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Media Ideologies of Gender in Hong Kong

During and after the women's movements of the 1960s and the 1970s, feminists in Australia, Canada, Europe, and the US began to examine gendered images and the participation of women in the media. There has been a healthy and rapid growth in feminist scholarship in the area of media studies and communication in the past two decades (1980-2000). Not only do major communication journals publish essays deconstructing media ideologies of gender informed by a feminist approach, but major communications associations (such as the International Communication Association, the National Communication Association, the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, and the International Association for Media and Communication Research) now also have caucuses and/or divisions devoted to media and gender studies and feminist scholarship. Most importantly, women and the media is one of the twelve critical areas of concern in the United Nations' Beijing Platform for Action. This reflects the view that the media can serve women in the areas of peace-keeping and development.

Against the background of ferment in feminist scholarship around the world, this paper provides an updated picture of media ideologies of gender in Hong Kong. We begin with a review of the existing studies of media and gender in Hong Kong, with details of gender stereotyping in the media. Gender stereotyping refers to one of the most common tactics used by the media to generalize female and male characteristics, personalities and attributes. Stereotyping helps the audience to construct their world views, and thus shapes their knowledge of gender relations. It will be followed up with

a discussion about the ubiquitous slimming advertisements and messages in Hong Kong, which we believe have serious implications for the self-conception, identity, and social values of women, as well as for the construction and maintenance of gender relations and ideologies in Hong Kong. The media serve as a site from which the culture of slimming flourishes; the audience also helps build gender ideologies by consuming the mediated culture and by producing discourses of the slimming culture. Hence, gender stereotypes and gender ideologies can only be maintained with the involvement of the audience.

The strong economic focus of Hong Kong, as well as the commonly held belief that Hong Kong women enjoy a high political, economic, and social status in Asia may conceal Hong Kong's gender inequality and discourage a meaningful deconstruction of media ideologies of feminist discussions of gender. It is indisputable that Hong Kong women are politically, economically, and socially more empowered than women in most Asian countries. One illustration of this is that, in 2002, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) ranked Hong Kong twenty-third in terms of gender-related development.¹ Among all Asian countries, only Japan was ranked higher than Hong Kong, at twelfth place. The two economic dragons of Asia, Singapore and South Korea, were ranked twenty-eighth and twenty-ninth, respectively. China was ranked seventy-first. Another piece of evidence is that, in terms of access to the Internet by women, Hong Kong has one of the highest rates in the entire world: the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) has established that 49% of Internet users in Hong Kong are females; only females in the US and Canada account for a larger percentage of all Internet users in a country.² The state plays an active role in promoting the use of new technologies by Hong Kong women. For example, the Home Affairs Department of the Hong Kong government carried out an active campaign in local community centres of encouraging women to use new information and communication technologies. Moreover, some women's organizations (such as the Hong Kong Federation of Women's Centres) have organized programmes for women to learn new technologies.

A few international studies on the media (e.g. Haavio-Mannila et al., 1985; van Zoonen, 1994; Rommes, 2002) have found that an improvement in the status of women in society is misleading us into believing that women have “made” it and that it is no longer necessary to talk about feminism and feminist ideals. This may also be happening in Hong Kong. In addition, the historical absence of women’s/feminist movements in Hong Kong and the general political apathy of the public may account for the media’s silence with respect to feminist issues, and even its silencing of discussions on such issues.

In a five-year review conference on the Beijing Platform for Action, the Gender Research Centre of the Hong Kong Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies found that although some actions have been taken to combat gender stereotypes in the media and to promote more positive images of women, many obstacles still exist to the achievement of gender equality and equity. We are going to demonstrate in this paper that gender inequality in and through the Hong Kong media is still a prominent phenomenon. It is not at all difficult to name examples: many soft and entertainment news items in newspapers are written by female journalists, while male journalists are assigned to cover hard and financial news; tabloid and entertainment magazines use the female body as a selling-point; and there is a lack of representation of gays and lesbians in the mainstream media. In addition, the mass media often abuse the freedom of expression to defend their gender-biased stereotypes. It is essential, for the interest of the public, and for women or feminists in particular, to deconstruct these gendered ideologies and arrive at a feminist understanding of the media. Here, we distinguish a feminist knowledge of the media from a knowledge of “women and the media”; the former is the lens that we use in this paper to evaluate the media’s portrayal of women and gender. Such a lens helps us to add to knowledge about feminist issues beyond measuring the number of women involved in or represented by the media. It is contended that an overemphasis on quantitative measurements (for example, comparing the number of female students versus male students majoring in communications, the number of female versus male media practitioners, etc.) may limit our understanding

