

*How to be a Chinese Woman? Reflections from Chinese Self-help Literature*

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Abstract

A number of prominent studies have been conducted regarding the proliferation of self-help literature in American society since the 1960s. These studies, usually from a feminist perspective, ascribe the genre's widespread popularity to the growing financial and social independence of women who, as a result, seek to gain greater control over various aspects of their lives. What these studies make clear, however, is that this self-help literature, whether unthinkingly or by design, is itself significantly prejudiced by the power of consumer marketing, whose aim is to sell goods and services irrespective of any actual benefits accruing to those women who are induced to purchase them. Self-help literature of this kind trades off an already established image of the female subject, and thereby tends to reinforce and perpetuate it. It does not attempt to create a diagnostic approach to the prevailing image, let alone alert its readers to the possibility that there might be other, more enduring achievements to which they could aspire.

A similar proliferation of self-help literature in Chinese, especially from Taiwan, emerged in the 1990s, which has in turn stimulated an interest in self-help literature in Hong Kong. This paper aims to study a selected number of such literature, to analyze the "female self" it both reflects and underpins through the advice it gives and the ideas it discusses. These manuals or personal sharing formats cover a range of topics relating to urban women's life and work, including relationships, appearance, lifestyle, spiritual growth, finance, health, and so forth. Taken together, this provides a broad grasp of the fashion in which the female subject and her needs are perceived. This paper will subject this perception to a thorough critical analysis with a view to evaluating its role in popular culture.

A number of prominent studies have been conducted regarding the proliferation of self-help literature in American society since the 1960s. These studies, usually from a feminist perspective, ascribe the genre's widespread popularity to the growing financial and social independence of women who, as a result, seek to gain greater control over various aspects of their lives. What these studies make clear, however, is that this self-help literature, whether unthinkingly or by design, is itself significantly prejudiced by the power of consumer marketing, whose aim is to sell goods and services irrespective of any actual benefits accruing to those women who are induced to purchase them. Self-help literature of this kind trades off an already established image of the female subject, and thereby tends to reinforce and perpetuate it. It does not attempt to create a diagnostic approach to the prevailing image, let alone alert its readers to the possibility that there might be other, more enduring achievements to which they could aspire.

With the success of a number of internationally popular self-help books, such as the by now iconic *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* (John Gray 1992), in Hong Kong, the city has also cultivated its own self-help book market. A proliferation of self-help literature in Chinese, mostly written by Taiwan writers, emerged in the 1990s, forming the basis of a self-help literature in Hong Kong. This presentation is a preliminary study of such literature in Hong Kong, aiming to analyze the "female self" it both reflects and underpins through the advice it gives and the ideas it discusses. These manuals or personal sharing formats cover a range of topics relating to urban women's life and work, including relationships, appearance, lifestyle, spiritual growth, finance, health, and so forth. Taken together, this provides a broad grasp of the fashion in which the female subject and her needs are perceived. This presentation will subject this perception to a critical analysis with a view to evaluating its role in popular culture.

While Chinese self-help books in the form of *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* is a relatively recent phenomenon in Hong Kong, the demand for advice for women from "experts" of various kinds have been present for much longer. The local print media, including newspapers, the weekly entertainment magazines (e.g. Xin Dianshi 新電視, Jin Dianshi 金電視, Xianggang Dianshi 香港電視) and the monthly fashion magazines (e.g. the Chinese version of International Fashion Magazines such as *Cosmopolitan* which first issue was published in 1984 in Hong Kong, and it was the first of its kind then) featured sections where in-house editors or guest editors will select letters from readers and respond. Usually these sections were called "Madame so-and-so Mailbox" although it was not known whether the actual person selecting letters and writing responses was a woman or not. The content of these readers' letters covered quite a range, from teenage girls asking for information about their idols, to young women seeking advice about how to handle problems in their relationships, to housewives inquiring ways to deal with children, husband and housework, depending mainly on the nature of the newspaper columns and the magazines.

Besides the print media, the local TV stations also had specific programmes targeting housewives. These programmes (e.g. Funu Xinzi 婦女新姿 – "New Information for Women") were usually aired in the afternoon, right between the two main meals of the day, and also a time when children were at school and the mother would have the leisure to sit down and relax. Since the target audience was the housewife, each

episode usually contained information that a regular housewife would find interesting and useful, such as demonstration of cooking, experts explaining how to handle tricky chores at home, health tips, simple exercises which could be done at home, doctors to answer phone-in questions about various health conditions, and sometimes performances by/interviews with local celebrities. These afternoon programmes were very good illustrations of how the needs and identity of housewives were perceived because the target audience in this period was so obvious and exclusive. In the past 3 decades or so, foreign domestic helpers from the Philippines and Indonesia had increasingly become an important member of the local Hong Kong family, but it is not very likely that their interests would affect very much the content of the TV programmes aired in the afternoon when housewives will be free to watch.

