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# Age as a Category of Gender Analysis: Servant Girls, Modern Girls, and Gender in Southeast Asia

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Gail Hershatter's presidential address at the March 2012 Annual Conference of the Association for Asian Studies (AAS) encouraged historians to regard gender as a tool with which one navigates a messy, fragmented historical terrain, rather than an enclosed house in which one can "sit back and enjoy the view from a single well-appointed location." The paper that follows can be regarded as an enthusiastic endorsement. Gender history has made enormous inroads into mainstream academia; "gender is everywhere in the scholarship." But, as Hershatter observes, "it is not the self-same thing wherever it is to be found." Each of the stories she told illustrated a complex landscape of political change that was only partially visible or legible from inside the "house of gender," hard-won though it has been. "Perhaps," she commented wryly, "we need to get out of the house." For Chinese historians, "disquiet in the house of gender" promises to be immensely productive, offering fresh views of the junctures in Chinese history in which large political projects affect changes in the smaller projects of everyday life, to arrive at an expanded notion of political change and a more complex understanding of what the revolution meant for Chinese women.

It is frequently suggested that, to continue the analogy, the house of gender remains relatively rickety in Southeast Asia in comparison to its sturdiness in other regions of the world. Southeast Asian historians have "come late" to the study of women and gender—which is in any case itself a relatively new field. Gender as a category of analysis—the study of male-female interactions, the cultural systems by which roles are assigned to men and women, the lived and recorded experiences of women—has attracted general attention only over the last thirty years or so. Within that growing field of study, Southeast Asian scholars who would focus on women and gender are further impeded by difficulties innate to the field: the necessity of acquiring of multiple linguistic skills; the limitations of written material, particularly before the twentieth century; and both the allure and the burden of maintaining the field's regional coherence.[1] Barbara Andaya (2007) observed a pattern in the development in regional research on women and

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[1] For two relatively recent overviews of gender trends in Southeast Asian history, see Andaya (2007) and Ramusack (2004). See Andaya's essay for a more detailed analysis of the "lateness" of Southeast Asian gender scholarship.

gender, beginning at the stage of "recovering women" in the historical record, followed by increasingly inclusive approaches that deploy gender as an organizing principle for studying the ways in which men and women interact. The field of Southeast Asian studies, she suggests, fits such a pattern. There has been pioneering research that has worked to recover women in history, and scholars have only recently begun to move towards broader and more refined analyses of gender relationships, transgendered persons, and constitutions of femininity alongside that of masculinity. Yet studies of women in Southeast Asia have been reluctant to pull away from political narratives that write women into the "national epic" and attempt to locate female counterparts to male positions of power—the "add women and stir" approach that other regions of gender historiography have already firmly repudiated—suggesting that, despite great advances in the last two decades, there is still much to be done (Andaya 2007, 113–17).

Given the relative underdevelopment of women's history in Southeast Asia, what I am about to write may seem churlish, or "premature"—whatever that may mean in historiographical terms. But without downplaying the importance of these developments in Southeast Asian gender historiography and their contributions to feminist activism in the region, I nonetheless want to insist that gender is not the only social process through which historical agents experience and negotiate their daily lives or engage in dialogue with the state. Other forms of self-identified belonging have been mobilized for political ends in different times and contexts, and other lenses of analyses are thus needed to explicate their histories. This is of course well known to social historians and sociologists, who now deal as a matter of course with the intersections of race, class, and gender in explicating historical and social phenomena. Perhaps it is because of gender's relative newness as a category of analysis that its practitioners, justifiably proud of the battles that have been fought to bring it to the scholar's table, have been more inclined to insist on the centrality of the gender lens, to bring women into history *as women*—even where doing so may not, as I suggest in this essay, always yield the most insight.