of gender and the media. Unlike liberal feminists, we do not believe that gender equality in the Hong Kong media can be assessed merely by counting the number of women and men involved in the media. In determining the ties between women and the media, we embrace a notion of gender that is fluid, inclusive, and situational (Olesen, 2003). The topic, gender ideology in the media, has to be examined in an historical, political, and socioeconomic context.

The social construction of gender is a discursive process (van Zoonen, 1994) in which one has to experience gender in and through, among other things, the media. The concept of gender challenges the biological determinism of the category of women/men and the fixed identities of female/male. In other words, while it is valuable to study “women and the media” (such as comparing how women and men use the media), conceptualizing women as a static group neglects the complexities and diversities of what is meant by, categorized, and labelled as “women.” On the other hand, “gender and the media” implies that one has to experience gender in a local situation and that the gendered identity has to be constantly contested and negotiated with other participants and the material world. For example, an educated female university student’s understanding of a television programme could be different from that of a recent female immigrant from mainland China with a different national ideology; more, our understanding of gender representations in magazines depends on the contexts in which we consume the mediated gender: whether we read them with friends or family members or on our own, whether we read them at home, at school, or in a mass transit railway compartment.

Given the above, we advocate that feminist scholars of media studies decentralize and demystify the concept of Hong Kong woman as a complex and unstable social construct that is constantly being negotiated and contested in and through the media. In addition, we should be inclusive and embrace all women and their life experiences. The notion of inclusiveness calls for attention to be paid to marginalized (but not necessarily powerless) groups: single mothers, elderly women, newly arrived girls and women, foreign domestic helpers, women and men of different sexual orientations, and girls and women living in poverty.

Research on Media and Gender in Hong Kong

As both a discipline and a method of inquiry, the late arrival of women's/gender studies in higher education in Hong Kong may explain the lack of scholarship on feminism and the media. Public forums, seminars, and conferences on media and gender began to be held in the early 1990s. The early concern came from religious organizations and academic institutions. Among the most prominent, in December 1990 the Hong Kong Christian Service Communications Centre organized a "Mass Media Awareness Seminar: Mass Media and Women in the 90's"; and the Gender Research Centre of the Hong Kong Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies of The Chinese University of Hong Kong in collaboration with the School of Journalism and Communication held a seminar in 1996 called "Workshop on Gender and the Media." Studies presented in the seminar suggested that women have a low level of awareness about the fact that the media in fact construct reality rather than merely reflect it. Many studies were imbued with the subtle goal of helping ordinary women. For example, the studies revealed the pressure and helplessness felt by grassroots women and stressed that they are particularly vulnerable to ideal images constructed by the mass media. In terms of the relationship that women have with new information and communication technologies, in 2001 the Gender Research Centre of The Chinese University of Hong Kong organized a workshop entitled "Women and Information and Communication Technologies."

In the mid-1990s, the academic discussion on women and the media slowly became a focus of study for many feminist groups and pressure groups. For example, the Association for the Advancement of Feminism began studying media images from a critical perspective. They found that half of all Hong Kong commercials contained sexist imagery or content that promoted gender inequality and sexual stereotypes (Wu, 1995). All of these developments led to the first baseline gender study coordinated by the Equal Opportunities Commission (1997). With the Equal Opportunities Commission data, Fung and Ma (2000) found that Hong Kong people have internalized stereotypes about both males and females. The data suggested that one

of the possible reasons for the holding of stereotypes about females is the audience's exposure to mass information, in particular that of an entertainment nature. The latter strengthened the audience's cultural perceptions of females and their sex roles in society.

