

What **Today's** Chinese Women Want



Chief Content Officer of the Chinese version of *ELLE* magazine Xiao Xue (EMBA 2011) was one of the speakers at the 2015 World Women Leadership Summit held in Berlin from April 21 to 22. She spoke about how Chinese women have evolved, over the decades, and what they want today. Here are edited excerpts.

“It’s my great pleasure to be standing here at this summit of Global Female Leaders 2015 in Berlin, sharing with you the needs and current state of life of Modern Chinese urban women. My professional background has always been magazine editing, and prior to becoming an editor I worked in the movie and TV industries. So I prefer expressing myself with words, pictures and images. My speech may not be intellectually serious, but I think it has a sweet and soft touch of sensibility, and I hope it will eventually give you some insight into what today’s Chinese women are looking for.

ELLE CHINA: GROWING WITH CHINESE WOMEN

When *Elle*, the first international women’s title for the China market, launched in 1988, trust me, it was like a new era had dawned in China. P&G led the first wave of western foreign brands



1. Xiao Xue with panel members Cindy Lee and Baria Alamuddin after the summit.
2. Chief Content Officer of *ELLE* China Xiao Xue during her speech on behalf of Chinese women at Global Female Leader Summit 2015.
3. In 2006, Xiao Xue with the inaugural issue *ELLE* China.

that invested their ad spend in *ELLE*. Three years later – that was in the early 90s – Louis Vuitton, Armani, Gucci, Dior began opening stores and mega stores in China. The gold rush in China had started. All the top brands also start placing advertisements in *ELLE* China.

Before year 2000, *ELLE* China re-used pictures of western, foreign celebrities and models on its cover. We “picked up” covers from the US, France and Italy editions because Chinese readers back then thought that western faces were most stylish, fashionable and classy. In April 2004, entered Chinese superstar Ziyi Zhang – the first Chinese face on an *ELLE* China cover.

THE EVOLUTION OF CHINESE WOMEN

For Chinese women, what has changed since 1988? Let's look at the Synonate and Bain & Company's reports on Chinese women.

Change in lifestyle

The need for pleasure and excitement

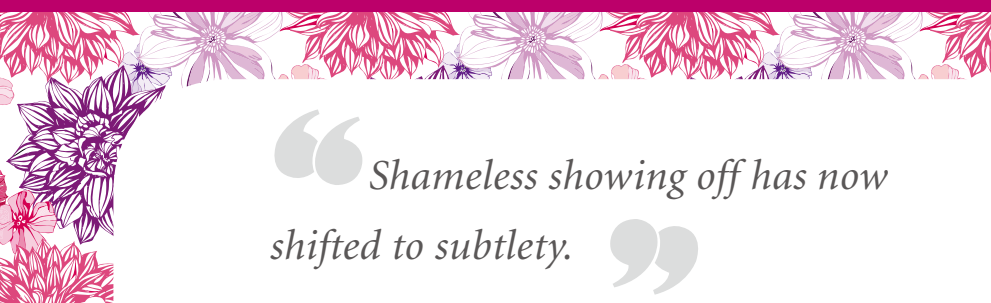
For our *ELLE* readers' survey, we asked them to submit a photo that best depicts their state of life. What we can gather from the information provided is: Chinese women will spend for indulgence and pleasure; they are willing to splurge and this is so unlike generations past which were big on saving. You can say that, for now, Chinese girls just want to have some fun; they are looking for the good life!

Yearning for middle class good life, keeping up with the Joneses and the symbols of middle class success.

They like sophisticated family vacations; leisure driving in and outside of the city; horseback riding; golfing, flower arranging, scuba diving and other hobby classes; sending young kids abroad for study. Consumers are now willing to spend on experiential luxury.

Relationships

China has been peddling the notion of “shennv” – leftover women



“Shameless showing off has now shifted to subtlety.”

– which puts a lot of social pressure on late twenties or older Chinese single women. For those that are married, dealing with extra-marital affairs has since become an important topic. A great many married women feel the pressure of their husbands’ extra-marital affairs, which are more likely when the men become successful entrepreneurs and bosses of huge public listed companies.

Independent women and girl power

The main topics of the last two issues of this year’s *ELLE* China are pretty catchy and interesting. One topic is: a woman’s got to have a sense of her own self, as well as a husband and kids. This is also the headline of my editor’s note which I address to all career women. It’s not only an editor’s voice for the magazine, it’s the voice of all Chinese career women. The other topic is Women: Single, happy and loving it. I dedicated this issue to all the “leftover women” of urban China. From these two topics, we can see and understand the heart and emotional journey of today’s Chinese women.

