

The Awakening and Expression of Women's Consciousness in Modern Women's Creation: Taking Modern Women Journalists as an Example

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Abstract. Modern China underwent a pivotal period of social transformation, during which the emergence of women's periodicals provided a crucial platform for the awakening of female consciousness, becoming the vanguard of public opinion driving gender paradigm shifts. This study centres on representative modern women's periodicals from 1898 to 1907, such as *The Journal of Women's Studies* and *The Women's World*, examining how female journalists constructed a female discourse system and participated in modern China's social transformation through various genres including political commentary, criticism, and literary supplements. Research reveals that female journalists advocated for the establishment of women's education, promoted economic self-reliance, and criticised feudal practices such as foot-binding and arranged marriages. By integrating women's issues with nationalist discourse centred on saving the nation from peril, they gradually shifted female consciousness from individual life experiences and rights demands towards broad participation in national destiny and public affairs. This discursive practice not only expanded women's expressive space but also progressively challenged the traditional gender power structure of 'men outside, women inside'. Combining close textual analysis, word frequency statistics, and social network analysis, this study reveals the historical role of women's periodicals in reshaping gender concepts and facilitating sociocultural transformation, offering fresh perspectives for modern gender and media research.

Keywords: Modern female journalists; female consciousness; journalistic writing; gender discourse; women's periodicals.

1. Introduction

Modern Chinese society underwent a pivotal period of transformation, during which women achieved self-expression through journalistic writing, emerging as a significant force driving gender cultural reform. Li Yichen, in her work *Expanding Women's Discourse Space in Late Qing Public Opinion*, noted that women's periodicals successfully carved out their own platforms for expression within the male-dominated public sphere, thereby creating crucial conditions for the awakening of female consciousness [1]. By the pre-revolutionary phase of the Xinhai Revolution, nascent signs of female consciousness had emerged. Publications such as *The Women's Gazette* gradually broadened the scope of this awakening by disseminating feminist ideas, advocating for women's education, and campaigning against foot-binding. After 1907, late Qing women's periodicals further linked female concerns to the nation's destiny, forging a distinctive system of female discourse.

This study centres on the journalistic writings of modern female journalists, exploring the awakening of female consciousness and its expressive strategies as presented therein. Zhan Yiying's research in "*A Re-examination of 'Revolutionary Heroines'*" offers fresh perspectives on understanding the image construction of female revolutionaries during this period [2]. Through analysing the circulation and transformation of the image of Russian revolutionary Sofia in both China and Japan, she reveals the transnational flow characteristics of female revolutionary discourse. The identity transformation of the female journalist cohort—their metamorphosis from 'subjects of writing' to 'self-authors'—constitutes a pivotal juncture in the evolution of modern gender culture. Through autonomous writing, they reconstructed female narratives, progressively challenged the male-centred discourse order, and asserted female subjectivity within textual practices.

At present, domestic research primarily focuses on biographical verification and case studies of female journalists. Scholarly case studies of female journalists have mainly centred on elite women such as Kang Tongwei, Qiu Yufang, Qiu Jin, Lü Bicheng, and Tang Qunying, yet comprehensive and systematic group-level research remains insufficient [3]. Moreover, existing research exhibits relative weakness in analysing specific strategies employed to articulate female consciousness (such as discursive modes, column design, and symbolic usage) [4]. Concurrently, the interactive relationship between social environments and female expression warrants deeper exploration, particularly concerning the construction of female journalists' social networks and their modernisation transformations. Within international academia, specialised research on the writing practices of modern Chinese female journalists remains relatively limited, predominantly focusing on female journalistic practices and theoretical frameworks within Western contexts. The Western-centric perspective exhibits limitations in interpreting the particularities of modern Chinese women's press activities, necessitating expanded cognitive boundaries through cross-cultural comparison and the construction of localised theories [5].

