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## GENDER AND ASIA: WHY STUDY MEDIA CULTURE?

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# Gender and Asia: Why Study Media Culture?

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## Resumen

Este artículo explora la experiencia cotidiana con los media de las mujeres en los países asiáticos, en contraposición a los enormes cambios y transiciones sociales. Los medios implican los complejos procesos del cambio y la transición social, desde el comportamiento de la vida diaria a la comprensión reflexiva del mundo global, o a la construcción de una nueva identidad y una constante tensión en su expresión dentro del día a día. Este artículo proporciona un análisis crítico de las consecuencias emergentes del consumo mediático en la vida diaria de las mujeres, en un momento en que los contextos políticos, económicos y tecnológicos son cada vez más globales. Se argumenta que la globalización de los media en Asia necesita ser reconocida como un recurso que se propaga, indispensable, altamente complejo y contradictorio para la construcción de la identidad dentro de la experiencia de la vida cotidiana

## Palabras clave

Media, género, Asia, consumo, reflexividad

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## Abstract

This article explores women's everyday experience of the media in Asian countries in confrontation with huge social change and transition. The media involve the complex processes of social change and transition – from the conduct of everyday life, to the reflexive understanding of a global world, to the construction of a new identity and a constant tension in its expression within the everyday. This article provides a critical analysis of the emerging consequences of media consumption in women's everyday life at a time when the political, economic and technological contexts are becoming increasingly global. It argues that the media globalization in Asia needs to be recognized as a proliferating, indispensable, yet highly complex and contradictory resource for the construction of identity within the lived experience of everyday life.

## Keywords

Media, gender, Asia, consumption, reflexivity

## **GENDER AND ASIA: WHY STUDY MEDIA CULTURE?**

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### **Everyday Reflexivity and the Media**

The notion of reflexivity has, since the mid-1980s, been a crucial issue for social researchers in Western academic debates – notably in critical ethnography (Clifford and Marcus, 1986) and feminist epistemology (Skeggs, 1995) – emphasizing the necessity of reflecting on the conditions (e.g. power relations) under which knowledge is produced. But what about the reflexivity of ordinary people? What about women in a culture (e.g. Asia) where repression is supposed to be pervasive? What is it about the globally connected media world that provides openings for everyday people to make sense of their lives in critical ways? Here I set out to consider reflexivity as the major mechanism of grasping a relationship between globalization, as a mediated cultural force, and experience, since I argue it is precisely reflexivity that is at work in the everyday experience of global media culture (for details, see Kim, 2005, 2008).

Reflexivity is an everyday practice. It is intrinsic to human activity, since human beings routinely keep in touch with the grounds of what they do, what they think, and what they feel as a circular feedback mechanism. But there is a different and significant process in contemporary everyday life, which has changed the very nature of reflexivity by providing conditions for increased capacities for reflexivity “in the light of new information or knowledge” (Giddens, 1991). This reflexivity involves the routine incorporation of new information or knowledge into environments of action that are thereby reconstituted or reorganized. Everyday people have the ability to reflect on the social conditions of their existence and to

change them accordingly, going beyond traditional markers and the givens of social order (Beck *et al.*, 1994).

The question, however, is, to what extent and in what ways? Whose reflexivity? This reflexivity is experienced differently by different social subjects in different social locations, defining those societies as distinctive. Reflexivity should not be understood as a universal capacity of subjects, or a generalized experience that cuts across social divides, but should be understood in specific life world contexts, where reflexivity arises unevenly and often ambiguously with competing reflexivities. There is a need to recognize situated reflexivity, specifying the different experiences of reflexivity situated within different social spaces. The degrees of reflexivity and its particular character and content may differ in Asia – stronger and weaker, emotional and rational, positive and negative in its implications – since it is mediated by a remarkably high level of education in a Confucian society (Kim, 2005: 195-202), operates at a more collective, rather than individual, level than in the West, and it can also be influenced by the lack of the reflexive forms of media representations in a relatively rigid society (Kim, 2008).

