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From Fertility to Spectacle: Performing Women's Bodies in Post-socialist China

This paper examines the layered transformations of a festival now known as the “Fair Lady Festival” (*Xiannü Jie*) in Southwest China. I argue that the performance serves as a site where women's bodies serve as a palimpsest—repeatedly inscribed with shifting ideological meanings across pre-socialist, socialist, and post-socialist regimes. Originating as an indigenous fertility ritual celebrating spring through floral offerings and pilgrimage to sacred caves, the festival celebrated the blossoming of spring through floral offerings and pilgrimages. With the arrival of Buddhism, monks incorporated the animistic cult into the rituals they performed next to the pilgrims, thus reinforcing symbolic connections between femininity, fertility, and communal renewal.

During the socialist era, these religious meanings were overwritten by revolutionary narratives. Oral performances reinterpreted the ritual as the commemoration of a martyred slave girl, casting women's suffering and sacrifice as conduit for socialist ideology, class struggle, and nationalist liberation. In the post-socialist present, the festival is yet again transformed—commodified by as a three day state-sponsored ethnic tourism spectacle organised by the local governments, it caters to tourist with staged ethnic performances, ethnic craft competitions, sports, and beauty pageants. Stripped of religious symbolism and notions of class struggle, the bodies of women are sexualized and objectified as spectacles for tourist gaze, ethnic spectacle and visual consumption.

Drawing on long-term ethnographic fieldwork, oral histories, and visual representations from state media and tourism sources, this paper argues that the Fair Lady Festival reveals how women's bodies have functioned as pliable mediums—reproductive, redemptive, and erotic—upon which the various institutions of power project their moral, political, and economic desires.

Keping Wu is Associate Professor of Anthropology at Duke Kunshan University. Her research focuses on religion and urbanization, ethnicity, gender and material culture, as well as aging and community care. She is the co-author of *Religion and Charity: The Social Life of Goodness in Chinese Societies* (Cambridge University Press 2017), and co-editor of *It Happens Among People: Resonances and Extensions of the Work of Fredrik Barth* (Berghahn 2019). Her publications are found in journals including *Modern China*, *Current Anthropology*, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, and *Journal of Asian Studies*.

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