Chapter 8

Long Live Cuteness

S.H.E.'s 'Girl Power' and the Negotiations with Nationalisms in the Chinese-language Market

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Spanning more than fifteen years with a total of twelve album titles that have sold more than 10 million copies (plus five solo albums since 2010), S.H.E. – Selina Ren (任家萱), Hebe Tien (田馥甄), and Ella Chen (陳嘉樺) – counts as one of the more enduring girl groups in contemporary Taiwanese popular music. Prior to the success of S.H.E., the dominant aesthetics of pop idol femininity in Taiwan (and thus throughout the transnational Chinese popular music, or 'Mandopop', scene at the centre of which Taiwan stood), was defined by the images of either the independent, sexy, or cute, virginal 'goddess'. However, through their successful mixing of youthful innocence, cuteness, and independence without sexiness, S.H.E. was able to create a model of femininity that appealed to fans in the Chinese-language market.

S.H.E., a girl band discovered, trained, and packaged by the HIM International (華研國際音樂) music company, represents the Taiwanese media industry’s attempt to advance towards the increasingly China-dominated 'Chinese-language market', or Huayu shì chǎng (華語市場). This chapter investigates how the media industry packages this new cultural icon through S.H.E.'s performances of femininity, and considers how its cultural meaning and significance are implicated in the sociopolitical and economic demands of increasingly transnationalised media culture flows and connections. It argues that this trio’s staged femininity is the product of a subtle localisation of American- and Japanese-influenced aesthetics and ideologies of femininity to suit Taiwanese and Chinese-language markets, which has generated an evolving local ‘post-feminist’ culture, one that conforms to patriarchal conventions while allowing a narrower consumeristic sense of individuality and autonomy, and at the expense of (sexual) equality. It will also discuss how S.H.E.'s post-feminist performance has negotiated with opposition that comes across as interchangeably
masculinist and nationalistic as they reach out to the regional Chinese-language market. Focusing on their marketing strategies in the Chinese market, and the critical responses they have provoked in Taiwan, we will demonstrate how S.H.E.'s selective femininity can be flexibly accentuated to smooth out the ideopolitical contours of Chinese-language markets in East Asia, but at the cost of Taiwanese post-feminism's claims of equality.

**FEMALE STARDOM AND THE CHINESE-LANGUAGE MARKET**

Established as Cosmo International Music (宇宙國際音樂) in 1999, among the series of mergers by multinational record companies that constituted the globalisation process in Taiwan's music industries, HIM International refashioned itself in 2001 and bet on S.H.E. to target the Chinese-language market. This section positions the Chinese-language market within the 'not-yet-postcolonial' and 'not-yet-post-Cold War' Taiwan in order to highlight the roles that America, Japan, and China play in the formation of this transnational market stretching across the politically tense terrain that celebrities with international aspirations had to negotiate.

The concept of the Chinese-language market, which emerged along with Greater China discourse in the early 1990s, aimed to integrate and facilitate the capital flow among China, Taiwan, Singapore, Hong Kong, and Macao (Yang 2017); in this respect, the media industry has played a key strategic role in the making of this market. The Chinese-language market is far from monolithic, due to geopolitical tensions alongside cultural and linguistic differences from Beijing to Singapore. However, with the invention of increasingly penetrative communication technologies, coupled with the use of Mandarin as the lingua franca for popular entertainment, it is thought that such differences can be potentially narrowed by highlighting a shared 'Chinese' cultural heritage. The emphasis on 'Chinese' cultural heritage is legitimised through a discourse of Chinese-West opposition that views Chinese cultural production as a way to overcome Western cultural penetration in the region. Moreover, a strategic emphasis is placed on entertainment and leisure to avoid political tensions, especially those with or the People's Republic of China (PRC) (Yang 2017). In this trade discourse, Taiwan is asserted to be the centre of Chinese-language cultural production by virtue of its more open political climate and its longer exposure to contemporary popular culture flows (Yang 2015).

