

Awakening to Independence: The Evolution of Chinese Urban Women's Ideology Behind Consumer Behavior

Sanqi Dai^{1, *}

¹ Department of Literature and Media, Yunnan Minzu University, Kunming, China

*Corresponding author: 20230037810025@ymu.edu.cn

Abstract. Women, in the long-standing structure of social development, have been excluded from the relations between production and consumption; they have been repressed in the gender confrontation between men and women. Chinese feminism started late and was influenced by the patriarchal system that has existed in China for thousands of years, so there was great resistance to its development. Nowadays, with the prevalence of consumerism, "women" and "consumption" are even more bound by social identity. The process of Chinese women's pursuit of independence is tortuous and difficult. Therefore, focusing on the current situation of women's consumption can help us understand the current situation of Chinese women's survival, so as to summarize the problems facing the development of Chinese feminism and explore the possible future development trend of Chinese feminism. First, this paper composes and summarizes the current consumption status and survival status of Chinese women, using the Chinese Women's Living Conditions Report as a data source. Secondly, it briefly reviews the development trajectory of Chinese feminism and points out the problems faced by Chinese women in their pursuit of independence at present and the possible countermeasures to be taken. In order to make useful reflections on the development path of Chinese women.

Keywords: women's consumption; women's life; Chinese feminism; urban women.

1. Introduction

2019-2020 is a very extraordinary year in the historical development of China's comprehensive building of a moderately prosperous society. The 70th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China, "national economic and social development of the thirteenth five-year plan" to a successful conclusion, at the same time, the new crown pneumonia epidemic sweeping the world in such a special period, the majority of women in their respective work positions to overcome the difficulties of the time. The company's main business is to provide a wide range of products and services to the public. " [1] China's development has entered a new era. Every step in the development of women's cause has promoted the progress of human civilization. Promoting gender equality and comprehensive development of women at a higher level is both an opportunity and a long way to go." Therefore, it is far-reaching to focus on the development of Chinese women in the context of such an era.

The women's emancipation movement in China sprouted during the Hundred Days' Reform, and after the Xinhai Revolution, it reached a climax during the May Fourth period. This was the result of the emancipation of ideas and the influence of feminist movements in Western countries. In reality, however, the achievements of women's emancipation during the May Fourth and subsequent periods were limited. [2] Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China, the status of Chinese women has made a qualitative leap. The right of Chinese women to enjoy equal status with men was gradually established in national laws and policies and regulations. However, due to the influence of traditional feudal ideology and the constraints of social and economic development, the development of Chinese women's independence is still unsatisfactory. In discussing the current situation of women's development in China, we should note the changes in women's living conditions, the awakening of their independence and the struggle for women's rights. At the same time, we cannot ignore the complexity and difficulties of the development of Chinese feminism in the contemporary cultural and social context. The meaning of "femininity" in economic, social and cultural terms should be analyzed very carefully. [3]

The Blue Book of Women's Life - Report on the Status of Women's Life in China (2021) (hereinafter referred to as "Report on the Status of Women's Life in China"), jointly compiled by China Women Magazine and its affiliated Huakun Women's Life Survey Center and Women's Consumption Guidance Center and distributed by Social Science Literature Publishing House, is a classic book reflecting the development of Chinese women in the new era. A classic bibliography reflecting the development of Chinese women, it is also an important reference document for understanding the living conditions of Chinese women.

This paper intends to analyze the 2019-2020 General Report on the Living Conditions of Chinese Women and the 2019-2020 Survey Report on the Consumption Situation of Chinese Urban Women and Families in detail, so as to explore the inner connection between women's consumption behavior and the living conditions behind it.

2. The Current Consumption Situation of Chinese Women

As women's economic income continues to rise and their consumption ability continues to increase, women, as one of the important consumer groups, have made important contributions to the development of the economy. Focusing on female consumer groups and exploring and developing female-related industries is conducive to the promotion of the overall economy. Understanding the current development of women's economy and recognizing the huge development potential of women's economy can help us better think about how to promote the overall development of society. [4]

The following data mainly comes from the 2019-2020 Survey Report on the Consumption Situation of Urban Women and Families in China, which was jointly conducted by China Women Magazine, Huakun Women's Consumption Guidance Center and Huakun Women's Life Survey Center. The organization distributed relevant questionnaires to Chinese urban women through questionnaire platforms such as China Women's series of new media, and a total of 5,153 valid questionnaires were returned. The report's content was derived through statistical analysis by technical means and consists of four main sections.

