

Depoliticized Mimicry: Modern Girls, Bodily Discipline, and Colonial Consumer Culture in 1930s China's Hong Kong

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Abstract: Hong Kong is an inalienable part of China. This article examines the phenomenon of “modern women” in the historical period when Hong Kong was under British colonial rule (1930–1941). This study takes Homi K. Bhabha’s theory of imitation, Foucault’s technique of self, and Bourdieu’s theory of class stratification as the analytical framework, and uses archival evidence from periodicals such as *The Kung Sheung Daily News* to analyze the generation logic and historical implications of female imitation practices in the colonial background. The research results show that colonial commerce, Shanghai immigrant communities, and local class forces are intertwined, forming a depoliticized imitation machine. Media organizations exert micro-disciplinary control by moralizing women’s bodies. Women from different social classes have adopted various imitation strategies, namely synchronous imitation, planned adaptation, and cultural appropriation, while deviant behavior has been condemned by the public. Compared with China’s Shanghai, Mumbai, and Singapore, the modern girl culture in colonial Hong Kong shows unique commercial characteristics. This study expands the analytical boundaries of post-colonial gender studies and traces the historical continuation of how physical discipline during the colonial period evolved into the contemporary appearance-based economic hierarchy.

Keywords: Modern girls; Colonial Hong Kong; 1930s; Mimicry; Hybridity; Depoliticization; Bodily discipline; Postcolonial theory

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1. Introduction

Against the backdrop of the tensions between the two World Wars in the 1930s, Colonial Hong Kong experienced an asymmetrical commercial boom. Modern girls, as a novel prototype of women, occupy a prominent position in urban public life. These women are characterized by short or permed hair, wearing custom-made cheongsams, stockings, and high heels. They frequently visit department stores and dance halls, gradually evolving into iconic modern figures meticulously crafted by contemporary print media. However, the visual imagery of modern girls is fundamentally anchored in imitative practice. Their aesthetic taste and behavioral patterns integrate Western trends with Shanghai modernity, while deliberately eliminating the individual radicalism of Western modernity and the patriotic ideology contained in the discourse of modern Shanghai women. This social and cultural phenomenon has raised a crucial academic paradox: Does

this imitative behavior represent a liberating resistance of women to traditional patriarchal constraints, or does it constitute an implicit disciplinary cage formed by the interaction of colonial commerce, fragmented modernity, and indigenous patriarchy?

To solve this paradox, this paper takes Homi K. Bhabha's imitation theory as the core analytical framework. Bhabha believed that colonial rule depended on the construction of the colonized subjects, who were "almost the same, but not quite" imperial prototypes. Although aimed at consolidating colonial hegemony, this institutionalized imitation mechanism inevitably gave rise to cultural conflicts, thus creating a potential stage for power negotiations and symbolic subversion^[1]. Modern women in Hong Kong are a typical embodiment of this theoretical proposition. The colonial commercial system endeavored to cultivate compliant consumer groups, while the immigrant group in Shanghai introduced a depoliticized fashion paradigm. In this process of imitation, local women in Hong Kong have developed a unique "depoliticized flame-like" temperament, which is a distinctive survival and performance strategy adapted to the cultural environment of colonial society.

This study takes the advertisements, social news, comments, and readers' letters published in *The Kung Sheung Daily News* from 1930 to 1941 as the main data, supplemented by *The Hong Kong Telegraph* and *Shen Bao* for intertextual comparative analysis. It examines how the colonial commercial system, wartime immigration experiences, and indigenous class structures together constitute a social institution of mimicry. This article further explores how media advertising constructs aesthetic norms and enforces physical discipline, reveals the stratified mimetic strategies and limited agency of women from different social classes, and highlights the uniqueness of the Hong Kong case through cross-city comparisons.

This research bears both historical significance and practical significance. Historically, it advances research on Hong Kong's gender history and urban culture, and enriches academic discussions within the postcolonial theoretical framework on mimicry, hybridity, and female subjectivity. In contemporary times, it has constructed a historical context ranging from the moral norms of modern women to the self-discipline that prevails in the contemporary appearance economy. This article holds that genuine female emancipation stems from a critical interrogation of the power chain — who defines beauty, for what purpose, and who benefits from such definitions — rather than an uncritical mimesis of standardized aesthetic norms.