This study comprehensively examines the interactive relationship between late Qing women's periodicals and their social environment across three dimensions: textual production, social reception, and historical conditions. Methodologically, it combines close reading with discourse analysis to explore the expressive strategies and thematic choices of female journalists; analyses dissemination and reception through historical materials such as readers' letters and circulation figures; and employs socio-cultural historical methods to reconstruct the publishing context of these periodicals. Regarding data, a representative article database was established based on periodicals such as *The Journal of Women's Studies* (China's first women's publication) and *The Women's World* (one of the longest-running and most influential early women's journals), spanning 1898–1907. Keyword frequency statistics and social network analysis were conducted to enhance the objectivity of the arguments. Through systematic examination of women's periodical texts, this research aims to reveal the methods and strategies employed by China's modern women's press in articulating female consciousness through writing practices, clarifying their position and contributions within the history of Chinese women's consciousness development. Employing scientific research methodologies, this study seeks to outline the process by which female consciousness evolved from individual awakening to collective social advocacy, thereby providing new perspectives and case studies for modern gender and media research.

2. Historical Conditions and Expressive Formations of Women's Periodicals

The emergence and development of women's periodicals in modern China took shape under specific historical conditions. They were both a product of the dual forces of national crisis and intellectual enlightenment, and a significant marker of the awakening of female consciousness. Following the defeat in the First Sino-Japanese War, with the nation teetering on the brink of collapse and the political landscape in turmoil, progressive intellectuals—represented by the reformists—established a public discourse centred on national salvation and enlightenment through the publication of newspapers. Against this backdrop, women began to be recognised as subjects of enlightenment, leading to a shift in the focus of public discourse on women's issues.

The founding of *The Women's Journal* in 1898 marked the formal commencement of women's periodicals in China [6]. Jointly established by pioneering women such as Kang Tongwei and Li Huixian, it became China's first genuinely women's publication—managed by women and addressing women's issues—constituting a pivotal event in the history of the modern women's movement. Subsequently, publications such as *The Women's World* and *The Chinese Women's Journal* emerged, gradually forming a significant force in public discourse. These periodicals not only provided women with a platform to voice their opinions but also actively advocated for women's rights, women's education, and the abolition of foot-binding. They propelled women from the confines of the

household into society, transforming them from passive recipients to active participants in public expression.

The editors and contributors of women's periodicals were predominantly educated women who had received modern schooling, such as Qiu Jin, Chen Jiefeng, and Lü Bicheng. They served both as publishers and content creators for these publications [7]. Through their writing practice, these women journalists integrated personal experiences with public issues, thereby constructing a novel system of female discourse. It is noteworthy that the establishment of early women's periodicals often received support from male intellectuals. For instance, Qiu Yufang of the *Wuxi Vernacular Newspaper* established her publication with the assistance of her uncle Qiu Tingliang, though the majority of the newspaper's content originated from Qiu Yufang's pen. This demonstrates that the expansion of early female discursive spaces exhibited characteristics of male-female collaboration. Table 1 provides a concise summary of major modern women's periodicals, offering an initial understanding of their features.

Table 1. List of major women's periodicals in modern times (1898–1907)

Publication Title	Date of first publication	Founder/Editor-in-Chief	Characteristics
Journal of Women's Studies	1898	Kang Tongwei, Li Huixian	China's first women's newspaper, advocating women's rights and women's education
The Wuxi Vernacular Gazette	1898	Qiu Yufang	Enlighten the people through vernacular discourse, Revive the nation through practical learning.
The Ladies' Gazette	1899	Chen Jiefeng	Included with the Suzhou Daily, featuring a bold and incisive writing style.
Women's World	1904	Ding Zuyin	Revitalising women's education and promoting women's rights, the longest-standing and most comprehensive initiative.
China Women's News	1907	Qiu Jin	Combining women's liberation with national revolution

The content production and dissemination strategies of women's periodicals also merit attention. Female journalists conceived the two hundred million Chinese women, then confined to domestic spheres, as their intended readership, designing content, reforming language, and broadening channels of communication accordingly. For instance, the *Wuxi Vernacular Newspaper* employed vernacular Chinese to ensure women with lower levels of education could comprehend and embrace new ideas. *Women's World* prioritised the social resonance of its content, employing strong advocacy and mobilisation techniques. Through reforming communicative language and expanding dissemination channels, these publications broke through the traditional exclusion of women from public discourse, thereby creating conditions for the propagation of female consciousness.

