

Speaking for Her: Public Opinion Platforms and the Construction of Women's Discursive Space in Chinese Periodical Media Discourse (1921-1949)

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Abstract

This study focuses on the role of print media in shaping public opinion space in China during the New Democratic Revolution period (1919-1949), specifically examining three women's publications: "Nüxing" (*Women's Star*), *Women's Daily*, and *Zhejiang Women*. The study adopts an approach based on communication studies and sociology, using primary research materials from archival microfilm editions. It explores the knowledge production process within the public discourse space and the editorial communities associated with these publications. The paper investigates the discursive effects of editorial and publishing strategies, as well as the strategies of women's press and women's movements during the New Democratic Revolution. It also highlights the significance of public opinion space formed by print media in influencing society and shaping gender relations. Overall, the early women's magazines played a significant role in promoting women's liberation and integrating it with labor, state, and class liberation. They provided a platform for women's voices, fostering a strong keystone force in the women's movement and actively promoting its development. The print media, represented by these women's publications, played a crucial role in shaping public opinion space during the New Democratic Revolution period in China. They provided a platform for women's voices, disseminated feminist discourse, and actively contributed to the development of the women's liberation movement.

Keywords

Feminist Discourse, Chinese Women's Liberation Movement, Chinese Periodical Media Discourse, Editorial Communities, New Democratic Revolution Period

1. Introduction

Newspapers are considered to be the currency of social opinion (Sun, 2019). In the historical process of China's modern social transformation, the social opinions conveyed by the content transmitted through journals played a central role in social transformation and people's liberation (Wen, 2017). With regard to the development of the women's movement, various women's groups and organisations have chosen to actively launch women's publications (Liu, 1994). They promoted the development of the women's movement in contemporary China, the establishment of gender equality and the promotion of cooperation between men and women. It provides an important direction for expanding and deepening a century of research on the leadership of the women's movement in China.

Since the turn of the century, new fields have emerged along with the intersection and interpenetration of historical and gender studies, more Chinese scholars have begun to pay renewed attention to the important role that the women's press has played in leading China's social change and women's liberation (Li, 1999). A number of women's magazines were launched in China, starting with the first Chinese women's magazine, *Women's Studies Journal*, which was launched on 24 July 1898 (Li, 2011). The number of women's magazines subsequently increased rapidly. Current research focuses on historically significant periods, such as the 1898 Reform Movement, the Xinhai Revolution, the May Fourth Movement, the Liberation War and the socialist construction period (Jiang, 2020). In contrast, studies on women's magazines during the transitional period are relatively few and fragmentary. Where such studies exist, they often take a general historical approach and lack specific analysis of individual periods and publications. In terms of gender, previous studies have mainly focused on the voices of male editors, male authors and male readers, and women's discourses on feminism and gender relations have not been adequately analysed. Interactive textual analysis of the writings of both genders is also lacking. At the same time, much of the research literature on the history of the women's movement in China is influenced by the revolutionary history paradigm, which tends to downplay the status of women as protagonists of the movement. There is an emphasis on the victimhood of pre-revolutionary women and a tendency to downplay the Enlightenment discourse of women's subjectivity of self-liberation and self-enlightenment. Representative works in this sense include *History of the Chinese Women's Movement (New Democratic Period)*, edited by the National Women's Federation of China; *History of the Modern Chinese Women's Movement*, edited by Liu Shucai; *History of the Chinese Women's Movement*, edited by Ren Fen; and *History of the Chinese Women's Movement*, edited by Ji Rong. However, with the introduction of social gender theory as a new category in historical research, researchers have begun to focus on the study and consideration of women's subjectivity. For example, the work *The Spread of Marxist Women's Theory and the Awakening of Women's Subjectivity in the Early Party Building Period* examines the history of the Communist Party's women's movement from a gender pers-

pective. New perspectives and paths towards women's liberation are presented (Dong, 2021). Ke Linsheng's *Engendering the Chinese Revolution: radical women, communist politics and mass movements in the 1920s* sheds light on the role of women party members within the Communist Party in the women's movement. Wang Zheng's *Women in the Chinese Enlightenment: oral and textual history* details the deeds of Chinese feminist pioneers and comrades of the communist women's movement. They place the socio-political women's movement in a longer and more complex historical and discursive context by introducing an analysis of the influence, participation and limitations of the public opinion sphere in the development of the movement (Wang, 2021).

