

Resemantizing Gender Stereotypes: Reproductions, Experiments and Challenges in China and Japan.

Editors' Introduction

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Gender is at the center of public debate all over the world. In Euro-American societies, it is particularly evident how a rollback on gender-based rights, anti-discrimination policies, and liberatory movements is a fundamental part of reactionary or ‘populist’ agendas. At the same time, those very nondiscriminatory policies, including Diversity, Equality and Inclusion (DEI) frameworks, have been used as instruments for pink- and rainbow-washing by governments, institutions, and corporations, easily cast aside at a turn in the sociopolitical climate. Furthermore, waging ‘culture wars’ based on identity politics is increasingly showing its limitations. In fact, they end up being either a means for conservative forces to gain political advantage or an attempt by progressive movements to combat discrimination through symbolic, cultural, or moral change in politics, education, and society at large. Both sides obscure (or conveniently distract from) the material and socioeconomic roots of the problem, such as the need to respond to the demographic crisis, and make up for the reduction of public welfare by firmly reestablishing the family, which is based on women’s domestic labor, as the site for the reproduction of the domestic workforce. Gender stereotypes emerge as the cultural canonization of patriarchal gender hierarchies that prop up a certain mode of production, piling up on stereotypes left over by previous societies. Clearly then, in the process outlined above, which is going on today, gender stereotypes are not simply reproposed, but also subjected to processes of resemantization.

Although less visible in the media and the public debate, the same concerns are present in East Asia as well. This special issue of *DIVE-IN*, a journal devoted precisely to questions of diversity and inclusion (also from a critical perspective), aims to address these pressing contemporary issues, starting with the examples of China and Japan. We are convinced that they are extremely valid cases to increase our understanding of how gender stereotypes are rearticulated, repropounded and ultimately resemantized in a crucial part of Asia, and particularly in one country – Japan – that is generally considered the most ‘westernized’ of East Asia, and another – China – that is increasingly advancing an alternative modality of capitalist rule. Furthermore, they help us expand that understanding, both geographically, by taking us beyond the Euro-American hemisphere, and thematically, by identifying the particular/local cultural and social aspects on which these processes hinge. Ultimately, these cases highlight the transnational and transcultural character of the processes of resignification of gender roles and stereotypes. East Asia is often a ‘mirror’ that “blows a model, which is also our own, out of proportion”, as the late journalist Angela Pascucci wrote with reference to China (Pascucci 2013: 131).

Throughout the 20th century and the early decades of the 21st century, Asian societies have been through processes of articulation and rearticulation of gender stereotypes and roles. The different patterns of modernity experienced by Asian countries have impacted the speed, dynamics, and actors of these processes, particularly with reference to women’s function within the family and their participation in the labor-force (Ochiai 2020). Contestations of erstwhile established models of gender disparity based on cultural tradition (Mann & Cheng 2021) have also been substantially different: while Japan has seen significant bottom-up participation (Mandujano-Salazar 2016), China has grappled with the complex legacy of a state that promoted top-down emancipatory policies until the 1970s before repropounding traditional family roles following the market reforms of the 1980s and marginalizing women’s and feminist groups in the wake of the authoritarian turn in the last decade or so (Zhu & Xiao 2021).

In general, in both China and Japan, the processes of emancipation that characterized the second half of the 20th century are now counterbalanced by state-enforced policies that go in the opposite direction. These policies, responding to population declines or to actual or perceived shifts in family models, aim to reaffirm pre-existing stereotypes in the form of hegemonic masculinity and subservient femininity (see, e.g., Nakamura 2023; Song & Hird 2013; Wu & Dong 2019).

In China, the increasing age at which women are choosing to marry corresponds with a cultural (particularly media-driven) reproduction of the image of women as wives and caretakers (Sun 2004; Feldshuh 2018). This phenomenon is compounded by the stigma surrounding so-called ‘leftover women’, i.e. those who are unmarried and childless (Fincher 2014). Particularly over the last decade, this discourse has been joined by concerns about a supposed ‘masculinity crisis’ in Chinese society, which is thought to exacerbate the demographic challenges (Song 2021). Stereotypes of femininity and masculinity are reproduced amongst LGBT+ individuals and relationships as well (Zheng 2015) and, almost paradoxically in a country where gender non-conforming subjects are still marginalized, even in surreptitious forms of ‘transnormativity’ (Ma 2025).

