

# Women's Taste and Fashion Consumption: Modern Life in Chinese Elite Families in the 1930s

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## Abstract

This article investigates 1930s home design in Shanghai through magazines and newspapers, highlighting changes in gender roles and domestic tastes. It analyzes how middle-class families balanced luxury and affordability by examining the styles and possessions showcased in Star Families. Using the Shanghai YWCA's "Special Issue of National Products Exhibition" as a case study, the article explains how the "Model House Exhibition" promoted national products through furniture displays, product trials, and speeches. Elite women played a crucial role in shaping their homes and daily lives, despite bourgeois standards indicating social hierarchies. The article argues that ethnic interests redefined middle-class aesthetics, creating a blend of local and Western influences. By emphasizing home aesthetics, individuals expressed their cultivation and identity, reflecting their aspirations for modern life.

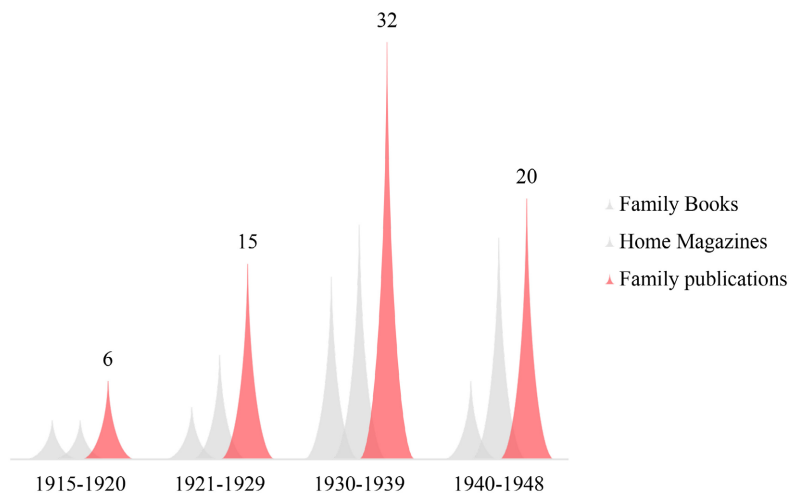
## Keywords

Fashion Consumption, Domestic Aesthetics, Elite Women, National Products Promotion, Shanghai 1930s

## 1. Introduction

With the modernization of cities, rapid growth in urban commerce, industry, and population has led to an increasingly diversified range of occupations. People's activity spaces have gradually shifted from the home to society, weakening the original unity of family life. The decline of the extended family system and the collapse of feudal authoritarian structures have created an urgent need for establishing new household concepts and forming a "nuclear family" model as a standard

for social and family life. In response, intellectuals and young people advocated for “family reform,” reflecting on and critiquing domestic life and living environments while proposing personal insights and corresponding improvements.



**Figure 1.** Number of family publications.

**Table 1.** Number of articles on “interior decorating” in family magazines.

Year	Magazine Title	Number of Articles	Category
1930-1936	Women’s Illustrated	138	Home & Lifestyle
1936-1939	Happy Family	146	Home & Lifestyle
1935-1937	Family Week	75	Social Issues
1936-1940	Family Friends	124	Home & Social Topics
1937-1940	Modern Family	90	Interior Design
1930-1937	Family	103	Home & Housekeeping
1937-1941	Ideal Family	85	Home & Lifestyle

At the same time, in the 1930s, the popularity of print media led to a rise in household magazines and books targeted at middle-class women (Figure 1). It was especially noticeable in Shanghai, where publications with titles such as “The Family” or featuring “Family Columns” focused on home design (Table 1). Magazines about home life, such as Star Family, Modern Family, Happy Home and Family Friends (Figure 2), not only introduced the aspects of home management, such as childcare, cooking, hygiene, and consumerism, but also had unique columns for home decoration, regularly publishing examples of famous home design works and commercial advertisements from both home and abroad. Paper-based media widely disseminated the modern home’s visual image and design concepts. For instance, Happy Home magazine, first published in 1936, was edited and published in Ladies Home Journal and Woman’s Home Companion in the United States, and The Home Magazine and Modern Home in the United Kingdom. It aimed to teach women about home management and guide home decoration. The

magazine aimed to educate women on home economics and provide guidance on home decoration. Meanwhile, *Star Family* focused on the daily lives of Shanghai's female celebrities, showcasing their middle-class lifestyle and home environment. These magazines offered practical information and advice on home design and marketed the modern home's physical living environment through photography, advertisements, and other graphic methods.



