

Global Fashion Brands and the Construction of “Modern Girl” Archetypes in the Emerging Chinese Market

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Abstract

The rapid growth of the Chinese economy since the late 1970s has dramatically changed the dynamics of the marketplace. China’s consumer society has been transformed to a more liberal market system in which a variety of diverse market imageries have been created and circulated to consumers. This article examines how global fashion brands construct different “modern girl” archetypes for consumers in the emerging Chinese market. Through conducting a semiotic analysis of printed advertisements published in four major fashion magazines during a four-year period from the beginning of 2009 to the end of 2012, we identified six “modern girl” archetypes constructed by global fashion brands. Our findings reveal a dialogical relationship between brand-created imageries and prevailing cultural attitudes. We argue that fashion brands strategically create alternative modern girl archetypes as a way to depict a new era marked by the liberation of Chinese women under the influence of global consumer culture.

Keywords: Archetype, Modern Girl, Fashion Brands, China, Advertisement

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INTRODUCTION

Owing to the economic reform in the late 1970s, China has been transformed from a state-owned economic system to a market-oriented consumerist society in which multiple local and global corporations compete to define what is desirable (Chen et al. 2001; Davis 2000; Watson 1997). Various market imageries have been created and circulated in this new emerging economy. Constantly exposed to global brands, Chinese consumers are seeking new resources to construct the “New Chinese” identities and to redefine their modern selves in order to differentiate themselves from the socialist iconic images that dominated China in the past (Lu 2008; Stevens 2003; Watson 1997; Wu, Borgerson, and Schroeder 2013).

In the present study, we employed Carl Jung’s (1959) notion of archetype to describe the transpersonal realm that is inferred or hypothesized through psychic ideas or images expressed in dreams, fantasies, delusions, myths, stories, and symbols (see Ford, 2004). An “archetype” therefore is a model image of a person. Mark and Pearson (2001) examined how brands incorporate widely-circulated and recognized archetypes in building their brand images and meanings. Our work focuses on the construction of “modern girl” archetypes (Weinbaum et al. 2008)—the collective unconscious that consumers identify with—based on the co-constructive practices of multiple fashion brands and the new cultural system in China.

Advertisements play an important role in communicating “ideals” to targeted consumers. Marketing and consumer researchers are interested in understanding how visual and linguistic elements influence the brand/product perceptions and purchasing intentions of consumers, as well as the construction of different cultural discourses such as identity, masculinity, fashion, and luxury (McQuarrie and Mick 1996, 1999; Moeran 2004; Schroeder and Zwick 2007; Scott 1994; Stern 1996a; Thompson and Haytko 1997). The data employed in our analyses comprises of a set of global fashion brand advertisements collected from four Chinese magazines over a four-year period (2009–2013). Extant studies in this field indicate that advertising images and content are key instruments for consumers to negotiate their self-identities in emerging economies such as China (Zhao and Belk 2008b; Zhou and Belk 2004). We aspire to address three research questions: (1) what symbols do global fashion brands employ to construct the “modern girl” imageries, (2) what are the symbolic meanings of these symbols and text used to appeal to Chinese females, and (3) what are key archetypes constructed by global fashion brands in targeting Chinese women? To answer these questions, we employed the semiotic analysis approach (Mick 1986; Mick and Oswald 2006; Schroeder and Zwick 2004) to unpack the meanings of symbols that appear in the advertisements under study. Our semiotic analysis revealed six “modern girl” archetypes, which were examined in the context of consumer revolution era (Chen et al. 2001), marked by consumer empowerment to choose their preferred lifestyles and representations in the new market-socialist governance.

CARL JUNG’S ARCHETYPES AND THE EMERGENCE OF “MODERN GIRL”

Over the years, Carl Jung contributed several influential works on active imagination and introduced numerous concepts and arguments in presenting differences between human consciousness and unconsciousness, as well as contradictory aspects of human beings in society. Jung's notion of "archetype" is one aspect of his broader thesis on collective unconsciousness (Jung 1916, 1921, 1961). Unlike personal unconsciousness, which refers to repressed or forgotten memories and desires, collective consciousness is the transpersonal realm that is inferred or hypothesized through psychic ideas or images expressed in dreams, fantasies, delusions, myths, stories, and symbols (Ford 2004). Following Jung's works, Rowland (2002: 173) provided a comprehensive definition of "archetype." To Rowland, archetypes are "inherited structuring patterns in the unconscious with potential for meaning formation and images". He also viewed archetypes as "containers of opposites and so are androgynous, equally capable of manifesting themselves in either gender or non-human forms" (173). An "archetype," in this sense, is a model image of a person.