In the past ten years, studies on gender in the media have based on different kinds of media such as television, magazines, and popular culture. In the field of television studies, Furnham, Mak, and Tanidjojo (2000), Siu (1996), and Young and Chan (2002) focused on comparing how men and women are portrayed in television advertisements in Hong Kong and other Asian countries. Specifically, Furnham, Mak, and Tanidjojo (2000) found that gender portrayals are similar in both Hong Kong and Indonesian television advertisements: while women assume fewer authoritative roles than men, they are more often represented as product users and are frequently associated with body-related products. In a comparison of Hong Kong and Singaporean television advertisements, Siu (1996) found that men are portrayed as figures of authority in both societies and that women in general assume a subordinate role. Young and Chan (2002) found that despite Hofstede's taxonomy classifying Hong Kong as a masculine culture and South Korea as a feminine one, the differences in portrayals of gender in children's television advertisements between the two societies are equally biased, and in a similar way. In television advertisements in Hong Kong, females are commonly found to be less likely than men to be central figures, more likely to be product users (especially body-related and personal products), more dependent, more likely to be shown in a household setting, to be younger in outlook than the male characters, more likely to be with other females and children than to be in a mixed group, less likely to be voice-overs and narrators, more likely to be parents, and less likely to be professionals. In sum, the female roles are more family oriented ones and belong more to the private than the public realm.

Some scholars adopted a qualitative and interpretive approach and attended to the cultural production of meanings. For example, Lai (2004) conducted an ethnographic study of how three working-class married women understood the television series *True Love*. She found that in contrast to a popular belief that the audience "receives" media

messages passively, two of the three interviewed women utilized their cultural capital to read popular texts in a largely oppositional manner. One of them even took up the role of a researcher to gather the opinions of her friends about the show and acted as an opinion leader.

Studies have long focused on the print media as a site for the formation of gender identity. Fung (2002) found that a female identity is specifically connected not only with the consumption of women's magazines but also with the capitalist consumption commonly practiced by a community of readers and promoted by the magazines. In another study, Leung (2004) found that local editors of the Hong Kong edition of *Cosmopolitan* are reluctant to publish articles about sex and sexuality as they originally appeared in the US edition of the magazine. The translators often tone down words and delete details that are deemed obscene by Hong Kong standards. Therefore, the local editors create a cultural space in Hong Kong in which the Hong Kong edition of *Cosmopolitan* is packaged as a high-class magazine for professional women. The femininity of the Hong Kong edition is different from the one sold in the US market. The latter targets a mass audience and can be easily found on supermarket check-out racks. Lee (2004) used the method of critical discourse analysis (cf. Norman Fairclough) to examine newspaper coverage of high-ranking female government officials in Hong Kong. He found that, over a long period of time, the discourses used by the newspapers fixed and unfixed the meanings of femininity of Hong Kong high-ranking officials. The representations of female officials shifted along the work/family, public/private, and masculinity/femininity dichotomies in different contexts. A good example to illustrate this is the discourses surrounding the former Chief Secretary Anson Chan. During her tenure in both the colonial Hong Kong and Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (SAR) administrations, her image as the "iron lady" was made prominent in the media. Her leadership style and achievement as a Chinese woman in both administrations were highlighted. After her resignation from the SAR government, the media shifted its focus to Anson Chan as a mother, a grandmother, and a wife who "respects" her husband.

Erni (2005) argued that Hong Kong popular music (known

as Cantopop) reflects gender politics. First, the music industry is patriarchal in nature, and it is rare to find female musicians and lyricists; they have to break the fraternal and paternal glass ceiling in order to succeed. Second, as most lyricists are male, they have to imagine female and feminine voices. As a result, a lot of Cantopop lyrics are gender-neutral and ambivalent. Hence, a song sung by a female singer can be re-imagined to represent a male point of view. Lastly, the lyrics of political songs also reflect a male rather than a female point of view. There were also supposed to be more male than female working-class heroes in the 1960s, as well as patriots.

