Chen Man: Masks, Makeup, and Monsters in Contemporary Chinese Photography

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Chen Man skyrocketed to fame with her covers for Vision Magazine (青年视觉杂志), which spanned from 2003 to 2005. Each depicted a different woman challenging traditional Chinese conventions of demure gaze, small lips, and double eyelids as the epitome of female beauty and femininity. This project studies Chen Man’s Vision series as a lens on her aggressive, yet decidedly non-feminist approach in digital manipulation and contemporary Chinese photography, which ultimately diversifies socially acceptable forms of beauty that transcend gender, class, and ethnicity. An analysis of her work reveals a deliberate counter-reaction to a globally standardized notion of beauty as increasingly Caucasian. Chen retains authentic elements of traditional Chinese culture, from gender identity created by Peking Opera stage makeup to white skin as a trait of the elite class during the Imperial dynasties. Additionally, Chen’s use of makeup and digital manipulation to create artificial fantasies alludes to Chinese myths about shape-shifting women as a method historically used to imagine a purely aestheticized female ideal or “hyperfemininity,” a beauty so unattainable that it could only exist in a nonhuman form. This ultimately demonstrates Chen Man’s work as a prominent change in the method of promising beauty as a product of natural health that magazines and advertisers typically use to shape ideal self-images for consumers.