The notion of archetypes is at the core of Jung's psychology and is closely linked to his idea of individuation. Jung defined the concept as the process of "coming to selfhood" or "self-realization" (Jung 1943: 173). According to Jung, each individual has an unconscious drive to become who he or she wants to be, whereby archetypal narratives serve to direct the self-formation or individuation process (see also Hecht 2011). In the field of marketing and consumer research, marketing agents and brands have been actively creating new ideals and imagined communities, as well as new cultural discourses, such as "cosmopolitanism" and "global citizens," to inspire consumers in the global marketplace (Zhou and Belk 2004). In the present study, we were

particularly interested in examining the interconnection between archetypal imageries and the “modern girl” archetypes that are constructed by luxury brands.

The notion of the “modern girl” emerged in the first half of the twentieth century and has since become a global phenomenon. Weinbaum et al. (2008) and other authors argued that the “modern girl” is only a heuristic device, a product of a series of advertising activities in our consumer society. Burke (2008) noted that the “modern girl” concept is closely connected to the cultural construction of “modernity” and “contemporaneity,” claiming that these local definitions are largely shaped by global discourses. He further posited that the “modern girl” is “a construct, a representation of personhood, identity, and practice” (363). For Burke, human agents such as marketers are essential “producers” of representations of the “modern girl.”

In this work, we argue that global fashion brands and advertisers are key producers of new archetypes. Imageries and projected lifestyles associated with these archetypes become aspirational, idealized references or new standards for consumers. Thus, to examine this hypothesis, we employed the conception of archetypes to describe the construction of “modern girl” ideals in contemporary Chinese consumer society (or the post-Open Door era [since late 1970s]).

CHINA’S EMERGING CONSUMER SOCIETY

In imperial China, social ranking was primarily based on the occupation and was categorized into four major groups, namely the scholar-bureaucrats, the farmers, the artisans, and the despised merchants (Lu 2008). Among these groups, the scholar-bureaucrats received the highest respect, as many members of this group were often

called upon to help the emperor manage the country. Thus, the social hierarchy defined the career advancement opportunities. Consumption was viewed as a form of leisure activity in ancient China and was limited to the affluent upper class. However, the situation changed dramatically in the late Qing dynasty (late nineteenth century) while imported goods had become more affordable to the general public. Shanghai was considered as one of the top five cosmopolitan cities in the early twentieth century and the “Old Shanghai” images were still iconic Chinese representations in the global market (Barlow 2008; Zhao and Belk 2008a). However, the series of wars in mid-twentieth century turned China into a war zone due to which many Chinese suffered from poverty and forced migration for decades. The Cultural Revolution in the late 1960s also plunged the country into a decade-long political instability.

Since the late 1970s, consumerism in China has been intimately linked to the changes that occurred in society as the country opened up to the outside world and underwent a transition from a command to a market economy. By the 1990s, access to new methods of communication, diverse leisure activities, and differing social discourses enabled Chinese consumers to gain new commercial freedoms (Lu 2008; Watson 1997; Wu, Borgerson and Schroeder 2013). Consumers started to enjoy fashion and imported products that bolstered their status, yet exceeded their income. China’s consumption behavior was thus guided by cultural perceptions reinforced by social and cultural assumptions. New identifications were created and were continually changing (Joy and Li 2012). At the same time, the Chinese were either restrained by communist principles or freed by consumerist and individualistic values (Zhao and Belk 2008b). Consumers made purchases in support of modernization by partaking in socialist activities or by seeking

hedonistic consumption experiences. Although the West was perceived with admiration, as being modern and progressive, Chinese consumers would creolize goods imported from the West by viewing them from the perspective of Chinese cultural values. Lu (2008) noted that the purchasing power and trend-defining lifestyle of Chinese consumers reshaped the global consumer market to an unprecedented extent.

Owing to these changes, the definition of the self was moving from product to brand. In this article, we argue that new consumption practices are key to demonstrating the transformation of Chinese consumer identities and to illuminating the new social order under the market-socialist approach. The act of consuming global brands and fashionable goods signals modernity and transformation (Zhao and Belk 2008b; Zhou and Belk 2004). To respond to this emerging desire, global fashion brands are attempting to gain recognition through a wide variety of market communication strategies, including those that connect the brand image with cultural heritage. For example, the “Louis Vuitton Voyages” exhibition in the National Museum of China was aimed at drawing equal attention to history and art and at connecting the mission of a museum to the brand’s commercial activities (McLaughlin 2011). The advertising approaches of global fashion brands, however, remain universally coherent; each promotes an individualistic representation of its own identity, as such a strategy is what distinguishes and defines the brand as modern and fashionable. Through analyzing advertising discourses, our aim is to gain a better understanding of how Chinese consumers incorporate a diversity of resources to construct their identities (Arnould and Thompson 2005).

Prevailing Female Archetypes in China

While Chinese society has undergone rapid economic, social and cultural transformation in the past few decades, women's roles and status have also experienced dramatic changes. In this section, we discuss three prevalent female archetypes in China, namely the "Confucian-bounded housewife," the "Communist woman," and the "*bai, fu, mei* ideal" (white, rich, and beautiful).

