The Afterglow of Women’s Pornography in Post-Digital China

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Women's sexually explicit media and art forms in mainland China and Hong Kong, which contribute to public cultures of art, social media, and media activism, comprise a wide range of media that stretch beyond the more narrowly applied genre of commercially produced pornography. They are sometimes steeped in cultural heritage genres such as ancient erotic ghost stories, or they are developed around digital technologies and online databases such as the products of Japanese manga culture. At times, they embody an angry-activist dimension and posit a significant difference from globalized “male-stream” pornography. They are proposed by young women whose aesthetics and goals also differ from the matured Euro-American video genres of female-friendly, feminist, or queer-produced pornography.

For instance, in the United States, Shine Louise Houston’s queer-produced pornography has expanded into a state-of-the-art pay-porn site that offers weekly video segments revealing the sex lives of queer and transgender models who question the idea of gender normativity. These videos detail sex acts by performers who can manifest their “various gender identities and sexual orientations intermixing and exploring genres in ways infrequently seen in other sexually explicit content” (Tibbals 2014: 132). Related to her enterprise are commercial porn stars and sexperts such as Brandi Love who host matured-aged fetishes and relate them to a need for alternative and queer lifestyles. Brandi’s pay site offers a mixture of porn and essays about “responsible non-monogamy,” “open relationships,” or “how sex became a sin.” She declares on
her site that she loves sex with women and men and also hosts a swinger’s network. Brandi’s life philosophy resembles that of queer activist porn stars Annie Sprinkle and Nina Hartley, who have fully reinvented their public careers as sex-positive feminists and educational performers. Nina Hartley is a mature-aged porn star who confidently wears glasses and whose main slogan on Nina.com is that “we all have something to learn, that sexual experience is crucial to enjoyment,” and who has packaged her videos as lessons about different types of positions and techniques. Annie Sprinkle is a former porn star who became a queer sexologist and artist and who gives public talks and performance art shows to reflect on sex industries and social change. For instance, in a most discussed sequence of the performance art piece Post-Porn Modernist (1990–95), called “Public Cervix Announcement,” Sprinkle is featured onstage with her legs spread, inviting the audience to view her cervix with the aid of a speculum and a flashlight. She presents the vagina in all its glory but also deconstructs the common image of the vagina as it is presented in mainstream pornography. In recent years, Sprinkle has collaborated with her partner Beth Stephens to spread a message of living alternative lifestyles respectful of maturing natural environments, the aging body, and processes of illness and death.

These mature sex workers who are openly queer personalities are largely invisible in Chinese public culture, but they are celebrated as fictionalized role models in Hong Kong’s soft-core erotica movies, such as Intimate Confessions of a Chinese Courtesan (愛奴, 1972), directed by Chor Yuen (楚原導演) featuring Betty Ting Pei (Yue Hua, 貝蒂) as the owner or “mama san” (老鸨) of a brothel who hires the younger and rebellious Ainu (愛奴; Lily Ho, 何莉莉) and also falls in love with her. As I explain in Chapter 2, both women are experts in martial arts and develop a roller-coaster love-hate relationship that leads to their final demise. The Shaw Brother’s production My Name Ain’t Suzie (花街時代, 1985), by Angie Chan (陳安琪), similarly stars an ex-courtesan
who becomes a sex entrepreneur and starts a lesbian relationship with one of the younger sex workers. This movie is a response to the Hollywood classic *The World of Suzie Wong* (蘇絲黃的世界, 1960), which features the turbulent relationship of an American artist who takes a long sabbatical leave in Hong Kong and falls in love with a local sex worker. It presents an orientalist male fantasy of Hong Kong women who are highly attractive but also infantile and in need of rescue by a kind foreigner. Chan’s movie is a feminist response-narrative that pays homage to Hong Kong sex workers by showing their entrepreneurial success and their lesbianism.

There are other ways in which the Chinese and non-Chinese erotic arts and sex industries are conversing with each other. In the United States, according to Chauntelle Anne Tibbals, younger–older couplings and mature women (such as “MILFS,” “Cougars,” and “BBWs”) are popular among mixed consumer groups, including women, men, and couples of various sexual orientations (Tibbals 2014: 131). In the context of Chinese pornography, an obsession with younger–older couplings is highly popular in women’s erotica industries. As will be shown, these unusual couplings and fantasies that originated in manga culture have an extraordinary impact on Hong Kong and mainland political controversies and cultural debates.

