

## *Female Masculinity and the Image of Women in the Chinese Cultural Revolution*

Zhuying Li, University of RMIT, Australia

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### **Abstract**

This research aims to investigate the influence of the Cultural Revolution on the image of women in Chinese film and television. The paradigm used in this paper to examine this is the concept of “female masculinity”, which I theorize as a specific female identity that advocates masculinity (or that women internalize and embody masculine traits). Postmodern feminist Judith Butler argues that gender identities are not a natural thing but a process of social construction and performances (Butler, J., 1990). Also, gender identity has been deemed a relatively unstable construction that is formed and reproduced through social institutions including political and media agendas (Butler, J., 1990; Connell, R., 2009; David, G., 2002). According to traditionally gendered stereotype, “Female Masculinity” has been viewed as a subversion and marginalization of identity in the traditionally binary gender system. However, this category of deviant identity flourished in Mao’s China, particularly in the Chinese Cultural Revolution and has been widely accepted as an orthodox of women’s identity. On the one hand, Mao’s China as a communist country applied Marxist ideology and Mao aimed to construct a new female identity which was different to bourgeois women. On the other hand, mass media in the Cultural Revolution, in particular the films, not only served as propaganda, constructing the ideal identity of women, but also reflected or re-presented the social realities. Therefore, this paper argues that the Chinese Cultural Revolution can be viewed as a cultural event which reformed gender identities, changed gender relations and challenged the traditional image of women.

Keywords: image of women, female masculinity, female identity, media, the Cultural Revolution

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## Introduction

In China from 1966 to 1976, the Cultural Revolution dominated by Mao Zedong dramatically changed gender relations and the identity of Chinese women. In terms of the Cultural Revolution, many Western and Chinese scholars have observed that was a period that femininity and traditionally female identity were declared as symbols of bourgeois and rejected by the national state (Mayfair, Y., 1999; Pei Yuxin & Petula Sik-ying Ho, 2006; Cui, Shuqi; 2003). Also, women's identity had been reconstructed by the national state and the image of women was portrayed as masculine (Emily, H; 2003 & Elizabeth, C., 1995).

From Mao's perspective, women's femininity represented inferiority and oppression. The function of femininity was viewed to benefit men's desires in feudal society and to be consumed by men in bourgeois society (Mayfair, Y., 1999; Pei Yuxin & Petula Sik-ying Ho, 2006). A focus on gender difference was denounced by the national state (Emily, H, 2002 & Cui, Shuqi; 2003). Also, Mao treated the mobilization of women's masculinization as an innovation to present "Chinese women in new China" and "women's liberation" that differed from feudal and socialist periods (Mayfair, Y., 1999; P, Yuxin & Petula, S, H, 2006; Emily, H., 2003; Elizabeth, C., 1983, & Rvni, T., 1997).

In the meantime, the mass media, including print, radio and film served as a propaganda tool which strongly obeyed the political agenda and deployed propagandistic strategies to construct women's new identity. For example, during the Cultural Revolution, only images of prototypical masculinized women such as "iron girls" and "female warriors" were permissible in the media sphere (Pei, Yuxin & Petula, Sik-ying. Ho, 2006; Chen, Y, 2009; Cui, Shuqi, 2003; Dai, J. H, 1995; 2000 & Chang, Y. L, 2010). Moreover, these images of women played a significant role as sociocultural icons which had been disseminated by propaganda and further reconstructed the identity of women during the Cultural Revolution. Consequently, propaganda not only shaped women's thoughts and behaviors, but also mobilized Chinese women to practice the standards of male success during this period.

There is no doubt that films also played a significant role in presenting and constructing an ideal image of women which was dominated by national ideology during this historical period. In the context of this socialist regime, Chinese cinema served as a part of sociocultural reform rather an entertainment enterprise. Meanwhile, political agendas influenced film production to portray women as a "master of the new state" to demonstrate the triumph of women's emancipation. Therefore, Cui (2003) argues that feminine features such as female body had been replaced by a genderless and sexless symbol in film in Mao's China (Cui, Shuqi, 2003). By erasing gender difference, women on screen had become collective symbols to demonstrate equality with men in the "new China".