First, "Confucian-bounded housewife" presents the long-existing expectations that highlighted the importance of family, respect, and the awareness of shame. Throughout history, gender relations were very much guided by the Confucian discourse of "*zhong nan qing nu*" (giving importance to men, while women are looked down upon) (Thakur 2006), which emphasized male superiority and dominance in the society. The Taoist concept of *yin-yang* also addressed the difference between men and women. Even though the concepts of *yin* and *yang* are complementary, they are not equal (Hooper 1975). In China, women were traditionally viewed as subordinate to men (Gao 2003) and were expected to be guided by the husband (Lu 2008), in line with the Confucian doctrines. Practices such as foot-binding were introduced back in the 10th or 11th century to restrict the movement of women (Foreman 2015), and polygamy was an accepted custom in ancient Chinese society. Women's role was based on the "three obediences and the four virtues"¹ (Gao 2003; Hooper 1975) and this ideology prevailed until the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

However, the "Confucian-bounded housewife" archetype experienced the first wave of challenge during the late Qing Dynasty (late 1890s and early 1900s). As a part of

¹ The Three Obediences require women to obey the father before marriage, obey the husband after marriage, and obey the first son after the death of the husband. The Four Virtues are (sexual) morality, proper speech, modest manner, and diligent work (Gao 2003: 116).

the anti-imperialist, anti-Confucian, nationalist, and intellectual movements, the Reform Movement in the mid-1890s and the New Cultural Movement of the May Fourth Era (1915–1925) initiated public discussion on gender equity—the role of women in the new China in particular. The introduction of Western ideologies such as socialism, feminism, and Marxism challenged the dominant Confucian ideology and played a key role in the development of the new socio-cultural environment in the country (Chow et al. 2004).

During the Cultural Revolution, equality became an important ideology to unify the nation. *Lei-Feng*² style figures were heavily promoted and publicized. The Communist Party placed an emphasis on the value of self-scarification in order to de-emphasize individual achievement and class differences. Gender equality had become an important ideology. The slogan “Women hold up half the sky” and images of the women from the Dazhai oil fields were used to recognize women’s role and contribution in the communist society (Thakur 2006). This revolutionary concept not only challenged the traditional gender relations but also played an important part in constructing the conception of “New China” (Hooper 1975).

The status of women has changed dramatically in the past three decades since the economic reform. The economic growth in mainland China required that more women entered employment, while the one-child policy created a generation of “little empresses” (along with “little emperors”) (Jing 2000). The desire for “*bai, fu, mei*” (white, rich, and beautiful) is some of the newly developed “standards” for females in contemporary China. These standards also echo the new ideological values, whereby the society places

² *Lei Feng* is an iconic heroic figure that was heavily used by the Communist Party during the Reform period in China (1950 to 1970) to promote selflessness and devotion to the country.

greater value on wealth, social position, confidence, leadership, achievement, and adoption of the latest technology (Lu 2008). The “*bai, fu, mei*” archetype was also widely promoted through the digital media and has become a popular buzzword in the popular culture. To some extent, this archetype reflects the influence of the latest version of consumerism to the Chinese society. The definition of females is thus articulated unconsciously through mass media and market myths.

Even though the “Communist woman” archetype is no longer influential, the idea of gender equality is still embedded deeply in contemporary Chinese society. Instead of being the role model for Chinese women, the communist women have become an opposite archetypal image for the New Chinese. As one of the fastest-growing economies in the twenty-first century, China has experienced dramatic economic, social, cultural, technological and political changes in the recent decades. How these changes affect conventional cultural constructs such as family, gender, values and belief systems is an ongoing question for academics, practitioners, and policymakers. In this article, we aim to address the interrelationship between fashion, advertising messages, and consumer identity, as well as explore the opportunities and tensions among these interacting constructs.

RESEARCH METHODS

Semiotics in Advertisements

To better understand the connection between archetypal images and the development of “modern girl” ideals, we employed the semiotic approach to analyzing selected luxury fashion advertisements in China. Semiotics is generally perceived as the scientific study

of signs, codes, icons, and other objects, as these symbols facilitate meaning-construction (Mick 1986; Manning and Cullum-Swan 1994). Semiotic analysis is rooted in Saussure's (1915) work on semiology. It considers the process of meaning construction and transfer between the nature of objects and the preferences of individuals and the perception of sign systems. Semiotics in this case helps to produce interpretative responses between interpreters and objects.

In extant studies on advertisement, semiotics was employed as a form of illustrated analysis (Mick 1986). Stern (1996b) conveyed this idea by suggesting that traditions and historical conventions, shown as pictures and texts, are incorporated into advertisements to create unified and standardized meanings. In their study of the semiology in advertisements, Mick and Oswald (2006) suggested that semiotic analysis could highlight how brands differentiate themselves from their competitors. Semiotics, therefore, captures dialectic relations and showcases the transfer of the meaning and significance of objects. In this article, we seek to identify the archetypal images that global fashion brands have used to construct new “modern girl” ideals in Chinese consumer society.

