

Mapping Society onto the (Gendered) Body: An Introduction

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This chapter introduces the topics and issues addressed in this volume. It shows how the chapters weave together the themes of gender, identity, and the corporeal by examining a variety of lived experiences and cultural expressions in India, Indonesia, Japan, mainland China, Taiwan, and Thailand in historical contexts ranging from antiquity until today. It highlights the contribution of this volume to wider debates on issues such as the performance and construction of gender identities, misogyny and homophobia, biopolitics, and feminist and LGBTQ+ activism, and also how it relates to recent studies and collections on these subjects.

Keywords: gender norms, embodied identities, intersectionality, performativity, activism, violence, biopolitics

This volume brings together seventeen studies that explore societal, cultural, and political phenomena in Asia with a focus on the interrelated topics of the body, gender, and identity. While ambitious in its scope, its aim is not to trace a unitary narrative of these topics in Asian cultures and histories, but rather to cast a wide net on ideas, experiences, and social and cultural manifestations across eras and fields of research. As a result, the volume affords the reader insights into a variety of lived experiences and cultural expressions in India, Indonesia, Japan, mainland China, Taiwan, and Thailand.

Some topics that emerge repeatedly throughout the volume include gender norms and social expectations; the construction and representation of embodied identities; sexuality, morality, and social pressure; forms of defiance and resistance; and explorations of queer experience and intersectionality. Chapters that focus on today's Asia, in particular, confront issues such as inequality, violence, and discrimination while highlighting the struggle for dignity and fundamental rights that takes shape not only through activism and protest movements, such

as #MeToo, but also literature and art. Questions related to beauty, pleasure, desire, individual agency, and empowerment in this book foreground debates on embodied subjectivities and power relations as they interrogate the use of bodies and (de)construction of gender. The book approaches these issues from a range of disciplinary perspectives, including anthropology, sociology, gender studies, history, literary studies, and art history.

There is increasing scholarly and societal interest in the themes addressed by the present volume. Issues that pertain to gender equality, queer identities, biopolitics, necropolitics, and sexual and gender-based violence are among the most urgently debated in today's world, and the studies in this volume confirm that Asia is no exception. Several books published in recent decades have contributed to the study of socio-political and cultural issues related to the human body and gendered identities in Asia across eras and fields of practice. Because of the layered nature of these issues, especially when different Asian societies and traditions are taken into consideration, the edited volume represents a congenial place to think about them in a pluralistic and interdisciplinary way while critically engaging with underlying concepts and theories. One pioneering work in this growing area of research to which the present volume contributes is *Bewitching Women, Pious Men: Gender and Body Politics in Southeast Asia* (1995a), edited by anthropologists Aihwa Ong and Michael G. Peletz. While more specific in its geographical and disciplinary scope than this book, Ong and Peletz's volume also collects explorations of a wide range of topics that are often underpinned by issues of power and knowledge, while emphasizing alternative discourses on gender and the body. Drawing mainly on Foucault for their definition of "body politics," Ong and Peletz posit that "cross-referencing inscriptions of power—that is, the diverse ways society is mapped onto the body and the body is symbolized in society—are mutually dependent upon and entangled in each other" (Ong and Peletz 1995b, 6). In his more recent work, a short monograph titled *Gender, Sexuality, and Body Politics in Modern Asia* (2007), Peletz offers an ambitious overview of body politics and gender-related issues across the Asian continent, touching upon multiple issues, including gender pluralism, violence, agency, resistance, and transgression.

Recent research on Asian societies and cultures that addresses the intersection of gender and the corporeal has resulted in the publication of volumes that focus on more specific dimensions, such as migration and health. The studies in *Gender, Health, and History in Modern East Asia* (2017), edited by Angela Ki Che Leung and Izumi Nakayama, offer insights into topics such as fertility, pharmacology and health knowledge, sexual education, and sex change in Japan, Korea, mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. The volume revolves around the concept of biopolitics in relation to gender and sex

during a key period of empire, modernization, and nation-building in the region. The contributions collected in the volume *The Asian Migrant's Body: Emotion, Gender and Sexuality* (2020), edited by Michiel Baas, focus on the figure of the Asian migrant in the world rather than Asia per se. They investigate migration as an embodied and gendered experience through case studies from Southeast Asia, the Middle East, Oceania, and North America. In their introduction to the book, Baas and Peidong Yang conceptualize the body of the migrant as a material and physical anchor of their identity, as being socially constructed in discourses as well as in physical encounters, and finally as the site upon which institutions exercise their regulatory power (Baas and Yang 2020, 12).