The media are central to everyday reflexivity – the capacity to monitor action and its contexts to keep in touch with the grounds of everyday life, self-confront uncertainties and understand the relationships between cause and effect, yet never quite control the complex dynamics of everyday life. The significance of everyday life, its particular character and distinctiveness, is taken to be a context for understanding the dynamics of media consumption and the complexities of socio-cultural change in contemporary Asian societies. It is in the everyday that the functional and the cultural dimensions of the media are worked through, by various ways in which women engage with and incorporate the media into the familiar,

ordinary and more or less secure routines of their everyday life, while constructing relationships and meanings within it (Kim, 2005, 2006).

Four dimensions, at least, can be highlighted concerning the significance of everyday life and its relationship to media consumption. First, everyday life is the domain where economic and material as well as cultural and symbolic resources are made available or not in order to engage meaningfully with the surrounding world. It is the ordinariness of the everyday where the different portions of power and resources, their presence or absence, and the significance of such difference and inequality largely determined by social structure, are most keenly felt in its invisibility. Everyday life is thus a site of struggle. The trivial and petty side of life, the humble and disappointing aspects of social praxis, the suffering and the “misery of everyday life” (Lefebvre, 1971: 35) are a battleground, in which a dialectical relationship between the dominating and the dominated is displayed in tension.

Second, however, it is also the domain of everyday life where the individual and collective capacities of people to create their own life world are realized and achieved through everyday practices, albeit with different power and resources. It is in everyday life that genuine “creations” are achieved, those creations which people produce as part of the process of becoming human; the human life world which is not defined simply by historical, ideological and political super-structures, by totality or society as a whole, but defined by this intermediate and mediating level of everyday life or the “power of everyday life” (Lefebvre, 1971: 37). Everyday life is both structured and structuring, making and remaking meaning, while acknowledging its dynamics and possibilities for transformation.

The media are among sources of the creations, the working out of significance in everyday practices. They give shape to the social and cultural environments of everyday life and provide a framework for making sense of the world; herein lies the possibility of a multitude of meanings to emerge and circulate. The circulation and movement of meaning, or mediation (Martin-Barbero, 1993), involves a constant yet dialectical transformation of meaning with consequences, whether intended or unintended, significant or insignificant. The significance of media consumption practices can be understood as a creative, dynamic and transformative process, often involving active and intended engagement.

Third, it is within the sphere of everyday life that people create and sustain their own experiences, both lived and mediated, in many different and specific ways. The media are central to contemporary everyday experience – as a mediating, not determining, process through which people constitute and reconstitute experiences in their distinctiveness within a shared, yet contested and highly differentiated social space governed by different power, resources and constraints. This often invisible and taken-for-granted category of experience should be made visible and confronted to understand how subjects are constituted as different, how they operate differently, how they contest the workings of given ideological systems; in other words, to politically rework the “project of making experience visible” (Scott, 1992). The purpose of this project is to manifest this easily ignored hidden world that has been suppressed, and to open new possibilities of the challenges of the experiences and activities in the ordinariness of the world.

Finally, it is within the sphere of everyday life where ordinary and taken-for-granted experiences and activities emerge as a significant and defining characteristic of what takes place in society as a whole, its social transformations. What takes place

in the everyday life of people within society is a crucial determinant of what makes the society as a whole, which leads to an understanding of what lies behind cultural change, the cause and consequence of this progressive, or possibly regressive, mediation of everyday life (Silverstone, 2005). To understand a contested process of cultural change and a fundamental characterization of the nature of such change, it is necessary to look at and understand what people are doing in their everyday lives and in their relationships to the media – where and how meanings are created and contested, structures are accepted and challenged, and the possibility of change emerging in that tension. Although media consumption may not lead to dramatic social or political change in the short run, and although the importance of the transformations generated by the media in the long run are problematically obscured by the attention to short-run immediate effects (Martin-Barbero, 2003), people’s mundane changes, imagination and critical reflection triggered by the media and expressed in the practices of everyday life can be the basis of social constitution (Kim, 2008).

