



# The afterglow of women's pornography in post-digital China

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To cite this article: Gemma Commene (2016) The afterglow of women's pornography in post-digital China, Porn Studies, 3:4, 467-469

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/23268743.2016.1235896>



Published online: 14 Dec 2016.



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## BOOK REVIEW

**The afterglow of women's pornography in post-digital China**, by Katrien Jacobs, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, 204 pp., £60.00 (hbk), ISBN 978-1-13-748517-5

Academic debates and media discussions on pornography and other sexually explicit media tend to focus on western contexts, with few studies exploring how women engage with, produce and consume porn outside of the West. *The Afterglow of Women's Pornography in Post-digital China* addresses this absence and draws upon a range of artists, Boy Love (BL) fans and scholars to develop a rich and sustained narrative about women's engagement with body and gender politics and porn consumption in Hong Kong and mainland China. Despite the potential problem that data collection captures the experiences of more 'privileged women', this privilege is neither straightforward nor something which Jacobs fails to recognize in her interrogation. The inclusion of juxtapositions, the hesitance of some women's disclosure, and the recognition of the women who are yet to tell their stories demonstrates Jacobs' commitment to resisting homogenizing the experiences of the women in her study. *The Afterglow of Women's Pornography* is wholly shaped by (and through) women's experiences, all of which contribute to the outcomes of the study. What is interesting is how Jacobs herself has had to navigate laws and refine data collection in order to facilitate focus groups in mainland China: another reminder for the porn scholar of forces that would question the validity of porn scholarship, let alone the consumption of porn for pleasure. A discussion of these themes can be found in the introduction, but also in other chapters exploring how Jacobs negotiated laws and participant safety within mainland China/Hong Kong as well as in institutional settings. An example of this can be found in the discussions in Chapter 4 where we discover that showing explicit materials, even within well-established forums such as the Sex and Gender Education Forum at Sun Yatsen University, can be problematic given Chinese censorship legislation. This repressive context provides a nuance and gravity to the discussions and disclosures of the sensorial and erotic lives of Chinese women.

The book explores a disparate range of topics including drifting eyeballs, ghosts in literature and erotic softcore films, art and politics, leftover women and women's fantasies through BL fan culture. The range and depth of examples develop a rich narrative, allowing a reframing of intimacy and porn consumption that is powerful, affective and significant. *The Afterglow of Women's Pornography* further develops how 'porn studies' and porn consumption can be conceived, through a cleverly queer unpicking of the social, cultural, political and agentic layers which collide and try to map out Chinese women's existence. Katrien Jacobs and her participants identify the continuing struggles Chinese women – from mainland China and Hong Kong – face. These struggles are not limited to pornography or sex, but to women's everyday lives and aspirations, even in Hong Kong. The book details the socio-political measures and techniques that persistently try to control and restrict Chinese women's rights to their own body, a career or identity outside 'motherhood', self-pleasure and space. In putting women's experiences and testimonies at the heart of new orders of artistic sexual activism in transnational ecosystems, Jacobs enables resonance and feeling to extend from the book to the reader. The testimonies of women are beautifully re-presented in the text, but the range and complexity of case studies allows a rawness to readily punctuate complacency: a constant reminder of the precarity and fragility of women's desires, aspirations and place in the social

world. This should not always be seen as a negative thing, something which stifles women's desires and creativity. Instead, each chapter shows how women dismantle neoconservative rhetoric through body-writing, resistance and rewriting love scripts.

Exploring softcore porn and erotic films (*Sex and Zen* and *Erotic Ghost Story* series) we see how sexual enlightenment and seductive femininity are presented as other-worldly. This can be a metaphor for feminism and women who delight in sensorial erotic arousals: a queer empowerment that transcends political morality tales perpetuated by mainstream erotica and gender-centrism. To queer is to fail to comply with neoconservative framings of success, family and partnership in the everyday realities of Chinese women. Failure or phantom feminism is positive and productive, another interweaving key strand in the book relating to Halberstam's *Queer Art of Failure* (2011). Phantom feminism is not something negative; rather, Jacobs explains that the roaming ghost figure in the texts she has selected continues to destabilize and disrupt heteronormative scripts, which is something that the male protagonist falls victim to. The ghost woman disappears, but the man goes back to and continually remains within the confines of masculine responsibility: to family and country. Ghost story erotica and the framing of the female ghost as a succubus not only terrifies (going against 'natural human sexuality and natural human embodiment' [p. 73]), she is also exciting, liberating and continues to disrupt. Jacobs explains that phantom feminism (in the films) 'is a kind of force that does not transform but rather haunts and disrupts' (p. 75), but this theme is not limited to just one chapter or the ghost figure: instead, destabilizing masculinist power and the fabric of Chinese political culture is the key theme in all chapters.

Failure to comply with neoconservative family values and gendered positions is another theme which is interwoven into the overall narrative of the book. What is striking is Jacob's application of Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure* in her reading and analysis of artistic erotic activism, where female artists put their lives, bodies and freedoms at risk by directly confronting accepted 'standards of decency and morality' (p. 11). Through exploring stories and experiences of young women who like and/or produce BL fanzines and content, it is evident that some girls ('rotten girls') enjoy extreme sexual imagery. This disrupts both standard norms concerning femininity, but also themes in some BL stories that eroticize masculine vulnerability via the image of the old man and loser. Although the microfiction is stigmatized, the production and consumption of it by women highlights frustrations and resistances towards patriarchal authority. Consuming porn and erotic fiction in versatile and unpredictable ways is connected to Susanna Paasonen's (2011) work on carnal resonance and new ways of sensing media. Jacobs extends this via the term 'drifting gaze', which is about positive sexual curiosity as 'a way of creating alternative fantasy objects (such as gay male BL fanzines) while also deconstructing traditional hard-core male fantasies' (p. 179). Further extending these themes, in the final chapter of the book – 'The Master Class of Leftover Women' – Jacobs describes how her study builds on pioneering studies of Hong Kong sex cultures and politicized subjects 'by asking women how they resist the label of "leftover woman"; how they consume sexually explicit media; and finally, how sex and love are related to the current political crisis between student protestors and the government' (p. 139). This chapter adds a further layer that we need to consider when addressing the contradictions and resistances in socio-political, cultural and carnal spaces that women have to engage with when consuming, producing and making sense of erotica.

*The Afterglow of Women's Pornography in Post-Digital China* is a phenomenal book because it calls attention to inconsistencies, ruptures and challenges in media-saturated (digital) landscapes, where sensorial experiences and ranging tastes develop how women's erotic consumption and sexual identity can be seen and critiqued, particularly as a political, carnal and affective movement.

## References

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/23268743.2016.1235896>