Since the 1980s, feminist scholarship has elucidated the gendered character of nations and connections between modern gender and national discourses. The role of the arts in the construction of gendered national identities has also received some scholarly attention in recent years. *Performing “Nation”* builds on this body of research and extends it by bringing together for the first time studies on late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century China and Japan from a range of disciplines. This offers an exciting premise for cross-disciplinary dialogue concerning two then emerging nations that faced comparable concerns but developed in vastly different ways.

The four-part volume contains twelve essays, five on China and seven on Japan, many of which were first presented at a conference in Heidelberg in 2004. Except for Part One, the sections are categorized by medium – literature, theatre and the visual arts respectively. Part One broadly titled “Engendering the Nation-State” consists of three essays, two of which do not deal with the arts. These are John Fitzgerald’s essay on equality in Chinese ethics and Joan Judge’s essay on the education of Chinese women. A third essay by Melanie Trede discusses the depiction of the mythical Empress Jingū on Meiji banknotes. While this is a disparate grouping of essays, each raises pertinent issues concerning gender and nation. Fitzgerald’s essay locates the concept of gender equality in a larger moral context in China that came to regard equality, in race and among nations, as an ethical ideal. It is a reminder that gender is one among many axes of difference. Judge’s essay shows that official anxieties over the education of Chinese women were as much about their sexuality as they were
about their morality. Judge’s observations can be located within a broader discussion concerning the emergence of the “Modern Girl” and its effect on gender roles. Trede argues that Jingū proved an ideal choice as proxy for Meiji Japan and the imperial family on banknotes because her multi-gendered persona and varied iconography catered to diverse objectives. This theme of gender bending and blending in conjunction with nation-building is addressed by several essays in the volume.

In Part Two “Woman as Literary Metaphor”, Keith McMahon and Tze-lan D. Sang study specific themes in Chinese fiction related to changes in gender relations. McMahon discusses the notion of qing, an ambiguous term that the writer has defined as a sublime state of union between lovers that creates the potential for the breakdown of status and gender boundaries. By exploring manifestations of qing, McMahon argues for the continuity between the motif of heroic women in earlier fiction and the sophisticated Shanghai prostitute who subjugates her male patrons in late Qing literature. Tze-lan D. Sang’s essay explores views of the Chinese Modern Girl from the lower-middle ranks of society previously neglected by scholarship. Sang focuses on the “failed Modern Girl” theme that frequently appeared in Chinese popular literature (tongsu xiaoshuo) after the late 1920s. In this scenario, lower-class urban girls’ desire to emulate the well-to-do Modern Girl image ultimately ends in failure because of socio-economic disparities. Thus, according to Sang, popular fiction, a category that warrants further examination, served as a site of struggle that carried potentially radical messages. The third essay by Tomi Suzuki engages in a wider analysis of the connections between concepts of gender and the formation of the new field of literature (bungaku) in Japan at the end of the nineteenth century. Suzuki identifies the mutually-generating relationship between terms used to define Japanese language and literature, particularly the novel, and those by which new gender relations were conceptualized. Suzuki examines the implications of this for women
writers and their place, or lack thereof, in the subsequent construction of the modern Japanese literary field.

In Part Three “Performing Arts and Gender Role-Playing”, Ayako Kano discusses the emergence of women actresses in public theatrical performances in Japan. Kano observes that while European-style theatre enabled the participation of Japanese women on stage, reception of their performances focused on their physical bodies, which contained the risk of objectification and sexual exploitation. Catherine Vance Yeh examines the extraordinary rise of the female impersonator (dan) in Peking Opera, exemplified by Mei Lanfang (1894 – 1961), as a symbol of Republican China. Yeh shows that the success of the dan role was made possible by ambiguities in interpretation that it permitted in both China and Japan. It encapsulated for the Chinese their own strengths and weaknesses at a time of socio-political crisis, while its presentation of China as a cultural nation, open to aesthetization, found acceptance among international audiences.

The theme of gender ambiguity in representations of national identity, explored by Trede and Yeh, continues in two essays in Part Four “Art, Sexuality, and National Erotics”. Doris Croissant examines allegorical representations of womanhood by Nihonga or Japanese-style painters who were concerned with the construction of a modernist “National Painting” in the early twentieth century. By studying specific examples, Croissant reveals the gender ambivalence among Nihonga painters in their reference to a “third gender”, which the writer argues is linked to Buddhist concepts of transgender, Western theories of sexual perversion and fin-de-siècle decadence. Joshua S. Mostow analyses the philosopher Kuki Shūzō’s (1888 – 1941) theory of iki or “bordello chic”, which proposes that true Japanese aesthetics, as distinct from European culture, is located in the unlicensed brothel districts of early nineteenth-century Edo. Specifically, it finds embodiment in the cross-gender
sexuality of the *haori geisha* (*haori* being a loose jacket worn over a kimono) represented in *ukiyo-e* prints. Mostow suggests that Kuki’s attraction to Edo as essence of Japanese culture is due to its expressions of intense gender ambiguity, which find resonance in Taishō (1912 – 1926) society and 1920s Europe where Kuki was a student.

The remaining two essays in Part Four are concerned with representations of Japanese women and their significance for nation-building. Ikeda Shinobu’s essay on images of Japanese women in Chinese dress highlights the tensions in Japan’s conception of China. Shinobu convincingly argues that such images incorporate Chinese women into the “Modern Girl” of Japan, embodying Japanese imperialist desires to subjugate and encompass its neighbour. Jacqueline Berndt examines engagements with the Western canonical art genre of the female nude in Japanese oil painting and advertising posters from the late nineteenth to early twentieth century. Berndt observes the concealed nationality of early Japanese painted nudes, which gave way to a visible “Japaneseness” in their representation in both the elite arts and mass media. Her analysis demonstrates the function of the female nude as a site where Japanese national identity was explored. The thought-provoking issues raised in Part Four could have been even more interesting if research on the visual arts of China was included for cross-cultural comparison.

Together, the diverse collection of essays in *Performing “Nation”* shows that the arts were deeply implicated in the articulation of gender roles and gendered national identities in contested and often contradictory ways. Undoubtedly, exposure to European cultural models and gender categories, which were presented as measures of national accomplishment, profoundly affected China and Japan. However, the introduction’s acceptance of modernization (including gender consciousness) as Westernization is questionable given the existence of critiques such as that by Paul A.
Cohen arguing for the measuring of change by internal points of reference. Continuity with the past and the diversity of views towards modernization, gender roles and national identity, expressed in many of the essays, cast doubt upon conventional dichotomies of tradition / modernity, impact / response.

*Performing “Nation”* draws together rich and challenging material from a range of disciplines. The thought-provoking issues it raises will surely inspire further scholarship on the intersections of the arts, gender and nation in China and Japan, as well as other parts of Asia.

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