The Development of Female Visual Culture and Self-Adornment as an Extension of Revolution in 20th Century Communist China

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Abstract

This work discusses the narratives and discussions of gender erasure and the formation of a new method of self-adornment and beauty in the period of Maoist China. Through the examination of scholarly works and a variety of visual images, the paper seeks to connect various dialogues in the discipline to argue that a new form of beauty that was promoted for females in the Communist era utilized the physical appearance of women as an extension of revolution itself. Additional topics that are explored include the impact of different regimes, institutions and policy goals and how they influence the visual culture presented to the masses.

Majority of the work in the paper focuses on history and analysis of visual images, with occasional ideas and references to other scholarly works. The visual analysis found that much of the changes in trends in beauty came through the different interest groups, and stakeholders who had incentive to influence or utilize the female figure for some form of goal. Additionally, it is found that though many individuals believe that it was a form of gender erasure that was promoted by the Communist Party – i.e. the destruction of external factors that differentiated the genders – the paper finds that what happened instead was the abandonment of a former style of adornment, and the emergence of a new trend and standard of beauty, that was quickly lost to that period in history with the reintroduction of market-driven reform policies in the last 20th century.
Introduction to Thesis and Methods

Within the 20th century of China, a variety of social, political, and economic aspects of Chinese society had been altered from what it had been previously. The century is characterized by a series of tumultuous reforms, policies, regimes, and power struggles, that affected all citizens – particularly women -- in the society. Throughout this period, the identity of the “idealized woman” was subject to many forms of change due to the shifting attitudes and climates of political leaders and regimes. As seen in the former Republic era of China in the 1920s, there existed a rather traditional and western portrayal of women within spheres of commercial merchandise and consumer culture (Hung). The latter greatly influenced the representation of the female figure, as it was utilized throughout a wide range of mediums in the capitalist society. However, with the rise of the Communist Party in the 1940s, there was a change in the standards, definitions and portrayals of the new woman. Throughout the period in which communist ideologies spread, there was a push for a new form of self-adornment or beautification, which in turn lead to what many scholars would term as gender erasure or masculinization of the female figure – this was seen every day on the streets, or in media and propaganda of the time. Shortly after that period, with the re-opening of China to the international community and the dual-track reforms to embrace more market-based mechanisms in the economy, the visual culture of womanhood was redefined once more with the influx of western consumer culture (Lee). Thus, we reach a point in which we notice narratives and dialogues of many who argue that the CCP (Chinese Communist Party) stifled and suppressed the evolution of beauty and womanhood. This paper will hope to critically examine those narratives, and argue that through various attempts at gender erasure and the denial of self-
adornment, the CCP effectively promoted a new visual aesthetic and form of self-beautification specific to their regime and era. Institutions and economic ideologies can greatly influence the mindsets and visual status of an entire gender, and we will move to examine that in critical detail.

In addition, this paper will closely examine visual propaganda and print publications in the Republic and Reform era as a way to create dialogue with primary sources. Propaganda sources will be pulled primarily from the Cultural Revolution era – considered by many to be the peak of Maoist ideologies – whilst print publications such as calendars and advertisements will be drawn from the 1920s and the early 1990s – which was considered to be the start of the second wave of economic reforms. The period of internal conflict, civil war, Japanese invasion and WWII will be overlooked within this paper, due to the nature of the scope being primarily focused on the effects of a single political regime’s policies and ideologies on female culture. Additionally, primary sources from the first wave of economic reforms in the late 70s and 80s will not be examined, due to the short time in which the policies put forth lacking the ability to make significant impacts on visual female culture. Nonetheless, by putting these in conjunction with pre-existing literature on topics of gender erasure, and by further elaborating and developing the ideas put forth by Hung-Yok Ip in his paper on Fashioning Appearances: Feminine Beauty in Chinese Communist Revolutionary Culture, the paper will be able to provide further insight on the thesis of gender erasure in the spheres of self-beautification, consumer culture, and sociopolitical regimes and ideologies pushed by the CCP (Hung).
Fall of the Qing Dynasty and Emergence of the Republic Era

Within the cultures of traditional Chinese norms, 19th century women were expected to hold a matronly position, and expected to be occupied – though not obsessively – with their self-adornment and beautification. Few print publications exist from this time, but this could be seen from the costumes of the women, the makeup, and the practice of bound feet.