Studies of film and gender have also been conducted on the same lines of femininity and masculinity. Examining movie stars from the 1960s to the 1980s, Choi (2004) showed that femininity and masculinity are not fixed over time. A movie star's femininity/masculinity is co-constructed by both on-screen and off-screen images. The on-screen images help the audience to construct the off-screen images; the opposite is also true. In the discussion of Siu Fong-fong and Chan Po-chu, Choi suggested that the femininity that both popular female actresses represent is different because femininity is defined in conjunction with modernity, sexuality, filial piety, westernness, and so forth. Siu Fong-fong's on-screen images are those of a westernized, independent, glamorous, fashionable, and competent woman. Her femininity is defined by her modernity. Siu Fong-fong's off-screen image re-informs her movie images of modernity: she has studied abroad, married twice, emigrated abroad, and returned to Hong Kong to make "arty," award-winning films. On the contrary, Chan Po-chu's on-screen and off-screen images are more traditional. Chan Po-chu was not active in making movies after her marriage. Hence, her femininity is more confined to a time frame and she does not constantly re-invent herself. Choi further argued that the Hong Kong-born Hollywood star Chow Yun-fat's masculinity is made up of his off-screen image of being a good son, a good husband, as well as his tendency towards homophobia.

As for new studies on the media, Nip (2004) examined the website of the Queer Sisters and found that the online community could strengthen the offline community only if both share the same goals.

Her study suggested that the online participants are more interested in sharing personal thoughts and engaging in self-expression than in activist and political work. In the same study, she also found that other queer communities (i.e., apart from lesbian) are not content that the online community is only lesbian-friendly. This implies that queer identities are not homogeneous.

In sum, the media play a particularly important role in the highly capitalistic city of Hong Kong. The existing body of literature on women/gender and the media in Hong Kong is not extensive, but is far from insignificant. Difficult as it is to appraise the merits and to critique the shortcomings of the studies as a whole, what is commendable, apart from the large-scale survey of media's impact on values of various femininities, is the inclusion in the studies of different marginalized groupings and voices (Lai, 2004; Nip, 2004).

Consuming the Slimming Culture

In this section, we describe and discuss the pervasive cultural phenomenon of the past few years in Hong Kong of body slimming. Leung, Wang, and Tang (2004) suggested that eating disorders have become more severe among Chinese adolescent girls. The desire to be thin may be a result of westernization (Leung, Lam and Sze, 2001). Illustrating this phenomenon can deepen and enhance the understanding of the dialectics among gender, popular culture, and the media in Hong Kong. Here, we would like to emphasize that the culture of weight loss is not unique to Hong Kong nor is it a whole contemporary phenomenon. For instance, the South Beach Diet and the Atkins Diet, which both stress the daily intake of specific food groups rather than exercising and taking medication, have created a craze in North America and the UK for losing weight. Bulimia and anorexia are common among female teenagers and young adults in the US (Kilbourne, 1999). Leung, Wang, and Tang (2004) found that both Chinese and Western adolescent girls share a high level of dissatisfaction with their bodies.

Leung, Lam, and Sze (2001) suggested that thinness and fragility

were two standards for judging female beauty in ancient China. Thinness was also a class-related value: upper-class women were thinner than peasant women. However, the body slimming culture in Hong Kong is unique in two ways: first, Hong Kong women generally suffer from the problem of being under-weight rather than overweight. In 2002, it was reported that studies showed that 30 per cent of Hong Kong women were under-weight and that close to 50 per cent of women aged 15-24 were under-weight (*Wen Wei Po*, 26 September 2002). Thus, slimming in Hong Kong is a cultural and ideological problem, rather than a way of addressing a physical problem. Even though most of the body slimming advertisements do mention health as a reason for slimming down, the ultimate aim of losing weight is not said to be the achievement of personal gratification, individual happiness, or demonstration of one's sexuality. Rather, it is suggested that becoming slim will help individuals regain their confidence, build up their self-esteem, and so on, because one's slim body will be attractive to the opposite sex and be appreciated by members of the same sex. Body slimming is sold as a strategy for a woman to compete as a sexual being and a gendered aesthetic object in a patriarchal order.

As a cultural phenomenon, slimming is closely linked to capitalist consumption in Hong Kong: the popular media (such as popular magazines, mainstream movies, etc.), the beauty industry (such as beauty salons, fashion companies, health products, etc.), and society as a whole co-construct a consumption-mediated culture. Reports have shown that advertisements of slimming products and services in *Sudden Weekly* (along with the supplement *Eat and Travel Weekly*), and *Oriental Sunday* (along with the supplement *Sense*) constituted 47 and 53 per cent respectively of all advertisements in 2003.³ Furthermore, surveys have also revealed that in just the first five months of 2001, beauty salons and services had poured HK\$537 million into slimming advertisements. Forty-three per cent of the revenues went to the five television stations and 37 per cent to the print media (*Hong Kong Economic Times*, 19 June 2002). The slimming culture is obviously infused with the cultures of advertising and capitalism. It is also highly institutionalized and well-planned, so

that the behaviour and images of women (to a lesser extent, men) in the media are heavily regulated, constantly surveyed, and scrutinized, and those involved are severely disciplined if found to not conform. It is the media that has changed the discourse on women's beauty and the ideologies of gender in society.

