

When Sissy Boys Become Mainstream: Narrating Asian Feminized Masculinities in the Global Age

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ABSTRACT

Since the 1990s, the appropriation of unconventional dressing codes to perform a new masculinity has gradually been normalized as a mainstream practice in East Asian societies. This paper addresses contradictory currents concerning gender representations operating in East Asia, a fast-growing, rapidly changing region. The personal narratives of nine Taiwanese men, who use unconventional dressing codes to present desirable selves, are analyzed. The men were asked to reflect upon life moments when their dress codes were either pleurably achieved or bitterly confronted by significant others and higher authorities. The study emphasizes that researchers should place a greater emphasis on how individuals' lived experiences respond to the postmodern, highly intertextual media environment, rather than on content or textual analysis of media representations of the popular culture scene. Our research participants' narratives illuminate a site where hegemonic and alternative masculinities contest one another in search of an ever-changing self. Through an examination of the life narratives of these nine men, our study elicits meta-narratives to illustrate how some local and global actors become established in the East Asian post-capitalist identity politics.

Keywords: Narrative, Masculinity, Identity Politics, Men's Fashion, Dressing codes

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Introduction: East Asian Masculinities

Masculinity, as argued by Mulvey (1975), like femininity, may be the center from which *Others* are defined, but it is not simply one uncontested construction. While the earlier monolithic representation of masculinity has attracted criticism, the presentations of alternative masculinities in global fashion marketing campaigns have reshaped the media environment, which further offers a fertile site for men to negotiate the way they can present ourselves (Patterson & Elliott 2002, Darling-Wolf, 2004, Shiau, 2008b) .

Earlier academic endeavors in the West regarding media representations of males have attempted to understand the four hegemonic features of masculinities presented (e.g. Connell 2000, 2002, 2005; Garde, 2003). With the growing popularity of lifestyle magazine advertising in the 1990s, the ubiquitous eroticized male bodies have caused men to gaze upon images of their own bodies. The implications of “the inversion of the male gaze” have been discussed to shed light upon the negotiated character of male identities (Patterson & Elliott, 2002). Along this tradition of inquiry, scholars have increasingly gone beyond the analysis of symbolism, stressing how the signs of fashion manifest systems of power (Turner, 1996). However, earlier studies of male representations in the mass media focused on adult men and failed to interrogate constructions of young or adolescent boys (Consalvo, 2007). In spite of their significance in representing masculinities, the popular cultural texts may often confine the contribution of understanding to hegemonic cultural constructions of masculinity (Connell, 1987; Hanke, 1990). To address the limited interpretations falling outside the traditional confines of gender representation, the study attempts to offer potentially contradictory currents operating in East Asia, a fast-growing, rapidly changing region (Barthes, 1975; Hall, 1980).

Although Japanese feminists and scholars of the Japanese cultural environment have certainly paid attention to the way gender is constructed in the Asian media (e.g., see, Funabashi, 1995; Ito, 1995; Rosenberger, 1996; Sakamoto, 1999; Suzuki, 1995; Tanaka, 1995), their analyses—like those of Western feminists until fairly recently—have tended to mostly focus on the way women have been represented, largely ignoring their male counterparts. Nevertheless, since the early 2000s, how the appropriations of unconventional dressing codes to perform a new masculinity has gradually been normalized in East Asian societies such as in Japan, Taiwan, South Korea and Hong Kong have gradually drawn attention scholarly (Aizura, 2006; IIDA, 2004; Adkins 2001; Darling Wolf, 2003, 2004, Kameda, 1994; Li, 2008). Using Taiwan as example, this study acknowledges the terrain of our

inquiry has been shifting away from producing knowledge about areas as coherent and bounded units, to a focus on processes that increasingly link areas together (Chin, 2000; Chua, 2004). While the dressing codes pertaining to a younger generational cohort have become diverse in both content and form, for most Taiwanese men (or other East Asians) in their 40s or older, the frequent use of pink tie, cherry blossom patterned shirts and white pants among youth are perplexingly intriguing. A myriad of life stories has become a shared memory among youth. The collective memories narrated by our informants often are presented in terms of conflicts and negotiations with their parents and higher authorities.