Figure 2. Selected family magazine.

If the term “home” has a feminine connotation, its frequent appearance in print suggests the existence of a growing market of female readers (Sand, 2003: p. 21). Additionally, the magazines aimed to reach a new, intellectual class of women and were dedicated to improving women’s access to professional knowledge and skills training in housekeeping and home decor. As advocated by these home magazines, the emphasis in home decoration was not on using expensive, high-quality furniture but on furnishings and displaying the modern housewife’s aesthetic taste and organizational skills. The purpose of interior decoration was to make the home a place of comfort, beauty, and pleasure. For instance, the article titled “Decorative Speech: The Housewife’s Profession” suggests that the modern housewife should be responsible for furnishing the home, planning interior decorations, purchasing appropriate furniture, and arranging it in a way that creates a beautiful and relaxing atmosphere for the family (*Decorative speech: the housewife’s occupation*, 1939: p. 45). Another article titled “How to be a Homemaker” highlights that modern homemakers in urban areas should meet three criteria:

Firstly, an artistic mind. Women should have an artistic sense and vision for

the arrangement of guest rooms and bedrooms and the choice of furniture in the family; secondly, they should have scientific knowledge and basic knowledge of home economics, electrical appliances, hygiene, and education to make a comfortable and safe life for herself and her home. Thirdly, she should be capable of dealing with beautification, economy, entertainment, and home cleaning efficiently and effectively (Yi, 1936: pp. 4-5).

It can be observed that “the idea of art” and “the idea of taste” share a commonality, requiring individuals to possess aesthetic concepts and knowledge in home decoration. Through the consumption or arrangement of home furnishings, individuals can transform their taste decisions and aesthetic criteria into the material environment of their homes. Home decoration is a crucial aspect of home furnishings. Home furnishings are the material environment of the home because they reflect and embody women’s values and sustain their identities (ter Laan, 2021: pp. 57-82). Summary, the mass media played a significant role in defining the role of women in the home. It included defining the roles of middle-class and upper-class women as managers, governors, and beautifiers of the new domestic space. Additionally, the media suggested that educated elite women should improve home comfort and create a happy family life and modern home environment through interior decoration or home design.

## **2. Reconstructing the Interior: A Celebrity’s Guide to Home Aesthetics and Taste**

According to Penny Sparks, “taste” is expressed through objects and styles, conveying complex messages about users’ values, pursuits, beliefs, and identities (Sparke, 1995: pp. 5-10), and fashion was particularly evident in the interiors of celebrity families such as the middle class represented by the Shanghai actresses. They conveyed their identity, image, and home environment to others and found their niche within a particular group to differentiate themselves from the rest of society (Miller, 1988: pp. 353-372; Murdock, 2010: pp. 63-65). For instance, the 1934 publication of *Star Families* magazine featured pictorials of famous Chinese film stars, including Xu Lai, Li Minghui, Ruan Lingyu, and Hu Die.

Additionally, the home magazines aimed to showcase the actresses’ home environments and leisure lives, highlighting new furniture arrangements, functional layouts of indoor spaces, and new materials such as wallpapers, wooden floors, and floor tiles. The actresses created a lifestyle and aesthetic taste for the emerging middle class. Paper-based media distinguished them from ordinary citizens and encouraged readers and audiences to imitate home fashion (Field, 2019: pp. 34-48).

### **2.1. Fashionable and Modern Aesthetic Aspirations**

Most actresses resided in Shanghai’s new-style Lilong (lane) houses and garden houses near the Concession Center in the Jing’an district. These houses were situated in the affluent neighborhoods of Yuyuan Road, Aidoya Road, and Aiwenyi

Road, primarily inhabited by middle-class families such as doctors, lawyers, business people, and cultural figures (Xiong et al., 2022: pp. 26-64). These modern homes were constructed to meet the demands of the emerging middle class. They feature simple and elegant architecture, steel windows, open-air balconies and courtyards, pink-painted facades, interior heating, fireplaces, and other sanitary fixtures (Kaltenbrunner, 1991: pp. 87-96).



Figure 3. Xu Lai's bedroom.



Figure 4. The kitchen and bathroom of Xu Lai's home.