For example, the following data from my ethnographic research (Korean middle-class women in their 20s) demonstrate that reflexivity is an integral process of media talk and the women’s reflection upon their self and their world is the major element of the experience of the media in everyday life (for details, see Kim, 2005, 2006).

“English is a must for employment (in Korea). I withdrew from the university for one year and went to Australia for an English course. To brush up English now, I keep the TV on and listen to CNN, drama, movies. Who would find CNN interesting? But it’s good for a listening practice. I don’t find American drama interesting, but it’s best for learning spoken English”.

“The completion of an English course abroad is a boost on the employment resume. So many students travel to America, Canada, Europe. In this globalizing society it may sound strange if you haven’t been abroad. You have to travel abroad to join the conversation”.

Transnational culture today tends to be tied to the job market; it is more or less “occupational culture” (Hannerz, 1990: 243). The compulsory requirement of English in the contemporary job market means that English, as a language of global modernity and a means of making a living, has become a crucial precondition for the women’s attainment of work and quest for economic independence. As a consequence, these young women go on learning and speaking English, whether they like it or hate it. English has emerged as a new form of cultural capital in globalizing modern Korea. Learning English and involving themselves with wider Western culture through travel and global television is a distinctive characteristic of the lives of young middle-class women. Their openness towards new cultural experience is increasingly self-reflexive, characterized by a search for “differences” rather than universalities. What is common to this experience is a “learning of the self” that is reflexively interpreted and understood by a contrast between imagined (Western) freedom and practical (Korean) constraints. The following extract illustrates what they mean by Western free lifestyles, and its details reveal some of the constraints on being free in Korean society:

“In *Friends* (an American comedy drama), they often get together in the coffee shop and chat sitting comfortably on the sofa. None of them seem to worry about life or work. Everyday life is just ha-ha-ho-ho happy and simple. They don’t seem to have a nice job, yet life is jolly. The long blond works in the coffee shop as a waitress. The tall stupid woman sings stupid songs. Did they go to university? Probably they

did, they don't look smart though. In Korean society, if we are a university graduate and work in a coffee shop, people will think of us as a total loser. Not to mention parents' fury, "Have I sent you to university to see you work in a coffee shop?" None of their parents seem to compel, "Quit fooling around, get married and settle down!" In their culture it seems OK to fool around and enjoy a life. Because nobody interferes in their life. I like such free social atmosphere".

This manifests the media's great capacity for evoking reflexivity in an endless chain of referentiality, intersected with the microcosm of everyday life. In the context of new cultural experiences, Korean ways of life and traditional norms are interrogated and criticized. Young middle-class women commonly criticize Korean gender models and appropriate forms of behaviour predicated on rigidly defined matrimonial roles, middle-class family expectations and direct parental control. On the other hand, they derive new interpretations of life through the Western image of free lifestyles. Significantly, their yearning for Western freedom is crystallizing around the meaning of "individualization" that is fundamentally incompatible with traditional family values:

"I like Western people's free individualistic life. They are making their own life, while we are making life for others".

"I hate the (Korean) car commercial. It's so stupid – "My husband wanted to remodel the kitchen for me, but I wanted to get him a new car instead. For my husband's confidence". Then, the husband drives a car and the wife happily leans on his shoulder. I hate that commercial. I would earn money on my own, change the kitchen on my own, and drive my own car!"

By imagining different ways of living and being through the reflexive experience of the media, these young women struggle to invent a more self-responsible, self-determined, "emancipatory life politics" (Giddens, 1991: 214), a politics of self-actualization, which is no longer obligatory and embedded in traditional gendered roles. It is a struggle to break free from the fixities of social rules, norms and expectations to discover a new self: "How should I live?" "What do I want in life?" This search for a new identity is played out in the midst of trans-cultural experience, in heightened awareness of thoughts and feelings. The intensified self-reflexivity signals a deliberately hopeful movement, a transformative quest for individualization.