2. The formation of mimetic apparatus: The intersection of colonial commerce, migrant experiences, and class dynamics

2.1. Colonial commercial system

Throughout the 1930s, Colonial Hong Kong, under the interaction of colonial authorities and commercial capital, evolved into a depoliticized consumption space, and its political and cultural development remained largely separated from that of the Chinese mainland. Following the Canton-Hong Kong Strike of 1925, the colonial administration imposed strict restrictions on the political activities of the Chinese, which effectively suppressed ethno-nationalist sentiments. Therefore, the aspirations of southbound immigrants and local residents have largely shifted towards economic pursuits.

This political voicelessness paved the ground for the emergence of mimicry as theorized by Homi K. Bhabha. With colonial protection and geographical advantages, Hong Kong attracted a large number of merchants, especially business elites from Shanghai, to expand their business territory. By the late 1930s, the region hosted over 2,000 Chinese-funded factories and a working population of 100,000^[2]. Commercial prosperity has gradually become a comprehensive replacement for political demands. Against this backdrop, depoliticized consumer culture and the trend of showing off wealth have been prevalent. Leading department stores such as Wing On and Sincere have been established one after another, not only bringing in capital but also achieving systematic output of modern lifestyle paradigms.

The commercial advertising and entertainment industries have jointly woven a desire system targeting women. Beauty products such as skin care products, cosmetics, and clothing have become micro-disciplinary tools, while public Spaces like coffee shops, dance halls, and cinemas constantly stimulate consumption desires. The definition of modern power has

shifted from political emancipation to consumerism. Gradually, the female body has become a carrier for the operation of power and capital. What seems to be a spontaneous mimetic behavior is actually a precise compliance with colonial commercial apparatus.

2.2. Wartime migration and modern lifestyle paradigm

The stable situation in Hong Kong contrasts sharply with the warfare on the Chinese mainland. The grand narrative of the ethnic crisis in the Chinese mainland requires women to give up grooming and devote themselves to national salvation against foreign aggression. However, as a “safe haven” during the war, Hong Kong has a relatively weak sense of nationalist sentiment, and the people do not regard fashion consumption as a moral burden opposed to the survival of the country^[3].

In the 1930s, Shanghai was the fashion hub of popularity in the Far East, while Hong Kong was initially in a state of “lagging behind by half a step” as a whole. Following the outbreak of World War II, numerous privileged refugees like elite tailors, socialites, and film stars moved south, transforming Hong Kong from a mere follower of Shanghai to a “successor.” By the eve of the Japanese occupation, the total population of Hong Kong had increased to nearly 2 million^[4]. What they brought was not only funds but also a de-contextualized modern template: the Shanghai culture, which was once closely intertwined with national salvation, was completely stripped of its political connotations through the dual transfer of “West—Shanghai—Hong Kong”, retaining only the external form of fashionable consumption.

This iterative dilution process involving multiple groups and elements is the key mechanism for the depoliticization of Hong Kong’s modern model. Rather than undergoing prolonged incubation of indigenous culture, Hong Kong has rapidly implemented and iterated based on the mature Shanghai model, forming a unique modern ecosystem that fits the colonial environment.

2.3. Local social structure and class distinction

Bourdieu pointed out in *A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* that aesthetic orientation is not a natural preference but an identity differentiation behavior shaped by class position and cultural capital^[5]. In the 1930s, Hong Kong was a complex field where colonial power and Chinese capital were interwoven. Chinese elites were not only the promoters of modern trends but also the delineators of disciplinary boundaries. Despite the widespread racial discrimination in the colonies, they still actively emulated the social logic of the European upper class. Sports such as woodball, which were favored by the British upper class, were also widely pursued and emulated by the Chinese bourgeoisie in Hong Kong^[2]. The British lifestyle has been transformed into a cultural capital for climbing up. Such a kind of utilitarian mimicry based on the driving force of class distinction eventually contributed to the hybridity of Hong Kong’s modern culture.

For women, mimicry is essentially an unequal “survival performance.” In male-dominated family structures and marginal economic status, modern standards have been internalized as strategies to enhance marital value and social mobility. The female imagery constructed in advertisements and films integrates Western ideals of bodily vitality with traditional Chinese norms of wifely virtue. Accordingly, mimetic practices of women from different social strata show a distinction: elite women with robust purchasing power have initiated an open lifestyle oriented towards the West, while women from the working class and disadvantaged groups, even in the midst of heavy labor, pursue the modern ideals defined by the media through perming and consuming affordable cosmetics.