Dataset

The data utilized in the present analysis was sourced from luxury brand advertisements placed in four global and local magazines in China, namely Cosmopolitan (Chinese version) (时尚), Elle (Chinese version) (时尚), Jessica (时尚) and Shanghai Fashion (时尚). The initial sample comprised of 650 advertisements collected

between 2009 and 2012, 580 of which were analyzed after removing the duplicates (Table 1).

---- Insert Table 1 above here ----

In our data analysis, we followed a coding procedure proposed by Strauss and Corbin (1998). We started with descriptive coding, whereby we recorded the brand, product category, slogan, and model's ethnicity featured in each advertisement. In the next step, we recorded the visual codes, such as the background, theme color, model's body posture, make-up, facial expression, and the placement of products and other objects. Finally, we examined the semiotic codes, such as the implicit meanings, visual references, and the overarching expression. The first and second author were responsible for the coding activities, while the entire research team was engaged in the ongoing discussion on the emerging themes. The analytical procedure consisted of decoding the collected data for less conspicuous visuals of interest. Traditional icons were recognized and newly discovered prominent symbols were abstracted for analysis. They were subsequently reordered in each advertisement to identify hidden yet plausible connotations. During this stage of the examination, this scrutiny of chosen symbols for implicit messages was supported by interpretations provided by the authors of extant studies in this field.

The findings presented in this article are based on theories connected to semiology and current semiotic analytical methodologies employed in American and Chinese research on advertisements. During the thematic analysis, we noted that some of

the ads were also circulated in other countries with minimal alternation. Our interpretation, however, primarily focused on connecting Chinese culture to the advertising messages generated by fashion brands. The research team continually compared and contrasted the codes and emergent themes and discussed the discrepancies in order to achieve consensus in interpretation. The advertisements discussed were chosen on the basis of how “conceptually interesting” the ads are (Zhao and Belk 2008b) in connection to the identified “modern girl” archetypes. Such an interpretative approach is not uncommon in semiotic research (Zhao and Belk 2008b). However, we are aware of the possibility that other cultural researchers might offer different interpretations.

FINDINGS

Our semiotic analysis of the advertisements revealed six “modern girl” archetypes that were strategically constructed by fashion brands to inspire Chinese consumers to adopt new interpretations of modern girls and New Chinese. These archetypes were constructed by promoting the brands’ interpretation and elaboration of “modern” to Chinese female consumers, thereby creating new ideals of femininity, beauty, and fashion. The first four archetypes, the “innocent and natural beauty,” the “subordinated lover,” the “exotic Oriental,” and the “classy Western,” tended to portray stereotypical traditional Chinese women. The remaining two archetypes, the “empowered achiever” and the “liberal rebel,” reveal the influence of Western liberalism on redefining ideal imageries for Chinese women.

The “Innocent and Natural Beauty” Archetype

Innocence, purity, and natural beauty among the many widely disseminated and reoccurring codes illustrated in a wide range of fashion brand advertisements analyzed as a part of this investigation. Objects from the natural environment, such as olive trees, doves, waterfalls, forests, leaves, blue sky, beach, horses, and blooming flowers, are some of the props used in the fashion ads in order to elicit the sense of purity and naturalness.

Hermes, for instance, has launched an advertising campaign showcasing the beauty of nature. In one of the advertisements, a female model is leaning against an old olive tree, wearing a classic Hermes green scarf on her head (*Elle Hong Kong* 2012: 61-63)³. The scarf is blown by the breeze into the sky and emerges in the shape of a butterfly's wing. The background—a pure white sky—embellishes the tribal designs of the scarf. On the left, the Hermes logo is accompanied by the slogan “时□□□” (literally translated as “gift of time”), placed immediately beneath it. To further interpret this visual setting, the linkage between women and nature matches Chinese traditional gender roles and perceptions—men are closer to the culture while women are closer to nature. This ad also showcased the Hermes signature product—a patterned silk scarf—with an implied message that is faintly but yet pervasively imbued with Chinese cultural values. The slogan “时□□□” (gift of time) reveals the brand's attempt to associate Hermes brand heritage with the sense of timelessness. This message is sustained by the meaning of the objects and Eden-like natural setting in the ad. Although introduced to China from Persia, olive trees are regarded as a symbol of life. At the same time, rocks

³ A sample of this ad can be found at <http://luxuryes.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/Hermes-2012-Ad-Campaign1.jpg>

symbolize longevity and are prevalent in Chinese paintings (Eberhard 1986). The combination of the olive tree and rocks thus associates the Chinese symbolic meanings with the Hermes brand, injecting culturally desirable values that convey a sense of class (see also Zhao and Belk 2008b). Other fashion brands such as MaxMara and Salvatore Ferragamo also used natural environment as a background to their advertising campaigns.

The emphasis on nature and harmony is also regarded as a nationalistic representation. Soil, roots, genealogical trees, and landscapes symbolize the origins of their lives and represent the unity of the nation-state (Cayla and Eckhardt, 2008). By depicting a collective binding force like nature, fashion brands have the capability to connect consumers and brands by justifying the image, philosophy, and heritage of the brand, as well as the manifest desire for happiness and timelessness. The imageries presented by the fashion brands discussed above also promote the experience of returning to the nature, simplicity, and innocence.