### **Female Individualization and the Media**

To what extent do women have control over their lives? How do the media intersect with imagining different lives for women? The troubling signs of female individualization as intersected with everyday media culture have become a new arena of anxiety for women in contemporary Asia (for details, see Kim, 2010, 2012). Signs of female individualization have been proliferating as a defining feature of contemporary modes of identity, albeit untenable and ambivalent, within the discursive regime of self – embodied in regulatory practices in society where individualism is not placed at the heart of its culture. Arguably, the media are central to the signs of emergent cultures of female individualization producing the alternative social, cultural and symbolic relations women wish to live within and define the kind of self they wish to become. Seeming suggestions of individualization are encountered, mediated through popular media imaginaries that are present and often intentionally used as resources for reflexivity and self-imagining. This also provides a condition for an increased awareness of cultural differences and of women's own

positions in relation to global Others, new symbolic objects of identification and contestation.

From the 1980s onward, women in Asia have gained higher levels of education and the commensurate expectations have become a driving motor in the women's aspirations for work, economic power, independence, freedom and self-fulfilment. However, women often experience gendered labour market inequity setting limits on patterns of participation, women's socio-economic position on the margins of work systems, and thus the illusion of the language of choice that the new capacities of education appear to promise. The enlargement of choice can be particularly illusory for women in contemporary Asia, where gendered socio-economic and cultural conditions persist and continue to structure labour market outcomes and lifestyles.

For example, in contemporary Korea, 95.3% of women go to high school and 63% of the women go on to higher education. High school education in Japan has also reached equal levels for men (96.0%) and women (96.7%), and 45.3% of the women advance to higher education (for details, see Kim, 2012). Young women in urban China, who were born in the era of the single-child policy with the emphasis on individual success, become the focus of parental expectations and the products of a fiercely competitive education system, in which gender difference is not recognized. There is greater gender equality in education and the expansion of educational opportunities for urban middle-class women; therefore, gender inequality is often thought to be diminished or non-existent at the educational level of the urban middle class.

Despite the impressive level of higher education in Korea, only 46.7% of female university graduates are employed, mostly in traditional female tracks, non-managerial and secretarial

positions in small firms. A wage differential of 76% compared to male wages gives Korean women little economic security. Japanese women in full-time employment earn only 65% of male wages, far from being economically rewarding or emotionally fulfilling. Japan's male-dominated labor system divides recruits into "career track position" and "general clerical work", with 80% of women being hired in the second category. The perception of education has become "consumption", a thing to be consumed by Japanese women without any expectations as to the consequences. Middle-class women in urban China have to compete for jobs in a post-socialist context, in which gender difference, officially denied in their school years, seems "suddenly very pronounced".

Increasingly, educated women are choosing to invest their resources into their career, rather than into marriage and family. The average age of marriage for Japanese women increased from 24.5 in 1975 to 28.5 in 2008, making Japan one of the latest-marrying populations in the world. Non-marriage for women has become common in many urban areas of East Asia (Jones, 2005). The total fertility rate for Asia as a whole dropped from approximately 6 children per woman in the period 1950-1955 to approximately 2.7 children per woman by 1995-2000 (Chan and Yeoh, 2002). Low fertility countries are characterized by low gender equity, robust marriage institution and strong familism (Suzuki, 2008). Korea, a typical case, shows one of the world's lowest birth rates, 1.15 (KWDI, 2009), as a growing number of women delay marriage/family life in pursuit of employment and self-actualization. Amid these transformations, divorce rates have increased, although in some countries more radically and more quickly than in others. The Korean divorce rate has rapidly increased from 5.8% in 1980, to 11.1% in 1990, 16.8% in 1995, 33% in 2000, and almost 50% today (KWDI, 2009). Since the 1990s the divorce rate in

China has increased quickly in urban cities, Beijing (39%) and Shanghai (38%) today (*Sina*, 2010).

The rise of female individualization, albeit complex and often contradictory, has been reflected in, and enabled by, the gendered socio-economic change as discussed above – higher levels of educational attainment than ever before, labor market participation, delayed marriage and non-marriage, declining fertility, increasing divorce rates and family break-down. These indicators of family-at-risk represent visible and provisional, if not permanent, cases of individualization. The social transformations in many parts of contemporary urban Asia appear to engender similar trends and consequences of individualization, which is notably linked to Western/European social theory in the processes of second modernity (Beck, 1992) or liquid modernity (Bauman, 2001) of post-traditional society (Giddens, 1991).