A Change in the Discourse on Slimming

In retrospect, prior to the late 1990s, losing weight was mainly an activity for women (and sometimes men) who were considered fat or obese by health standards; losing weight was more an individual activity and was similar to curing a medical condition that was temporary and clinical. The latter part of the 1990s, however, witnessed a dramatic change in the discourse on weight loss; the term "weight loss" became passé, replacing it was the term "body slimming." By placing stress on the body over the weight, on slimming rather than losing, body slimming has successfully been created as a lifestyle pursuit rather than as a one-off attempt to lose weight. The shifting from a discourse on a clinical condition that has more in common with other health problems to a new discourse on body slimming reflects the fact that the image takes a prominent place in the new currency of weight loss. As in many postmodern works (Kellner, 1995), the discourse on body slimming puts the emphasis on the presentation of the self and on the superficial image, and identity is constructed by what one consumes. Moreover, being skinny is arbitrarily associated with such virtues as beauty, diligence, persistence, and determination.

In other words, we may suggest that an acceptance of the body slimming discourse gives consumers a false sense of self. Consumers are said to be able to achieve beauty, diligence, and other fine qualities simply by accepting the truth of some empty signs. For example, some body slimming products play with the word "sau" (瘦, literally meaning thin) in "sau sun" (瘦身, to slim the body) by substituting it with another Chinese word with the same pronunciation "sau" (秀) but with the connotation of being graceful and nice-looking. The play

on words shows that empty signs have come to displace the action of weight loss.

As a lifestyle, body slimming is more than the action of losing weight; it is more about the selling of a “wholesome” lifestyle. Consumers have to buy more than one type of service or product in order to engage thoroughly in the culture. The types of products and services range from exercising to dieting, purchasing special underwear to medication; in extreme cases, it also involves undergoing minor surgery. The culture of body slimming has become so pervasive in Hong Kong society that the advertising discourses of other products and services have to conform to those of body slimming in order to succeed. For example, dairy products cannot be merely promoted as being good for health; they have to be promoted as being low in fat so that they do not “harm” the slim body. Hence, it is the body image, not health, that is being highlighted. Traditionally, it was the healthy body that was desirable. The body slimming culture now dictates that it is the slim body that is to be desired.

The Omnipresence of Gendered Media

The current slimming culture in Hong Kong, as we suggested, is largely attributed to the omnipresence of the media in Hong Kong. Van Zoonen (1994:41) has argued that the media are “(social) technologies of gender, accommodating, modifying, reconstructing and producing disciplining and contradictory cultural outlooks...” The media are not only powerful in conveying advertisements produced by beauty salons, but are also able to construct media ideologies and discourses in television dramas, movies, and fiction that collectively promote a culture of body slimming; for example, entertainment news about the successes and failures of the weight loss efforts of artists; movies and television programmes that include themes and references to body slimming, and advertisements and campaigns that use body slimming as selling points. In the case of television, commercials that feature successful cases of women slimming down, in the form of reality shows, are found during prime-time. The “real” cases demonstrated

on television show how slimming can restore a woman's confidence, enhance her career, help her make friends, and appeal to the opposite sex.

