

Femininity

Femininity refers to behaviour and ideas associated with womanliness or normative female sexuality, separable from women's anatomical sex. As intersexuals, men and women can all possess femininity, so historically the organization of this quality is quite diverse. Particularly in the transnational movement of ideas, practices and habits, conflicts occur over how feminine normality is to be understood and enforced. Thus it is important to explore femininity as such in relation to political spatialities or regions. In light of current Pacific Area politics and commodity flows it is illuminating to see questions of femininity via regional politics among Tokyo, London, New York, Shanghai and Beijing rather than, for instance, Buenos Aires, Mexico, Madrid, Paris and Washington.

Events in Tokyo, London, Washington, Shanghai and Beijing lay at the bottom of one crisis that erupted over the question of who definitively owned normal femininity in the period of colonial modernity (circa 1842–1937). The power of transnational capital to transform states and rewrite interregional trade relations accelerated in the mid 19th century, when Britain, the United States and other imperialists sought to marketize China and Japan and assimilate the Korean peninsula into a new region named the Far East (now East Asia). The Japanese Imperial Meiji state rose and the Chinese Qing dynasty devolved to a weak form of republicanism. As the United States accelerated its empire building in the Pacific, a subimperialism emerged in which the Japanese state and corporate entities seized territory, markets and labour on the China mainland, Taiwan, Okinawa, Korea and other traditional Chinese suzerainties.

During the 18th and 19th centuries, *jingxi* theatre in China and *kabuki* theatre in Japan had inspired widely accepted social norms of femininity in this part of Asia. The gender of *onnagata*, for instance, refers to Japanese male actors' theatrical performance of femininity in the 18th century, and to the fact that throughout the 19th century, civilized female performance of femininity and male impersonation of women conformed to identical codes. In these same centuries, Chinese norms of cultivated femininity stressed two elements: interiority and the power of passionate emotion, *qing*. This style of femininity was canonized and naturalized in widely

performed stories starring a hero and a heroine, a scholar and an educated beauty, who share a *qing* femininity.

Elites in the Far East came into contact with English social biological theories of femininity in two ways. First, many educated men travelled to Europe or the United States (later to Tokyo) and learned firsthand about evolution of the species, sexual selection theory, advances in surgery, hygiene, anatomical science and so on. The modernists they encountered saw femininity as an outgrowth of physiological libido, and thus a driver of evolutionary social and national progress. Asians educated abroad accepted such European ideas as truthful. Second, missionaries and adventurers to East Asia, both women and men, entered colonizable space armed with enthusiastic blueprints for emancipating and civilizing Asian erotic and domestic life. They believed that they knew Nature's plan for all societies because they knew modern science. Scientific principles and social theory, they held, offered liberation to ancient, oppressive states and backward peoples.

Contention broke out early in Chinese cultural circles over which dramatic performance of femininity was normative – that of an emerging, internationalistic female movie star or of male-impersonated, *jingxi* heroines. As a defensive measure, anti-imperialist nationalists of the 1890s had already moved *jingxi* performance from popular venues into teahouses, where they set about to rework the national culture through dramatic performance. This elite male, homosocial preference for masculine femininity rested on the belief that actually female sexual expression was not feminine: femininity is not a quality in women's bodies or a healthy instinctual expression of erotic desire. Rather, femininity is a cultivated form of artistic expression.

Two events repositioned femininity into the sex of women – the rise of a new film culture and the acceleration of colonial modern flows of ideas, commodities, styles and people throughout the re-regionalizing space of the new East Asia. Under pressure of economic imperialism, modernism and the new media, enlightened women and men challenged the male performance of femininity. They pointed to a 'natural' female performance of femininity in the international media that was beginning to centre Hollywood globally

and link the Hollywood system to Tokyo, Shanghai, Beijing, Seoul and other emergent markets. The moving picture, like the modern printing press, underwrote a large-scale transvaluation of erotic and aesthetic values, including a modernist association that linked anatomical sex, normative femininity, and performance styles in Asia, as in Europe and America.

In the second event, Chinese, Korean and Japanese connoisseurs, colonialists, students, merchants, artists, professionals and military (not to mention overseas Chinese and itinerant Japanese throughout Southeast Asia) brought a torrent of Japanese translations of European enlightened ideas to Chinese readers. Because Chinese students found Japanese easier to learn than European languages, Japanese became one major conduit of new ideas, including theories about who owned generic femininity. It was a translation event of massive proportions. A surprisingly large readership supported particularly publications on sexuality, femininity and natural-social evolutionary theory in the book market. Japanese-to-Chinese scientific sexual theory, along with the emergent avant-garde spoken theatre, informed audiences who were already absorbing norms of femininity in silent-film culture through Clara Bow, Colleen Moore, Ri Koran, Theda Bara, Ruan Lingyu, Hu Die and other globally known stars.

As a consequence, there emerged an 'international', enlightened feminine look and performance style that was considered natural rather than artificial, and which rejected the older masculine aesthetic. Of course, for women to acquire the international look cost money. The cosmetics, cigarettes, clothing styles, education and élan associated with new femininity had a clear class bias. Still, it is obvious in studies of female workers that the aspiration to these allegedly natural forms of femininity and feminine self-expression was not confined to the elite classes. Wherever civilized, enlightened European, American and Japanese women of any class went to populate the new empires, they brought with them the idea that femininity is the natural expression of female sexual physiology. For their part, nationalist transnational corporations like Japanese manufacturer Nakayama Taiyodo pioneered colonial, 'Chinese' forms of commercial femininity, as did American companies like Pond's and Cutex.

