



Architectural metaphors: construction of feminism vis-à-vis Confucian culture in women's magazines in China

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Abstract Feminism is frequently depicted through the metaphors of struggle and warfare in English-language magazines, underscoring an oppositional stance towards patriarchal structures. Yet, the discursive construction of feminism in Chinese women's magazines, unaddressed by Chen (2023), remains underexplored. This study investigates the use of architectural metaphors in representing feminism within the context of Confucian cultural values, analyzing two magazines, *Women of China* and *Marriage and Family*. A corpus of 4,182 articles (3,631,345 words) was analyzed. Lexical realizations like “construction” and “support” were identified using the AntConc 4.2.4. Architectural metaphors are prioritized for their systemic structural mapping and Confucian cultural embeddedness. In *Women of China*, women are framed as primary builders of national projects, while in *Marriage and Family*, they are portrayed as individuals developing within family life. Under a Confucian lens, these metaphors depict feminist progress as a form of “social renovation” grounded in harmony. To explore intersectional tensions, the metaphors integrate rural–urban and caregiver-professional identities as complementary “structural components”, reflecting the Confucian ideal of “harmony in diversity”. This study reveals how women's dual roles in family and society are framed as natural extensions of the social structure, offering concrete strategies to promote gender equality while accommodating cultural traditions.

Keywords Architectural metaphors · Feminism · Chinese women's magazines · Confucian culture · Social role construction · Intersectionality

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Introduction

Feminism has played a pivotal role in advancing equality and justice in society. Vachhani (2023) notes that the feminist movement has long been controversial across all sectors of society. While it has inspired many women to pursue equal rights, it has also faced questioning and opposition from conservative forces (Sanders and Jenkins 2022). Given the media's growing influence in contemporary culture, magazines serve as key vehicles for disseminating and shaping ideas, and their coverage of feminist issues significantly shapes public understanding (Johnson 2017). Metaphor, as a powerful linguistic tool in this discursive process, shapes the cognitive framing of social phenomena, significantly influencing the construction and interpretation of gender roles as well as public perceptions of feminism (Aragbuwa and Omotunde 2022).

Existing studies have extensively explored the use of feminist metaphors in the media in different countries including Spain (Fontecha and Jiménez Catalán, 2003; Reali 2021; Reali and Avellaneda 2023; Carnero 2024), Nigeria (Ahmed 2018), the United States, and the United Kingdom (Abu Alrub 2022), and China (Chen 2023; Bouviern and Chen 2021; Bao 2024). Fontecha and Jiménez Catalán (2003) analyze animal metaphors such as fox/vixen and bull/cow in English and Spanish and show that terms for women often carry more negative meanings. In Spanish, *zorrais* is associated with prostitution. Male terms tend to be neutral. This reflects the role of metaphor in reinforcing gendered power structures. Ahmed (2018) finds in her study of five Nigerian newspapers that female authors frequently use metaphors such as “family manager” and “farmland”. Even when promoting equality, these metaphors remain within a patriarchal frame. This resonates with the semantic devaluation observed by Fontecha and Jiménez Catalán. Abu Alrub (2022) compares Women's History Month coverage in the UK and the US. Both rely on war metaphors. In the UK, the focus is on workplace equality. In the US, the focus is on race and gender intersection. This shows that cultural context shapes metaphor selection. Reali and Avellaneda (2023) find in their study of Spanish-language media that war metaphors can highlight women's agency but may also evoke negative associations of “aggressiveness”. This double-edged effect appears across cultural contexts.

Research in the Chinese context highlights a tangled and context-specific negotiation between Confucian cultural norms and emergent feminist ideals. Confucian cultural values refer to a contemporary adapted system emphasizing family as social foundation, hierarchical harmony and gendered complementary roles, distinct from traditional patriarchal Confucian ethics that restrict women to domestic spheres (Li 2022). Bouviern and Chen (2021) analyze fitness discourse on Weibo and find that women balance Confucian obligations with neoliberal aspirations through a “family-compatible fitness narrative”. Chen's (2023) diachronic study of China Women magazine shows a similar pattern of reconciling Confucian gendered expectations with shifting societal demands, a tendency evident in the reconfiguration of metaphorical framings over time. Between 1956 and 1998, metaphors shift from the war domain (“female warrior”) to the nature

domain (“flower”), reflecting a societal transition from collectivism to market-oriented individualism that repositioned women’s roles in both public and private spheres. Bao (2024) finds that war metaphors account for 62.2% of feminist discourse on Weibo. Many carry negative connotations, such as “feminism is a tumour.” This stark contrast in metaphorical framing exposes the deep-seated tension between hierarchical Confucian views of social order, which prioritize familial duty and gendered division of labor, and the egalitarian demands of contemporary gender equality movements.

Architecture serves as a foundational metaphorical framework in Chinese society, deeply rooted in Confucian culture, which emphasizes hierarchical harmony, social stability, and the family as the fundamental societal unit (Liu 2024). The family is likened to a “main building”, women’s roles in maintaining family stability to “load-bearing pillars”, and their participation in public life to “expanding the building’s wings” (Hidayati et al. 2022). In this study, “Confucian culture” refers to a set of enduring social ethics and relational norms derived from classical Confucianism, which continue to inform contemporary Chinese social structures and value systems. Its influence on gender is manifested in the persistent emphasis on familial harmony, gendered role expectations (e.g., the virtue of “nei”/inner sphere for women), and a social ontology that views the stable, hierarchical family as the foundational unit of a well-ordered society. The “tension” noted in existing research arises from the negotiation between these enduring norms and modern egalitarian ideals. In Chinese society, women are the key elements in this Confucian-infused architectural metaphorical system. For example, the role of women in the family is like the foundation of a building, silently supporting the stability of the family that serves as a haven for the children and the family unit (similar to the shelter function of architecture). Thus, in the context of feminism, this metaphor reflects the particular status of Chinese women navigating between Confucian familial duties and contemporary demands for gender equality. Unlike the adversarial logic of war metaphors or the organic growth implied by plant metaphors, architectural discourse centers on deliberate design, foundational stability, and complementary functionality—concepts central to negotiating change within a Confucian framework that values harmony and order.