For example, the interior of actress Xu Lai's house reflects a modern and stylish taste in home furnishings (Figure 3). This "modernity" is evident in all aspects of life, including the cement facade with rough texture treatment, round arches and metal railings surrounded by private gardens, indoor walls adorned with idyllic patterned wallpaper, and furnished with Western musical instruments such as

radios, floor lamps, and pianos. The bedroom has simple steel furniture, including a five-drawer cabinet, a modernist-style vanity mirror, and a metal bed. The kitchen and bathroom have a new electric stove (Figure 4), a ceramic washbasin, and a three-piece set of sanitary ware to meet daily cleaning and hygiene needs. Notably, the steel pipe vanity mirror in Xu Lai's bedroom was the same product displayed in the Shanghai Model Home Design Exhibition.

Additionally, the new electric stove in the kitchen was a product developed and designed by the Shanghai Electric Power Company and advertised in various newspapers and magazines at the time. The new fashionable household products imported or imitated by Shanghai manufacturers have a more consistent appearance with Western fashion, demonstrating the potential of Shanghai star groups in designing home spaces with an international style (Ding, 2021: p. 91). However, the media at the time commented that Xu Lai's opulent homes, which often cost 3000 RMB to 4000 RMB or tens of thousands of RMB to furnish, were only admired and envied, and not many families could emulate them (Tegi, 1937: p. 7).

The interior of Xu Lai's house is the epitome of modern domestic life. On the one hand, it represents the general pursuit of Western-style modern life by Shanghai's middle class at the time, and their material environmental life is comparable to that of European and American elite families; on the other hand, Xu Lai's domestic environment suggests that modern women used their aesthetic skills to a great extent in home decoration, which helped to construct their own identities and conveyed to those like themselves the level of social aspirations and professional achievements achieved by her family (Clegg, 1999: pp. 3-4).

## 2.2. Aesthetic Needs for Affordability

In contrast to Xu Lai's modern and stylish aesthetic, actress Li Minghui's interior design focuses on economy and practicality. Her house is in a quiet Shikumen. Regarding architectural spatial structure, houses in Aiwen'fang are less modern and fashionable than the new-style lanes and flat houses. However, the indoor facilities and equipment are perfect, in line with the general needs of the public at that time. Her interior decoration pays attention to the aesthetic needs of "neatness and order", "functionally applicable", and "clean and hygienic".

Li Minghui's overall interior design planning focuses on functional zoning, dividing different areas such as guest rooms, bedrooms, studies and bathrooms. The living room was equipped with a long sofa, a single sofa chair, a wooden coffee table, and a floor lamp, where family members can read and warm themselves with a new electric cooker and on the other side, there is a piano for entertainment; the comfortable and spacious bedroom was also outfitted a long sofa, a writing desk, a dressing mirror, and a simple wooden bed, and it does not use costly steel pipe furniture. All the furniture was placed against the wall for a spacious activity space. Adjacent to the bedroom on the right is a small study room with two windows for light and air circulation, a desk, sofa, storage cupboard, wardrobe, and another orderly arrangement, and the space was further divided into a

private bathroom for personal bathing. Overall, the interior space is arranged, with each room divided into functions, focusing on the separation of motion and static (leisure and reading), public and private, and dry and wet areas (bedroom and bathroom), creating a functional, simple, and economical family space.



**Figure 5.** Li Minghui's apartment.

As for the furnishings (**Figure 5**), the wooden bed in the bedroom is the latest product of domestic design, the sofa, coffee table, tea set, and round table are quite cubist in style, and the new radio, piano, and bookshelf cater for daily entertainment, there are modern teapots decorated with geometric patterns, and the refreshments for drinking include light milk biscuits outside the port. Hui's home décor was well received by the media at the time, with *Star Family* magazine commenting that "Miss Li knew about art, so she put much thought into her interior décor, and the color palette is harmonious, creating a comfortable and beautiful environment." *Women's Feature* also commented:

Li Ming Hui's interior is perfect for a small family, with impeccable comfort, aesthetics, and hygiene, and her relatives and friends find it memorable as the home of a film star. Although each of them had a rich income, they did not have an air of opulence in their home furnishings, nor did they spend much money on

decorative furnishings, which made film fans, in general, compete with each other to learn from and imitate them to furnish their own homes like Ms. Li's (Li, 1936: p. 29).

It is precisely because Hui's home decoration presents a basic image of comfort and generosity without spending much money that it is more likely to resonate with society, enabling the general public to obtain direct reference and guidance to draw from the affordable aesthetic taste.

