2: There is a saying that a good woman should not weigh more than 50 kilograms. That is my goal. I want to be as thin as possible, as long as I am healthy.

F30: Ideal woman’s body? Big breasts and hips do come to my mind, but if you ask whether they are necessary, my first reaction is they are not.

Two interviewees, in particular, were able to provide some interpretations of body issues with regard to femininity construction. F10 and F4 were active users of Western-style women’s magazines. F10 considered both slimness and body curves to be important. Nevertheless, she was a strong supporter of slimness and was actively adopting various ways to lose weight at the time of the interview. Her explanation for her pursuit of slimness was:

F10: If you are slim, you will be good looking in any clothes, just like Miranda Kerr or Megan Fox. Even they are wearing jeans and slippers, people still think they are beautiful. Men judge you from your face, breasts and legs, so my first priority now is to lose weight.

Here, F10 connects slimness directly with attractiveness. Therefore, the appreciation of other people, especially men, was the major driver for her to shape her body. From this quote, it seems that F10 assumed that the body’s function was to please others, rather than for it to please herself. Connecting the body to her
gender identity as a woman, F10 unconsciously conformed to the male gaze, which stimulated her conscious willingness to shape her body. Nevertheless, throughout the interview, F10 repeatedly emphasized that no external forces could compel her to make decisions about her own body and that everything she did was for her own benefit. This inconsistency in F10’s responses to body issues indicates that for a woman who has devoted some reflexivity into her body issue, for her, the meaning of the body was still difficult to anchor in self-identity construction.

F4 was the only interviewee who tied the meaning of her body to her self-identity, but not to her gender identity as a woman.

F4: I just want to be slim. I require myself to be slim and think it is part of my self-discipline and self-control. It helps me to regulate my life. I can only control few things in my life. Keeping fit reminds me that I am still living a life. Actually, I will not get fat as long as I live a regular life. I feel comfortable. I feel good and clearheaded.

Compared to F10, F4 was more self-driven in terms of control over her body. She internalized keeping fit as a disciplinary self, but that disciplinary self was gender neutral; it did not link to her identity as a woman. As a matter of fact, despite most interviewees’ “aphasia” in terms of the body, or F4’s and F10’s interpretations of meaning of the body, it is clear that the role of the body in the femininity construction of these Chinese urban women was floating. Whether interviewees supported slimness or curves, most of them had difficulties explaining why certain bodies were important in demonstrating femininity. On the surface, one could argue that the “aphasia” of body issues is evidence that these women had internalized the messages from the women’s magazines. At the same time, one
could identify the users as being in the dominant hegemonic position in decoding the media messages. On the one hand, since the images of women’s slim bodies with natural curves are massively mediated in the symbolic world, the interviewees, whether they approved or not, naturally reinforced those ideas when asked about the body’s role in femininity construction, even if they could not provide a more detailed interpretation. On the other hand, the interviewees actually expressed their understanding of the body through some indirect expressions.

As discussed in Chapter 5, both the woman’s body and fashion can be signifiers of femininity, while fashion can help to anchor the meaning of the body. In this chapter, I show that if the body is a topic that women are unwilling or unable to discuss, talking about fashion can be a substitute. This approach is more subtle, but anchors more specific meaning in terms of their understanding of the body. Examining all three sets of ideal feminine traits, I found that most of the feminine traits could be obtained through fashion, such as the one-piece dress or high heels. When the one-piece dress was mentioned as the most prominent indicator among ideal feminine traits, it was usually mentioned along with one of its attributes: that it was fitted. This attribute itself implicates the body in femininity construction. Some interviewees even directly related fitness of dress to a woman’s curves.

F10: Women are most feminine when they are in wedding dress and cheongsam (qi pao). These clothes are so feminine because women’s features are so obvious when they wearing them. I think women are most feminine when their body curves are accentuated.
The role of the body was more strongly implied in the narration of sexy feminine traits through the wording “wrap up the bottom” or “wear low-cut dress.” These indirect expressions of body, again, indicate that the women had the general idea that the woman’s body itself was feminine, despite it being hidden behind a certain fashion style: the fitted one-piece dress. The idea of “fitted dress” also provides a clue to understanding the acceptance of slimness, since the opposite to slimness in this context should not be understood as fat or obese, but out of figure. The link between slimness and the ideal feminine body is not slimness per se, but when a woman’s curves are shown naturally with any flab concealed.

In the set of “femininity as maturity,” the mature woman’s body was implied through the description of women’s experience and sophistication. Women over 25 with “a few years working experience” and “maturity” must have already gone through puberty, meaning that they would be endowed with all of the bodily features of a grown-up woman. By contrast, “femininity as cuteness” was absent from all three sets of ideal feminine traits. Despite the popularity of the Japanese-style women’s magazines, no interviewees mentioned the cute “woman-child” image in the context of the ideal femininity—even the regular readers of Japanese-style magazines.

The interviewees’ attitudes about the body reflect the hybrid nature in their femininity construction. On one side, they accepted that mature women’s bodies and curves were key components of femininity, which is, broadly speaking, the idea embedded in Western-style magazines. On the other side, their reluctant and
avoidant attitudes toward the body are rather typical in the Chinese/East Asian context. Trapped in the uncertainty of an ongoing process of cultural hybridization, it is reasonable that most of the interviewees struggled to integrate the body into their identity construction as women. They treated the notion that women should be slim or show their curves as some distant “common sense” with no particular relation to them. In effect, these standards of the ideal feminine body had not yet reached the level that interviewees could exert their reflexivity on them. Indirect evidence of the non-reflexive hypothesis can be found in the fact that most interviewees were quite tolerant toward their bodies. Even if they complained about their weight or body shape in the interviews, they also admitted that they did not feel it compulsory to take real action on their bodies, either through diet or sport.

It seems that the body has not yet been legitimized as a resource for active use in identifying oneself as a woman in China. Indeed, as discussed in Chapter 5, the body is not necessarily a vehicle for femininity construction, especially for women immersed in East Asian culture. Even if women are aware of the existence of their bodies, they are not necessarily aware that the body can be endowed with meanings and participate in the construction of self-identity. Outwardly, I observed that most of the interviewees were dominated by the messages about women’s bodies that were encoded in the women’s magazines. However, they also demonstrated tendencies coinciding with the notion of the “indifferent audience” (Morley, 2006, p. 111). In this case, they were indifferent not because they were
not interested in the issue, but because they were still in an uncertain, transitional stage in terms of their understanding of their body and gender identity.

7.1.2 Fashion and Self-Presentation

In the previous section, I discussed the floating and awkward position of the body in terms of its ideal feminine traits. I also noted that the interviewees used the narration of fashion to replace the narration of the body in their discussions of ideal feminine traits. Therefore, besides the body, fashion’s importance speaks for itself. All fashion elements that are connected to ideal feminine traits, such as dresses, high heels, makeup, and accessories, require the investment of resources and effort on the part of individuals. Since, in this particular study, I define fashion as a process of producing new styles in clothing and related areas at a given point in time, one can infer that, every year, numerous resources are produced for women, which can be used for the constitution of an ideal femininity. In this section, I investigate how the interviewees understood the concept of fashion. I am also interested in the role of fashion in the construction of their external femininity. A more important question is that, even if women had the knowledge of which elements could make them look feminine, did they necessarily aspire to become feminine women?

In the previous section, I showed that the interviewees’ understanding of ideal feminine traits were not distinctly different across active users, passive users, and non-users of international women’s magazines in China. To some extent, they all acknowledged through their latent expression that a slim body with curves was
necessary in order to look feminine. However, their understanding of fashion followed three diverse routes. Most active users, especially users of Western–external magazines, considered fashion to be creation and production, as defined in this study. As analyzed in Chapter 5, magazines with this type of orientation frame fashion as information to disseminate.

F6: Fashion is ceaseless creation, overthrowing previous designs. Every brand has their style. Designers define fashion. If a brand changes their designer, the whole style will be different.

F4: Officially speaking, fashion is the work of designers. Their production can influence the trend and they are the trendsetters. I think most ordinary people have not realized that we are living in the world of fashion, though we may not be in the center of it. You have to put something on every morning, right?

F6 was an *Elle* reader, and F4 read both *Elle* and *Vogue*. Both of these magazines fall into the Western–external dimension, focusing on global fashion trends. Both F6’s and F4’s quotes indicate that they had transcended the stage of knowing what was “in fashion” to understand the essential nature of fashion.

The active users of Eastern–external and Western–internal magazines, to a certain extent, understood fashion as something created by somebody somewhere, but they were more likely to see fashion in terms of its popularity.

F12: What kind of fashion is popular or not is not defined by someone. Sometimes a brand creates something or some fashion icon wears something, people think that is good, and then this “something” become fashion. People will go after the fashion.

Fashion as popularity actually gives fashion some additional attributes compared to the notion of fashion as creation. First, fashion needs to be illustrated or interpreted by some fashion icon or celebrity who is an opinion leader. Second,
that illustration or interpretation needs to be accepted by the general population. These attributes happen to be the products of the “translation” of fashion in Japanese-style magazines. F12 was a reader of *Mina* and *Vivi*; therefore, she was possibly accustomed to the reified version of fashion, which further influenced her understanding of fashion. F25, as a reader of *Vogue*, especially clarified the difference between fashion and popularity:

F25: Fashion is not entire popularity. Some stuff can be popular but not fashionable at all. Fashion is something with wisdom and something keep updating. Just like new technology, fashion makes you elegant, fresh and creative.

In F25’s eyes, fashion’s value was embedded in its originality and the condensation of intellectual activities, rather than in the recognition of the “masses.” From her point of view, fashion as popularity, in a way, was anti-fashion, since any item or element needed a period of time to be picked up, interpreted, and then accepted. By then, it may not reflect the latest or most original idea. In effect, its “newness” would be lost.

Despite the internal contradiction between fashion as creation and fashion as popularity, both groups of active users agreed upon at least one thing: that fashion, produced by professionals, was a form of external resource that they could utilize in their self-presentation as women. In other words, fashion’s objective existence was encoded in the women’s magazines through different frames, and its meaning was ultimately constructed by the active users.

F6: When I read about fashion shows, I am thinking whether I can use the elements in my life and whether I can take something in. If the show is too unreal, I will feel it is too “floating”. I do not
appreciate this kind of design. F6 reinforced the conscious invitation of fashion into everyday life. The meaning of fashion for F6 was appreciation and application. F25 also expressed her admiration of fashion—as something she would like to chase after.

Most of the passive users and non-users tended to adopt the third route to define fashion. Basically, they believed that fashion was something they defined for themselves; in other words, “fashion is something that suits me most.”

F42: Fashion is not something in fashion magazines. If you can present your own style, and if you have something unique or something people can identify you with, you will have fashion. It is your own style, not what is popular, that makes you fashionable.

F3: I must not be a fashion chaser. Fashion is something I am comfortable in. Maybe the style is strange for others, but I really do not care, even if someone tells me that I am strange.

The major difference between the third way of defining fashion and the other two is that this group of interviewees did not see fashion as something that existed outside of them. These interviewees were extremely aware that they were constructing their own personal style, but they did not admit to using external resources in the process, despite the fact that I was able to identify several alternative resources for external femininity construction adopted by both passive users and non-users. The definition of fashion as self-defined, in fact, shares one commonality with fashion as creation. Both definitions reject the broad acceptance or recognition of anonymous others in defining fashion. Interviewees following the first route exerted their subjectivity in their ability to appreciate and utilize the products created by an exclusive group of professionals. According to
F25, understanding fashion was all about a person’s innovative ideas and attitudes, indicating that one’s activeness was what made fashion meaningful and valuable. The followers of the third route, on the other hand, demonstrated confidence in their own uniqueness in defining fashion.