The notion of individualization in Western theory of reflexive modernization is seen as an ongoing shift from a traditional gender role-oriented, collective, normal biography to a labor market-steered, elective, do-it-yourself biography, or an extended, Others-related, reflexive project of self. Women are now released from traditional gender roles, and find themselves forced to build up a “life of their own” by way of the labor market, training and mobility (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). Confronted with a plurality of choices, individuals’ life politics is organized around an increasingly reflexive and calculable mode of thinking to colonize the future with some degree of success (Giddens, 1991). At the heart of life politics lie enterprising agents, who strategically plan, avidly self-monitor and manage a life of their own. Crucially, this do-it-yourself biography is planned around labor market freedom in a neo-liberal economy emphasizing the importance of a flexible labor market and competition (Beck, 1992). This tends to

intensify the fluidity of human relationships not only at work but also at home, including intimate relationships (Bauman, 2001). With the rise of post-familial families, the individual is becoming the basic unit of social reproduction. Family members form an elective relationship or a permanent do-it-yourself project, shifting from traditional expectations of “being there for others” to contemporary notions of “living one’s own life” as a free and independent individual (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002).

What does it mean to be a free and independent individual in Asian societies today? There is no doubt that, with higher educational attainment and assumed empowerment, women in Asia are seeking to plan a life of their own with a greater capacity for the reflexive project of self. It is the educational achievement that engenders a fundamental shift towards the choice of individualization departing from a normative female biography. The language of choice obscures the ongoing existence of gender inequalities, the highly exclusionary and regulatory function of the labor market in structuring the opportunities and identities available to women. Enduring inequalities in the labor market intimately linked to family and care work further impede the logics and possibilities of female individualization. The neo-liberal idea of the market, individualized, subject is ultimately an economically viable and single individual unfettered by family and care work. Surely, women in contemporary Asia still take much more responsibility for the unpaid work of family care than men, not necessarily being released from gender fates or moving towards more equal, flexible and democratic relationships between women and men, and within families (Kim, 2012).



What does individualization mean in the context of the family? Changes in family structure and size in China, for example, have led to the rising importance of the individual in family life, and to a process of the “individualization of the family” that is mostly reflected in the weakening of the bonds between the family and the larger kinship/community organization (Yan, 2009). Despite the lack of a culturally embedded democracy and a welfare system, a growing individualization has been registered in the rising expectations for individual freedom, choice and individuality (Hansen and Svarverud, 2010). Nevertheless, traditional external constraints on marriage and family, the hetero-normative expectation of marriage by 30 in East Asia, have not progressively disappeared. The family, not the individual, is still the basic unit of social reproduction in Asia. Individualization, or family-oriented individualization, encompasses a much more complex and delicate, culture-bound balance between individual and family, whose values and practices differ significantly from the individualizing trend of the West (Kim, 2012).

The unresolved identity of individualization, as addressed above, serves as a necessary context within which I consider the role of the media, the troubling signs of female individualization as intersected with popular media culture in everyday life. Transnational flows of the media have emerged in globalizing Asia with a seeming emphasis on individualization and new heterogeneous choices within a neo-liberal capitalist culture of freedom. One of the most important resources for individualization is the availability of a variety of media cultural materials, from which one can choose in order to create a life of one’s own, or a do-it-yourself biography as an enterprising agent, although this does not necessarily lead to an unfettered self-creation in the world. The transnational media appear to resist patriarchal institutional structures in order to encourage the intertwined trends of individualization and

capitalist consumerism particularly on the part of women who are increasingly tied to global cultural Others. As a new cultural phenomenon, imagined individualization propelled by everyday media culture opens up new spaces for the pluralization of lifestyles, freedom and the imagined democratization of work opportunities, with the emphasis on self-realization as opposed to traditional values of self-sacrifice.