The performances of gender have been shaped by new local and global actors as the rapid transition of media environment and gender politics in Taiwan are important features facilitating the changes. Not only feminine dressing codes, but also, events such male beauty contests, crying competitions among male idols, and marching bands in swimming shorts launched by advertisers, local or global, are recalled by our informants. While scholars have repeatedly investigated how these social and political actors have reshaped post-modern societies, few, if any, researchers have examined how these “feminized” qualities have become normalized among the youth. For instance, little attention has been paid to the issue of resistance. As many of the narrators in the study recalled, when growing up, they were resistant, consciously or unconsciously, to the “hegemonic masculinities” and “5th-graders¹” or older generation Taiwanese men.

This study tries to focus on non-conforming youth who retrospectively articulate the development of their alternative masculinities in relation to men’s fashion. The young male informants, mostly in their 20s or early 30s, grew up in a period of time when the rise of new communication technologies, along with an efflorescence of critical social movements, such as feminist/Tongzhi (queer) movements, reshaped Taiwanese society most rapidly (Martin, 2003). It examines what type of negotiations they have to exercise, and why these nonconforming practices became established in spite of possible animosity and bashing. In the context, this study considers fashion as a site of negotiation of “power relations” (Turner, 1996). These research participants, including both authors, reflexively rehearse a recurring script to present a fashionably desirable self. The study samples nine Taiwanese men in the circles of the two authors, who both see

¹ A generation growing up earlier than 1971, usually workaholic and career conscious thus contributing to the Taiwanese economic booming, is called 5th grader. Taiwan – Republic of China – is established in 1911, so the year count in Taiwan follows a different system. Those who were born between 1951 and 1961 are named 4th grader. 3rd grader is equivalent to American’s baby boomers.

themselves as non-conformists in terms of dress and who are seen as “queer-like.” Although the inquiry is related to queer studies and frequently framed in the identity formation of homosexuality, this study focuses on how these non-conformists, who may be gay, straight, or sexually exploring, negotiate a situated self. Through a series of interpersonal conversations, shopping, hanging out experiences, even in three Taiwan gay parades, we attempt to delineate the ongoing, interactive and multi-faceted process among “us” – the nine men’s lived experiences to shed light upon how global and local men’s fashion has channeled and regulated identifications in relation to sexual division, in relation to the orders of gender, sexuality, and social identity and authority, writing and rewriting patriarchal society since the late 1980s.

Shedding a New Light on the “Hegemonic Masculinities”

Masculinity, as a growing field of study, is increasingly attracting attention in response to the recent spate of crimes and school violence; beginning in 1999 with the Columbine High School shooting followed by several others, including the most destructively traumatic Virginia Tech Massacre in 2007. These studies of male representations attempt to examine how social definitions of “being a man” in contemporary United States society relate to some failings revolving around men’s emotional, physical, and psychological well-being in the twenty-first century (e.g. Evans & Wallace, 2008; Bowker, 1998; Consalvo 2007). A myriad of studies, mainly on advertising and sports, attempts to characterize situated men’s roles, norms, and values (Consalvo, 2007). Through these studies a manual on masculinity has been constructed, and the seemingly trans-historically natural and inevitable qualities of manhood in the US, were made ideological and problematic.

Sex role research suggests that the conception of masculinity has changed over time in response to historical and social currents (Franklin, 1984; Kimmel, 1987). A significant feature dominating these changes is manifested in visual constructions of masculinity. Along the same line of inquiry, Garde (2003) concluded that four dominant norms featuring masculinity are: power, ambivalence toward femininity, domination and objectification of nature and the psyche, and the avoidance of emotion. Another key point emerging from this research, stemming from a global urge to synthesize variances among western cultures, has been the investigation of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 2002, 2005), as opposed to subordinate masculinities such as homosexuality. Within the literature, hegemonic masculinity is seen as the dominant style of masculine performance in traditional Western

societies. Although cross-cultural popular texts may often contribute to hegemonic cultural constructions of masculinity (Connell, 2000; Hanke, 1990, Potts, 2002), they may also offer potentially contradictory currents operating within a specific social context and lead to interpretations falling outside the traditional confines of gender representation (Barthes, 1975; Hall, 1980).