2.1 The Basic Situation of The Surveyed Women and their Families

In terms of geographical composition, 5,153 women were surveyed, of whom 61.4% were from eastern China, 16.6% from central China, 14.7% from western China, 7.2% from northeastern China, and 7 from Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan; in terms of marital status, 68.6% of the women surveyed were married, 27.7% were unmarried, and 3.7% were divorced or widowed Those who had children accounted for 68.0%, while those who were divorced or widowed accounted for 3.7%. In terms of education, 56.6% of the women had a bachelor's degree or above, 20.6% had a college degree, and 22.8% had a high school/junior college degree or below; in terms of employment, the women surveyed had a wide range of employment, in descending order: UNESCO and other institutions 25.0%; private/private enterprises, 21.8%; freelancers, 10.0%; students, 7.6%; state-owned enterprises, 7.5%; party and government agencies, 6.3%; full-time mothers, 5.4%; organizations, 3.4%; and social organizations, 2.7%.

2.2 Income Status of the Surveyed Women and their Families

The survey report shows that 91.5% of the respondents have income (income including salary and wages, business income, property income, etc.). In terms of income, middle-income women with an annual income of 30,000-18,000 yuan accounted for more than half of the respondents, at 64.4%. However, there are significant differences in the personal income levels of surveyed women in different occupations. Among high-income women (annual income over 180,000 RMB), the highest proportion of those engaged in foreign-funded enterprises and private/private enterprises were 24.5% and 8.3% respectively; among low-income women (annual income less than 30,000 RMB), farmers accounted for the largest proportion, 65.5%.

2.3 The Consumption and Investment Status of the Surveyed Women and their Families

In 2019-2020, the consumption and investment status of surveyed women and families can be roughly divided into the following categories, ranked from highest to lowest: basic living consumption 62.4%; investment and saving category 30.0%; public welfare poverty alleviation 28.3%; the high quality of life category 28.3%; home visiting services 23.9%;

Meanwhile, combined with the frugal consciousness and consumption habits of surveyed women in different age groups, more than 65.0% of married mothers advocate thrift and frugality, and their consumption and investment mainly meet the basic life of the family; 57.6% of childless women pursue high quality of life and tend to consume online, and their age groups are basically between 18-24 years old. It can be seen that different groups of Chinese urban women reflect large age differences and conceptual differences in consumption investment.

2.4 Consumption and Investment Expectations of the Surveyed Women and Households

The surveyed women's consumption and investment plans can be roughly divided into 10 categories, and the main categories in descending order are an investment in children's education 50.1%; investment in self-education 48.1%; bank savings 35.9%; acquisition of fixed assets 26.1%; purchase of commercial insurance 20.1%; travel 16.7%, etc.

3. The Current Situation of Women's Life from Consumer Behavior

The behavior of individuals in society unfolds in a specific context, and the city, as a core area of economic development and a concentrated area of cultural integration, provides the necessary material basis and ideological conditions for the awakening of individual self-awareness. Compared with the traditional social environment, the modern city brings a basis for change in the development of the individual, and women are no exception. This is reflected in the balance of work and family life and the need for self-development. In addition to having the characteristics of an individual in society in general, women have to take on multiple roles as wives, mothers, housewives, and even women in the workplace. [5] This multiplicity of social roles determines that women are subject to a variety of relationship ideologies - traditional family morality and workplace rules. The former is reflected in the conflict between the new gender relations in the rapid economic and social development and the gender relations in the traditional society, i.e. the conflict between playing the role of a good housewife and individual independence; the latter is reflected in the conflict between women taking on multiple roles and functions at the same time. Therefore, based on the current consumption situation of urban women, we can see that the consumption concept of modern Chinese urban women has changed greatly, which is important for further understanding the current life situation of Chinese urban women.

3.1 Women have Higher Requirements for Self-Growth and Improvement

The economic foundation is the basic guarantee of the quality of life. In the survey report, it is found that compared with the proportion of consumption expenditure of low and middle-income women, the highest proportion of high-income young women, mainly aged 18~29, spend their expenditure on beauty, clothing, medical beauty, and self-learning, indicating that image management, consumer goods position and self-improvement gradually become the expenditure choice of this part of women. High-income women have more economic autonomy, and the impact of this change in economic structure also affects the traditional value system of life. In other words, the economic base directly affects two dimensions of women's life: first, the improvement of the quality of life; second, the increase of the proportion of disposable income component other than the basic livelihood security contributes to the improvement of women's quality of life.

3.2 Women's Desire for Family Independence

At the same time, we should also note that the indicator of educational attainment also has a key impact on women. Based on the abundant material base, family service is a major share of expenditure for women with high education and children. With the increasing pressure of work in modern cities, family services have gradually moved from being self-supporting job security within the family to a professional and institutionalized job. High-income, highly educated women also tend to choose such services to free themselves from the role of mothers and housewives. However, we also note that the percentage of low-income and low-educated women choosing this service is still very small. There are also large group differences within the group of urban women. From the results of the survey report, it is clear that the economy and education are two important factors that constrain women's lives.

