

**Megan M. Ferry. *Chinese Women Writers and Modern Print Culture*.
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The study of China's print media influences public understanding of its society. In early twentieth-century China, print media was not only a manifestation of cultural phenomena at specific historical stages but also a lens showing the collective narrative of Chinese modernity and the emancipation of women. It took the author of *Chinese Women Writers and Modern Print Culture*, Megan M. Ferry, twenty years and six rewrites to examine paratextual elements such as literary criticism, book covers, book advertisements, and photographs in detail, exploring modern women's identities and intellectual labour as reflected in the print media in twentieth-century China. Ferry notes that while a plethora of women's voices appeared in the print media at the time, the media drew on cultural norms to frame women's intellectual contributions through visual and linguistic differences, which "highlights a contradictory outcome of women's emancipation and gender equality" (Ferry 3).

Following the introduction, the book is divided into five chapters. In the first chapter, Ferry describes the particular experience of Ding Ling (1904-1986) in the 1930s. Chapter Two illustrates how male intellectual criticism of women writers' works influenced the social acceptance of these writers. Chapter Three analyses how the content and typography of book advertisements, book covers, and journal iconography about women writers guided people's vision and influenced their understanding. Chapter Four turns to the "extra-literary" texts—essays, letters, diaries, and autobiographies—produced by several modern women writers to discuss women's responses to the social norms of femininity and their views on literary production (Ferry 158). The final chapter again picks up the focus on Ding Ling, recounting her story after 1949 and following it to the 1990s to analyse post-1949 social discourses about gender.

Ding Ling is a representative female writer of modern China, and Ferry uses her unique historical experience as a typical example for discussing the gender issues faced by women writers. In Chapter 1, "Controlling Readings," Ferry focuses

on Ding Ling's experiences in the 1930s, showing the operation of the print media in shaping gender recognition. In 1933, Ding Ling disappeared from public view for three years following her kidnapping by the Nationalists. During this period, publishers and male intellectuals created images of Ding Ling for their readers as they imagined her. The female protagonists of Ding Ling's early works are mostly portrayed as breaking away from the old traditional life but feeling lost in their new freedom. Ferry quotes comments, articles, and memoirs by male intellectuals such as Qian Xingcun (1900-1977), Mao Dun (1896-1981), and Shen Congwen (1902-1988), recounting how they related these images to Ding Ling herself through their criticism, thus portraying Ding Ling as a Modern Girl. Ferry also mentions several publishing houses and newspapers, such as Liangyou Press and *Shenbao*, examining their portrayal of Ding Ling after her disappearance through book covers, book advertisements, and photographs. The readers at that time saw multiple images of Ding Ling: a Modern Girl, a mother, a female revolutionary, and a New Woman who "was supposed to be everything that the woman of the old society and Modern Girl was not" (Ferry 64). However, Ferry notes, "Ding Ling's physical disappearance removed her from any say in the reading and appropriation of her texts and her person" (Ferry 71).

Chapter 2, "Marking Difference," continues the discussion of critical commentary from the previous chapter. Ferry investigates the reviews of several influential male critics in the 1920s and 1930s, such as Qian Xingcun, He Yubo (1896-1982), and Cao Ye (1907-1994), and finds some common features. She reveals that while praising specific attributes, male critics always identified flaws in women writers' works, stated that they were gender-related, and provided guidance and suggestions for improving them. And when these women writers were considered more masculine, there was a clear shift in the commentary. Ferry points out that these critiques relegated women writers into a singular category, which claimed that their works were capitalistic and sensual, as well as lacking realism and grand narrative. Rather than the works themselves, these criticisms were widely circulated in the print media, strongly influencing the public reception and opinion of women's intellectual labour.