In light of this, the present study focuses on three classic women's publications during the New Democratic Revolution period, namely "Nüxing" (*Women's Star*), *Women's Daily*, and *Zhejiang Women*. Using the original microfilm editions preserved in the archives as primary research materials, this investigation adopts an approach based on the paradigms of communication studies and sociology. Based on historical records, the study systematically examines the fundamental aspects of the establishment, operation, and distribution of the above-mentioned women's publications. It delves into the knowledge production process within the public discourse space and explores the editorial communities associated with these publications. The study takes into account the discursive effects of editorial and publishing strategies.

2. Print Media and the Construction of Public Opinion Space in China

Public opinion refers to the collective tendency or opinion of the masses on an issue. In modern times, as newspapers flourished, criticism, which was traditionally reserved for Chinese scholars and officials, gradually extended to the general public and became society-oriented public opinion.

Xu Baohuang, a lecturer in modern journalism, noted that in terms of freedom of expression on public issues, those who express their opinions publicly are the majority in society. He believes that public opinion is free, but not all free opinions become public opinion. He clearly emphasises the public nature of public opinion, stating that private action is difficult, but facts about public issues that have a significant impact on society must be judged in order for them to become public opinion (Yuan, 2009). The public opinion space formed by public opinion is the sphere in which public opinion is generated between the state and society. The public opinion space is not a product of nature, but an artificially created space and constructed entity. It includes both physical spaces, such as schools, squares, clubs and material spaces, and virtual discursive spaces, such as the immaterial spaces formed nationally through newspapers, magazines and other public media (Zhang, 2021).

In contemporary China, the formation and expression of public opinion is closely linked to the prosperity of newspapers and magazines. As bearers of public opinion, newspapers and magazines not only convey information and ideas,

but also function as “amplifiers” that unite new ideas and amplify their influence, thus stimulating the formation of public opinion and forming an “imagined community” among readers that transcends regional boundaries (Dong, 2021). For this reason, many intellectuals in modern China started newspapers and magazines to intervene in national life, using the media as a battlefield to save the country through public opinion. Individual ideas are formed by language, and social ideas are reported and recorded. Compared with other specialised newspapers of the same period, the early women’s magazines were distinctive in terms of editorial goals, style and publishing philosophy. They helped unite the leaders of the national women’s movement and emphasised the integration of women’s liberation with labour, state and class liberation. Its content was honest and easy to understand, both in language and style. The early women’s periodicals vigorously propagated the women’s liberation ideology, promoted the development of the women’s workers’ movement and embarked on building the Chinese women’s liberation speech system in the revolutionary struggle. They also fostered a strong keystone force in the women’s movement and actively promoted the development of the modern Chinese women’s liberation movement (Cui & Guo, 2017).

3. Strategies of the Women’s Press and the Women’s Movement during the New Democratic Revolution (1919-1949)

3.1. Nüxing and the Women’s Movement during the May Fourth Period (1919)

In April 1923, a group of intellectuals with early communist ideas, including Deng Yingchao, Li Jishan and Chen Xiaocen, founded the Ruoxing Association, a progressive women’s organisation. They declared that they would actively work to save oppressed women, promote the revolutionary spirit that women should have and strive to get conscientious women to join the proletarian revolutionary movement. They published *Nüxing* as a centralised platform for discussing women’s issues and expressing feminist views. Its aim was to publicise the realities of women’s lives and to promote the idea of women’s self-help and self-determination. Initially a supplement to “*Xin Min Yi Bao*” (*New People’s Voice*), *Nüxing* was published every fortnight on the 5th. Li Zhishan, as editor-in-chief, was responsible for replying to readers’ letters, Deng Yingchao was responsible for reviewing manuscripts, and Chen Xiaocen was responsible for contributions, proofreading and distribution. The content and responses to the readers’ letters in each issue were jointly determined in group discussions. Starting from the fourth issue, distribution points were established in more than ten cities, including Beijing, Shanghai, and Nanjing, with the aim of strengthening collective power by connecting with comrades in the women’s movement. Exchanges were established with over 20 newspapers and periodicals nationwide. Unfortunately, due to suppression by warlords, *Nüxing* was forced to cease publication at the end of

September 1924. During its existence, it published a total of 57 issues (Li, 2011).