These three different routes for defining fashion reflect the first level of decoding fashion. The first route can be roughly categorized as dominant decoding, the second route as negotiated decoding, and the third one as oppositional decoding. However, even if the interviewees used their own experiences to explain fashion, the topic was still discussed in a remote and indifferent way. Therefore, I was eager to understand how fashion was demonstrated in the interviewees’ own style of self-presentation. This would actually fit with the second level of decoding fashion, as the women integrate fashion into their individual, everyday lives. Interviewees’ interpretations of personal style will further help to clarify the external femininity construction on the individual level. Personal style in this study is explored according to three aspects: current personal style, aspired personal style, and disliked style.

Active users usually gave simple and specific descriptions of their personal style. F6 only used two words to describe her style: simplistic and Western. F21 just said she followed Japanese style. It was not surprising that F6 read Western-style magazines and F21 read Japanese-style ones. In this context, how Western- and Japanese-style could be understood as styles of women, rather than styles of magazines required further analysis. Therefore, interviewees were asked
to explain what they meant when they used words such as “Western” or “Japanese” to describe their styles. In general, Western style was described as simple, cool, unique, sexy, and mature, while Japanese style was cute, sweet, ordinary, “layer upon layer,” and innocent with bows and the color pink. Consistent with the analyses of the magazine covers, these descriptions show Western style as the “simple” and “cool” style expressed through the mature woman and her body (not necessarily ideal), without many symbolic attachments; Japanese style meanwhile seeks childlike features in women with the help of feminine symbolic elements.

However, which style active users adopted is not the central issue in this context. What is important is that active users of women’s magazines of both styles and alternative resources tended to be confirmative about their own style and had the intention to hold on to it. Even if they did not use the labels “Western” or “Japanese” to describe their styles, they were still able to give concrete and vivid descriptions of their appearance.

F13: My style is simple, maybe a little bit mature. I like clothes a little bit more fitted. If I need to carry heavy stuff, such as a laptop, I will choose sport style with backpack.

From F13’s quote, it was clear that she adopted the mature and “fitted” Western style, even if she did not use the exact phrase. We can also see that she changed her dressing strategy depending on her practical needs.

By contrast, passive users and non-users could not give precise descriptions of their personal styles. They tended to use vague and ambiguous wording in their expressions on this issue.

F15: I do not look to any reference when dressing myself up, not to
these celebrities or popular stuff. I just want to be comfortable. I
have no fixed style.

F42: My style is…a little bit simple and informal. I will put
something on as long as I am OK with it.

The equivocal descriptions from passive and non-users do not imply that they
looked sloppy in their real lives. In fact, their final presentations were not
radically different from those of active users. To some extent, they still knew how
to dress properly, but they could not express it well due to the fact they were less
active and less reflexive on the issue. Nevertheless, I was still able to find some
characteristics of personal style among the passive and non-users. F15 as a
non-user, said she “has no style,” but gave a rather detailed description of the kind
of style she did not like.

F15: I do not like cuteness and all this pink stuff. I have never liked
them since I was a child. I do not like to watch people wearing
unsuitable clothes, such as extremely tight dress. I once saw a girl
pulling down her dress all the time, which makes me very
uncomfortable. I also do not like women who are in clothes not for
their age, such as middle-aged women in extremely bright colors or
cute and innocent style.

From this quote, it seems that F15 first rejected the femininity of “woman child,”
but aspired to a more grown-up femininity; second, she had a strong intention to
pursue suitability with a style that suited both her body and her age. These
characteristics are not directly linked to fashion, but constitute an internal control
line for F15. Regardless of the role played by fashion as an external resource, a
woman’s self-presentation should be controlled by her stable and consistent
self-identity. Although not manifestly expressed by this quote, F15 hoped that her
self-presentation could tell people who and what kind of person she was.
This control line was drawn in most interviewees’ minds across all three types of users. Analyzing the interviewees’ accounts of disliked personal style, some principles hidden behind the descriptions of their current personal styles came to the surface. Principle one, as indicated by F15, was the notion of suitability, which was not only limited to body figure and age, but also included season, occasion, and personality. According to this principle, the interviewees’ antipathy did not target a specific style, only when it showed up on an “improper” person or at an “improper” occasion. Wearing casual outfits for a formal occasion or wearing clothes that amplified defects of the body were generally found to be unacceptable. Principle two was one of consistency, rejecting the mixed use of too many colors or radically different fashion elements. In the management of self-presentation, principle one demonstrated the internal link between self-presentation and self-identity (i.e., the externalization of self-identity), while principle two was more of a skill or strategy of dressing that required a strong connection to and understanding of fashion.

Based on the analysis of the styles the women did not approve of, we can achieve a better understanding of their aspired personal styles. Similarly to the narration of disliked style, the expression of aspired personal style could also be broken down into two categories, demonstrating no obvious differences among all the interviewees. The first category was a fashion-based aspired personal style in which women wanted to dress in a comfortable and simple way. By comfortable, they meant that the clothes should not cause them any pain or lead to any
awkward or embarrassing behaviors, such as “pulling down a dress all the time.” The requirement of being simple referred to uncomplicated design and limited use of colors, patterns, and accessories. The second category was an identity-based aspired personal style in which women wanted to dress up and look capable, intellectual, and professional. This category did not describe what the style would actual look like, but highlighted some qualities they aspired to as women. Overall, these qualities did not form the image of a traditional, domestic woman, but that of a strongly competitive, independent woman.

I discuss the interviewees’ interpretations of “being a woman” in detail in next section. At this point, I am more interested in making a comparison between the ideal feminine traits, the interviewees’ actual personal style, and their aspired personal style. The result of the comparison is clear: feminine traits barely occupy a position in these personal styles. As discussed in this chapter, ideal feminine traits are expressed by the body and accompanying fashion garments. These typical feminine traits, both presented through the women’s magazine covers and mentioned by the interviewees (e.g., long, curly hair, makeup, fitted, one-piece dress, and high heels), to some extent, can conflict with the criteria of the aspired personal styles for several reasons. First, maintaining these feminine traits can be time and energy consuming, and the final presentation is not necessarily simple and comfortable. Indeed, fitted, one-piece dresses and high heels may reduce the women’s freedom in daily activities, since they have to pay extra attention to their bodies in case of accidental exposure or suffer from foot pain caused by the high
heels. These drawbacks can make women less efficient at playing their social roles. In fact, most ideal feminine traits facilitate the gazing value of women, rather than empower them with activeness in their work or life routines. In a way, ideal feminine traits, if not totally rejected by women, are not entirely compatible with women’s practical needs and identity-based aspired personal styles.

F7: I have many hopes. I hope to be feminine and attractive. I also hope I am independent and unique. I hope I look effortless and unpretentious. However, I know all my hopes are contradictory to each other. Now I prefer to be effortless and unpretentious. If someday I have a huge amount of money and I do not need to work anymore, I may try to be feminine. Sometimes I buy high heels for no reason, but I never really put them on. They make me too uncomfortable and tired.

F7’s quote provides an excellent articulation of the problematic nature of ideal feminine traits in terms of external femininity construction. She did not impose negative meanings on the ideal feminine traits, but considered them unsuitable to her current identity as a working woman. Therefore, she consciously rejected feminine elements in her daily style, and instead chose the “effortless and unpretentious,” which are almost synonyms of “comfortable and simple.” F7’s strategic avoidance of ideal feminine traits indicates the existence of a unique version of “de-feminized” femininity among current Chinese urban women. This does not mean that women discard their identities as women to become masculine; rather, they choose to reduce the ideal feminine traits in their self-presentation for practical reasons in their everyday lives.

F10: I think women blur their femininity more or less in the workplace by dressing up with a suit or something else. When you reach a certain level in your career, the requirements for women and
men are the same: You need to be decisive and strong-minded, so the soft and beautiful feminine style becomes improper, but simple style of blazer and legging in dark color will be better.

The presence of “de-feminization” raises a question: Does this process imply that gender cues of women will disappear from the workplace? Will men and women eventually dress up in the same way just as in the era of formal gender equality in China? The answer is no. First of all, the body as the gender cue plays its role whether or not it is helped by fashion. Second of all, the construction of external femininity is not an either-or issue; there are numerous possibilities and combinations of self-presentation along the spectrum of “feminine–masculine” thanks to the vibrant production of symbolic resources in the fashion industry. With the help of all the resources of fashion, women can actually manage the level of femininity they would like to present, depending on the requirements of the occasion. In Chapter 5, I discussed the possibility that women could break gender boundaries to utilize traditionally masculine symbolic resources for their own purposes. Through the interpretation of “de-feminization,” it seems that such a boundary crossing has been happening among these young women. Finally, although this “de-feminization” can be seen as a general pattern, feminine traits have not totally disappeared from the interviewees’ personal styles. Some of the interviewees, such as F2 and F20 who worked in areas traditionally believed to be feminine (teacher and nurse), still valued the ideal femininity as their aspired personal style. F17 appreciated the “casual sexy” style represented by the American brand Hollister. Most of the others, including the students, admitted that
they adopted some ideal feminine traits for particular occasions, usually involving men (e.g., a date or their wedding). By way of conclusion, the strategic rejection of ideal feminine traits will not lead to the annihilation of gender difference, but to the expansion of the space for external femininity construction and, in turn, the much more diversified self-presentation of identities as women.

Although some possible correlation might have been found between the magazines (or other external resources) the interviewees used and their personal styles, it was beyond the scope of this study. I was more interested in the phenomenon that consuming women’s magazines as an active resource-locating behavior helps women to understand themselves and to become more conscious of their self-presentation. Active users of Western-style magazines were found to have a more objective understanding of the nature of fashion. All of the active users of any external resource were aware that they sent certain messages through their appearances and that they needed to cultivate the ability to control their self-presentation at different levels with the help of fashion. They internally linked these messages back to their self-identities as women; thus, almost all of the interviewees demonstrated, latently or manifestly, their desire for suitability and consistency in their self-presentation. Among all of the possible expressions of self-identity, the interviewees (including married women and young students) highlighted the identity of an active woman who can act independently in society, rather than a feminine woman who is there only to be gazed at. Because of this, ideal feminine traits were decoded into something that is optional, while most
interviewees aspired to a more flexible and practical style without strong feminine connotations.

7.1.3 Consuming Fashion

Before discussing the interviewees’ self-identities as women, I would like to highlight several paragraphs introducing their consumption patterns. In a way, such consumption patterns can be seen as auxiliary routes to decoding fashion. The topic of consumption is easily connected to the discussion of class, income, fetish, and the control of “evil” capitalism. However, in this study, I focus on how these women’s consumption patterns reflect their understanding of fashion and self-presentation. Studying consumption is important because it is one of the most important and common ways for ordinary urban women to get the material products they need to conduct their self-presentation. Without consumption, the understanding of fashion and self-presentation would not find their place in the real world.