In Korea, Japan and China, the attainment of higher education does not necessarily increase women’s work opportunities and the subsequent role of work in developing individualization; yet, multiple ways of imagining such a possibility are widely available in mediated cultural domains (for details, see Kim, 2010, 2012). Currently proliferating in various forms across the Asian media landscape, lifestyle TV is promoting models of individualized femininity and enterprising modes of selfhood, but within structural constraints and gendered social and economic inequities. A huge influx of Western fashion magazines into the urban centers of Asia has offered shifting conceptions of female identity, as reflected on the Chinese versions of Western magazines, *Cosmopolitan*, *Elle* and *Marie Claire*. It is this continual intersection of local cultural space with the transnational flows of media culture in which re-fashioned modern women reflect on a future different from their mothers’ lives of self-sacrifice, and develop a half-imagined future (“maybe one day”) characterized by self-actualization, career success and a consumer lifestyle.

The media, not only the global cultural force but also the national and local mediation, can be understood as a key cultural mechanism creating the emergence of precarious individualized identities in Asia. On one hand, the media’s growing emphasis on individualization and lifestyle choices, as well as a process of reflexivity at work, apparently signifies de-traditionalization, individual autonomy and emancipation from

oppressive traditional social forms, including the conventional family and gendered self. New ways of conducting life and constructing the self with changing expectations and relations between men and women are playfully signified in the various images, symbols and narratives of popular media culture that appear to weaken the determining influence of gender and represent imagined empowerment through the de-traditionalization of the private and public spheres. On the other hand, there are also emerging forms of re-traditionalization, new models of cultural continuity and re-integration replacing ongoing rupture, and the symbolic production of regulative forms of social control over the lives of individuals, and women in particular. The pulls of regulative traditions still operate in the competing regime of signifiers, of dialectical relations between gender, work, sexuality and family that are being reconstituted in ambiguous and sometimes contradictory ways that simultaneously de-traditionalize and re-traditionalize contemporary female subject formation.

Women's social roles in some parts of Asia have undergone a rapid transformation from the traditional image of the "good wife and wise mother" to the career women working and playing for pleasure. The Japanese popular media have historically pushed the boundaries of social acceptability with increasingly unconventional content, from women's magazines with a "sex special" to TV programs advising women about pornographic videos and even love hotels they may enjoy. However, women's shifting relationships with the media and the contradictory images of women's bodies are often represented as both the protectors of traditions and as consumers for pleasure. Women are invited to feel empowered and modernized through the liberalized consumption, while at the same time dutifully maintaining their traditional role as mothers in the family. Fashion, beauty and luxuries become signifiers of independence and hard work, the markers of a life

of one's own, but also they need to portray a traditional, "soft and gentle" femininity. Popular media discourses seemingly produce new models for the empowerment and freedom of women, yet simultaneously continue to deepen gender inequality and existing social oppression by re-stabilizing and regulating the gendered self.

This indicates the complex and often contradictory status of female individualization, regulated and confined but also challenging and contesting at the intersection with popular media culture in everyday life, its imagined modes of self-actualization but also new forms of social control operating in an expanded world of mediation. Mediated experience heightens reflexive awareness of the deeply embedded aspects of identities given by social structural locations, and also provokes confusion or anxiety over the construction of new individualized identity projects and intended effects on life politics. Amid the proliferation of the media, the seeming pluralization of choices in life and the deepening of the self, ongoing identity work is struggled for by women, who create the expressive possibilities for identity transformation but may also face considerable difficulties, may still not know which way they are going, or may potentially suffer from unintended consequences (Kim, 2012).