The resources for mimicry vary greatly among different social classes: the elite group monopolizes the high-cost capital for imitation, while ordinary women are prone to fall into the predicament of imitation. Against this backdrop, beauty has transcended its mere aesthetic value and become a realistic prerequisite for survival. Women complete identity reconstruction through their daily consumption practices. This stratified imitative behavior eventually shaped the modern consumer-oriented female body and was formed in the interstitial colonial social order.

3. Power techniques of mimicry: Disciplinary effects of advertisements and media

3.1. Mimicry field: The Logic of depoliticized consumption and physical reshaping

Mimicry is not merely aesthetic convergence; it is also a power practice deeply rooted in the physical body. In *The Position of Culture*, Homi K. Bhabha proposed: “Colonialism is the desire to obtain a transformed, recognizable other. As a distinct individual, it is almost the same as the colonizer, but not exactly the same”^[6]. Cultural assimilation in Hong Kong in the 1930s was not a tough transplantation of systems, but rather the implantation of modern desires into daily life through media and advertising.

The colonial authorities and commercial capital collaborated to build a consumption network through department stores and newspaper advertisements, establishing soft domination and turning Hong Kong into a depoliticized consumption paradise. Political consciousness has been subdued, and the pursuit of modernity has to a large extent been led into fashion, aesthetic pursuits, and entertainment activities. To narrow the aesthetic gap between their self-image and the ideal female prototype, women voluntarily accept the self-techniques advocated by commercial advertisements to reshape their appearances. As Foucault argued, such techniques enable individuals to approximate an ideal state by regulating their bodies, conduct, and minds^[7]. However, these seemingly liberating practices are essentially standardized mechanisms designed by the operation of dominant power.

Mainstream media have commercialized the “modern” identity, with power shifting from suppression to guiding desires, shaping standards, and producing entities. Advertisers systematically treat the physical characteristics and natural aging pathologies of people of the yellow race as “defects”, making women internalize colonial aesthetic standards and become the subjects of continuous self-monitoring. After assessing the disparity between themselves and their “ideal appearance”, driven by aesthetic anxiety to generate mimetic desires, they are inspired to consume, regarding the purchase of skin care products and the repair of “flaws” as ways to gain confidence. This anxiety became the fuel for business operations, forcing women to bind their own value to their appearance in the illusion of “self-improvement”, achieving the triple oppression of business, colonialism and gender power.

3.2. Facial self-techniques

The face is the most direct field for women to practice mimicry. In the 1930s, white women favored smoky eye makeup, thick eyelashes, and thin lips. They believed that only women who had to work all day long could have a sickly pale complexion. Therefore, they were enthusiastic about sunbathing in pursuit of healthy brown skin and to show their love for outdoor sports. And show off her beautiful figure^[8]; While Hong Kong modern ladies pursue a three-dimensional makeup look, they retain the traditional Chinese softness and grace, and show an almost obsessive insistence on “light skin.” This aesthetic not only inherits the traditional class perception of manual laborers in East Asian society, but also is endowed with a modern new meaning in the colonial context, forming the ideal skin standard of “fair with a rosy tint.”

The ideal skin depicted in skincare product advertisements, which is like a flower bud in the morning dew, is essentially a kind of “mimicry bait”: it provides a perfect mirror image that seems like the East and the West that blurs racial boundaries, luring the colonized to fill the eternal aesthetic gap through consumption. The micro-mechanism of discipline is hidden in the “pathological” definition of natural physiological phenomena in advertisements. Taking the German Kalo Face Cleanser advertisement as an example, it frames the inherent skin characteristics of Eastern women as flaws requiring rectification, and glorifies Western cosmetics as products of mysterious scientific power. Such discourse transforms colonial inferiority complex into tangible consumer desires^[9].

This kind of discourse forcibly links “fair skin and beautiful appearance” with modernity, conveying a dangerous perception that “achieving modernity does not require education or political participation; it only requires consuming Western goods.”

Ultimately, external discipline is transformed into women’s self-skills through daily rituals: the steps of using skin care products turn skin care behaviors into actionable daily rituals. The actions of women applying in front of the mirror

and checking for spots are precisely the convergence of Foucault's self-surveillance and Bhabha's convergence anxiety. Discipline is quietly completed in front of every woman's dressing table.