The music industries went through further restructuring in the 1990s. On the one hand, American-led globalisation led to the consolidation of Taiwan's music industry under six major multinational companies (Polygram, EMI, Sony, Warner, BMG, and MCA [later Universal]), which then used Taiwan as a regional base to reach the Chinese-language market (Moskowitz 2009), with China as the centre. On the other hand, the local music industry, including Rock Records and Cosmo/HIM International Records, also began to expand its reach into China as a strategy of survival. Along with this economic restructuring were changes in sociocultural discourses of femininity and sexuality, including post-feminism and cuteness, that the music industry has had to work into the production of female stars. First, globalisation of culture industries facilitated the travelling of American post-feminism to Taiwan. By post-feminism, we mean the incorporation of aspects of second-wave feminism such as individuality, autonomy, choice, and freedom into the making of a female subject, while emphasising her sexuality, beauty, and investments in heterosexual romance through consumption (McRobbie 2009). In accounting for the translation and localisation of American post-feminism in Taiwan, Yang argues that American second-wave feminism that challenges patriarchy is constructed by popular media as promoting men-hating ideas and, thus, is considered unsuitable for Taiwanese society. Instead, befitting Taiwanese society is the men-loving post-feminism, which celebrates women's autonomy, individuality, and equal demand for sexual pleasure, all of which can be obtained through consumption (Yang 2007). This localised post-feminism should be seen as global capitalism's attempt to negotiate the ideological contours of specific cultures of patriarchy. In this respect, the latter's hegemonic position is assured in rendering the otherwise restrictive domesticity of women as wives and mothers, compatible with their roles as financially autonomous workers and consumers.

Second, coexisting with, but contrary to, the discourse of post-feminism is cuteness, which celebrates women's sexual innocence, purity, passivity, sweetness, dependence, and group-orientation. As in previous decades, female stars in this decade either embody the post-feminist sensibility and sexuality (e.g. Chang Hui-mei), or are sent to Japan for cute training (e.g. the S sisters). Where this diverges from the previous decade is the normalisation of sexiness or cuteness as everyday practices among female stars and the general female public.

If the space of commercial popular culture is predominantly influenced by America and Japan, another space, that of official national popular culture, approved by and closely affiliated with the nation state, is primarily structured by cross-strait relations. Within this space, patriotism determines the status and future of the stars. However, patriotism is gendered whereby men are owners of the nation, while women can only play a supporting role. Within the music industry, beginning in the 1980s, 'campus folk music' (校園民歌) emerged as a product of the commercialisation of the 1970s folk movement that claimed to 'sing our song' (唱我們自己的歌) to replace
the dominance of Western music (Chang 1994). Central to ‘our song’ is the celebration of the greatness of the Chinese race and its civilisation, and a nostalgic longing for the beautiful homeland of China, for example, in ‘The Descendants of the Dragon’, ‘Love for China’, and ‘The Water in the Yellow River’. With the opening up of China, these songs became popular and helped to shape Chinese identity and boost Chinese nationalism in China (Cheng 2014). These songs became the predecessors of ‘China style’ (中國風), defined by a mixture of modern and traditional musical instruments as well as references to what is presented as an unchanging ethno-heritage such as traditional Chinese costumes, architecture, and landscape. The music industries saw ‘cultural China’ (文化中國) as the guiding principle for transcending national differences within the Chinese-language market, which operates through cultural essentialism in celebrating the greatness of ‘traditional Chinese culture’, and uses the West as the Other to legitimise its expansionist dream (Huang 1999; Lee 1998).

The space of cultural China or China style is populated by male singers whose patriotism is expressed through the claim of ownership to the nation, as in ‘I am the descendants of the Dragon’ or ‘I am Chinese, I am Proud’. Women’s patriotism, however, can only be expressed through their role in ‘comforting the military’ (勞軍), as they are seen not as subjects/citizens of the nation, but those in need of protection. But, their sexuality also needs to be policed to guarantee the purity of the race which founds the nation. This relationship constitutes the difficulties and opportunities that female stars had to negotiate in crossing national boundaries during the Cold War (in the 1980s). Tsai Tai-jung, the embodiment of American sexuality, was tolerated because she dutifully performed her job of ‘comforting the military’, thereby subordinating her Americanness to Republic of China (ROC) Chineseness. Hiding in America, Teresa Teng made a deal with the ROC government to ‘comfort the military’ in exchange for her stay in Taiwan due to an unpatriotic act – using an Indonesian passport to facilitate her entrance to Japan (as Japan, together with the PRC, was considered the ROC’s enemy). This negotiation won her the title of patriotic entertainer who used her feminine voice to conquer China, something that the men were not able to do.