### **Transnational Mobility and the Media**

The limitations and contradictions of female individualization within the key parameters are continually salient, yet unresolved, giving rise to transnational mobility as a temporary resolution and a form of defection from an expected normative biography (for details, see Kim, 2010, 2011). Women are travelling out of Korea, Japan and China for very different reasons than those that sent them into diaspora only 20 years ago. From the mid-1980s onward there has been a rising trend

of women leaving their country to experience life overseas either as tourists or students, eventually surpassing the number of men engaging in foreign travel. Now, 80% of Japanese people studying abroad are women (Kelsky, 2001; Ono and Piper, 2004), an estimated 60% of Koreans studying abroad are women, and more than half of the Chinese entering higher education overseas are women (HESA, 2006; IIE, 2006). These new generations of women, who depart from the usual track of marriage, are markers of contemporary transnational mobility, constituting a new kind of diaspora, a “knowledge diaspora”. Why do women move? How do the media play a role in this migration process?

The disjuncture between higher educational attainment and labor market inequity prevents the chances of individualization, yet simultaneously generates the individualized, choice-based narratives that women tend to construct in talking about an imagined future of individualization. Despite the paradoxical outcomes and anxieties of where women actually stand regarding a move towards individualization, multiple ways of imagining such a possibility are widely available in mediated cultural domains with proliferating resources for the mobilization of self. The women’s desire to move is constituted by the contradictory socio-economic relations, as well as by the cultural-symbolic forms by which everyday life is lived out, re-thought and re-articulated in its intersection with the emergence of precarious individualized identities.

For example, the following data from my ethnographic research (Korean, Japanese and Chinese women in their 20s and early 30s) demonstrate that transnational mobility is frequently figured in their imagination of the West through the everyday media (for details, see Kim, 2010, 2011).

“My job might be OK, my life might be OK compared to my mother’s (in Korea). But I didn’t feel happy, couldn’t be satisfied with just that! I have bigger desires... The more I got to know bigger things through the media, the more I thought about them”.

“This (Korean drama) showed beautiful scenery of Cambridge and London where they met while studying. It’s a typical romance, an illusion made by TV. But I wanted to believe that could happen. Life would feel different there... I imagined myself and anticipated to go”.

Young Korean women appear to have more choices and capacities in life, higher education and better material provisions compared to past generations, yet this does not necessarily translate into greater happiness. Expectations of satisfaction have risen, affected by what other people have or an insatiable endless desire to have, which occurs by the intrusion of cultural Others through the media and has the consequence of causing both rising expectations and rising frustrations. The construction of an autonomous illusion (“I wanted to believe that could happen”), the ability to create an illusion which is known to be false but felt to be true, suggests that the knowing individual creates the existence for herself in her imagination, as both actor and audience in her own drama, thereby obtaining pleasure “constructs a more realistic anticipation of those events yet to come” (Campbell, 1987). Considerable meaning is gained, not merely from the illusion, but from “imagining that illusion as actuality” mobilizing the self towards a hoped-for-future.

“Japanese women’s magazines showed photo essays about experiences of travelling and living abroad, which inspired me a lot... A 30-year-old TV announcer quit her job because old women are not considered suitable for that job in Japan.

Her job was replaced by a younger woman. So she moved to Paris to study... Her photo essay shows, Paris is beautiful! The beautiful illusion arouses such a good feeling that you want to be there”.

“So sick and tired of office work (in Japan), one day I decided to do nothing and watched this film *Noting Hill*. Romance, freedom, laughter, London parks are so green! I felt, go there! It makes you feel something good can happen there... You know that is an illusion but you want to believe that illusion and go”.

The aestheticization and romanticization of Western cities is known to be false but felt to be true or suggestive of possibility, “something good can happen there”. A general awareness of the link between media consumption and physical displacement exists in the Japanese women’s emotional investment in the media at a level of utopian sensibility. It is intertwined with good feelings the media embody and evoke; “utopian feelings of possibility” (Dyer, 1992) acting as temporary answers to the specific inadequacies of society and showing what solutions feel like. The media certainly construct an illusion or an image of something better that women’s day-to-day lives do not provide. But it is the intelligently detectable illusion that is put to work by the knowing individuals with intentionality of knowledge: “You know that is an illusion but you want to believe that illusion and go”.