Change in consumption

How does the consumption of luxury goods change the life of Chinese women? In short, shameless showing off has now shifted to subtlety. For the past few years, top “logomania” brands like LV and Gucci have met with new challenges in China due

to the change in economic environment and the shift in female consumer’s buying behaviour. In 2013, LV re-launched their classic retro Alma Bag, tapping Chinese actress *cum* fashion icon Bingbing Fan as its spokesperson. This Alma Bag isn’t made of monogrammed leather nor is there any eye popping logo, BUT it has “rescued” LV in China. Bain & Company’s 2014 survey reports have confirmed that women are now focused on individualistic consumption. Forty-four percent of consumers are willing to try out “not so common” luxury brands like Balenciaga and Michael Kors.

In addition to being the first ever LV Chinese spokesperson Bingbing Fan is also a regular face on *ELLE* China covers. How have Chinese readers’ preference of their magazines’ cover stars changed over time? From 2009 till 2014, of the 108 issues of *ELLE* China, we have featured a total of 89 Chinese celebrities and 45 foreign stars on our covers. From the readers’ survey and newsstand sales figures, we reckon that Chinese faces “sell” better than foreign faces.

Besides the shift from western to Asian faces, has the perception of a cover girl changed too? Who do you want to see on *ELLE* China’s cover? This is the million-dollar question that has consistently

appeared on all our readers’ survey. And I have talked to a social psychologist who told me that, in answering this question, a reader has subconsciously revealed which type of woman she secretly wants to be.

In 2008, *ELLE* China’s 20th anniversary, we carried out a survey on choice of cover stars. Our readers, the Chinese women, clearly wanted to be that successful and alluring woman who they love to see on our covers. Incidentally their top three choices were all Chinese actresses: Maggie Cheung, Ziyi Zhang and Shuqi. These three Chinese stars share the similarities of being beautiful, sexy, single and highly successful.

When we did our latest cover stars survey in 2014, those three female stars were still immensely popular, but they were not on the top 5 list of readers’ choice. This time around, our readers have chosen Sun Li, Yang Lan, Gao Yuan Yuan and Brigitte Lin as their top 3. Two out of three of these female stars are married women with kids and the last one recently got married. These women shared the similarities of being successful, married and happily raising their kids.

Therefore, it can be seen that after 20 years of robust economic growth, Chinese women have achieved career success, and now they long for a well-rounded life, a stable and happy family.

BIG DATA ON FASHION TREND

A few months ago, *ELLE* China cooperated with China’s biggest search engine Baidu

ELLE 2015 THE DESIRE OF CHINESE WOMEN

ELLE Editorial Workshop



in releasing a report on “Chinese Female Fashion and Lifestyle Orientation”. Through Baidu’s big data analytics, we gathered a lot of interesting findings. At the end of the press conference, Baidu and *ELLE* posted a common question: What, exactly, do Chinese women need?

This question is particularly focused on the main consumer group, those born after 1985. In 2015, the post 85 generation is now 30 years old. For the Chinese, 30 is a very important age. In fact there’s a Chinese saying, “sanshi erli”, which means “at thirty, plant your feet firmly on the ground”.

The *ELLE* editorial team recently carried out a survey among the post 85 generation, from an abstract yet emotional point of view. The survey began with the definition of “elegance”, which is the core value of the

ELLE brand. In the mind-set of all Chinese females of the post 1970s generation, they perceive elegance as demure, dignified, and decent, best exemplified by Song Qingling, the mother of our nation.

The survey told us a lot about our post 85 generation and their very own, fresh and new definition of elegance. A peek into the mind of China’s younger generation shows that there are seven traits that they think define elegance: sexy instead of hot; independent but never lonely; humorous and sometimes sassy; courageous, even crazy; friendly, dare to be nice; freshness that goes beyond age; living in the moment, enjoying the present.

Now let’s come back to the question: what do Chinese females need exactly, and what do they need most? Honestly, I don’t think there’s a one-line answer.

Last year, I established my public account on China’s WeChat platform, posting some of my own as well as *ELLE* China’s selected articles, while reviewing the feedback of my fellow readers. One of the articles that gained a great number of likes and has been widely reposted could probably answer the question. The title of that immensely popular article is: I want to define my own freedom. The closing lines of the article are:

I want to look pretty. I want to make money.

I want to have a loving husband and lovely kids.

I yearn for boundless inspiration and to make my own decision.

I can be both soft and tough as hell.

I can be the boss and a sweetheart as well.

I don’t want to be defined by others. I want to define my own freedom.