In particular, I want to suggest that we pay attention to age, especially in circumstances in which age complicates or trumps gender. Age, too, is a system of power relationships;[2] like gender, it is simultaneously natural and constructed, and can cut across, or undercut, the category of gender. Is it really desirable, or even possible, to think of gender without reference to its temporality? Of gendered subjects divorced from their development over time? Hershatter (2012, 17) tells a story, for example, of Chinese rural villages in the 1980s in which "gendered desires about family size fractured along generational lines." In this particular case, shared gender among the rural women "meant much less than generational cohort and relationship to village authorities." It is also the case that the age of a female subject deeply inflects her lived experience, the way in which society and the state regard her sexuality, the norms to which she is subjected, and the range of choices and behaviors available to her. Andaya (2006) has been attentive to the fluidity and liminality of age-bound identity, drawing attention to the life cycles of female experience in early modern Southeast Asia from youth to old age, including the way in which a woman's gender—the social construction of how she relates to men, other women, and society—develops with age. A striking observation she makes is that with the onset of middle age and the end of menstruation—"a basic indicator of femaleness"—a woman became "a woman who is not woman." This was a transformation that inspired awe and reverence, and perhaps helps to account for the large presence of senior females in a range of socially significant positions of authority and power in Southeast Asia (Andaya 2006, 218–22). The historical terrain that we survey is messy and fragmented, and gender, while undeniably central, can at times offer us only a partial view, and may, at other times, actively blind us to the centrality of other modes of being, acting, and belonging.

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[2] See the series of articles collected as "Age as a Category of Historical Analysis," found in the inaugural issue of the *Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth*, especially Mintz (2008) and Paris (2008).

The two historical examples I have selected are useful for exploring this claim: the *mui tsai* (young female bondservants) and the Modern Girl.[3] Because they are so self-evidently gendered and sexualized subjects, the temptation to read them as such is strong and may sometimes foreclose questions we may otherwise ask of them. Here I draw particular attention to the relevance of the age of these gendered subjects, to the fact that they are "girls" rather than "women." I suggest that the *mui tsai* and the Modern Girl are both complex historical figures of whom our views from the house of gender will only tell some of the story.

## ON SERVANT GIRLS: AGE IS A USEFUL CATEGORY OF GENDER ANALYSIS

The *mui tsai* were young girls transferred from their impoverished natal homes to wealthier households to serve primarily as servants and household drudges. The practice of keeping *mui tsai*, in various forms, was maintained in China, Hong Kong, Macau, Malaya, and Singapore, as well as in other parts of the world with a significant Chinese diasporic population, and was frequently defended as a Chinese custom. Because this transfer of bodies was accompanied by money, the system quickly assumed the status of a monetized sale in the eyes of the British public, to whose attention the *mui tsai* were brought by indignant missionaries, abolitionists, and progressives as a particularly heinous incarnation of the dreaded "human merchandise" problem. Worse yet were the persistent rumors of sexual or physical violence. These in particular impelled reformers to apply increasing moral pressure to the colonial administration, though with debatable degrees of success. The practice of keeping *mui tsai* was eventually abolished, at least in law, in the late 1930s (Leow 2012).[4]

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[3] The term "Modern Girl" is often capitalized to emphasize that it refers to a distinct category of women with a particular set of characteristics beyond simply "girls who are modern."

I found in my own research on the *mui tsai* in British Malaya that neither transnational feminism, imperial maternalism, anti-slavery lobbying, nor discourses of labor regulation were sufficient to secure effective legislative action from the colonial state. What tipped the scales in favor of abolition was the eventual recourse by reformers to non- or less-gendered claims about the universal rights of the child. Similar conclusions have been reached independently by scholars studying the *mui tsai* or analogous institutions of bondslavery. For the *mui tsai* in British Hong Kong and French Indochina, David Pomfret has shown how distinctions of age critically informed European colonialism and their reformist agendas. British anti-slavery campaigners mobilized "emotive interpretations of childhood to break down the defence of bond service as 'oriental custom' " (Pomfret 2008, 211). Sarah Paddle (2003) has emphasized the increasing importance of professional discourses on child welfare in her study of the *mui tsai* in interwar China.