These visual images created by the domestic environment conveyed the domestic life of the bourgeois elite, and the symbolic meaning of their identities, as well as the social and cultural status of their users, can be read through this visual language. For urban women in the 1930s, their living environment and material conditions were unprecedented in China. The modernization of Shanghai, the materialization of social relations, and the pursuit of fashionable objects were also reflected in the actresses' home decorations (Field, 2019: pp. 34-48), which encouraged women to play the role of "consumers" and "taste-makers" in their homes. That prompted women to play the roles of "consumers" and "taste-makers" in their homes, as taste determines the impression others have of the home, and the display of the home environment further enables female consumers to transcend their desires and raise the level of "altruism". In addition, the social and cultural demands of family beliefs also led people to participate in the home fashion system. Family beliefs expected the new middle class to emulate modern fashion, to display what Van Buren called "conspicuous leisure" (Veblen, 1992, 2017), and participation in fashion signaled a distance from the real world and an ability to indulge in extravagance.

### **3. The Shanghai YWCA's Pioneering 1933 Model Home Exhibition**

In 1933, when home décor was being shown to the public in the print media and the ideal homes of middle-class families were entering the mass market, the Shanghai YWCA initiated and organized the first women-led exhibition of exemplary home design, calling on new women to recognize their responsibilities and obligations to their families and the nation and encouraging women to buy and use national household products for domestic life and national salvation. The exhibition brought women from behind the scenes to the forefront, not only creating a new exhibition format but also redefining the role of women in society.

#### **3.1. Home Furnishing Exhibition**

In 1923, the National Association of the YWCA was born in Shanghai. Through the establishment of the Women's Normal School, the Vocational Women's Association, the Family Improvement Seminar, etc., it sought professional development and ideological progress for Chinese women. As a social organization, the core of its cause was undoubtedly the majority of women. In 1933, the YWCA in Shanghai renewed its membership, elected a new president and departmental

officers, and proposed that the first Model Families Exhibition be held in conjunction with the women's community in Shanghai. From then on, in addition to the news of the Model Families Exhibition published in paper media such as *The Declaration*, *Women's Illustrated Newspaper*, and *Young Women's Monthly*, the YWCA also created a special edition of the magazine *National Model Families Exhibition* to introduce information about the exhibition and its layout. The magazine declared:

The model house exhibition is dedicated to the promotion of national products and has the following five objectives: firstly, to carry out civic education, inspire patriotism, make people aware of national products and enjoy using them, guide them to run their families economically and develop a sense of aesthetics in home decoration; secondly, to introduce high-quality national products; thirdly, to study home decoration and furniture products, especially the decorative design exhibitions of model houses, which are of great research value; fourthly, to transfer the national customs and promote the inland areas through the Shanghai women's community's willingness to use national products; and fifthly, to subsidize the funding of the YWCA (*The mission of the National Products Exhibition, 1933: p. 15*).

From the YWCA's point of view, the Model Home Decoration Exhibition differed from any other past exhibition. On the one hand, the purpose of the exhibition was to connect with the Shanghai women's community to organize the first women's national goods movement, call on women to buy national goods and beautify their homes, and extend the exhibition's influence to the whole country. On the other hand, in the form of exhibition and display links to push the boundaries of innovation, contrary to the traditional layout of the former display exhibition, boldly adopted a three-dimensional, movable model room display design.

The modern term "exhibition" can be traced back to the Universal Industrial Exhibition held in Heidelberg Park, London, in 1853 (*Green, 2003: pp. 836-863*). In terms of the form of the exhibition, both exhibitions and expositions share the same characteristics: both are a kind of visual performance, and the experience of the exhibition space was constructed through the interaction between "displaying" and "viewing" (*Pappas, 2013: pp. 300-301*). However, in terms of scale and richness of exhibits, the exhibition is smaller than the exposition but more focused on the theme of display, the selection of objects displayed in exhibitions, their arrangement, the arrangement of lines of movement, and even the way and angle of viewing, in addition to the visually oriented spatial field constructed, there is also a kind of ideology implied behind it. Unlike general commodity exhibitions, the Model Home Layout and Design Exhibition pays special attention to the identity of the exhibits and explicitly calls for domestically produced home furnishings. This shows that the core of the Model Home Exhibition is not only the exchange of goods and money but also the flow of information and symbolism floating on the objects, as well as the non-discriminatory openness to the recipients. In addition to this realistic goal, there is also the self-representation of the "exhibition"

and the “view” (Wu, 2015: p. 9). From this point of view, the Shanghai YWCA’s Model Family Design Exhibition was not only a promotion of national consciousness but also a significant public display of the role of women in society, for whom it was the first time they had the opportunity to express themselves in an exhibition, and this “self” consisted of two levels: first, it was organized and hosted by women; second, it was organized by elite women.

