



The front page of the program for *Woman of Tokyo* (*Tokyo no on'na*, dir. Ozu Yasujiro, Japan, 1933) distributed at the film's screening in the Tokyo Kinema movie theater. The actors pictured are Okada Yoshiko, right, and Tanaka Kinuyo, left. Reprinted from *Toyo Cinema Weekly*, 9 February 1933.

New Women of the Silent Screen: China, Japan, Hollywood

Catherine Russell

The movie screen here is not simply the philosopher's mind as was, perhaps, the literary text; nor is it simply the window, frame, or mirror as theorized by Western film critics. It is a scene of crime with the woman's body as evidence and witness, a new type of ethnographic picture, and . . . a "front" and an arcade in the international culture marketplace.

—Rey Chow, *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema*

Feminist film historiography has become a dynamic site of scholarly activity in which the screen is indeed "a new type of ethnographic picture," one that is highly contradictory. The glamour photography of the silent period threatens a fossilized forgetting, but if the construction of gender was one of ongoing catastrophe and repression, it is now ripe for rescue. The present group of essays, collected from the "Women and the Silent Screen" conference held in Montreal in 2004,¹ suggests yet another front for the ongoing investigation of gender in the silent era. A special emphasis was placed on the international scene in this third meeting

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Camera Obscura 60, Volume 20, Number 3
Published by Duke University Press

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of the conference, generating a remarkable spectrum of papers on women and film in a wide variety of film cultures. The Asian context emerged as one of the most exciting areas for a number of reasons, not the least of which is the high volume of films produced in Japan and China in the late 1920s and early 1930s. During this period, the film industries were consolidated in both countries within complex networks of discourses of nationalism, Orientalism, and gender.

The articles in this issue demonstrate that the silent cinema played a key role in Japan and China, negotiating competing representations of gender and modernity. The question of becoming “modern” without becoming “Western,” and the attempts to delineate the terms of a modern indigenous popular culture within the institutions of cinematic representation, seemed to turn again and again on the female body. In both countries, actresses appeared for the first time on stage and screen in the late teens, effectively making the convention of the female impersonator obsolete and mapping the realist aesthetics of cinematic representation onto the female body. Actresses in the public sphere gave human faces to the many social transformations of urban modernity, and their role in the construction of Asian modernity should not be underestimated.

Meanwhile, in Europe and North America, Asian women appeared in silent films as key representations of Orientalist ideology. The star discourses of Anna May Wong and Tsuru Aoki, discussed here by Yiman Wang and Sara Ross, respectively, indicate how competing notions of sexuality and femininity were projected onto these actresses. Across the spectrum of the American, European, and Asian films discussed in this issue, we can see how the figure of the New Woman took on a range of personalities and appearances as she traveled across cultures and national cinemas. In both the West and the East, cultural otherness became a significant means of articulating new gender norms within the mass media. Harry Harootunian has suggested that “the Japanese experience showed, especially for subsequent examples labeled as ‘alternative modernities,’ that modernity was always a doubling that imprinted the difference between the demands of capitalism

and the force of received forms of history and culture.”² These essays suggest that these “dialectical optics” in fact apply to a much wider field of global visual culture in which the commodification of the female image intersected—and often conflicted—with received norms of gendered behavior.

The Montreal conference was not only more international in scope than the previous two meetings of “Women and the Silent Screen”; it was also marked by a more broad-based methodological approach to the multiple roles of women in the silent era. Already in the second meeting of the conference, in Santa Cruz, there was an emphasis on women’s labor, cultural practices, and historiography. While the Women Film Pioneers Project—which was particularly central to the first gathering—has been a crucial undertaking, bringing the work of many women film professionals from the silent period into the light of scholarship, and indeed into the public sphere,³ two of the keynote speakers at this most recent meeting of the conference challenged the methodology behind the “pioneers” emphasis on first women. Kay Armatage provided a cogent critique of the rhetorical tropes of privation, hardship, and stoicism that tend to be attached to the heroic, unique, and extraordinary women championed as pioneers. She pointed out that “as an intellectual project, the search for women pioneers blithely flies in the face of feminist critiques of mainstream historiography developed over more than two decades.”⁴

In her address to the conference, Lauren Rabinovitz sketched the outlines of what she describes as a “new feminist film history,” which embraces the cultural histories surrounding film texts. The fusion of history and theory that feminist film studies potentially offers can only have an activist component, she argues, when the cinema is recognized as operating within “larger spheres of cultural power.” Moving beyond models of authorship to understand how power and agency function within industrial economic and national institutions, this new history has already begun to challenge and transform the field of film studies. Rabinovitz notes that “this new feminist history has the potential to overthrow the paradigm of a U.S.-centrist cinema,” but we can take back world film history only by avoiding “the binarism of dividing the world

between imperial and colonial or postcolonial, between a First World and everyone else.”⁵ Indeed, by attending to the geopolitical traffic in visual culture of the interwar period, the essays collected here challenge many film-historical paradigms, including those of authorship, nationalism, and film language.

