

The Transformation of Gender Concepts and the Construction of New Women Images in Modern China

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Abstract

Against the backdrop of repeated military defeats after the First Sino-Japanese War and the Boxer Uprising, the urgent mission of national salvation drove Chinese intellectuals to launch a thorough critique of feudal Confucian ethics through Western ideological discourse. This nationalist narrative tied women's liberation closely to national modernization, giving rise to a series of New Women images in modern China, including the National Mother, the Female Citizen, the Runaway Nora, and the Modern Girl. Throughout this process, male intellectuals dominated the discourse power of shaping female images, while women's subjective consciousness gradually awakened and challenged the patriarchal-nationalist narrative. Based on existing research and historical documents, this paper systematically combs the evolution of new women images in modern China, analyzes the discourse logic behind image construction, and summarizes the contradictions and dilemmas in the transformation of modern Chinese gender concepts.

Keywords

Modern China; Gender Concept; New Women; National Mother; Female Citizen; Nora; Modern Girl.

1. Introduction

The late 19th and early 20th centuries marked a critical turning point in Chinese history. After the First Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895) and the Boxer Protocol (1901), China faced an unprecedented national crisis, with the threat of subjugation hanging over the nation. In response to the urgency of saving the nation from extinction and striving for survival, intellectuals of the time initiated a comprehensive ideological reform movement, launching a fierce attack on the feudal Confucian ethical system that had dominated China for thousands of years [1-4]. Core Confucian norms such as the husband as the guide for the wife and three obediences and four virtues were labeled as cannibalistic ethics, while practices like foot-binding, chastity obsessions, spousal abuse, arranged marriage, and gender segregation were cited as evidence of the backwardness and ignorance of traditional Chinese culture (Wang, 1999).

In this nationalist narrative, women's status became a key indicator of national civilization. Intellectuals argued that China could not stand among the nations of the world without elevating women's social status, thus binding women's liberation to the cause of national modernization and making feminism an unavoidable social issue. Against this background, a core question emerged: what kind of New Women could shoulder the responsibility of national salvation and rejuvenation? What female images were shaped by the surging feminist movement? And who held the discourse power in constructing these images?

Answering these questions helps reveal how women reflected on and recognized their own identities during this transformative period, and clarifies the development trajectory and

inherent dilemmas of modern Chinese feminist discourse[5-7]. This paper divides the evolution of new women images in modern China into three typical stages: the National Mother and Female Citizen in the late Qing and early Republican period, the Runaway Nora during the May Fourth Movement, and the Modern Girl in 1930s urban China. By analyzing the connotation, social background, and discourse logic of each image, this paper summarizes the characteristics of modern Chinese gender concept transformation and reflects on the gains and losses of women's liberation in modern China[8-10].

2. National Mother and Female Citizen: The Emergence of Women in Nationalist Discourse

2.1. Social Background: Social Darwinism and National Salvation

From the late 19th century to the early 20th century, with the rise of modern intellectual groups, Social Darwinism was introduced to China. The idea of natural selection and survival of the fittest deeply influenced elite thinking, leading intellectuals to link individual physical and mental quality to national competitiveness. They believed that a strong nation must be built on strong citizens, and citizens' physical and moral foundations originated from maternal upbringing. Thus, the slogan to strengthen the nation, we must first strengthen the mother became widely popular (Ya, 1902) [11-13].

This logic placed women in a unique position within the nationalist framework: women were no longer merely family appendages, but national resources related to national survival. As one early text argued: A nation without National Mothers cannot produce citizens; a nation without citizens born of National Mothers will perish. This statement clearly defined women's reproductive function as a national strategic need, laying the theoretical foundation for the National Mother image [14,15].

2.2. Connotation of the National Mother

The National Mother was the first modern female image constructed by male intellectuals under nationalist discourse. Its core logic was instrumentalist: women's value lay in bearing and raising qualified citizens for the nation. To fulfill this role, women must be freed from traditional shackles—specifically, through promoting women's education and abolishing foot-binding, so that they could get rid of physical dependence and mental ignorance, and become qualified mothers of modern citizens.