It is also becoming clear that the interwar years, and particularly the 1930s, witnessed growing support among British colonial officials for the protection of the child as a "less contentious object for statutory reform than the native woman," upon whose body (in a similar fashion to the Modern Girl, whom we will encounter presently) was frequently inscribed a range of complex struggles over social morality; definitions of custom and tradition; and national, racial, and communitarian identity and difference in the twentieth century (Pande 2012, 205).[5] In her research on child marriage in India, Ishita Pande (2012) has identified a shift in the mentality of colonial governance from "woman-rescue" to "child-protection," which was accompanied by a growing concern with the "digital denotation of social fact": the attempt to fix age in numbers in order to rationalize governance.[6] Children may have been less contentious stimuli for reform, but protecting the sexuality of children was also a frequent, particular obsession of the colonial state. Through laws governing the age of consent, for example, the state can take over as a "surrogate parent" (Tambe 2009). Over the issue of child marriage in Indonesia, the Dutch were "most scandalized" by the prospect of premature consummation: "the sexual violation of childhood" was the sole point on which they took legislative action, in 1915 (Blackburn and Bessell 1997, 113).[7]

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[4] The literature on the *mui tsai* has been growing slowly but steadily in the past two decades. A more comprehensive bibliography and a general narrative can be found in my forthcoming article (Leow 2012). In the last decade, studies on the *mui tsai* include Carroll (2009), Pomfret (2008), and Pedersen (2001).

[5] For a classic treatment of women as bodies upon which the political, cultural, and spiritual aspirations of a nation were inscribed, see Chatterjee (1989).

[6] Pande (2012, 206–7) calls this the "digital definition of the child."

[7] The history of sexuality is curiously, even prudishly, divorced from the history of childhood and youth; see Egan and Hawkes (2008, 2009).

Notwithstanding these successes, often couched in terms of triumph for moral and social advancement, such arguments proved efficient at provoking state intervention, but, turned on their head, could also preclude it. Nazan Maksudyan (2008) has elsewhere written of the *beslemes*, a striking analogous figure to the Chinese and Southeast Asian *mui tsai*: they were girls who were "adopted" to work in the homes of Christian and Islamic families in the late Ottoman empire. Due to their "ambiguous position as daughter, servant and even concubine, *beslemes* faced suspicion, social scrutiny and little cultural protection. . . . The twin framing of *beslemes* as daughters (and thus a member of the family) and sexually seductive servants (and thus at the will of their 'father'/ 'master') illustrates how the dynamics of social class worked to cast *beslemes* out of the protected domain of 'childhood' " (Egan and Hawkes 2008, 362; see also Maksudyan 2008). A similar ambiguity can be read into the Modern Girl as both sexual temptresses and daughters, as we will see presently.

Attention to age also raises another issue in understanding the lived experience of the *mui tsai*: what happens to her as she grows up. Given the relative immutability of the patriarchal structures in which she moved, some of the ways in which a *mui tsai* could change the range of agency available to her became available as a direct function of her age. As she reached sexual maturity, she might elevate her position by seducing the master of the house. This could substantially boost her household status, sometimes even raising it beyond that of "legitimate" female kin. If that did not occur, another possibility remained open: through occasional "money gifts" from her owners, a *mui tsai* might gradually alter her own status into that of a remunerated housekeeper, an *amah*, rather than a bondservant. *Mui tsai* status might also be inheritable if, for example, a *mui tsai* became pregnant but could not secure a legitimate position in the household. In fact, the position and lived experience of the *mui tsai* was so frequently inflected by her age that the extent to which this has not been explicitly analyzed in the literature is surprising.[8]

## ON MODERN GIRLS: IS AGE A USEFUL CATEGORY OF GENDER ANALYSIS?

If studying the *mui tsai* from feminist and gender-aware perspectives has tended to obscure the recognition of the issue as critically (rather than merely incidentally) one of child protection rather than women protection, are there other historical subjects that may suffer from similar blind spots? To address this I consider the Modern Girl, who has been a fruitful subject of study since at least the 1990s, and has attracted more attention in recent years.[9] In particular, she has been analyzed in unprecedented detail by a research group established at the University of Washington (The Modern Girl Around the World Research

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[8] I include in this criticism my earlier work on the subject, which does not make these themes explicit, although see Leow (2012) for some narrative details on the *mui tsai*'s age-bound status.