Existing research on Chinese feminist media discourse has only examined war, nature, family and animal metaphorical domains (Chen 2023; Bao 2024). Analysis of architectural metaphors, a culturally salient category embedding Confucian values, remains absent. There is also a lack of analysis of how they shape roles for women with different intersectional identities. This study examines the representation of feminism using the architectural metaphor in two Chinese women’s magazines, *Women of China* and *Marriage and Family*. The objectives of the study are:

- (1) To identify the main lexical realizations of architectural metaphors in Chinese women’s magazines *Women of China* and *Marriage and Family*;
- (2) To analyze how architectural metaphors construct female social roles under Confucian culture;

- (3) To explore the differences and tensions presented by women with different intersectional identities in the roles shaped by these architectural metaphors.

Theoretical framework of study

The analysis proceeds from the premise that architectural metaphors are not arbitrary but are resonant within a Confucian cultural framework. CMT provides the foundational lens to understand how abstract feminist concepts are structured through this concrete imagery. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) posit that metaphor is not merely linguistic in nature, but rather constitutes a cognitive mechanism, involving systematic cross-domain mappings from tangible source domains (e.g., building structures, construction actions) to abstract target domains (e.g., gender roles, social change). In this study, CMT elucidates the manner in which terms such as “construction” and “pillar” serve to map physical construction processes onto women’s social roles, thereby transforming vague conceptions of gender equality into concrete “engineering projects” that resonate with Confucian values of harmony and structure. This mapping reveals how metaphor shapes cognition of women’s agency by framing their empowerment as a “renovation” of existing social systems rather than a radical break.

Social Role Theory (Eagly 1987) helps analyze how these metaphorical mappings engage with specific, contextually-shaped role expectations. In the contemporary Chinese context, these expectations are a hybrid product, where traditional Confucian prescriptions for women (centered on familial piety and care) intersect with modern demands for public participation and economic agency. The theory posits that gender stereotypes emerge from repeated behavioral patterns tied to social roles: women are often perceived as “communal” (caring, cooperative) due to their traditional association with family domains, while men are seen as “agentic” (active, competitive) through public sphere participation. In this context, the theoretical framework facilitates the analysis of how architectural metaphors, through the repeated association of women with “co-construction” or “support” roles, progressively extend their perceived agency beyond the confines of familial care. This occurs under Confucian principles of collective contribution while concurrently challenging entrenched gender divisions. To illustrate this point, consider how the portrayal of rural women as “foundations” of industrial platforms or urban professionals as “load-bearing beams” of innovation reflects a shift in role expectations, driven by metaphorical repetition.

Intersectionality Theory, developed by Crenshaw (1989), adds nuance by examining how overlapping identities (e.g. rural–urban, occupational, age-based) shape diverse experiences within these metaphorical frameworks. Crenshaw emphasizes that identities do not operate in isolation. Rather, their interplay engenders unique forms of privilege or oppression. In this context, the theory elucidates that architectural metaphors accommodate varied female experiences: rural women might be cast as “soil” for grassroots development, while urban white-collar women are framed as “steel structures” of workplace progress. These distinctions serve to circumvent the fragmentation of Western identity politics, instead integrating differences into a

cohesive “social architecture” that reflects Confucian “harmony in diversity”. The integration of CMT, Social Role Theory and Intersectionality Theory formulates a framework for examining how architectural metaphors negotiate feminism and tradition in Chinese media.

Method of study

Data collection

During data collection, the search term “women’s magazines” was used to locate the online Chinese women’s magazines of *Women of China* and *Marriage and Family*. These magazines were selected primarily for their accessibility and distinct editorial profiles within a shared institutional ecosystem. It is acknowledged that both are administered and published by China Women’s Publishing House, which provides a clear, bounded context for examining how architectural metaphors operate within a specific, influential media genre.

Since its inception, *Women of China* (*Women of China*, n.d.) has been reporting on women’s achievements and challenges in various fields such as politics, economy and culture, and also women’s roles and psychological growth in social change. The magazine occupies a position of considerable importance in the historical context of women’s magazines within the Chinese context (Chen 2023). As for *Marriage and Family* (*Marriage and Family*, n.d.), the focus is on new problems and trends in *marriage and family* such as husband-wife, parent–child relationship and family ethics in modern families. The articles also provide scientific and practical suggestions to deal with changes in Chinese family structure. *Marriage and Family* has significantly impacted China and globally by its profound and evocative content, authoritative and credible reports, and a rigorous and pragmatic ethos (Choi and Luo 2016).

There are four topics in the homepage of the website of *Women of China* and all the articles under these topics were copied and pasted into Word document for analysis: “Women’s Federation Live Studio”, “Top News”, “Women’s Elegance and Charm”, and “Legal Assistance”. The website of *Marriage and Family* magazine has three topics namely “Women’s Federation Live”, “The Art of Marriage”, and “Profiles”.

In the data collection stage, all articles listed under these specific thematic sections during the one-year period were collected. Non-article content (e.g., advertisements, author bios, website navigation text) was manually identified and excluded. Duplicate articles (e.g., cross-posted across sections) were identified by URL and title comparison, and only one instance was retained. A total of 72 irrelevant texts were manually removed from the initial download pool, resulting in the final corpus of 4,182 articles. The raw frequency imbalance in Table 1 stems directly from the magazines’ differing scope and publication volume. *Women of China* emphasizes social reporting while *Marriage and Family* focuses on in-depth family essays. This imbalance arises because *Women of China* is a weekly comprehensive magazine (52 issues/year) while *Marriage and Family* is a monthly specialized journal (12 issues/year).