Overall, there is an ongoing contest associated with the identity of women in the Cultural Revolution. The majority of scholars claim that the identity of women in Mao's China particularly the Cultural Revolution, is the "gender erasing" or "genderless" (Chen, Y, 2009; Dai, J.H, 1995; Yang, Dai Jinhua, 2002, p. 103; Cui, 2003 & Pei, Yuxin & Petula, Sik-ying. Ho, 2006). Indeed, women in the Cultural Revolution distinctly showed the masculine traits and de-feminization. However, it is

unsuitable to define women in this period as the “genderless” or gender as having been “erased”. Firstly, the phenomenon of masculinization on women cannot be defined as “genderless”, because the masculine gender is a gender. Moreover, the so called “gender erasing” merely focused on erasing femininity rather than erasure of masculinity during the Cultural Revolution. Other academics such as Elisabeth Croll (1995) deemed women in Mao’s China as androgyny (Elisabeth, C., 1995, p.77) or sort of “gender neutral”. In contrast, Emily Honing (2002) argued that they were neither androgynous nor gender neutral due to the fact that men were not encouraged to behave like women or to take domestically female roles and obligations (Emily, H., 2002, p.264).

Based on the previous research described above, it appears that China in the Cultural Revolution was a masculinized society and media served as propaganda to support the movement of masculinization. Simultaneously, women in the Cultural Revolution were strongly influenced by propaganda and believed the messages that there were no limits or differences between men and women. They could overcome gendered difficulties including biological limitations and domestic resistance to achieve the same successes as men or even moving beyond men. Thus, I describe the construction of identity of women during the Cultural Revolution as a process of “female masculinity” and also consider the way in which this sort of “female masculinity” is visually represented by film. On the one hand, I deem to investigate the dominant image of women on screen during the Cultural Revolution as an approach to examine the process of de-feminization and masculinization. On the other hand, I expect to explore an alternative model of identity of women through studying the image of women in Chinese films during the Cultural Revolution that further extend the understanding of gendered identity including “female masculinity”.

### **Research Questions**

This study explores the influence of the Cultural Revolution on the image of women in films. In other words, what is the significance of “female masculinity” in this specifically historical context and how did this positive image of women contribute to the construction of female masculinity in the Chinese Cultural Revolution? In the meantime, how this influenced the representation of women in Chinese films during this period?

Therefore, my key research question is what were the dominant representations of women in film during the Chinese Cultural Revolution, and are any of these still discernable in visual representation in contemporary China? In order to solve the central question, the related questions are

- (1) How have Marxist and Mao’s ideologies shaped the representation of women in Chinese film in Mao’s China?
- (2) What purposes did these representations serve for the nation state?
- (3) Are these influences still visible in contemporary Chinese visual videos?
- (4) Had these representations constructed a particularly female identity during the Chinese Cultural Revolution?

### **Definition of Female Masculinity**

The term “female-masculinity” has been described in the book of *Female-masculinity*

by Judith Halberstam (1998) which describes historical phenomenon of hegemonic masculinity in terms of masculine traits of personality, appearance and behavior that embodied by women. Judith Halberstam has applied queer methodology and Butler's theory of gender performativity to illustrate that gender identities and roles are social rather than natural configurations. Halberstam asserts

I want to carefully produce a model of female masculinity that remarks on its multiple forms but also calls for new and self-conscious affirmations of different gender taxonomies. Such affirmations begin not by subverting masculine power or talking up a position against masculine power but by turning a blind eye to conventional masculinities and refusing to engage (Judith, H., 1998 p9).

In this book, Halberstam illustrates the image of female masculinity including the anatomically mixed androgyne, the sexually aggressive tribade, the melancholic female invert, the female husband, the gallant lesbian, the stone butch, the female to male transsexual and the costumed drag king. These images indeed constructed a specifically gendered type and it can be identified as the "female-masculinity".