3. Manifestations of Feminist Consciousness

Women's periodicals exhibit a distinct thematic trajectory in their content, reflecting the evolution of feminist consciousness from personal aspirations to public engagement. Textual analysis of publications such as *The Journal of Women's Studies* and *Women's World* reveals the frequent occurrence of core terms including 'equality,' 'education,' 'autonomy,' 'rights,' and 'nation,' collectively forming the lexical framework of modern feminist discourse.

Early women's periodicals frequently adopted 'abolishing foot-binding' and 'promoting female education' as their primary focal points, emphasising the liberation of women's bodies and equality in education. In 1897, Kang Tongwei published '*On the Advantages and Disadvantages of Female Education*' in *The Journal of Knowledge*, highlighting the importance of female education: 'It

liberates two hundred million women from their shackles, abolishing an irrational and archaic custom that has persisted for over a thousand years [8].’ During this period, feminist discourse primarily centred on women's self-emancipation, seeking to alter female status through education. Lei Lang's *The Origins of Modern Public Toilets for Women in the Context of Feminist Liberation* argues that the establishment of women's public toilets not only reflected advances in public hygiene but also epitomised the women's liberation movement. This micro-level transformation was closely linked to the advocacy of women's periodicals [9]. Over time, female consciousness gradually expanded from individual demands to encompass social participation and national construction. After 1904, publications such as *Women's World* frequently featured statements like ‘women ought to provide for themselves’ and ‘women ought to participate in politics,’ reflecting women's pursuit of economic independence and political rights [10].

Through keyword frequency analysis and social network analysis, the trajectory of women's consciousness expression becomes clearly discernible. Taking *Women's World* as an example, the co-occurrence frequency of the terms ‘women’ and ‘nation’ increased significantly after 1905, indicating the close integration of women's issues with the nation's destiny. In his treatise *On the Decline of China: Women Cannot Escape Blame*, Hu Bin impassionedly declared: “With two hundred million women constituting half the nation's populace, how can they possibly fulfil their civic duties and national obligations if they remain crippled and useless, ignorant and uneducated... Henceforth, let every woman regard China's calamity as her own calamities, China's corruption as her own corruption. Embracing this conviction and realising this purpose, China's revival shall be as easy as turning one's palm.”[11] Such phrasing directly links women's responsibilities to the nation's rise and fall, embodying the national turn in women's consciousness.

Women's periodicals further localised Western feminist ideas through diverse genres such as fiction, poetry, and translations, propelling female consciousness beyond the private sphere into the public domain. For instance, *The Chinese New Women's World Magazine* serialised multiple articles detailing exemplary women who had made outstanding contributions in fields such as education, journalism, publishing, and healthcare, thereby establishing emulatable role models for women of the era. *The Female Student*, meanwhile, emphasised innovation in travel writing, replacing traditional landscape descriptions with accounts of modern technology and urban social structures. Through travel narratives, it constructed new relationships between women and the external world [12]. These diverse stylistic practices formed an enlightening and mobilising writing style, expanding the depth and breadth of expressions of female consciousness.

It is noteworthy that publications of different natures exhibited variations in their expression of female consciousness. As an early women's publication founded by men, *Women's World* featured strongly propagandistic content, prioritising the social impact of its works. In contrast, *The Female Student*, produced by the East City Girls' School for its internal student body, presented travel writing that was more liberated and ‘personalised’. This distinction reflects the multi-layered nature of female consciousness expression, encompassing both grand narratives addressing society and private expressions centred on individual experience.

4. Expressive Strategies and the Transformation of Gender Power

Female journalists employed multiple expressive strategies in their writing practice to challenge traditional gender power structures and reshape women's discursive identity within the public sphere. These strategies primarily included: advocating for women's studies, critiquing feudal ethics, leveraging nationalist discourse, and diversifying stylistic choices.