At the beginning of the 20th century, a new style of writing emerged in the women's sphere under the influence of the transformation of old prose concepts and the theory and practice of Liang Ke-chao's literary revolution. The advocacy of this new style opened up new writing spaces for women and established a discourse for women's self-development. Women's magazines, especially *Nüxing*, provided an important avenue for women to enter the public sphere, allowing them to express themselves in a new writing style and participate in debates on public issues (Liu, 2013). *Nüxing* inherited the feminist discourse of the May Fourth Movement, advocating individuality, social openness, freedom of love, autonomous marriage and family revolution; in the discussion section of *Nüxing*, women expressed their views on the male-led discourse on women's liberation. Some of them undermined traditional gender politics. In this way, women strengthened their positions and broke through the boundaries of issues traditionally discussed in mainstream feminist discourse. This shift transformed the women's movement from male-led to women's autonomy, reflecting the diversity of women's voices and the richness of women's subjective consciousness.

Combining public issues with personal experiences is a unique expressive strategy of *Nüxing* and characterises its distinctive editorial style. This approach translates personal experiences and imaginative readings into concrete textual content, which helps disseminate gender concepts and build the public sphere of discourse (Hu & Yin, 1987). It helps to strengthen the persuasive power of the discourse. Active dialogue, negotiation and cooperation with men leads to the expansion of women's discursive space. The participation of women in editorial and writing activities and article contributions positions women's magazines not only as intermediaries of information, but also as a new form of social exchange between activists and a wide readership. The interaction between editors, writers and readers allows readers to be transformed by the magazine media from being passive recipients of information to discussing the subject and actively articulating women's perceptions of gender relations and the modern state (Miao & Huang, 2013).

3.2. Women's Daily and the Women's Movement during the Nationalist Revolution (1924-1927)

The *Women's Daily* was co-founded on 1 January 1924 by Liu Qingyang, Deng Yingchao, Li Zhishan, Chen Xiaocen and Zhou Yi of the Consciousness Society. It was banned on 29 September of the same year due to its continuous coverage of the North China War and growing dissatisfaction among the warlords (Huang, 1986). As the first women's daily in modern China, the launch of *Women's Daily* marked a breakthrough in the form and content of women's media.

First, the *Women's Daily* shortened the publication cycle of newspapers, increased the timeliness of information dissemination, increased the volume of information communicated and promoted interaction between editors, writers and readers. This increased the potential for newspapers and magazines to in-

fluence public opinion and social events. Second, the layout and columns of *Women's Daily* were carefully designed. The paper consisted of four pages, with the first page devoted to the Freedom Forum, which featured essays and commentary. The second page, "Women's World" and "Domestic and International News", featured current political events, various information on women's movements abroad, and translations and introductions to feminist works; the third page, "Tianjin News", focused on reporting news related to women, while "Casual Talk" provided news interpreted the social and gender significance of the news; on page four, literary works, including novels and poetry, were presented alongside letters and discussions. This thoughtful layout and section design allowed readers to understand the universal themes of the women's movement, while also engaging in thoughtful discussion and reflection on cultural issues of women and society through specific examples. Through the interaction between editors, authors and readers, a new view of gender was disseminated and shaped. Finally, *Women's Daily* did not address individual issues using deductive language or sophisticated theoretical commentary. Instead, it respected the life experiences of individual women and used appropriate expressive strategies based on the identity of its readers to meet the practical needs of its wider female readership. For example, they added interesting elements, focused on clear writing and incorporated illustrations to make what they wanted to say dynamic and lively, ultimately aiming for the highest communicative impact.

At the time of its launch, *Women's Daily* was the only newspaper to focus exclusively on women's issues, and it enjoyed broad support and endorsement from all sectors of society. Xiang Jinyu, Director of the Women's Department of the Central Committee, enthusiastically hailed the paper's launch as the "first dawn of the silent Chinese women's world. She expressed her hope that the *Women's Daily* would become a hotbed of ideological change for women across the country. Similarly, on 29 January of the same year, Liao Zhongkai wrote a special contribution to the same newspaper on *The Essence of International Women's Day*. What set this publication apart from contemporary magazines was its emphasis on promoting the women's liberation movement, rather than focusing solely on depicting the sad fate of women. It dealt extensively with the theories and strengths of this movement.