However, this patriotic script for female stars lost its validity as democratisation challenged the legitimacy of state-supported Chinese nationalism in Taiwan, along with many other patriotic practices. Instead, with the rising Chinese nationalism supported and cultivated by the Chinese state, nationalism became a proven formula for success for the music industry to cash in on (Weiss 2013), with male and female stars trying out different forms of patriotism as each is structured differentially to the nation. Several ‘lessons’ were on offer for the music industry on how to work with gender politics and Chinese nationalism. In targeting the Chinese market, Jackie Chan transformed himself and took on the masculine, paternalistic, big-brother role, taking charge of policing the nation as if he were the owner of the Chinese nation. However, his patriotic expressions alienated his fans in Taiwan and Hong Kong (Weiss 2013). Ronald Cheng’s English song, ‘Broken China’ (as in broken porcelain) was banned in 1998 for obvious reasons, as was Anita Mui because of the ‘pornographic’ nature of her performance in ‘Bad Girl’ in 1995 (Chang 2008). In Taiwan, as an icon that hybridised local and global forces, Chang Hui-mei (commonly known as A-mei) was invited to sing the national anthem at the presidential inaugural ceremony of the pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party’s Chen Shui-bian in 2000. Her performance angered the Chinese government and audiences, leading to the withdrawal of her commercial endorsements and suspension of her music promotions in China (Guy 2002). These cases demonstrate that stars are often caught in the tangled process of capitalist regionalisation encountering nationalist stumbling blocks (Moskowitz 2009).

In constituting Taiwan’s music industry as well as its stars, transnationality also gives shape to multiple modernities and publics arranged hierarchically according to the logic of the nation state. The space of official national popular culture is dominated by men who sing about the nation state (even though their styles are evidently foreign influenced). Conversely, in the domain of commercial popular culture, female singers are constructed as the embodiment either of American sexiness, individuality, and autonomy or of Japanese purity, cuteness, and innocence, subordinated in supporting roles for the men of the nation. At the time when China was not yet the major market, transnational female stars caught between different patriotism used their feminine obligation, comforting the military, to subordinate their embodied Americanness or Japaneseess to the ROC nation state in proving their loyalty.

Since the 1990s, despite China’s ‘opening up’, Beijing remains tight in control in cultivating patriotic subjects while, paradoxically, allowing the local and transnational media industries to promote consumerist lifestyles. With China’s increasingly dominant role in the Chinese-language market, artists whose political inclinations are deemed by Beijing to be ‘pro-democracy’ and ‘pro-Taiwan’ are systematically excluded. Moreover, with China’s emphasis on traditional Chinese culture securing family harmony as the foundation of national harmony, expressions of sexuality outside the heteronormative, monogamous ideals of coupledom are carefully scrutinised. These historical experiences of gender, sexuality, and nationalism, which have resulted from globalisation and regionalisation which have changed the relations between Taiwan and China, constitute the context that HIM International and their first product and poster child, S.H.E., has had to respond to. As women are, first of all defined by their gender, which then determines their relationship to the nation state, HIM International carefully packaged S.H.E.
in a way that is acceptable to both the Taiwanese and Chinese conventions of gender and sexuality while also responding to the post-feminist culture and cute trend in Taiwan. The founder of HIM International, Lyu Yan-ching (呂燕清), makes clear that their success lies in their ‘respect for the artists as human beings’ – that is, they allow them to realise their life plans and package their images accordingly. In S.H.E.’s case, HIM packaged their image and music following a life trajectory from longing and falling in love to getting married and (in the future) having children (HIM Entertainment 2013). This definition of personhood filtered through deep-seated ideologies of gender, supplemented by an acknowledgement of spaces for change in response to the exigencies of the times, allows S.H.E. to be defined as ‘ordinary’ girls whose desires and roles in life conform to the heteronormative conventions of love, marriage, and family. In doing this, S.H.E. appropriates two dominant, contradictory discourses of femininity: post-feminism and cuteness – conceptualised as American and Japanese, respectively – with the former emphasising independence, autonomy, choice, sexiness, and sexual equality, and the latter purity, innocence, infantilisation, and dependence, resulting in the elimination of post-feminism’s sexuality. As such, S.H.E.’s femininity should be seen as capital’s attempt to negotiate and transcend the otherwise contentious particulars of patriarchy and nationalism in the region.