All of the interviewees were recruited in Shanghai, and most of them were Shanghai locals. They had all received some degree of higher education, although some of them were still in college. For the interviewees with jobs, all of them had more than 5,000 RMB as disposable income each month, while nine of them had more than 10,000 RMB. The students usually had 1,000 to 2,000 RMB to cover their basic expenses each month; their parents usually paid for costs associated with dressing or beauty products. Seven of the interviewees were married; six of them had young children; and all of their husbands were well employed. Most
single interviewees still lived with their parents, meaning that their basic living costs were primarily shouldered by their family. While I want to avoid classifications by class, the general situation of the interviewees suggested that they were able to consume, and consumption was an ordinary routine in their everyday lives without overwhelming struggle and calculation, except for the purchase of luxury goods.

One side of the story is that these women are a vigorous consuming group; the other side is that fashion is well popularized and conveniently accessible. In Chapter 5, I pointed out that the world of fashion is highly hierarchical, and the latest fashion is produced by recognized top brands and their designers. This means that the prices of the newest fashion products are usually out of ordinary women’s league. That is why the brands occupying the top position of the fashion pyramid are considered to be luxury brands. In this case, women’s magazines, especially the Western–external ones, are criticized for luring women to buy things they can never afford. However, this criticism is not reasonable because the direct purchase of luxury goods is not the only way to consume fashion.

I found five ways that the interviewees tended to consume fashion: (a) fast fashion chain stores, such as Zara, H&M, Gap and Uniqlo (all international brands), which provide a straightforward way to consume fashion; (b) traditional local department stores focusing on local and Japanese brands; (c) online shopping—a newly emerging channel—including the major Chinese local online shopping platform Taobao (taobao.com) and overseas online shopping websites;
(d) small-scale, private-owned fashion stores; and (e) direct shopping from luxury brands.

Fast fashion brands were the priority choice for some active users of women’s magazines, usually Western-style ones. In their minds, only these brands could truly reflect the latest fashion trends.

F4: The most attentive audiences in fashion shows are not fashion editors, but these people from fast fashion brands. Have you seen the bags from Michael Kors? They are so similar to these of the top brands. Zara is always doing the same thing, though the copied styles are slightly different from the original designs.

F4’s quote cannot be seen as straight fact; instead, it reflects her observations of fast fashion brands and their relationship to the latest fashion production. F6 and F10 did not provide anecdotal evidence, but did admit that consuming fast fashion helped them to reach the latest fashion designs. They preferred fast fashion brands also because of the reasonable prices, wide selection, easy access (i.e., the chain stores are located in all major commercial circles), and convenient return policies. What they did not mention directly was that shopping in fast fashion stores is usually a self-help process with no services or advice from shop assistants, who do not persuade clients to buy anything. There are also no labels on the clothes indicating that they are “in fashion.” In effect, a smooth shopping experience in these stores requires clients to activate their knowledge of fashion, their aesthetic taste, and their judgments of suitability and consistency; in the end, they need to make the choices and decisions. In this context, shopping itself becomes a practice of fashion. Therefore, it is reasonable that fast fashion brands are well accepted
among women who are already active information collectors and who consider fashion as creation.

Consuming fashion via fast fashion brands represents a consumption pattern based on activeness. F15, as a non-user, provided a case of an extremely passive consumption pattern.

F15: I am not good at making choices and I am too lazy to try clothes on. If I meet a good and patient shop assistant and she recommends several clothes to me, I will buy a lot and I do not care too much about the price. I do care about the service from shop assistant because they make my shopping experience happy and easy.

F15’s case was not very common among the interviewees, although she pointed out the most prominent feature of shopping in traditional department stores. The purchasing is conducted through the interaction with the shop assistants who tend to provide advice, professional or not, to persuade the client to buy a certain product. The designs and prices of the brands in traditional department stores vary widely. Except for consumers like F15 who enjoy the service, shopping in these stores requires women to evaluate whether the design and quality of a certain piece of clothing is worth its price. Department stores are the major options for passive users and non-users. Student interviewees tended to go shopping with their mothers, and their mothers also preferred department stores.

The result of their price–quality evaluation sometimes led interviewees to shop on Taobao, since they could get similar styles for lower prices than in the traditional department stores. The major drawback of shopping online is that it is extremely difficult to judge whether the piece of clothing fits the description and
the photos, and whether it will fit the buyer. In general, despite its convenience and lower prices, shopping for fashion on Taobao contains a high level of uncertainty. As a result, only two active users chose Taobao as their major way of consuming fashion, while others openly rejected shopping for clothes online. Most passive users and non-users treated shopping on Taobao as an option, rather than the only choice. However, overseas online shopping, called “Haitao (海淘)” in Chinese, is a different story. As mentioned in the previous section, some interviewees considered overseas online shopping platforms to be alternative resources for fashion information, and the consumption of information was sometimes accompanied by real purchasing. Price advantage was not the major reason for interviewees to choose “Haitao.” They tended to use Haitao to satisfy some personal needs in fashion. F4 used Haitao to locate independent fashion brands, while Haitao helped F8 to locate some Japanese brands unavailable in mainland China.

Generally speaking, the first four channels of fashion consumption provided the interviewees with the basic material resources needed for self-presentation. However, interviewees could still purchase luxury goods. Half of the interviewees possessed luxury goods, mainly handbags. These possessors of luxury goods were over 20 years old, and they purchased, or at least chose the item to be purchased, by themselves. Among all the major brands, Chanel, Prada, and Gucci were the most frequently mentioned brands, with a rather wide coverage of dozens of other brands. F12 was still a student in graduate school. She had a Chanel shoulder bag.
and a Prada purse.

F12: I started to know the top brands when reading Vogue. My friend asked me to read Vogue. My two bags are from my father, but I am not that interested in them. Actually I do not mind if I have them or not. There are too many people in China can afford this stuff, so I do not think luxury bags can prove anything. If I pay for my luxury goods someday, I will buy an exquisite one which I really appreciate and I can afford. I do not think we need to buy this stuff crazily.

F12 was still exploring her definition of “exquisite”, but F11 had already developed her own theory of luxury brands.

F11: I know most of the brands from magazines, and now I have my own knowledge of these brands and my favorite brands. I like Celine, Vivienne Westwood, McQueen, Balenciaga, Alexander Wang, and Marni. Celine is clean, with nice shape, and without unnecessary decorations. The colors are always beautiful and special. I choose Vivienne Westwood and McQueen for my casual style. I think I have my taste.

This study has no intention of introducing all the luxury brands. What is worth noting in F11’s quote is the way she talks about these brands. She demonstrates a high level of familiarity with the brands and interprets her fondness for certain brands based on the properties of the products, rather than the symbolic meanings they carry. She treats the luxury goods as external resources to serve the purpose of her personal style. In fact, interviewees rarely brought up a connection between luxury goods and conspicuous consumption. As indicated by F11 and F12, the two main reasons for women to buy luxury goods were that they appreciated the designs and they could afford them. The most frequently mentioned value of luxury brands was that they produced “beautiful things.” In F7’s words, “I will be happy if I possess some beautiful things and I will be happy
to see them every day after buying them.”

Consumption is not the focus of this study, but discussing the consumption of fashion highlights that with all of the existing channels, women are provided with ample room and resources to practice their self-presentation. Regardless of whether or not they are active users of women’s magazines, how they understand fashion, whether they manage their appearance on their own or depend on someone else, there are enough possibilities for them to develop their practice. With all the resources and opportunities available, these young women can achieve a clearer self-presentation strategy if they have the willingness and ability to utilize them. Through the interviewees’ consumption patterns, we can observe the connection between acquiring symbolic resources and acquiring material resources. Resources, in whatever form, are vital for urban women to realize their external construction of femininity, but these resources are never evenly distributed. However, for the interviewees in this study living in Shanghai with reasonable income or economic support, material resources were abundant and accessible. Only some luxuries were out of some interviewees’ reach. Scholars have pointed out that the uneven distribution of resources can influence the construction of self-presentation and self-identity (Skeggs, 2004), but in this comparatively homogeneous group of interviewees, their activeness in allocating and using the resources exerted more influence on their self-presentation.

7.2 Being a Woman: Self-Identity as Women

Previous sections of this chapter have mainly focused on the construction of
external femininity on the individual level. Chapter 5 unveiled that the cover figures of women’s magazines are in general feminine, although they are feminine in different ways. However, through the analysis of the interviews, I discovered that these feminine traits were more or less compromised in the daily self-presentation of ordinary women. The compromising force was women’s desire to keep a stable and consistent self-identity as women. Considering the actual personal style and aspired personal style as a way to decode feminine images in the symbolic world, it is clear that ideal feminine traits have been reduced to optional status in women’s everyday practices.

7.2.1 An Ideal Woman in the Making

In this study, self-identity is understood as a narrative—a story kept by an individual. The particular part of the story I am interested in is the interviewees’ stories of being a woman. In the last section, I identified that the interviewees tended to maintain a modern version of self-identity that was stable and consistent, rather than adopting a chaotic and fragmented postmodern version. In this section, I further explore what this self-identity is like by questioning what being a woman means to the interviewees through their expression of an ideal femininity, and how they understand their careers, relationships, and lives. In Chapter 5, I discussed how Western-style women’s magazines construct internal femininity in the context of feminism. Women become independent social agents through their active pursuit of career development and a dominant position in their relationships. In this context, women’s magazines provide an ideal image of an independent,
competitive, and even perfect woman who has the right and ability to perform a powerful and active role in the social realm, all the while keeping a feminine look. However, this image of the perfect women faces the possibility of being negotiated when decoded on the individual level.

I invited interviewees to propose important attributes of an ideal woman in order to understand the meaning of being a woman that was in their mind. The attributes contributed by the interviewees generally fell into two categories. The first one was social agent oriented: An ideal woman should have a career, but she has to achieve a balance between her job and family. She should be well educated and demonstrate her intellectual ability in her daily life. She should also be strong-minded with proper communication skills. This category of attributes obviously reflects liberal feminist values, emphasizing women’s individualism and can-do nature; therefore, we can also consider them to be feminist oriented. The second category was more domestic oriented: An ideal woman in this category should have a feminine personality. She should be kind and gentle. She should demonstrate a well-cultivated manner. At the same time, she should look feminine.

Among all the attributes of ideal femininity, ideal feminine traits were mentioned even less frequently than when ideal personal style was discussed, meaning that the importance of ideal feminine traits declined when femininity was discussed in a more holistic way. Only nine interviewees actually mentioned feminine appearance as one attribute of ideal femininity, while only five of them
considered feminine traits as the most important attributes of an ideal femininity. One interviewee, F25, proposed ideal feminine traits as the only criterion of ideal femininity. For her, women should keep “the perfect appearance which conforms to the aesthetic standard of ordinary people.” She mentioned a Chinese actress Lin Chi-ling as her model of the perfect woman. The actress’s image demonstrates almost all of the ideal feminine traits.

Seven interviewees provided attributes that fell only within the domestic category. They were students or worked in comparatively stable units, such as state-owned enterprises or hospitals. Obviously, these women were not traditional, domestic women who barely participated in the social realm. However, in their mind, the ideal status of women was to shape themselves according to traditionally valued virtues. F31 and F34 were college students and non-readers of women’s magazines.

F31: Perfect woman? She should be beautiful, smart and kind-hearted. She also needs to be good at housework and cooking. I cannot cook, but I think boys like beautiful girls who can cook.

F34: She should be beautiful and rich, with a good personality. Everyone has a positive impression of her and everyone likes her personality, feeling comfortable and warm around her.

