

Becoming “Bad Women”: The Transnational Women’s Magazine Cosmo and the Re-Shaping of Female Sexual Subjectivity in Post-Reform China

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Abstract

After years of scholarly critique on postfeminism in western societies, it has been increasingly noted that the postfeminist sensibility is a transnational culture because it is “a fundamentally mediated and commodified discourse and set of material practices” (Dosekun, 2015: p. 961). This paper joins the conversation by examining the sexuality discourse in the transnational women magazine *Cosmo China*. I traced the historical entry of the magazine into China and analysed the sexuality discourse in it in juxtaposition with the local sexual discourse. I argue that, despite that the postfeminist sexuality discourse in fact re-traditionalizes women—often in the vocabularies of autonomy, choice, empowerment and consumerism—it garners a sense of modernity relative to the local gender culture. This is embedded in the geopolitics at that time that repudiated the local socialist past which is criticized to repress femininity and sexuality. Class disintegration between Chinese women is important to build up this geopolitical dichotomy, as the magazine functions to deliver the urban, middle- and upper-class women in post-reform China to global capital. In the end, I argue for the need to adopt a truly transnational feminist perspective to combat neoliberal, individualist, and consumerist nature of postfeminism.

Keywords

Transnational Women’s Magazines, Post-Reform China, Discourse of Sexuality, Postfeminism, Geopolitics

1. Introduction

China’s market reform and open-door policy since around the 1980s have trans-

formed the political economy of the domestic media industry. The commercialization of the media industry and the introduction of transnational media capital brought about new textual possibilities for media contents such as those related to gender and sexuality. When *Cosmopolitan* entered China in the 1990s, its blatant discussion of sexuality marked a distinct style from sexuality discourse in local women magazines or official sources, which largely confine sexuality to the realms of reproduction and marriage and was often discussed through a medical lens (Evans, 1997). Transnational women's magazines like *Cosmo China*, with its western and commercial background, introduced what appeared to be a more liberal sexual culture for women for its association with women's desire.

This study seeks to document how the magazine *Cosmo China* has developed a discourse of sexuality in juxtaposition with the context of local culture and thus contributing to the reshaping of women's sexuality in post-reform China. This study contributes to existing scholarship in two ways. First, feminist media scholarship has criticized the postfeminist media culture, largely in the western context, to be re-entrenching male power in more complicated ways (Gill, 2007, 2009; McRobbie, 2009; Negra, 2009; Tasker & Negra, 2005). Scholars have also considered the transnational travel of gender-related discourse such as postfeminism and neoliberal feminism in non-western context, which often serve to reinforce geopolitics between the west and the non-west while countermanding transnational feminist praxis and a shared vision against gender dominance across culture (Dosekun, 2015; Durham, 2015; Eisenstein, 2017). This study joins the conversation by offering a case in China to illustrate the gender politics as inter-related to geopolitics. Second, the discourse of women's sexuality in China is often understood as shifting from a repressed one to a modernized one as the reform and opening took place (Braverman, 2002; Jeffreys, 2006). Drawing from critical analyses of postfeminist media culture, this study hopes to destabilize such simplistic dichotomy and provide more nuanced languages in assessing such transformation of female sexuality (Hershatter, 1996; Honig, 2003; Jeffreys, 2006; Mann, 2011).

2. Literature Review

2.1. Women and Sexuality in China

During the socialist era starting from the 1950s, the dominant discourse of sexuality in China was mainly disseminated under the auspices of official agencies, such as official publishing houses and state-run medical, educational, and legal institutions (Evans, 1997). In particular, medical experts, with their "scientific" backgrounds, were predominantly drawn upon as the authoritative voices of appropriate sexual norms. The discourse of sexuality during this period was a didactic one, instructing men and women about codes of the normal and abnormal, of right and wrong. The ultimate goal of these discourses was to serve the state's collectivist government and development rather than to promote individual, private enjoyment (Evans, 1997; Zhang, 2005).