[9] One of the earliest works in the field is Silverberg (1991).

Group et al. 2008).[10] Their investigation has situated the Modern Girl firmly in consumer culture, shed light on the simultaneous emergence of a Modern Girl icon in urban milieux from Bombay and Rangoon to Tokyo, Johannesburg, Berlin, and beyond. Their research suggests that the Modern Girl is a trope, a global abstraction expressed in local particulars: Japanese *moga*, French *garçonnes*, American flappers, Chinese *modeng xiaojie*, and others. She was a unique product of globalizing markets and flows of culture and capital across national boundaries, and a heuristic case study in gendered modernity. She circulated in the newly internationalized media across the world, cutting a svelte, art deco silhouette in the pages of new magazines and newspapers, as well as in the movies. She felled a generation of men with her devastating wit and candor, her spirit and unabashed eroticism. In all milieux in which she appeared, she was associated with practices of hypersexuality, with dating, romantic love, and the legitimation of premarital sex. Clad in the scandalous fashions of the time, she was a siren, a femme fatale. Yet, clad in trousers and shifts, sporting the bobbed, boyish haircut of 1920s chic, and frequently declining marriage or children, she was also curiously androgynous, even asexual. She thus threatened and destabilized norms for appropriate gendered behavior at a time when those norms were themselves undergoing substantial revision.

The modernness of the Modern Girl was a testament to the milieux in which she emerged. The 1920s and 30s were the heyday of interwar feminism. These decades witnessed the rise of feminist civil society and women's suffrage movements, as well as the increasing participation of women in nationalist movements. Her challenge went directly to the nation and its modernity. Images and ideas of the Modern Girl were used to shore up or critique nationalist and imperial agendas. In the service of the nation, she was expected to be, somehow, both traditional and modern. She was to be highly educated and politically knowledgeable, yet protected from the dangerous influences of social ills. These contradictory features of the Modern Girl arose as a result of her availability for others to inscribe desires, definitions, and hopes onto her, particularly those pertaining to national revival. As Louise Edwards (2000, 125) put it, "good women = good nation." Women's bodies were "used to enact the struggle between conflicting aspects of modernity" (Stevens 2003, 86).

Some of these tensions are captured in the uneasy distinction between the "New Woman" and the "Modern Girl," one which has little to do with her actual age and more to do with positive or negative ascriptions of modernity. In general, however, the distinction is unsatisfactorily unpacked.[11] In speaking of the Modern Girl, "girl" and "woman" are frequently used interchangeably in historical analyses, leading some to speculate on the relationship between the two as being temporally contiguous: perhaps the New Woman gives birth to the Modern Girl, or perhaps the New Woman is the ideal "continuation" of the Modern Girl, or perhaps they are contemporaries, or predecessors. But I would venture that the term remains useful because it highlights something that many have taken for granted: the Modern Girl's age.

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[10] The Modern Girl Around the World Research Group consists of Alys Weinbaum, Lynn E. Thomas, Priti Ramamurthy, Uta G. Polger, Madeleine Yue Dong, and Tani E. Barlow.

[11] Sarah Stevens (2003) has addressed this most directly. From a European perspective, David Pomfret has attempted to pick apart the distinction between "woman" and "girl" as it appeared in French Modern Girl iconography; see Pomfret (2004). I am grateful to David Pomfret for his thoughts on this matter, provided in personal correspondence.