The “Subordinated Lover” Archetype

The second archetype, “subordinated lover,” we identified in our analysis presents how fashion brands articulate the subordination of women through their advertisements.

The imageries associated with the subordination of women not only reinforce the oppression of women in traditional Chinese society, but also depict the brand-constructed fashion standards and visual relationships that further enslave female consumers in the contemporary marketplace. Women in China have long been considered subordinate to their male counterparts. Women were controlled and monitored by men in ancient Chinese society. Practices such as foot-binding were aimed at limiting the movement of

women in the community, as men believed that most women should stay at home and take care of the children and the seniors of the household. Women were perceived as “flower vases”—a display of beauty and an object of admiration aimed at male audiences. This analogy also suggests that female beauty and style determine their status in society.

The subordinate status of women is also conveyed by the body posture of the female models. Leaning, for instance, was found to be a very “popular” position in the advertisements analyzed in the present study. Dior’s 2010 March advertising campaign showcased a model leaning towards the wall in an enclosed space. The female model expressed the “yearning” emotion in this ad, which could be interpreted as the expectation of arrival of her male counterpart. Since body posture was found in Chanel’s 2010 March advertisement⁴ as well. Peiss (2008) observed that the “leaning” position is a common body posture adopted by American ads aimed at modern girls. Such position in fact reinforces the subordinate status of women in both Chinese and Western consumer culture. The absence of men in some of the advertisements also creates the illusion of the “waiting” or “looking forward.”

In summary, this archetype shows that the female body continues to be sexualized, objectified, exploited, disenfranchised, oppressed, and commercialized (Rosenmeier 2011; Uberoi 1991).

The “Exotic Oriental” Archetype

⁴ A sample of this ad can be found at http://alovevelybeing.com/storage/channelspringadcampaign1.jpg?__SQUARESPACE_CACHEVERSION=1266722830067

Western Oriental views are based on a mixture of Asian stereotypes. Global fashion ads sometimes incorporate many iconic objects of the Chinese values that establish Chinese traditions. In one of the Louis Vuitton advertisements, objects that signify a more complex perception of China's female beauty and status are used (*Cosmopolitan Hong Kong* 2011: 1)⁵. The Caucasian models are dressed in *qipao*-style outfits and the background is a chamber-like setting that associated to the night club scene during the period of Old Shanghai (the 1920s to 1930s). Similar to the “Classy Western” archetype, the “Exotic Oriental” archetype seeks to present the timelessness of the prevailing Oriental look. The use of *qipao* and the luxurious décor in the Louis Vuitton ad reconnect fashion to a set of Chinese imageries and femininity (Leung 2012).

In addition to fashion style and the Asian-look of the models, status-signifying objects such as the golden-yellow European veils and utensils depicted in the background represent advancement, progress, and recognition, as only the Chinese Emperor was permitted to wear that color (Eberhard 2001). Finally, the “chamber-style” background reinforces another Chinese gender perception—women should stay “inside” the house, while men are supposed to be “outside.” To sum up our analysis, the “Exotic Oriental” archetype presents the persistence of the globally circulated Chinese imageries. These imageries not only showcase the aesthetic and artistic aspects of Chinese culture but also illustrate the non-western civilization and class structure. Fashion brands are strategically incorporate these cultural symbols and aesthetics to enrich their interpretations and elaborations of fashion in the global marketplace.

⁵ A sample of this ad can be found at <http://www.ilvoelv.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/DEI-220x285-F-AVANT1-UK.jpg>

The “Classy Western” Archetype

The “classy Western” archetype is a great representation of the Euro-centric fashion industry in which global fashion brands seek to incorporate the long-lasting Western imageries in the advertising and brand-building strategies. Classic Hollywood icons, such as Audrey Hepburn, Sophia Loren, and Elizabeth Taylor, were globally-recognized fashion icons during the Hollywood Golden Age (late 1910s to 1960s). Their fashion style and appearance greatly influenced the representation of haute couture and Western lifestyle in the Chinese market.

In Louis Vuitton’s Fall 2012 advertisement (*Cosmopolitan Hong Kong* 2012)⁶, the visual setting was very much inspired by the slow-train journey in pre-World War I Europe. The serious-looking female models (the young ladies of entitlement) were dressed in the pre-WWI style wardrobe—elongated, ankle-grazing, A-line silhouettes, with the tall, deep-brimmed, expression-concealing hats, each sprouting an eccentric medallion of fur, with a puff of feather on the side (Mower 2012). The ad seeks to create an aristocratic theme by showcasing lives of the super-rich females travelling around the region, piling up their purchased trophies. Similarly, Chanel’s March 2011 advertising campaign featured a typical Western garden picnic.