More specifically, the discourse of sexuality in this era postulated that sex was exclusively for reproduction and marriage, while nonreproductive and nonmarital sex were disapproved of. In this framework, sex outside of heterosexual-marital relationships, such as sex for single women, one-night stands, and homosexual sex, was excluded. The dominant discourse was normative as much as it was scientific, relying on an essentialist notion of gender difference and perpetuating the model of the active male and the passive female. Maleness was constructed as strong and active, prone to sudden and powerful excitement and possessing an impetuous sex drive; femaleness, on the other hand, was constructed as yielding and passive with unrecognized sexual desire, which, when present, could even be constructed as dangerous (Evans, 1997).

Moving into the post-reform era since the 1980s, sexual culture demonstrated a significant departure from the socialist era, particularly in urban centres. Despite more nuanced discussions of sexuality in the socialist and post-socialist eras, it is hard to dispute the general trend as described by scholars: there is a move away from strict state regulations toward more open, desire-centric discussions of sexuality (Du, 2015; Zhang, 2005). Sexual content received greater publicity, people's sexual attitudes and practices became more open, and the primary issues or concerns regarding sexuality shifted, although these changes did not necessarily promise egalitarian gender values (Evans, 1997; Yang, 1999). The discourse of sexuality represented by *Cosmo China* is part and parcel of this general trend.

While the arc from a socialist sexual morality to a post-reform one seems to be identifiable as such, it does not necessarily indicate a linear move from a traditional to more liberated vision of gender politics. Paralleling the transformation of sexuality discourse is the shift from the socialist feminist cause (Wang, 2016; Yin, 2021)—though unfinished—to the postfeminist China (Chen, 2012; Liao, 2019). It is generally agreed that the post-reform China has brought new challenges to gender equality as the market principle dominates in many spheres of life of Chinese people including women. There was a restoration of essentialist femininity that easily co-opts with commercial culture and devalue women in terms of productivity (Song, 2011). In the reforming era, such femininity yet was celebrated as women's liberation from the "gender sameness" in Mao's socialist China as it reveals women's "true selves" (Yin, 2021). In particular, the young, educated, urban, middle-class women were the prime target of this consumerist, feminized discourse (ibid).

2.2. Transnational Women Magazines and Gender Norms

The scholarship on transnational women magazines have sought to understand the similarities and differences between the original version and the oversea version, especially regarding its representation of gender and sexuality (Machin & Thornborrow, 2003, 2006; Saraswati, 2010; Shaw, 1999). It is often found that the gender and sexuality messages of the western, parent version of the magazines

exert cultural significance on their oversea versions though with local moderations (e.g. Machin & Thornborrow, 2003).

A few studies have explored how the political-economic operations of transnational magazines affect gender culture in non-Western societies as they are integrated into the global capitalist order. Analyzing the development of *Cosmopolitan* in post-socialist Eastern Europe, True (1999) argues that marketing gender distinctions allowed multinational corporations to tap into the newly open markets of post-communist Eastern Europe. Such economic strategies thus reinscribe gender norms onto societies where such norms might have once been less dichotomized. Consequentially, the magazine both empowers women as individuals and consumers as much as it subjects them to new forms of discipline (True, 1999). For another example, Cao & Zhao (2010) in their study of transnational men's magazines in China suggest that global capitalism, realized through copyright trade and brand control of men's magazines, has restructured masculinity and class in China. The hegemonic masculinity endorsed by global capitalism that emerged after the economic reform is transnational, wealthy, elite and gentle, one that is embodied by men of the privileged class. They have replaced the labor class and farmer, who used to represent the ideal type of masculinity but who have come to be perceived inefficient, unskilled, and backward in the reform era.

The above cases show that transnational magazines are important vehicles for the accumulation of capital and, while serving this economic function, they also play a role in reshaping the culture of gender in newly open liberal markets. These studies help illuminate an analytical framework that integrates a political-economic perspective on transnational media and gender analysis in the realm of the discourse of sexuality.

2.3. Postfeminist Media Culture and Its Transnationality

In contemporary western media culture, the objectification of women seems to have given way to a greater emphasis on women's sexual agency (Attwood, 2006; Harris, 2005; Harvey & Gill, 2011; Jackson, 2005). Women's sexual desire and pleasure are increasingly visible in media, though not in an unproblematic way. Scholars have pointed out that the celebratory discourse could render gender ideologies even more pernicious to uncover, at the very least it has complicated the notion of sexual agency (Evans et al., 2010; Farvid & Braun, 2006; Machin & Thornborrow, 2006; Nikunen, 2007; Reviere & Byerly, 2013).