In fact, some domestic-oriented attributes, such as kindness and good manners, generally reflect positive human virtues. That is, it is worth cherishing all of these virtues whether you are a man or a woman. Therefore, how these virtues are expressed and interpreted matters in exploring what they mean for individual women. It is not difficult to find out from the two women’s quotes that the ideal
femininity in their mind was built on the premise of pleasing others, whether the “others” in their mind were men or the general public. In other words, the existence of anonymous others formed the context within which these attributes were interpreted. Women aspire to have a beautiful appearance and nice personality because they desire the other’s recognition, rather than their aspiration for their own establishment and development of their careers and lives. As a possible result, the subjectivity of the woman is blurred, or even undermined in this process. F3, worked at a famous transnational corporation (TNC) and provided a different interpretation of “good personality” and “beautiful appearance.”

F3: A perfect woman should be confident and strong-minded. She has her own ideas but she knows how to express them properly. She only chooses clothes that really fit her personality. I think everything starts from inner side. A perfect woman should understand herself first. A perfect woman should be sincere and kind. She has no intention to do any harm to others, and she is beautiful.

F3 first contextualized her understanding of the perfect woman against a broader background, compared F31 and F34. Although F3 did not specify whether the “confident and strong-minded woman” was situated socially or domestically, she at least emphasized woman’s subjectivity as the primary criterion of an ideal femininity. For F3, a good personality meant the decent expression of the self, while beauty meant suitability—all of which contributed to a single aim to express self-identity decently, with the precondition that a woman should maintain a consistent self and have a clear awareness of her self-identity. Perfection, for F31 and F34, was derived from others’ recognition, but F3, as indicated in her quote,
saw perfection as the constant reflex and refinement of the self. F3 also repeatedly expressed the values of woman’s self-identity when responding about her personal style and ideal personal style: “Women should spend some time thinking about who they are, rather than follow others’ styles or just popular styles.” F31 and F34, on the contrary, could barely provide clear interpretations on the issue of personal style. This difference, again, demonstrates the internal connection between self-presentation and self-style: If there is a perfect self-presentation to be achieved, according to F3, it can only be achieved through constant self-reflection, since women are more confirmative about their personal style when they have already developed a comprehensive understanding of themselves.

7.2.2 Family and Work: Looking to Achieve the Balance

Most interviewees brought up the dichotomy of social and domestic roles for women by expressing their desire to achieve a balance between work and family. These interviewees were not limited to married women, but included single women and college students. In their minds, women shouldered responsibilities in both the workplace and the family, and those two types of responsibilities were in conflict with each other; therefore, a woman who could balance the two actually reflected her personal ability. Although the interviewees were aware of or had already experienced the difficulties in fulfilling both types of responsibilities, they showed no inclination toward giving either one up. F30 was a college student, majoring in psychology.

F30: A woman should be knowledgeable and intellectual first. If she can balance her career and marriage, she will be a perfect and
successful woman.

F7 was married with no children. She provided a specific case to exemplify this “perfect and successful woman.”

F7: There is a vice president in our company. She looks beautiful and young even in her forties. She has overseas experience, successful career and marriage. She jogs for one hour everyday and she can even finish a marathon. She is so energetic.

F29 was an architect and mother of a four-year-old daughter. She had obviously had a much more vivid experience of this balance than F30 and F7.

F29: A perfect woman first needs to dress up in a suitable way. In working place, she cannot show weakness only because she is a woman. She needs to do her best in work. She also needs to take care of the family, raising the child up in a home with mother’s love and providing a comfortable environment for her husband. She also should shoulder one-third of family cost to guarantee her status in the family. Married woman should take care of both families to please everyone. There are so many things to do to achieve perfection, but I will arrange all errands according to their importance. I have not much time to consider myself and I have not much time to rest, but I will feel sense of achievement if I arrange everything well.

Through the comparison of the three quotes, we can see that F30, as a student, only has a very vague idea about this balance. She undoubtedly considers learning and absorbing knowledge as the priority, which is consistent with her identity as a student. Being a qualified student equals being a perfect woman in F30’s mind, indicating that she uses social-oriented attributes to describe her ideal femininity.

F7 is interested in the career stories in the magazine Self, and her description of the ideal femininity most resembles the ideal career women in the women’s magazines among the three interviewees. She sees the balance as a perfection that will be achieved without any struggles. She is fascinated by the aura of the
successful women, but not interested in background details. F29 actually lives in the background of such a successful woman. She unsurprisingly indulges herself in the ceaseless requirements from career to family, and she defines perfection as meeting all the demands from all parties involved. F29 considers the balance as the only attribute of ideal femininity. In such an extreme case, F29 actually gives her subjectivity up to construct a version of perfection based others’ pleasure. In this sense, F29 is similar to the young students who only value domestic attributes: their selves are less important than pleasing others. The only difference is that the students want to satisfy imaginary anonymous others, whereas F29 wants to meet the demands of specific parties in her practice of everyday life.

Discussing the conflict between career and family deconstructs the image of the ideal career women in women’s magazines, since women can never be that individualized and driven as long as they are still embedded in the traditional family values. In fact, one of the major criticisms of Giddens’s reflexive self-identity is that he fails to notice that some societies have not gone through radical individualization and traditional values can still be powerful (Adkins, 2002). Therefore, the independent “can-do” career women in the symbolic world are easily compromised by Chinese women’s family values. Almost all of the interviewees in their 20s and 30s prioritized family in their life agenda. From the perspective of valuing family, women’s careers and relationships all become endowed with different meanings. Only through understanding these new meanings can we finally achieve a comprehensive understanding of balance and
the reason why it dominates the definition of ideal femininity.

Among all of the interviewees, only one explicitly expressed her apathy toward the family. The rest of them equally explicitly expressed their determination to pursue marriage and have children. They naturally compared the importance of career and family, and came to the similar conclusion. F3 considered a strong-minded woman as being perfect, and her own strong mind was fixed on family.

F3: Family is the most important thing in my life. I am a very traditional woman and I like children. If I have children, I will not keep myself that busy at work and I will put my attention in my family. I really want to get married as soon as possible, and then I can have children.

F5 and F15 were also career women. In their minds, career and family were radically different and even incompatible.

F5: If I have a family, my career will step back. Family means responsibility to husband and children, but career only means responsibility to me. People have their freedom not to go into family, but if I make the choice, I will shoulder the responsibility.

F15: If you ask me to give up my career for family, I will do it, but not vice versa. Family is an emotional bond. If I lose my career, I can pick it up again, but family does not work in the same way. They are not at the same level.

Interviewees repeatedly expressed their family values throughout the interviews, making the interpretation of family the most salient and consistent in the whole study. However, the confusing point was that, if these young women valued family so much, why did they still keep on their career paths and why did they want to achieve a balance, rather then become perfectly happy housewives? In fact, the importance of family was always accompanied by the comparison with
career, because the coexistence of family and career provided a space of choice for these women. Indeed, unlike when family was the only compulsory duty for women, the interviewees’ preference for family was the result of careful reflection and calculation. At the same time, the reason why they had the right to utilize their subjectivity and power of reflection to make such a choice was because they were independent social agents, and their independence was secured by their work or their potential to work. If they chose to give up their careers, they would lose their roles as social agents. By then, family would turn into a non-negotiable burden, instead of a responsibility the women chose to shoulder or an emotional bond they were eager to embrace.

Therefore, even though family was of paramount importance, career was still a necessity. Family for these women did not only mean responsibility and emotional attachment, but also support. When the interviewees expressed their willingness to devote more attention and energy to their family after getting married, they also clearly suggested that their husband (men) should be more devoted to their career, playing the role of breadwinner. While a career guaranteed the women’s independence as social agents, a family offered them the benefit of dependence. From this perspective, the balance between family and work also reflects the tension between independent and dependent women’s self-identities. Yet, compared to the one-sided approval of family values, the interviewees’ understanding of independence varied widely.

F25 considered ideal feminine traits to equal ideal femininity, and she made
her point perfectly clear that she chose to depend on men.

F25: I would rather depend on a man, because the track of life is different for men and women. Men’s twenties are for striving and learning, so they don’t need to spend too much money; but for girls, this ten years is for blossoming, so they perhaps spend more money than earned. That is why it is better to have a boyfriend or husband to depend on.

Similarly, F31 and F34 demonstrated bewildering attitudes toward the issue. Neither of them agreed to become a housewife in the future, but the meaning of work for them was rather uncertain. For F31, the major function of work was socialization and to keep her from get bored. F34 emphasized that a woman had to have her own career because otherwise a man could easily cheat on her; she could not give more explanation as to this point. None of the three interviewees made a connection between a woman’s career and a woman’s individual identity. Since all of them were still students, it is possible that they did not yet have authentic experience of working and thus their understanding of the relationship between independence and dependence was generated based on indirect experience filtered through their imaginations. F31 and F34, in particular, were quite hesitant when it came to responding to this issue. A possible reason for this hesitation is that the tension of a woman’s choice between a man and a career had not yet entered their realm of reflection. Not all of the students, however, demonstrated such confusion and uncertainty on this issue. For example, F36 said that work was the most fundamental basis of one’s existence in society.

For the women who already had working experience, the meaning of work was more grounded. It was clear for them that the most important gain from work
was their independent identity, which was guaranteed by their economic independence. This independence could further engender other important meanings in their lives. On the one hand, the independence gave women the power to exert control over their lives. They could satisfy their desires, manage their appearances, shape their lifestyles, achieve self-improvement, and create other possibilities without the need for approval by any other party, whether it be their parents or husbands. On the other hand, women could be more empowered in a relationship with men if they had their own jobs. The interviewees felt that they could treat their partners as equals and be treated as equals in return if they had their own economic independence.

In Chapter 5, I noted that women’s magazines send a strong suggestion that women are not “born” to be equal to men, but need to “do” something to “achieve” the same equality. This message was perfectly elaborated in the interviewees’ interpretation that the value of work is always accompanied by their low expectation of men’s help. Even if the interviewees had a strong commitment to their family, they did not assume that their husband would support the family constantly and unconditionally.

F13: Independence is very important. Marriage and love is the most unreliable, since they put two strangers along to build up a relationship. Any problem in the process can destroy the relationship. It is not safe for a woman to depend on a man in marriage.

F7: Depending on a man is the investment of high risk. Chinese men obviously like young women much more. You can offer him ten years of your time without any reward.

These women’s interpretations of work, family, and men were deeply intertwined.
Most of them valued their equal status with men in a relationship. Although, they looked forward to men’s support in marriage, they did not see that support as guaranteed. Most interviewees did not appreciate the role of housewife, because it seemed isolated from society, incapable (no income), and resistant to progress. They thought that the status of housewife was dangerous and without dignity. In this case, career development not only benefited the women’s internal desires for self-realization or independent self-identity, but work also became an effective strategy for women to balance their desires for a traditional family structure and a certain level of equality with men.

Some of the interviewees acquired a stronger sense of achievement from work, while others saw work merely as a “safety net,” protecting them from potential despise and other negative judgments from their current or future partners. In general, for most of the interviewees, to keep working was the only way to achieve the happy family life they desired. F11 was one the “workaholic” interviewees, working in the marketing division of a luxury brand and traveling all over the country for her job.

F11: My choice is to get married as late as possible, after my career enters a stable stage, but I will put my focus on family after I am married. Family matters, but I do not want to give up my career either. Career can bring me a fast and clear sense of achievement, but gratification from family is gradually accumulated. I think family is more important for women than for men.