In China, Western lifestyle is also a key reference to consumers. The “classy Western” archetype indicates that the prevailing Western imageries are in fact key resources for consumer identity formation. The classic imageries also showcase how brands anchor their identity with globally circulated “Western” symbols. Carrier (1995) used the concept of “occidental”—in contrast to Said’s (1979) conception of

⁶ A sample of this ad can be found at <https://fashionslop.files.wordpress.com/2012/06/louis-vuitton-fall-winter-2012-2013-ad-campaign-1.jpg>

Orientalism—to describe the self-imaging practices adopted by the West. Such practices also create a set of Western ideals for Chinese females in the current context.

The “Empowered Achiever” Archetype

Unlike the previous two modern girl archetypes that emphasize and magnify traditional “beauty” and the subordination of women in the society, the archetype of “empowered achiever” demonstrates the recent development of modern girl ideals in China. This archetype illustrates the new definition of “masculine beauty” (in contrast to the Communist masculine women) to uncover modernity through gender-balanced social changes in present-day Chinese society. The emerging nation is depicted as contemporary through the empowerment of women and the recognition of their financial independence.

In their 2012 advertising campaign, Emporio Armani featured the post-colonial Hong Kong as the backdrop for the campaign. Under the creative direction of Giorgio Armani himself, the campaign sought to highlight the international financial center status of Hong Kong. In one of the advertisements (*Cosmopolitan Hong Kong* 2012: 10-11), the two Asian models (Tao Okamoto and Wang Xiao) stand firm against the International Financial Centre (IFC) in Hong Kong. One of the models featured in this ad is wearing a unisex business attire and is holding a briefcase, signifying the idea of “working females” which is equated with a more masculine look. It is also important to note that the fashion style presented in this ad is closely connected to the colonial British ideals. The straw hat that both models wear was a British fashion introduced to Hong Kong men during the British colonial era (the 1800s–1930s). In the ad, the females are permitted to take on the roles of males by having careers and assuming masculine traits, while retaining the

pleasures of feminine beauty (Eberhard 2001). It is worth noting that Giorgio Armani is known to be particularly partial to slanting his women's fashions toward masculinity (Davis 1992: 45).

Advertising campaigns of other fashion brands, such as Dolce and Gabbana's September 2011 initiative, also feature the unisex female style. Such "masculine women" showcased in the Armani and Dolce and Gabbana ads in fact contradicted to the "masculine women" image the Chinese Communist Party heavily promoted in the mid-20th century. In his study of Chinese consumer culture, Doctoroff (2012) noted that, as Chinese women seek to reconcile achievement and traditional feminine grace, consumer goods such as fashionable clothing are key objects through which they can fulfill this desire. Instead of highlighting the equal opportunities and equal contribution of the women to the society, the "empowered achiever" archetype conveys the independence and career achievement under the influence of market-socialism.

The "Liberal Rebel" Archetype

The last archetype, liberal rebel, present the very "Western" imagery in the development of the notion of modern girl. The emphasis on sexuality, nudity, female body, affairs, and freedom is literally challenging various boundaries of traditional Chinese culture. Such emphasis can be found in the advertising campaigns of many popular fashion brands. For example, Lacoste's Fall 2012 campaign used the tagline "unconventional chic" to introduce the "new woman" identity to the fashion industry. In their March 2010 advertising campaign⁷, Gucci presented the "liberal rebel" archetype, which echoes what

⁷ A sample of this ad can be found at http://media.onsugar.com/files/2010/02/07/6/325/3254443/27/Natasha_Poly_Gucci_ss10.jpg

Üstüner and Holt (2010: 47) called “the Western lifestyle myth” in which females in non-Western societies were inspired by the globalized Western ideologies and lifestyle. The desire for more control and freedom to express oneself are addressed by the fashion brand advertisements analyzed in the current study.

The “liberal rebel” archetype can also be linked to the “women warrior” figures that long existed in Chinese culture. The masculine, warrior-life imageries presented by fashion brands echo some ancient or mythic female figures, such as *Hua Mulan* and the Iron Girls of the Cultural Revolution (Mann 2000). The celebration of the powerful women therefore becomes a powerful submissive ideology in the emerging Chinese consumer society.

---- Insert Table 2 about here ----

In summary, the six identified “modern girl” archetypes showcase the polarity of opposing views and ideals that inform Chinese female identity project. The abundance of (often contesting) choices also amplifies the multiple perspectives therefore fosters individuation practices in the collectivist society. The brand-constructed archetypes are now available and accessible to the New Chinese and such freedom to choose and consume has become a milestone of the new consumerism under market socialism.

DISCUSSION

As a part of this investigation, we found that global fashion brands are contributing a number of new archetypes to the development of “modern girls” in contemporary

Chinese society. New symbols, lifestyles, and expectations are communicated through imageries in the advertisements. The new imageries serve as a new ideological framework to shape consumption practices and construct new meanings of brands and consumer culture. Our semiotic analysis shows how texts and symbols incorporated into fashion advertisements constitute the daily consumer discourses and contribute to the politics of definition. Female status and role have experienced dramatic changes in the past few decades due to different waves of political and market reformations.