The intertwining of the emphasis on women's agency and looming sexism has been noted in scholarly works on postfeminist media culture, which is characterized by the complex entanglement of feminist and anti-feminist ideas that may, in turn, work against women's interests (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2004, 2009; Tasker & Negra, 2005, 2007). Most crucially, scholars problematize the language of freedom, agency, choice, and empowerment that have been inextricably associated with the category of "women". McRobbie (2009) argues that in postfeminist culture, women are imbued with agency and choice so that they can then

use their “feminist” freedom to choose to re-embrace traditional femininity. Feminism, in this process, is at once incorporated and depoliticized, revised, or disparaged. Gill (2007) points out that the overt emphasis on choice, agency, and empowerment signals the renewed operation of power and ideology. Power does not operate through a top-down imposition, but by “remaking the subject,” that is by causing individuals to internalize gender norms as “a prerequisite for subjecthood itself” (Gill, 2008: p. 440). In this way, notions of cultural influence that demands a particular version of femininity are evacuated and the hegemonic power regulating gender remains intact.

Scholars have noted postfeminism to be a transnationally circulating culture (Dosekun, 2015; Lazar, 2006). Dosekun (2015: pp. 961-962) insightfully argues that postfeminism is “readily transnationalized” because “it is a fundamentally mediated and commodified discourse and set of material practices.” Furthermore, such transnational circulation is not simply a linear transmission from the North to South, but needs to be considered in relation to the “deeply political and contradictory cultural logics of globalization”. In this process of globalization, class is a crucial criterion of building a “postfeminist global sisterhood”.

3. Method

This paper focuses on *Cosmo China*, the Chinese edition of the long-established US-originated magazine leader *Cosmopolitan*. It gained a foothold in China in 1998 (its local predecessor *Trends* was launched in 1993, but this magazine did not collaborate with *Cosmopolitan* until 1998), along with many other transnational women’s magazines, such as *Rayli*, *Harper’s Bazaar*, *Marie Claire*, and *Vogue*, which entered the Chinese market around the same period. This wave of transnational women’s magazines seized a significant amount of the market share away from local magazines and significantly influenced their look and content (Frith & Feng, 2009). For years, *Cosmo China* has continued to be among the top women’s magazines in China in terms of advertising revenue and social impact. Influenced by its original US version remarkable for its frank discussion of sex, in *Cosmo China*, sex is almost a “must” in every volume. Sex-related content usually appears in cover stories, features, relationship and sex columns, and beauty columns.

This paper first employs a political-economic perspective to understand the economic motivations and conditions underpinning the circulation of *Cosmo China*. This entails tracing the magazine’s historical entry into the Chinese market and its relation to the broader economic environment, the magazine’s ownership and control, revenue resources, and audience commodities. Materials were drawn from journalistic articles, memoirs, scholarly works, and organization websites.

The paper then moves to a textual analysis of sex-related content in *Cosmo China*. Sex-related content refers to texts in which sex is the primary topic or texts that touch upon sex issues for at least one full paragraph. The magazine is-

sues included in this study are from 1999 to 2014 for two reasons. First, the magazine finalized its collaboration with the American version in 1998 and remained relatively consistent in its style in the following years. Second, the year after 2014 may start to witness some discursive changes in gender due to the rise of feminist discourses on social media. The texts sampled is therefore representative of the historical period that embraces opening and reform and one that dominated by traditional mass media. Due to the limitation of time and energy, the selected texts were sampled from three months that were randomly chosen rather than the whole year issues. A total of 141 articles related to sexuality were chosen for analysis.

Textual analysis is a way to understand how the use of language socially constructs our reality through a close examination of texts (Brennen, 2012). When conducting textual analysis, the theoretical lens is crucial because it allows researchers to make conceptual sense of layers upon layers of meaning instead of merely being descriptive (Brennen, 2012; Lindlof & Taylor, 2018). This study drew from the theorization of postfeminism and its transnationality to engage with the magazine texts to see how women's empowerment, rights and autonomy are depicted and in what ways conservative gender values are reinforced, while also paying attention to the positioning of the localness of sexuality and gender. Following the traditional method, the author conducted an immersive reading of each text and then labeled the texts and reconstituted them into categories or patterns (Kracauer, 1952; Larsen, 2002).