S.H.E.’S FEMININE STARDOM

The packaging of celebrities revolves around the paradox of ordinariness and extraordinariness, with ordinariness used to solicit audience identification and extraordinariness to justify the worthiness of the star’s fame and wealth (Dyer 1979). This section demonstrates that the music industry constructs S.H.E.’s ordinariness through the gender ideologies of post-feminism and cuteness and their extraordinariness through the ideology of meritocracy and hard work for legitimation. The concept of ordinariness needs to be conceptualised not only within the space of gender ideology, but also at the intersection of gender and media. Female stars are best understood through the notion of celebrity, not only because women function effectively as spectacles in media but because of their common association with the private domain of personal relationships, romance, leisure, and domesticity (Geraghty 2000). But, this observation also needs to be contextualised within a media context which, with the invention of new technology, allows for new formats and genres that construct fame through a focus on personal life. With the rise of reality TV, celebrity studies in the West has focused on whether the inclusion of ordinary people constitutes a form of democratisation (Turner 2006). Some focus on the ideological function of ordinariness in disseminating the myth of meritocracy through a process of identification that functions to sustain and reproduce neo-liberal subjectivities (Littler 2003). While the selective and, therefore, ‘sanitised’ nature of ordinariness is emphasised (Turner 2006), these accounts fail to explain the gendered dimension of ordinariness – in particular, how conventional gender ideologies come to structure our notion of ordinariness. S.H.E. successfully exploits this aspect of ordinariness for commodification.

S.H.E.’s rise to stardom needs to be understood through the intersection of gender and media, which enables the trio to frame their celebrity images in a seemingly more intimate way within the shifting geopolitical and cultural contours of Mandopop. The construction of S.H.E.’s ordinariness relies on the use of various media formats, including their on-stage music videos (MV’s), ‘off-MV’ interviews, variety talk shows, and discussions in print, broadcast, and digital media. Examples include S.H.E.’s confessions in S.H.E.’s Secret Diaries, and Internet streaming of their intimate interactions as disc jockeys in ‘FM S.H.E.’, as well as books such as S.H.E.’s Growing Up Diaries. However, this ordinariness cannot make sense without taking into account the already dominant gender ideologies of post-feminism and cuteness, both of which are best defined as ‘sensibilities’ composed of distinctive elements that constitute the site of inquiry (Gill 2007a).

Before discussing the elements of cuteness and post-feminist sensibility that are deployed, it is necessary to foreground the hybrid nature of S.H.E., which has been a signature of Taiwan’s music production. Selected through singing competitions called ‘Cruel Stages: beautiful young girl competition war’ (残酷戰台: 美少女爭奪戰), the trio was contracted to stay in a dormitory together as part of their collective training, an experience that was subsequently packaged to define their debut album, Girls’ Dormitory (Apple Daily 2013). Girls’ Dormitory defines the aesthetics and styles of their music: a fusion of American and Japanese influences. The defining song of this album, ‘Not Yet Lovers’, is a reworking of ‘Brown Eyes’ by Destiny’s Child. The title and the lyrics of the song are inspired by the Japanese phrase, ‘more than friendship, but not yet lovers’ (友達以上、恋人未滿). In fact, S.H.E.’s music career can be defined by their singing cover songs from the West (one in four of their songs are cover songs) (Huang 2013).