From this very brief sketch of the situation of reader-responding print media in the form of newspaper columns and magazine sections, as well as the obviously housewife-targeting TV programmes in Hong Kong, it can be seen that giving advice to women, to help them with problems they encounter - or to put it in another way, the idea that women need advice from experts on various aspects of their daily life - has a history in Hong Kong. The emergence of Chinese self-help books is therefore not a completely new thing in terms of the general perception of women, although the target readers of this particular form of literature is more precise and the range of issues tackled is narrower given the clearly-identified target readers. And who are the target readers of these books? Obviously it would be someone who frequent bookstores, who is accustomed to getting information from books, perhaps because of flexibility in terms of time, and someone who has a mind to “help”/ “improve” oneself. The profile of target readers for self-help books is not that of full time home markers who have a few hours of leisure when the children are at school, but full time working women who may have encountered different problems and conditions in their lives, including workplace, relationship, health maintenance and finance etc. These books present themselves as direct, specific, and professional source of information to help solve various problems in these full-time working women’s lives. Because of the “professional” nature of these books, the qualifications of the writers becomes an important part of the marketing – it is no longer enough to have just the in-house writer/editor to answer readers’ questions, in most cases, the academic or professional qualifications of the author determines the sales of the book.

While self-help books have frequently made the best-seller lists, it is impossible to analyze and discuss thoroughly the types and contents of this genre within this paper. Allow me to briefly describe the main types as classified by the identity of the authors:

1. professionals/experienced administrators giving working women advice on workplace strategy;
2. medical professionals/gurus giving advice to all women concerning health and beauty;
3. famous stylists advising women on ways to present themselves;
4. psychologists/relationship gurus teaching women how to seek and maintain good relationship with the opposite sex;
5. celebrities, famous column writers teaching women how to find happiness.

Sometimes there are also books offering advice on a combination of health, happiness, relationship, beauty, and success in life. In the following, I have selected two

examples as a starting point to see what kind of advice is given to urban working Chinese women in areas of relationship, healthy and beauty, wellbeing, and workplace practice in the belief that these Chinese self-help books are giving the Chinese female readers a picture of the “proper” way to behave, a standard of what successful women should be like. From an analysis of the content and perhaps the way the content is presented, we can have an idea of what contemporary Chinese women are encouraged to be. The two selected examples are:

1. *To Become a Woman of Quality* (Li Ka Man 2006)
2. *The 40 Selves to Be for a Happy Woman* (Sha Sha 2012)

*To Become a Woman of Quality* (2006)

Although the title of the book sounds like a general advice manual for all women who want to become a woman of quality, it is in fact a book targeting working women specifically. The design of the book, and the highlight of topics on the cover all point to the workplace and qualities valued in the workplace. At this point, some readers may not feel comfortable about the exclusiveness of the book – what about women not working? Does it mean that only women with a paid job can become quality women? The author Li Ka Man is an academic working in one of the universities in Hong Kong, and she has also contributed to columns in local newspapers. Since her area is corporate communication and specifically organizational behavior, this book belongs to the type in which experts in the field give professional advice to women. The author’s other books, namely *To Enhance Your Work Wisdom* (2005), *Manage Yourself, and You Can Manage the Others* (2007), are also manuals giving women advice concerning their behavior in the workplace.

The preface describes the context which gives rise to the book – the complexity of being a woman in our society today. It says,

Yes, we are amazing, our own special characteristics, the multiplicity of our environment, social norms, the rise of old and new values, the multiple roles we assume, and the impacts of interaction among these different forces, altogether create a complex internal and external existence for women. Contemporary women navigate among multiple roles, having to be capable, decisive, quick-witted, determined, but also gentle, beautiful, dainty, and considerate; needing to dedicate to the job, the family, and manage the various human relations; having to be presentable and a good housewife at the same time. In the midst of all these role negotiations, women still need to wear high heels, driving full force in work, and yet to spare the time to do yoga, pilates, facials, work out at the gym, spa, have high tea, etc. In the whole world, besides women, there is no other living creature with such stamina. (*my translation*)

This description is interesting, especially placed at the beginning of the book, because it becomes a standard to which women should aspire. It is saying, because this is the complex and difficult and very demanding position women are expected to take in the Hong Kong society, readers will need to know how to better negotiate that position, thus the book is going to make suggestions to help.