South Asia is the focus of two recent collections of essays on gender and the corporeal entitled *Gender, Sexuality, Decolonization: South Asia in the World Perspective* (2021a) and *The Gendered Body in South Asia: Negotiation, Resistance, Struggle* (2024a). According to its editor Ahonaa Roy (2021b), the first volume aims to challenge the mapping of gender and sexuality theorizations from the Global North onto the Global South by centering gendered, racialized, and marginalized subjectivities in post-colonial and neo-colonial contexts. Studies included in this book explore queer and trans politics alongside broader dynamics of gender and sexuality in South Asia and its diasporas. The contributions in the latter volume, edited by Meenakshi Malhotra, Krishna Menon, and Rachana Johri, discuss everyday embodied experiences, resistance, and feminist activism of women in South Asia as well as their representation in literary and cultural expressions. "[T]he body—especially the woman's body," the editors point out, "is enmeshed in questions of identity (individual, social and national), citizenship and cultural location" (Malhotra, Menon, and Johri 2024b, 4).

Finally, numerous monographic works and edited volumes published in the last two decades deal with the topics of embodiment, gender, and identity, looking at specific Asian societies and cultural productions and practices using diverse disciplinary perspectives. These publications include, to mention only a few, *Bodies of Evidence: Women, Society, and Detective Fiction in 1990s Japan* (2004) by Amanda C. Seaman, *Women's Sexualities and Masculinities in a Globalizing Asia* (2007) edited by Saskia E. Wieringa, Evelyn Blackwood, and Abha Bhaiya, *Lost Bodies: Prostitution and Masculinity in Chinese Fiction* (2010) by Paola Zamperini, *Religion, Politics and Gender in Indonesia: Disputing the Muslim Body* (2010) by Sonja van Wichelen, *Curative Violence: Rehabilitating Disability, Gender, and Sexuality in Modern Korea* (2017) by Eunjung Kim, *Becoming a Malaysian Trans Man: Gender, Society, Body and Faith* (2020) by Joseph N. Goh, *Forms of the Body in Contemporary Japanese Society, Literature, and Culture* (2020) edited by Irina Holca and Carmen Săpunaru Tămaș, and most recently, *Gender, Islam and Sexuality in Contemporary Indonesia* (2024) edited by Monika Arnez and Melani

Budianta. This overview of recent studies points at the vitality of the area of research to which our volume contributes.

The seventeen studies included in this volume are organized into four parts. The following outline will show how multiple threads tie the chapters together.

Part I features four studies that explore the quotidian experience and performance of gendered identities and sexuality in Japan and Indonesia. In their chapter entitled "Virtual Fashion and Identity in Japan: Counterculture in an Age of Global Transparency," Liudmila Bredikhina and Agnès Giard examine fashion as part of the practice called *babiniku*, which typically involves male virtual YouTubers who incarnate a stereotypically feminine and cute, computer-generated avatar to create online content, as a form of countercultural action in Japan. Their study considers virtual bodies and fashion as resources that enable the content creators to explore and change themselves, their identity, and enjoy parallel lives, free from prescribed roles and obligations, and self-expression through artificiality in the face of contemporary dominant social expectations concerning sociability and self-presentation. The theme of embodied and negotiated performance of gender in this chapter constitutes one of the recurring themes in this volume.

The second chapter in the book also deals with the theme of construction of bodies as well as gendered social expectations, imagined selves, and empowerment. In her chapter, entitled "Constructing the Ideal Face: The Japanese High School Girls' Makeup," Keiko Aiba investigates makeup practices by female high school students in Japan. Situating her research in feminist discourse, Aiba presents and discusses findings from interviews she conducted with female high school students aimed at determining the reasons behind the students' use of makeup as well as their reasons for not engaging in the makeup practice, which, as the author points out, is largely regarded as a norm, that is, part of social etiquette for adult women in Japan.