In the contexts of China and Japan, where female film pioneers are still rare, it is especially important to theorize film history within larger global cultural frameworks. Certainly there were many important women stars in the silent era, but they worked in industries that, unlike Hollywood, were almost exclusively male. The prominence of actresses and the challenges they posed to traditional norms of performance and gendered behavior make it a dynamic site for feminist film research, for which methodologies of cultural critique are far more appropriate than the assumptions of authorship and innovation within the pioneers model. Without downplaying the accomplishments of the actresses they discuss, the contributors to this issue focus more on the intertextual and intercultural complexity of the global image culture in which the names and bodies of these stars circulated.

Furthermore, once the focus shifts away from the Euro-American centers of film production, the periodization of silent cinema also necessarily shifts. In both China and Japan, sound and silent cinema coexisted until well into the 1930s. Zhang Zhen has argued that the term *early cinema* be used to refer to the silent Chinese cinema before 1949 in order to stress the different temporality of this film practice.⁶ Within the shadow of foreign imports, Asian silent film arguably became a primary site of a localized visual culture, forging new languages appropriate to the experience of Asian modernities. Far from the Euro-American center of film production, Asian cinemas in the late 1920s and 1930s, both silent and sound, enacted a complex dialogue of emulation and differentiation as the terms of national popular cultures were being produced.

The aesthetic debates of the time were intense as critics strove to locate the new cultural practices within new critical values. In both China and Japan, this interwar period was marked by a perceived cultural decadence as the streets of the major cit-

ies became scenes of dynamic cosmopolitan consumption. The modernity of the era was, however, short-lived. With the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931, the two nations entered into a new era of nationalist fervor in which the incursions of Western modernity were gradually sublimated, not to return until the late 1940s. Thus not only was there no clear break between silent- and sound-filmmaking practices but this early period also has an important coherence as a transitional era preceding the China and Pacific Wars (the China War officially began in 1937). For feminist film studies, it is crucial to recognize that during the 1920s and 1930s, filmmaking was established as an industrial mass culture that circulated globally, creating conduits of cultural exchange in which the New Woman became a principal figure of currency.

The discourse on silent film in the late 1920s and early 1930s was therefore a site for the negotiation of competing notions of Asian modernity, in which the New Woman became emblematic of the possibilities and dangers of modern mass culture. Cinema and its pantheon of female stars were at the heart of emergent urban, metropolitan social formations, and the emergence of the New Woman on Asian screens, including the “serial queens” Pearl White and Helen Holmes, provoked extensive discussions in the media about the norms of gender and femininity. Furthermore, as Sara Ross and Yiman Wang point out in their essays, the contradictions produced around the intersection of gender and Asian identity were equally pervasive in Europe and North America. Competing discourses of Hollywood Orientalism and Asian nationalism converged in the star images of Asian American stars Anna May Wong and Tsuru Aoki. While their hybrid identities suggested exciting new configurations and possibilities, they were also criticized by both American and Asian constituencies for transgressing cultural norms. Asian stars such as Irie Takako, Tanaka Kinuyo, Okada Yoshiko, and Wu Suxing were likewise trapped within progressive paradigms of New Women and traditional expectations of appropriate gender norms. The modernity of mass media was incarnated in their bodies, especially as they were so prominently inscribed within the visual culture of fashion and glamour photography. Through the iconography of costume,

especially the highly coded tension between Western and traditional dress, and through the global popularity of art deco style, these women became emblematic of the new identities and subjectivities available within the experience of modernity.

