This study of visualized gender identities and ideologies in Modern East Asia brings together eight essays (some new, some already published elsewhere) on Korea, China and Japan spanning a good 150 years. In her introduction, Aida Yuen Wong states that with this book she is out to “present a kaleidoscope of imaginations about women in China, Japan, and colonial Korea” but names two female types that, according to her, dominate East Asian visual media in particular: the Modern Woman and the Traditional Woman, one “depicted in the latest fashions and enjoying a lifestyle of the urban West,” the other “the embodiment of the Confucian ‘good wife and wise mother’” (p. 1). The book then shows, however, that these two categories established at the beginning of the book are much too straightforward and must be significantly complicated. They may be two extremes, but both East Asian reality and East Asian visuality have offered much in between these two poles. The volume illustrates how many of these variations were possible and how numerous different factors were involved in the making and shaping of them. Many of the essays attempt to address the question of manipulation, of the ideology behind these images, be they colonial, anti-colonial, anti-imperialist or self-deprecating and pro-Western. The essays thus illustrate the way, for example, in which Confucian ideas of female subordination to husbands and parents-in-law, as well as female thriftiness and chastity resonated with questions of nationalism, colonialism, and consumerism at the time.

While the introduction clearly states that perceptions of womanhood in the period under scrutiny are always the joint products of politics, education and literature, the volume turns to one particular source, the visual, which, according to Wong, has hitherto been neglected in scholarship on the topic. The set of visuals discussed in these eight essays ranges far and wide, from women in beauty contests (Karen M. Fraser), painting manuals (Lisa Claypole), advertisements (Francesca dal Lago), propaganda media (Hung-yok Ip), women’s journals (Yeon Shim Chung), to new artistic products such as oil painting and sculpture (Yisoon Kim, Kaoru Kojima), and finally to interior design (Sarah Teasley).

Most essays significantly highlight the importance of cultural interconnectedness in the formation of female images and show the crucial role that
visual materials from abroad, as well as from other East Asian countries played in the transcultural image-making typical of East Asian modernity. Obviously, there is no one-way, single direction of “copying” and “influence” here (if we need to call it that), but a crisscrossing of visual relations and visual memories and East Asia’s “own” visual imaginaries and memories play an important and significant role. It is also clear that what is created in each particular historical, cultural and social setting is never a pure and “authentic” product or category but always already an interesting mixture, a visual inscription into transcultural and global discourses on modern womanhood.

While on the one hand, then, the volume illustrates how East Asian painters and artists have offered new takes on questions of exoticism, orientalism and eroticism (e.g. Kojima & Kim) and have often engaged in dialogue with art produced outside East Asia, one of the important themes throughout the book is the question of whether and how visual imaginaries or visual memories from East Asia’s visual repertoire frame the kinds of images made of women. Both Claypool and dal Lago point to the importance of particular well-established templates for painting women in the making of images of women throughout the twentieth century, and Chung, too, illustrates some of the discursive frames of seeing the Modern Woman through cultural memory.

Throughout the volume, the question of how a “woman” is embodied visually, and how the body is emphasized and domesticated in ever newer forms, is key and opens a whole new set of arguments: by establishing the importance of feminine beauty in the making of Chinese Communist ideology (Ip) or Japanese professional sensibility (Teasley), or by emphasizing, for example, different ways of reading the breastfeeding woman in Korea—erotically, exotically, ideologically (Kim).

The essays are, each and of themselves, stimulating pieces of scholarship. As is so often the case in edited volumes, however, they are only loosely connected. An effort could have been made to play up more certain themes touched upon in some of the essays which would have resonated well in all of them: the reader gets to know a little bit in some of the essays about those who produced the kinds of images discussed, but not enough about those who viewed them: the question of whose gaze the images meet and to what extent an implied or actual gaze determines the ways in which these images are represented and change over time, as well as the question of who produced the images and why, an issue which is addressed in many of the essays.
already, could have been played up much more forcefully in all of them. Then, a more comparative approach, taking into account the different East Asian experiences of colonizer (Japan), colonized (Korea) and constantly defeated (China) and their repercussions for the visualization of a “woman” would have been useful. Indeed, as Wu Hung is quoted as saying, images of women not just in East Asian but also in global modernity more generally can be considered “signifiers without a focus of signification” or “empty vessels” able to carry any meaning inscribed into them (p. 28). It would have been worthwhile to develop a bit more systematically, perhaps in the introduction, a few points of comparison and explanation for the many differences and similarities in the shapes that a “woman” takes throughout East Asia’s long twentieth century. It would also have been useful if the essays had engaged in more cross-referencing in order to highlight these. The same can be said with regard to questions of gender and authorship and masculinity and femininity in terms of the production of these images as well as their reception. Again, some essays address these questions but others do not, and it would have been fruitful to emphasize some of the common ground to be established there.

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