3.3. Somatic self-techniques

The female body is no longer merely a physiological entity but has been constructed as quantifiable and disciplined class capital. Physical discipline forms a dual operating mechanism of self-regulation and public display in parallel. Taking the advertisement of Shiwulu Golden Rooster Iron Tree Wine as an example, the advertisement begins by putting forward the argument that "it is advisable to choose a wife with a tall and straight chest", directly binding the female body form with the value of marriage and love ^[10]. The advertising image integrates the sexy curves of the West and the facial features of the East, constructing a hybrid visual text in the sense of Homi Bhabha, triggering a contradictory dual identity among women.

The subtlety of such discipline lies in framing innate maternal physical traits as aesthetic deficiencies, while supplying standardized remedial techniques to alter them. The advertisement pathologizes the physical changes of women after giving birth, backed by "prescriptions from Western science doctors" and "proven by thousands of doctors", claiming that it can restore the body to "perfection." This kind of micromanagement of the physical body transforms external aesthetic surveillance into internal spontaneous behavior, while requiring women to balance the role of motherhood and the modern curves that meet men's expectations. Ultimately, it consolidates the position of women being objectified and dominated.

Complementary to private restoration is the public display of the body in modern sports culture. Influenced by Western sports and fitness culture and the subtropical climate conditions in Hong Kong, swimming became one of the most popular sports at that time. Swimming culture has brought women's bodies from private dressing tables into the public eye. The fit figures in swimsuits in advertisements have created an ideal model of "smooth skin and graceful figure", and together with the restorative narrative of skin care product advertisements, they have achieved comprehensive coverage of women's bodies. In the process of imitating the main body of Western sports, women have thoroughly internalized external aesthetic standards: the body is both a "lesion" that needs to be privately repaired and a "result" that needs to be publicly flaunted.

4. Imitation strategies in hierarchy

The modern ladies in Hong Kong in the 1930s were not a homogeneous group. When women from different social positions faced the temptation of modernity, the mimicry strategies they adopted and the psychological consequences they endured presented highly tense manifestations.

4.1. Elite and comprador families: Synchronous mimicry and identity monopoly

As the elite group at the top of the social hierarchy, the modern practices of China's elites and comprador wives are essentially identity monopolies in step with overseas trends. Their social activities and consumption venues are mainly concentrated in luxury department stores like Lane Crawford, and they always follow Western styles in cosmetics and clothing, which requires huge economic costs. In those days, the price of a pair of stockings was enough to cover the food expenses of an adult male for a month ^[11].

Faced with such huge economic barriers, upper-class women integrated modern Western elements into China's traditional aesthetics. The Western-style dress design tailored for the ball occasion, combined with the hot Lingnan climate, gave birth to the distinctive features of the Hong Kong cheongsam, namely the high side slit and the inner lace petticoat. From Bourdieu's perspective, such mimetic practices serve to achieve a social distinction from the general public ^[5]. Abundant capital enables them to closely adhere to the ideal female prototype. By participating in Western-style tea parties, balls, and other social activities, they can dissolve the sense of otherness as articulated by Bhabha and ultimately consolidate their core position in the colonial social field ^[6].

4.2. Middle-class professional women: Calculative mimicry and emergence of social fractures

The modern practices of middle-class professional women such as female teachers and public servants have evolved into an “actuarial convergence” that repeatedly weighs between budget constraints and identity. Their monthly salary was limited, and they had to look for more cost-effective options among Xianshi, Wing on Department Store, or domestic brands ^[12–13]. Domestic skin care products are much cheaper than foreign ones. Brands like Fuxin and Two Girls offer hundreds of affordable daily necessities, enabling middle-class women to approach the elite within their affordability by purchasing individual items, getting fashionable hairstyles, and buying clothes during discount seasons.

However, such partial aesthetic optimization constrained by limited budgets inevitably leads to the excessive differences proposed by Bhabha. Disparities in material structure often make them fall into an inferiority complex in social scenes ^[6]. Furthermore, the pursuit of modern glamour frequently becomes an obstacle to career development. At that time, modern female office workers were widely accused of being just eye-catching candy in the workplace, forcing middle-class women to strike an unstable balance between pursuing aesthetic charm and maintaining professional dignity.