Girls’ Dormitory set the format for subsequent albums in constituting the elements of the cute sensibility that HIM International appropriates and defines. These include the subjectification of cuteness as bodily performance, consumption and possession of cute objects, and romantic longing. As discussed, cuteness originated in Japan but has been domesticated in Taiwan since the late 1990s. As a cultural code, cuteness has become part of the collective gendered embodiment of femininity and weakness: pink colours, cheerfulness, expressions of innocence, purity, infantilism, and youth that
stand in stark contrast to the masculinised, adult rational order. The trio demonstrates how this cuteness can be embodied as forms of subjectivity by staging cuteness within concrete gendered spaces in everyday life. For example, S.H.E. presents a kind of informal ‘girls’ talk’ that is usually peppered with seemingly unrestrained frankness and senselessness, which conveys a sense of sincerity and truthfulness, uncompromised by the adult world of calculated rationality. One example of this frankness is their constant expression of happiness when achieving the standards of beauty demanded of femininity and displaying disappointment when falling short. However, it is their senseless, out-of-context expression in making fun of their inadequacies that makes the laughter and cuteness. Moreover, S.H.E. sings about the desire to forever be cute. With upbeat songs with melodies resembling nursery rhymes like ‘Don’t Feel Like Growing Up’ (不想長大), the trio sings about remaining single and young. In ‘Long Live Cuteness’ (可愛萬歲), S.H.E. calls on women of all ages to join the team of cute girls and not be the ‘boring elegant lady’.

The second element that is narrated as cuteness is the possession of cute objects. In many of their MVs, S.H.E.’s cuteness is defined by their holding teddy bears, sleeping with dolls, wearing pink ribbon hair accessories, and reading fairy tales and cartoonish books within the concrete, ordinary settings of the domestic space of bedroom, living room, and kitchen, as well as in the streets, neighbourhood areas, and parks (as in the Girls’ Dormitory MV). The important message here is that cuteness can be purchased and performed: ‘If cuteness has a special counter [in a department store], consume as much as possible. Do not waste it. No matter how old you are, please return to our team’ (’Long Live Cuteness’).

The third element is the association of cuteness with romantic longing, which is often reflected theatrically in their songs. In many of the MVs, the trio is seen in playfully longing moods as they ponder either their dream men, or whether the men they have affections for will reciprocate. For example, in ‘Not Yet Lovers’, S.H.E. sings ‘come closer and I will let you hold my hand; be a little more brave, and I will follow you; say it and you will have me’. Off-screen, the trio has not been hesitant to discuss their search for romance and finding Mr Right, as tabloid reports occasionally publicise dates they have been out with.

Recognising both the visible trends of its commodification and objectification as well as the more nuanced ways in which it sweetens power relations, McVeigh (1996) underlines the sociocultural role of cuteness in turning affection and innocence into authority. But this authority, as Kinsella points out, is assuming one’s lower status but turning it around. It demonstrates a kind of refusal to conform to the dominant social order that is typified by the conservative notions of familialism and individual diligence (Kinsella 1995).
S.H.E.’s use of ‘wife’ is central to their expression and commodification of female friendship. However, unlike friendship, which offers an alternative family imagination and feminist solidarity, the concept of wife here can also serve as a linguistic hegemonic double-edged sword (Ackelsberg 1983) that reduces friendship to the realm of heterosexual family. In the case of S.H.E., the double-edgedness of ‘wife’ allows for a commodification of female friendship while, at the same time, making this friendship a support for, rather than an alternative to, the family.

The popularity of S.H.E. lies in their ability to respond to the contradictory concerns and demands of the times with regard to gender and sexual politics. As Taiwan is at the frontline of the globalising and regionalising forces in the Chinese-language market, various and even contradictory discourses of femininity coexist. Japanese cuteness being one and American-influenced post-feminist individuality and autonomy being another. On the one hand, S.H.E. emphasises the commonality among these gender discourses, namely, a naturalised heterosexual romance/marriage that can be obtained through consumption by dressing up oneself as cute or/and beautiful. On the other hand, in responding to the popularity of Japanese cuteness in women’s culture, they replace post-feminism’s demand for gender equality and, in particular, women’s right to equal sexual pleasure, with cuteness discourse’s innocence, child-like dependence, and vulnerability. However, the trio retains post-feminism’s emphasis on individuality and autonomy, only to reconfigure it into a discourse of selfhood. In ‘Long Live Cuteness’, the essence of individual selfhood is simplicity and innocence which is, paradoxically, to be shared by all women through consumption. In ‘Shero’, this selfhood is about actively pursuing one’s romantic interest in men.