Despite the explicit discourses of racism and sexism that surrounded these women, once we penetrate the veil of ideology, we can begin to understand how they were inscribed within a changing public sphere. Through primary research into the intellectual and journalistic literature published in China, Japan, and the US, in conjunction with detailed film analyses, the essays in this collection forcefully fill in the details of the vernacular modernism proposed by Zhang Zhen and Miriam Hansen.⁷ The theory of vernacular modernism enables a recognition of the positive influences of Hollywood on the representation of women in the developing world as these influences were translated into “locally and culturally specific aesthetics.”⁸ Vernacular modernism can be contrasted not only with Western high modernism but also with the dominant models of modernity that emerged in both China and Japan during this period. Indeed the instantiations of vernacular modernism frequently run counter to the ideals of national culture. Thus the recovery of these new subjectivities hitherto obscured by the dominant discourses of high modernism in both Asia and the West opens up an important new insight into global popular culture.

The parallels between China and Japan that emerge from these essays are fascinating, and suggestive of the parameters of Asian modernity as a phenomenon of the public sphere. In both countries, the relation to the West was at once one of resistance and perceived inferiority. However brief, the interwar period was an important cultural interlude during which the potential of mass media for the production of a public sphere was recognized by cinema auteurs, film critics, women’s magazines, and nationalist intellectuals alike. Within the political and critical debates of the period, the aesthetics of silent film managed to produce a new Asian subject, who was neither the New Woman nor the traditional woman but the film actress—an independent public female figure who had a certain mobility that few during this

period could claim. By thinking of the Chinese and Japanese stars alongside their Asian American colleagues, we can only imagine the sensory effect such women might have had within the larger framework of global modernity. We hope that this collection provides a useful basis for further research into the role of women in other cinemas in Asia and elsewhere during this period.

Sara Ross's essay on Tsuru Aoki, the Japanese American wife of Hollywood star Sessue Hayakawa, provides an important counterpoint to the progressive impact of American films in Asia. Aoki was frequently depicted as a "hyper-Victorian" woman in whom the mores of an older age were preserved. Through such popular narratives as the early-twentieth-century opera *Madame Butterfly* and its many spin-offs, the Japanese woman became emblematic of a fragile, objectified, and aestheticized femininity. And yet, in Japan, while Mizoguchi Kenji strove to push his star Irie Takako into such archaic forms, she herself was so strongly identified with the *moga* (an abbreviation of *modan garu*, "modern girl") figure that she played in the late 1920s that, as Chika Kinoshita argues in her essay, she was not so easily contained. Nevertheless, the Butterfly myth was such a pervasive theme of Orientalist discourse, in Asia and in the West, that actresses Anna May Wong and Aoki were persistently considered to be playing themselves in their roles of suffering and sacrifice, and were rarely recognized as actors playing (rather than simply embodying) Asian characters. Caucasian actors, on the other hand, frequently "stretched" themselves to play Asian characters during this period of Hollywood Orientalism.

The new gendered identities available in modern culture were not simply narrative productions; they were produced through the sensory detail of material culture, which is to say, the discourses of design and decor, fashion and music. The art deco stylistics of the late 1920s and 1930s brought Asian and Euro-American aesthetics together within a sensual discourse of modernity. Moreover, the Hollywood Orientalism that framed the star images of Wong and Aoki tended to map Asian femininity onto a familiar binarism of virgin and vamp. Aoki was positioned as the demure, overly feminized wife of Hayakawa, while Wong

was demonized—and celebrated—as the exotic and erotic Other. Both star images were heavily inflected by the symbolic effect of costume. Aoki's kimono tended to fix her identity as Japanese, despite her almost lifelong American residency, and as Sara Ross argues, her star image offered a narrative of assimilation, cultural adaptability, and progress from a primitive otherworld into that of American modernity. For her part, Wong learned how to “put on” the Oriental in a complex game of masquerade. In her revisionist reading, Yiman Wang argues that the fascination of Wong should be understood in terms of a performative strategy of screen passing, with its subversive potential of troping the trope and outdoing the stereotype (of the yellowface) through a kind of excessive, self-conscious acting and becoming.