The attraction of family was equally strong for F11 who barely had any time to cultivate a relationship.

Under the core value of family, the interviewees’ opinions of men and
relationships were radically different from what was revealed in the women’s magazines. For these women, men were not “hunted” or “conquered” as objects, nor were they “understood” and “used” for sexual pleasure. In fact, the interviewees carefully selected and screened men according to the standard of family supporter. The ultimate goal for the women in this study was not just to take the initiative position in the relationship; they wanted to establish a family and raise children. As a result, the ideal masculinity in these interviewees’ eyes was not about a strong, muscular body, handsome face, or decent fashion style, but about the ability and willingness to pursue career development and support their family—perfectly responding to the requirements of the ideal femininity.

With men’s body and appearance marginalized, the importance of their sense of responsibility, ability to solve problems, and similar views on life came to the surface. An unexpected finding was that, although much of the criteria implied that the interviewees had economic requirements for their partners, they tended not to talk about it directly. Instead, they put more emphasis on men’s willingness and potential in their career development, and a mutual understanding in the relationship. For these women, the attributes of the ideal partner, in fact, were built on the basis that women and men are individual social agents, rather than on the axiom that women should depend on men. This view also benefited from women’s own insistence on work and independence. Similar to the interviewees’ views on work, some of them put more emphasis on individualism in a relationship, while others just suggested it latently. F10 was very devoted to her
career at a public relations company and her work kept her very busy.

F10: He should have his own career. He should have the desire to advance and keep himself busy. He should live a healthy life; enjoy his own socialization and interests. Not too ugly. Not too short.

F10 hoped that her future partner would fulfill the same demands she placed on herself. For women with a strong self-identity and individuality, all they asked was for something similar and equal from men; they actually had no desire to make an exchange in any form. F11 wanted to postpone marriage for as long as possible. Compared to F10, she valued mutual understanding in a relationship more.

F11: Mutual understanding is more important than blind investment of emotion and passion. Mutual understanding is based on the fact that I know what I want, and then I can understand what my partner want, thus we can support each other. That is more important than that you both love each other very much without understanding.

From the perspective of ideal masculinity and ideal partner, I argue that most of the interviewees aspired for the intimacy of confluent love where romance and passion do not play a major part. Confluent love is built on mutual understanding and equality in an emotional give and take (Giddens, 2013). According to Giddens (2013), this form of intimacy developed through modernization, as women struggled to break free of their traditional gender roles. Furthermore, this form of intimacy can only be achieved through equality, especially in marriage. The Chinese women interviewed in this study had broken out of the constraints of traditional gender roles. They were not born to be housewives affiliated to someone else. They were well educated. They had their own careers. More
importantly, they more or less had ideas about individualism and their own self-identities as women. However, responding to the criticism of Giddens’s theory, these women who were benefiting from the mechanism of disembedding truly aspired to be re-embedded. This phenomenon can be explained by the strong residual effect of Chinese tradition, which positions family as the most important factor in the value system. Or, as Yan (2010) points out, the lack of support by the system, especially at the state level, has pushed Chinese individuals back toward the family and personal connections to find support and security. These women, after all, have their choices. Their current or future struggle to achieve the balance between work and family is perhaps the price they have to pay to achieve the ideal femininity in their mind.

7.3 Summary

This chapter has mainly discussed two major issues: self-presentation and self-identity in the femininity construction of Chinese women on the individual level. Following the discussion of the use pattern of symbolic resources in Chapter 6, this chapter moved on to show how these resources help women with their construction of external femininity. I also analyzed their understanding of internal femininity construction and feminist ideas. Through Chapter 6 and this chapter, it seems that the differences among interviewees diminish as we move from external issues to internal issues related to femininity construction. On the media use level, there were clear cohorts of active users, passive users, and non-users, and each had their preferences for different styles of magazines and
alternative resources. They also demonstrated different levels of understanding in terms of fashion and adopted different strategies with respect to their self-presentation of gender identity.

However, the interviewees’ interpretations became more and more similar when it came to the issues of ideal feminine traits and ideal personal style. They demonstrated a general inclination toward de-feminization. They looked for a simple, comfortable, and convenient personal style that needed to be consistent with their self-identity as a woman. After unveiling their ideal femininity through the comprehensive discussion of work and family, and independence and dependence, it became clear why these women did not appreciate the ideal feminine traits that much. In their minds, being a woman meant responsibility and constant devotion to both career and family; this gender identity was not compatible with the burden of ideal feminine traits.
Comparing the femininity constructed in international women’s magazines and on the individual level (see Table 3), one can observe the importance of the practices of everyday life and traditional family values as powerful negotiating forces. In this study, individuals’ resistance to the structural power, whether as audience to the text or as women to the patriarchal order, is deeply rooted in the women’s ordinary everyday lives. In effect, their activeness and resistance is not purposeful or intentional, but derived from their construction of a self-identity through the trivial tactics of their daily routines. No interviewees labeled themselves as feminists, but most of the interviewees practiced some feminist ideas. The difference was that feminism for them was something extremely individualized and scattered throughout the practices of their everyday lives. As such, most of them were not aware of it. Furthermore, they never directed their
reflections on gender identity toward the structural level. That is, they did not blame the patriarchal order or the insufficient support at the state level. On the contrary, they focused on how they could perform better at the individual level. The version of Chinese femininity reflected in this study, briefly speaking, indicates an external de-feminization and an internal valuation of “can-do” and “doing.”
CHAPTER 8

CONCLUSION

8.1 Women as Active Audiences and the Media’s Role in the Construction of Femininity

In this study, we revisited the encoding-decoding model by reviewing the relationship between the mass media and ordinary people. Instead of considering mass media as the carriers of symbolic power designed to manipulate or dominate people, I adopted the perspective of mass media as the carriers of symbolic resources. However, the women’s magazines, along with the many other cultural products discussed in this study, are not the only providers of symbolic resources. They are among a wide range of other cultural products, countless family members, friends, relatives, and even professionals clustered around a certain individual. Actually, compared to internal femininity construction, the resources of external femininity construction in the women’s magazines play a more observable role. One possible reason is that there are so many more alternative resources for internal construction other than women’s magazines. This study shows that for a certain group of people at a certain period of time, the resources acquired from mass media can be both important and influential. For other people, media’s influence is comparatively illusory and unimportant.

Making use of women’s magazines as a resource for gender identity construction requires young women to be aware of the existence of the resources and understand their natures. In this study, active users demonstrated
unambiguous awareness of the existence of the available materials and chose to invite them into their lives to help them. Therefore, the influence of the magazines on this group of individuals was the result of their active acquisition. This activeness was demonstrated by some active users who showed a clear reading history of women’s magazines with conscious invitation and determination. When this group of young women became more sensitive to their identities as women and hoped to externalize those identities through their personal styles, women’s magazines became one of the most direct platforms for them to access the resources they needed. Once they felt that they were experienced and sophisticated in the game, some active users reduced their frequency of reading women’s magazines or transferred to other types of resources. Because using women’s magazines is self-identity based, these women had the ability to make assessments about the place of women’s magazines in their lives. They could adjust their distance from this genre of mass media and determine its level of involvement in their lives.

Media’s influence was uncertain for passive users and non-users, especially for users who did not explore symbolic resources on their own. Although suggestions from their mothers or other people in their lives probably also came from the media, these women did not play in the symbolic world by themselves, and this tactic was perfectly feasible for this group of people. Symbolic resources from the mass media are conveniently available to most people, but they are not necessarily the best resources or the most proper resources for all individuals. For
example, resources from mass media could not compete with the professional fashion designer’s advice in F32’s life. It seems to be common sense, but sometimes easily neglected in media studies; people have the ability and every right to keep their distance from mass media, even if they are immersed in the mass mediated information, especially in the age of new media. People can be constantly exposed to the resources from mass media, but keep them out of their life at the same time. This was demonstrated clearly when the college student interviewees took out their smart phones to show their sources of fashion information, yet were surprised to find out that they actually followed many accounts they were not aware of. Their distance to mass media is not shortened by the extremely convenient devices and free content carried.

Whether with the women’s magazines or other resources in the mass media, the active users, by contrast, were familiar with what they read and could provide interpretations of their exploration of symbolic resources. Generally speaking, their self-identity-based decoding was operationalized through their instrumental reading, and further consolidated by their actual personal style, aspired personal style, and understanding of femininity. By instrumental reading, I mean that they maintained a pragmatic attitude toward the magazines they read. They invited the magazines into their lives because they used the resources for their femininity construction.

The assumption of media as carriers of symbolic resource was verified through this process. Therefore, the types of magazines mattered, as did the
different orientations of the content. The active users chose, used, and integrated the resources into their everyday lives and their narration of their stories as women. However, they were not emotionally attached or even addicted to these resources. As mentioned in Chapter 6, most active users were career women or career women to be. As such, they had real and specific requirements in their femininity projects. For them, women’s magazines would never be their good friends or sisters (i.e., as company), but instruments to take action on.

Their instrumental reading further endowed the active readers with a space of critical reading. After all, making use of these resources was not a simple game of “taking them all.” Instead, these women needed to make judgments according to their pre-existing self-identity. In the context of this study, self-identity means their self-narratives of being women. In Chapter 6, I found that many of the interviewees started to read women’s magazines with the Japanese-style ones, which presented a childlike femininity and easy-to-pick fashion suitable for most girls in their late teenage years. Some of the interviewees later switched to Western-style magazines because of the fashion trends, while others stayed with the Japanese-style ones for the fashion tips. However, even if the women still appreciated the practical fashion tips or the cute and feminine styles, they rejected the dependent, obedient, and childlike version of femininity depicted because it conflicted with their self-narration of a qualified, independent career woman. These women did not adopt a critical reading to be purposefully and consciously critical. Rather, their awareness of a self-identity based reading created a critical
reading simultaneously. The ways in which the negotiation of the ideal femininity and aspired personal style contributed to the negotiation of feminine and feminism further supported the critical reading pattern, which will be further elaborated in next section.

Due to the dynamic and unpredictable nature of self-identity based decoding, it cannot be mutually exclusively categorized into dominant, negotiated and opposite reading as the decoding on the collective level. However, we still can identify some factors influencing self-identity based decoding through this study. The whole idea of self-identity based decoding has been discussed against the background of a modern society filled with individualized social agents. Therefore, individuality is the basic drive for the self-identity project, while the self-identity audiences look up to influences self-identity-based decoding. In other words, it is not just these women’s life experiences that influence decoding but life projects – not just who they are but who they are trying to become that influence the meanings they construct.

In this study, I found that women who had already worked with economic independence and confirmed their social identity tended to be the active users. As analyzed in Chapter 6, the lack of family support, especially in terms of external femininity construction, was also a reason for them to activate their subjectivity and activeness toward the symbolic resources, thus generating meanings and narratives that fed back into their self-identity projects. Most of the students, however, were less active in the self-identity based decoding of women’s
magazines or other resources. Their less saliently constructed self-identity as independent women reduced their level of motivation to locate external symbolic resources. At the same time, their family support was, in general, stronger, making them less dependent on the resources from mass media. In addition to the level of individuality and need for self-identity, women’s most subtle everyday life practices can influence their decoding on individual level. As unveiled in this study, different situations such as work or dating can change women’s self-presentation strategy, which is a very small and observable factor among numerous other practices uncovered in this study.