4. Analyses

4.1. Transnational Media Capital Expansion and the Women Consumer in China

Before presenting the textual analysis, a political-economic background about the entry of the magazine is foregrounded here. Global media such as transnational magazines are the main vehicles through which nonmedia transnational products and services can advertise themselves to new markets, thereby facilitating corporate expansion into new nations, regions, and markets (Herrmann & McChesney, 1997). In around the late 1980s, the global media market dominated by Western transnational media firms greatly expanded (ibid). For global media companies, the opening Chinese market was an attractive spot. It is in this context that transnational women's magazines took root in China. The launch and development of *Cosmo China* shows that the magazine was first and foremost conceived by capitalists as a vehicle to deliver the newly-developed consumer market in China to transnational capital ventures.

As China's opening policy was carried out, Wu Hong, the founder of *Cosmo China*, sensed that some Western high-end commodities and services were gradually coming to China but lacked appropriate media channels to promote themselves. Meanwhile, the economic reform of China was also generating an emerging consumption class that transnational capital could not afford to neg-

lect. After Deng Xiaoping's southern tour in 1992 that further confirmed and accelerated economic liberalization in China, the huge potential of consumption was released. The rapid per capita GDP annual growth since then indicates an increasing disposable income amongst a population numbered at 1.3 billion. The luxury market also went from nothing to being explosive thanks to economic development.

Wu Hong and his team were astute enough to exploit the promising yet untapped appetite of Chinese consumers, particularly women, for fashion, beauty, and luxury brands. In 1993, Wu Hong's team started a consumerist, lifestyle magazine called *Trends*, the local predecessor of *Cosmo China*, that published content with strong commercial appeal and targeted high-end, white-collar Chinese readers who could afford products and services like overseas travels (Chen, 2009; Xinniu, 2009).

The turning point for *Trends* came in 1997 when it formed a joint venture with IDG (International Data Group), one of the first and the most successful US venture companies entering the Chinese market at the time (IDG, 2018). Before partnering with *Trends*, IDG already published a series of magazines in the area of digital technology aimed at the emerging wealthier class in China (Zhao & Ye, 2005). To further expand its commercial ambition of capitalizing on the new high-end market in China, IDG coordinated collaboration between Trends Group and Hearst, the parent company of *Cosmopolitan*, in 1998 (Beishan, 2017). This copyright collaboration turned Wu Hong's *Trends* into *Cosmo China*. Priced at 20 RMB, much higher than most existing domestic women magazines at that time, *Cosmo China* clearly targeted readers with strong buying power, typically the urban, white-collar upper-income and middle-income women who emerged in post-reform China and who could afford international beauty and fashion brands.

Like other transnational women's magazines, *Cosmo China* heavily relies on advertising as its source of revenue instead of on circulation numbers (Frith & Feng, 2009). Advertising pages in *Cosmo China* usually account for almost half of each issue; some advertisements are placed within articles. Its advertisements are dominated by competitive global fashion leaders, largely consisting of beauty products, personal care items, clothing, and accessories from such companies as Estee Lauder, Lancome, Chanel, L'Oreal, Gucci, Dior, Louis Vuitton, Prada, Clarins, and Vichy just to name a few, while domestic brands are rarer (Feng & Frith, 2008). *Cosmo China*, with its glossy pages and high-quality design, attracted international brands to place advertisements targeting financially capable female consumers.

The integration of the domestic market to the global capitalism thus demarcated a classed and gendered market in China, which is then exposed to global media content that sustain the political, economic, and moral bias that capitalist corporations need to survive (Herrmann & McChesney, 1997). This is primarily realized via the franchise system and copyright control of the transnational media, which set the tone for the content of gender and sexuality. Since the re-

