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From Iron Girls to Oriental Beauties

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By Hongmei Li
In a piece I did for the Huffington Post on women and the Olympics, I provided a brief overview of the history of ideas about feminine beauty in China and their links to concepts of modernity. This post supplements it by looking at the shift in representations of women from celebrating iron girls to extolling Oriental beauties over the course of the still relatively short history of the People’s Republic of China (PRC).

During the three decades that followed the 1949 founding of the PRC, one goal promoted in official discourse was that of erasing gender differences and promoting gender sameness. This was linked to achieving a broader agenda: the elimination of class and socioeconomic differences. The underlying assumption was that women and men had the same fundamental responsibility: serving collective units, above the nation. The following are typical images of Chinese women during this period.

As you can see, women were dressed in the same androgynous way as men and they were portrayed as enthusiastically engaged in building a Socialist nation. Eroticism had no place in the official discourse. High-achieving “iron girls” (smiling soldiers, peasants and workers engaged in military, agricultural and production labor) were praised in the official discourse. These girls were said to be provided with a vast platform of sky and earth on which to achieve great things (guang kuo tiandi, da you suo wei).

Typical Images of Iron Girls during the Culture Revolution
In the last three decades, however, the image of Chinese women has dramatically shifted and women’s bodies have been closely associated with pleasure and the rise of consumer culture. In the 1980s, feminized women were said to represent progress and the iron girls were ridiculed. Numerous books and magazines have begun to stress “nu ren wei,” which can be literally translated as the taste of womanliness and that stresses gender differences and femininity. There has been an explosion of feminine and erotic images of women in Chinese TV programs, magazines, billboards and other media outlets. To be good looking is now often considered something that is important to becoming happy and achieving success in a career. Here are some images of two well-known Chinese actresses Zhang Ziyi and Gong Li, which clearly link women with consumer culture and fetishize particular parts of the female body.
Images of Zhang Ziyi and Gong Li as Symbols of Beautiful Consumer Culture
In Chinese gender discourse, one of the often heard issues is the production of the Oriental beauty in China, which can be clearly seen in the Beijing Olympic medal presenters. Approximately 380 Chinese women were selected to be Beijing Olympic medal ceremony presenters as medal tray carriers, flower presenters, and attendants for guests, officials and athletes: they must be aged between 18 and 25, with height between 5'6 and 5'10. And they must have a “regular appearance with standard proportion.” It was also reported that there were guiding criteria regarding applicants’ sizes of waists, breasts, and hips (sanwei). In their heavy training schedules, they were required to carry themselves and walk in a particular way so that they could represent the oriental beauty to the world. Chops were also used to produce the perfect smile, which was defined as the exposure of six to eight upper teeth.

*An Image of Chinese Medal Presenters in a Training Session*
The medal presenters for the Olympics aim to represent Chinese women as reserved, submissive and traditional in the finest sense. Ironically, these women are somehow similar to women waitresses and stewardesses. Often times, in job ads for waitresses and stewardesses, there are requirements about an applicant’s height and regular appearance (五官端正). Once selected, they are often trained for their smiles and postures.

While discriminatory hiring practices existed in the US, they become subtler now. Employers often declare that no individuals will be discriminated against based on gender, race, nationality, or sexual orientations. In China, however, such discriminatory employing practices seem to be officially endorsed and become more explicit. Indeed, it was reported in 2004 female applicants for civil servants in Hunan Province were required to have balanced breasts, which caused a public outcry. While economic reforms give some women more opportunities in their career development, they also expand gender inequalities. Ironically, China could claim the most progressive gender policy in the past, its current gender discriminations in social, political, economic and cultural arenas mean that women are put in a worse situation than before. A common Chinese saying that summarizes an effort in vain states, "several decades' hardship only leads to the pre-1949 China overnight" (辛辛苦苦几十年, 一夜回到解放前). Efforts need to be made in order to prevent such a retreat from happening.

Tags: The 2008 Beijing Olympics