The preface continues,

It's true that being a woman is not easy. It is a vivid description of the position of contemporary women. But as a woman, facing internal and external impacts and pressures, besides sighing "it is not easy to be a woman", is there no room to push ourselves forward? Exactly what kind of woman should we become? This is a very important but often neglected question. Once this question is answered, the core of our life's direction can be grasped.  
(my translation)

So far, it is quite clear that the book is going to suggest ways to become a woman of quality, not in terms of acquiring an attractive appearance, but in cultivating certain qualities that will give substance to the person. But when it asks "exactly what kind of woman should we become", who is to decide? If it is up to the individual readers to have their say as to what kind of woman they want to become, then a book such as this one will be impossible to write, since there can be infinite possibilities and only very general guidelines could be given. In this 157-page book which speaks to working women about ways of becoming a woman of quality in the workplace, what we see is a rather specific approach to present oneself and strategies to handle different situations. In other words, the suggestions are acknowledging a specific image as the woman of quality, and are helping women to meet the pre-set requirements of that image.

So how can one be the multi-tasker who is dedicated to work, and still finds the time to take care of the family, and to enjoy yoga, pilates, facial, spa, the gym, and high tea? The book divides the suggestions into 5 parts:

Part 1: It's not easy to be a woman (it is about how a woman in the workplace can master the difficult position of being a female supervisor)

Part 2: From appearance to cultivatedness (it explains that beauty is not only referring to one's appearance, but also one's manner, taste, upbringing, and suggesting ways of presenting these other aspects of beauty in the workplace)

Part 3: Non-verbal communication (it contains various issues about communication in the workplace, including how to speak effectively, how to listen, understanding different colleagues' communication style, how to face criticism, and how to consolidate one's position in the workplace)

Part 4: Thinking and management (it contains issues about thinking, including gender, how to breakthrough old modes, good time management, and target-oriented working habits)

Part 5: Interview strategies (it gives some reminders about job interviews)

I am not going to go into details about all the suggestions. From the topics alone, it is already quite clear that the woman of quality is one who is efficient, a good communicator, someone who knows when to keep a distance with one's colleagues, and one who is not afraid to present her ideas and achievements to the right person. These are reasonable suggestions, from the author's own experience as well as from research findings. In fact, these suggestions are quite typical of this kind of manual offering advice to working women about etiquette and good practices in the workplace. My interest in them here is not whether they are practicable, or even whether they are good suggestions or not. This book, as a representative example of this kind of literature for the Chinese female readers, describes a female image which is unquestioned but claimed to be ideal, and then goes on to present ways for

women to become that approved image. Nowhere in the book is this “woman of quality” image questioned, and it is simply taken as universally accepted. It becomes almost a standard against which women may measure themselves, to see what they are lacking to be a woman of quality. A lot of working women may need to strive very hard to meet the requirements, but non-working women (if they get a chance to read the book) will be left wondering whether a paid job is the basic requirement for acquiring quality.

While *To Become a Woman of Quality* (2006) may target female readers who have a paid job, *The 40 Selves to be for a Happy Woman* (2012) seems to be more inclusive in its target readers.

On the cover of the book, it is stated that the author is “magic-performer Sha Sha”, and her title is “new generation relationship coach” indicating that she is an expert on gender relations in the new age. Her full name is not given, and from the inside cover, we know that this book is already her third one in a series of books giving women advice as to how to secure happiness – the previous two books bearing the title of *40 Things to Do to be a Happy Woman* (2010), and *40 Attitudes that a Happy Woman Should Adopt* (2011). It is not difficult to imagine the content of these books, so obviously suggested by the titles. In fact, the author introduction gives us a hint of the central belief in this series of manuals for women to live a happy life. It says, “Sha Sha believes that a lot of women lack confidence, and do not dare to pursue the life they want, thus missing a lot of happiness and joy which they rightfully should possess. She wishes to share her own confidence and courage when facing life with all female friends through this book, so that all women can understand that a woman should have the courage to be herself, and that only she herself can be her own mistress!” (*my translation*) In other words, the core belief of the book is that if a woman knows how to be herself, and has the courage to do that, she will lead a happy life.