The international encyclopedia of men and masculinities (2007) indicates the female masculinity as

These female masculinities vary in qualities of body, psychological characteristics, sexual orientation, fantasies and desires, dress and comportment, and degree of permanence. They disrupt conventional associations between masculinity, male bodies and power. Halberstam believes that studying female masculinities reveals the operations of hegemonic male masculinity, unmasks its claims to naturalness, demonstrates alternative and often desirable forms of social power for women, and disrupts the gender binary. (p.204)

However, Halberstam elaborates on the phenomena of "female masculinity" and portrays what it looks like but she does not define what it is. It is subject to strong critique, for example, Carrie argues that the notion of female masculinity is confined to empirical analysis (Carrie, P, 2006). Therefore, it is confusing to apply the Halberstam's theory in terms of female masculinity to further identify the category of female masculinity due to the fact that the theoretical standard is vague. In addition, in the book of "female masculinity", Halberstam deploys a queer method and concentrates on the female masculinity which embodied in lesbian culture. Thus, the current studies in terms of queering female masculinity are fruitful. Albeit, I think the identity of female masculinity can be identified in a broader scope involving heterosexuality, and cannot be automatically associated with homosexuality, however butches and tomboys are very typical embodiment of female masculinity.

Therefore, by combining Halberstam's descriptions of female masculinity and relevant masculinity studies, I define "female masculinity" in this research as a specific female identity that not restricted by sexual orientation. Thus, the female masculinity means women should internalize masculine values and acquire power through engaging in masculinities, especially the hegemonic masculinity; and fully or mostly rejecting femininities in the meantime. The internalization of masculine values has been expressed through women's bodies, personality, traits, behaviors, interests and

aesthetics.

On the one hand, female masculinity can be viewed as a personal or contingent choice which has been influenced by factors including biological hormones, personal behaviors, individual agency, individual preference and situational context (Bem, S, L., 1993). On the other hand, in a macro spectrum, the identity of female masculinity as a sexual subversion is also deemed as a part of social construction. For postmodernist account, gender identities are not solid. They can be shaped and reshaped by social construction. “Being” or “doing” gender is a social process; it depends on what we perform rather than what we are. (Butter, J., 1990) It is believed that masculinities are placed in dominance and contribute to reproduce this dominance in the context of patriarchy (Nigel, E& Margret, W, 1996). Therefore, in my standpoint, the female masculinity which refers to the masculine identity is related to masculinity politics that can be produced, reproduced and socialized.

### **The Rationale for Studying Female Masculinity**

I chose to study female masculinity due to three reasons. Firstly, the study of female masculinity demonstrates alternative and desirable forms of social power for women that disrupt the gender binary (Halberstam, J., 1998). Postmodern scholars like Judith Butler and Connell argue that the identity of gender is not nature but a process of social construction and performances. Thus, the gender identity can be shifted through social construction including economy, politics, culture, race and religion. Gender binary is a mechanism by which notions of masculine and feminine are produced and naturalized. Albeit, “gender” is able to exist outside the gender norm that moves beyond or deconstructs gender binary. (Butler, J, 2004; Butler, J, 1990; Connell, R, 1995 & Connell, R, 2009). Thereby, the emergence of female masculinity in human history illustrates that however ‘masculinity’ has been dominated by men but it also can be performed and embodied by women. For postmodern-feminists perspectives, the phenomenon of “female masculinity” is challenging dominant and stereotypical gender constructions. It has been viewed as a discursive deconstruction or subversion of the traditionally gender norm which has a positive influence for deconstructing patriarchy including gender binary. Judith Butler (1992) argues that “the categories of gender identity are never merely descriptive, but always normative, and as such, exclusionary”. Therefore she calls for a concept of “contingent foundations” which emphasizes individual desire of women to discursively deconstruct the so called “universalities” such as the gender dichotomy. (Butler, J., 1992) Thus, the praxis of female masculinity can be identified as a participation of “contingent foundations” that challenges the “gender norm” and “gender universality”.

Secondly, if masculinity implies power under the patriarchal ideology, the praxis of female masculinity possibly indicates a way for women to access power. It has been noted that under the patriarchal gender norm, “masculinity” has been viewed as the crucial point to construct male identity; and its central concept is power (Connell, R, 1987; Kimmel, 1987; Brittan, 1989; Segal, 1990; Kaufman, 1994 & Beasley, C, 2005). Therefore, the female masculinity demonstrates that women possibly engaging in equal power through emulating men via performing masculinity. In other words, pursuing ‘masculinity’ can be viewed as a feasible approach for women to grasp power and thus possibly achieve gender equality.

