

Looks, not substance, get more press

Oct 27 , 2013 by Daniel J. Bauer

I was struck this week by local news coverage in photos and reports that focused attention on young women and their bodies.

Consider for example the case of model-actress Cheng Chia-chen, popularly known as “Chicken Cutlet Girl.” Ms. Cheng has been drawing major attention for provocative poses in photos on her Facebook page and in variety shows on television screens. She is equally celebrated because of her satirically laced criticism of President Ma Ying-jeou. Ms. Cheng earned her moniker, by the way, because of her role some time back in a TV commercial pushing fried chicken.

Ms. Cheng is making her mark in the public eye in a particularly sensitive way. Aged 20, girlish and pretty, she pictures herself, and wants us to picture her, as a Taiwanese sex kitten, but a kitten with a head on her shoulders, a young woman with a mind of her own and, at least occasionally, a mind on politics.

It turns out that some folks do not agree that a woman who is young, cute, and a bit brash should play with politics. That is like playing with fire. “Chicken Cutlet Girl warned off political issues” read the headline of a recent report (with large photo) on her (TT 10-18-13 p. 4). A thoughtful editorial that touched on her recent activities appeared on page 8 of the same newspaper.

Then, six days later, we find briefer mention, but mention just the same, of animal rights advocate and local star Mina Lee. The ironically worded headline over her photo was, “Keeping abreast of the situation” (CP 10-24-13 p. 16). Ms. Lee is pictured in what honestly appears to me to be her underwear (the pose is a far cry from attractive). She is performing a skit with two male models stripped to the waist. The news was that the entertainer was upset with the Taipei Zoo, of all things. Her half-clothed role-play is all about protecting Taiwan's first born panda, baby Yuanzai, from exploitation. My goodness.

To be fair, the spotlight on Ms. Lee is fleeting indeed, and words below the picture say her actions may raise “public suspicion that she is also capitalizing on Yuanzai's fame.”

The same edition of the same newspaper featured on its front page a photo promoting not panda awareness, but the Miss Universe 2013 beauty pageant. I suppose we could call those bikinis that Miss Netherlands and Miss Hungary are wearing. For the record, the pair of beauties do have names, and the paper tells us what they are, Stephanie Tency and Rebeka Karpati. So, we are not only admiring feminine pulchritude. These two are not only beauty queens. They are human beings as well, with real names and so on.

Is it over the top to offer one last illustration of a young woman drawing the eye of our local media? Let's do this quickly. Did you too catch “Sharp as a laser,” a clip about the 2013 Laser Expo Exhibition at the Taipei World Trade Center in Nangang (TT 10-24-13 p. 13)? The accompanying picture caught my eye, all right. Dressed in a tasteful blue cocktail dress, the model appeared as modest and wholesome as an angel.

The China Post ran a postage stamp version of the same picture with the interestingly different headline, “Beaming with excitement” (10-24-13 p. 16).

I agree: enough already of all this talk of how media in general use young women for their own interests. I confess that I am as human as anyone else. The types of pictures I've been describing here do at times tickle my fancy (a useful cliché, that). I am also quite sure that news coverage that deleted all reference to the wonder of physical beauty in our world would be drab, dull and disastrous.

At the same time, however, it is important to be sensitive to the images we rely on in the media to deliver the news, promote products, and please our audiences.

There is so much more to the women who appear in our photos than only their physical appearance. That is my point. These people could be our daughters, our sisters, our friends. They have their dignity as human persons. They have their minds and their feelings. The images our models and entertainers convey are but partial glimpses of their deeper and more precious selves.

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Talking points :

1. This column focuses on photographs of girls / women in recent editions of The China Post and The Taipei Times. Do YOU pay much attention to "sexy" or attractive photos in newspapers?
2. Have you ever felt that if newspaper editors were women, that we'd find fewer pictures that focus on physical beauty for girls / women?
3. If you had a friend, sister or close cousin who wound up in a photograph in the newspaper that made you uncomfortable, what would you do?

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