The third chapter looks at the self-fashioning and negotiation of gendered identities in a different context of contemporary Asia, namely, present-day Indonesia. In her study entitled "Waria and Marriage in Malay Muslim Society in Indonesia," Novidayanti examines how the institution and experience of heterosexual marriage is viewed and lived by waria (male-to-female transgender individuals) in Jambi, Sumatra. Based on the author's interviews with waria and perspectives by Malay scholars on waria's lives, the chapter provides insights into how Islam and Malay customs and traditions relate to the ways in which waria live and understand heterosexual marriage. As a result, the study sheds new light on discourses and experiences of transgenderism and homosexuality in Malay Muslim society.

The experiences of LGBTQ+ people and the complex interaction between gender and other socio-cultural identities also represent the focus of the fourth chapter. In their study, entitled “Intersectionality in Japanese Schools: The Experiences and Struggles of LGBTQ+ JET Teachers in Rural Japan,” Kazuyoshi Kawasaki and Ami Kobayashi apply the concept of intersectionality to their analysis of the situation of LGBTQ+ college graduates from overseas who come to Japan to participate in the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Programme as teaching assistants. Exploring the intersectional experiences linked to the participants’ nationality, gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, and regionality of their work placements, the authors disentangle the complexities of their everyday experiences, pointing out how different factors intertwine with one another and shape the everyday lives of participants as people with marginalized and minority backgrounds living in rural Japan.

Part II of this book focuses on issues such as gendered violence, activism, and rights in Japan, Taiwan, and Thailand. It opens with a chapter by Verita Sriratana entitled “‘Queering Misogyny’ in the Context of Marriage Equality: A Proposed Approach to Understanding and Resisting Necropolitics and Epistemic Violence against Women and LGBTQINA+ Persons in Thailand.” The chapter offers an examination of gender and marriage equality in Thailand through analyses of political, legal, and activist discourses. Sriratana’s findings help to dispel the myth that Thailand represents a “queer h(e)aven,” contrasting officially-endorsed rhetoric with how the legal foundations of gender equality have been eroded and feminist activism demonized. Drawing on the work of Achille Mbembe (2019), Sriratana argues that the 2021 verdict of Thailand’s Constitutional Court on marriage equality enacts the “hermeneutic death” of LGBTQINA+ persons and suggests combining feminist theories and activism with queer theories and activism to deconstruct misogynist discourses and resist epistemic violence against LGBTQINA+ individuals.

The exploration of queer activism advocating for gender and marriage equality continues in Chapter Six, entitled “Coming out as Everyday Life Activism: ‘Displaying’ Gay Father Families in Taiwan,” where Jung Chen explores the question of reproductive rights for Taiwan’s LGBTQ+ community. Even though Taiwan is a global leader in legal protections for LGBTQ+ rights, the community still faces challenges, particularly when it comes to forming families. Chen provides analysis based on participant observation and interviews with gay fathers and prospective fathers, showing how gay men are using their visibility and family formations to promote everyday activism and envision a better future for the gay father community. Not unlike the previous chapter, Chen’s analysis sheds new light onto the legal and social status of queer identities in what is often perceived as one of the most LGBTQ+-friendly countries in Asia.

The next chapter also pertains to the issue of how individuals have coped with gender inequality in Taiwan, this time, however, focusing on Taiwanese girls and women in the mid-twentieth century. Entitled "Nursery Rhymes, Rituals, and Cultural Trauma: A Connotation of the 'Chair Maiden' in Taiwan," the chapter by Yu-Yin Hsu and Kuan-Wei Wu explores the custom of Chair Maiden, a child psychic divination ritual practiced in rural Taiwan until the 1970s. Based on their analysis of collected rural stories, rhymes, and ritual practices, the authors argue that this tradition functioned as a way to collectively heal the traumatic encounters experienced by young girls growing up in a patriarchal society.

The second part of the book closes with another chapter that addresses the issue of gendered trauma from a perspective that centers the discourses and practices of women. This chapter, penned by Chiara Fusari and entitled "Body and Violence: Reshaping Narratives on Sexual Violence in Japan," examines stories of survivors of sexual violence, shedding light on the ways in which they challenge the dominant discourses around the issue of sexual violence in contemporary Japan. Fusari presents the results of her analysis of three case studies of sexual violence victims turned advocates and activists, discussing both the structural silencing of victims, sexual double standards, and rape myths, as well as the subversive potential of sexual violence survivors' testimonies and the empowerment that they can gain through speaking up and going public with their stories.