My previous book *People’s Pornography: Sex and Surveillance on the Chinese Internet* (人民色：中國互聯網的性與監控, 2012) aimed at initiating critical debate concerning mainland China’s covert sexually explicit media in general, its official attempts at a nationwide porn ban since 1949, and the sociopolitical mechanisms of the surveillance state. This book provoked controversy and generated far-reaching debates in Hong Kong media, communist Chinese news organs such as *Global Times*, overseas corporate media, and independent media sites such as *Global Voices Online*. The commentaries in these diverse news sites were overall supportive of the research and in agreement about the fact that mainland
China maintains a double standard of control and leniency toward sexually explicit media and sex entertainment.6

An ongoing state-controlled war on pornography and indie movie culture stipulates that the ban will not be lifted anytime soon. In an investigative article about the mainland Chinese war on pornography, Tyler Roney explains that major cleanup campaigns are organized by a centralized National Office against Pornographic and Illegal Publications (全國掃黃打非辦公室), which hires people on the ground as “Chief Pornography Identification Officers” (首席鑒黃師). Government calls for the hiring of Chief Pornography Identification Officers have tended to garner large groups of opportunistic applicants, but the chosen officers also meet with significant opposition and are sometimes ridiculed by netizens (Roney 2013). For instance, it came to light that almost all officers are married women, and netizens have distributed versions of their simplistic entrance exam questions—for example, “Why did CCTV decide to put a mosaic on Michelangelo’s sculpture of David?” and “How many sexually explicit words are there in this sentence?” (Zhai and Chunchang 2014; Wang 2014). Netizens poke fun at the bureaucratic and simplistic mindset of these questions and contest the climate of zero tolerance, showing that their sexual intelligence has advanced far beyond those of government-hired “mommy” officers. In recent years, however, young women’s databases and sites of soft-core eroticism around the Boys’ Love (耽美) manga genre have been targeted in these rounds of censorship and have led to some of the erotica writers and artists being investigated and sent to jail.

I want to further analyze netizens’ eroticism and intelligence by looking at the role of sex-positive feminisms as well as queer aesthetics and phantasms in various types of sexually explicit media. In this way, I hope to extend my ongoing studies of Chinese pornography and hope to invoke reactions and instances of culturally embedded research by Chinese scholars. This book is based on an analysis of media content and on fieldwork in mainland
China and Hong Kong, though I am fully aware of the fact that these cultures have distinctive cultural histories and social movements that are often at odds or even in conflict with each other. At the time of completing research for this book in October 2014, Hong Kong is in great turmoil with respect to its treatment by the Beijing central government. Large groups of Hong Kong students, activists, and civil disobedience protesters in the “Umbrella Movement” have occupied several major roads of the city-state in protest against an August 2014 decree by Beijing’s National People’s Congress Standing Commission that vetoes open elections and claims China’s comprehensive jurisdiction over Hong Kong. An earlier online referendum organized by the civil disobedience group Occupy Central had garnered 700,000 votes in defense of democracy and radical legal reform. At the same time, the referendum’s online voting site was almost destabilized by a world-class “hack attack” or DDoS (distributed denial-of-service) attack at 300 gigabits per second, apparently issued by several thousands of computers in mainland China (Lai 2014). The current political standoff between mainland China and Hong Kong is not the topic of this book, but it most definitely affects its ability to provide a cohesively “Chinese” view on pornography as an aspect of democracy, media activism, and civil rights. Therefore, I have made efforts to examine women’s sexually explicit media within its turbulent sociopolitical landscapes, while also arguing for a trans-Chinese erotic consciousness, one that is informed by global waves of activism and their underground sensibilities.