Thirdly, the study of female masculinity reveals the operations of patriarchy, in particular hegemonic masculinity (Halberstam, J., 1998). The female masculinity is a part of masculinity studies which is a small and relatively new subfield in the wider arena of gender studies (Beasley, C., 2005). By studying female masculinity, it will enhance acknowledgements of the way patriarchal power dominates women, privileging masculinity whilst simultaneously devaluing femininity. Due to the fact that masculinity as a symbol of “maleness” represents domination, legitimacy, power, privilege and an orthodox of “maleness” is at the opposite of “childness” and “femaleness” ((Halberstam, J., 1998 & Jeffery, P. D, 2012). Thus, “being” or “doing” female masculinity through internalizing or practicing masculine values implicitly reflects the fact that patriarchy as a form of hegemony dominates , produces and recycles political, economic and cultural “meaning” of patriarchy. Also, to explore the relationship between the social construction and the category of female masculinity, it contributes to compare strategies of masculine politics between men and women which are traditionally viewed as binary categories in a hierarchal society.

### **The Rationale for Studying Female Masculinity in the Cultural Revolution**

I chose to study the female masculinity in relation to the Chinese Cultural Revolution because of the ongoing debate associated with contemporary female masculinity studies.

Firstly, it seems that the majority of female masculinity research is focusing on homosexual women and it is disconnected from heterosexual women. If female masculinity is only associated with the masculine lesbian, the female masculinity is merely “identification” and there is no explicit distinction between “female masculinity” and “butch”, at least in terms of linguistics (Wiegman, 2001 & Beasley, C., 2005). However, the phenomenon of female masculinity that emerged in the Cultural Revolution represented heterosexual, not homosexual women. Therefore, female masculinity is not a marginalized phenomenon uniquely associated with homosexual women but also can be adopted by the heterosexual women. In other words, in the context of the Cultural Revolution, sexuality is not the determinate factor for performing female masculinity. Thus, this study differs from the study of Judith Halbersam’s “Female masculinity” (1998) because it aims to investigate female masculinity beyond sexuality.

Secondly, current studies of female masculinity merely demonstrate the possibility of female masculinity as an individual choice. Gender studies academics (Zicklin, 2002 & Beasley, C., 2005) critique if it is possible that female masculinity is not only a distinctly individualized strategy but also a strategy in terms of a set of institutional processes or techniques under a specifically social or historical frame (Zicklin, 2002 & Beasley, C., 2005)? Thus, it is appropriate to question whether it is necessary that the investigation of female masculinity should focus on a macro scope which strongly connects social agendas, or whether these agendas are politically designed and can reflect relations among social construction, gender identity, gender performativity and social power. In the context of the Cultural Revolution, the praxis of female masculinity is the collective activities that were mobilised by the national state rather than a discursive performance or private desire. Thus, the female masculinity in the Cultural Revolution is a perfect context to examine how social agendas produce and reproduce the female masculinity.

Thirdly, in terms of the female masculinity in the Cultural Revolution, it is important to question whether the construction of female masculinity can be identified as the process of consolidation of patriarchy, or the deconstruction of patriarchy. On the one hand, if masculinity implies power under the patriarchal ideology, and thus women possibly engaging in equal power as same as men via performing masculinity. On the other hand, if “masculinity” always links to power or privileges in a patriarchal society, does it mean women potentially access power via deleting femininity? In addition, if women possibly access power through performing masculinity, is the production and reproduction of female masculinity and the praxis of female masculinity identified as the processes in relation to the consolidation of patriarchy or deconstruction of patriarchy? In particular, the context of the practice of female masculinity is collectively rather than discursively performed by women due to political reasons such as the Chinese Cultural Revolution.

### **The Rationale for Studying Female Masculinity in Terms of Film Studies in the Cultural Revolution**

I chose film studies to examine the Chinese Cultural Revolution because I think the image of women in the Chinese Cultural Revolution is significant material that facilitates a broader understanding of female masculinity which exists in a large scale macro scope.