Chapter 3, "Technologies of Sex," continues the examination of another branch of Chapter 1—visual epitexts and peritexts. Ferry depicts seventeen images of book covers and advertisements related to women writers from the 1920s to the 1930s, exemplifying the elements, typography, and representation of women in detail. She highlights the illustrators' attitudes toward women as consumers and commodities that these images represent. Ferry finds that the "modern woman" is a more West-

ern, seductive image and denotes that the modern female body receives much attention, with print media judging women's modernity by emphasising their physical appearance: "the nonconforming body to this way of seeing is either unrecognisable or deemed 'unwomanly' and 'immoral'" (Ferry 127). Women writers, despite having a large number of works and some even doing editorial work, "were subjects of the printing panopticon, not its agents" (Ferry 145). People's desire to know more about women writers became part of marketing strategies, and these writers became a means of connecting literature and commercial interests. Ferry demonstrates how print media limited and defined women writers, rather than liberating them. She argues that these women writers were still the sexualised Other in the culture and that the paratexts marked and framed them.

Chapter 4, "Literary Lives," turns to focus on the voices of women themselves. Ferry notes that public attention to women was increasingly focused on their bodies and femininity in the 1920s and 1930s. She turns to the analysis of self-expression-based texts published by women, such as prefaces, diaries, letters, and autobiographies, arguing that these nontraditional literary forms, with their immediacy and unmediated nature of expression, could provide an alternative voice to the dominant literary narratives. Ferry analyses the expressions of female identity recognition and modernity in the relevant texts of several representative women writers such as Xie Bingying (1906-2000) and Bai Wei (1894-1987). While arguing that these texts express more of the true selves of women compared to literary texts, she is also aware that these texts that privilege text over image "may come across as less influenced by the belief system of the time, yet are equally immersed in the saturated vision of modern ideology" (Ferry 159). Ferry indicates at the same time that this kind of public manifestation and definition of the female self is "an integral part of the process of identity formation" (Ferry 172).

Chapter 5, "Emancipation and Sexual Difference," again picks up Ding Ling's story. In this chapter, Ferry recounts Ding Ling's experience after 1936, following her journey from reaching a certain height as a cultural producer to her exile in 1957 and finally to her rehabilitation in 1979, arguing that despite her cultural and political status and largely emancipated self, she was still confronted with the gendered hierarchies and was unable to guarantee her liberation. From this, Ferry discusses the political dimension of women's intellectual recognition in socialism after 1949. She mentions several contemporary women writers like Mian Mian (1970-) and Muzimei (1970-) who struggle to be the makers of their own images, yet "these women's recognition focused almost exclusively on their bodily exposure" (Ferry 200). Ferry points out that gender differences have reemerged since the 1980s as

the market has evolved. When contemporary women writers and intellectuals seek dignity under policies of redistribution of wealth, the print media resumes its commercial practices. It adopts similar patterns of curiosity and interest to those of the 1920s and 1930s, emphasises and exaggerates gender differences, and the status of women is subsequently reduced. Ferry thereby argues that “regardless of fifty years of attempted gender equality under socialism, traditional readings of women writers still dominated the media” (Ferry 203).

For women, having the opportunity to create and publish articles is often seen as an improvement in their status. Instead, in this monograph, Ferry breaks with the perception of media narratives familiar to scholars, pointing out that modern Chinese print media profits from the identity of women authors, as well as restricts and frames women writers’ intellectual recognition. Instead of focusing on the content of specific literary texts, Ferry pays attention to how the media market employs strategies such as visual presentation, commentary, and nontraditional literature texts to frame the image of women. This book contributes significantly to people’s understanding of the complex relationship between print media and gender in twentieth-century China. At the same time, Ferry does not limit herself to historical research of a specific period but extends her analysis to contemporary society, making illuminating and meaningful discussions for the present.

The work leaves some questions that deserve further consideration. Do the voices and encounters of the women writers, who represent only a small group of female intellectuals, represent the entirety of women’s emancipation in the twentieth century? Furthermore, the overall situation in China from the 1920s to the 1990s is intricate, with different regions experiencing different conditions at different periods. Focusing on the two ends of the period, irrespective of region, is to oversimplify the process of women’s emancipation. In addition, this book avoids discussing literary texts. It would have been more interesting if the book had explored interactions between literary texts and the media.

Overall, *Chinese Women Writers and Modern Print Culture* succeeds in combining media studies, gender studies, and paratextual studies, provides a complex reflection on the perspectives of media and gender relations in modern China, and inspires meaningful questions for further exploration.

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