This is where S.H.E. can claim ordinariens by sticking to the conventional gender ideology that women’s nature and place is located in the private space of romance, home, and personal relationships. The extraordinariness that justifies S.H.E.’s star status is the meritoriac value and ethic of hard work that they represent. This is evidenced by the media’s emphasis on their origin — their being discovered in the ‘Cruel Stage’ competition and the hellish training process they went through. In describing the hardships they went through in their ‘devilish collective training’, S.H.E. writes, ‘within one or two hours, you sweat like a waterfall and you sweat till your tears come out’ (S.H.E. 2003). Moreover, both Ella and Selena were forced to temporarily halt their careers as a result of occupational injuries. In Selena’s case, her healing process became a public event, evidenced by HIM International’s release of ‘Selena’s Diary in the Hospital Ward’ to update the public on her progress and treatments. Selena also ‘revealed the hidden, darkest moments’ in tears about how she ‘hated everyone close to me’ but eventually found hope and optimism through Hebe’s support (ET Today Entertainment Center 2014). With these reports, audiences were invited to experience depression, hopelessness, tears, and joys with her as she went through years of recovery. In sharing photos of her burns and scars with fans, Selena hoped that she could ‘encourage and inspire those burn patients. As long as you are alive, you have hope’ (Li 2014). She became a symbol of hope for burn patients, as her case testifies to the significance of tenacity and perseverance.

FEMININITY MEETS CHINESE AND TAIWANESE NATIONALISMS

We have analysed how the media industry packages S.H.E.’s femininity to respond to and negotiate with the dominant yet contradictory gender discourses in Taiwan brought about by globalising and regionalising forces. However, what also needs to be kept in mind is how the girl group was packaged for the wider Chinese-language market and, in particular, China. For the former, Taiwan is considered the ‘beacon’ for sexual rights for people of all sexual orientations in Asia (Jacobs 2014), whereas the latter is keen on retraditionalising a more authoritarian brand of ‘Asian Confucian values’.

In media production, this means censorship of what the Chinese government perceives to be morally objectionable expressions and relations that include sexually explicit material, promiscuity, and homosexuality. Chang Hui-mei’s rise to prominence in the 1990s can be seen as an expression of Taiwan’s post-feminist sensibility. However, without planning to, she also opened up a space for homosexuality and publicly defended gay marriage rights. S.H.E., however, eliminates equality and sexuality by replacing them with cuteness. This gender ideal, which puts women in the private sphere of romance/marriage/family and interpersonal relationships, while also promoting consumption and an ethic of hard work, not only affirms patriarchal values but also contributes, simultaneously, to the workings of authoritarian capitalism by infantilising women and depriving them of their right to (sexual) equality claims.

The media industry’s strategic definition of ordinary women/girls as pre-political, infantilised subjects rather than adults with citizen rights and obligations is meant to navigate the difficult national political borders within the Chinese-language market, a lesson learnt from singers who have been banned, as mentioned in the first section, with Chang Hui-mei as the most recent example. However, as with the suspension of her activities in China as a result of her singing for President Chen’s inauguration ceremony, the democratic political awakening ran against capital’s demands for economic integration. This demand is further strategically facilitated by the Chinese state to promote eventual unification with Taiwan, which has, paradoxically,
been opposed by stronger Taiwanese nationalistic sentiments. S.H.E.’s venture into the Chinese market occurred at a time when relations between China and Taiwan began to take on a new dynamic as a result of China’s increasing political and economic presence. What has been established here for the gender politics of mainstream popular music is the shifting political terrain that artists crossing transnational markets have to deal with. This requires constant adjustment to the packaging of pop aesthetics and content to negotiate the ideological undercurrents in the three interrelated realms of the domestic, the societal, and the geopolitical.