One of the most frequently employed strategies by female journalists was to advocate for women's education. They emphasised that education was both the foundation for women's self-reliance and a prerequisite for national strength. In her essay *‘On the Advantages and Disadvantages of Women's Education,’* Kang Tongwei asserted: ‘The rise of women's education bears profound significance for the nation's strength or weakness.’ Chen Jiefeng, in *‘The Peril Facing the Female Realm,’* stressed:

‘Our Chinese population totals four hundred million, with men and women each constituting half. The nation is a collective, the land is a collective, adversity is a collective, rights are a collective... Since the nation is a collective, how can we allow men alone to bear all obligations while the female realm remains indifferent?’ This argument directly links women's education to national prosperity, underscoring the importance of female education while providing a legitimate basis for women's educational rights. Liu Fusheng's research further indicates that in later historical phases, female writers such as Ding Ling underwent a shift in their feminist consciousness—from emphasising ‘freedom’ to prioritising ‘autonomy.’ This transformation was already foreshadowed in the discourses of early female journalists [13].

Critique of feudal ethics constituted another pivotal strategy. Practices such as foot-binding, arranged marriages, and gender inequality became the primary targets of female journalists' criticism. In 1904, Ding Chuzai's essay *‘On the Revolution of Women and the Family’* highlighted that woman endured at least four layers of oppression within traditional households: from parents, brothers, in-laws, and husbands. This incisive critique of the feudal family structure undermined the foundations of traditional gender power dynamics. Women journalists further challenged traditional notions such as ‘male supremacy and female inferiority’ and ‘a woman's virtue lies in her lack of talent,’ thereby cultivating a public discourse conducive to securing equal rights for women.

Another key strategy employed by female journalists was the skilful utilisation of nationalist discourse. By linking women's liberation to national prosperity, they sought broader societal recognition and support. In her address *‘To My Sisters’*, Qiu Jin declared: ‘To strengthen the nation, one must first strengthen the race; to strengthen the race, one must first strengthen women [14].’ Yan Bin, in the inaugural address of *China's New Women's World Magazine*, emphasised: ‘This publication holds the four characters “women as citizens” in the highest esteem. Though our founding principles number five, they are fundamentally encapsulated within these four characters.’ This appropriation of nationalist rhetoric endowed women's issues with a legitimacy and urgency scarcely conceivable within traditional society.

In terms of stylistic choices, female journalists predominantly employed public-oriented genres such as political commentary, criticism, and epistolary writing. By blending rational argumentation with emotional mobilisation, they enhanced the persuasiveness and impact of their texts. For instance, the travelogues published in *Women's World* infused traditional descriptive landscapes with pronounced discursive elements, interweaving travel observations with social commentary. *The Wuxi Vernacular Newspaper*, meanwhile, employed vernacular prose to ensure that women with lower levels of education could comprehend and embrace new ideas. These stylistic practices gradually reshaped women's identity and standing within public discourse.

It is worth noting that the expression strategies employed by female journalists still exhibit certain limitations. On the one hand, male-dominated modes of thinking still occasionally surfaced, making the balancing of nationalism and feminism a persistent challenge. On the other hand, due to limitations in educational attainment and social resources, early female journalists predominantly hailed from elite backgrounds, inevitably lending their focus on women's issues a certain class-based bias. Despite these constraints, their writing practices successfully challenged traditional gender power structures, securing greater discursive space for women.

5. Gender Order and Historical Influence

The emergence and development of women's periodicals not only catalysed the awakening of female consciousness but also participated in reshaping modern China's gender perceptions and socio-cultural order. Through sustained discursive practices, these publications gradually transformed societal perceptions of women, propelled a series of social reforms, and laid the organisational and ideological foundations for subsequent women's rights movements.

Women's periodicals have played a significant role in fostering solidarity and identity among female communities. Through reader correspondence and essay competitions, they have established

a transregional community of female discourse. This collective not only enhances women's self-awareness but also provides a platform for their engagement in public affairs. For instance, *Women's World* featured sections such as 'Women's Literary Collection' and 'Translation Forest', publishing letters and articles from female readers. This enabled women scattered across different regions to exchange ideas and experiences. The formation of such virtual communities created conditions conducive to the development of collective female consciousness.