owned editor Helen Brown took over the magazine, *Cosmopolitan* precisely targets modern single career women and distinguishes itself for advocating sexually liberating ideas for women. These cultural values of *Cosmopolitan* in the US transmitted to *Cosmo China* via a franchise system adopted by most transnational magazines. Under the franchise system, the parent publishing house—in this case, the Hearst Corporation—builds up local agents to expand its network, and the local publisher—the Trends Media Group—forms joint ventures with the headquarter office (Frith & Feng, 2009). The headquarter office trains local staff and editors to maintain brand consistency (Karan & Feng, 2009). Under this system, *Cosmopolitan* has maintained its core publishing idea of the “Fun Fearless Female (the 3Fs)” across the globe, despite some local variations. The local agent in China, the Trends Media Group, pays a high copyright fee annually to the parent company, Hearst, to obtain content. Approximately 25% of the materials in the Chinese version of the magazine are purchased from the Hearst Corporation, which has the copyright for *Cosmopolitan* in over 30 countries (Fan, 2005). The content selected for translation by local Chinese editors usually comes from Western countries such as France, the UK, the US, and Australia (ibid). For the Trends Media Group, the collaboration with Hearst is highly beneficial since it helped the local version of the magazine quickly excel in the magazine market on account of *Cosmo China*’s high quality, skilful editing, resources, and ideas.

Sexual content, so prevalent in *Cosmopolitan* in the US, has thus become an integral part of *Cosmo China*. *Cosmo China* either translates content from versions of the magazine in Western countries that may be more sexually liberal or it produces local content that remains consistent with the core publishing ideas, despite nuanced variations. Although the amount of sexual content in the Chinese version has been moderated, the magazine still maintains several sexual articles per issue, including both translated ones and locally produced ones. Given the commercial nature of media, transnational women’s magazines are subject to governmental regulation less than party media are (Chan, 1994). This relatively loose media control may have left more room for *Cosmo China* to translate and publish sexual content that diverges from the official position of the government on issues of gender and sexuality. The following section will critically analyse the sexual content of articles in *Cosmo China* to explore what kind of sexual ideologies are being “sold” to gendered and classed readers and consumers in China.

The following will explicate three recurrent themes in the discourse of sexuality in *Cosmo China*: redefining sexiness as empowering, turning women into sexual subjects in heterosexual relationships, and policing women’s sexual bodies. These discourses demonstrate characteristics that are quite divergent from the discourse of sexuality documented in the literature on the socialist era, offering women a new female sexual subjectivity to adopt, while also subjecting them to new modes of gender governing.

4.2. Empowering Sexiness

The first frequent theme is redefining sexiness as empowering. Sexiness, defined as quality of being sexually attractive or appealing, can be easily positioned in a way that objectifies women to serve male gaze. In *Cosmo China*, one can easily find plenty of blatant visual display of sexy models or celebrities not so different from *Playboy*, as well as discussion of the sexiness in columns.

Sexiness is redefined as empowering first by making it an internal need of women themselves. Wearing clothing in a sexy way is, according to the magazine, “nature and the right of women.” The high heel is celebrated as women’s “sexy weapon” or a sign of female power rather than a restrictive sign invented for the male gaze, as one article claims: “nine-centimeter high heel changes everything and props up new feminism.” Some articles on women’s self-remaking, which feature women confessing about how they transformed into “better versions” of themselves, equates sexiness with a liberated version of self.

After realizing that I can be sexy as well, I started trying out different types of clothes, sexy ones, and practicing facial expressions that look sexy—and it really works! This method helps me realize that the way I used to behave is too rough and has nothing to do with elegance.

I used to be not interested in bikinis at all since I don’t have large breasts. But this time, I tried out a couple of bikinis and my friends all said that my photos are sexy.

The pre-makeover, desexualized womanhood in such statements is constructed as in need of modernization. By using the “confession” genre, the pursuit of sexiness is spoken out from women’s own mouths, thus constructed as something generated from their own selves rather than from any external cultural influences. In such discourse, the regulating power operates in a Foucauldian sense, that is, by having the subjects internalize power-inflected norms as part of their own subject-formation.

To incorporate an empowering sense in defining sexiness, the magazine also expands the definition of sexiness to non-bodily aspects such as life attitude, personality, psychic life, intelligence, or behaviour that seem to avoid being criticized as replicating the shallow, restrictive beauty norms. One can easily find the semantic structure of “sexiness is not about... but...” that seeks to deny traditional notions of sexiness and to re-articulate sexiness as “something more”:

Yes, indeed, women wrapping themselves up in low-cut dresses is a kind of sexiness and it is not necessarily fake. But I think that real sexiness can be felt by others, even in ordinary things like how one talks. Sexiness does not come from how you dress. Following your own way is the real sexiness.