Firstly, the period of Chinese Cultural Revolution is a specifically historical context in which to explore the possibility that politics made heterodoxy of gendered identity possible and prevalent. On the one hand, female masculinity can be viewed as a personal choice which has been influenced by factors including sexual orientation, biological hormones, personal behaviors, individual’s agency, cultural preference and situational context (Bem, S, L., 1993). On the other hand, in a macro spectrum, the identity of female masculinity as a gender rebellion is also a part of social construction. “Being” or “doing” a gender identity is a social process; it depends on what we perform rather than what we are (Butler, J., 1990). Besides, it is the fact that masculinities are both structured in dominance and contributing reproduce this dominance (Nigel, E & Margret, W, 1996). Therefore, the representation of women in the Cultural Revolution can be viewed as evidence which possibly indicates that the female masculinity is not only a queer but a gender category which can be produced, reproduced and socialized like other traditional gender categories. It is not only a distinctly gender performance but also a gender identity in terms of a set of institutional processes or techniques under a specifically social or historical frame

Secondly, examining the images of women in Chinese films is an approach to explain the relationships among the social phenomenon of women’s masculinization, political regime and gender agenda during the period of Cultural Revolution. Initially, the liberation of Chinese women since Maoist China has become a myth that indicates an ideological construction associated with the socialization, politicization and masculinization of women (Cui, Suqi, 2003). The media played an important role of mobilization of women’s masculinization during this period. Women simultaneously influenced by media and thus engaged in pursuing the same political and economic power as men. In addition, the media including cinema played a significant role in disseminating the ideology of “gender equality” through mobilizing the masculinization of women during this period. Finally, a myth of women’s

emancipation put women's position into a dilemma. On the one hand, women practiced equal rights with men as labors and participated in power structures through legitimizing the concept of gender equality. On the other hand, the mobilization of masculinization convinced women to ignore or reject their femininities (Cui, Shuqi, 2003).

Thirdly, the revolutionary film has created a typical role model for Chinese women and thus not only contributed to construct a "queer" image of women on screen but also a "real" identity of women. In the socialist film, a female protagonist usually portrayed as a prototypical heroine who acts as a mouthpiece for the state and a social model for audiences (Cui, Shuqi., 2003). For example, in the case of "*Red detachment of women*" (1960), it created a special but popular image of women which women have military dress, short haircuts and square faces. They show courage, strength and determination (Kristine, H & Suny, N. P, 2010). Women in the Cultural Revolution emulated the female red guards who cut their hair short and wore the military clothes and cap to mimic the '*Red detachment women*'. Furthermore, women who devoted in socialist construction also had been influenced by national propaganda. Women's images and role have been sharply changed not only regarding female red guards but also associated with other female social participators. Masculine dress and performances were considered as a sort of orthodoxy.

### **Significance & Potential Contribution**

The expected outcome of this study aims to fill the gap which a specific study focuses on the relations between media and construction of images of female masculinity in the Cultural Revolution. The outcome potentially contributes to knowledge as following

Initially, this project focuses on the female masculinity of heterosexual women and the masculinization movement that predominated and promoted by a national state for political reasons. Therefore, it will extend the research scope of female masculinity augmenting and complementing research that represents queer female masculinity.

In addition, this project will facilitate the epistemology in the relations between social construction and gender identities. This project explores how media played a role in constructing women's images and identity in a socialist context. It is clear that media and communications play a crucial role in constructing gender identities and the way of thinking gender identities. However, the socialist propaganda possibly has a more powerful influence than western commercial media that intensively affects its audiences. Therefore, this research is a specific study which focuses on the relations between media and construction of images of female masculinity in the Cultural Revolution. It will provide powerful evidence to acknowledge the performativity of gender, and gender identity that is a process of social construction.