In the inaugural address, the founders elaborated on the objectives of the women's newspaper: First, to consolidate the views of activists from across the country and to systematically discuss and study the women's movement. Second, to establish links and facilitate information exchange between women's movements and organisations in the north and south. Third, as Chinese women have historically been less interested in political, economic and social issues, the newspaper aimed to raise women's awareness by providing concise but systematic coverage of the political, economic and social situation in China. And finally, the newspaper was to serve as a platform for women to voice their grievances (Li, 2015).

The *Women's Daily* prominently demonstrated the role of women's newspapers in the public discourse space, particularly in the context of the women's li-

beration movement, through its coverage and support of the Baoding Second Women's Teachers' Movement in 1924. In March 1924, influenced by the new Marxist-Leninist ideologies, female students of the Baoding Second Women's Teachers' School could no longer tolerate the oppressive actions of Principal Yan Shiqi, which included stifling individuality, restricting freedom, damaging women's education, and insulting and expelling female students. This led to a student strike, demanding the removal of Principal Yan Shiqi, punishment for instructors who assaulted students, and a ban on expelling students. They hoped for a new principal with "new and reasonable thoughts," "respect for all women's rights," and "enthusiastic efforts in education" (Liu, 2019). The movement garnered a certain level of social response, particularly within the women's community, where the reaction was intense. The *Women's Daily* made the most of the newspaper's role as a social discourse organ, mobilising women from all walks of life and actively supporting the students at Baoding, thereby providing important public support. The newspaper not only continuously reported on the incident and the various reactions, but also analysed and commented on the movement. It dealt with the causes of the student strike, criticised the current state of women's education and tried to raise the general awareness of female students and their political consciousness. The newspaper campaigned for reforms in girls' education (Zou & Ming, 2020).

3.3. Zhejiang Women and the Women's Movement in the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression (1937-1945)

The *Zhejiang Women* was a monthly general women's magazine organised by the Zhejiang branch of the War Childcare Association. It was officially launched on 15 July 1939 in Jinhua, Zhejiang. Due to the Japanese occupation of Jinhua, the magazine ceased publication in April 1942. It was later resumed as a weekly edition of Part four of the *Zhejiang Daily*, with a full edition published every Monday. This continued until the end of October 1943, with a total of 30 issues published. *Zhejiang Women* was a sixteenmo format, issued monthly with forty pages per edition, and a semi-annual compilation. Two-thirds of the circulation was sold in 52 counties in the province, while the remaining third was distributed to provinces south of the Yangtze River, including Fujian, Hunan, Sichuan and Yunnan (Lin & Qin, 1987). To ensure diverse and rich content, *Zhejiang Women* used various formats and perspectives on similar themes. Each issue contains more than 30 articles of varying lengths and is divided into more than 10 sections. Each issue has a central theme, which focuses on in-depth research and discussion of a particular topic. Since its inception, *Zhejiang Women* has published a total of 34 issues, 25 of which have featured a central theme or theoretical article covered in a special feature. Every effort was made to ensure that all sections were in line with the central theme, including the illustrations on the front cover, back cover and front cover, as well as other visual elements. Given that the founder, Ge Qin, was a literary writer, *Zhejiang Women* placed great emphasis on the "Literary Section" from the very beginning of its publication.

Each issue published literary works of various genres, including novels, essays, reportage and poetry. In addition to the structure of the content and sections, *Zhejiang Women* also put a lot of effort into the design of the format. The headlines of each column were accompanied by illustrations and woodblock prints, and the title of each article was accompanied by a graphic design that aimed for a visually rich and colourful presentation.

During the war, *Zhejiang Women* broke down gender barriers and actively promoted women's political participation, employment, education, resistance to the traditional role of good wife and wise mother, arguments against returning home, wartime childcare issues and international affairs. Moreover, the magazine's advocacy of women's liberation reached rural areas and resonated with women from the lower strata of society. The publication's mission was to "unite, educate and mobilise large numbers of women to sustain resistance to the end and to achieve final victory" (Lin & Qin, 1987). It called on women to actively participate in the struggle for national independence and achieve their own liberation in the process. The *Zhejiang Women* had a significant impact on social opinion and received a positive response from all quarters. For example, the *Xinhua Daily* on 20 December 1942 praised the magazine as "a monthly magazine for women with relatively rich content, providing up-to-date insights on various women's issues through brief commentaries and discussions in each issue" (Lin & Qin, 1987). Most importantly, it is a "local correspondence", reflecting vividly and realistically the movements of women in different regions and the lives of women from all walks of life, sometimes with practical experiences and lessons learned from women's work. Similarly, a letter from a women's association in the guerrilla areas of Shuanglin and Linghu in western Zhejiang province stated: "Your publication is the only one in the province that cooperates with resistance, advocates women's liberation, reflects the dynamics of women in each region and raises the theoretical and cultural level of our sisters" (Sun, 2019).