Table 1 Corpus composition after applying inclusion criteria

Data category	<i>Women of China</i>	<i>Marriage and family</i>	Total
Circulation/readership	280,000+ monthly copies	180,000 monthly copies	460,000+ monthly copies
Number of articles	3,837	345	4,182
Total number of words	3,159,025	472,320	3,631,345

Data analysis

Metaphor identification followed a semi-automated procedure grounded in the Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP) (Pragglejaz Group 2007). The process involved three stages. First, we used AntConc 4.2.4 to generate a frequency-ranked word list for the entire corpus. Second, to identify candidate metaphorical expressions, we performed a collocation analysis centered on a pre-defined seed list of architectural terms (e.g., 建设 jiàn shè (build), 支撑 zhī chēng (support)). We extracted their significant collocates (MI-Score ≥ 3.0) within a span of L1-R1. A strong correlation between two words is usually considered to exist when the MI-Score is equal to or greater than 3.0 (Mohr et al. 2001). Third, all concordance lines for the high-frequency architectural terms and their strong collocates were manually examined using the KWIC (Key Word In Context) function. Four, two researchers independently reviewed these concordance lines. For each instance, they determined if the contextual meaning of the word contrasted with a more basic physical meaning (e.g., “building a house” vs. “building capacity”) and could be understood via comparison. Only instances where this cross-domain mapping was clear were tagged as metaphorical. Five, an inter-coder reliability check was performed on a 10% random sample (approximately 420 articles), achieving a Cohen’s Kappa (Cohen 1960) of 0.87, indicating strong agreement. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion. Institutional or formulaic expressions with potentially dead metaphors (e.g., “capacity building” as a fixed phrase) were included only if the analysis of the immediate co-text suggested an active architectural mapping was being invoked to conceptualize a social process.

The following example illustrates the procedure. The collocate analysis for “力量 (power)” returned “她 (her)” with a high MI-Score. Examining the KWIC lines for “她力量 (her power)” allowed us to confirm its metaphorical usage in contexts like “showcasing ‘her power’ in flood relief efforts,” where physical force is mapped onto collective social agency. This process was repeated for all target terms.

他们以实际行动在防汛抗洪中展现巾帼“她力量”，勇做风雨守护人。tā men yǐ shí jì xíng dòng zài fáng xùn kàng hóng zhōng zhǎn xiàn jīn guó “tā lì liàng”, yǒng zuò fēng yǔ shǒu hù rén. (They showed “her power” in the flood control and flood fighting with practical actions, brave to do the guardian of wind and rain.)

In flood-relief efforts for Hebei Province, the Women’s Federation of Handan and the Women’s Entrepreneurs Association jointly organized donations and support activities, highlighting the metaphor “her power”. From a CMT perspective, “power” serves as the source domain, mapping physical strength onto women’s

agency in public affairs. This cross-domain mapping renders women’s social participation as tangible “action energy”, reinforcing their image as societal builders. Social Role Theory shows that repeated collective actions, such as flood prevention, challenge the stereotype of women as confined to the private sphere, adding “social participant” to women’s role perception. Intersectionality Theory reveals the convergence of roles, federation members, entrepreneurs, and philanthropists, whose organizational capacity, economic resources, and social responsibility integrate into a synergistic force greater than the sum of its parts. This multi-identity collaboration demonstrates the broader value of women’s attributes in complex social contexts. Figure 1 presents the study’s analytical framework.

Results

There were 12 dominant metaphors appearing in the women’s magazine articles, namely, architecture, force, journey, war, innovation, plant, container, performance, light source, wave, obstacle, and animal. Table 2 presents the normalized (by total metaphorical tokens) frequency of the most used metaphor: the architectural metaphor and its lexical realizations.

As shown in Table 2, architectural metaphors are prevalent in both magazines to depict women’s roles in family, society, and self-growth. The core word 建设 jiànshè (build) appears most frequently (4,776 times), followed by 打造 dǎzào (create) (896), 创建 chuàngjiàn (creation) (890), 营造 yíngzào (create) (829), and 建立 jiànli (establish) (776). Chinese offers more nuanced choices for “create.” 打造

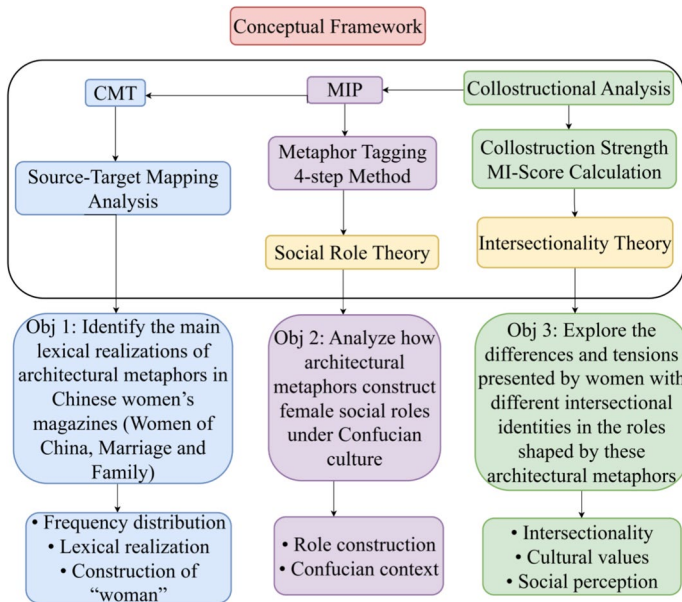


Fig. 1 Analysis framework of study

Table 2 Frequency of the architectural metaphor and its lexical realizations

Metaphor type	Lexical realizations	Frequency	Total
The architectural metaphor	建设 jiàn shè (build)	4,776	10,960
	打造 dǎ zào (create)	896	
	创建 chuàng jiàn (creation)	890	
	营造 yíng zào (create)	829	
	建立 jiàn lì (establish)	776	
	共建 gòng jiàn (co-construction)	581	
	搭建 dā jiàn (erect)	535	
	构建 gòu jiàn (construct)	462	
	组建 zǔ jiàn (form)	377	
	筑牢 zhù láo (build a solid barrier)	156	
	建 jiàn (build)	126	
	建成 jiàn chéng (constructed)	113	
	顶梁柱 dǐng liáng zhù (pillar)	112	
	支撑 zhī chēng (support)	98	
	共创 gòng chuàng (co-create)	83	
	建设者 jiàn shè zhě (builder)	79	
	撑起 chēng qǐ (support)	71	

dǎzào (create) emphasizes deliberate effort and detail, 营造 yíngzào (create) stresses creation of atmosphere, and 创建 chuàngjiàn (creation) covers both material construction and spiritual creation. Although English “create” is concise, these Chinese variants convey different attitudes, efforts, and affective tones more precisely.