4.3. Underprivileged women: Misappropriated imitation and on the verge of survival

For underprivileged women living on the edge of survival, their pursuit of modernity is manifested as symbolic possession oriented by livelihood. With meager incomes, they are excluded from mainstream consumption spaces, and high-end imported cosmetics become unattainable symbolic admission tickets in Bourdieu’s sense. They can only do marginal mimicry through street stalls and cheap imitations of pure cotton cheongsams. Taking the female teahouse attendants in Guangzhou and Hong Kong in the 1920s and 1930s as examples, they entered the service industry during the economic depression and prostitution ban. They adopted short hair and modified cheongsams to attract customers, yet rarely perm or wear costly ornaments ^[14]. By combining traditional charm with a modern style of dress, they maintain the bottom line of physical autonomy in social entertainment interaction and turn modern appearance into livelihood capital.

Such vulgar modernity is easily discovered by mainstream public opinion, which labels their behavior as blind imitation or moral degeneration, and makes them subject to severe social sanctions.

Such stratified mimetic practice has received completely divergent moral judgments in public discourse. The modern lifestyle that elite women regarded as elegant, professional women are stereotyped as mere ornaments, while lower-class women are condemned for performing urban decadence. This disparity in evaluation essentially exposes the power operation behind moral criticism. Once this mimicry is defined as social deviance, public opinion against the disadvantaged groups will evolve into a complex disciplinary mechanism, which will strengthen the class boundaries in colonial society.

5. Penalties for crossing boundaries and cracks in the main body

5.1. The case of Ruan Lingyu: From screen security to the pseudo-punishment of private domain overstepping

Although the modernity of the 1930s was a visual feast shared by the masses, there were always clear boundaries. The tragedy of actress Ruan Lingyu is an extreme footnote to this boundary patrol system. In the safe zone of the screen, Ruan Lingyu is a perfect modern benchmark, highly sought after by audiences for her fashionable outfits and emotional entanglements. However, when this favored “mimicry” attempts to spill out of the screen space and get involved in real private domain disputes, public opinion takes a fatal turn.

After Ruan Lingyu fell into emotional disputes and legal proceedings, the special commemorative issue of *The Kung Sheung News* explored the question of “Who killed Ruan Lingyu?” yet deliberately escaped the oppression imposed by male-dominated capital. On the contrary, they blamed her tragedy on the vanity of urban women ^[15]. This confirms the inherent threat in imitation. When Ruan Lingyu is no longer satisfied with merely imitating the external image, but strives to obtain the real subject position commensurate with her modern identity, such as openly pursuing free love, her state of

“being almost the same yet never identical” challenges the patriarchal social order. By pathologizing her private life, public discourse not only denies the legitimacy of her personal pursuit, but also warns all imitators that imitation must be limited to consumption and never cross the red line of power.

5.2. Daily regular training: The “modern curse” and the rift between the subjects from a class perspective

This vigilance against “overstepping boundaries” permeates the daily lives of ordinary women in more subtle ways. In reality, if a woman is influenced by the urban atmosphere, gets her hair permed, wears makeup, befriends the opposite sex, or even shows dissatisfaction with her husband, she will be diagnosed as “contracting urban diseases.” Those women who focus on their own appearance and try to break the established order are often labeled by the media as a “modern curse” and labeled as “deformed” or “social waste”^[16].

The collision between the indigenous everyday norms in Hong Kong and the mainland’s nationalist moral discourse further makes the operation logic of social norms more complicated. Mainland narratives demonize modern women as ominous signs for the country, while the New Life Movement categorized modern body behaviors, including hair perming and fashionable dress, as immoral and vulgar behaviors, which need to be strictly eradicated.

When disseminated by Hong Kong local newspapers, these moral critical words were cleverly appropriated by local elites and re-contextualized as a symbolic class defense mechanism to consolidate the hierarchical boundaries within colonial society. However, this kind of public opinion shows obvious structural double standards. English newspapers tailor-made aesthetic guides for upper-class ladies, legalizing their modern consumption and body beautification as a civilized practice of self-care and self-pleasure. In sharp contrast, working-class women, including factory workers and teahouse waitresses, adopt the same modern behavior pattern, which is collectively accused of being the internal source of social unrest and moral turmoil.

It is worth noting that self-censorship with “progressivism” arrogance has also grown among women. In the Women’s Weekly of Business Daily, some contributing women called for awakening, but at the same time, they also made a secondary pathology of simple imitation behavior that could not rise to the height of “soul liberation.” In the process of pursuing modernity, women at the bottom have to cope with the moral whipping of the patriarchal society and the awakening review from the same sex, and are forced to find a more flexible survival path in the folds of identity.

