

BOOK REVIEW

Vamping the Stage: Female Voices of Asian Modernities

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This edited book describes the various activities and subjectivities of Asian female singers, and their forms of agency in ongoing struggles and negotiation with the social circumstances that have surrounded by them from the early twentieth century until today, following the historical accumulation of one hundred years of Asian popular music. The word “VAMP” in the title of this book, not only has a literal meaning, but also constitutes the abbreviation of the Voice of Asian Modernity Project. This book is a collection of the project papers that relate to the main theme of this book: female singers in Asian popular music. As stated by the editors, it is significant that this is the first book to offer a historical and comparative examination of women and popular music in Asia. According to my review of the development of gender studies in the field of music, I believe this book is a must-read, equivalent to significant books such as *Women and Music in Cross-Cultural Perspectives*, edited by Ellen Koskoff in 1987, and *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality*, which was written by Susan McClary in 1991.

In the introductory chapter, the editors address the following themes: the historical and cultural conditions, the relationship between female singers and the modern media, esthetic forms and practices, and the meanings about women and gendered relations. Further difficulties do emerge in this kind of study. First, the editors point out that as a term, “Asia” is not limited to suggesting a geographical imagination. As a scholar of Asian area studies focusing on India, whenever I hear this term, I am immediately reminded of another, “Orientalism,” as defined by Edward Said, along with its ideological implications. We must inevitably consider colonial experiences that resulted from the unequal power relations between Asia and Europe, and we can easily identify the influences of colonial rule anywhere, even in the postcolonial globalizing world.

This perception also leads to consideration of the term, “modernity,” which the editors carefully use in its plural form (“modernities”) in the subtitle of this book. Here, “modernity” is explained as both a discursive construct and an experimental project within Asia. I argue that the political implications of the unequal power relations that still exist between the colonized and the colonizer, the East and the West, Asia and Europe, or the Orient and the Occident, might be weakened if modernity is ambiguously defined. Although it is natural for people’s experiences to be varied according to their social circumstances, and I agree that we should not essentialize “modernity” according to a Euro-American model, we should not forget that the practical reality is the common experience of colonized Asians.

This point is also closely related to gender issues in Asia. Women are often relegated to a position characterized not by “modernity” but “tradition.” We can find numerous examples: unmarried women who are accompanied by men, housewives who subscribe to western fashion, and educated women who assert themselves. As a whole, westernized women in the public sphere have often been criticized by conservatives as those who rebel against tradition, social norms, and even the national identity. In this sense, some scholars have noted that women are often ignored or left out of accounts of

modernity. However, the scholars contributing to this book have endeavored to describe female singers as powerful individuals with their “own voice,” while also highlighting their marginalized histories.

Several projects have focused on female subjectivities and their agencies using various approaches to examine global modernity. Substantial difficulties emerge in such projects, as women have rarely left a personal account of themselves; they have instead frequently been discussed by others collectively, as “women” but not as individuals. Although we can recognize that female singers with fame and a professional skill owing to their own unique expression are accustomed to having a voice in public (unlike ordinary women), those same voices off-stage might be “silent” (or silenced), in which case, they must engage in the performance of conventional characters that the audience expects them to perform, which are often objectified by the male gaze. Most scholars who contributed to this book also depend on an analysis of lyrics composed by others, as well as gossip columns, articles, and other accounts appearing in magazines, newspapers, and other media that were written and spoken by critics, fans, the audience, and other entities. Many years passed before female singers were able to obtain the means of expressing themselves with their own authentic voice. Thus, research on Asian female pop singers addresses three issues affected by unequal power relations: Asia, modernity, and gender.

Following its introductory chapter, the book is divided into four parts, each of which includes three or four chapters following the introductory chapter. Part I is titled “Triumph and Tragedies of the Colonized Voice: Colonial Modernity, Commodification, and the Circulation of Women’s Voices,” and includes papers on Chinese singers who appear in films (two chapters), Malay women singers, and migrant comfort women from East Asia. Part II is titled “Modern Stars and Modern Lives: Nation, Memory, and the Politics of Gender,” and includes papers on Japanese Diva Hibari Misora, a famous Indonesian pop singer, and a female playback singer of South India. Part III is titled, “Silenced Voices and Forbidden Modernities: Censorship, Morality, and the National Identity” and includes papers on the female singers of South Korea, a post-Islamic pop diva in Malaysia, and an Iranian female singer. Part IV is titled, “Body Politics and Discourses of Femininity: Image, Sexuality, and the Body” and includes papers on Filipina female singers from the time period of 1913–1972, a Javanese female singer who is described in print media, South Korean dance divas, and the virtual idol Hatsune Miku in Japan.

As we can see from the above chapters, the papers are ordered almost chronologically, beginning with those situated in colonial times (the first half of the twentieth century or the prewar era), then the era characterized by the postcolonial struggle with modernization following the independence of particular Asian countries (1950s–1970s), followed by the next stage of identity exploration during the era of nation-building (1960s–1980s), and finally, the era of the postmodern globalizing world (1980s onward). In terms of geography, more papers are focused on East Asia (China, Japan, and Korea) and Southeast Asia (Indonesia, the Philippines, and Malaysia) but fewer focus on South Asia (one on India) and West Asia (one on Iran). This may suggest that academic research on Asian popular music has been mainly led by English-speaking scholars focused on the study of East Asia. Given that South Asia is my main field, I can observe that not only are playback singers typical in Indian film-making but various types of female singers have attracted large audiences because the popular music industry has independently evolved in India since the early twentieth century. Although a number of English-speaking scholars in India are involving themselves in *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, one reason fewer papers are published on South Asia may be related to the fact that studies on the popular culture of contemporary India are dominated by film studies, since the film industry in India is the most prolific in the world in terms of productivity.

In addition to the above, I would like to comment on the relationship among gender, religion, and geography, which comprise as my primary area of study, although I cannot discuss each paper in this review. I also regret that there is only one paper on the so-called Middle East countries, which scholars may consider to be located between Asia and Europe, the very area of confrontation between the Orient and the Occident, about which Said conceived the idea of his book, *Orientalism*. Furthermore, it is important to highlight that Muslims are in the majority in this area; the paper on an Iranian singer reveals her fame during the prerevolutionary era and her silence after the

revolution. Due to the segregation of women and the negative view of music, popular music industries are typically difficult to develop; female singers face discrimination and exclusion from the scene in Islamic countries. Nevertheless, a few well-known female divas have emerged, such as Umm Kulthum in Egypt and Fairuz in Lebanon. It is quite interesting to note that in Chapter 9, the Malaysian pop diva Siti's commercial success with religious songs was formally certified as *halal* (permissible). I wonder whether it would be possible to recognize a *halal* entertainer like Siti in stricter Islamic countries. How are Arab nations characterizing Umm Kulthum among increasingly fundamental Muslims today?

I am somewhat perplexed as to why the editors decided to include the last chapter, which focuses on Hatsune Miku, as this particular phenomenon has no subjectivity and is instead merely a software operated by those who purchase it. Although I agree that it is important for popular music studies to research the creation of virtual idols based on individual user preferences, we should introduce different perspectives to analyze this phenomenon. In particular, we should focus on those who operate Hatsune Miku. In this sense, the distinction that was made previously between idols and fans could be transformed into more ambiguous and multitiered relations mediated by an operable idol. The main themes of this book (female singers' subjectivities and agencies in Asia at the time of modernization) do not emerge from the software itself but through the operators, whose gender is not always recognized by the public. I think that this topic should have been treated as another project.

However, there can be no doubt that this book provides various ideas and inspirations for carrying out further projects on musical performance, gendered relations and Asian modernities.