In Japan, it is worth noting how the economic crisis that began in the 1990s significantly altered the social fabric, contributing to population aging, declining birth rates and a growing distrust of the state. Unsurprisingly, during this period, women became the targets of harsh criticism as more and more of them expressed reluctance to marry and have children (Kingston 2016). Today, more than twenty years later, it is significant to observe how certain forms of media-driven discrimination persist, perpetuated by those in power (notably the political and economic elites) through gender stereotypes (Saitō 2007). It is important to highlight that these stereotypes also apply in distinct ways to men (SturtzSreetharan 2017; Vitucci 2023).

Against this background, this special issue draws on and expands a fruitful and engaging discussion that took place at the workshop on “Resemantizing Gender Stereotypes in 21st-Century Asian Societies: Reproductions, Experiments and Challenges in China and Japan”, held at the University of Bologna on 19 March 2025 and organized by the Department of Modern Languages, Literatures and Cultures. The six scholarly articles included in the issue, emphasizing suggestions raised during the workshop, analyze recent reproductions of stereotypes surrounding femininity, masculinity, gender conformity and non-conformity, and sexuality, as well as cases or experiments of resistance and questioning. To maintain an interdisciplinary approach that is vital to capture the complexity of the issues scrutinized here, the articles move across a variety of fields – cultural studies, film, literature, media, and translation. Finally, although we focus on present-day societies and how gender stereotypes are resemantized in the contemporary environment, the issue is also based on a solid understanding of how they originated and evolved throughout history.

In line with this overarching approach, Sabrina Ardizzoni's essay, "From Confucian Archetype to Neoliberal Resemantization: The Resurgence of the Ideal 'Good Wife and Wise Mother' (Xiánqī Liángmǔ) in Contemporary China" investigates the genealogy of the quintessential concept for women's confinement to domestic reproductive labor in China's historical culture and how it is reused today by the state and within society, also provoking critical responses within society. Setting off from a chronologically closer period to us but still adopting a rigorous historical perspective, Marco Taddei's "Homoerotic Desire and Masculine Identity in Tachibana Sotō's Narrative" examines little-known literary works by writer Tachibana Sotō and how he managed to skillfully employ fictional literature to negotiate homosexual desire in 20th-century Japan, particularly connecting to the tradition of homoeroticism present in Japanese culture (itself, however, not devoid of stereotypes). In "To My Dear Friend: Furuhashi Teiji's 1992 Letter and the Subversion of AIDS", Marco Del Din connects to yet another dimension of stereotypes, namely their resemantization during the tragic AIDS pandemic, and explores a case of their subversion through the outspoken and transgressive work of the artist Furuhashi Teiji, which maintains a certain topicality. What these articles variously demonstrate is that the evolution of gender stereotypes is not linear, nor does it necessarily move from a condition of oppression to one of liberation, but is fundamentally dependent on structural and societal processes, where artists, activists and other actors attempt to carve out spaces to question or negotiate the prevailing gender hierarchies.

Engaging with pressingly contemporary contexts, a sociolinguistic perspective is adopted by Francesco Vitucci with reference to the depiction of foreign women in Japanese TV news. His article, "Resurgences of Women's Language in Japanese TV News: Shirabete Mitara and the Representation of Foreign Women", shows how the bodies of foreigners themselves are subjected to a process of resemantization that places them within the stereotypical image of femininity, actively excluding alternative possibilities. There are, however, examples of contestation and agency by those oppressed by persisting stereotypes. In "(Not) Becoming Mothers: Fertility Intentions and Reproductive Agency During the Three-child Policy", Cristina Manzone investigates how Chinese feminist activists online have responded to the shifting policies on fertility and family amidst China's growing demographic crisis and the abolition of the (in)famous one-child policy, elaborating on what she considers the disjuncture between ordinary Chinese families' (and women's) material conditions and the traditional cultural and societal imperatives, now

picked up again by the state. Last but not least, Martina Renata Prosperi's essay, "A Time that Goes Nowhere: The Resemantization of Time as an All-Human Language in Zheng Xiaoqiong's Poetry and Our Contemporaneity", elaborates on the powerful verses of Chinese poet Zheng Xiaoqiong to point out how the resemantization of gender is carried out through a complex construction of time and rhythm that ultimately reveals interdependent ways of life for all human – and living – beings.

Complementing these contributions, the issue features an interview with another Chinese poet, Zhang Huijun, conducted by Martina Benigni. Setting off from Zhang's latest collection, the interview discusses the presence of gender stereotypes in the field of poetic construction in China and the spaces for women-authored poetry to question them.

We will use the closing words of this introduction to express our belief that, given the worldwide relevance of themes such as the demographic crisis and the resurgence of gender stereotypes, this project will serve as an exploratory step towards developing future collaborative research initiatives, also involving other areas and regions.

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