Another set of construction-related terms includes 共建 gòngjiàn (co-construction) (581), 搭建 dājiàn (erect) (535), 构建 gòujiàn (construct) (462), 组建 zǔjiàn (form) (377), 筑牢 zhùláo (build a solid barrier) (156), 建 jiàn (build) (126), 建成 jiànchéng (constructed) (113), and 顶梁柱 dǐngliángzhù (pillar) (112). Each term signals a distinct stage or aspect of the metaphor, from collaborative system-building to final completion, and together they map women’s empowerment as a process that elevates women to the status of societal pillars. Confucian cultural elements mirror this architectural logic and influence women’s role positioning. The following sections present the lexical realizations of these metaphors with the original Chinese words and English translations; pinyin are included in all figures, and elsewhere only the English terms are used. Figure 2 presents the architectural metaphors used in representations of feminism.

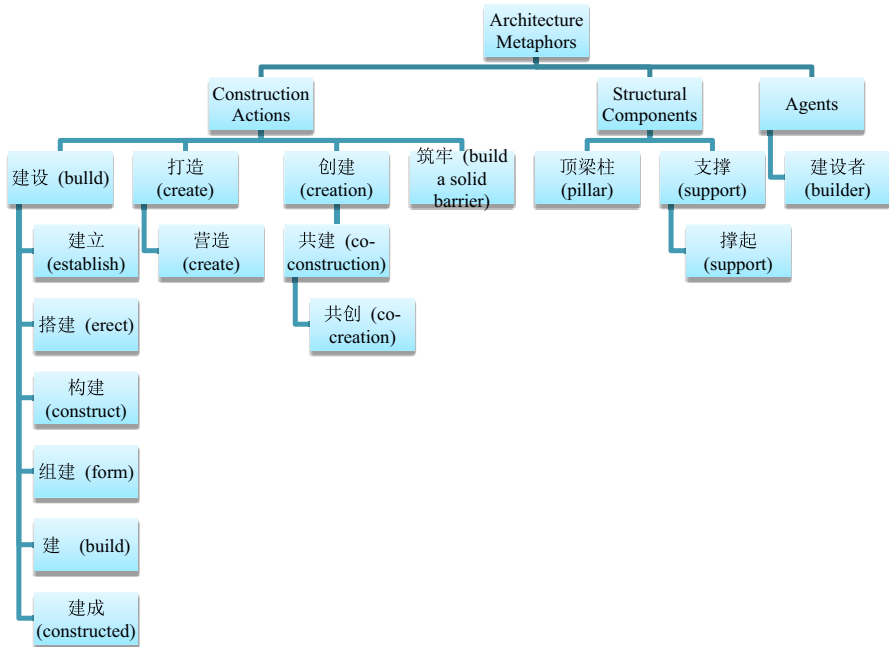


Fig. 2 Architecture metaphors used in representations of feminism

Extract 4 analyzes architectural metaphors in Chinese magazines operating across three dimensions: construction actions, structural components, and agents. Grounded in CMT, these metaphors construct a narrative of “collaborative social engineering,” reflecting the Chinese system’s integrative logic in accommodating women’s multiple identities.

The construction actions dimension centers on terms such as “co-construction” and “co-creation”, aligned with CMT’s action schema (build, establish, erect). Feminist practice is conceptualized as layered, coordinated engineering. Social Role Theory interprets this as women’s transformation from family-centered roles to active participants in social development. Examples include rural–urban collaboration in industrial platform building and intergenerational co-creation of community service systems. From an Intersectionality perspective, “co-construction” resists fragmented identity politics, integrating women across age, region, and profession, e.g., border-region women advancing ethnic unity alongside gender equality, urban professionals constructing work-family balance models.

The structural components dimension features terms such as “pillar” and “support,” mapping women onto load-bearing elements in societal architecture. Social Role Theory identifies a shift from passive support to central structural roles. Rural women combine family and industrial responsibilities; professional women serve as sectoral pillars. Intersectionality highlights differentiated alignment with institutional frameworks: disabled women building inclusive employment systems; ethnic minority women integrating cultural heritage with gender equality.

These forms of “support” operate through coordinated contributions to national development goals.

The agents dimension uses the “builder” metaphor to recast women as active constructors rather than constructed objects. CMT reframes the builder as an agentic figure; Social Role Theory reads this as a disruption of male-dominated construction narratives. Grassroots Women’s Federation cadres create service networks; female entrepreneurs develop industrial ecosystems. Intersectionality reveals diverse builder identities, from elderly women cultivating volunteer systems to migrant women constructing urban integration networks. These subjectivities sustain a discourse of collective participation aligned with institutional mechanisms for inclusive engagement.

Table 3 presents architectural metaphors realized through “建设jiànshè (construction/building)” in *Women of China*.

Extract 1 reports a training program in Yichun City designed to enhance female entrepreneurs’ skills and leadership, thereby promoting business and economic development. In Table 3 the co-occurrence frequency of “construction” and “training program” is 5,338 with an MI-score of 6.129, indicating a strong association and making this collocation a salient element in narratives of capability building for women.

According to CMT, the architectural metaphor of “construction” maps building processes onto capacity building. The curriculum functions as a foundation through political theory study, the frame is formed by business skills training, and decoration is added via health and wellness courses. Tax training corresponds to compliance inspection and intellectual property development resembles architectural design, all contributing to the main structure of women’s economic agency. This mapping turns the abstract idea of capacity building into a stepwise construction project.