While the Modern Girl has been debated in terms of her modernity, her feminist challenge to patriarchal norms and social standards for women, as well as the radical agency she claims in her action, dress, speech, and sexuality, there has been little discussion of her age, her developmental temporality, and her status as a "girl." For the Modern Girl Around the World Research Group, Modern Girls were "young women—'girls'—with the wherewithal and desire to define themselves in terms that exceeded conventional female roles and that transgressed national, imperial or racial boundaries" (The Modern Girl Around the World Research Group 2005, 249). Their choice to use the word "girl" is deliberate: for them, it signifies the "contested status of women who lie outside childhood and outside contemporary social codes and conventions relating to marriage, sexuality and motherhood, and is a preferable theoretical alternative to the overdetermined category 'woman' " (291). This has caused some controversy, partly to do with the semantic indistinguishability of the terms "girl" and "woman" in some languages into which the term "Modern Girl" has been rendered (for example, Chinese).[12] It has also provoked accusations that calling the Modern Girl a "girl" infantilizes what is otherwise a subject of serious historical inquiry.[13] As Miriam Silverberg (2008, 358) put it: "What better way was there to disempower woman than to call her a 'girl'?" Denying the use of the term "girl" is a good feminist move, but here it might actually work to obscure an unexplored relationship between gender, age, and modern temporality.[14] What I am interested in here, then, is whether paying attention to the Modern Girl's age can bring questions into focus that may not appear if we are paying attention only to her gender or sexuality, or if we are trying to be good feminists.

One might inquire about the isomorphism between the Modern Girl's youth and her modernity: a natural but curiously uninterrogated relationship. It seems at least possible that some of the features of her emblematic cultural status can be considered from the perspective of age rather than gender. Gender concerns are deeply imbricated in modernity and national visions of the future, but so too have the youth been easy symbols of modern times: "harbingers of the future," in Adrian Bingham's (2004, 83) terms.[15] In the interwar years, around the time of the emergence of the Modern Girl on the world stage, "global popular culture valourized the young and modern" (Lewis 2010, 199),[16] political struggles all over the colonized world bound together youths and nationalism,[17] and immense national and social anxieties accompanied both. Can we specifically read the uneasy tension between the Modern Girl and the New Woman as an expression of this? How and to what extent, for example, did the modernness of the Chinese Modern Girl as the embodiment of national hopes intersect with the valorization of youth and children as the symbols of the "Young China" (*Shaonian Zhongguo*) of which Liang Qichao wrote?[18]

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[12] For semantic distinctions in Chinese, see Barlow (1994). I am grateful to Louise Edwards for reminding me of the salience of this issue when I presented an early draft of this paper at the AAS Annual Conference.

[13] The group alludes to this when they mention that questions about their use of "girl" were asked every time they presented their work—"someone even struck out 'girl' and wrote 'woman' on all the posters announcing our presentation at the University of Washington campus." See The Modern Girl Around the World Research Group (2005, 291).

[14] My thanks to Roy Chan for encouraging me to draw this point out.

Another question concerns the centrality of the Modern Girl's flagrant sexuality and youthful eroticism to her modernity. A blindness to the age of the Modern Girl potentially forecloses a set of questions about whether or not older, less sexually available or eroticized women could express similar qualities of being "modern," in ways that collapse the divisions between the intellectual, patriotic woman versus the superficial, sexualized girl. If some of the most defining qualities of the iconographic Modern Girl were so physically salient—what she wore, how she cut her hair, how she colored her face—how do we think about real, older women who might have adopted these accoutrements of modernity? Were there, for example, older, less sexualized Burmese women who wore the controversial Burmese "sheer blouse" (*eingyi-pa*) as a marker of their modernity—and if so, were they somehow less modern?[19] If the Modern Girl is defined in large part by an unrestrained sexuality, does a more mature eroticism in an older woman signal the same kind of modernity? We can also ask a question that I asked of the *mui tsai* earlier: what happened to the Modern Girl as she grew up?