### 3.2. Preparation and Sponsorship of the Exhibition



**Figure 6.** Group photo of staff preparing for the YWCA National Products Exhibition.

On 14 December 1933, the YWCA hosted the official opening of the National Model Family Exhibition, which was attended by elite women such as (Figure 6) Madam Mao Yunqin, President Madam Jiang Hezhen, Vice-President Madam Huang Qianyi, Director of Preparation, and Mrs Song Xingcun, Vice-President (Organiser and Director of the Shanghai YWCA National Products Exhibition, 1933: p. 13). There were more than 5000 exhibitors on that day. More than 100 women organized the work on the exhibition site, including many social and business elites, such as the wife of the architect Fan Wen-zhao, the wife of the mayor of Shanghai Wu Tie-cheng, the wife of Mr. Xu Wei-ming, the manager of the Bank of China in Shanghai, the socialite Tang Ying, and Mrs. Wang Shu-zhen, a doctor who had been in the United States. There were also students from the Bureau of Public Works Girls’ High School and girls’ schools such as Qingxin and Yiwen who participated in the National Oratorical Competition (Student Speech Contest, 1933: p. 32). The organizers of the exhibition were mainly new women, represented by middle and upper-class elites and intellectuals, who mobilized women to join in the fight for national salvation, advocated that women should set up a correct concept of consumption, and give full play to their strengths in family and

social work to make progress for the country, which is enough to show that the women's circles in Shanghai were full of enthusiasm for the exhibition and attached great importance to it.

In addition to the women's sector, the guests included Mr. Pan Gong-zhan, Director of the Shanghai Bureau of Industry and Commerce, Mr. Fu Qing-huai, Labour Officer of the Shanghai YMCA, and Mr. Wang Chang-lin, Founder of the Chun-he Sporting Goods Manufacturing Factory. It shows that women organized the first home furnishing exhibition and were supported by sponsors from the government, industry and commerce, banks, and other sectors; their financial support was also an essential factor in the smooth running of the exhibition. In the YWCA's National Product Fair magazine, special thanks to the individuals and manufacturers, such as the Bank of China, Mr. Lu Shou-qian, who sponsored the design of the venue display, the Dachang Construction Company, who sponsored the wood for the exhibition, the Chan Wing Hing Construction Factory provided workforce and material support. There were also sponsors, such as the Zhenhua Paint Company and the Xingtai Electricity Company, who provided help in the decoration of the exhibition venue (*Acknowledgement of the sponsors of the exhibition, 1933: p. 19*). This shows that curators and sponsors play an essential role in the success of home design exhibitions. However, the curators at that time were not professionals in the modern sense but an international women's association because it was an international organization of scale and social influence, which solicited social fund-raising and sponsorships from the association's members that the first model home design exhibition was successfully held.

### 3.3. Sample Design for Model Homes

The exhibition was held in the new building of the National Association of YWCA, and due to the spatial structure of the building, the entire venue was arranged and displayed differently from other exhibitions in the past. The exhibition space was concentrated on the second, third, and fourth floors, with the first floor being the venue's entertainment area, the third floor being the food and beverage area and the games area, and the fourth floor being the model home showroom and temporary shopping mall (*Venue Guide, 1933: p. 8*). As well as displaying national products so that visitors could understand their nature and function, the exhibition venue also organized gardening activities, product trials, and games such as lotteries, and most pioneering of all was the pioneering use of home furnishing model rooms, which was the first intuitive way of presenting interior design solutions to the public.