Furthermore, in recent years, beauty salons have been spending enormous amounts of money to commission popular singers, actresses, models, and other socialites to be their "spokespersons." To be a spokesperson of a beauty salon means more than advertising their services; the spokesperson becomes synonymous with the brand. The spokespersons bring their images forged in other domains (such as from the movies) and their social histories to sell the body slimming culture. The spokespersons are rarely overweight; in fact, some are underweight to the extent that they can be mistaken as anorexic. One example is Sammi Cheng, who is said to have been paid an enormous sum to be the spokesperson of a beauty salon. The image of Cheng that is sold is a hybrid of her image as a successful popular singer, and as an actress in the comedy *Love on a Diet*, which is about body slimming. The plot revolved around how Mini (played by Sammi Cheng) risked losing her beloved because of her inability to control her body size, and how slimming served as a solution for women to acquire love and happiness in life. In general, the persona of Sammi is an icon of slimness, which she exemplifies in reality and in the fictional characters she has played in movies. This new tactic of selling both the symbolic (fictional) and the real (body) seems to send a message that even the skinny, the successful, and the rich have to commit to body slimming and disciplining; hence, there is no excuse for the ordinary not to conform. While the old tactic was only to display changes in the appearance or body shape of ordinary women after their participation in weight loss programmes, the new tactic that began to be adopted in the early 1990s combined both physical fitness and symbolic meanings, reflecting the fact that body slimming of today is more about the selling of an image or a lifestyle than of one-off services.

Famous slimming stars who all enjoy high visibility in Hong Kong media make the culture ubiquitous. Because of the high remuneration to the artists (for instance, some reports suggested that most artists received over one million Hong Kong dollars for

their endorsements), press conferences about their participation in the slimming programmes are high-profile media events and always become cover stories in entertainment news in Hong Kong. Moreover, all of these artists are carefully selected. They range from mainland artists for the China market, artists who have given birth, and those with a household image to those representing the typical Hong Kong young lady. To sum up, body slimming is not only a lifestyle pursued by the unmarried, the unhealthy, and the obese, but also by the married, the healthy, and the skinny.

It seems that the slimming trend has also spread to men, when the advertisers began to use male actors to sell slimming products in China in August 2004. Another famous male artist has also acted as a spokesperson for the famous beauty service Sau San Tong. In addition, many male slimming participants in reality shows have explained that one major aim of joining the slimming programme is to attract the opposite sex. Messages like these could be easily mistaken as signs of gender equality, that both women and men share equal passion for body slimming. However, few media commentaries have offered alternative views or have suggested that male participation in the slimming culture further perpetuates the gendered culture of our society by placing the symbolic in the position of primacy.

Women's Participation in the Discourse on Slimming

The success of the slimming culture relies on shared meanings among the consumers. It seems that the predominance of the slimming culture cannot be solely explained by the mere imposition of media images and the advertising of the beauty industry. At least, it is not difficult for us to find instances of friends and family members recounting in casual conversations their successes and failures in trying to slim down. Body slimming, unlike losing weight, is not perceived as shameful, but normal. Those who are not trying to slim down are pressured to feel that their current lifestyle is abnormal. The discourse on body slimming is not limited to how salespersons of the products and services interact with customers in beauty salons and

beauty shops. It is becoming more legitimate for friends and family members to talk about body slimming in their daily interactions and conversations. Gradually, the above advertisements may be seen to be having a regulatory impact: friends and family members work with the media to persuade those who do not live the lifestyle of body slimming to conform. Such surveillance is multi-dimensional and multi-directional, and is more powerful than media advertisements. Those who do not conform to the discourse are often being surveyed (such as through comments about body size), monitored (by having others control their diet), and regulated (by being reminded of the delinquency and abnormality of not living the lifestyle) (Foucault, 1979). Foucault's notions (1980) of capillary power and delinquency are particularly useful for understanding the culture of body slimming. They denote that the exercising of power is not uni-directional and top-down, but is exercised through different agencies in an institution. In the case of the slimming culture, it is not just the media and capitalists who are imposing this culture on women; rather, all women and men consumers in fact participate in making this a dominant culture in Hong Kong.

To pitch in with narratives about women consumers, many slimming product brands such as Fanc! also publish magazines that are freely distributed to customers to generate "talk" about and among women. Some brand names (e.g., DHC Hong Kong) have bulletin boards to crystallize a community of women who can interact, exchange news, and share with each others the joys of slimming! From a poststructural perspective, body slimming is a mediated discourse that women as social actors produce and consume for the construction of their gendered identities. Coupled with the web of discourses of the media and daily interactions, body slimming in society becomes a "moment of truth." This is what Foucault's sense of the subject refers to (Hall, 1997): the discourse produces the subjects; at the same time, the subjects are subjugated to the discourses. The subjects only exist discursively.