Another way in which the Modern Girl's age might matter is in what we might refer to as a "generational" gaze, as opposed to a "male" gaze. The male gaze on the Modern Girl has been richly explored by Madeleine Yue Dong (2008). The Modern Girl, as she shows through an incisive reading of *manhua* drawings and caricatures in popular magazines, is "always being looked at" by men. "She rarely shuns such gazes but instead blatantly ignores them, enjoys them, gazes back, or even purposely provokes and attracts them" (208). Studies of the Modern Girl have been justifiably focused on this highly sexualized interaction, since her flagrant eroticism has been so central to both her global notoriety and her appeal.

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[15] I thank Su Lin Lewis for bringing this quote to my attention.

[16] See generally Lewis (2010), chapters 5 and 6.

[17] On youth and nationalism, see Anderson (2006, 121–22).

[18] For a commentary on this from the perspective of age, see Bai (2008). See also Bai (2004).

[19] For a rich account of the controversy over Burmese women and the sheer blouse, see Ikeya (2008).

But if we pay attention to age as well, we might ask: did the Modern Girl come under the gaze of men, older women, and boys in the same way?

The gaze between the older and younger "Modern Girl" may, for example, highlight some unexplored developmental chronologies. Barbara Sato (2003) is exceptional in dedicating sustained attention to the generational rifts that opened up between a "flashy" younger generation of Japanese Modern Girls and an older generation of progressive Japanese women intellectuals. The latter group of women "generally joined their male counterparts in expressing disappointment and anger" with what they regarded as the Modern Girl's superficiality, and consequent betrayal of women's liberation. Because these older and younger women both wore their hair short, however, they were both cast as "Modern Girls"—much to the annoyance of the older generation (54–60).

We might also ask if the Modern Girl was occasionally an object of a parental rather than a solely male gaze. These generational dynamics have been most obscured behind the hypersexual "gyrations" of the Modern Girl (Silverberg 2008, 358). Consider, for example, this delightful passage from Mao Dun's *Midnight* as extracted and analyzed by Sarah Stevens (2003, 96–97):

> All this talk about fashion acted like a needle on the atrophied nerves of the old man. His heart fluttered, and his eyes fell instinctively upon [his daughter] Fu-fang and he saw now for the first time how she was decked out. Though it was still only May, the weather was unusually warm and she was already in the lightest of summer clothing. Her vital young body was sheathed in close-fitting light-blue chiffon, her full, firm breasts jutting out prominently, her snowy forearms bared. Old Mr. Wu felt his heart constricting with disgust and quickly averted his eyes, which, however, fell straight away upon a half-naked young woman sitting up in a rickshaw, fashionably dressed in a transparent, sleeveless violet blouse, displaying her bare legs and thighs. The old man thought for one horrible moment that she had nothing else on. The text "Of all the vices, sexual indulgence is the cardinal" drummed on his mind, and he shuddered. But the worst was yet to come, for he quickly withdrew his gaze, only to find his youngest son Ah-hsuan gaping with avid admiration at the same half-naked young woman. The old man felt his heart pounding wildly as if it would burst, and his throat burning as if choked with chilies.

Stevens (2003, 96–97) has read this passage for the Modern Girl's unbearable urban sexuality: "Bare arms, bare legs, breasts that invite baring—such a barrage of urban sensuality is too much for Old Mr. Wu … [who] feels attacked by the Modern Girl and her sexuality." Yet what is equally evident in this passage is the generational rift between *Old* Mr. Wu and his *young* son and daughter. There is also the suggestion of a disturbing relation between Mr. Wu's gaze on his modern daughter, whose bare forearms cause his heart to "constrict with disgust," and on the Modern Girl figure, whose bare legs and thighs provoke the litanic drumming on his mind: "sexual indulgence is the cardinal vice." How does the historically particular Modern Girl figure intersect with the much more universal experience of a father's sudden, catastrophic recognition of his daughter as a sexualized being? What impact does this have on our understanding of the Modern Girl as a historically specific expression of modernity in the interwar years? More broadly, to what extent can we situate the moral panic about the Modern Girl in a chronology of increasing state management of youth in national culture, of generational conflict,[20] or of global girlhood (Helgren and Vasconcellos 2010), rather than one that emphasizes gendered emancipation as the standard of modernity? The Modern Girl as icon is a necessarily flattened, abstract figure, and has proved to be of great utility as a heuristic device. Unpacking her particularities, however, must take into account not only her gender and sexuality, but also these complexities of age and generation, many of which seem to be—as gender was only a few decades ago—hidden in plain sight.