The secret to sexiness is to be generous, understanding, independent, confident, energetic, and aspirational.

Sexiness is not simply about the exterior appearance but is generated from the innermost being.

Women’s sexiness comes from beauty plus brains.

What seems to be schizophrenic is that, while the magazine seeks to redefine sexiness as more than bodily appeal, the celebrities or models it chooses demonstrate sexiness in the most traditional way—slim, curvy, scarcely covered and seductively posed. In a page that features Karen Mo (Mo Wenwei), a female singer, it highlights her words “I think only confident women possess sexy elements... I just don’t want to cater to anyone’s taste. I don’t want to compromise,” with her remarkably sexy photos right next to the sentence.

Moreover, the magazine endorses non-traditional sexiness on the one hand, while knowingly disavows the new conceptions of sexiness and reinforces the most traditional notions on the other. A brief article put it explicitly—it first asks why there are many types of sexiness shown in fashion magazines and then answers by stating that “those types of sexiness are meaningless until a month later after you know [a man]—before that, the only type of sexiness that matters to men is a curvy body.” The matter-of-fact, worldly tone functions to forestall any straightforward charge of the magazine as being simply antifeminist or conservative since an awareness of a more “liberated” version of sexiness is taken account yet is immediately suspended.

For sexiness to be perceived as empowering in the context of China at the time, it also needs to be situated in the cultural climate that sought to depart from the de-gendering culture in pre-reform China under the dogma of Maoist feminism, which tended to condemn feminine sexiness as corrupted. As the reform took place, the feminized and sexualized presentation of women’s bodies came to signal a modernized project as opposed to androgynous, working-class femininity in the socialist era (Honig & Hershatter, 1988). In the cultural context that repudiates a past where feminine and sexy expression of self is largely muted, the postfeminist discourse probably takes on a progressive look more easily. This makes it even more difficult to unveil the gender power in the discourse already so insidious and complicated in postfeminism.

4.3. Sexual Subjectification

Sex-related content in *Cosmo China* is also remarkable for its sexual subjectification of women, which refers to the depiction of women as knowing, active, and desiring subjects rather than as passive objects in sex (Gill, 2003). Such constructions are in stark contrast to officially-sanctioned texts in the socialist era, which assumed women’s sexual passiveness as a scientific fact and prescribed sexual activity not for personal pleasure but for the collective interest, limited to reproduction and marital obligation (Evans, 1997). By encouraging women to adopt sexual values and behaviours that used to be only reserved to men, the magazine seems to destabilize sexual double standards, yet it simultaneously revitalizes the male-oriented heterosexual normativity.

The tendency to subjectify women in sex is best epitomized in the notion of “bad women” frequently endorsed in sex expert advice articles, feature interviews, or sex skill tests of the magazine. “Bad women” in the magazine refers to women who are not sexually “virtuous” in traditional sense—contained, reserved,

and pure—but are sexually active, autonomous, and desiring. They triumph the “traditional women” or “good women” who are believed to be less sexually progressive. According to the article “Why do bad women have a better life than good women?”, “bad women” are more sexually advanced in that “they have more romantic relationships and sexual experience; they understand men well; they do research on men they are fascinated with, and then craft a plan to approach him and get him; they are able to deny men and to seduce men.” In contrast, “good women” are too sexually conservative, do not know how to seduce men, and are not sexy.

A crucial characteristic of “bad women” is that they are active in initiating sex, often through ways that would otherwise be coded as self-objectifying, rather than passively waiting for men to approach. Women are taught to initiate sex by revealing body curves or wearing lingerie, to give him a surprise with a sexy apron, candles, and underwear, in short, to make themselves look always up for it. Behaviours as such are by no means presented as “serving men” men but as a form that women actively demonstrating their sexual appeal to “get men”. Such paradox of actively choosing to self-objectify effectively renders the feminist consideration of unequal gender relations in intimacy a killjoy.