The Chinese Communist Party’s (中國共產黨) implementation of a surveillance state also took a new turn in 2013 when Edward Snowden revealed that the US National Security Agency had globally hacked into major digital databases, including ones in Hong Kong and mainland China. This revelation changed US–China diplomatic relations and made it harder for global mass media to posit China as the most intrusive country in regards to Internet surveillance (Kwok and Chen 2013). Moreover, it was
revealed that China is reacting frantically to the Snowden effect by building the world’s largest quantum communications network to provide the highest level of protection for government and financial data. The data encryption technology of the quantum communications network is vastly different from previous technologies and thought to be nearly impossible to hack (Chen 2014).

This novel shield of Internet surveillance, signifying national pride and security, also comes with an authoritarian vision concerning sexuality and with movements of political and sexual disobedience. In her book *Left-Over Women: The Resurgence of Gender Inequality in China* (2014), Leta Hong-Fincher has shown that China’s claim to superpower status has emerged in tandem with a recurrence of gender inequality, a compulsive rhetoric of heteronormativity that urges a new generation of educated women to marry and reproduce in haste while concurrently surrendering home ownership to their husbands. The Chinese Communist Party has implemented a forceful campaign in collaboration with media and feminist organizations such as the All China Women’s Federation (中华全国妇女联合会) that claims the existence of an underclass of “leftover women” (剩女) who have not met the goal of marriage and reproduction by the age of 25 (Hong-Fincher 2014). Leftover women are pressured and derided by state-issued media reports and dating services alike, and women are made to believe that it would be nearly impossible to attract a suitable partner or experience uncomplicated pregnancies after the age of 30. The mainland Chinese women interviewed in this book are highly affected by this rhetoric, but they are conversely immersed in erotic pleasures that provide an outlet from this reactionary lifestyle.

Women in Hong Kong have fewer social pressures to pursue a nuclear family at an early age and are less influenced by the derogatory label of “leftover women,” but the concept has nevertheless crept into the social imagination through corporate-sponsored entertainment, such as a controversial reality television dating show called *Wannabe Brides* (盛女愛作戰), hosted by the
Introduction

well-known matchmaker Mei Ling Ng Liu (吳美玲), which has managed to pull in millions of viewers. In Hong Kong, the gender ratio is skewed toward men, and the program thrives on chastising women in their late twenties or early thirties by suggesting that they are “too successful for their own good,” they should submit to average male fantasies, and they should “learn how to cook and clean, [and] improve their looks though surgery and hard-core dieting.” A spokesperson for a dating agency who was interviewed about the television shows adds that indeed “all men are visual . . . and Hong Kong men have an even higher standard of beauty” (Chan 2013). The dating agent also confirms the long-standing cliché that Hong Kong women (港女) are highly consumerist and numb workaholics who have become selfish and do not attach value to sexual pleasures or erotic fantasies.

In contrast to these neoliberal entrepreneurs who want to sell a retro-conservative point of view, I have discovered through my interviews that women in Hong Kong manifest a different type of sexual intelligence—they are fed up with Hong Kong’s government and its reliance on manipulative mainland ideologies, and they are tired of sexist, sex-phobic policies and a censorious mentality. Some of the Hong Kong women featured in this book even rage against the new Chinese patriarchy by refusing to get married and procreate, by refusing to go on dates or to have sex at all, and by expressing their queerness and difference from normality within localized fashions and media landscapes.

I am interested in finding out how Hong Kong and mainland Chinese women are experiencing eroticism and why they are becoming less reproduction minded. For instance, their acts of naked online self-display, such as those described in Chapter 3, “Message on the Body in the Chinese Netsphere,” evoke titillation but also make references to shame, pain, and discomfort around sexual intercourse. The public display of sexuality functions as erotic awakening and as remembrance of histories of hatred, violence, and abuse. The outcome of revealing these duplicitous
sensations within a public sphere evinces emotional cleansing and a positive claiming of sexual feelings. In this sense, corporeal sensations are evoked to construct collective memories of sexuality and how they reinvent the nature and function of pornography itself.