Framed as construction, the training program can be interpreted as an attempt to reshape gender role perceptions. It juxtaposes political and business training, typically associated with public agency, with family care responsibilities. Traditional norms confine women to family care, but repeated participation in political study and business training cultivates agentic qualities and challenges stereotypes about women’s economic competence. The program addresses the needs of women holding dual identities as entrepreneurs and community members. It combines elements like traditional health practices with modern brand building. In this specific case, the construction metaphor frames development as a structured process.

The construction metaphor suggests a tentative pathway for women’s development that accommodates tradition and modernity within structural limits. The concept of 创建 chuàngjiàn (creation) is closely associated with connotation and enriches narratives of women’s contributions across private and public domains. Table 4 presents feminism-related architectural metaphors with the source domain of 营造 yíngzào (foster/create) in the magazine *Women of China*.

Extract 2 describes various feminist activities and initiatives, including community support for working parents, children’s educational programs, and promotion of gender equality through training and events by local women’s federations. In Table 4 the co-occurrence frequency of “create” and “gender equality” is 978 with an MI-score of 4.910, indicating a significant association and forming a core

Table 3 Feminist architectural metaphors with the lexical realization of “建设jiànshè (build)”

Lexical realization	Frequency	Collocates	MI-Score	Extract
建设jiànshè (construction/building)	5338	研修班yánxiū bān (training program)	6.129	江西省宜春市女企业家能力建设研修班成功举办。Jiāngxī Shěng Yíchūn Shì nǚ qǐyèjiā nénglì jiànshè yánxiū bān chénggōng jǔbàn. (The capacity building training program for female entrepreneurs in Yichun City, Jiangxi Province was successfully held.) (<i>Women of China</i>)

Table 4 Feminism-related architectural metaphors with the source domain of “营造yíngzào (foster/create)”

Lexical realization	Frequency	Collocates	MI-Score	Extract
营造yíngzào (foster/create)	978	男女平等nánǚ píngděng (gender equality)	4.910	他们营造男女平等, 和谐发展社会氛围。Tā men yíngzào nánǚ píngděng, héxié fāzhǎn shèhuì fēnwéi. (They created a social atmosphere of gender equality and harmonious development.) (<i>Marriage and Family</i>)

metaphor in gender equality narratives. According to CMT, the architectural metaphor of “create” maps construction processes onto equality building: ground-laying corresponds to legal education, frame building to institutional guarantees, and maintenance to ongoing advocacy. Nationwide livestreams on legal education by the All-China Women’s Federation function like pouring foundations across townships, with legal knowledge serving as the steel framework and harmonious development providing inclusive form. Anti-discrimination clauses act as compliance standards and employment rights protections reinforce structural stability, turning gender equality into a stepwise social construction project.

This practice foregrounds equal employment rights, potentially contributing to a public discourse that associates women with both legal agency and traditional social roles. The process of “create” also appears to address a range of potential audiences, including rural and urban women, through its content.

Within the tension between Confucian tradition and feminist consciousness, the “create” metaphor frames the pursuit of gender equality as a constructive activity aimed at social harmony. This framing also imposes gender discipline that constrains feminist demands within harmony norms. The concept of 创建 (*chuàngjiàn*, creation) is closely associated with connotation and enriches narratives of women’s contributions across private and public domains. Table 5 demonstrates feminist architectural metaphors with the lexical realization of 创建 (*chuàngjiàn*, creation) in the magazine *Women of China*.

Extract 3 reports the Xuyi County initiatives for rural revitalization where women’s federations empower women, promote entrepreneurship, and advance female competencies to drive economic and social progress. In Table 5 the co-occurrence frequency of “create” and “connotation” is 959 with an MI-score of 5.046, indicating a significant association and forming a core metaphor in narratives of “Making Achievements by Women”.

According to CMT, the architectural metaphor of “create” maps construction processes onto capacity building. Blueprint design corresponds to policy orientation, material preparation to skills training, and project inspection to performance evaluation. Entrepreneurship and employment training act as pouring the foundation, and the establishment of Women’s Merit Posts resembles constructing the main structure. Concrete tasks such as tax knowledge dissemination and anti-money laundering advocacy shape women’s presence in public service, while infant care training and domestic service function as operational zoning and supporting facilities, together advancing the project of women’s social value.

This practice reshapes gender role perceptions within a Confucian context and aligns with Social Role Theory. The Making Achievements by Women initiative repeatedly attributes agentic qualities to women through workplace success, with examples including a national merit post serving families with autistic children and a provincial post promoting financial literacy. The process integrates intersecting identity needs and reflects intersectional logic. Women in Xuyi County embody multiple identities as women, workers, and community members. Training addresses left behind rural women with eldercare programs and meets urban women’s career demands with entrepreneurship courses. The post village pairing

Table 5 Feminist architecture metaphors with the lexical realization of “创建chuàngjiàn (creation)”

Lexical realization	Frequency	Collocates	MI-Score	Extract
创建chuàngjiàn (create/build)	959	内涵nèihán (connotation)	5.046	深化中帼建功创建内涵, 促进女性综合素质提升。Shēnhuà jīnguó jiàngōng chuàngjiàn nèihán, cùjìn nǚxìng zǒnghé sùiyáng tǐshèng. (Deepen the connotation of “Women Making Contributions” creation and promote the comprehensive quality of women. (<i>Women of China</i>))

model ensures precise resource matching, with vehicle management offices paired with communities and rural commercial banks providing financial literacy.

Within the tension between Confucian tradition and feminist consciousness, “create” accommodates tradition and modernity by combining traditional caring content such as traditional Chinese medicine health care with modern brand building skills. This allows women to balance virtue and ambition and embeds a modern structural element within a traditional framework. This integration also reinforces role binding that prioritizes social harmony over radical gender critique. The concept of 筑牢 zhùláo (strengthen/build solid) strengthen or build solid is intertwined with safeguarding, portraying rights protection as a substantial barrier. Table 6 presents feminist architectural metaphors with the lexical realization of 筑牢 zhùláo (strengthen/build solid) in the magazine *Women of China*.