6. Comparative perspective: The uniqueness of Hong Kong’s mimicry

6.1. Political noise reduction: A paradigm shift between Shanghai and Hong Kong

Despite both Shanghai and Hong Kong being modern trading ports permeated by colonialism in the 1930s, their connotations of modernity were completely different. As the cradle of modern fashion in China, the prototype of the new woman in Shanghai is based on the modern national citizenship model, in which the acceptance of Western modernity and the pursuit of national rejuvenation by nationalism are closely intertwined. Fashion periodicals widely disseminate knowledge about modern physical exercise and public health, closely linking the image of fashionable noblewomen with the discourse of maintaining national vitality and public health^[17]. Furthermore, these publications advocate the egalitarian nature of all occupations and encourage women to actively integrate into the workplace. By starting from the grassroots level, women can gain recognition from the upper echelon, thereby achieving upward social mobility^[18].

In contrast, the modernity of Hong Kong exhibits a light-hearted quality that has nothing to do with political burdens. Modern women in Hong Kong have become global consumers, and their consumption awareness and physical investment constitute the core of their modernity. Their pursuit of fashion aesthetics is mainly aimed at enhancing personal charm and accumulating marital capital. Local newspapers give priority to promoting cosmetics, clothing, and entertainment consumption. A large number of advertisements even embed the desires of modern women into traditional family obligations. In Hong Kong, modernity is no longer a panacea for survival and rejuvenation. On the contrary, it has

become a survival tool for appreciating personal charm and enhancing social status. This fundamental shift from civic responsibility to individual survival essentially reflects Hong Kong's deliberate political depoliticization of Shanghai's modernity template.

Through the mediation of Shanghai, Hong Kong has achieved a highly strategic re-mimicry: it precisely stripped away the political soul of the “new female awakening” in the Shanghai-style culture, retaining only the superficial visual shell of fashion, professionalism and entertainment. Consequently, these originally transform the disruptive modern symbols into purely commercial equipment.

6.2. Mimicry comparison: The creolized modern practices of three ports

The concept of Creolization proposed by Édouard Glissant in *Poetics of Relation* has the characteristic of “coexistence of harmony and wandering”, which is in line with the confounding nature of mimicry, achieving transcendence on the basis of confounding: It is not a simple superposition of elements, but rather the generation of new cultural dimensions^[19]. This view provides a core perspective for interpreting the mediating female images that jointly emerged in Hong Kong, Mumbai, and Singapore in the global colonial trade network. The modern women in these cities moved between the colonial rulers and the local society. Their clothing practices presented a mixed feature of local traditions and Western elements, forming a unique cultural form of colonial port cities.

While inheriting the aesthetic of the Shanghai style, Hong Kong cheongsams integrate British suit tailoring and high-slit design, and are paired with Western accessories such as geometrically cut gemstones and watches. It has moved away from the symbolic label of “progress” and turned to a more pure sensory presentation. The new-style saris in Mumbai have adjusted the way of wearing and the fabric, introducing Western elements such as sleeveless cuts and lace decorations. Some of the embroidery even has a visual association with Chinese style. The Nonya attire style of Singapore combines Portuguese-modified Javanese jackets, Chinese embroidery, and traditional Malay sarongs, forming a unique fusion style^[20].

These custom-made and improved garments transcend the binary division between local traditions and Western imitations. These mixed garments are neither static local legacies nor identical Western replicas; they form a tangible third space sewn together in the gaps of colonial rule. This Creolized modernity departs from the uncritical worship of foreign aesthetics. On the contrary, it represents a tactical functional disguise adopted by women in the mutual restraint among colonial rule, patriarchal constraints of clans, and commercial capitalism. In this squeezed tripartite power structure, marginalized female subjects strategically manipulate mixed body aesthetics to negotiate spatial autonomy and promote subtle subjective empowerment within structural oppression.