[Copyrighted images removed. Please see links below to view.]
https://depts.washington.edu/chinaciv/clothing/11qinwom_files/maid.jpg
https://depts.washington.edu/chinaciv/clothing/11qinwom_files/11grayfe.jpg

In the images that we see above, traditional portrayals of womanhood and beauty are seen in what is termed to be looser fitting clothing that is less revealing in form, along with minimalistic makeup on the face. What is prominent in both images however, is the silhouette of the woman, who appears to many western scholars as “doll-like”, in particular when considering the size of her feet. As the Qing dynasty came to its close however, a variety of reformers such as Li QingChao and KangYouWei criticized the traditional models of beauty, with a particular emphasis on the practice of foot binding, and sought for it to be abolished – which it was (Hung). Such acts were deemed as restrictive and spoke to a lack of education and ignorance. This perhaps lays down a starting point for the investigation in the “masculinization” or “de-feminization” of womanhood that is so commonly mentioned in examinations of Chinese women in the 20th century. Gradually, we would see activists such as Ding Ling, in 1932, criticize the methods of adornment practiced by Western women as well, particularly corset training (Hung). Nonetheless, what can be drawn from the portrayals of traditional Qing women, as well as the
focus of activist’s criticisms, is that there seemed to be an undercurrent of – what is considered by western contemporary society – androgyny (University). This is seen specifically by the fact that the criticisms of the activists focused on practices of self-adornment that would either harm, or “feminize” or “soften” the woman’s appearance. There was little comment on the use of minimalistic makeup or less form-revealing clothes.

As the analysis progresses onto the 20th century and the Republic era, it is important to realize the first wave of the “new woman” in China. Nonetheless, it should be noted that in the early 20th century, that the public sphere in China was highly dominated by men, and that there was less discourse on the public appreciation of woman as public figures. Nonetheless, there remained notions of gender that were still stifling, especially those that manifested in visual culture.

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https://static1.squarespace.com/static/52d72ed2e4b06dbaf3adc404/t/544973aae4b094d797af621d/1414099937864/

In the above images, we see a drastic shift in the portrayal of womanhood. The Yue fen pai or calendar poster is reflective of the Republic era’s eagerness to engage in consumer and visual culture that was portrayed (Vantage). The Republic era was marked by the influence of western consumer culture, market-oriented policies, and the rise of the modern woman. When compared to the image of Greta Garbo in the 1920s, we notice similarities in the clothing and
beautification (Greta Garbo). Not only is the rise of the bobbed haircut becoming more prominent, but makeup styles in the posters seek to westernize and slim the face. Clothing appears to be far less loose, and bear a more decadent, form fitting aesthetic to them.

Nonetheless, with the rise of consumer culture and western influence, there were always purists who would seek to eradicate said fashions from contaminating traditional and local culture. Thus, despite the portrayal of the new, modern, western woman in consumer culture, activists and communist supporters sought to create a more androgynous picture of womanhood. This was in many ways a fight back against commercialization and the rising influence of fashion trends due to the rising availability of ready-made fashions. This new Chinese woman – portrayed by many activists in the May Fourth movement – were seen to be not concerned with fashion, to be politically involved, and intelligent. As seen in the poster below, the woman on the left, appears with almost masculinized features, short, un-styled hair, no makeup, and plain androgynous clothing – a stark contrast to the more decadent representation seen in the Republic and Qing eras. This new aesthetic was hoped in part to resist the lure and pre-occupation of bourgeois self-beautification and consumerism. As this image began to gain influence – especially in younger generations – it became referenced more and more, in particular by speakers and politicians who sought to appeal to younger women in the 1920s and the 1930s.

[Copyrighted images removed. Please see links below to view.]

http://chineseposters.net/images/e40-62.jpg
The Maoist Period

With the rise of androgynous fashions and culture for females, a certain tone was set for the cultural revolution. As this new fashion slowly became the norm, it was clear that attention to traditional forms of feminine beauty was considered synonymous with the behaviors of the petit-bourgeois classes, and therefore, looked down upon by the rest of society (Hung). The communist not only approached this rejection of traditional western and Chinese beauty norms through the lenses of dignity for women, but also through the necessity of such a look for revolutionary processes and procedures (Lee).