Our study of modern girl archetypes constructed by global fashion brands also reflects the role of fashion system in the consumer society. Fashion is both a consumable and a promise. Fashionable items promise to make consumers' dreams and desires come true (Craik, 2009). At the same time, it is a body-constructing and self-realization practice under the influence of consumerism and materialism. Figure 2 presents the interactions of a diversity of constructs in the construction of "modern girl" archetypes. We argue that the construction practice is guided by both cultural and brand heritage as well as the distinction between the local and global in the current context.

---- Insert Figure 2 about here ----

Our semiotic analysis informs the academic community and industry practitioners of the fashion brands' contribution to the construction of Chinese "modern girl" archetypes. The fashion advertisements examined in the present study systematize strictly formed codes that are not in accord with the values of all consumers. The perceptions and consumption behavior of Chinese consumers today are driven by their desire for global

cosmopolitanism, Chinese heritage, and status-heightening goods. The “modern girl” archetypes identified in this study illustrate a wide spectrum of beauty and fashion styles and standards currently used to define females in the new China.

Our findings also reveal the dialogical relationship between the interdependent and independent self-concepts present in the Chinese consumer society. While authors of extant studies noted that East Asian cultures are heavily influenced by the Confucian collectivism and value the fundamental connectedness of human beings (Markus and Kitayama 1991), the “innocent-natural beauty,” the “subordinate lover,” the “classy Western” and the “exotic Oriental” archetypes very much conform to the prevailing stereotypical representations of females. However, the “liberal rebel” and the “empowered achiever” archetypes identified in this study present the existence of the independent construal of the self in the contemporary Chinese market.

Our findings have several notable implications for the field of fashion studies and consumer research. First, we argue that fashion and beauty ideals constructed by global fashion brands have become new contributors to the ongoing construction of “modern girl” archetype in the emerging Chinese market. These market-constructed archetypes in fact constantly challenge existing definitions and perceptions of beauty and females in China. Traditionally, Chinese have perceived such beauty as being unreflective of Chinese values because Confucian values are immutable and are at the core of China’s consumer society. Our findings, however, show the recent promotion of independence and self-indulgence are starting to challenge these prevailing norms.

Second, Chinese conceptions of the “modern girl” are influenced by the contents of globalized advertisements, as has been made evident in previous studies on marketing

and advertising (e.g., Cheng 1997; Cheng and Schweitzer 1996; Huang and Lowry 2012; Ji and McNeal 2001; Lin 2001; Tse, Belk, and Zhou 1989; Wong and Ahuvia 1998; Zhang and Shavitt 2003). Zhou and Belk (2004) posited that such influences do not explain how symbols used in the global context affect local consumers. Thus, our examination of the global influences on the local in China provides a new theoretical lens to unpack the inter-relationship between global and local in the context of advertising imageries.

Compared to the Maoist era (1949–1978), consumerism and individualism are more acceptable in contemporary Chinese society. Even though our findings show that gender differences are being strategically created and promoted through commercial activities, we argue that Chinese consumers are being exposed to a new set of values pertaining to human rights and empowerment. Instead of being governed by the norms of a state-operated society, Chinese consumers now enjoy more autonomy in their everyday lives. The consumption of global fashion has become one of the many ways of signaling upward mobility. The lifestyles and imageries portrayed by the brands have become new standards and archetypes for the tastes and preferences of consumers. We argue that the abundance of “modern girl” archetypes identified in this work represents a new era of consumerism in contemporary China.

CONCLUSION

Our study revealed that global fashion brands have created sign interpretations that are strategically shaping personal experiences, cultural milieus, and social forms (Manning & Cullum-Swan 1994) in the contemporary Chinese consumer society. The brand-

constructed archetypes discussed in this article are not only new standards of beauty but also new ideals for female consumers in modern China. Ewen (1988: 71) stated that commercialized goods have become resources for forging a persona or key elements for constructing the “commodity self” (see also Murray 2002). Various imageries and concepts are used in luxury fashion advertisements to appeal to Chinese consumers. The implicit connotations of themes that were identified in this study with regard to global fashion and social and cultural changes are illustrated through the different juxtapositions of symbolic values.

As an extension of extant research on advertisements and semiotics, the present study highlights the significance of the collective yet clandestine symbolic meanings of advertisements in encouraging consumerism within China. Each “modern girl” archetype that has been identified could be perceived as an attempt by advertisers to project the image of a brand by using symbolic values to communicate the desired representation of the brand. Our analysis presents the translation of objects to Chinese values, which enables consumers to continue their local appropriation of imported goods (Hung, Li, and Belk 2007) and the desire for an imagined cosmopolitanism (Zhou and Belk 2004) when they encounter symbolic appeal.