It sounds really simple, because the user manual (if we see the book as such) is merely teaching women how to BE THEMSELVES. But it is also this seemingly simple principle of the book that makes the reading so ironic. First of all, it is suggesting that (some, perhaps) women are not happy because they are not being themselves; and so to follow up on that problem, the simple and logical solution will be to find this “own self” and become it again. In the 270 pages of the book, the author has delineated 4 aspects for women to work on finding this self and living it. Advice on these four aspects make up the 4 parts of the book: Part 1, Inner Heart, women’s talk; Part 2: Personal Charm, to nurture the inside as well as the outside, to make the inside synchronize with the outside; Part 3: Emotions, the unbearable heaviness of life; and Part 4, Living, to be an all-round woman. These pages of advice are supposed to tell the unhappy female readers that they are not happy because for some reason or another, they have not been themselves, and through reading the advice on these pages, they will know the way to be themselves again, and have the confidence to live a life of happiness. At this point, the questions one has about the situation of these unhappy women may include, how do they come to depart from themselves and end up being unhappy? And also how can the content of the book help them overcome the obstacles to their real selves and happiness? If these women do not know that the cause of their unhappiness/discontent is that they have not been themselves, then how would they know that they have become themselves

again after heeding the advice and following the instructions? I am basically puzzled by how they will know that they are “being themselves” again **if that has to be taught and does not come naturally?**

Let’s examine the contents of the book to see what kind of advice Sha Sha is giving Chinese women so that they can be their own selves again and pursue happiness. There are 10 topics in Part 1, Inner Heart:

1. What kind of woman do you want to be?
2. Master happiness, be the mistress of your own emotions
3. Do not live in other people’s expectations, be brave to be yourself
4. Occasionally enjoy a trip with your own self
5. Put yourself down at suitable times, but never demean yourself
6. Be a woman who can forgive others
7. Why can’t one indulge oneself occasionally?
8. There is no string attached to doing good, do it when you feel like it
9. Set a life goal for yourself
10. Learn to enjoy your own company (*my translation*)

Assuming that these topics are good representations of the actual content of the advice given, this part seems to be mainly on the WORK one has to do on oneself, such as learning about oneself, to be in control, to like oneself, to indulge and be kind to oneself, to like being on one’s own. While the advice does not sound out of the ordinary in our individualistic and almost egocentric society now, further examination of the various parts of the book may yield a contradiction, making it a bit difficult to understand what exactly “to be oneself” means – especially when this is the central principle of the book teaching women how to secure happiness. In the contents page, there is a small paragraph of introduction prior to the 10 principles listed above, as a kind of summary of what this part embodies. It says:

If you cannot change the world, then you have to change your heart! There are a lot of things in this world we cannot control, but we can **master ourselves**. A lot of women cannot face the many problems in life with a peaceful attitude, ending up in a troubled and irritated mental state. Actually, if only we adopt a different perspective to look at the world, and change our inner hearts, everything will be untangled. Sisters, if you want to be a true and happy person, why not start from changing your own inner hearts? (*my translation*)

Again, there is nothing strange or out of the ordinary in the advice given here – there are so many things we cannot control in life, therefore in order to lead a happy (or at least peaceful life), we have to learn to adjust ourselves in our way of thinking, in our way of understanding the world. This is called positive thinking. Readers of the book are probably all quite familiar with the sensible message and the vocabulary used to convey the message here. But if we put this introductory summary of Part 1 together with the 10 main topics of Part 1, and recall the central belief in this book, namely to be truly ourselves, then it becomes confusing.

Why is it confusing? The cover, the title and the chapter headings all suggest that the cause of women not leading a happy life is that women are not brave enough to be themselves. So the book is trying to teach women to be themselves so that they can be happy (which is problematic already). But the advice given concerning how to be

themselves involves changing their hearts, their ways of thinking, their approach to life, because the world is not changeable but our selves are. In order to be truly ourselves, we need to make an effort to change, according to Sha Sha. But how do we know that we have finally changed to become our true self? If the current state of our selves is not the true one, and work has to be done, then how do we know that after working on our attitudes, our approaches to life, our emotional well-being, just as Sha Sha has suggested, then we shall arrive at a state that we can safely called our true self?