3.3 Women's Reliance on Fixed Assets Gradually Decreases

With the increase in women's income, the "frugal and hardworking" style of life is decreasing. Choosing a better quality of life has gradually become the consensus of most women. With an abundant material base, fixed assets such as cars and houses are no longer an important direction for women's spending choices. Investment insurance, travel, and health care have become the new choices for women's consumption expenditure. According to Maslow's needs theory, human needs are composed of physiological needs, security needs, belonging and emotional needs, respect needs, and self-actualization needs. The decrease in women's dependence on fixed assets reflects women's desire for security needs (health protection, ownership of resources and property, etc.) and self-actualization needs (spiritual needs, resources they can control, etc.)

4. The Pursuit of Independent Women: The Development and Future of Chinese Feminism

Based on the above analysis of the current situation of Chinese women's consumption, it can be concluded that the current situation of Chinese women's existence has four major characteristics: First, the quality of women's life has generally improved. Second, women's awareness of independence is gradually increasing. Third, women still need to assume multiple roles in society and family. Fourth, income level and education level are the two key factors limiting women's development. In conclusion, women's increased employment opportunities, more and better education, greater economic independence, social freedom, and more choices have had a significant impact on Chinese women's consumption habits. [6] As a result, Chinese female consumers are becoming one of the most important consumer groups in China. This is not only attributed to the egalitarian, open, and inclusive nature of the current Chinese social environment, but also the changing role of Chinese women themselves. Chinese women's voice in the social economy has risen to a level never before seen in China's history. This power is changing the social structure of China and has led to the rise of female consumption, resulting in a new trend of "female consumerism," especially as the size of the Chinese family continues to shrink, thus weakening the traditional role of women as parents and children, and making them more independent in their behavior. [6]

For a long time, consumption and women have been rejected in the opposition between production and consumption and suppressed in the opposition between men and women. Women, as subjects of consumption, combine the subjects of consumption and gender and are oppressed by both capitalism and patriarchy. But is the future field of women's existence entirely an iron house without space? The future development of Chinese women should be based on three latitudes: female situation, female consciousness, and social gender. [7]

In the context of the current prevalence of commercial consumerism in China, feminism is being promoted more as an intellectual product to the nation. The success of a modern business requires a new kind of subjectivity. [8] Women are the category of social groups that distinguish themselves from the rigid, authoritative men of the past. Through a "labeled" consumption model, a completed

set of female consumer culture and values is constructed, and the identity coordinates of women are constantly reinforced and defined. Therefore, feminism in this situation is still confined by certain rules, and women need to find their discourse and intellectual support. [9] Most of those who raise the discourse of "female consciousness" are intellectual women, elite women, who are part of the backbone of Chinese intellectual society and an important part of the structure of Chinese urban civilization. Therefore, this discourse is powerful and representative. Yet in the same way that the struggle for rights in any era is a long and tortuous tug-of-war, the fight for feminism and the awakening of women's consciousness is also a very long process and one that could go backward at any time. Just as American social thought broke through segregation in the 1970s, conservative forces bounced back in the 1980s. The future development of feminism in China also has a long way to go. In order to break through the gender discourse symbol of "female consumerism" in the era of the market economy, we have to borrow the concept of "gender".[10] As a descriptive concept of the whole gender system, "gender" is the core of the new feminist movement's theory, which can not only help human beings re-examine the gender power relations at different stages of social changes, but also analyze the distribution of power in the context of the prevalence of consumerism. Focusing on the development of Chinese feminism under such a gender system and pondering the gains and losses of Chinese feminist development may bring more help to the development of Chinese feminism.

5. Conclusion

Firstly, this paper makes a detailed analysis based on two reports, "2019-2020 General Report on the Living Conditions of Chinese Women" and "2019-2020 Survey Report on the Consumption Situation of Chinese Urban Women and Families" released by China Women Magazine, Huakun Women's Consumption Guidance Center and Huakun Women's Life Survey Center. Secondly, the current consumption status of Chinese women is summarized in four aspects: the basic status, income, consumption and investment status and consumption and investment expectations of the surveyed women and families. It is found that there are three characteristics of the current situation of Chinese women: first, women have higher requirements for self-growth and improvement; second, women are eager for family independence; third, women's reliance on fixed assets is gradually weakening. Finally, the paper briefly reviews the history of Chinese feminism and discusses the future outlook of Chinese feminism. The difficulties in the development of feminism in China are important social issues that should not be ignored, but at the same time are fraught with hardships and dangers. It is hoped that the research in this paper will serve as a reference for further research on Chinese feminism in today's society. At the same time, due to the author's limited academic level, the number of interviewees and the number of regions quoted in this paper are still limited and do not reflect the whole picture of the current situation of Chinese women's consumption and life, and the study still lacks a comprehensive and in-depth discussion and summary.

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