Throughout the 1920s and 30s, the political avant garde and left-wing artists challenged grosser forms of sexualized commercial images. A politicized critique of mass-mediated, movie-star femininity could be found throughout East Asia among anarchists, communists, feminists, middle-class reformers and religious figures. Nonetheless, during the interwar years (1919–37) two central figures – the female factory worker and urban middle-class modern girl – reshaped styles of femininity to cohere around the desire for capitalist commodities. This acquisitive, middle-class, urban and commodity-focused feminine style would lead, at the close of the Pacific war (1937–45), to an impasse in the Chinese social revolution. By then a significant historical transition was complete. The nationalist icon and world-renowned performer of female roles in nationalist *jingxi*, Mei Lanfang, bequeathed femininity to younger, female players. A symptom of this critical shift is illustrated by the contemporary complaint that Mei Lanfang was a homosexual, and that male impersonator femininity and homosexuality itself were, in a revolutionary age, 'feudal leftovers'. Although it is regularly argued in the Western media and among some Chinese feminist ideologists that the Chinese revolution made women into men or denied the femininity of women, this is incorrect. More accurately, revolutionary aesthetics would sever the modernist link between eroticism and femininity, just as it would delink sexuality and masculinity.

During the Cold War, the Maoist Revolution exuberantly forwarded an official femininity rooted in the rustic village peasant styles and in Soviet Russian Bolshevik fashion, feminine figures whose large hands, muscled arms and prominent breasts romanticized the productive femininity of liberated working women. The earlier association of women's sexuality with commercial commodities was demonized in the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (GPCR, 1966–76), although the right of women to claim femininity in their bodies did not change. In fact, some Maoist feminine poses resembled politically cleansed silent-movie star photo images. The GPCR promoted a range of balletic political stories like 'The White Haired Woman' and 'Red Detachment of Women' that offered women's femininity with two opposing aspects: the female rape victim on the one hand and eroticized militant avenger on the

other. By the late Cold War period, a crisis of masculinity emerged along with a charge that politics had emasculated men, in great part because it caused insufficient femininity of women. The writing of postrevolutionary memoirists like Jung Zhang rested uneasily on this perceived crisis of femininity, voiced by Zhang Xianliang in his hit novel, *Half of man is woman*. The alleged deficiencies of femininity and masculinity were resolved, in the end, as regnant neotraditionalism not just at the level of personal identity, but in the new domestic commodity markets and the marriage market, as well.

Transnational styles of Communist femininity originated from diverse and contiguous places. The importation of Communist Russian advisors, films, high-art conventions, and styles of clothing and language in the 1950s had offered a European socialist tradition of labour femininity. Soviet fiction and the translation of the Russian masters into Chinese injected a strong romanticism (and provided a facsimile of the bourgeois women's style for readers who had never seen or travelled in a capitalist country with an existing bourgeoisie). Other elements of mass media in the socialist period included popular films from India and other points in Asia. Resurgent interest in Chinese rural art forms, which had begun early in the 1940s, and the saucy ingénue and pedagogue Li Shuangshuang, who teaches her cadre husband a thing or two about commune management, exhibits an unmistakably socialist feminine posture.

In fact, one could interpret Cultural Revolution aesthetics as a nationalist Chinese effort to surpass the USSR Communist bloc iconography, philosophy and ideology. And in a final interesting twist to this socialist transnational flow, the Cultural Revolution's fiery and vengeful peasant heroines and iron-like feminine martyrs shuffled off the old, sadomasochistic stories about the anti-Japanese war period, and leaped into United States so-called Second Wave feminist iconography in the late 1960s. Speaking bitterness emerges transformed in this era, as post-Maoist 'consciousness raising'. Socialist notions of femininity across the Communist world had previously been mocked, maligned and tarred with being 'masculine'. This Cold War tactic allowed the capitalist bloc countries to claim not just a vision of femininity as hyperfeminine but also the complement of

the hyperfeminine style, the hypermasculine man. (Just think John Wayne.) At the same time in the socialist bloc, as the case of China makes clear, femininity had been redefined as a physical, balletic performance of liberation. Sexuality was sublated into a statist idea that femininity is compassionate service to the society through labour and social service to the dispossessed, a code that remains in play to this very day.

The ongoing rise of China as a significant element of the world capitalist economy is a central fact. Globalization is a term used to understand the impact of the two-decade-old rise of China in relation to US imperialist policies of containment, re-regionalization and now a global war on terror, tailored to expand its military footprint. The greatest human migration in history is sending vast labour pools from rural areas in China to continental urban sites, and from China to every part of the world. As the world's greatest factory, Chinese urban areas are importing style even as China exports its own. Any current understanding of femininity in today's globalized world, then, should stress two factors. First, the movement of corporate giants into the production of femininity is a potential reformatting of the body. Chinese and Japanese cultural markets are now as entranced as Americans are with the phenomenon of the medically altered physical body, exemplified in the transsexual, whose presence – among other things – raises the question of how femininity is instilled into a body that is anatomically female. Body alteration will continue to affect male and female bodies at medical, social (i.e. sovereignty and citizenship), market, cultural and media levels. Second, although disputes over copyright and ownership of style and fashion are real, what is occurring in China now is an obsessive recoding of femininity as money. Much of the world is being tugged toward Asian modes of postdevelopment capitalist culture. What began as a ploy to gain market penetration is flowering into a massive, uneven, yet globally commodified femininity. In the international sex markets, transnational movies, digital games and cartoon art, and in the transnational knowledge informatics regarding genetic, social, medical, hormonal, sexual production of femininity, we confront future changes of unimaginable dimensions.

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Related essays

beauty; Cantonese opera; China; consumer society; dress; empires and imperialism; fashion; film; gender and sex; Hollywood; honour; Japan; language; language diplomacy; love; Maoism; missionaries; new man; performing artists; sexuality and migration; theatre; translation; Westernization; women's movements