Thus, scholars have come to recognize that masculinity, like femininity, is a social construct (Bourdieu, 2001; Strate, 1992). The recent academic interest in the study of masculinity comes from a conviction that the understanding of masculinity can provide powerful additional insights upon the ever-evolving nature of cultural constructions of gender through a complex process of negotiation and renegotiation (Craig, 1992; Saco, 1992). Post structuralist approaches to the study of identities often emphasize the fluidity of identity formation, deeming that identity is "a process of negotiation between these various subjectivities" (Saco, 1992) that helps us generate an awareness of who we are, "to position ourselves in relation to others and to function in the society" (Nixon, 1997).

Along the same line, stressing the impossibility of "proving" sex, sexuality, and gender by recourse to a prior, foundational biological body, the notion of performativity (Butler, 1993, 1997, 1999) illustrates the process of how a gender is rehearsed, much like a script, and how we, as the actors make this script a reality over and over again by performing these actions. In this light, a school of thought has emerged to examine how situated masculinities are not preconfigured, but performed across cultures. Against the backdrop, the presentation of men's fashion can be framed as part of the performance, and becomes an important aspect in the understanding of masculinities. In particular, as vividly recalled in their narratives, our informants have engendered an ongoing project to remodel themselves. They illustrate how, through their negotiations, the composites of multiple and sometimes contradictory subjectivities that materialize as a result of specific discourses. In the establishment and maintenance of the "necessary fictions", that are our identities (Nixon 1997), our bodies function as sites upon which we inscribe a wide spectrum of codes and to which we attach many meanings.

Methodology: Narrative Analysis

For the purpose of this study, an interpretive approach to gather qualitative data is employed. Based on the premises and procedures of phenomenology, this study focuses on how those not conforming the dominant presentations of masculinities coming to put together their phenomena in such a way as to

make sense of the world and, of the social order, as Patton (1990, p.69) explained. The interviews with our informants here are seen a process in which we collaborate to construct a quest out of which may emerge narratives of identity” (Hollway & Jefferson 2000, 45). These young men, self-identified as non-conformists and fashion conscious, are seen not as interviewees who have to answer our questions, but as informants or important storytellers who write and rewrite their sense of coming to terms with “who they are.”

The nine men sampled in the study include both authors. The remaining seven informants are sampled through the authors’ life circles. The first author has been quite active in civil right for the youth in Taiwan, through his volunteering work at a non-profit organization; he became connected with four informants well. The second author is a graduate student in Journalism, modeling for a fashion magazine at a part-time basis. He has long been involved in the fashion circle and got to know many fashion-conscious young men in their late 20s. All informants are aged between twenty-five and forty, and college-educated. After two-year correspondences with these participants regularly, our attention became caught up by our long journey of identity search. Our informants were aware of our quest, and we often discussed with regards to our multiple and sometimes contradictory subjectivities that potentially materialize as a result of specific discourses. Since all my informants are well-educated and sexually non-conforming, I do not pretend that they well represent Taiwanese or East Asians. Rather, the selection of these informants may more be reflexive of a social stratification at work: how and who are these non-conventional code users? How have these informants tackled challenges, coming up with their life narratives for survival?

A considerably rich body of writings considers narrative interviewing as a postmodern process in which researchers, also as informants and narrators, co-construct and de-construct their identities (Atkinson& Silverman, 1997; Fontana & Frey, 2000, 2001, Gubrium & Holstein, 2001). The reading of dominant discourses and narratives of resistance fits into post structuralist ideas put forward by Foucault (1980, p82). As posited in the following, such discourses open up spaces for resistance and counter-narrative:

It is through the re-emergence of these low-ranking know ledges, these unqualified, even directly disqualified know ledges....that criticism performs its work.”

This study challenges efforts in determining a search for true or authentic self and shares a post-structuralist concern that alternative junctures and transformations could support informants in noticing they are making differences to the stories they tell about themselves (Pollack, 1995). My informants are informed as “participatory action co-researcher” gearing towards eroticizing the domestic assumptions, habits, and rites to delineate a shared process in which we relate our performances of masculinities to a sense of fashion. In this vein, the interviews with our informants here are seen as process in which we collaborate to construct a quest out of which may emerge narratives of identity” (Hollway & Jefferson 2000,p 45).

