

A Forum on Genders & Sexualities in Asian Cinema

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Abstract

Although neither the first nor the last instance in attempting to provide a snapshot of current concerns in the issue of genders and sexualities in Asian film, there will always be a need to determine the status of female, queer, and non-binary subjects in the region. In a medium as universally “readable” (though not always as readily accessible) as film, the project acquires extra significance during a period when film practice and scholarship are becoming more feasible for a greater number of individuals.

Keywords: feminisms; film apparatus; bachelor machines; East Asia; Othernesses

About the Author

Joel David is a Professor of Cultural Studies at Inha University’s College of Arts and Sciences. He is a member of *Kritika Kultura*’s editorial board and has overseen a number of compilations in past journal publications, starting with a special issue devoted to *Manila by Night* and including topics devoted to film criticism, overseas Filipino images, and the star system.

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A forum with such a title as the present one immediately raises the expectation that feminism will be the primary component of the articles being presented, and that the collection might not be entirely perfect even if the authors were as feminist as it’s possible to be in film studies. The call for papers referenced the groundbreaking issue on sexual representation in the March 1985 issue of *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media* (edited by Julia Lesage and the late Chuck Kleinhans). Awkward as it may be to start on a defensive tone, I must clarify that the CFP yielded a great handful of responses; but the inordinate lead time of over two years, the longest I ever had among the journal issues I handled, probably resulted in contributory fatigue, loss of interest, and (definitely in a number of cases) decisions to publish elsewhere.

I also resorted to asking some authors who submitted their drafts if they could name some experts in the specific fields they were covering. A few of them said it was unusual, by which I think they meant that the double-blind peer-review system might not prove to be as sightless as it should be. I was ready to answer that I once recently participated in a single-blind peer review, which I found much more of a relief, since my awareness of the author’s identity allowed me to calibrate my recommendations according to what the author seemed capable of achieving. Nevertheless, the process I undertook for this issue resulted in more than one author withdrawing her (as a universal pronoun) contribution after finding the reviews too overwhelming to accommodate at the present time.

After one final postponement, from the August 2022 issue to the present one, I managed to solicit a few more articles to fill up the gap in the original collection. Only one completed the arduous peer-review process (in which, I hasten to add, the responders who might have had an idea of the author they were evaluating were all much more stringent in their responses; so much for the inevitability of bias in academic undertakings, at least of this type). With the authors no longer entirely biologically male, I had to acquiesce to the continuing absence of material outside a geographic East Asia coverage with “Eastern” contributors: two from the Philippines, two Korean nationals, one Chinese; even though I finalized a draft I was working on to provide a non-East Asian coverage, the Philippines has been historically configured as part of the Far East, and the article I finished needed to refer to a film trend first identified and named by Korean scholars. The final coincidence, which I just had to ascribe to serendipity, is that I happened to be familiar in varying degrees with the authors—something I could also say with some of the past special issues I edited, but then those involved topics confined to the Philippine context.

Hence our group assault on the “bachelor machine” that Constance Penley hoped could be countered by careful studies of the film apparatus will have to

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begin with my piece, “From Hostesses to Working Girls: Sex Workers in Late 1970s Philippine Cinema.” It proceeds from my interest in narratology as a socially facilitative device, but also reconsiders a sub-genre of Philippine film melodrama that has been historically downgraded for its constant promise of sexual titillation. The other Philippine-authored piece, Maria Luisa Torres Reyes’s “Gendering Genre in Korean Films with Filipino Women Characters,” anticipates our expansion of scholarly concerns by providing a study of Philippine migrant workers in Korea.

The Korean article, from Kim Jihoon, is encapsulated in its title, “Activism Renewed and Beyond: Korean Feminist Documentary Practices in the Twenty-First Century.” This may seem like a temporal and generic leap from hostess- and migrant-themed movies, but take a closer look: the larger meaning of “prostitute” was meant to be applied to women who dared to defy the constraints imposed on them by patriarchal systems. Professor Kim acknowledges not just that the struggle is real and still ongoing, but also that great strides are being done in a format that was formerly associated with male practitioners.

The other Korean contribution inspects a film that became popular because of its extremely controversial status in adapting a novel whose author was jailed for obscenity. Yu Taeyun’s “A One-off Foregrounding in Korean Film: Pornography, Erotica, Technology, Desire” also resulted in a similar response when I oversaw its submission to a faculty of film professors: some of them actually flunked the thesis from which it was drawn! Fortunately I was at the stage where such subcompetent responses no longer fazed me, so I decided that it required no further revisions and gave it a grade that led my dull-witted former colleagues to object, since it overrode the mark they thought it deserved.

The final article, “Jiang Qing and the Visuality of the Revolutionary Model Opera Films in the Cultural Revolution,” circles back to the same period I covered, but in a far more tumultuous context: the Cultural Revolution where Mao Zedong’s wife, Jiang Qing, took charge of film production. As Jiang Wei explains, since the downfall of the Gang of Four that she led,

her role in these extraordinary Revolutionary Model Opera films has been virtually minimized, even if the films were revived for the nostalgic appreciation of the earlier generations of Chinese audiences and unexpectedly found new devotees among the youth. Professor Jiang was part of the first batch of master's graduates in the film program that I helped set up, and until recently has been the only film graduate (after me) who completed a doctorate. The article he wrote for this issue was based on his master's thesis, which he built on for his dissertation. Most of the authors in this issue are far younger than I am, so we can expect to read more from them even as I start my countdown to retirement.

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Work Cited

Penley, Constance. "Feminism, Film Theory, and the Bachelor Machines." *The Future of an Illusion: Film, Feminism, and Psychoanalysis*, University of Minnesota Press, 1989, pp. 57–80.