6.3. Business paradox: Hong Kong's uniqueness in the triple crevice

Compared with Mumbai and Singapore, Hong Kong's modern culture shows a completely commercialized uniqueness. Traditional Indian new women would participate in non-violent anti-colonial movements, resist foreign goods and Western fashion, and nationalist sentiments restricted the commercial development of modern culture. Singapore is influenced by complex ethnic politics. Conservatives regard modern girls as a symbol of colonial corruption. The zonal management also restricts cross-ethnic social interaction, which limits the spread of modern culture. In contrast, Hong Kong is neither constrained by intense nationalist movements nor bound by complex ethnic politics. Modern culture is entirely at the service of commercial logic, and cultural mixiness has been absorbed into the consumption cycle suspended by the political future.

The realization of this thorough commercialization is attributed to the mature model provided by Shanghai as the modern center of China in modern times, as well as the promotion of the southward migration of Shanghai's fashion practitioners and refugees after the outbreak of the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression. However, the depoliticized convergence has also trapped Hong Kong's modern women in a triple crevice of “Shanghai's mimicry model—Hong Kong's colonial reality—moral condemnation from the mainland”, and their cultural identity is filled with a sense of tearing apart. This predicament gave rise to overly flashy aesthetic features—this was not a pure aesthetic choice, but an

exaggerated distortion of Shanghai's dignified image under colonial pressure, as well as an anxious response to criticism from the interior, reflecting the transitional awkwardness in the construction of the identity of modern colonial women.

7. Conclusion: The dual legacy of imitation

7.1. Core summary: The practice of mimicry in power folds

The mimicry practices of modern ladies in Hong Kong in the 1930s were essentially “mimicry” that grew up in a colonial context. This seemingly homogenized “mimicry game” is the result of the joint weaving of the colonial commercial system and the local patriarchy: the repair of the face and body is meticulously arranged by “self-technology”, advertisements pathologically transform natural physiological phenomena into defects, driving women to fill the eternal aesthetic gap through consumption. The practice of imitation shows a distinct class spectrum. The elite monopolize their status, the middle class actuary tends to converge, and the lower class appropriates their means of survival. Overstepping the boundaries will be severely punished by public opinion.

Even in unequal disciplines, mimicry still creates a vague “third space.” The fusion and splicing of cheongsam with Western elements is not a blind replication but a functional disguise, allowing women to explore the limited subject space in the gap between colonialism and tradition. This approach has created a unique image of “the glory of depoliticization”: although women have thus stepped out of the boudoir and into the public domain, their main forms of expression have always been confined within the “safe zone” of fashion consumption.

7.2. Historical significance: “Political noise reduction” in the narrow gap and the tearing of identity

The modern practices in Hong Kong profoundly reflect the narrow gap characteristics of the thorough commercialization of early urban culture. Compared with Shanghai's model of deeply binding personal modernization with national mission, Hong Kong has achieved a re-imitation of modernity through precise “political noise reduction”, stripping away the political soul of modernity and retaining only the visual shell of fashion and consumption, making modern women a medium that stimulates colonial trade and promotes commercial prosperity.

This process also reveals the profound cultural identity rift among Chinese women in the colonies. They have always been caught in the triple crevice of “mimicry objects—colonial reality—moral condemnation.” The overly flame-like and exaggerated aesthetic features are precisely a distorted treatment of the dignified style of Shanghai and a compensatory response to the moral anxiety in the interior, becoming the most genuine microcosm of the construction of the identity of modern colonial women.

7.3. Contemporary relevance: Women's discipline relay

This pseudo-historical legacy has not dissipated but has evolved into a gender discipline spectrum that transcends eras. From the modern ladies of the 1930s to the contemporary “appearance-level economy”, despite the continuous upgrading of disciplinary techniques, the underlying logic remains consistent: all are about transforming structural inequality into physical problems that can be solved through personal consumption and effort.

The contemporary appearance-level economy and the modern phenomena of the 1930s exhibit the characteristics of “surface liberation and deep continuation.” Social media may seem to give women more aesthetic autonomy, but in fact, the standardized templates pushed by algorithms are exactly the same as the advertisements in newspapers and periodicals in the past. Digital likes and comments make self-discipline more compulsory. True female liberation does not lie in the exquisite imitation of standardized aesthetic templates, but in the clear deconstruction and active transcendence of the aesthetic power structure colluded by colonialism, commerce and patriarchy. Today, by tracing the imitative legacy of Hong Kong's modern women, people aim to be vigilant against the new round of “mimicry games” woven by commercial forces under the guise of “women's emancipation”, and to explore possible paths to truly achieve the dual liberation of women's bodies and spirits.

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