Most stories retrieved in the study were not told in a neat linear fashion. It was clear and expected that many of them had not formulated an ongoing narrative with respect to how their stories of being and becoming can connect with a potential audience (Kivel & Kleiber, 2007). However, their life stories were grounded in the following issues, which help the researcher retrieve the themes in their narratives.

1. In our memories of growing up, how would you describe your sense of yourself in relation to men’s fashion and your *unconventional* etiquettes?
2. As a non-conformist, does this being seen different speak anything to you about who you are?
3. What is your sense of the process of changes? Struggles? Pleasures?

Theme identification is fundamental in conducting qualitative research (Sandelowski, 1995), although it is also often mysterious and contentious in weaving different discourses of fashion into a grand meta-narrative. To facilitate a plotline and theme of stories to unfold naturally, I have gone shopping with some informants for nearly two years on a regular basis. Part of the interviews took place while we were examining clothes items, and some were to follow up their comments and criticisms on an item. Examining the data at multiple levels affords access not only to stories about the negotiation of the informants’ own masculinity over time but to their philosophy about masculinity and how both of these relate to a desirable fashion (Van Manen, 1990).

Narrating Femininized Masculinities

1. Against the “Older Generation,” being “Somebody”

“I would rather be a fake “somebody” than a real “nobody”...and indeed, I want to be a fake branded, homeless and trendy celebrity,

rather than a real, nerdy, rich somebody” (Dicky. He names himself after Dicky after watching the film, *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, and the first sentence was derived from the film and constantly quoted by Dicky)

Dicky, one of my informants, was admonished by his father not to dress too tight too pink and too decorative, because it is too “gay.” He responded to his father that it is a sense of “fashion” practiced by his fellow students. Despite his claim of being similar, he vaguely recalled that he was influenced by the visual impact of the model of *Versace*. The awareness of these brands differentiates himself not only from his fellow students, but also from his salary man-like father. In his explicit narratives, being recognizably somebody takes precedence over academic success, or other acclaims traditionally seen as significant. These narratives also are reflected in Ted’s comparison of two hypothetical personae examining a lace-embroidered white shirt. When questioned: ‘Why don’t you buy it, you have tried it on four times. Is it too outrageously “untraditional”?’

Ted: I would rather be fashionably sissy than ordinary manly. At least sissiness is distinctive, whereas a man is ordinary,... and boring.”

Researcher: So what is your sense of being sissy...and perhaps not fashionable. Would it be better off than being ordinary, and manly?

Ted: well, my sense of being a man, particularly, like my father, is ordinary and invisible. Nowadays, invisibility suggests that you are non-existent, thus, at the bottom.

2. The Importance of Being Distinctive

While being distinctive is important, another defining feature underlying our negotiation is to place myself just in the right place where we will be being shingly admired in our situated circle. Stan’s case explicates the process. Since Stan first moved to Taipei in 2002 as a college student, his regular itinerary during his long leisure afternoon hours through to midnight, involved completing a prominent part of himself as a male model -- literally an authentic male "role model" that everyone may look up to. The circle Stan chose - urban and fashionably sophisticated - defied his parent’s expectation, but he found his pursuit of fashion better grounded in a site more urban and friendly to his “unusual self.” Titillated by his rural playmates’ ignorance of the fashion world, Stan made himself distinguishable through a process of “distinction,” a concept introduced by

Bourdieu (2001), knowingly displaying dressing codes, and a nuanced knowledge of fashion.

However, the work of self-definition, being differentiated from peers in search of a “real self” regardless of gender, appears to be a core theme across the different narratives. Although few clearly explained what themselves were, most informants mentioned repetitively that a man should be dressed in a way he is happy with. One informant noted about his use of mustard-colored and silk scarf, that “when critics come across, the ultimate defense seems to be the same proposition: who cares, at least I am happy, at least I have guts...at least I am not like working ants running beneath earth busy with work...”(Mr. Hot Dog Less)

It should be noted that an underlying storyline that pokes fun at “conventional codes” functions in tandem with the use of alternative dressing codes. For instance, while the use of traditional colors was “not cool,” one informant likens grayness to “rat-haired,” and “dark blue” is associated with cheap laborers working for manufacturers “on the verge of bankruptcy”. While the use of pink is linked to sensible, funny and talented celebrities, who can sing and dance well, sometimes performative enough to drag and laugh.