In the Home Design Show, a display design called "Model Family" achieved excellent publicity and attracted society's attention. The theme of the model home is to display artistic and economical home spaces (**Figure 7**). In addition to the display of daily household goods and different spaces such as living rooms, bedrooms, studies, kitchens, and bathrooms, three different home design solutions are also displayed according to the budget for home decoration (*Yan, 2020*). The

model home showroom is divided into three types: high-end, medium, and affordable, with the high-end type of interior decoration costing about 2000 RMB, medium decoration 1000 RMB, and general home furnishings costing 500 RMB (*Model Families at the YWCA National Products Exhibition, 1933: p. 16*). The 2000 RMB exemplary home model room shows a modern and stylish parlor, bedroom, and study. The parlor is furnished with modern furniture and appliances such as patterned carpets, complete sets of chrome steel chairs and sofas, table lamps, radios, and other furnishings such as satin curtains, copper electrical plugs, and pines and cypresses bonsai, etc., are also readily available. The two-room space design of 1000 RMB, on the other hand, is furnished with wooden furniture such as teak king-size beds, dressers, satin sofas, mahogany piano tables, and other household furnishings such as chandeliers, vases, table clocks, and antique brass tripods made of glass. On the other hand, the 500 RMB home model room is dominated by a wooden five-drawer chest, a rattan sofa table and chairs, and general electrical appliances (*Setting up and budgeting for a model home at the YWCA National Fair, 1933: p. 44*).



**Figure 7.** Home design show.

This interior design exhibition full of modern temperament caused a sensation then, and domestic and international media widely reported its display of goods and layout schemes. The interior design was no longer presented as a single product display, but the furniture products were placed in the interior space, giving viewers a visual and tactile body experience. In addition to the immersive spatial

display, the exhibition brochure also shows the design points of a model home:

The living room should be spacious, comfortable, simple, and elegant; the dining room should be neat and pleasing to the eye; the bedroom should be quiet, beautiful, airy, and well-lit; the kitchen and bathroom should be clean and hygienic; the children's room should cultivate creativity and good habits; the interior seating and bookcases should be designed according to the children's physiological dimensions, and there should be sufficient light to protect their eyesight, etc (*Model Families at the YWCA National Products Exhibition, 1933: p. 16*).

In conclusion, the design and display of the model home showroom present the visual effect of the home environment and creates a novel consumer experience that not only provides viewers with the opportunity to study the types of materials and furnishings for home decoration but also demonstrates economic, aesthetic and scientific interior design methods, and at the same time guides homemakers on how to purchase national goods and rationally decorate their homes.

The exhibition of exemplary home design featured everything from modern furniture to carpets, dressing mirrors, dressing cabinets, heaters, radios, etc. Ranging in price from a few tens to a few hundred RMB, Chinese and foreigners highly praised the tubular furniture on display, produced by the then-domestic manufacturer Dahua Iron Works, for its novelty, beauty, and durability.

However, were they as “cheap and useful for everyone” as the manufacturers claimed? Judging by the consumer orientation of the Home Design Show, this type of tubular furniture, which originated as a Bauhaus design and was imbued with the concept of gentrification, is not only priced at a high level but is also only displayed in upper-middle-class homes. In addition, the stainless steel furniture displayed in the showroom was styled in the same way as Bauhaus Marcel Breuer's Vasily chair and Mart Stam's cantilever chair, reflecting the imitation of foreign furniture design by national manufacturers and suggesting that Chinese furniture was unconsciously influenced by Western modern design. In fact, after taking over Lei Heng Foreign Iron Works in 1925, Mr. Shen Shijian, the founder of Dahua Iron Works at that time, began to imitate various imported furniture such as tubular beds, sofas, tables, and chairs to improve sales and operational efficiency. Major department stores, international hotels, hospitals, and upper-middle-class families purchased and used these beautifully designed modern products (*Dahua Iron Works, 1936: p. 2*).

### 3.4. Social Evaluation of the Home Design Show

Although the Model Home Exhibition claimed that “the exhibition is an all-out effort to transform the home, to make the decoration artistic, economic and national, to demonstrate the new life of the home, and to provide a reference for the general family to improve and take as a model” (*The mission of the National Products Exhibition, 1933: p. 15*), society's assessment of the Home Design Exhibition was mixed. The critic You Huaigao praised its modern design and believed that the exhibition promoted the two main goals of family happiness and the pursuit

of national wealth and power, rational production, and correct consumption (Glosser, 2003: pp. 27-80). However, some people criticized:

The Model House Exhibition should be used as a demonstration standard for families below the middle class; only upper-class families can spend 3000 RMB to 4000 RMB or even tens of thousands of RMB to decorate their houses magnificently, and most of them are only admired and envied, and not many families can imitate them (Tegi, 1937: p. 7).

The review article in Family Weekly also pointed out that the model family should meet the norms and conditions in terms of economy, system, and decorative arrangement to qualify as a model family:

The model family is not based on the standard of aristocracy or Westernization but represents the family life of the general public society and the attention to cleanliness and hygiene, not the need for almost extravagant decorations. The furnishings and the householder of a model family should be a new woman with knowledge who pays attention to the economy and moderate consumption in domestic life and keeps the domestic environment neat and orderly, simple, and comfortable (Cheng, 1936: p. 53).