Last but not least, I also noticed that, even if non-users of women’s magazines had no preferences for alternative resources, such as F5 and F15, their personal style and aspired personal style did not differ drastically from those of the active users or passive users. This phenomenon sheds light on the possibility that when both symbolic and material resources for femininity construction are abundant enough in a society, an individual can achieve a normal look by sticking to some basic principles derived from their self-identity, such as suitability and consistency as discussed in Chapter 7. The situation of the interviewees again proves that symbolic resources in mass media are not necessary for every individual. Understanding fashion and makeup is helpful for externalizing self-identity in a more specific way, and the process itself can bring pleasure and satisfaction to some women. However, as long as the symbolic resources are produced constantly and vigorously, people who are not interested in or less capable of
identifying and using these resources can still benefit from the mechanism.

8.2 Feminine, Feminism, and Femininity: Re-Contextualized in China

In Chapter 2, I outlined the Western narration of feminine traits, feminism, and femininity. Generally speaking, feminine traits are understood as femininity in the Western context, and any features that make women look feminine are considered to be opposed to feminism. However, in this study, I defined femininity as a compound of two levels: the feminine traits, or the external dimension of femininity, and feminist ideas, or the internal dimension of femininity. In terms of the external dimension, I examined how ideal feminine traits are presented and understood by Chinese young women. In terms of the internal dimension, I identified how feminist ideas are embedded in women’s magazines and how they are interpreted by these women. In juxtaposing the analyses of the texts and interviews, it seems that the conflict between feminine traits and feminist ideas is somewhat mitigated, not only because the theoretical space provided by post-feminism is more tolerant of inconsistency, but also because femininity in the context of China is constructed through a different path than in Western countries.

The conflicts between feminine traits and feminism are derived from the negative implications of feminine traits. In this study, I found that there was a general consensus on the attributes of ideal feminine traits in Western mass media, in the Western- and Japanese-style women’s magazines in China, and in the minds of young Chinese women: If a woman wants to look feminine, she needs to have
long, curly hair, and wear makeup, a dress, and high heels. Some of these fashion elements, such as the dress and high heels, are designed to help women to show off their curves. All of these standardized feminine traits, in Western feminists’ eyes, are constructed to fulfill men’s fantasies and desires (Winship, 1978). They are disseminated through women’s magazines to reinforce and perpetuate male domination (McRobbie, 2000). These ideal feminine traits in women’s magazines can also make women feel anxious, self-loathing, and depression (McRobbie, 2005) and cause self-objectification among women. They only consider the appearance of the body, rather than the actual feeling of the body (Frederickson & Roberts, 1997). All of these criticisms of mass-mediated ideal feminine traits reflect a similar worry among scholars, namely, that the attention paid to achieve these standards will deprive women of their subjectivity and activeness; they will neglect their own self-identities and live out their lives as the ideal feminine women in anonymous others’, especially men’s eyes.

These criticisms are also built on the assumption that the ideal feminine traits are in a way compulsory and naturally aspired to by all women. What makes feminist scholars even more concerned is that women even utilize these ideal feminine traits as tools to claim certain benefits and “equality” in a male-dominated society. The irony is that the more “equality” they gain, the more deeply they are trapped in a pattern of self-surveillance and self-remodeling. In this sense, the wholehearted pursuit of ideal femininity does, in fact, impede the core ideas of feminism, since women are supposed to fight against the patriarchal
order and resist the ideal feminine traits established by men. Women should cherish and protect their equal rights with men and hold on to their independent subjectivity and self-identity. In this context, it is actually not the ideal feminine traits that are problematic, but their overemphasis in the mass media and in women’s minds. However, what happens if all of these assumptions do not stand? As revealed in this study, ideal feminine traits are clearly presented in women’s magazines, but these magazines are only one among many options in women’s minds. In this case, how should we review the mass-mediated ideal of beauty and rethink the relationship between the ideal feminine traits and feminism?

Considering that ideal feminine traits are products of male-dominated society, their existence itself is not problematized or challenged on the structural level. In fact, ideal feminine traits are among the dominant structuring power in femininity construction. However, these ideal feminine traits have experienced a round of obliteration and re-introduction in China. Instead of forcing women to adopt ideal feminine traits, in China, the formal gender equality that obscures gender difference actually becomes another version of oppression when the patriarchal power is played out at the state level. Therefore, while in some cases the ideal feminine traits can be seen as evidence of women living for the pleasure of others, in the Chinese context, those same traits can be seen as a strategy by women to gain unique identities in the face of state-male domination. Even if they are equal to men, they are not men. In this way, the ideal feminine traits that were once for others’ pleasure are reinterpreted as something serving women’s interests, easing
the tension between ideal feminine traits and feminism.

This study shows that ideal feminine traits are not only tolerated, but also mass disseminated through the women’s magazines in China. At the same time, these attributes of ideal beauty are also constantly produced, reproduced, combined, and recombined into different versions of feminine appearances. Following the two styles of women’s magazines, this study presented at least two versions of feminine style: the body-centered and mature version depicted in the Western-style women’s magazines and the face-centered and childlike version promoted in the Japanese-style ones. Of course, there may certainly be many more versions. Outwardly, most of the interviewees rejected the cute and childlike feminine style and accepted the Western-oriented feminine traits more suited to grown-up women. However, the fact is that they did not have to make a choice between the two at all, since the development of fashion and the massive production of symbolic resources across all forms of mass media have transformed ideal feminine traits from the dominant attributes of women’s appearances to a tiny point among a wide range of choices from extremely feminine to extremely masculine. This means that there are indeed attributes of feminine traits constructed to conform to men’s aesthetic standards, but these are only a part of the resources available for external femininity construction.

As long as we consider that women have the power to control their level of femininity, we do not need to question whether the mushrooming number of choices of symbolic resources represent real choices for women or whether they
are just another way to control women. In fact, the expansion of the spectrum of feminine and masculine facilitates what I have identified as a new round of de-feminization in this study. In China, de-feminization used to be an informal state enforcement to eliminate gender difference, while re-feminization symbolized the country’s opening up and tolerance of gender difference. The new round of de-feminization implies that women have negotiating power in the process. They choose less feminine styles for various reasons. They want feel more comfortable, they want to release their feet from the pain caused by high heels, or they just do not want to manifest their gender identity. However, the most common reason the interviewees mentioned was that the ideal feminine style was very difficult to integrate into their daily lives filled with crowded subways, busy work lives requiring lots of walking, and punishing schedules. For the young women interviewed in this study, the ideal feminine traits were easily subverted by the practical requirements of their everyday lives. They aspired to a simple and comfortable style and labeled that as the ideal.

Another reason for this trend of de-feminization is young Chinese women’s general insensitivity to their bodies. More specifically, they care about how their biological bodies feel, but they are less sensitive to the body’s signifying value that identifies them as women. This study revealed these young women’s uncertain and even conflicted attitudes toward their bodies. The interviewees were aware of what the ideal body should look like, and some of them adopted exercise or diet, but none of them chose to push themselves too hard by way of body
building. This is because they understood the value of the body in an isolated way: They did not tend to build symbolic relationships between the body and other properties, such as health, youth, or attractiveness, and neither did the women’s magazines. The ambiguous nature of the body, constructed both in the symbolic world and on the individual level, to some extent, undermined the value of the body-centered ideal feminine traits. In effect, the body was not a major source of power for these young Chinese women; at least, the idea had not yet become salient in their minds.

Due to the de-feminization of and the insensitivity to the body, the tension between ideal feminine traits and feminism is further mitigated. As a consequence, there is the possibility of reconciling feminine traits and feminist ideas, at least on the individual level. This reconciliation is not induced by a purposeful campaign spearheaded by a leader or group of activists, but derived from women’s practices in their everyday lives. The interviewees demonstrated that they were active, young women who exerted control over their appearances for their own benefit with their subjectivity. In a way, they successfully revised the definition of ideal feminine traits. For them, ideal feminine traits were not merely something to please men, but more importantly something to facilitate their lives. Seeing this kind of activeness from women, even only a small number of women, we can be less critical of these women’s magazines, since they at least provide these women with one possibility among many, counterbalancing the extremely masculine, especially in the context of China. The beautiful cover models aside, everyday
women have the ability or potential to embed the construction of feminine appearances in their self-identity as independent women, cherishing and protecting their current equal rights with men. As to the symbolic world and the production of symbolic resources for femininity construction, it is important to remember that traditional media is not the only active player. Accordingly, instead of criticizing women’s magazines for not providing diverse enough content, all of the players in the realm should produce more stratified and rich resources for women to harness in building up their gender identities.

8.3 Femininity Constructed by Chinese Young Women

Based on a re-contextualized understanding of the relationship between feminine traits, feminism, and femininity, we can discuss the current version of femininity in China both in the symbolic world and on the individual level. From the beginning of the 20th century to the new millennium, Chinese femininity has experienced many changes. This study is not designed to delve into these historical issues, but I can still generate a rough picture of change over nearly 80 years.

According to the discussion in Chapter 3, women’s basic quality of life has been one of the main concerns of women’s issues. Women should enjoy the right to survive and be exempt from bodily suffering, such as foot binding. They should develop a healthy and hygienic lifestyle if possible, cultivating habits such as brushing teeth and trimming nails. Compared to a healthy lifestyle, fashion has been an auxiliary strategy for women to construct proper appearances. In fact, in
the 1930s, the choices for women’s fashion were still limited. In other words, the symbolic resources produced in the realm of fashion were not enough for women to demonstrate different levels of femininity and self-identity. Moreover, only a few urban women had access to the world of fashion. From the feminist perspective, women’s education was widely advocated, but the purpose of that education was a topic of debate. Should education be designed to produce a smart wife and loving mother to fulfil her domestic duties, or should it help women to join the workforce as individuals? At that period, the thought was that the “new woman” should at least have a healthy body and receive a certain level of education. If she knew the latest pattern of Qi Pao and wore it to work as a doctor or teacher, she would be quite close to the ideal femininity of the time.

After 1949, the perfect woman became the woman who could contribute equally to the construction of the country alongside men. Women’s and men’s equality in education and work was promoted for the country’s benefit, rather than for women’s benefit. Other issues, such as women’s social and domestic roles, which had been debated publicly before 1949, became subsumed under the state-dominated discourse. Meanwhile, women’s appearance and identity construction were almost off the table. As a matter of fact, in the first 30 years after the foundation of socialist China, the notions of individual and individuality were not included in the official discourse. Therefore, it was natural that women were not seen as individuals either. Even though women had achieved some equality, they had no space, opportunities, and resources to reflect, to act, and to
establish their self-identities as women. Women were identified as model workers and industrious farmers in the official women’s magazine (Luo & Hao, 2007), while women’s identity was all but ignored. The nation-party dominated women’s liberation and development presented formal gender equality on the structural level, while the individuality and subjectivity of women on the individual level remained rather underdeveloped. Women’s needs and grievances in their everyday lives were consequently excluded from the discourse of gender equality, which in fact led to a different kind of inequality.

Generally speaking, femininity construction in the early 20th century can be seen as survival based, with the main achievements being women’s existence in the public sphere as social agents and the chance for women to live healthy lives. From 1949 up to the 1980s, femininity construction became a nation-dominated project, monopolized by national discourse and equalization in the form of national policies. For the women born post-1980 and post-1990, national intervention into ordinary people’s life was already ebbing in their childhood, expanding the space of individual identity. Those born post-1985, in particular, have been fully allowed to develop their self-identity since their teenage years. Therefore, the femininity construction for these young women has been identity based from the beginning.