Extract 4 highlights an article by Chen Yiqin, Chairwoman of the All-China Women’s Federation, emphasizing women’s contributions to national development. In Table 6 the co-occurrence frequency of “build solid” and “safeguard” is 201 with an MI-score of 4.961, indicating a significant association and forming a core metaphor in narratives on protecting women’s rights and interests.

According to CMT, the architectural metaphor of “build solid” maps construction processes onto the domain of rights protection. Foundation compaction corresponds to improving laws and regulations, wall construction corresponds to establishing protection mechanisms, and structural reinforcement corresponds to long-term supervision. Full-chain governance corresponds to pointing brickwork and filling gaps across procedural links, while multi-departmental coordination is like tying steel bars to strengthen the structure. The Anti-Domestic Violence Law functions as protective wall design and employment discrimination governance resembles applying a waterproof coating. Together these measures complete the women’s rights protective system.

This practice reshapes gender role perceptions within a Confucian context and aligns with Social Role Theory. While traditional Confucian culture confines women to an inner domestic role, repeated safeguarding actions such as legal education and rescue services gradually attribute agentic traits to women. Regularized rights-protection work reinforces recognition of women as rights-holders and shifts social cognition from seeing women as protection objects to seeing them as rights defenders.

The “build solid” approach also integrates intersecting identity needs, reflecting intersectional logic. Full-chain governance addresses rural demands for land rights and tackles workplace discrimination faced by urban professionals. Targeted initiatives such as the Spring Bud Project for girls’ education and the Healthy China Mother Action for maternal health act as safety rails and medical protection nets. This multidimensional protection ensures that women of diverse identities obtain corresponding safeguards within the rights-protection barrier.

Within the tension between Confucian culture and feminist consciousness, the “build solid” metaphor accommodates tradition and modernity by embedding equality in the family harmony framework. Rights-protection actions range from family dispute mediation to legal litigation support, enabling women to balance roles as virtuous wives and rights-holders. Ultimately this approach preserves the cultural

Table 6 Feminist architecture metaphors with the lexical realization of “筑牢zhùláo (build a solid barrier...)”

Lexical realization	Frequency	Collocates	MI-Score	Extract
筑牢zhùláo (strengthen/build solid)	201	维护wéihù (safeguard)	4.961	4. 我们共同筑牢维护妇女权益的坚固屏障。 Xiétóng pèihé gè yǒnguān fāngmiàn gòngtóng zhùláo wéihù fù nǚ quán yì de jiāngù píngzhàng. (We jointly build a solid barrier for safeguarding women's rights and interests.) (<i>Women of China</i>)

foundation of the family-state analogy while expanding a stronger rights space for women, making gender equality an enduring load-bearing wall in the social structure. The concept of 顶梁柱 *dǐngliángzhù* (pillar) resonates with the notion of mother and underscores maternal agency. Table 7 presents feminist architectural metaphors with the lexical realization of 顶梁柱 *dǐngliángzhù* (pillar) in the Chinese magazine *Marriage and Family*.

Extract 5 outlines the Nanping Women's Federation's initiative to support "pillar mothers," who single-handedly sustain their families due to divorce, widowhood, or job loss. In Table 7 the co-occurrence frequency of "pillar" and "mother" is 160 with an MI-score of 11.313, indicating a very strong association and constituting a core metaphor in narratives of familial support. According to CMT, the architectural metaphor of "pillar" maps pillar features onto mothers' roles: load-bearing for economic support, stability for emotional maintenance, and seismic reinforcement for crisis response. The Federation's "1 + 3 + 1" assistance model functions as a pillar reinforcement project, with cadres and volunteers providing auxiliary supports; skills training such as e-commerce and domestic service increases load-bearing capacity; psychological counseling prevents structural fatigue; employment support raises pillar capacity; and parent-child coordination secures family joints. Training and targeted services, including mobile workshops for rural women, 117 psychological counseling sessions for urban mothers, and "one household, one plan" interventions such as "one elderly, one child" care for 76 mothers, ensure contextualized support across different needs.

This practice portrays mothers as combining economic and emotional responsibilities, a portrayal that extends beyond a purely domestic role. The initiative combines support for family roles with skills training. This framing also reinforces gendered care burdens that place family stability responsibility primarily on women. The concept of 支撑 *zhīchēng* (support) shows a strong correlation with "talent," linking collective collaboration with expanded female participation in public development. Table 8 presents feminist architectural metaphors with the lexical realization of 支撑 *zhīchēng* (support) in *Women of China*.

Extract 6 describes the Inner Mongolia Hohhot Women's Federation's efforts to enhance the "Walking Women's Home" initiative by improving quality and expanding services, thereby strengthening the connection between the party and women at the grassroots. In Table 8, the co-occurrence frequency of "support" and "talent" is 150 with an MI-score of 7.447, indicating a significant association and forming a core metaphor in narratives about sustaining female talent. The architectural metaphor of "support" is realized through the "Women's Home on the Move" practice, which makes women's contribution to organizational development tangible as structural support. According to CMT, "support" maps architectural features such as foundational support for talent cultivation, structural reinforcement through organizational networks, and joint connection via resource integration onto the target domain of women's talent empowerment. The Hulunbuir project "Strengthening Foundations, Expanding Coverage, and Enhancing Vitality" functions as a structural reinforcement initiative, with 1,951 "Women's Homes on the Move" operating as distributed support points. Executive committee work studios address last mile problems analogous to joint reinforcement, and the "Ten to the Countryside, Ten to

Table 7 Feminist architecture metaphors with the lexical realization of “顶梁柱dingliángzhù (pillar)”