Critics believe that the model houses' design goes against the exhibition's original intention, especially the display of the modern taste of upper-class families. However, instead of promoting the wind of luxury in other words, the interior environment displayed by the model house design is the interior view of the home life of the middle and upper classes, which is still oriented to a small number of elite families, rather than displaying a "model", it is more a "modern" home design.

As the first national model home decoration exhibition organized by a women's association, its original intention was to promote national products and show the public the form and style of home decoration and proper consumption through model families, as the exhibition declared, "The promotion of national products and artistic decoration should start from the family and women" (*The mission of the National Products Exhibition, 1933: p. 15*). In a word, the Model Home Design Exhibition, on the one hand, strengthens the relationship between women and family and society and believes that women's role in the exhibition is not only that of visitors and consumers but also establishes a new exhibition form and exhibition style to lead the national women's product movement through leading and participating in design practice activities. On the other hand, the exhibition design of the model home was filled with modern and contemporary interests and imagination. The home space was composed of new exhibition designs and novel modern products that displayed the consumption of national products and the fashion and model of the modern home, and women created this ideal and modern home environment. Paradoxically, the YWCA's participation in home design exhibitions liberates women from the private sphere of the home. However, they still did not escape the gendered role of home shapers, invisible in home decor as patriotic saviors and controversial for their tasteful consumption of modern fashions.

## 4. Theoretical Constructions of Modern Life: Good Taste and Chinese Interests

Evaluations of celebrity families and exemplary home design exhibitions point to the aesthetics and consumption of home decoration, as the mainstream media commented that “the culture of a country can be observed in the interior decoration of individual families” (Shi, 1933: pp. 4-5). Although the mass media try to construct the correct consumption and local style of interior decoration and teach people to decorate their homes with meticulous and detailed guidelines, the fact that more foreign examples are cited to guide readers to be purely European in home decoration has made Western-style homes and interior decoration almost exclusive to the middle-class families and the elite class, whose home decorations are published in all kinds of popular magazines and newspapers to entertain readers, which has undoubtedly raised the concern of intellectuals.

### 4.1. Good Taste and European Fashion

The print-based mass media market was earlier and faster than the market circulation of the goods themselves, and most of the images of interior decorations and home furnishing goods were mass-produced and disseminated through magazines and advertisements, thus completing the promotion of decorative styles and tastes. For example, Star Family published the home decoration designs of female celebrities, and the inaugural issue of Happy Family featured the interior design works and furniture advertisements of Time Inc. and American Art Co. The Family Magazine declared:

Western-style HOS decoration requires craftsmanship and artistic thinking and knowledge, and American Art Co. specializes in the decoration of apartments with the help of British art experts. The wealthy people of Shanghai who live in Western-style houses are all furnished in the Western European style, and the American Arts Company will be satisfied with their furnishings (HOS Decoration Methods, 1926: p. 64).

The dissemination of modern interior design aesthetics came from various magazines and English-language newspapers and magazines used by expatriates to communicate business information. Take The China Press Newspaper as an example. The newspaper established a particular page on interior decoration in 1930, mainly introducing and publishing decorative design works, advertisements, and suggestions from designers and furniture dealers. The newspaper’s graphic resources demonstrated foreign aesthetic traditions and popularised Western fashion among Shanghai’s elite and upper class. In 1934, the WAL SHION FURNITURE CO. advertisement stated:

There is nothing more important in home decoration than skillful matching, harmonious color tones, and beautiful furniture arrangements, and our staff are experienced in this field and will be happy to discuss your home problems (Display ad 4—No Title, 1934: p. 5).

These advertisements reflect the fact that foreign interior design not only

introduces new furniture products but also brings with it a whole new system of home decoration; not only that, but the popularity of interior design products also makes the term “furniture” refer to specific goods rather than all the objects in the home, requiring the housewife or designer to have an aesthetic and appreciation of interior design by purchasing sets of modern furniture items to furnish a room. As the Studio of Modern Crafts declared in an advertisement entitled “Good Taste”: “Your taste will be reflected in your home furnishings, let us design your furniture and advise you on decoration, all work supervised by a designer direct from Paris” (Display Ad 4—Your Good Taste, 1934: p. 5).