3. Individualist: Love the Way You Are...

While dressing differently is not directly associated with being feminine, the informants agree that a large portion of innovative performances are feminine related. This reflection stipulates that most male dressing codes have a rigid format and content: monotonous dark color and style.

Since the 1990s, a tumultuous outpouring of advertising campaigns, following the aforementioned rhetoric, has encouraged youth to “be what you are (be the way you are),” “always do yourself,” “don’t be afraid to be yourself” and “just do it”. The uses of ubiquitous sexually charged visual presentations were often narrated in conjunction with questions of how one can become a man. While these dressing codes and mannerisms may paint a landscape of meanings in which events took place over time, my study continues to explore the particularities and contexts of meanings titillating people to exoticise their everyday life stories and discover new possibilities for “rewriting it.”

Meanwhile, Kervin (1990) has analyzed the chorological change of presentations, discovering that the use of stereotypical images of “sturdy

oak” and “big wheel” was prevalent in *Esquire* prior to the 1980s with most male models’ nonverbal communication connoting confidence and self-reliance. It was at about the same period of time that codes of sexuality were imported. As informants recalled vividly, the colossal poster featuring models of *Calvin Klein*, *Armani* and *Hugo Boss* in the busiest shopping district in the late 1980s or 1990s first brought underwear into the light. The strategic shadowing on the underwear, as narrated by Johnny, suggests the feel of the material against the skin, creating a “sensuousness usually associated with representations of women”.² In our conversations, our lived experiences were elicited, usually in shopping experiences. These fragmented texts, not linear in manner, weave themselves into a web of meanings, which speak with us³.

Although the search for an authentic self in poststructuralist terms is an impossible task, the notion of “finding a real self” drove both informants and researchers to keep moving, rewriting ourselves. Few informants declared that they know who they are; most of them nevertheless feel that the way they dress has become more static and consistent. They are unlikely to overhaul their method of dressing, although small modifications are possible, and will be consistently undertaken.

Issues related to being distinctively different could arise as early 7 years-old. Most Taiwanese elementary schools had uniforms for their students when our informants were growing up. However, some of them went to schools, elite and liberal, that did not regulate how students dress. Given this, some started embarking on a dressing project while still at school: they carefully selected branded shoes and outfits. Oftentimes, the choices were more reflexive of their mothers’ choice and social status. Their priorities were twofold: first, whether or not the dress code was to be western, or Japan imported through a prior announcement of upcoming visit to a culturally higher destination; or whether it was to be constituted through the selection of a brand known to their circles (Adidas or Nike) to establish the benchmark. If the project became more consistently undertaken, the accumulated impressions could paint a “branded” self.

² This description was originally used by two informants in different situations, which was surprisingly identical to the notion made in Kervin’s study (1990) on *Esquire*. This seems to suggest that my informants, to a large degree, share the dominant reading strategies.

³ As a researcher, I find myself changed as I was “engaged” in supporting my informants during our sequences of gathering and shopping experiences. Growing older (or becoming mature) apparently moves my informants and I from an external to an internal locus of evaluation in terms of our position in gender.

The long, contradictory and complicated process often is comprised of strategically introducing some brands not known to locals in combination with some well-branded items. However, of what feminine codes were these informants aware, when they began their projects? Were they mostly ones we had known for years? Why were some feminine codes incorporated, and some not? For instance, skirts remain an item that informants use exclusively for special occasion such as dragging.

Narrating Feminine Codes: Forms and Formats

1. Colors

Color is a significant dimension in narratives about the use of feminine qualities to perform a self, but this attribute should not be isolated from other qualities in discussion. For instance, pink or anything bright is generally considered "feminine." However, as mentioned earlier, it depends on how these colors appear or are coordinated with other elements. The colors chosen for trousers and shoes are limited: white shirts or socks are considered conventionally proper, but white trousers become feminine. Traditionally male colors on pants and shoes include black, blue, brown and Khaki colors, the others are seen as feminine.