I have discussed "age as a category of gender analysis" to show how attention to different social processes opens up different sets of questions. We saw that the *mui tsai* question was raised in Britain and the colonial office as a women's issue, but was reformed as a question of child protection. In a curious historiographical parallel, feminist history brought the *mui tsai* issue to the scholar's table, but analyses from feminist perspectives have tended to obscure other critical factors in accounting fully for the governance and abolition of the *mui tsai*. Perhaps there are other blind spots. This is not to say that gender is not important, only that in order to arrive at an understanding of women's positions in society, it may not be possible or desirable to allow our focus on gender to foreclose other ways of seeing.

As an area of inquiry, age remains, so far, poorly theorized. Yet, as Stephen Mintz (2008, 92) suggests, historians, with their "dynamic, diachronic approach," are particularly well positioned to appreciate and substantiate how age categories and consciousness shifted over time. I suggested that there is value in considering highly gendered subjects of inquiry with a more sustained attention to questions of youth; generation; and social, political, and cultural constructions of age. This has significantly altered historians' understanding of the *mui tsai*, and as I have suggested it may also open new avenues of inquiry for studies of the Modern Girl. Only time, and further research, will tell.

## A FAMILIAR DISQUIET: GENDER HISTORY IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Where does this leave Southeast Asian gender history? I may well be accused of introducing disquiet into the house of gender before the paint has even fully dried on the walls. Yet I would venture that Southeast Asian scholars have always been in a uniquely good position to appreciate disquiet in the house of gender, because of the great linguistic, cultural, religious, and intellectual diversity built into the region, and because the experiences of being female and male in the Southeast Asian milieux have had a long history of variance and complexity. The best gender scholars have had an instinctive grasp of this, and the fine granularity of gender analyses have much to do with the contributions of anthropologists and ethnologists to the articulation of gender in the region, as well as the contributions of scholars with impeccable linguistic training.[21] Plurality and diversity, as scholars often remark, are hallmarks of the region (Reid 1988, 1993; Wolters 1999). Andaya (2006, 221–22) has suggested that many gender relationships of the early modern era are "touched by the liminality that constantly surfaces in Southeast Asian cultures," inscribed into legendary regional forms that have always been regarded with awe and respect, such as the crocodile that slides between land and sea, the half-human and half-bird *garuda*, and the male-female hermaphrodite. "Gender pluralism," as Michael Peletz (2006, 311–12) has called it, seems a natural outflowing from the "deeply entrenched and broadly institutionalized traditions of pluralism with respect to gender and sexuality" that have characterized the region since the early modern era.

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[20] What Maila Stivens (2002) called "parenting for modernity." I am grateful to Mark Frost for alerting me to this aspect of Stivens's work.

In more modern times, though there may have been a gradual "constriction of pluralism" (Peletz 2009, see esp. ch. 3), the Southeast Asian historical terrain remains characteristically complex and plural. Almost a decade ago, Brenda Yeoh, Peggy Teo, and Shirlena Huang (2002) identified, though not in these terms, "disquiet" in the house of gender in the Asia-Pacific region: the way gender competes at different times and places with other categories of understanding lived women's experience, the abiding problems of scale and geography, and of attending adequately to the global and local. They argue for the need for "situated" knowledge and "contextualized evaluations in unravelling gender relations in the region" and to recognize that

> there are myriad [gendered struggles and projects] which emerge in spaces somewhat disconnected . . . from the 'global' or even 'public' platform. These fragmentary, less-than-completely articulated, and possibly unintended, struggles written into the interstitial spaces of everyday life should not be dismissed. Given that there are multiple oppressions at work in women's lives at different scales, we argue that emancipatory politics can rely on no one single, universal formula but draw on multiple identifications and diverse strategies, sometimes working the ground 'locally', sometimes collapsing the personal and the political . . . and sometimes by drawing on transnational or global frameworks or discourses. . . . (Yeoh, Teo, and Huang 2002, 2–3)

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[21] A thorough review is beyond the scope of this article, but some recent and excellent contributions include Andaya (2006), Ikeya (2011), Loos (2006), and Peletz (2009).