Lexical realization	Frequency	Collocates	MI-Score	Extract
顶梁柱dingliángzhù (pillar/support beam)	160	母亲mǔqīn (mother)	11.313	5. 联合心理专家为压力大、情感焦虑的“顶梁柱母亲”提供咨询服务和心理治疗117人次,帮助她们提升自信心。Liánhé xīnlǐ zhuānjiā wèi yālì dà、qíngǎn jiāolǚ de “dǐngliángzhù mǔqīn” tígòng zixún fúwù hé xīnlǐ zhìliáo 117 rěncì, bāngzhù tāmen tíshēng zìxìnxīn. (Psychological experts provided 117 consultations and treatments for stressed and emotionally anxious “pillar mothers,” helping them enhance their self-confidence.) (<i>Marriage and Family</i>)

Table 8 Feminist architecture metaphors with the lexical realizations of “支撑zhīchēng (support)”

Lexical realization	Frequency	Collocates	MI-score	Extract
支撑zhīchēng (support)	150	人才réncái (talent)	7.447	6. 长远统筹谋划素质建设, 强化女性人才支撑, 稳步夯实组织建设基础。Chángyuǎn tǒngchóu móuhuà sùzhì jiànshè, qiǎnghuà nǚxìng réncái zhīchēng, wěnbù hǎngshí zǔzhī jiànshè jīchǔ. (Long-term planning of quality development should strengthen the support of female talents to steadily solidify the foundation of organizational construction.) (<i>Women of China</i>)

the People” campaign extends policy resources to grassroots communities. Training over 2,100 grassroots executive committee members increases support strength, while establishing women’s organizations in emerging sectors expands the support range, both contributing to organizational stability.

This support practice reshapes gender role perceptions within a Confucian cultural context and aligns with Social Role Theory. While Confucian tradition has confined women to an inner domestic role, female talent support enables continuous participation in grassroots governance, such as dispute mediation and legal publicity, which gradually manifests agentic traits. In Hulunbuir’s border regions Northern Frontier Women’s Demonstration Bases show committee members combining familial care with contributions to border security, and such repeated practices weaken the stereotype that women’s work is limited to household chores. Frequent co-occurrence of “support” and “talent” facilitates recognition of women as public supporters, positioning female talent as a social role that integrates traditional virtues with modern governance capabilities.

The construction of “support” also addresses intersecting identity needs and considers diverse circumstances. Women in Hulunbuir often embody multiple identities as women, farmers or herders, and border residents. The “Women’s Home on the Move” responds to pastoral production needs through initiatives such as the Grassland Girls research group and addresses urban rights protection via services like the She Station. A categorical support model avoids one-size-fits-all solutions. For example, the Arong Banner mobile station provides agricultural technology training for female farmers, while the Zhalainguoer District station focuses on workplace health for professionals. Such multidimensional support aims to provide support to women in diverse circumstances points within the social structure.

In the tension between Confucian culture and feminist consciousness, the “support” metaphor constructs a pathway that bridges tradition and modernity. Confucian emphasis on the family-state continuum is preserved while women’s social functions are expanded within that framework. Federation initiatives combine family education guidance with new sector organization building, enabling women to balance roles as family supporters and social builders. This approach preserves the cultural foundation of family centrality while reinforcing social support capacity, ultimately positioning women in a more pivotal support role within both family and society.

Discussion

Through the metaphorical analysis of feminist discourse in two Chinese magazines *Women of China* and *Marriage and Family*, this study has produced two key findings. Firstly, under Confucian culture, architectural metaphors construct female social roles by framing women as both “builders” and “pillars” who retain traditional communal traits of family care while embodying agentic qualities in social participation. These metaphors carry implicit gender discipline and role binding. It reflects a neutral Chinese feminist discourse distinct from radical Western feminism. Secondly, women with different intersectional identities exhibit role differences

shaped by architectural metaphors, which are alleviated through integrated mechanisms like “co-construction” rather than fragmented representations.

First, architectural metaphors construct female social roles within Confucian culture by framing women as both “builders” and “pillars”. Ahmed (2018, p. 93) found that in Nigerian newspapers, women were often metaphorically framed as “home managers,” with their roles strictly confined to the private sphere; repetitive acts of caregiving continually reinforced a passive and subordinate stereotype. In the present study, however, the “pillar mother” metaphor (Extract 23) encompasses both the fulfilment of family responsibilities, such as child education and elder care, and active participation in public affairs through community mediation and volunteer service. This framing presents women as composite figures integrating both private and public responsibilities. It suggests a discursive integration of roles, but it is crucial to reflect on the implicit power dynamics this integration may entail. The architectural metaphor, with its emphasis on “pillars” and “support,” can subtly bind women to a role of structural necessity. The expectation to reliably “support” both family and community may enforce a form of gendered discipline, where agency is exercised within, and contingent upon, fulfilling foundational, often unremunerated, care duties. The tension between Confucian expectations of familial harmony and feminist ideals of individual autonomy is thus not resolved but managed within a framework that prioritizes systemic stability.

Florencia Reali (2021, p. 355), analyzing Spanish media, argues that war metaphors cast women as “warriors,” whose confrontational public actions amplify their agentic traits but diminish their traditional communal qualities. By contrast, the “co-construction” metaphor (Extract 24) identified in this study reflects a distinct discursive strategy: in rural revitalization projects, women collaborate with men to build industrial platforms, demonstrating agency through project planning and resource coordination while sustaining communal traits through care for farming households and the mediation of neighbourly disputes. This pattern frames agency and communion as complementary within a collaborative project. The stark contrast with adversarial Western metaphors like “warrior” points to a fundamental divergence in the discursive construction of feminism. Western feminist discourse often employs conflict metaphors to challenge and dismantle patriarchal structures directly. The Chinese architectural metaphors analyzed here, however, construct a feminism that seeks to renovate and expand the existing social edifice from within. This reflects a more neutral or integrative conceptualization of “feminism” in this context, one where advancement is framed as contribution to collective harmony and development, rather than as a battle against an opposing system. The relative mildness of the tension discussed here stems from this foundational discursive difference.