"I found white pants quite girly. Due to its high-maintenance, it is not suitable for outdoors activities. Namely, it suggests that the wearer means to convey a sense of being domicile and neat."

"White pants look quite feminine. I think it take "guts" for a guy to wear...unless the pants come as a set of suits."

Shirts are granted a greater degree of freedom in terms of color selection. In fact, feminine codes were often first adopted in T-shirts as they offer a fertile site for experimenting. They are inherently non-sexual and easily disposable. Informants did not see such T-Shirts as feminine, unless otherwise suggested. Most informants have experimented with pink, orange, rainbow and bright green on T-shirts. Once pronounced as not successful, these experiments were withdrawn. Such experimentation could never happen with other components of dress due to their higher costs.

The second important feature is the degree of fit. Being tight and well-fitting is conventionally considered feminine, used to exaggerate the sexuality of body parts (e.g. breast or waist). As the performance of sexuality has become important among men, these strategies traditionally used to strengthen femininity are increasingly used. Tight shirts and pants were chosen by

some informants to celebrate their being in good shape. The uses, however, privilege some type of men but alienate others.

The use of tight clothes, in fact, was originally not as challenging to dominant masculinities in Taiwan due to its frequent use in sports, such as gymnastics and swimming. This historical backdrop offers a negotiable justification for research participants to rationalize their preference for tight clothes. However, the right to wear tight clothes is confined to those who desire to show off their sexuality.

"I always want to wear tight, but I am too chubby. The use is not well-suited. Dressing in loose clothes makes me look not as chubby."

"Skinny young men wearing tight would look quite effeminate...in some cases, if you are trying to emphasize being girl-like. I would not say it is a mistake, but I won't do it. This is not my type"

2. Purposely Decorative

The feminized practices of masculinities are linked with another attribute: the prevalent use of adornments. This practice is used to differentiate the younger generation (growing up in the 1990s) from an older one. There are varying degrees of risk involved in using accessories: neck or others. In our documented transcripts, necklaces, bracelets and earrings were frequently discussed. While the uses of necklaces, rings and bracelets were common among young Taiwanese men, they were once considered exclusively ritually related. The gold necklace was once associated with the rite of passage to adulthood (or a marital relationship), or religion. As our informants recalled, when the outdoors leisure activities and water sports became popular in the 1990s, a wide range of men's accessories that enabled young men to adorn their bare chests and feet became trendy. The popularity of the use of adornments has expanded beyond ritual or religion-related contexts. For example, the adornments were traditionally gold necklaces or coded-donuts in jade. However, with the change of leisure activities, a myriad of accessory items, ranging from translucent seed bead kits, to rainbow colored glass, and to silver-wired crystal, have mushroomed in the popular scene, allowing young men a rich range of adornments from which to select and negotiate. The adornments, according to a number of informants, have been a significant aspect of men's "liberation." Since their use has become acceptable, which are more feminine than others? Some informants interpret that femininity here lies in being "over-decorative." "If a necklace is small, colorful and fragmented, it is more for women." But, ultimately, our conversations came down to a proposition which

interrogates a key issue underlying these performances: “What’s wrong (or good) with being woman-like?” Despite variations in addressing the question, most informants say that it is good if you identify yourself as “woman-like.” However, if being a woman is not your dominant identity, the performance does not lead you to a place where you want to be. It is then considered bad.

Class, Globalization and Politics of Performing Feminized Masculinities

At the age of 6, Stan was aware of his grandmother’s ability to play piano gracefully, and its cultural connotation with *taste*. Although it was not uncommon for children to attend music lessons in his neighborhood, “boys” who learned and played piano well were few and far between. These intangible qualities were an important “backdrop” to convey a sense of culture, but as the story continues, in Stan’s memory, a model competition in his elementary school was what ultimately transformed his life. He became conscious of institutionalized fashionably proper dressing codes. Stan won a top-place model competition. He attributes his transformation not only to a growing awareness of dress codes, but to *all* the aforementioned cultural activities, including piano. These contributed to the leveraging of his *taste*, quickly paving a way for him into vanity world, however unconventionally. Yet, as a non-conformist (with an unconventional cultural *taste*), the laureate awarded to Stan was mixed with confrontations. Female classmates were usually more comfortable with these non-conformists than male classmates. Boys, according to some informants, had to negotiate their distance with a sense of masculinity and *taste*, and relocate their own position in the landscape of power. The unconventional etiquettes they displayed were mixed: sometimes honored in the aforementioned institutionalized process, mostly contradictory to the “hegemonic masculinities.” Piano playing, modeling and unconventional dressings are codes for taste.