Ironically, the participation of women in the construction of such discourses constructs and reinforces gender and social relations, perpetuates stereotypes, and throws up obstacles to improving the

status of women. Through participating in the slimming culture discourse, consumers construct identities that are manufactured and maintained by an industry for which the principal purpose is to make profits. The sense of independence, autonomy, and success that is sold to consumers does not give them real power. The empowerment of women is commonly believed to be about sharing more power in the economic and political realms; engaging in the slimming culture discourse definitely does not bring women any gains in real power. The body slimming industry is admittedly a profit-making one. In Hong Kong, it is estimated that in a single year a single beauty salon can make up to US\$20 million. Here we do not hold the view that maximizing profit is not legitimate. Rather, we would say that, as a business, the industry's primary purpose is not to help society to arrive at gender equality or to empower women. Thus, it is necessary for other social institutions to carry out this task.

In narrating and recounting of personal stories and life experiences, social actors in the first instance draw on their cultural understanding of body slimming and gender relations, and of the existing values of Chinese/Hong Kong such as beauty, success, femininity, or sexuality; second, they actively account for their experiences of gender and consumption in the material world. Examining the historical discourse on women in the media and daily life, Sin (2005) documented cases in which women recounted stories about their husbands or boyfriends making jokes by addressing them with the media label "fat see-lai" (肥師奶).⁴ The study points to the fact that to understand the term "see-lai," one has to look into the genealogy of gender relations in Chinese/Hong Kong culture: what do husbands and boyfriends mean to women in the culture (e.g., are they companions or as bread-winners?) under different social situations? Why may a "fat see-lai" not be desirable to husbands and boyfriends? Lastly, we need to deconstruct the connection between "fat see-lai" and body slimming: what do the advertisements for, and consumption of, slimming services and products mean to the "desperate married women" and how do they understand their identities in relation to the mediated images? An account of the deconstruction of these processes by charting the contour of the political economy of our gendered

culture would not only be critical of the dominant discourses but would also encourage (women) readers to take a position in relation to the discourses.

Although not all audiences are empowered and active, such an analysis could help women articulate the vocabulary, stance, and coherent discourse that make negotiated and oppositional meanings of media discourses possible. A critical reading of media discourses is not only valuable to the groups being targeted by those selling body slimming products and services: predominately, women who have enough money to spend on consumer goods and services. Such a deconstruction is also useful for a resource-poor audience of women who may not be able to afford to immerse themselves in a culture of slimming, but who may relate to the body slimming culture in different ways.

Toward a Feminist Approach to Media Studies

To conclude this paper, we would like to remark that feminist scholars of the media in Hong Kong are attempting to explore two dimensions of gender and media analysis. In the first dimension, the scholars aim to incorporate and include diverse narratives that validate female subjectivities and identities at both the macro- and micro-levels. Anthony Giddens used the term “structuration” to describe the importance of the dual levels: daily interactions, social structures, and their dialectics. While social actions contribute to or disrupt social structures, social structures can also constrain how women and men of diverse backgrounds come to understand the body slimming culture and gender ideologies. The body slimming culture has to be situated in the post-capitalist, consumer culture of Hong Kong and our gender relations in a patriarchal, capitalist system that constrains the experiences of social actors.

In the second dimension, there is an attempt in Hong Kong studies, especially some of those that focus on local developments, to simultaneously contemplate both knowledge and praxis. The aim of such is not just to describe the phenomenon of inequality or to

describe stereotypes; they should also probe (however implicit the process) for social and political changes. Women's concerns in society should be shown as being not segregated from general political issues, but as interconnected. After all, feminism started as a political movement. Fine et al. (2003:196) discussed the social responsibilities of researchers: "The purpose of social inquiry in the 1990s is not only to generate new knowledge but to reform 'common sense' and inform critically public policies, existent social movements, and daily community life." The pressure of getting employment, tenure, and promotion in academia makes it difficult for researchers to share their time with the people whom they are researching. It is as if the participants were only objects to study, not the prime purpose and the endpoint of the studies. If raising consciousness is the first and foremost task for the oppressed to shake off gender and social oppression, then feminist media scholars (regardless of which schools of thought they subscribe to) should have no excuse not to share their research findings with the communities. At present, there are a few forums that provide opportunities for exchanges. The Gender Research Centre at The Chinese University of Hong Kong organizes an annual gender role workshop that facilitates dialogues among academics, policy makers, service recipients and providers, as well as grassroots women groups. In addition, in 2003, the Women's Commission of the Hong Kong government held a forum "A Close-up on the Media through Gender Perspectives" to achieve a similar kind of exchange.⁵