Part III and Part IV of this volume connect the societal issues explored in the first two parts with cases from literature, cinema, and visual art, examining cases of cultural engagements with bodies and gendered identities from mainland China, Japan, Taiwan, and India. Dedicated to literature, Part III begins with a study by Daniela Licandro. Her chapter, entitled "*Like Snow Like Mountain*: Narrating Gender Violence in the Era of #MeToo Activism," focuses on a collection of short stories by Zhang Tianyi. Closely aligned especially with the previous chapter by Fusari but also intimately connected to other chapters in the second part of the book that address the topic of gendered violence, Licandro's chapter shows how Zhang Tianyi explores the experiences of Chinese women who endure harassment and gender-based violence. Zhang's writings encourage a more nuanced understanding of women's issues and gendered identities in China and contribute to our understanding of contemporary Chinese literature and ongoing feminist discourse. According to Licandro, Zhang Tianyi's collection compels us to reconsider the mechanisms of gendered violence in a broader framework of interpretation, allowing for critiques of various forms of oppression.

The next chapter addresses a different type of "gendered" violence and embodied representation by discussing the media-constructed images of murderous women in Heisei-era Japan. In her study, entitled "Becoming-Simulacra: Textualizing Murderous Women in Heisei Japan (1989–2019)," Fengyuan Zhen

draws on Jean Baudrillard's theories to argue that such images represent "simulacra" detached from accessible reality. The author shows how both non-fictional works and novels generated and utilized the hyperrealities of female criminality as perspectival interpretations to engage with a variety of discourses on gender and social crises that concerned the public at the time. These included the gender division of labor, ideal femininity, the perceived loss of masculinity, consumer culture, and the monstrous potential of human beings.

Dunja Jelesijevic's chapter, "A Lady's Reckoning: Torture, Eroticism, and Salvation in the Noh Play *Shikimi Tengu*," discusses the religious and social underpinnings of the titular play, while exploring the suffering and potential redemption of Lady Rokujō, the infamous antagonist in *Genji monogatari*, a classic work of Japanese literature, placed within the context of a seemingly unrelated plot trope of stories about creatures called *tengu*. The main tensions are shown to arise from the character's female sensuality and corporeality, which unexpectedly elicit voyeuristic pleasure in her torture and pain. These, in turn, are not framed as part of a process for Rokujō to achieve enlightenment and salvation, but rather, her tortured body serves as an object for meditation for the mountain ascetic that watches her. To explore the relation between the concepts of "looking" and "observing" and the key themes of this volume, such as body, gender, and agency, Jelesijevic examines the male gaze and voyeurism in the play through the concept of *kaimami*, the important erotic trope in premodern Japanese literature that in its paradigmatic form involves a man peeking or secretly gazing at a woman through a gap.

The chapter by Li-wen Wang, "The Body as Lens and Testimony: The Bodily Experience and Cultural Identity in the Song Stories of Traveling to Foreign Lands (960–1279)," presents a critical reading of the representation of foreign peoples, lands, and customs in classical Chinese short stories from around the eleventh and twelfth centuries. The chapter focuses on a story titled "Gao Yan" included in the Northern-Song collection, *Lofty Debates under the Green Window*. By exploring this under-researched territory, Wang shows how the representation of bodies and embodied experiences stages the interplay between the environment on the one hand, and views on morality, civilization, and spirituality on the other. Wang's analysis of these stories—which mix realist elements with fiction—foregrounds the negative portrayal of the effects enacted on the body of the traveler by foreign lands and people, suggesting that their sensuous descriptions convey a normative tale of elite cultivation in the Central Lands.

Part IV is dedicated to the representation of bodies and gender in visual art and cinema. The first chapter in this part, "Archeology and *Onmyōdō*: Human-Shaped Ritual Objects Associated with Purification Rites and Curses," is authored by Marianna Lázár. In the chapter, Lázár relies on historical records, archeological

findings, classical works of literature, and secondary sources to investigate how human-shaped effigies and ritual pottery decorated with human faces were used in ancient Japan in both state and private rituals. While the former are discussed as, for example, serving as substitute bodies as well as symbolic representations of individuals, the latter are revealed to have, for example, been used as vessels into which a person would breathe during a healing or purification ceremony as well as objects that played a role in the rites whose aim was the appeasement of *kami*.