While a modeling competition is an event that makes change, most narrators have learned a way of presenting themselves and distancing themselves by importing dressing codes from “higher authorities of fashion,” primarily Taipei or other imagined culturally “higher” sites such as France, Italy, Japan and the US. However, the globalized fashion signs imported are highly hierarchical. In other words, as one expresses one’s appropriation of feminine codes, French-imported often indicates a higher position than other countries of origin; whereas informants have engaged a complicated process of negotiation when encountering Japanese-imported signs: although the West is often symbolically higher, Japanese imported codes enjoys cultural proximity. It is thus good to be sissy in Japanese or French style, rather than

Taiwanese. Without using these imported codes, my informants were often confronted as “not culturally sissy” but as “betel nut beauties⁴” or cheap prostitutes roaming around small towns.

Nevertheless, most of our informants have picked out some unconventional “feminized” dressing codes from “higher, global” cultures from the time they were in elementary school; some later in middle high. For instance, Bob explained his visit to South Italy where men were dressed very colorfully (red pants and yellow suits...etc.). He started experimenting with these codes in an attempt to leverage his cosmopolitan *taste*. Although initially bitterly challenged as “lunatic” and “clown-like”, he eventually acquired the nickname “*Italian Auntie*” and subsequently repositioned himself in his class as a person with “character” and “fun,” thus likeable.

These turning points could be described as being something akin to the challenge and collapse, of a self. The sense of being threatened or insufficient inspires a realization that the internalized codes, beliefs, and attitudes from which one has built one’s sense of self are inherently flawed or wrong. The following showcases some narratives of such turning points.

“I don’t like the way locale dress. It is too decorative. The most importance of dressing is to dress at your comfort. I follow American style because it is simplistic sophisticate”

“The cheapies sold in Taiwanese night market are comfortable. Why do you need to buy Polo or Armani Exchange?”

“They are comfortable without a sense of design, whereas very few items in night market can have a competitive offering. My sojourning experiences in Canada taught me that a confident man is attractive.”

“How do you relate your presentation of confidence to the use of Polo?”

“I could tell the real from the cheapie now. I am no longer someone in the night market oblivious of these brands.”

The above retrospection illustrates how the knowledge of a global brand is used to boost an informants’ cosmopolitan image (in contrast to the mass of ignorance). Most informants witnessed a gradual change in men’s dressing. In another case, an informant, self-identified as feminine, made efforts

⁴ The term betel nut beauty refers to a common sight along roadsides in Taiwan: a young woman selling betel nuts and cigarettes from a brightly lit glass enclosure while wearing revealing clothing. Betel nut beauties often hail from agricultural and working-class sectors of Taiwanese society; their revealing dress has once criticized as a sign of exploitation.

purposely to follow conventional dressing codes and considered the performance of femininity as an asset for boys without “identity baggage.” Performing “feminized masculinities” would only be positive if it is well associated with a successful display of cultural capital. As a “sissy” boy, he knew he ought to launch a project to strengthen his sports, for instance, becoming good at ping-pong. Some other friends in his position would probably employ vulgar (thus manly) languages to compensate for their “inadequacy in masculinities.”

Conclusion: Feminized Masculinities in Post-capitalist Taiwanese Society

"Taste is what matters. If you have a good taste, you can wear cheapies remaining perceived as if you were in Prada. Without a good taste, it happens in the other way around." (The second author's grandfather)

By virtue of being placed at the margin of the post-capitalist economy, my informants often appeared as “destabilizing elements,” exemplified in the various ways of feminine performance. Nevertheless, the good, the odd and the ugly of “feminized masculinities” fashion is not in the eyes of beholder, rather, their narratives are at the forefront of critiquing dominant forms of knowing and unexamined assumptions to illustrate the process to how the interplay of class, ethnic, and biological order in the Taiwanese system reshaped the likelihood of performing a feminine “*Other*.” It is in such a context, for instance, a boy from poor family, failing academically, and disliked by teachers would be in a difficult position to apply the above-discussed feminine codes. These unconventional codes are easily demonized as “*lower others*” to some degree associated with outsiders, mostly South East Asian immigrants⁵. A few of my informants were straight-A students and well-liked by authority figures. Thus, with the importation of Western dressing codes, their performances of sissiness can sometimes be admired, or at least not bitterly challenged.

