

Modern Women in Chinese Urban Culture

Poshek Fu *

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Catherine Chou's *Performing China: Actresses, Performance Culture, Visual Politics* is a wide-ranging, thought-provoking study of women and modernity in Chinese urban culture in the 1920s and 1930s. The book contains mainly four previously published chapters, each of which explores an important moment in the construction, performance, and critical reception of "new women" (新女性) on the screen and stages in Republican cities. Chapter one serves as the introduction to the book's major themes and theoretical approaches, mainly the concepts of performance culture and social actors. Chapter two discusses the leftist efforts to control the circulation of meanings

* Professor of History and Cinema Studies, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, USA

of “new woman” surrounding the suicides of actresses Ai Xia 艾霞 and Ruan Lingyu 阮玲玉, resulting in the silencing of the alternative type (and idea) of sexy, romantic “modern girls” (摩登女郎). Through a discussion of two popular Hollywood women types—flapper girls of the 1920s and *femmes fatale* of the 1930s—and their influence in literary Shanghai, chapter three provides a new feminist reading of some of modernist author Liu Naou’s 劉呐鷗 stories and of artist Guo Jianying’s 郭劍英 sketches and cartoons on modern women in popular magazines. Chapter four looks at the metamorphosis of Chen Boer 陳波兒 from a budding film actress to a committed revolutionary dramatist, bringing to light in particular her critiques of “new women” in film representation. Perhaps the most original of all is Chapter five, which maps the historical trajectory of woman performers and cross-gender roles in Chinese drama, arguing that “new drama” of the 1910s perpetuated the old dramatic bias against women and women began to play female roles on stage only with spoken drama in the early 1920s. This was due to the failure of May Fourth dramatists to provide alternative (Realist) performing techniques that could depict clearly-defined gender differences prevalent in society.

Three recurring themes appear throughout these varied chapters. First, “new women” were a male-controlled narrative trope that, in the hands of the Communist writers and film critics, actually ignored the subject positions of women and politicized their desires and social roles. Second, unlike in the West, Realist arts “guided” and “shaped” but did not document social life and gender roles in modern China. Life and characters—particularly women—which *appeared* on the screen/stage were thus markedly “more radical and avant-garde” than those which *existed* in society (p. 29). The disjuncture between the real and the idealized, according to Chou, encouraged the audience to conflate the performers with the roles they performed. Third, actresses were the victims of this “performance culture.” Performing “new

women” on the screen/stage, they personified modern culture and a new gender relationship to the public. This led to the commodification and politicization of their “female body” (女體): the entertainment industry manipulated their images for publicity, audiences developed voyeuristic interests in their personal lives, fan magazines exploited their fame for profit, and leftist writers and critics produced discourses that pressured them to live out their public roles in their private lives. “New women” on and off screen, as Chou states, continued to be dominated by the patriarchal society of modern China.

These are fascinating arguments which problematize important issues about woman and gender roles in the entertainment industry and the meanings and politics of “new women” in Chinese cinema and drama. However, as a collection of previously published book chapters and journal articles, this book is rather repetitious and does not sufficiently develop and document some of its arguments. For example, recent historical scholarship on early Hollywood sound cinema—including Ramona Curry’s work on Mae West and Lea Jacobs’ study of the fallen women—suggests that there was a multiplicity of popular women’s roles and types, many of which were tied to specific genres (like “fallen women” to melodrama, which had huge impact on Chinese films that has remains little studied), and each contained a multiplicity of possible meanings.¹ Flapper girls and *femme fatale* appeared among other popular roles and types in the 1920s and 1930s, and their cultural-political meanings shifted according to changes of genres and historical contexts. So what other Hollywood woman types were circulated in Shanghai and how popular were they among critics and writers? Similarly, when Chou claims that gender-crossing was immensely popular (if not normative) in Chinese drama

1 Ramona Curry, *Too Much of a Good Thing: Mae West as Cultural Icon* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); Lea Jacobs, *The Wages of Sin: Censorship and the Fallen Woman Film, 1928-1942* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

from at least the Yuan dynasty and women dominated these gender-crossing roles, she offers evidence from only a couple of plays and scholarly books. Did Chinese drama have similar gender conventions across time, generic diversity and regional differences? Moreover, the arguments that woman on stage suffered continued bias and oppression in the 1910s because of the collaboration of male new dramatists with the state authorities would be more convincing if Chou could document the state's attitudes toward new drama and its gender politics in general. As well, if the leftist critics are blamed for subjugating actresses to their moralizing, male-dominated notions of "new women," should modernist writers not also be blamed for subjecting women on the screen to their sexual fantasies (like the "masochistic desires" of Liu Naou)? Were not both groups equally implicated in the mystification of the female in the entertainment business?

Notwithstanding these criticisms, overall, this thought-provoking book is a valuable addition to the prestigious series edited by David Wang. It has a lot to offer us in rethinking woman and modernity in Chinese urban cultures.