Taking us back to the present time, Giorgio Strafella's chapter sheds light on the legacy of post-Mao avant-gardist trends in contemporary Chinese art by analyzing the artistic development and the themes of identity and the corporeal in Shen Jingdong's art. In this chapter, Strafella explores how Shen reflects on those themes throughout his artistic oeuvre, from his early conceptual and performance art projects to his later paintings. By doing so, the chapter shows that studying the experimental period of Chinese contemporary art—that is, the period from the mid-1980s to the early 2000s—is necessary to understand even the most popular art of the last twenty years. At the same time, the chapter points at the centrality of issues pertaining to the human body and social identity in postsocialist China, not only in visual art, but also in intellectual discourse and art criticism.

The topics of the male gaze, feminism, and gendered social roles return in another chapter on contemporary Chinese art, entitled "Yang Fudong: In Search of the Lost *Yin/Yang* Balance." In this chapter, Christine Vial Kayser examines photographic, video, and installation art by Yang Fudong to problematize the representation of women and the relation between genders in his oeuvre. Despite the importance and special status of women in his art, the author suggests that the gender dimension of Yang's work has been overlooked. Through a critique of several works of art by Yang Fudong that takes into account developments and expressions of feminism in twentieth-century China, Vial Kayser argues that Yang's taste for Chinese literati tradition is linked to his embrace of the New Confucian doctrine that has risen in popularity since the 1990s and assigns each gender specific social roles. According to her analysis, the representation of beautiful women in Yang's works is closely linked to a crisis of masculinity in contemporary China.

Taking us from China to late colonial India, the chapter by Sutanuka Banerjee and Lipika Kankaria offers an interesting parallel to the themes of the "modern woman" and the representation of femininity discussed also in the previous study. Entitled "Stylish and Bold: A Critical Analysis of the Trope of the Modern Girl in Indian Cinema in the Late Colonial Period," the chapter explores the portrayal of the Modern Girl in Indian cinematic works and film culture. As Banerjee and Kankaria show, the development of this trope is closely linked to negotiations of the (self-)fashioning of gendered bodies in the public sphere, as cultural and social

changes in India during the 1920s were redefining women's position in society. The authors' analysis of films, film posters, and other cinema-related sources focuses on the figures of two actresses, Sulochana and Nadia, to show how their celebrity challenged ideas of femininity and cultural identity while embodying "glocal" imaginations of modernity, emancipation, and consumerism.

In the final chapter of this book, titled "Labor, Marginalization, Taiwanization: Mapping the Embodiment of the Being-Woman in Post-Martial Taiwan through Wu Mali's *Stories of Women from Hsin-Chuang*," Roberto Ricardo Alvau examines the experiences of marginalized women workers in Taiwan during the Taiwanization period of 1990s. Alvau analyzes Wu Mali's artistic project, *Stories of Women from Hsin-Chuang*, to show how it challenges the Taiwanese patriarchal system and argues that the artist's strategy involves re-signifying the conditions imposed on women's bodies and actions. Such a change of perspective, the artist argues, would allow women to reclaim the spaces and realities that patriarchy has taken away from them and, as a result, modern Taiwanese identity could become more inclusive and diverse. Alvau shows how in Wu Mali's project, the themes of labor and national identity in Taiwan become intertwined with key issues addressed by multiple chapters in this volume, such as the gendering of social roles and identities, the intersectional oppression of bodies, and the struggle for empowerment.

This collective volume examines the dynamic and complex nature of corporeality, gender, and identity in several Asian societies. The authors discuss how historical legacies, sociopolitical structures, cultural narratives, and individual experiences shape these concepts. Although the themes discussed in this book focus on specific Asian contexts, they resonate far beyond regional boundaries. By showing the importance of interdisciplinary inquiry in capturing the complexities of embodied and gendered identities, this book will inspire further research into the ever-evolving landscapes of these issues in Asia and beyond.

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