Also crucial to the agentic, modernized female sexual subject is the incorporation of an entrepreneurial mentality in managing one’s sex life. Sex in this context is not simply an affective or physiological activity but a project that demands constant scheduling, self-evaluating, and reskilling, particularly on the part of women. For example, women are expected to take up the task of planning for sex. As the article “Cosmo Tips” suggests, “if you prepare for sex as thoughtfully as you prepare for a candlelit dinner, you will definitely impress your partner!”; or “it is professional to make an appointment via message so that your partner will be prepared.” Moreover, satisfying sex life is broken down into techniques and women are called on to evaluate their sexual techniques—to check if they are “spicy” enough. A sex quiz may ask women to do a “sexy test” to see if they can “win over his ex-girlfriends?”, accompanied by a series of playful sex tips that will help them “surpass their partners’ ex-girlfriends.” Articles such as “Get to know more about sex and be a more interesting woman,” “Time-tested sexy tips,” and “How about role-play?” alert women to the necessity of reskilling themselves to be more sexually adventurous and more desirable to men. At the same time that women are interpellated to be the “sexual entrepreneurs” (Harvey & Gill, 2011), the labor to “professionalize” sex life is asymmetrically assigned to women who are often expected to take up the feminized labor of managing private life, while men’s role is invisible or even positioned as the expert or judge in evaluating women’s performances.

Despite the pitfalls of such postfeminist sexual subjectification, the notion of “bad women” gains a sense of modernity in a relatively frictionless way in post-reform China. This is not irrelevant to the society’s mentality at that time to move away from the economically hampered socialist past. Explicitly or implicitly, the local Chinese women or women in the past—more of a conceived idea

than empirical fact—is often discursively allocated to be “good women” in need of modernization. Western women, female celebrities or metropolitan women are, on the other hand, the “exemplar” of liberated women, who, in the realm of sex, are active, desiring and knowing. The postfeminist sexual discourse thus serves to reinforce the geopolitics between the newly marketized China and the dominant western capitalist society. In this process, urban, middle- and upper-class women in China are connected to the global sisterhood more closely than to their own local, lower-class sisters in the name of sexual empowerment. Such intertwinement between gender politics and geopolitics makes it even difficult to retain the more emancipatory gender vision once formed locally in pre-reform socialist years.

4.4. Policing the Sexual Body

In the austere sexual culture during the socialist period, conditioning a body for sexual pleasure would be considered corrupted. However, the desire-centered consumer society of post-socialist China brings this bodily aspect to the foreground and consequently opens up a new realm of policing. The discourse of sexuality in *Cosmo China* fits well in and contributes to this general trend, zooming in particularly on women’s physical bodies, regulating their postures, sex appeal, skin qualities, or sex-related manners in sexual contexts. Whereas women’s bodies have long been policed, in postfeminist culture, there is a new emphasis on women’s self-surveillance and is distinguished by its increased intensiveness and extensiveness (Gill, 2007). Self-surveillance on the part of women is so intensive that it upholds stricter and more meticulous criteria of a satisfying sexual body, and it is so extensive that it expands to intimate bodies and conduct.

The self-policing required upon women for sexual purposes is first predicated on the assumption that women’s bodies are not good enough for sex in their natural state without management, especially from a man’s perspective. Women’s bodily aspects, such as skin quality, comportment, behaviors, and dress, are in need of monitoring. Thus, women are constantly called on to examine and amend their bodily qualities or performances in sexual contexts. Partly due to the sponsorship of skincare products, women’s skin quality is most problematized:

Be aware that how your skin feels cannot be more important to your sexiness. So, let’s look at our bodies in the mirror. Are there any parts that you never thought would be pleasant to touch? You probably do not have a perfect answer. So, let’s do something about it—right now!

Sexy zones... usually have skin pigmentation and are also loose. They are made this way, which makes it easy to ignore in daily care. To make them strong, delicate, and tender, make sure to take some specific actions.

The self-policing of women’s sexual body can be so intensive as to cover many body parts such as the breasts, the buttocks, the abs, the inner thighs, and even

the heels and the knuckles. Each part, noticeable or not, is expected to be maintained in a soft, silky, and tight state by exercising or by using beauty products so as to be sexually attractive for men. The language of health science is also employed to fashion the monitoring discourse into an objective, scientific one. Women are informed about their sexual organs, the methods of keeping their sexual organs healthy, and the importance of training sex-related body parts to enhance their own sexual satisfaction. To be fair, such scientific vocabularies open up the discursive space for women's own desire. Yet overall, the goal of self-policing is mostly framed in a male-oriented way.