As stated in the first section, the music industry in Taiwan and Hong Kong constructs the notion of ‘cultural China’ to create commonalities (both racially and culturally) among Chinese in order to enter China’s market. From the 1980s to the beginning of the millennium, songs that glorify the superiority of the Chinese race and their culture, such as ‘The Descendants of the Dragon’ (龍的傳人), ‘My Chinese Heart’ (我的中國心), ‘I am Chinese’ (我是中國人), ‘The Yellow Species’ (黃種人), and ‘I am Proud I am Chinese’ (我驕傲，我是中國人), have successfully conquered China’s market, cultivating their sense of racial identity and boosting Chinese nationalism (Cheng 2014). Aware of the success of this music formula and being careful not to repeat Chang’s experience, S.H.E.’s producers came out with ‘China’s Language’ (中國話), co-written by Taiwanese and Chinese songwriters. Donning androgynous Chinese martial arts clothes in the MV, the trio sings, ‘How smart Chinese people are, how beautiful China’s language is ... the language that Confucius spoke is now internationalised, people all over the world are learning Chinese, people all over the world have to listen carefully (and obediently) to China’s language we speak’ [authors’ translation]. Unsurprisingly, this song was met with anger within Taiwan (Duan 2007).

From the opposing responses came two memorable and widely circulated songs, ‘Taiwanese Language’ and ‘China’s Fa’ (sarcastic creolised ‘China’s Language’) by Da-Chi (大支), a pioneering independent rapper from Taiwan’s hip-hop music scene who often articulates his explicit politics in the non-Mandarin vernacular Hoklo or Taiyu language. Both songs remix the melody of China’s Language and change its lyrics and language to include Taiyu, Hakka, and indigenous symbols as responses to the original song in order distinguish the Taiwanese language, as culturally vibrant and multilingual, from the ahistorical and orientalised Chineseness expressed in ‘China’s Language’ (Mavis Wu 2016). The second song by Da-Chi celebrates Taiwanese nationalism by subverting the original lyrics, replacing ‘The whole world is listening carefully (and obediently) to China’s language’, with ‘Good girl/boy, be obedient’. Moreover, in making fun of S.H.E.’s celebration of ‘China’s Language’, Da-Chi sings that S.H.E. should rename their band ‘Ta’, the Chinese term for ‘she’, instead of their English initials, ‘S.H.E.’. However, the conflicts between Chinese nationalism and Taiwanese nationalism that are expressed through ‘China’s Language’ are embedded in gender politics. While a metaphor for China’s economic and state power is constructed through men’s sexual prowess (testicles, or the English acronym ‘LP’ in Taiyu), in Da-Chi’s ‘China’s Fa’, which tries to establish Taiwan’s autonomy, the power of Taiwanese language is conveyed through ‘fuck your mother’ (Gan-ni-niáng or 千你娘). This profanity, again, asserts male sexual prowess over the violation of the woman/mother’s body: ‘Listen, which national language is more powerful than Gan-ni-Niáng? People all over the world are speaking Gan-ni-Niáng!’ (Chang 2007).

Faced with such unexpected controversy, HIM International tried to use S.H.E.’s innocent girlhood identity to extricate them from the political differences, a lesson learnt from Chang Hui-mei. Caught between the irreconcilable publics formed through historical forces that can be characterised as ‘not yet postcolonial’ and ‘not yet post-Cold War’, Chang Hui-mei appealed to her gendered professional identity, an identity that is associated with innocent childhood, and saw herself as being victimised by the irrational political forces that adults engage with. This has created a sense of tragic feelings among fan publics in China and Taiwan, who helped to mobilise to recover her career (Tsai 2008). Chang’s personal experience is taken up by HIM International as a script to work with. On the one hand, HIM International emphasised the ‘apolitical nature of entertainment (as in ‘entertainment for entertainment’s sake’) and accused Taiwanese nationalists of being ‘adults’ (da-ren, or 大人) who maliciously imposed politics on the innocent girls. On the other hand, the company staged S.H.E. as brides to make their point. On the day of the official release of this album in Taiwan, the trio dressed themselves in wedding gowns to emphasise their femininity and called themselves ‘children’ who do not know about the ‘adult’ world of politics. This strategy allowed the pro-independence media such as Liberty Times to regard them as victims of the record company’s pro-China approaches. In their following album, called Long Live Cuteness (可愛萬歲), as a response to Da-Chi’s and many rockers’ accusations, S.H.E. sang, ‘My sisters, it is too exhausting to aspire to be patriotic “sheros” [巾幗英雄]. What is valuable is to have a child’s innocent heart, make funny faces and stick out your tongue to tease.’