Thus, it is prudent to examine the topics of gender erasure with the economic goals and institutions set up by the CCP. Several perspectives on how such a look was conceived, and fit into the ideologies of the CCP can be examined. For example, certain scholars had believed that the excessiveness and decadence of the traditionally beautiful woman was not sustainable, due to low supplies and rationing at the time. Others would argue that feminine beauty had always been synonymous with behaviors of the bourgeois, and combined with the CCP’s desire to have woman participating in the work force as equals to men, gender erasure was promoted in an attempt to masculinize women and remove them from domesticity to help boost industrial and economic prosperity (Hung). Thus, the virtues of the new aesthetic were framed as liberalization from the traditional patriarchal values of private property and as against the disciplinary measures to decorate the female form.
As seen in the posters above, the working power of the women is highlighted, not only through the texts but through their behaviors. The visual message sought to be conveyed is meant to empower women in such a way so that they will contribute positively to production and to society. When examining it through this lens however, because the spaces for visual culture for woman suddenly shift from domestic and matronly to very industrial and labor oriented, one could say that the ambitions to seek this empowerment of woman was a shallow attempt by the CCP to simply strengthen their workforce. Nonetheless, the quote by Mao, in which he states that women can hold up half the sky, resonates with much of the new trends and forms of beauty advocated by state visual media. This new form of self-beautification therefore extends not only to simply a woman’s visual appearance – ie collared clothing, minimal hair and makeup, strong limbs – but also to the behaviors of hard work, and desire to contribute to society. Therefore, this propaganda uses the new form of visual culture to manipulate appearance and behavior, and nonetheless engage in promoting a form of self-adornment. This has in turn sustained the interest in self-adornment – which in itself is difficult to eradicate – and gave it the ability to persist through the cultural revolution.

However, there were nuances in the portrayal of the revolutionary woman. In forms of propaganda and film, the woman portrayed nonetheless exhibited beauty or camera-readiness – despite being dressed and decorated in more masculine or revolutionary garments. For example,
in the film Bai Yang, the lead actress of the film was portrayed as “The girl of every high school student’s dreams”, thereby alluding to the fact that the sexual dimension of women that the CCP tried excessively to diminish or erase, still existed in the hearts and minds of the masses (Hung). This idea continues to manifest itself throughout culture, for example, a woman’s appearance had a massive impact on her social standing, and nonetheless caused them to continue depending on their appearance. For example, there were various instances in which the spouses of political figures – who were considered rather unattractive – who were divorced under the excuse of “political backwardness”. The male figures would then go on to marrying traditionally attractive and beautiful spouses.

Nonetheless, we return to the topic of self-beautification in various visual spheres. Within the film The White-Haired Girl – one of the Eight model plays of the revolution -- there is quite a representative scene, in which the young girl shows an excessive quantity of joy due to a simple decorative red string that her father bought for her hair (Hung). In the work, it was shown that despite the girl’s ability to buy flowers for her self-adornment, she had another way, which was through the accepted form of revolutionary décor – the red ribbon in the hair. Therefore, this speaks myriads to the fact that communists and the population at the time didn’t actually reject the idea of interest in female beauty, but just recognized that it was simply manifesting in a different form at the time. Women nonetheless adorned themselves to befit their activities in the sphere of culture and politics – despite the notion coming from non-adornment.
Conclusion – What Came After

After the death of Mao, China implemented a variety of policies to move the economy to one that was once again market-driven. With the re-opening of the country to capitalism, and the decreased need to promote state-sponsored nationalism, once again, the female figure returned to a visual image that was once again commodified, sexualized, and exploited for the purposes of sales and consumer interests. Why is this at all relevant? This speaks myriads to the influence of the government and corporate interests in curating a nations visual culture, as well as perspectives towards womanhood.

As mentioned in Hung-Yok Ip within the spheres of capitalism, all forms of visual culture tied to consumerism are prone to treating their subjects as commodities (Hung). This is no different with the female figure. However, when the interest of visual culture was no longer controlled my market forces, and rather a single party with a specific goal – to maximize the country’s productivity through an increased workforce – visual culture in turn takes a shift as well. We find that in the Maoist and Communist China, visual media sought to promote communist ideologies through the diminishing of physical traits that separated the genders. Whilst some may argue that this is akin to gender erasure or the destruction of a previously accepted form of beauty, it is found in this paper that rather, a new and temporary form of beauty standards and self-adornment was created in this era. Additionally, this speaks to the ephemeral nature of beauty standards, and furthermore, speaks to the idea that under the Communist rule, the visual female figure was subject to a different form of commodification. Their “new beauty”, or the rejection of previous models of beauty, was to be an extension of the greater ideals held by
the CCP, and this is seen in the placement of “new beauty” female figures in propaganda posters that were available to the public. Nonetheless, shortly after other stakeholders and powers were re-introduced to the market for female beauty, the image had shifted once more, illustrating the temporal nature of the exploitations and new form of self-beautification that was created by the CCP.
Works Cited