However, the National Mother concept did not endow women with independent citizen identity. It still confined women to the family and reproductive sphere based on biological gender differences, emphasizing their maternal function rather than individual rights. In essence, it was a limited liberation designed to serve national survival.

2.3. From National Mother to Female Citizen

Against the backdrop of male-led women's liberation, female intellectuals began to express their self-understanding, pushing the evolution from National Mother to Female Citizen. With the emergence of women's magazines and publications, women's own voices entered the public sphere, and the Female Citizen concept was formally proposed.

Compared with the National Mother, the Female Citizen emphasized women's subjective participation in public affairs. It aimed to establish a direct citizen-state relationship for women, endowing them with political awareness, national responsibility, public rights, and civic obligations. While still supporting foot-binding abolition and women's education, these measures were no longer ends in themselves but means to cultivate women into new citizens who fulfill national duties, bear national responsibilities, possess political thinking, and enjoy public rights (Zhang, 2024).

Thus, the Female Citizen represented a new modern collective identity emerging from the formation of the modern nation-state. It marked the first time women stepped out of the family and into the horizon of national politics, laying a foundation for the further awakening of female subjectivity.

2.4. Comparative Analysis of National Mother and Female Citizen

To clarify the differences between the two images, the following table summarizes their core characteristics:

Table 1. Comparison between the images of National Mother and Female Citizen

Dimension	National Mother	Female Citizen
Discourse Subject	Male intellectuals	Female intellectuals + progressive elites
Core Orientation	Reproduction, maternal duty, family sphere	Civic responsibility, public participation, national subject
Women's Position	National resource, instrumental value	Independent citizen, subjective value
Rights & Obligations	Focus on reproductive obligation; no clear civic rights	Equal civic rights and national obligations
Social Sphere	Private family domain	Public and private domains combined
Theoretical Basis	Social Darwinism, nationalist instrumentalism	Modern citizenship, gender equality

3. The Runaway Nora: Individual Liberation and Women's Self-Awakening

3.1. Introduction of Nora and Individualism

Influenced by Western ideological trends, the idea of breaking the family for the nation was advocated by progressive groups in the May Fourth era. They held that building a modern nation required transforming traditional subjects into new citizens characterized by independence, autonomy, and freedom. Thus, early May Fourth New Culture advocates embraced individualism as a core value.

It was in this context that Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* was introduced to China, and the character Nora became a symbol of individual liberation. When Nora first appeared in Chinese discourse, she was not defined by gender but as a modern person breaking free from old families and institutions to pursue true selfhood. Hu Shi emphasized that Nora left her husband and children because she realized she was a human being first and foremost, and must strive to be a complete person (Hu, 1988).

3.2. Nora's Localization: From Anti-Arranged Marriage to Career Pursuit

In the 1920s, amid the wave of free love and marriage autonomy, Nora's image was reconnected to gender issues and became an icon of New Women resisting arranged marriage. Many female students followed Nora's example, fighting with their families for the right to choose their own spouses.

However, Lu Xun's famous warning highlighted the dilemma of the Runaway Nora: without economic independence, women who left their families would face survival crises. This concern pushed the Nora image to evolve further, adding the dimension of career. The Career-Oriented Nora included multiple forms: educated Nora, employed Nora, patriotic Nora, all encouraging women to leave the family, participate in social affairs, and realize self-worth (Xu, 2010).

3.3. Discourse Shift and Implicit Dilemmas

Nora was the most influential foreign female image in modern China, and its meaning was continuously reconstructed to fit local social issues. Initially introduced by male intellectuals to promote individualism and liberal democracy, Nora later shifted from a male-led model of personal liberation to a symbol reflecting women's practical problems.

Intellectuals projected their ideal of modern women onto Nora: she must receive education, have an independent job, enjoy marital autonomy, marry for love, and form a monogamous Western-style nuclear family. However, this ideal ignored two deep contradictions: It did not challenge the unequal gender division of labor within the family; It overlooked the structural barriers that made it difficult for women to gain economic independence in a male-dominated resource system.

Thus, the Nora image reflected both the progress of individual liberation and the limitations of male-dominated feminist discourse.