All these efforts that try to raise the gender consciousness of the grassroots women are not without difficulties. The Association for the Advancement of Feminism reckoned that grassroots women are usually absent in the intellectual discussions of feminisms (and this is certainly unsurprising given the lack of free time that grassroots women have and the discrepancies in cultural competency between researchers and grassroots women).⁶ The organization also found that grassroots women are indifferent to gender stereotyping in advertising even though they are well aware of their helplessness and their limitations in dealing with matters of everyday life. On a brighter note, women's groups in Hong Kong have recently started to realize the significance of explaining the body slimming culture and

the ideologies of beauty to the public. There is also a self-organized website that raises protests against the ubiquitous nature of slimming advertisements and the dominance of the slimming business.⁷ Undoubtedly, efforts like this could encourage the emergence of more critical discussions of the media and empower audiences to be more self-reflective.

To this end, how can the sharing of our tale and analysis of body slimming empower women, in particular the ones who feel powerless? Feminist scholars in media studies may not always help grassroots women with their daily necessities and needs, but the empowerment of women can also come through discursive means, such as through efforts to help women attain a level of media literacy on the body slimming culture. This may liberate women to free themselves from one form of gendered, social, and cultural oppression.

Notes

1. The UNDP measured gender development by taking into account inequalities between men and women in health care, education, and living standards. The gender-related development index can be found at http://pooh.undp.org/maindiv/hdr_dypt/statistics/data/indic/indic_218_2_1.html (last access: 7 June 2006).
2. See the Participant's Manual of the "ITU Workshops on Sustainability in Telecommunication Through Gender and Social Equality: Module 7 — Strategic Change Management" (http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/gender/Training_Resources/index.html, last access: 5 December 2004).
3. Source: http://www.gutsywomen.org.hk/antislilm_passage.htm (last access: 1 March 2005).
4. "See-lai" is a local, colloquial Cantonese term that refers to married women. In the old days, "see-lai" mostly referred to those who stayed home. Nowadays, as a large number of Hong Kong married women are in the workforce, the term "see-lai" refers to both married women who work outside home and those who stay home.

5. More information can be found at http://www.women.gov.hk/eng/activity/activity_2003.html (last access: 1 March 2005).
6. The researchers are not assumed to have more cultural competency than grassroots women. They may share different scopes of competency.
7. See the website of Gutsy Women at http://www.gutsywomen.org.hk/antislim_passage.htm (last access: 1 March 2005).

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Media Ideologies of Gender in Hong Kong

Abstract

The aim of the first part of this paper is to reconstruct a general picture of Hong Kong media studies relating to gender issues and perspectives since the early 1990s. We found out that, despite a late start, studies on the Hong Kong media soon proliferated, and came to include examinations of various gender representations in the print media, television, films, and popular culture. In the second part of this paper, a critical analysis of the contemporary cultural phenomenon and discourses on body slimming in the Hong Kong media and popular culture is employed to illustrate that the Hong Kong media, as a capitalist institution, is selling a lifestyle — privileges the symbolic values of a promotional culture over higher-level values such as the health of women and gender equality. This paper concludes by suggesting that further studies be conducted focusing on gender subjectivities in the Hong Kong media and on the praxis of feminist research.

香港傳媒的性別意識形態

李沛然

馮應謙

(中文摘要)

本文首先重組自1990年代以來有關性別議題和觀點的香港傳媒研究。我們發現，雖然早期的相關學術研究頗為缺乏，但是有關媒體和流行文化對性別表徵的研究現在已百花齊放。本文繼而以香港媒體對瘦身話語和文化現象的論證為例，反證香港媒體作為商業機構，一直把重要的性別價值（如健康和性別平等）的考慮，置於符號價值之下。我們認為未來的研究應關注香港傳媒的性別主觀性及女性主義研究的實踐性。

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