The surveillance on women also extends to their bodily performance in sexual contexts, and again, they are constantly subject to men's perspective or experts' voices. Women are often posited as the ones who most easily fail to observe proper "bedroom etiquette," while men are usually the knowing judges of their gaffs. A feature article titled "Things that frustrated men in the bedroom" invited several men to share their dissatisfying experiences, such as seeing their female partners' dandruff or seeing them trimming their toenails in the bedroom. The article also alerts women that "if you are still wearing unmatched, old underwear, or never trim your private hair, or push men away, or squeeze acne before going on bed, then you should pay attention to your bedroom etiquette, baby." Contents like this cast women as less knowledgeable and are in need of instructions regarding bodily performances in a sexual context.

Moreover, an entrepreneurial mentality is also incorporated to the ever demanding surveillance on women's bodies for sexual purposes. Women are suggested to manage their bodies via scheduling, planning, and evaluating, whereas such sophisticated work should better appear unintended. For instance, women are told that they should "schedule one week or three days ahead, or even right on the day of a date" to "do something about sexiness and make him feel better without noticing what has been done." An article even lists a full-day skincare schedule for possible sexual encounters. At 20:00 pm., for example, when women are supposed to be dating, the shoulder, back, and buttocks are more likely to be touched by men. Women are thus advised to pay specific attention to the skin of these body parts so that "men's hands will not be disappointed." If you fail to do so, "you will lose points," the article warns. In short, women are instructed to closely monitor the status of their sexual bodies as if they are entrepreneurially running a project. The ultimate goal of such dense managerial work is, unsurprisingly, to avoid disappointing their male partners.

The self-awareness, consumerism, fetishism, managerial sentiment alluded in the discourse of policing sexual bodies echoed the newly cultivated subjectivity in the "desiring China" (Rofel, 2007). These sentiments cast stark contrast to the collective and austere culture in previous times or in locally produced women magazines, and in so doing, the discourse appears to be bold, urban and modern. However, the male supremacy, which was critically interrogated in the socialist feminist project locally, regains its potency while a more sexually blatant culture

emerges in women's culture.

5. Concluding Remarks

Scholarship about feminism in China, or even the official voice from All-China Women's Federation, the state-led women's organ, generally agree that there is a backlash against gender equality in post-reform China. The analysis above, via examining sexuality discourse specifically, reveals that the backlash takes place in a sophisticated, cunning way partly due to its entanglement with geopolitics. *Cosmo China* brought along a sexuality discourse that posits the western, the metropolitan, and the consumerist class women as the spearhead of female empowerment, while rendering the local gender culture to be outdated, passive, and backward. Class disintegration between Chinese women is important to build up this geopolitical dichotomy, as the magazine functions as a vehicle for the global capital to capture the classed and gendered market segment in the opening and reforming China. *Cosmo* women, constituted by women in China with transnational buying power and their global sisters, gain a superior status as the "bad", modern women, while distancing themselves from the socialist feminist legacy in China and abandoning an intersectional vision.

Ironically, the postfeminist sexual discourse that serves the geopolitics is imbued with conservative gender values sugar-coated in vocabularies of empowerment, agency and autonomy. Analyzing how power operates in *Cosmo China's* discourse of sexuality thus helps to demystify the outdated vs. progressive contrast between local sources and transnational media, resonating with the scholarship trying to move beyond the dichotomous assumption of a repressed and sexually backward China and an "open" and "free" western model (e.g. [Jeffreys, 2006](#)).

It is important to note that, by destabilizing the current geopolitics in accounting for gender and sexuality, this paper does not mean to construct a reversed dichotomy. Rather, following [Dosekun \(2015\)](#) and other transnational feminist scholars, I call for we think about postfeminist media culture transnationally and reflect upon its neoliberal, individualist, and consumerist nature that may hamper a more emancipatory vision of gender politics transnationally. To challenge the hegemony or supremacy of postfeminism in media culture, one way, at least, is to retrieve the local feminist history that is too easily to be forgotten or even disputed in the name of modernization.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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