What is highlighted here is the private space of girlishness, a space separated from the adult space of politics. This zone of girlishness, of intimacy, of girls’ bedroom culture, while part of the formation of politics through the division and exclusion of the private so that the public/political domain can be constituted as such, is constructed as an ‘elsewhere’ free of political discourses, a space where women naturally reside (Berlant and Warner 1998). It is the constitutive outside politics, that is, it is what founds politics but is actively denied its role. Its space as separate from politics is, itself, political.
In S.H.E.'s case, what we see is the politics of infantilising women as icons of transnational capital and depriving them of their status as adult citizens.

CONCLUSION: THE GENDER POLITICS OF S.H.E.

This chapter has highlighted the historicity of Taiwan’s post-war ‘state without nation’ status, where America, the ROC state, and histories of Japanese colonialism play a key role in the formation of the commercial popular and official national popular culture in Taiwan. Within this context, Americanness is defined in terms of sexual openness and Japanese sensuality, virginity, innocence, embodied by different entertainers/singers. The space of the official national popular culture, however, is dominated by men, who consider themselves the owners of the nation. American and Japanese influences gave rise to the post-feminism and cuteness revolution, mediated by Taiwan’s patriarchal culture, as Taiwan went through processes of neo-liberal globalisation and democratisation in the 1990s. If the post-feminist sensibility is embodied by Chang Hui-mei and cuteness by Hello Kitty, the music industry successfully combined these two contradictory gender discourses in creating S.H.E. as it attempted to reach the Chinese-language market.

The realisation of this market requires carefully planned processes of crafting politically odourless entertainment products, and S.H.E. is the poster child of this strategy. Their femininity is constructed and anchored in authoritarian capitalism construed as patriarchal Confucian values, with an ethos of perseverance and hard work that appeals to China’s market, but also giving a dose of individuality and autonomy to facilitate consumption. This political, selective process is made natural, ordinary, and, thus, apolitical, with women’s nature being presented as authentically simple and innocent, and hence their natural place being in the private sphere of romance, marriage, and family. The assignment of women to the private sphere is fundamental to the formation of the nation state and Chinese nationalism, be it ROC or PRC nationalism, which positions women as supporters of men who are owners/citizens of the nation. The de-politicisation and privatisation of femininity works to infantilise women as ‘cute girls’, without adult/citizen rights to equality.

Feminist scholars in cultural studies have pointed out the affinity between post-feminism and neo-liberalism as both promulgate individuality, autonomy, and self-responsibility, all of which can be obtained through choice of consumption. This post-feminism takes women’s equality for granted (hence, there is no need to fight for it) and reconfigures feminist demands through the discourse of heterosexual romance to trap women in the ‘new sexual contract’ with the beauty industry, in which women sexualise themselves as expressions of their individuality, agency, and equality (McRobbie 2009). In S.H.E.’s case, we find that American-influenced post-feminism is further packaged for export to the Chinese-language market in a way that fits the workings of authoritarian capitalism. What is promoted is a consumeristic spirit that reinforces patriarchal values for capitalist reproduction and an ethic of hard work that guarantees capitalist production and accumulation; what is eliminated is the claim of equality, in particular sexual equality. If post-feminism undoes feminism, as McRobbie (2009) argues, S.H.E.’s femininity, while appropriating post-feminism’s ‘feminist’ elements, is not only undoes feminism; it also subverts post-feminism by further relinquishing the claim of sexual equality (of pleasure), not to mention the notion of gender equality.