In other words, gender may not consistently be the most central organizing rubric to study the ways in which gender intersects with political projects.

Typically for the region, anthropologists are leading the way to these newer analytical terrains. Rebecca Elmhirst's (2002) study of the Indonesian government's transmigration resettlement program in Sumatra gives concrete evidence that in certain demographically complex milieux, class and ethnicity complicate the mobilization and lived experiences of women, and cannot be understood on purely gendered grounds. In the 1980s, in a state-initiated transmigration program called *Translok*, hundreds of land-poor Javanese migrants were uprooted and resettled into Lampung, on the southern tip of Sumatra. Elmhirst (2002) shows how, in this move, gender politics were inscribed through a politics of ethnic difference: discourses about the behavior of Javanese and Lampung women were invoked neither to speak to Indonesian state rhetoric on good housewives, nor to forge shared gender interests among women, but to affirm abiding and insurmountable differences between Javanese and Lampungese women. She concludes: "lived experience generally exceeds class, gender or 'ethnic' categories" (83). Maila Stivens's (2002) anthropological study of moral panics about youth in Malaysia is a rare and insightful attempt to disentangle issues of gender, class, ethnicity, and age in contemporary cultural contests for modernity.[22] Gender interests are invariably bound up with wider cultural struggles over resources and representation, with intergenerational disputes and contestations over ethnic identity; they need to be understood and apprehended as such.

Southeast Asian historians have also been sensitive to the ways in which social phenomena are often more than gendered. Studies of Modern Girls in the Malaysian context are illustrative examples. In Penang during the 1920s and 30s, gender equality was seen as "a marker of progress between Penang's diverse communities, a standard by which they judged themselves in contrast to others" (Lewis 2008, 1403). Indian and Sinhalese Penangites held up Straits Chinese and Eurasian Modern Girls as models for their own women, contrasting conservative attitudes of Indian parents to those of the relatively more liberal Chinese as an exhortation for the Indian community to modernize. The history of the education of modern women and girls, too, is inflected by ethnicity and nationalism in ways that undercut gender. Anti-colonial politics do not explain the rise of girls' schools in interwar Malaya and Singapore, but the particular ways in which they were governed by the state are not fully reducible to questions of gender and the modernity of women. Colonial state interventions in Chinese girls' schools in interwar British Malaya were guided much more by racial and political than by gender concerns. The rise of Chinese nationalism in the colonies underscored the need for increasing control over Chinese education: as a result,

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[22] Southeast Asian anthropologists have in general been more attuned than Southeast Asian historians to questions of youth. See Manderson and Liamputtong (2002).

Chinese girls' schools, and the Modern Girls they educated, were regulated as Chinese first (Teoh 2008, see esp. ch. 2).

All this suggests to me that disquiet in the house of gender may not—or should not—seem so disquieting to those who study Southeast Asia. For scholars of China, as Gail Hershatter (2012) suggests, alternative social processes have proven to be less than reliable as categories of historical analysis: class "has been both overdetermined and undermined by official discourse," while "ethnicity has been kept literally and figuratively at the margins of the Chinese state." But Southeast Asia has always been a region of multiple cultures, histories, peoples, class loyalties, generational negotiations, races, and religions; of historically fluid genders and gender performances; of diaspora and movement, and of instinctive heterogeneity. Southeast Asian scholars, it is true, came late to the gender party; but now that we are there, I would not be surprised if we prove to be less prone to staying in the house.

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