
First published as a special issue of the *Asian Studies Review* in June 2014, *Contestations over Gender in Asia* brings together the work of scholars from different disciplines to discuss contestation over gender in Asian societies in modern times as well as in the colonial context of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Departing from individualistic approaches to agency, using a perspective that emerged within feminist debates with the purpose of challenging the victimistic discourse on the condition of women in patriarchal societies, this collection looks at agency as a socio-cultural mediated practice that often lies beyond individual control. This project also acknowledges an important ontological problem, namely the marginality of Asian identities as subjects within feminist studies. Accordingly, this book explores how Asian women and men negotiate power in different contexts in their everyday lives, and, through their lived experiences, problematises agency.

This book identifies several spheres in which agency may manifest, including literary texts (Chapter Two), experiences of migration (Chapter Three), domestic violence (Chapter Four), the space between ideal/model and reality/practice in single women’s experiences (Chapter Five), and the construction of masculinity in colonial contexts (Chapters Six, Seven and Eight). Considering this heterogeneous picture, the authors touch upon important themes with regard to the ways in which agency can not only be enacted but also be analysed as a consequence of the differing ideals of personal autonomy and gender expectations arising in dissimilar cultural, social, and political contexts.

The book is organised in two main parts. The first five chapters are dedicated to agency in relation to women. In her work on migrant literature in South China (Chapter Two), Wanning Sun alerts us to the importance of awareness of the alternative spheres and languages in which agency is constructed. In this regard, popular culture may be a source of alternative narratives of agency, often neglected by official versions of history. Tamara Jacka (Chapter Three), in contrast, reflects upon the consequences of essentialist narratives of women either as vulnerable or as agentic, which are common in developmental discourse. Taking as an example the case of left-behind older women amidst rural to urban migration in China, the author argues that these women have a degree of control over life events, which should be taken into consideration by developmental discourses. On the other hand, their agency should be interpreted in light of the specific factors that shape inequality in their lives, namely the intersection of gender and age. The paradoxical nature of agency, as a potential stimulator of male violence against women, is discussed by Siti Aisyah and Lyn Parker (Chapter Four). Building on cases of domestic violence in Indonesia, the scholars note that several cases of abuse were responses to various forms of agency manifested by wives in everyday life. Hence Aisyah
and Parker suggest that it is not only important to reflect on the specific cultural context in which agency manifests, but also the responses that agency can bring about. The following chapter, by Laura Dales, introduces agency in the context of decisions by women to live outside marriage in contemporary Japan. The author argues that, in a society in which marriage and childbearing are seen as important markers of womanhood, failure to comply with dominant norms of femininity may require “particular strategies to increase resistance to shame” (p. 66). Thus, the ways in which women deal with their single status may reveal different forms of agency. The author also suggests that not only cultural, but also social and economic factors, such as class, economic capacity, geography and (dis)ability, may shape different responses and understandings to the same condition of singlehood.

Part Two, consisting of three chapters, discusses agency by looking at the historical construction of masculinities in colonial and postcolonial contexts. Chie Ikeya (Chapter Six) reviews three publications that demonstrate how promoting masculinity has been a widespread strategy to govern social relations and rule Asian populations not only in the colonial settings of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but also in the context of more recent global migrations. Similarly, Orientalist representations of Southeast Asian people as hyper-feminine and weak allowed Western powers to govern them. Asian governments have responded in different ways to a condition that has persisted until today. For instance, the Philippine state has played an active role in promoting narratives of heroism and masculinity in relation to Filipino labour migrants. This last point is further developed by Michael Pante (Chapter Seven). The author focuses on how society in Manila responded in different ways to the introduction of transport motorisation by the Americans in the early twentieth century. Both indigenous residents and colonials redefined their own masculinities according to the degree of access (or lack thereof) they had to motorisation. As the author argues, while the introduction of motorisation in Manila offered to Americans the opportunity to present themselves as “benevolent administrators” as well as dominators of Filipinos, Manila society responded to this condition of submission by redefining their own masculinities accordingly: class differences had an impact on how different sections of the colonised society reacted. This analysis challenges the dichotomy coloniser/colonised by offering a multilayered picture of different identities and responses within the two social groups. The last chapter, by Jessica Hinchy, offers another example of how colonisers governed public space and reinforced political borders by disciplining masculinity in the context of nineteenth-century British India. It focuses on how the bodies and behaviours of hijras (a community of transgender eunuch performers in India) were disciplined by colonisers. As the author argues, the picture could be very heterogeneous: different projects, agendas and anxieties shaped different attempts to discipline masculinity. Furthermore, hijras used various strategies to survive the disciplining actions initiated by the British under colonial law.

The compelling and insightful analyses of this collection are definitely of great value for
specialists and students alike interested in familiarising themselves with different debates on gender, power and agency in Asia. However, the overall quality of this collection would have definitely been enhanced if the editors had provided an introductory discussion of agency in relation to both femininity and masculinity in Southeast and East Asian societies. The one-page overview of the volume’s structure at the very beginning of the book does not do justice to the complexity of the themes and how they connect and resonate with each other. An opening section, providing a broader discussion of the main themes addressed throughout the book, would not only have enabled a more fluid transition between the two parts but would also have stimulated discussion on how different socio-cultural categories, the masculine and the feminine, could produce dissimilar, yet complementary, analyses and areas of enquiry.

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