I am not saying that advice given by this author, which in fact is echoed in the majority of self-help literature for men and for women, is not going to work. It may or may not work, although if it is effective, then probably it is not practiced as new books keep coming out talking about the same problems in life, and are offering the same advice to counter these problems. As Chinese self-help literature (whether written by Taiwan writers, like this one, or by local Hong Kong writers, like the previous one) frequently make the best-seller lists, we can assume that there is a great demand for this kind of books, which lead us to believe that a lot of people believe that they are not happy enough to try to amend the situation. But if these books are read, and still there is the demand, it might mean that the advice is either not followed because it is not regarded as effective, or too difficult to follow, thus the continual demand for such self-help literature (and interestingly of course, the same advice in different packaging). There is almost a cycle here of readers being told that they are not happy enough, and they are persuaded to find a solution to this seeming unhappiness by following the advice given in this type of books called self-help literature. The continual great demand for these books also seems to suggest that the state of discontent felt by the readers has not been eliminated and has generated further demand for such books, and thus it goes on.

In Part 2, Personal Charm, the 10 topics are:

1. Be responsible for your own appearance
2. Be a sensitive and sensible woman
3. Find the beauty that becomes you, and do not blindly follow fashion
4. Make yourself more feminine
5. Never stop enriching and improving yourself
6. Make your manners more elegant
7. Sharpen your gazes and heighten your concentration
8. Keep smiling, and be sincere
9. Be a charming woman
10. Make yourself more eloquent

Again, the list of topics is probably what readers of this kind of literature will expect. And the expectedness is interesting because it is promoting a rather conventional female image – one has to pay attention to one's appearance, to maintain a feminine and elegant manner, even paying attention to details such as the gaze, the smile, the demeanor. Women are encouraged to enrich and improve themselves and be sensible, but the overall impression is that happiness has a lot to do with cultivating a feminine image, which is also a conventional expectation from our society. And it is also worth thinking how conforming to our society's expectations of femininity is true to oneself, not forgetting that is the core belief claimed by the book.



### Part 3: Emotions

1. Believe in love, and be brave to love
2. Love your family for life
3. Be a woman who can maintain the temperature of romantic love
4. Become a good woman, let your family love you more
5. Have good female and male friends
6. Say no to men's obsession to control at times
7. Keep a suitable distance in love
8. Like yourself, pamper yourself
9. Learn to appreciate, cherish what you have and be content
10. Be a woman who knows how to maintain a marriage

Here in the section about emotions, again very common and expectedly sensible advice is given. Whether the advice will work really depends on the individual situation, but what is striking again is the sense of some "standard" feminine qualities which are advisable to acquire, not to say some standard ideologies to observe such as the centrality of heterosexual romantic relationship. Instead of daring to be oneself, it seems that readers are encouraged to meet these conventional expectations of our society.

### Part 4: Living

1. Maintain a balance among work, family and living
2. Keep a healthy body
3. Maintain an optimistic attitude, live positively
4. Keep an interest in work, and do not work for money
5. Be a woman who knows finance management
6. Keep the habit of working out
7. Keep your promises
8. Build your own belief/faith
9. Cultivate multiple interests
10. Cultivate the habit of keeping a diary

Finally the section on Living – I am not arguing against maintaining a healthy body, or cultivating different interests, or even learning finance management. What I am wondering is how the advice (whether easy or difficult to carry out) can assist women to be their true selves.

After a preliminary review of two examples of Chinese self-help books, one written for the specific working women readers, and the other for more general readership, we notice a few features of these books:

1. Although they are not translations from other cultures, there are no specific discussions relating to cultural background when women are given advice as to how to behave and what to want. In giving readers advice to be a successful working woman or a happy woman, the cultural identity does not occupy a noticeable position. It could be because the self-help manuals/books itself has an Anglo-American origin, and the Hong Kong society is westernized enough to allow this culture to take root and flourish here – at least for the group of readers who will seek and buy this kind of books.
2. Although there are no specifications about the age group of target readers, from the topics of discussion, these two examples are mainly targeting adult working

women. The reader is assumed to be leading a busy life, trying to strike a balance between work and family. She is also assumed to be heterosexual, and marriage and family is assumed to be the norm the reader aspires to. And although maintenance of health is mentioned, more space is devoted to maintenance of an attractive appearance and demeanour. Overall, what is given in these two books is a generally approved image of women, and ways to mold oneself to fit that expected image.

3. Finally, although these books claim to be offering advice about the formation of individual identities to their readers, they seem not to be offering any alternative routes outside the mainstream consumerist environment. In fact, the self-help book itself becomes another fast-growing commodity side by side with the other self-fashioning commodities and services in Hong Kong.

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