Discipline and Female Subjects:
An Analysis of Women’s Experience in the Learning
and Using of Female Underwear

KUNG Shuk Mei

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Master of Philosophy

September 2000

Hong Kong Baptist University
Abstract

Female underwear has been a critical unit of analysis to costume historians, clothing specialists, fashion designers and feminist scholars for decades in that there exist symbolic associations between female underwear, individual woman's class distinction, women's modesty and women's social status.

This thesis attempts to explore, from the life stories of women, how everyday life conversations and discussions regarding the issue of female underwear, between mothers and daughters, female teachers and female students, among female peers, between women's pictorials and female readers, and between lingerie producers and female consumers, create the meanings between female underwear, the female body, female behavior and female sexual matter.

Specifically, this thesis employs personal reflection with some in-depth interviews to reveal that: in the process of learning how to use female underwear, adolescent girls are excessively anxious about the threat of male sexual harassment, the maternal control of daughters' bodies, female teachers' discipline on female students' behaviors, same-sex peers' comparison
of bodily development, and the culture representations of the female body. It reveals that adolescent girls are directed to regard the physiological and sexual changes of the female body as being "undesirable", "negative" and "anxiety-generating". This functions to restrict adolescent girls from exploring and expressing their sexual desires. The making of adolescent girls' self-restraint on sexual activities aims to maintain female virginity and the submissive female sexuality.

Also, this study explores the ways females use women's undergarments in their everyday life practice, which create the possibility for them to redefine the relations between female underwear, the female body, female behavior and female sexuality. In the process of reclaiming individuals'/women's right to speak for themselves, females, as active subjects, develop their subjective thinking and understanding of their lives and living. The struggle for individuals'/women's autonomy incites and empowers female subjects to think, question, challenge, criticize and even resist to those external authorities which bind and direct women's lives. In their ordinary forms of resistance, female subjects are able to formulate the rationales for their actions. The justifications provided by them are indeed in response to their fight for individuals'/women's autonomy.
Table of Contents

Declaration i
Abstract ii
Acknowledgments iv
Table of Contents vi
List of Figures viii

Introduction 1

Chapter One: Theoretical Framework 30
1.1. The Symbolic Meanings of Female Underwear 31
1.2. Female Underwear and the Patriarchal Order 38
1.3. “Commercialized” Female Underwear 41
1.4. The Return of the Female Subject 49

Chapter Two: Methodology 59
2.1. A Personal Reflection: on Learning about Female Underwear 65
2.2. The Interviews 80
2.3. The Background Information of the Five Informants 82
2.4. Some Notes on the Interviews 88

Chapter Three: A Brief Overview of the History of Female Underwear in Hong Kong 91
3.1. 1950s Hong Kong 93
3.2. 1960s Hong Kong 95
3.3. 1970s Hong Kong 100
3.4. 1980s Hong Kong 102
3.5. 1990s Hong Kong 112

Chapter Four: Breast Development and the Learning of the Social Practice of Wearing Female Underwear: an Anxiety-Generating Process 122
4.1. Breast Development and Sexual Harassment 124
4.2. Reaching for mothers - But Not Always Getting Their Help 131
4.3. Maternal Control - Threat and Violence 136
4.4. The Making of Female Prudery 142
Chapter Five: Women’s Undergarments and the Control of Adolescent Girls’ Sexuality

5.1. Recognizing the “Undesirable” Change in the Female Body 149
5.2. “Undesirable” Sexual Maturation and the Control of Adolescent Girls’ Sexuality 155
5.3. Adolescent Girls’ Self-Restraints and the Patriarchal Suppression 158
5.4. The Making of the Female Object 167

Chapter Six: Some Reflexive Thoughts on the Social Practice of Wearing Women’s Undergarments 174

6.1. Awareness of the Patriarchal Order 175
6.2. Restrictions on Body Gestures and Female Responses 179
6.3. The Body Being Gazed at 184
6.4. The Body in the Culture Industry 192

Chapter Seven: Re-claiming The Autonomy Of The Female Body 203

7.1. Little Wai Wai’s Strategy 204
7.2. Consent, Not Coercion 207
7.3. Turning the Female Body into a Territory of Pleasure and “The Female Gaze” 217
7.4. The Formation of Women’s Autonomy 225
7.5. Turning the Feminine Body into a Weapon to Resist 243

Conclusion 252

Appendix A: Memorandum of Interview 265

English and Chinese Bibliography 267

Curriculum Vitae 280