Finally, through studying the phenomenon of female masculinity in the Chinese Cultural Revelation, it will contribute to a feminist rethinking of issues such as the notion of "equality" and "identity". On the one hand, this project is only focusing on heterosexual women; homosexual women are beyond the research scope and this is something that can be deemed as a key limitation, or point of differentiation, of this study. On the other hand, homosexual women in terms of female masculinity



contribute to reveal general relationships among gender equality, gender identity and patriarchy.

## **Methodology**

In order to address the research questions, this project applies a method which combines discourse analysis and a case study.

Firstly, I will adopt the Foucaultian approach, the discourse analysis as my main research method. Indeed, the “image of women” associated with “female masculinity” is the subject of my project. However, this project is not only a study of the subject “image of women” but also a study of masculine discourse around which the “subject” is constructed. In order to answer my key research question and the related questions, the feminist critical discourse analysis is the major approach to elaborate how “female masculinity” can be seen as a discourse and thus “a system of formations in its specific individuality is therefore to characterise a discourse or a group of statements by the regularity of a practice (Foucault, M., 1972, p74)”.

Secondly, in my project, during the period of the Cultural Revolution, the “image of female masculinity” can be viewed as the statement of the discourse of “female identity” and this links to my key research question “What were the dominant representations of women in film during the period of Cultural Revolution?” Whilst, the national state puts the statement in the central place in order to embody Maoist and Marxist ideologies which form it, and this associates with the research question one “How have Marxist and Mao’s ideologies shaped the representation of women in Chinese film in Mao’s China?” Simultaneously, the statement is told by media such as the film, and the film is authorized by the nation state to propagandize it. Therefore, film producers hold a specific power what Bourdieu (1979) named “symbolic power” to portray the image of women. Meanwhile, this process of “saying statement” is identified as both a construction and reflection of the “discourse of female identity”. Thus, by analyzing the process of “saying statement” this research contributes to the examination of the question: “What purposes did these representations serve for the nation state?” Furthermore, it explores the question: “Are these influences visible in contemporary Chinese audiovisual productions?” Whether the answer is *yes* or *no*, it can be viewed as the obedience or resistance in relation to the discourse of female masculinity. Finally, by integrating previous analysis, conclusions in terms of how a specific discourse on gender has the power to produce female subject accounts in this research aims to discover whether these representations constructed a particularly female identity during the Cultural Revolution.

In addition, I will undertake a case study of three audiovisual productions as theoretical samples which typically represent the phenomenon of female masculinity. All of them are called “*The Red Detachment of Women*”. The first one was film and made before the Cultural Revolution in 1961. The second one was a model opera and had been filmed during the Cultural Revolution in 1972. The third one is a contemporary production that is a television series which made in 2004. I would undertake a discourse analysis of the way in which women are represented, and the social structures which construct this sort of women’s image.

Indeed, gender identity has been formed and reformed through variously social

context. Thus the images of women also have been portrayed differently between the Cultural Revolution era and contemporary China. I chose the three different renditions of “*The Red Detachment of Women*” as data of case study due to the fact that the data has a strong continuum and comparisons. However, the case of “*The Red Detachment of Women*” has been represented by different forms of media including stage, film, TV series and caricature. I only chose the film and TV series as my data because they are all visual productions which meet my study objective. Moreover, the representations of women in terms of different visual productions as a focus of case study are comparable via discourse analysis.

## **Conclusion**

This study applies a post-modern feminist paradigm and thus gender is deemed as an unstable process of performance that constructed by social agency. Therefore, it conceptualizes female masculinity as a mode of gendered identity and performativity widely applied in a specifically political and cultural context like the Cultural Revolution. Moreover, the image of women in terms of female masculinity served as a reflection of visual praxis that influenced a specifically gendered discourse in a historically contingent system. However, it is not constant but varies through different political, cultural and economic context such as from the Cultural Revolution to the Post-Mao era. Furthermore, it is important to note that the performance of female masculinity during the Cultural Revolution was a politically enforced performance rather than the contingent performance of the natural itself. On the one hand, by investigating female masculinity, it could refer to gendered performance while arguing a possibility of gendered identity. On the other hand, it reveals how patriarchy devalued femininity and established a new form of masculine subjectivity that dominated the representation of women in the Cultural Revolution.

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**Contact email:** Zhuying.li@hotmail.com