For the New Asian Woman, fashion becomes a primary vehicle of new and hybrid identities. In Japan, for example, the *moga* was a media creation, designed to contain the Westernized woman in a convenient consumer package. While the *moga* was in many ways a caricature of modern Japan, a convenient target of ridicule and a perpetrator of tragedy, the figure also points to the profound changes occurring within the gendered public sphere. Most of the films discussed in this issue were marketed as “women’s pictures” for the emergent constituencies of female consumers that existed in Asia, as well as in the West. As the cultural historian Barbara Sato notes of Japan, “the media projected hope for urban middle-class women to participate actively in the creation of this burgeoning [modern] culture, without an intermediary. By going to the movies, for example, women could visually absorb, firsthand, everyday practices different from their own.”⁹ Chika Kinoshita, Mitsuyo Wada-Marciano, and I situate the *moga* image within a more complicated discussion of Japanese modernity in order to understand how kimono-clad women were also configured as modern subjects. If auteur study has been the dominant methodology in Japanese film studies, these essays suggest how that method, along with its formalist concerns, can be augmented by feminist research and analyses attentive to discourses of subjectivity and material culture.

The Japanese directors Ozu Yasujiro, Gosho Heinosuke, Mizoguchi, and Naruse Mikio all worked with the top female stars of the period, and while these directors have long been recognized as masters of cinematic style, the essays here suggest that their modernism is closely tied to the modernity of women's experience. In the auteur cinema of the early 1930s, both sound and silent, innovative use of film language has traditionally been linked by film scholars to an essential Japaneseness that ostensibly challenges Hollywood narrative conventions.¹⁰ However, these essays suggest that many of the most innovative techniques—such as camera movements, montage patterns, and unconventional point-of-view structures—were deployed within narratives about women's plight in patriarchy and were frequently predicated on the depiction of women's subjectivity. Despite their formal idiosyncrasies, these films were effectively modeled on the pathos and realist aesthetics of American film. Because the *shoshimin-eiga* (films about ordinary people) was fundamentally a realist and melodramatic genre, the stylistic effects remained grounded in a discourse of sensation and within the detail of everyday life.

The fragmentation of the visual field, produced through a disregard of continuity-editing conventions, is repeatedly linked in Japanese film of the late 1920s and early 1930s to an ambivalent and contradictory apprehension of the image of woman. Oscillating between traditional and *moga* identities, the female characters in these Japanese films were in turn caught up within the public star discourses surrounding the actresses who played them. As Mitsuyo Wada-Marciano argues, within the settings of modern Tokyo and Osaka, gender is at once a national defense against the incursions of Western consumer culture and the embodiment of its new forms of experience. In Mizoguchi's *Meiji mono* (films set in the late nineteenth century), gender is likewise read by Chika Kinoshita as the modernist incursion of agency into a narrative of suffering. In her essay on Mizoguchi's silent film *Taki no shiraito* (*The Water Magician*, Japan, 1933), Kinoshita argues that Takako Irie's face becomes a complex site where a tension between style

(woman as image) and corporeality (the immediacy of the female body) is staged.

In Mitsuyo Wada-Marciano's discussion of the Shochiku studio and some of its key late silent and early sound productions, she indicates how the female spectator was constructed in ways significantly different from the Hollywood terms of address. In my essay on Naruse Mikio, I explore the relation between the *gendaigeki* (films with contemporary settings) and the intellectual discussion of everyday life in interwar Japan. The panoramas of urban modernity that film theorists such as Miriam Hansen have borrowed from such European thinkers as Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer are echoed in the Japanese discussions of cultural life taking place at the same time. The dynamic appearance of women on the streets of Tokyo, along with the popularity of American women's films and serial queens, entailed a so-called feminization of culture that was soon sublimated by the emergent imperialism of the 1930s.

In China, we see similar patterns in which intellectuals displayed a deep ambivalence about New Women, even while new female subjectivities were leading the way to a more vernacular, inclusive, and democratic cultural formation. If the active, adventurous female heroine was considered to be ugly, as Weihong Bao notes, she was at the same time challenging long-standing standards of beauty that insisted on demure, polite femininity. Bao places the Chinese serial queen within a context of competing media of mass culture, including popular theater and Hollywood cinema, tracing the construction of the New Woman within and against the contemporary discourse on the "Chinese character." The ideology of New Heroism formulated in 1920s China opened up an important space through which a female martial-arts star such as Wu Suxing could be identified as a Chinese action heroine. The perceived Chinese inferiority to the West could be potentially overcome through the unleashing of this new female figure, even if she was ultimately contained and controlled through competing discourses of militarism and nationalism.