In this way, I would argue that this study bring one of many possibilities of femininity construction on the “ashes of identity” in contemporary China, which is the unique historic and social context for femininity construction. For these
young women’s mothers, femininity as self-identity was a taboo. Therefore, their mothers’ generation was unable to but unnecessary either to deal with all of the ceaselessly produced resources and construct their versions of femininity. When these young women’s mothers were young, they did not need to worry about what to wear as there were not many options; they did not need to worry about where to find a job or what career to pursue, as the state would assign one for them; they got married and had their daughters only because it was the nature taking its course. However, for these daughters, on the ashes of identity of their mothers’ generation, accompanied by all the external resources, the pre-determined routine of life for their mother’s generation becomes the specific problems to solve in their personal life.

On the fact of it, these young women’s lives are not radically different from their mothers’, since they still work, fall in love, and hope to get married and become mothers. However, at the same time, they hope that their personal style can speak for themselves. They have to explore feasible career paths for themselves. They also have to schedule a proper timetable for marriage and childbirth, since they look forward to achieving the balance between career and family, neither of which is dispensable. They are not the cover models of the women’s magazines, demonstrating ideal beauty, performing well in the workplace with no obstacles, and dominating their relationships with men. Indeed, these young women face a great deal of difficulty as long as they try to conform to the ideal femininity in their mind. They can locate external resources from all
types of mass media. Then, they can learn, and they can practice. They can also look to the traditional system, their original families, and their mothers to find experiences and support. All in all, they have to solve all of their problems with all the resources available in an extremely active way. For some of the interviewees who were married with children, this was already the picture of their life.

For most of the interviewees in this study, femininity was constructed on the foundation of social identity. This study revealed that these young women started to work on their femininity usually after they entered college, rather than when they reached puberty. The timing of this shift implies that these women were not enlightened by changes in their body, but by the individuality acquired in college, when they literally start living independent lives or embrace the hope of living independent lives. These women have internalized the belief in finishing higher education and hunting for a decent job, which actually reflects their desire to acquire a recognized social identity. According to F5, a woman should first live on her own means and then she can achieve more possibilities in personal development.

Therefore, we can see the whole project of both external and internal femininity construction for these young women as dominated by their insistence on social identity. Although they had a clear knowledge of the features of ideal femininity, they actually managed their appearances according to the routines of their real lives, and limited the ideal feminine traits to certain specific situations.
These women certainly did not want to go back to the period of time when all men and women were in blue and gray. They aspired to a style that could identify them as women and help them to fulfill their social roles as employees or pre-social roles as college students.

This aspiration actually reflects the development of fashion in China on both a symbolic level and a material level. On the symbolic level, fashion has been widely introduced through women’s magazines within the frames of newness and trend analysis or practicality and dressing tips. On the material level, fashion can be consumed through various channels from high-end designers’ brands and middle- and low-level fast fashion brands. Some of the interviewees were aware of fashion as a usable resource, while others were not. No matter what, these women live in the system of fashion, and it is the production of fashion that has provided them with more and more resources to stretch the spectrum of feminine–masculine.

However, an unavoidable question is whether these young women demonstrate any Chinese femininity through their everyday looks. According to the study, there was a general cultural vagueness in the women’s external femininity construction project. The analysis of the magazine covers revealed that some traditional Chinese cultural elements, such as Chinese red and Qi Pao, were “fashionalized” into the modern context and presented on the magazine covers as display. Overall, however, the women’s magazines demonstrated an unconcerned attitude toward national cultural elements. At the same time, I observed that the
interviewees used the terms Western-style or Japanese-style to describe themselves, but none of them mentioned any term related to Chinese style. It seems that the fashion production centered in the Western world does have a magnificent dominating power, and fashion is indeed a globalized empire. Within this context, Chinese women are exposed to very similar resources as their counterparts in Japan or South Korea, and women in European countries and America. Chinese women’s uniqueness is likely constructed through their techniques of mix and match, rather than through some specific item of clothing with Chinese characters. Another possible reason for the lack of Chinese cultural elements lies in the process of “fashionalization,” which only fulfils the need for display but not the needs of ordinary women on the everyday life level.

The question of whether the femininity discussed in this study is Chinese femininity or not should not be defined by the Chinese cultural elements presented, since the subject of femininity construction in the symbolic world (women’s magazines) and on the individual level (young Chinese women) are all deeply rooted in the social reality of China. Considering external femininity only, these Chinese women may not be able to present any outstanding style. But, when they make the connection between their personal style and their aspirations to become social agents, they bestow their own meaning on fashion and external femininity. In a word, since these young women are not professionals in the fashion industry or fashion addicts, they do not produce fashion; they produce meaning for fashion. The meaning Chinese women produce contributes to the construction of Chinese...
femininity.

This study showed that the femininity construction for the interviewees was a highly individualized process. Each interviewee was asked to express their opinion on gender equality at the end of the conversation. None of them thought that women and men were equal. As to the cause of the inequality, most of them referred back to their own grievances about career development and having children. From one side, we can see that these women fail to realize that their struggle to achieve this balance is derived from certain structural faults that fail to support women’s competition in the workplace, regardless of the fact that women have to shoulder the burden of pregnancy and child bearing. From the other side, however, it seems that these women at least have the intention to negotiate and compromise with the structural limitations by using their own strategies and tactics to achieve an acceptable situation. Feminists who criticize structural faults through various forms of activist campaigns are honorable, but these ordinary women who struggle in their everyday lives for their identities and improved living status are also admirable in the context of a subjectivity-dominated femininity construction. F4 was the only interviewee to mentions structural limitations and her personal endeavors under that limitation. In doing so, she articulated some ideas that could have also been on the mind of other interviewees:

\[I \text{ do not think I can change the world. Since I live in the society, I have to follow some gender codes, or I cannot function or communicate with others. But I will never do something only because I am a woman. I do not want to be somebody’s wife and}\]
mother, so I choose not to.

Similarly, if a woman wants to be somebody’s mother and wife, she should also have the right to choose to do so. As this study revealed, different women have different levels of subjectivity and different degrees of the urge to establish a self-identity. However, it is important to remember that it is not sufficient to understand femininity construction only from the superficial presentation of women. We should not judge them by whether they dress in a feminine manner or not, or whether they value their family or not. We should ask them why, listen to their interpretations and justifications, and understand their difficulties and solutions. Indeed, while the ordinary practices of these young women may look plain and uninteresting, they are actually nurturing a version of practical yet active femininity in China.

The final question is still about this group of women, as discussed through the study, they can be labeled in many ways: urban, well-educated, heterosexual and etc. However, examining through the labels, from the structural level, they are the weak group in the patriarchal order, but from the individual level, they are women of action and participation. To be more specific, these women are the participant of the project of identity reconstruction in a country once closed to the world and identity diminished. Therefore, this group of women can be seen as a lens that focuses a range of different aspects about the modernization/westernization of China in terms of identity. That is, the meaning these women generated is part of the discourse of the version of modernization in China. They cannot represent all the individuals experiencing and contributing to the modernization of China, they
cannot represent all women in China, but they can reveal possibilities, promising possibilities in China: With resources and room for practice provided for women as social agents, femininity construction can be a vibrant process, while identity project for every individuals in this country can also thrive. Women interviewed in this study are a part of an overall picture which can only be assembled by a large number of researchers working on different aspects and different groups.

Even though, based on the whole analysis of the study, I would not argue the rise of a generation of new women or the rise of ideology in femininity construction. As I mentioned earlier in this section, the femininity discussed in this study is constructed on ashes of identity, therefore, no matter which version of femininity will face great amount of uncertainties. Due to the fact that Chinese society is still under drastic changes, it takes time to observe whether femininity in this study or other versions of femininity will development into a stable one within a certain group. At the same time, though the women interviewed in this study demonstrate some similarities, there is no conscious group identification mentioned by any of them. Therefore, it is not a proper timing to attach more labels to them either. As to the notion of ideology, as discussed in Chapter 2, it requires a relatively stable social structure and stratification to identify certain ethos or ways of thinking as ideology for certain group or class. This study did reveal that the new independent, competitive, and “looking for perfection in all the aspects” version of femininity could possibly become a type of ideology, at least dominating the well-educated, urban women. However, since the femininity
and the group of women are still in a rather fluid status, it is not proper for this study to over-generalize the possibility of ideology.

8.4 Limitations and Reflections

The research on the femininity construction of Chinese women seems like a project would never be finished. This study presented a comprehensive discussion from external femininity to internal femininity, and from the symbolic world to the individual’s interpretation. Nevertheless, it could never cover all of the aspects relevant to this issue. Besides the limitations of the methodology discussed in Chapter 4, there are still some inspiring perspectives not included in this study.

First, the concept of class differences was not introduced in the study, although I mention the uneven distribution of resources among women with different social economic statuses. It is reasonable to argue that this study focuses on middle-class women and middle-class media. However, the definition of middle-class is extremely obscure in contemporary China; thus, I do not endeavor to put a class label on the subjects of this study. In fact, a possible reason why it is so difficult to identify the middle class in Chinese society is because the middle class in China is still coming into being. I certainly do not deny that there are differences among classes and that class can be a very useful tool for exploring gender issues.

Secondly, I have not delved deep into a historical analysis. The historical background is used in this study to provide the context for understanding the meaning of the international women’s magazines for young Chinese women. This
study does not dig into the reasons for the de-feminization, re-feminization, and
new de-feminization identified in the historical analysis, nor does it analyze the
changes or trends throughout the history of femininity construction in China,
which is a major limitation of this study.

Thirdly, this study does not focus on production analysis of the international
women’s magazines in China. With full awareness of the fact that production
analysis from the perspective of political economy can deeply influence the media
presentation and related analysis, this study is mainly about the relationship
already produced media products and the audiences. Further studies based on
single magazines through anthropological approaches can reveal the internal
mechanism the production of international women’s magazines in China.

This particular study can be improved by exploring all the limitations
mentioned above. Meanwhile, it can also inspire some new studies in this field.
On the one hand, the study of femininity can be applied to some more concrete
life situations. For example, researchers could study how women manage their
femininity at weddings. Studies could also be narrowed down to specific groups,
such as women working in TNCs or self-employed women. Hopefully, this study
can also provide some ideas for studying gender identity construction in LGBT
groups, although only heterosexual women were included in this study. On the
other hand, studies could be expanded to examine a wider range of women from
different places in China, women of different ages, or women with different
backgrounds. A large-scale survey could be conducted in order to map the general
picture of femininity in China if research resources are available. The study of mass media could also be expanded, since many alternative resources are mentioned in this study. Digital media, which are more subjective, fragmented, and changeable, represent the new factory of unlimited production of symbolic resources for femininity construction; thus it will warrant increased and focused attention in the coming years.
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**APPENDIX**

**APPENDIX 1**

**Coding Instruction for the content analysis**

This content analysis is designed to figure out the general pattern within the realm of femininity construction of Chinese women’s magazines. The content analysis should generate descriptive evidence to answer to following two questions: How the femininity is constructed through these women’s magazines? How the magazines are different due to the different femininity the constructed? The evidence derived from is content analysis should lead to a categorization of the women’s magazines in China based on the femininity they constructed and the foundation of further semiotic analysis.