As recalled by most informants, these feminine codes have been gradually incorporated into their performances of Taiwanese masculinities since the 1990s when they were growing up. The newly constructed masculinities as a negotiated site have eclipsed the traditional presentation of maleness as mainly “aggressive and tough.” Rather, there is an inverted gaze upon their sites of performance where they, along with many “new Taiwanese men,”

⁵ Taiwan is one of the major destinations for labour migrants for many South East Asian countries. Most immigrants are from Vietnam, Thailand, Philippine and Indonesia working especially in the manufacturing and fisheries industries.

under the scrutiny of themselves want to be lean, clean and nude; just like the presentations of many male models in some advertising campaign, they are dressed with strong sexual connotations but unabashedly do not care that he is being surveyed. Over the decades the images of male models lying in bed with overwhelming male nudity and submissive laziness, akin to those ads in CK underwear campaigns, remained in informants' memories. Part of these commercial performance of masculinities may have been resulted from the commercial triumph of the gay aesthetic first introduced to the mainstream by Calvin Klein (Dyer,1982, Bordo, 1999). Some informants reflect upon their lived experience, deeming that an incredible pleasure mobilizes virtually every many young urban men to become lean, fit and CK model like so they can join the game of gazing and being gazed at. My informants admittedly materialized their masculinities through the uses of highly eroticized underwear, nudity, cleanliness and light-colored outfits, wishing to "be pleurably gazed at and wanted" just like a male model. While the CK's and other fashion campaigns were often discussed, Japanese men's fashion magazines that coach young men to dress fashionably were also widely followed. As discussed in the conversations, informants drew pleasure not only from "being gazed" but also from the opportunity to "see other's admirations, just like many male models walking along the catwalk."

Similar to other forms of globalization of popular culture, the examination of fashion reveals that the construction of masculinities has moved beyond a nation-based modernity; Individuals now seem to be, more than ever, prone to articulate complex affiliations, meaningful attachments and multiple allegiances (Connell 2005, Shiau, 2008a). While the "feminization of masculinity" tends to reduce young Taiwanese men into passive, commodified bodies, this study, however, wants to view their uses of feminine aesthetics more in terms of assertions of non-conventional masculine identities, which are made possible by distancing themselves from the socially ascribed masculine value connotations practiced by the older generations. These life narratives are illuminating in illustrating how the notion of "feminized male fashion" emerged in ongoing multiple processes of interactive performances: internally, with individual rehearsed life scripts loosely related to their biological bodies, while externally, their performativity is policed by social norms, and, in the event of personal posing, linguistic capacity and anticipated institutional requirement. As Felluga (2006) suggests in reference to Judith Butler, "our most personal acts are, in fact, continually being scripted by hegemonic social conventions and ideologies", and the transitions of performance of fashion illustrate these multiple interactive processes.

Finally, this paper is written from a conviction that emphasis in the study of fashion should be placed on how individuals respond to the holistic media ecology (Shiau, 2008a,b). Rather than simplistically viewing these cultural labors as being circumscribed by a capitalist society with an ultimate goal to propagate consumption, attention should be paid to see how consumers write and rewrite their lived experience, and possible transformations and empowerments. In this sense, this project is an initiative to showcase how new actors, local or global, come into play in the popular cultural scene in the quest for identity. The employment of feminine aesthetics and strategies has enabled us to refute silently imposed ideological assignments and cultural expectations to reproduce the conventional masculine order in the post-capitalist Taiwanese society.

Along the same line, this research calls for a change of academic paradigm, to better enable the understanding of how sexuality is performed, by investigating the life narratives of symbol bearers themselves. A large scale study is called for to advance academic understanding regarding the implication of processes of race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, class and national origin in the formulation of feminized masculinities in postmodern capitalist societies.

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