It thus becomes evident that the female body served as a conduit for a host of competing notions of gender, nation, and cultural modernity. Within the globalizing network of mass media iconography at the end of the silent period, the figure of the New Woman was a dynamic force and an index of social change. These essays point to the need for more extensive research into other local incarnations of female subjectivity within the international scope of film culture during the interwar period. This initial work on China and Japan is suggestive of the aesthetics and politics associated with the central role of the feminine in silent film, effects that, through the globalizing effects of Hollywood cinema, can surely be traced through any number of additional contemporary cultural milieus.

The authors of these essays, while well acquainted with the horizons of experience of the period and cultures in question, have adapted critical readings informed by the dialectical optics of twenty-first-century feminism. Reading against the grain of the texts, Yiman Wang, for example, analyzes Anna May Wong's performance strategy as a form of screen passing. These interpretive gestures—like the identification of female subjectivity within Japanese auteur cinema—are intended as strategies by which women's discourses that may well have been largely unrecognized at the time can be redeemed and recovered within the context of transnational feminism. Giuliana Bruno has proposed a model of filmic spectatorship that might be more mobile, more that of the "*voyageuse*" than the voyeur,¹¹ and the essays in this issue demonstrate what this strategy might mean for transnational film historiography. Transnationalism was clearly a fundamental component of interwar Chinese, Japanese, and Hollywood cinemas, one through which hybrid gendered identities were constructed within Orientalist and nationalist ideologies. These essays suggest that feminist film studies is particularly well equipped to "translate" the vernacular modernism of the period into contemporary discourse. Indeed it may well be the case that this language was not even legible until contemporary postcolonial feminist practice was able to bring it into perspective.

Notes

I would like to acknowledge the support of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada in the preparation of this special issue and my own article. Invaluable research assistance was provided by Jodi Ramer. Thanks also to Amelie Hastie and Patricia White for bringing the project to fruition and to Rosanna Maule for co-organizing the Women and Silent Screen conference with me in Montreal.

1. The “Women and the Silent Screen” conference in Montreal, codirected by myself and Rosanna Maule, was the third such international meeting. The first was held in Amsterdam in 1999, the second in Santa Cruz in 2001. Essays from Montreal have also been collected in two additional journal special issues: Catherine Russell and Rosanna Maule, eds., “Dossier on Cinephilia and Women’s Cinema in the 1920s,” special issue, *Framework* 46, no. 1 (2005); Rosanna Maule, ed., “Femmes et cinéma muet: Nouvelles problématiques, nouvelles méthodologies/Women and Silent Cinema: New Issues, New Methods,” special issue, *CiNéMAS* 16, no. 1 (2005).
2. Harry Harootunian, *History’s Disquiet: Modernity, Cultural Practice, and the Question of Everyday Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 111.
3. The Women Film Pioneers Project has existed since 1995 and is dedicated to the advancement of research on women film directors, screenwriters, producers, editors, exhibitors, and others working in the early years. It is linked to a large archival project inspired by the need to discover, restore, preserve, exhibit, and distribute extant 35mm films. See www.duke.edu/web/film/wfp/index.html.
4. Kay Armatage, “Roughing It in the Bush: Nell Shipman and Pioneering in the Academic Marketplace” (paper presented at the “Women and the Silent Screen” conference, Montreal, June 2004).
5. Lauren Rabinovitz, “The Future of Feminism and Film History” (paper presented at the “Women and the Silent Screen” conference, Montreal, June 2004). This essay will be forthcoming in *CiNéMAS* 16, no. 1 (2005).

6. Zhang Zhen, "An Amorous History of the Silver Screen: The Actress as Vernacular Embodiment in Early Chinese Film Culture," in *A Feminist Reader in Early Cinema*, ed. Jennifer Bean and Diane Negra (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 506.
7. Zhang, "An Amorous History"; Miriam Hansen, "The Mass Production of the Senses: Classical Cinema as Vernacular Modernism," in *Reinventing Film Studies*, ed. Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams (London: Arnold, 2000), 332–50; and Miriam Hansen, "Falling Women, Rising Stars, New Horizons: Shanghai Silent Film as Vernacular Modernism," *Film Quarterly* 54 (2000): 1–22.
8. Hansen, "Falling Women, Rising Stars," 19.
9. Barbara Sato, *The New Japanese Woman: Modernity, Media, and Women in Interwar Japan* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 76.
10. The chief proponent of this analysis is Noel Burch in *To the Distant Observer: Form and Meaning in the Japanese Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979).
11. Giuliana Bruno, "Site-Seeing: Architecture and the Moving Image," *Wide Angle* 19, no. 4 (1997): 9.