These advertisements implied that modern domestic design depended heavily on the purchase and use of new furniture, arranged according to the functional needs of different domestic spaces, linking decorative design with consumer goods, and that “taste” played a new, fundamental role, expressing itself through fashionable new goods. In short, domestic advertising in the media not only stimulates consumption but also teaches potential customers the meaning and use of the new goods in a practical way, and the process assigns a special place to women in home decoration.

#### **4.2. Proper Taste and Chinese Style**

However, Intellectuals have expressed deep concern about tasteful display and consumption in the modern home. They stressed:

Aesthetics and interest in different decorative effects are different. The periodization and artistry of the home are home décor, and family happiness depends on decoration, so the interior design must be careful; only the expression of personal and national interest is the success of home decoration (Bai & Tian, 1936: p. 24).

Homemakers need to identify the style of their homes, avoid unthinkingly copying expensive Western styles, and not lose the simplicity of Chinese homes by following wrong tastes. The reformers in China advocated for using local decorative arts and applying regional styles to home interiors. Their goal was to demonstrate the equivalence of aesthetics between China and the Western world while showcasing their unique national styles and art forms.

In 1935, Lei Guiyuan pointed out in his article *The Decline of Chinese Decorative Arts and Its Current Way Out* that decoration is local and national and an essential part of daily life (Lei, 1935: p. 48). He believed that commercial capitalist nations exploited decorative arts as a means of economic aggression. However, the general populace in those countries needed to recognize the significance of decorations in everyday aesthetics and in showcasing their national spiritual temperament. This lack of appreciation was one of the primary reasons behind the decline of Chinese decorative arts. In this regard, Lei Gui-yuan advocated that interior decoration should have local and national styles, and he restructured and created decorative arts, designed decorative wallpaper patterns with a Chinese flavor, and integrated the design theory of functional order into Chinese home

design.

The pioneers of Chinese-style interior decoration were Liu Ji-piao and Zhong Huang. Liu Ji-piao's interior design for the China Pavilion at the 1925 Paris International Decorative Arts Exposition combined elements of both Chinese and Western styles, creating a unique national style that blended the ancient with the modern. Zhong Huang, who studied in France, designed an interior that combines Chinese and Western aesthetics to showcase the country's culture. The interior features Chinese lanterns, wooden windows, screens, carved cupboards, square tables, and porcelain, giving it a very Chinese feel (Figure 8). However, it is not strictly traditional Chinese style as a European-style marble mantelpiece with a dressing mirror replaces the conventional Chinese Tai Shi wall. This hybrid style aims to promote and display the aesthetic taste of the country's homes while influencing and enhancing the public's aesthetic and highlighting the characteristics of the national type.



**Figure 8.** Chinese-style interior decoration.

Discussions and practices regarding Chinese interior design have shown that proper taste in interior design is primarily concerned with ethnicity and consumerism (Altehenger, 2022: p. 163). The reformers attempted to incorporate the formal styles of other nations while preserving the local aesthetic. They aimed to liberate Chinese interior decoration from foreign fashion. Additionally, they encouraged the purchase of national furniture products. They organized exemplary home design exhibitions to construct a simple, plain, artistic, beautiful, practical, and economical interior aesthetic order and the national aesthetic concept.

## 5. Conclusion

The media's portrayal of celebrity homes and the trend of exemplary home design

led by women have created a realistic and textual image of modern homes. The media intentionally focuses on middle-class family life, providing design concepts and ideas that are easily understood and establishing ethical standards and material forms that go along with them. Innovative home design exhibitions, on the other hand, not only showcase modern design concepts for home furnishings but also closely link home decoration with individual consumer behavior and patriotism. Revealing the middle-class groups that have gradually formed as a result of the development of home décor consumption and commercial culture, and that these new consumers are represented by intellectuals, celebrities and contemporary women who have mastered the management of their homes.

Research on home décor has indicated that the particular style of home, furniture, and materials used in Shanghai during the 1930s reflects the city's urban lifestyle. It reveals how people expressed their class, identity, beliefs, and values through their home décor choices. The modern home became a famous symbol when magazines, radio, exhibitions, and other mass media used its imagery and pictorial style to appeal to middle-class consumers to evoke a progressive and comfortable home life. This led many readers to notice the difference between their homes and middle-class homes, causing them to adopt similar aesthetic preferences. Emulation creates proximity to the emulated, symbolizing the possessor's social identity.

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### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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