Zhejiang Women focused on disseminating the theories on the women's liberation movement and the wartime policies. It not only systematically examined the theoretical and historical aspects of the women's movement, but also actively promoted practical struggles, promoted the exchange of information on the women's movement, compiled and shared experiences of women's activities, advocated the strengthening of women's organisational structures and worked to establish strong women's groups. The magazine also aimed to train women leaders and sought to provide women with a comprehensive and dialectical understanding of the relationship between the war effort and women's liberation, recognising that national liberation was a prerequisite for realising women's liberation (Wang, 2021).

Zhejiang Women took a gentle, step-by-step approach to promoting the women's mobilisation strategy. The magazine's content was clearly Soviet complex. The articles published can be divided into three main categories: first, to raise women's awareness of the war and ignite their enthusiasm for resistance; second,

to train and educate women and involve them in anti-Japanese activities; and third, to advocate gender equality and promote the development of the women's liberation movement. *Zhejiang Women* achieved significant success in mobilising a broad spectrum of women to participate in the anti-Japanese war. It served as a vital 'voice' for Zhejiang women calling for resistance and promoting women's liberation during the war (Zhang, 2019).

4. Conclusion: Implications for “Mobilising Women” in the Contemporary Women’s Periodical

The influence of women's press on women's liberation during the New Democratic Revolution period in China was profound and multifaceted:

Women's publications provided a crucial platform for women to express their views, concerns, and experiences. By giving voice to women's perspectives, these publications challenged traditional gender roles and norms, empowering women to participate in public discourse. Women's press played a significant role in disseminating feminist discourse and ideas about gender equality, women's rights, and liberation. Through articles, editorials, and other content, these publications raised awareness about issues affecting women and advocated for social and political change. Women's press integrated the struggle for women's liberation with broader socio-political movements, such as labor, state, and class liberation. By highlighting the interconnectedness of different forms of oppression, women's publications contributed to a more comprehensive understanding of social justice and equality. Women's press actively promoted women's activism and participation in the women's liberation movement. By providing information, resources, and organizational support, these publications encouraged women to organize, mobilize, and advocate for their rights. Through their widespread circulation and influence, women's publications shaped public opinion on issues related to gender equality and women's liberation. By challenging prevailing stereotypes and promoting alternative narratives, these publications helped shift societal attitudes and norms towards greater gender equity.

4.1. Attention to the Construction of Female Speech Space and Public Opinion Platform in the Newspaper Discourse

Attention should be given to constructing a female speech space and public opinion platform within newspaper discourse. The discursive space characterised by the particular historical context of modernity has a multidimensional and multi-layered structural system. Its essential elements include public topics, communicators and target groups, spaces for dialogue and systems of information dissemination, as well as the adaptation of the periodical's style, layout design and perspective (Zhang, 2020). In the context of newspaper discourse, magazines should differentiate themselves in terms of their founding principles, style and publishing philosophy in order to ensure a certain influence in the public discourse space. They should link women's emancipation to the emancipation of labour, the state and class. Emphasis should be placed on linking political nuances

with real content. The language used should be simple and accessible, closely connected to the masses and persistent in the struggle.

4.2. Focus on Media Discourse and Social Action by Leaders of the Women's Movement

Emphasize the role of media discourse and the social action led by women's movement leaders. In the movement for their own liberation, Chinese women must courageously embody the spirit of self-determination, self-confidence and self-activity (Li, 2001). They must deepen their understanding of their own values and roles, develop them into a new force for socialist development and become the backbone of the women's movement. When building a speech platform, attention should be paid to media discourse from the perspective of social gender. The aim is to address debates on gender issues and use the interaction between editors, authors and readers to draw attention to the living conditions of women. Its aim is to create a favourable environment for the women's movement and, under the leadership of our party, to actively work on concrete measures to adjust social gender relations. This guidance is crucial in guiding women to recall their glorious history, consolidate their ideological convictions, build their cause, stand up for civilised norms and strive to pursue their fearless dreams (Xu, 2014).

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The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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