The subject of the study is the covers of ten major Chinese women’s monthlies. With two constructed year for each magazine, the total sample size will be around 240. The magazine cover is constituted by two parts which are the central figure, the visual part and the highlighted article titles set around the figure, the textual messages. Therefore, nine questions in the coding book are focus on the textual features of the cover while the rest are focus on the visual presentation.

There are two dimensions under the key concept of femininity to be measured through the content analysis: cultural dimension and subjectivity dimension. Since this study is mainly concerned on the Chinese version of international women’s magazines, the western / eastern and local / international dichotomy is basic concern of such type of study. Question 3, 4, 7, 8, 9, 14, 16, 22 and 23 are designed to measure the cultural dimension of the femininity constructed.

The discussion on subjectivity and objectivity embedded in the femininity is an important issue in recent women’s studies. The subjectivity of women including sub-dimensions such as women’s self awareness, free will and individualism, are more latent than the cultural dimension. A key conflict lying under the issue of subjectivity is whether women are represented with subjectivity when taking on the feminine traits. On the content analysis level, the feminine traits with regard to facial or body features can be measured, while the subjectivity is mainly reflected in textual messages anchoring the visual elements. In the coding sheet, there are the differentiations of women’s looking / being looked, socialized / domesticated, or can-do / cannot-do and etc. Question 1, 2, 5, 6, 10, 11, 12, 13, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20 and 21 are prepared to measure this subjectivity dimension.
Coding book

**Part one: Basic information**

1. Title:
2. Issue (year/issue no.):
3. Cover price (RMB):
4. Name and gender of the cover model(s):
5. Number of the items on the cover:

Part 1 is to document some of the very basic information of the magazine which can be all directly locate on the magazine’s cover. Q5 requires the coder to count all the items, usually the titles of the key articles, on the cover and write down the total number.

**Part two: Text features**

1. Is any article of these contents highlighted on the covers? Give 1 for ‘yes’ and 0 for ‘no’.
   1a. Fashion
   1b. Beauty
   1c. Relationship / Marriage
   1d. Sex
   1e. Mental / physical Health (self-improvement)
   1f. Career
   1g. Celebrities / Entertainment
   1h. Other, please specify:

Q1 for Part 2 is to identify the contents indicated by all the items on the cover, which can also be understood as the categorization of the key articles in each issue of the magazines.

1a. Fashion in this context is limited to dressing and accessories such as shoes, bags and jewelleries. All contents about fashion trends and fashion tips belong to this category. Fashion trends include the moves in fashion industry, such as fashion weeks, fashion shows or the moves of fashion designers, as well as the release of fashion points for a certain period of time (year/season).

1b. Beauty consists of all the articles about skin care tips, make up tutorials, cosmetic product introductions, plastic surgery, and other related articles such as manicure, hair care and hair styles.

1c. Relationship/ marriage refers to the article talking about how to deal with interpersonal relationship with boyfriend or husband, as well as how to resolve internal family issues such as children or mother-in-law problems.

1d. Sex is the particular article focus on sex life, both in and out of marriage. It can be technical or ethical discussions.
1e. Mental/ Physical Health is anything about mental or physical health. Mental health oriented articles can be discussion on common psychological problems such as anxiety and depression, mood adjustment or positive thinking. Physical health refers to articles about fitness, healthy diet, or illness prevention.

1g. Career can be any contents on job market, working place culture or the stories about career women.

1h. Celebrities / Entertainment category leads to the articles about the famous people, mostly TV or movie stars and models and related activities or incidents they are involved in.

1i. Other can be any other contents not listed above.

2. What is the selling title about?
   1a. Fashion trends
   1b. Fashion Tips
   1c. Beauty
   1d. Relationship / Marriage
   1f. Sex
   1g. Mental / physical Health (self-improvement)
   1h. Career
   1i. Celebrities / Entertainment
   1j. Other, please specify:

Q2 is about the content of the selling title which is usually the bottom line of the magazine printed in largest and conspicuous font. The definition of each category is the same with Q1.

3. How does the title of magazine displayed?
   1. The Chinese title and English title are displayed in equal prominence.
   2. The Chinese title is emphasized.
   3. The English title is emphasized.

In most cases, the tile of international women’s magazine is written in both Chinese and English and the coder need to judge the prominence for Q3. If the Chinese tile is written in larger, clearer and bolder than the English one, it is emphasized, and vice versa.

4. Is there any use of foreign language except in the title?
   1. Chinese and English
   2. Chinese and Japanese
   3. Chinese, English, and Japanese
   0. No

The foreign language means any other language besides Chinese.
5. What are the themes demonstrated in the cover? Give 1 for ‘yes’ and 0 for ‘no’.
   4a. Young
   4b. Fashionable
   4c. Better/Perfect
   4d. Sexy
   4e. Powerful
   4f. Unusual
   4g. Compulsory
   4h. Other

The themes can be measured by the nouns, adjectives or the verbs used in the titles on the cover, which can be the exact word, the synonyms, or the action form of the word used. Here some possible examples (in Chinese):
   4a. Young: 青春、年轻、减龄
   4b. Fashionable: 潮、摩登、新鲜、热卖、流行
   4c. Better/Perfect: 最美、新升级、无暇
   4d. Sexy: 性感
   4e. Powerful: 竞争、挑战、敢、不惧、逆袭
   4f. Unusual: 非凡
   4g. Compulsory: 法则、攻略

6. Does the cover directly speak to the reader?
   1. Yes
   0. No

The item can coded based on the use specific reference such as you, we and us(你，你们，我们).

7. Is China or any location in China mentioned in the cover?
   1. Yes
   0. No

If the word China (中国) or any names of the provinces, cities, scenic spots located in China including Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan is mentioned, it should be coded as ‘yes’.

8. Is there any other nation mentioned in the cover?
   1. Yes, specify the name:
   0. No

If any other counties’ names or places in the country outside China are mentioned, it should be coded as ‘yes’.

9. Is the general reference of eastern/western mentioned in the cover?
   1. Eastern / oriental
   2. Western
0. Not mentioned
If the specific word oriental (东方) or western (西方) is mentioned, the item should be coded as 1 or 2.

**Part 3: Image features**

10. What is the shooting scale of the model?
   1. Close-up
   2. Medium shot
   3. Full shot

Close up: above the chest
Medium shot: above the knees
Full shot: the whole body figure included

11. What kind of gaze does the model have?
   0. Look away
   1. Look at the camera

If the model is directly looking into the camera, then it should be coded as 1. If the model is looking somewhere else, than give 2 for this item.

12. What kind of makeup does the model wear?
   1. Normal daily makeup
   2. Bizarre makeup
   3. Lovely / childlike makeup

Normal daily makeup means the makeup style is suitable for everyday life. Usually strong colours are not used in such makeup; instead, nude colour (akin to the skin colour) is frequently used for eyes, check and lips. Bizarre makeup is designed for certain fashion concepts which is more close to artistic design rather than for daily use. Therefore, bizarre makeup is usually not seen in everyday life. Lovely makeup can be seen in everyday life, but the difference from the normal daily makeup lies in that visible pink is often used for check and lips while the eyes are always emphasized in roundness and bigness. In a way, this style of makeup is to imitate the features of juvenile girls.

13. Which part of the model’s face is emphasized?
   1. Eyes
   2. Lips
   3. Both
   4. None of them

The emphasis can be achieved in two different ways: makeup and act. If the model is wearing strong eye makeup such as smoky eyes with mainly black or navy blue, very strong and bold eye liner or extremely long false eyelashes, it indicates the eyes are emphasized. If the model is wearing strong coloured lipstick, or the lips are slightly open up or making some other acts such as kissing, or the model is putting some props against the lips, it means that the lips are emphasized.
14. What is the colour of the model’s eyes?
   1. Black
   2. Brown
   3. Blue
   4. Other, please specify:

   The coder need to identify the colour of the model’s pupils. The item is to question on the colour appears to be on the cover, not to question the real colour of the model’s eyes.

15. What is the expression of the model?
   1. Visible Smile
   2. Cool expression

   As long as the model is smiling, in whatever form of smile, the item should be coded as 1. If no smile can be observed, then code it as 2.

16. What the colour of the model’s hair?
   1. Black
   2. Brown
   3. Gold
   4. Other, please specify:

   The coder need to identify the colour of the model’s hair. The item is to question on the colour appears to be on the cover, not to question the real colour of the model’s hair.

17. What is the model’s hair style?
   1. Long straight hair
   2. Long curly hair
   3. Short straight hair
   4. Short curly hair

   The item is coded on the presentation of the model’s hair style not the real situation. If the hair can reach the model’s shoulder, it can be counted as long hair; otherwise it will be short hair. If the hair is presented with identifiable curls, it is the curly hair.

18. What does the model wear?
   1. One piece dress
   2. Top/ Top and skirt professional
   3. Top/ Top and skirt leisure
   4. Top/ Top and trousers professional
   5. Top/ Top and trousers leisure
   6. Unidentifiable

   This item is coded based on the visible part of the model due to the different shooting scale, thus it can be only top or top plus shirt or trousers. Shirt and blazer
in different forms belong to the professional type. T-shirt, blouse, and other informal tops are leisure. Similar with the tops, the suit skirt or trousers can be coded as professional, while the jeans and skirts other than the professional ones can be coded as leisure.

19. What are the exposed body parts of the model? Give 1 for ‘yes’ and 0 for ‘no’.
   19a. Arms
   19b. Shoulder
   19c. Cleavage
   19d. Waist
   19e. Thighs
   19f. Back
   19g. None of above

The item is coded based on the body part which is not covered by any cloth.

20. Is there any of the following elements displayed on the model? Give 1 for ‘yes’ and ‘0’ for no?
   20a. Lace
   20b. Bowknot
   20c. Flower
   20d. Pearl
   20e. Crystal / diamond
   20f. Gentleman’s hat
   20g. Tie
   20h. Rivet element
   20i. Other typical feminine element, please specify:
   20j. Other typical masculine element, please specify:

This item is to identify if any typical feminine or masculine element is shown by the model. Since it is about element, it does not matter if it is real material accessories or the printed pattern on the clothing.

21. What kind of environment is the model settled?
   1. Abstract background
   2. Urban environment
   3. Natural environment
   4. Other, please specify:

If the environment cannot be identified, then it is the abstract background. If there are streets or buildings in the background, it should be coded as urban environment. Beach, mountain, river, forest and etc. belong to the natural environment.

22. Are there any Chinese cultural elements displayed on the model?
   0. No
1. Yes, please specify:
This item is about the visual cultural elements, such as dragon, phoenix, panda, bamboo, plum blossom (腊梅), damask (织锦缎), Chinese knot and etc.

23. Are there any other specified cultural elements displayed on the model?
   0. No
   1. Yes

Any foreign cultural visual elements can be counted as ‘yes,’ such as cherry blossom for Japan, Eiffel Tower for Paris and etc.
APPENDIX 2

Interviewee List

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ID</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Marriage status</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Vocation</th>
<th>Monthly income (RMB)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>F01</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Postgraduate</td>
<td>Cardiologist</td>
<td>5000-10000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F02</td>
<td>31</td>
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CURRICULUM VITAE

Academic qualifications of the thesis author, Mrs. LU Nan:

• Received the degree of Bachelor of Art from Fudan University, July 2010.

• Received the degree of Master of International Journalism from Hong Kong Baptist University, November 2011.

September 2015