Bao (2024, p. 10), in a study of Weibo discourse, observed that war metaphors such as “feminist fighter” often link women’s agency to the “destruction of tradition,” provoking resistance to women’s public engagement. In contrast, the “building solid” metaphor (Extract 22) in this study frames women’s legal rights protection in terms of “maintaining protective barriers,” aligning their actions with the Confucian value of “social stability.” This framing aligns the discourse of rights protection with values of stability. While this may enhance social acceptability, it also invites critique regarding the depth of transformation. The metaphor of “maintaining

protective barriers” focuses on safeguarding within a given structure, potentially leaving the underlying architecture of power, the very design of the “building”, unchallenged. The power structure inherent in architectural thinking, which presumes a pre-existing blueprint (traditional social order) to be reinforced, can discipline feminist agency into forms that repair and sustain rather than radically redesign.

Second, women with different intersectional identities exhibit role differences shaped by architectural metaphors, which are alleviated through integrated mechanisms like “co-construction” rather than fragmented representations. Bouviern and Chen (2021, p. 16) notes that Confucian culture stresses women’s obligations to the family, such as caring for elders and raising children. The discourse of personal development under neoliberal thought, such as fitness and self-fulfilment, often conflicts with this norm. Women on social media must deliberately display an ability to balance family and self in order to manage this tension. This balance remains largely an individual-level compromise. In this study, the “Gangcun pairing” mechanism (Extract 21) frames the collaboration between urban and rural women as a form of collective capacity building (“beams” and “foundations”), presenting identity differences as complementary within a collective project.

From the perspective of Intersectionality Theory, Crenshaw (1989, p. 140) focuses on the oppressive overlap of multiple identities. Fontecha and Jiménez Catalán (2003, p. 782) show in their analysis of English and Spanish animal metaphors that women’s gender and class identities are often jointly devalued. Working-class women are compared to “cows,” which signals both gender disadvantage and low class status. This metaphor intensifies the negative layering of identities. In this study, the “support” metaphor (Extract 24) positions migrant women in urban production through “mobile workshops.” Their “migrant worker” and “female” identities are framed as “auxiliary structures”, a metaphor that acknowledges economic contribution while potentially accommodating expectations of familial roles.

Social Role Theory holds that role perceptions stem from repeated patterns of behaviour (Eagly 1987, p. 24). Nigerian newspapers depict rural women as “farmland” and urban women as “commodities.” The two roles are isolated in metaphor, which sustains divergent social expectations for women of different classes (Ahmed 2018, p. 94). In this study, the legal literacy livestream on “creating an atmosphere of equality” (Extract 19) involved both rural and urban women in delivering legal education. The “shared space” logic of the architectural metaphor makes urban knowledge transfer and rural needs expression essential materials for building equality. This repeated collaboration not only affirms the distinct value of both identities but also produces a new role perception of “urban and rural women co-constructing equality.” This reflects the Confucian ideal of “harmony without uniformity” in identity integration. It also extends Intersectionality Theory by showing a pathway of identity coordination in collectivist cultures.

It is important to acknowledge that the analysis is based on two specific magazines with distinct institutional positions. The architectural metaphors they employ, which emphasize integration, harmony, and collective contribution, reflect the discursive parameters and editorial orientations of these publication genres. While this provides a crucial window into how feminism is negotiated within sanctioned media

spaces, it necessarily excludes more adversarial or grassroots feminist discourses that may employ different metaphorical repertoires, such as those found on social media platforms like Weibo. Therefore, the findings illuminate a specific, institutionally-shaped mode of feminist construction in China, rather than claiming to represent the full spectrum of “Chinese feminism”.

Conclusion

The present study’s analysis of architectural metaphors in women’s magazines reveals a nuanced negotiation between Confucian collectivism and feminist agency. Metaphors such as “foundations”, “co-construction”, and “renovation” reframe women’s empowerment as a process of structural integration within existing social frameworks, aligning it with discourses of harmony and collective contribution. This alignment avoids direct confrontation with traditional gender norms while subtly expanding women’s social roles. It suggests a strategic use of cultural resonance to advance gender agendas.

Theoretically, the findings indicate how Confucianism shapes metaphorical mappings and moves beyond the “tradition versus modernity” binary. From a sociological perspective, the focus on structural integration challenges Western portrayals of intersectional identities that are fragmented due to the presence of various components. It does so by positioning caregivers, professionals, and activists as complementary parts of a cohesive social system.

However, this integrative logic necessitates a critical reflection on its limitations. The architectural metaphor, while effective for integration, carries implicit power structures that can bind and discipline. It emphasizes role fulfillment, support, and stability, potentially masking the systemic nature of gender inequalities under a guise of harmonious renovation. The tension between Confucianism and feminism, as presented in these magazines, appears relatively mild precisely because the discourse is carefully engineered to manage, rather than explode, that tension. This points to a crucial distinction: the “feminism” constructed is of a different nature, one of calibrated integration and sanctioned contribution, compared to the more radical, structure-challenging connotations often associated with the term in Western contexts. The study thus reveals not just a metaphorical preference, but a fundamentally different discursive strategy for conceptualizing social change and women’s roles within a specific cultural and political milieu. Nevertheless, the metaphorical “renovation” also gives rise to the question of whether it sufficiently addresses systemic inequalities or risks masking underlying conflicts under the guise of harmony.

Besides, this study is limited to two official publications under the same publishing house with homogeneous ideological orientations, restricting reflection of diverse feminist voices. The one-year time frame cannot capture long-term discursive changes. Findings are not generalizable to all Chinese women’s magazines or broader Chinese feminist discourse. Future research should expand the corpus to include independently run publications, social media platforms, and a longer historical span to assess the pervasiveness, variation, and evolution of these architectural framings.

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Data availability The datasets analyzed in this study are available from publicly available online magazines and can be obtained from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Code availability No custom source code was generated for this study; all analyses were performed using standard commercially available software as mentioned in the manuscript.

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