“Life in China is so competitive, crowded and stressful. People work so hard, try to survive and win in competitive society... Bus is so crowded that you have to squeeze in. There is no space for your self. I started the everyday with this crowded bus... A bus ride in the West seemed fun, pleasant (on TV), people easily got on and got off. Wouldn’t it be nice to live in that environment? I saw this empty bus on

TV a long time ago but still remember... Here, London bus is not crowded, most of time I can sit down and think. There is a space for thinking about my self”.

This mediated experience can powerfully create and allow a space for the self to emerge in the fluidities of transnational imagination, while engaging with a newly found curiosity and a search for a new self that can be played out and actualized. Different ways to conceive the self are emerging in more individualist terms marked by an outward-looking reflexivity. Contemporary Chinese female identities are being shaped by cultural consumption within mediated transnational networks, thus complicating an understanding of women’s position within, and as belonging to, the nation (Ferry, 2003). Women have been subject to different imaginary social spaces which enable them to reflect upon their lived experiences within the multiple and competing regimes of identification, expanding potentialities for self-invention that the divergent cultural experiences give rise to and mobilize.

### **Conclusion: Why Study Media Culture?**

It should be importantly recognized that this increased reflexivity is not only the outcome of education, but also significantly the consequence of the proliferation of sites of mediated experience offering wider contexts of knowledge and images concerning different discourses outside local networks of experience. The media are not the only contributor to the process of reflexivity, but the degree of the media’s contribution depends on what other sources of reflexivity might or might not be available and who can access and utilize them as meaningful resources. When other sources such as psychotherapy and self-help expertise are not readily available in the actual circumstances of day-to-day life, the transnational media can be appropriated for self-analysis in light

of issues of gender, social institutions and existential anxiety to better deal with the culture of everyday life. It simply cannot be assumed any more that information or knowledge from books is the best or main route to everyday reflexivity in today's primarily visual, media-dominated cultures. It is not just media's ubiquity in everyday life, but its unique and plausibly powerful capacity to affect the meaning making of everyday life experience, its capacity to trigger a heightened reflexive awareness of the world, which is arguably a key cultural dynamics and challenge.

Television, now available on the Internet, has become not just the site where such reflexivity takes place, but actually provides the specific terms and forms of everyday talk and practice in the light of incoming knowledge. Often, when local media productions largely fail to respond to the changing socio-economic status and desire of women in a transitional society of Asia, it is global television that is instead appropriated for making contact with the diverse formations of culture (also see Kim, 2007). It is via the increased exposure to global Others and reflexive capacities that ordinary women make sense of life conditions which differ from their own and come to critically question the taken-for-granted social order. Significantly, what is emerging here is the problematization of society itself, the increasing awareness of its structural rigidity and discontents as well as the interrogatory attitude towards the surrounding world. Engagement with the media constitutes a heightened awareness vis-à-vis gender, sexuality, class, social mobility and so on – not only the familiar form of “national differences” but many “different forms of cultural difference” (Pieterse, 2004: 41).

Subordinate women, unsatisfied with gendered inequalities and constraints, may find fulfillment through media cultural consumption practices, the often trivialized yet becoming-significant developments for the culturally specific ways in which individualization and de-traditionalization are imagined and

searched for. The mediated experience can have the effect of transforming women's sense of self, of the world beyond and their imagined place in it, while mobilizing the sedimented always-already orientation towards displacement. Media culture is clearly one of the new, mundane and prime sites in which self-reflexivity is operating continuously, and some knowing self-monitoring subjects are more likely than others to be reflexive about gender relations, inequalities and oppression within the larger context of the mediated world. The often intended consequences of everyday media consumption on the part of women – not only deriving pleasure and gratification but also gaining routine access to alternative forms of knowledge – contribute to the increasing likelihood of a habitual reflexivity, and moreover, a transnational reflexivity, through which the self can be regularly examined, re-thought and re-defined, even if not always discursively accomplished. Such changes in awareness, knowledge and the questioning attitude towards the world may not always lead to social transformation in a short run, but new possibilities may arise from this heightened capacity for critical reflection and questioning. This evolving reflexive project is not just a direct cause-and-effect in the speed of social and cultural change but an increasingly insistent and intense process of mediation (Kim, 2005, 2008, 2011, 2012).

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