The emergence of tangible social change was intrinsically linked to the existence of women's periodicals. The advocacy for women's education they championed directly catalysed the advancement of girls' schooling. In 1907, the Qing government promulgated *the Regulations for Girls' Normal Schools* and *the Regulations for Girls' Primary Schools*, formally integrating girls' education into the formal education system. This transformation was inextricably tied to years of advocacy by women's periodicals. Concurrently, the periodicals' condemnation of foot-binding spurred the Unbinding Movement. Numerous regions established 'Unbinding Societies' to encourage women to liberate themselves from this physical constraint. These tangible social transformations altered women's living conditions, laying the groundwork for their subsequent pursuit of rights.

Women's periodicals also participated in shaping the modern female image. By profiling accomplished women from China and abroad, they established new role models for women. For instance, *China's New Women's World Magazine* serialised multiple biographies highlighting exemplary women who made significant contributions in fields such as education, journalism, publishing, and healthcare. These new female archetypes broke away from the traditional stereotypes of the talented scholar or the virtuous beauty, offering contemporary women diverse role models. It is noteworthy that the female image constructed during this period often emphasised the dual roles of 'dutiful wife and mother' and 'female citizen,' reflecting the intertwining and compromise between tradition and modernity.

From a broader historical perspective, women's periodicals constituted a vital component of modern China's social transformation. They were both products of the gender revolution and forces propelling this revolution forward. By bringing women's issues into the public sphere, these publications shattered traditional boundaries between the public and private domains, elevating women's concerns to matters of significant societal importance. Concurrently, they laid the ideological and organisational foundations for the women's rights movement during the May Fourth era. Numerous female leaders of that period, such as Luo Jialun and Zhou Binglin, were enlightened and influenced by these pioneering women's periodicals.

However, research should also acknowledge the historical limitations of women's periodicals. Firstly, owing to the generally low level of education among women at the time, the readership of women's publications was predominantly concentrated among educated women, with limited influence on women from lower social strata. Secondly, women's periodicals often placed excessive emphasis on women's obligations to the nation and ethnicity, thereby to some extent diminishing the focus on women's own rights claims. Finally, constrained by funding and distribution channels, many publications had short lifespans, hindering their sustained and widespread impact. Nevertheless, women's periodicals played an irreplaceable historical role in the awakening of gender consciousness in modern China.

6. Conclusion

This study employs a combined approach of textual analysis and social history to systematically examine the intrinsic logic and historical significance of modern female journalists' writing practices. Findings reveal that against the dual backdrop of national crisis and intellectual enlightenment, these women utilised newspapers as a public medium to transcend traditional constraints on female expression. Through strategies such as advocating for women's education, critiquing feudal ethics, and integrating nationalist discourse, they propelled female consciousness from private concerns towards public engagement. Employing diverse genres including political commentary, criticism, and

literary works, they propelled women's issues from the private sphere into public discourse, reshaping female discursive identities while participating in and advancing the reconstruction of modern China's gendered cultural order. This study first systematically analyses texts from women's periodicals to reveal the internal trajectory and expressive strategies of female consciousness awakening. Secondly, it employs quantitative methods such as word frequency statistics and social network analysis to enhance the objectivity and persuasiveness of its arguments. Finally, it situates women's periodicals within the framework of modern social transformation to deepen understanding of the mechanisms driving gender concept change.

The research also has certain limitations, such as the incomplete coverage of newspaper materials, and studies on reader reception and dissemination effects require further exploration. Future research may explore regional comparisons, cross-cultural perspectives, and multimedia interactions to further trace the evolution of female consciousness in modern China. The writing practices of modern female journalists constitute a pivotal chapter in the awakening of Chinese women's consciousness. Through autonomous writing, they challenged traditional gender hierarchies and constructed new discourses for women. This not only laid the groundwork for subsequent women's liberation movements but also offers historical insights and inspiration for contemporary gender equality practices.

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