**Porn Studies and the Art of Failure**

Pornography studies, or “porn studies” more colloquially, is an interdisciplinary and international academic project, a subfield of several disciplines within arts and humanities, as well as the social sciences and health sciences. Many of these have only slowly and reluctantly accepted the study of pornography. In some cases, it has been actively prevented from becoming a field of inquiry. So far, porn studies has not had the chance to become a legitimate field of study that can be taken for granted. For instance, immediately after Routledge’s announcement of a new international journal, *Porn Studies*, a large petition under the title “Routledge Pro-Porn Studies bias” was signed by hundreds of Americans, a fair number of whom are academics. They openly attacked the journal and its international editorial board for pursuing an unbalanced and morally corrupt mission. As the petitioners against the journal *Porn Studies* stated, “We ask that you change the name to reflect and make evident the bias of its editors (Pro-Porn Studies) and create another journal which will represent the position of anti-porn scholars and activists and the voices of mental health professionals, porn industry survivors, and feminist scholars whose analyses examine the replication and reification of misogyny, child abuse, and sexual exploitation in mainstream pornography.”

The petition was actually initiated by a campaign group called “Stop Porn Culture,” who refer to themselves as “a group of academics, activists, anti-violence experts, health professionals, and educators.” Some of these academics are more down to earth about their opposition to the subject matter: “At a time when the humanities are endangered at many institutions, I can’t imagine
a more self-destructive development than a ‘pro-porn’ academic journal. It hands a supremely useful gift to the opponents of liberal education. Porn makes sexual experience unreal, and destroys the capacity of men and women to form meaningful and lasting relationships.” It is curious that a still emerging academic field is receiving so much uncritical attention and a response that might be ironically categorized as “biased,” but this type of outright ideological opposition to the study of pornography is indeed part and parcel of its historical mission. Of course, those of us who have actually carried out porn research will understand that the field does not aim to promote a pro-porn bias, just as academic studies concerning violent or racist media content or lowbrow culture are not concerned with promoting these products.

The ongoing opposition to porn studies is based, to a great degree, on historically contentious claims about the all-encompassing negative effects of pornography on society and specifically the more vulnerable groups of women and minors. Brian McNair shows that the popularized versions of porn studies are still dominated by a “negative media effects” tradition that maintains that pornography is an anarchic, disruptive force, undermining the moral and ethical values that hold society together. There is a concurring feminist negative media-effects tradition that stipulates that all pornography maintains heterosexist sociosexual relations. Both the patriarchal-conservative and feminist camps are united in their view that pornography consumption can be characterized as a new form of media addiction that has worsened in the age of social media (McNair 2014). McNair’s research shows that both these traditions have omitted any kind of empirical research and that actual media-effects studies have found no correlation between porn-tolerant cultures and an upsurge of media addiction or violence against women.

In a further attempt to criticize theories of negative media effects or the supposed “pornification” of media consumers, Monique Mulholland has done extensive research in Australian high schools
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asking young people to express their opinions about pornography. Many of them make it clear that pornography has become very normal to them and that it is available to them through social media and consumer culture. They can easily point out how to search for it online and can even demonstrate how to access porn sites. But unlike antiporn activists, they are not nostalgic for a prepornography era and find ways of tempering or taking distance from its products (Mulholland 2013: 111).

Theoretically speaking, besides carrying out and detailing fieldwork with young women in Hong Kong and China, this book will also interpret Jack Halberstam’s notion of creativity from the Queer Art of Failure (2011) as a type of writing, art, and social debate that stems from a deep crisis in patriarchal gender dynamics, political institutions, and modes of knowledge production. This mode of thinking envisions a radical-creative pedagogy for a generation involved in sexually explicit media in conjunction with a disruption of moral guidelines concerning “normality.” Halberstam’s theory places failure as an alternative to models of success, productivity, and sexual difference, which is at the root of social theory and critical thought: “Heteronormative common sense leads to the equation of success with advancement, capital accumulation, family, ethical conduct, and hope. Other subordinate, queer, or counter-hegemonic modes of common sense lead to the association of failure with nonconformity, anticapitalist practices, nonreproductive life-styles, negativity and critique” (Halberstam 2011: 89).

The cultural origins of such movements are porous, as they are interconnected as transcultural “climates” or “ecosystems” in which people are highly affected by transnational media and popular cultures. The call for failure as a new order of artistic-sexual activism will be developed and rethought within my framework of ethnographic case studies and interviews in mainland China and Hong Kong. Queerness in China and Hong Kong means a reclaiming of sexual otherness or perversion as expressed within
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