Even though the identified “modern girl” archetypes are not uniquely created to target the Chinese females, our analysis demonstrates the contradicting and contesting ideologies that articulate the tensions and opportunities that have evolved during the economic transformation of the Chinese society. Our study also provides critical lens through which to explore the interaction of local culture and the embodiment of global images. Fashion brand imageries and the imported fashion discourses have not only

become key resources for consumer identity projects, but have also provided new aesthetic and emotional content guiding the construction of “modern girl” standards and representations.

In conclusion, our work is the first study in which the notion of archetypes is employed to elucidate the contribution of market-constructed ideals to consumer identity projects in the emerging market of China. We argue that the identified modern girl archetypes are a reflection of the Western-style materialism, individualism, and consumerism that are taking root in China. At the same time, these newly imported ideologies and imageries have become important identity markers for constructing the imagined New Chinese selves.

As our findings merely illustrate possible values that may influence the definitions of “modern girl” in China, future research in this field can focus on the actual object-integration processes of Chinese consumers. In addition, authors of future studies should examine how consumers understand and internalize these archetypes. For instance, it is crucial to investigate how female consumers negotiate the boundaries of “standing out” and “fitting in” through fashion consumption. It would also be beneficial to examine the transferability of iconic values that are evident in Chinese consumers’ identity projects.

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Table 1. Summary of Data

Magazine	Number of Ads	Percentage
Cosmopolitan – China	265	46%
Elle – China	233	40%
Jessica	56	10%
Shanghai Fashion	26	4%
Total:	580	100%

Table 2. Archetypes and their Associated Gender Representations

“Modern Girl” Archetype	Gender Representation	Brand Example
Innocent-Natural Beauty	Purity, Mother Nature, innocence	Hermes (March 2012), Max Mara (September 2012)
Subordinated Lover	Subordination of women	Galliano (March 2012)
Classy Western	Vintage Pre-World War I European lifestyle, Hollywood Golden Age style, European arts	Chanel (March 2011), Louis Vuitton (Fall 2012)
Empowered Achiever	Career lady, independence, unisex outfit	Dolce and Gabbana (September 2011), Giorgio Armani (March 2012)
Exotic Oriental	Oriental, arts and cultural heritage	Louis Vuitton (March 2011)
Liberal Rebel	Wild, sexuality, liberalism	Calvin Klein, Lacoste (September 2012)
Communist Archetype	Gender Representation	
Confucian-bounded Housewife	Following the “three obediences and the four virtues” ideology and women were subordinate to men	
Masculine Woman	Gender equality, <i>Lei-Feng</i> style self-scarification	
<i>Bai, Fu, Mei</i> (White, rich, and beautiful)	Contemporary ideal for women, emphasizing both appearance and financial capability	

Figure 1. Modern Girl Archetypes Identified in Brand Advertisements

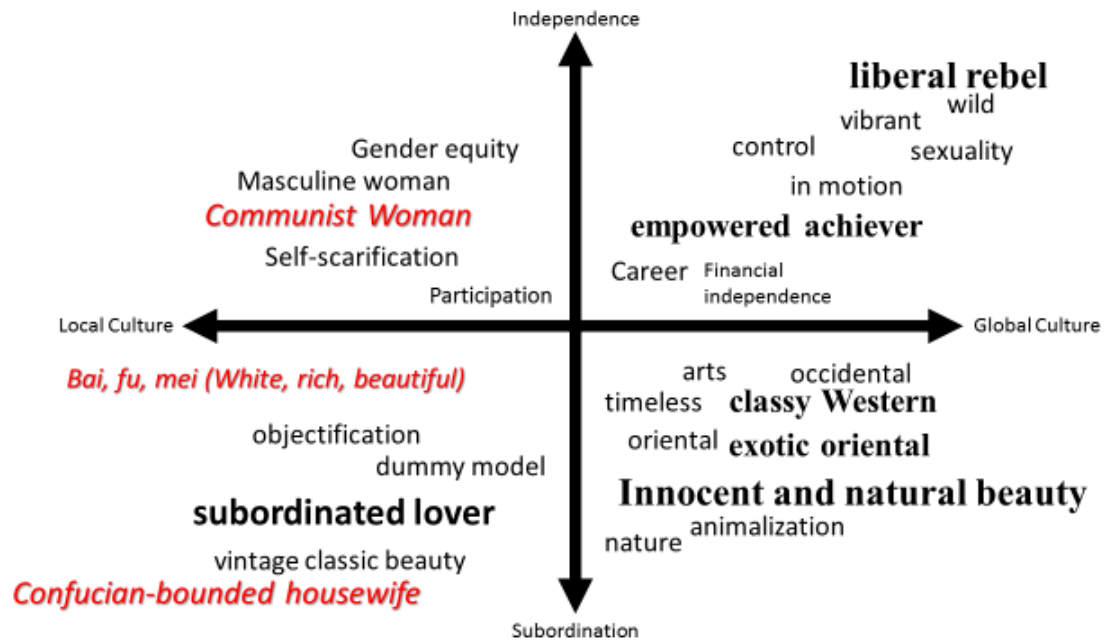


Figure 2. Theoretical Framework – Market Construction of Modern Girl Archetypes