4. The Modern Girl: Urban Consumer Culture and Contested Modernity

4.1. Rise of the Modern Girl in 1930s Shanghai

After Nora, a new female image emerged in 1930s urban China, especially in Shanghai: the Modern Girl. The *New Term Dictionary* (1934) defined her as a woman with foreign taste, certain economic security, and sexual liberalism (Xing, 1934).

The Modern Girl represented a radical break with traditional female norms: she permed her hair, wore nail polish and lipstick, used perfume, and adopted Western lifestyles, creating cultural symbols of fashion and progress. This image spread from Shanghai to inland cities and from upper classes to lower classes, becoming a nationwide social trend.

4.2. Controversy and Criticism: Nationalism vs. Consumer Culture

Unlike the generally positive Nora image, the Modern Girl was highly controversial. Critics accused her of consuming foreign luxury goods (cosmetics, perfume, clothing), which hindered domestic product sales and drained capital abroad, weakening local industry and commerce. She was labeled an imperialist salesperson and a fashionable traitor (Tan, 2023).

With the rise of the National Goods Movement, the Modern Girl faced massive criticism from public opinion and official policies. The New Life Movement led by Chiang Kai-shek imposed restrictions on women's dress and appearance, stigmatizing makeup, dancing, and going to the cinema as immoral behaviors.

Although some urban women defended themselves—pointing out that men also consumed foreign goods, and women should not be scapegoated for slow domestic sales—their voices were marginalized in the dominant nationalist discourse.

4.3. Essence of Criticism: Transgression of Patriarchal-Nationalist Norms

The root of the anxiety and condemnation toward the Modern Girl was her transgression of traditional female roles: she existed beyond the identity of daughter, wife, and mother. Her advocacy of sexual liberation further enhanced her dangerous aura. As historical research notes, the Modern Girl associated sexuality with commodity consumption: she could exchange sexual charm for material goods or use material consumption to satisfy sexual desire (Lian, 2018).

As a female image that broke through traditional social norms, the Modern Girl naturally became the target of criticism under the patriarchal-nationalist narrative. She represented a kind of excessive modernity that challenged both traditional ethics and nationalist instrumentalism.

4.4. Social Evaluation of the Modern Girl

The following table shows the multi-dimensional social evaluation of the Modern Girl:

Table 2. Social evaluation of the Modern Girl image in the 1930s

Evaluation Dimension	Positive Views	Negative/Critical Views
Cultural Symbol	Representative of urban modernity and fashion	Betrayal of national tradition, blind Westernization
Economic Behavior	Promoted urban consumer market development	Harmed domestic industries, imperialist accomplice
Gender Concept	Broke gender stereotypes, pursued personal freedom	Violated female chastity norms, immoral
Social Role	Independent personality, autonomous life	Abandoned family duty, threatened social order
Political Label	Pursuer of individual rights	Fashionable traitor, harmful to national salvation

5. Conclusion

By sorting out the evolution of new women images in modern China, it can be found that male intellectuals long dominated the construction of these images, which evolved from National Mother and Female Citizen to Nora and Modern Girl and reflected male elites' understanding of modernization and their design of women's roles for national construction. However, women's subjective consciousness continued to awaken: female intellectuals and urban women challenged instrumentalist feminist discourse, with the shift from National Mother to Nora showing women's demand for self-realization in the public sphere, and the emergence of Modern Girl reflecting their pursuit of personal liberation and sexual autonomy, breaking the patriarchal-nationalist framework. The transformation of modern Chinese gender concepts was accompanied by four inherent contradictions: the conflict between national instrumentalism and individual liberation, male discourse and female subjectivity, urban modernity and rural tradition, as well as economic independence and structural inequality. Nevertheless, this transformation had profound historical significance—it broke the traditional Confucian gender ethics, initiated the women's liberation movement, enabled women to step out of the family into society and politics, and laid the foundation for contemporary gender equality. The four women images are successive and overlapping, recording Chinese women's difficult journey toward modernity and reflecting China's tortuous exploration in modernization, which provides historical reference for promoting gender equality and women's all-round development today.

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