24. Transgender in China

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IMAGINING TRANSGENDER CHINA

Magnus Hirschfeld's ([1910] 1991) *Die Transvestiten* and Esther Newton's (1972) *Mother Camp* exemplify a rich tradition of scholarly thought and analysis on gender variance in the twentieth century. Nonetheless, it was only in the last two decades that an explosion of academic interest in transgender topics became ever more pronounced. In the 1970s and 1980s, social, political, cultural, and intellectual trends paved the way for some transgender people to increasingly distance themselves from the women's movement and the gay and lesbian movement (Valentine, 2007: 29–65). The emergence of queer studies as an umbrella field in the decade following these developments cultivated the growth and maturation of transgender studies (Stryker, 2004). In her seminal *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler (1990) used drag as a pre-eminent example to theorize the cultural performativity of gender, thereby reorienting women's studies beyond traditional concerns of feminist epistemology. In *Female Masculinity*, Judith Halberstam (1998) recentered women's relationship to masculinity, revealing a long-neglected undercurrent of Anglo-American literature and film. Seven years later, the publication of *In a Queer Time and Place* (Halberstam, 2005) enriched her problematization of the heteronormative alignment of sex and gender through the lens of subcultural practice. This book has been deeply influential in establishing the centrality of transgender issues to queer studies.

Between *Gender Trouble* and *In a Queer Time and Place*, other important book-length contributions to the development of transgender studies include Vern and Bonnie Bullough's (1993) *Cross Dressing, Sex, and Gender*, Judith Butler's (1993) *Bodies That Matter* and *Undoing Gender* (Butler, 2004), Kate Bornstein's (1994) *Gender Outlaw* and *My Gender Workbook* (Bornstein, 1998), Bernice Hausman's (1995) *Changing Sex*, Leslie Feinberg's (1996) *Transgender Warriors*, Zachary Nataf's (1996) *Lesbians Talk Transgender*, Patrick Califia's (1997) *Sex Changes*, Marjorie Garber's (1997) *Vested Interest*, Riki Anne Wilchins's (1997) *Read My Lips*, Don Kulick's (1998) *Travesti*, Jay Prosser's (1998) *Second Skins*, Viviane Namaste's (2000) *Invisible Lives*, Joanne Meyerowitz's (2002) *How Sex Changed*, Henry Rubin's (2003) *Self-Made Men*, and John Phillips's (2006) *Transgender On Screen*. This early set of books laid down the theoretical and intellectual foundations for much of the transgender scholarship produced in the subsequent decade. More recent definitive books in transgender studies include David Valentine's (2007) *Imagining Transgender*, Susan Stryker's (2008a) *Transgender History*, Patricia Gherovici's (2010) *Please Select Your Gender*, Gayle Salamon's (2010) *Assuming a Body*, Genny Beemyn and Susan Rankin's (2011) *The Lives of Transgender People* (see also Hines, 2007; Girshick, 2008; Bornstein and Bergman, 2010), and Afsaneh Najmabadi's (2014) *Professing Selves*. These newer studies demonstrate a remarkable measure of analytical sophistication and maturity, whether in terms of critical ethnography, synthetic

history, clinically based psychoanalytic theory, materially grounded phenomenology, or social scientific empiricism.

Apart from monographic studies, the development of transgender studies has depended heavily on collaborative projects that brought together scholars and activists working independently on this marginal topic. The essays included in an early anthology called *PoMosexuals*, coedited by Carol Queen and Lawrence Schimel (1997), bespeak the unique influence of postmodern theory on emergent critiques of gender dualism. A formal joint endeavor in shaping the early contours of transgender studies first took place in 1998, when the leading journal in queer studies, *GLQ*, published its 'Transgender Issue', guest edited by the trans activist-scholar Susan Stryker (1998). Meanwhile, other important voices challenging conventional sex dimorphism in social and cross-cultural settings came from such groundbreaking anthologies as *Third Sex, Third Gender*, edited by Gilbert Herdt (1993), and *Genderqueer*, coedited by Joan Nestle, Riki Wilchins, and Clare Howell (2002). It was only by 2006, however, that the very first *Transgender Studies Reader*, coedited by Stryker and Stephen Whittle, appeared in print (see also Currah et al., 2006; Sycamore, 2006). In the fall of 2008, a second set of critical essays devoted to transgender topics was published by the leading journal in gender studies, *Women's Studies Quarterly* (Stryker et al., 2008; see also Harrison and Engdahl, 2010). And a recent collection of papers edited by Laurie Shrage (2009), *You've Changed*, took up the broader philosophical implications of sex reassignment (see also Hines and Sanger, 2010). By the beginning of this century, studies began to not only move away from but also even to challenge the 'scientific' sexological framework that dominated most of the scholarship on non-normative gender expressions in the previous century.[1]

Above all, these books and volumes have turned transgender studies into a semi-autonomous, though in many ways highly contested, area of scholarly research. The watershed moment arrived with the founding of the academic journal *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, which has been published on a quarterly basis by Duke University Press since 2014. Yet as David Valentine (2007: 34) notes, 'The earliest use of transgender (in its institutionalized, collective sense) in US activism dates no further than 1991 or 1992'. Despite the early 1990s rupture, the highly institutionalized and collective usage of the term 'transgender' has important roots in the history of the feminist movement and the gay and lesbian movement, as well as in the historical dimensions of the categories of gender and sexuality. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, for example, a neat conceptual separation between male homosexual identity (erotic attraction) and overt effeminate behavior (gender expression) did not exist (Chauncey, 1994; Halperin, 2002). Sexologists loosely put masculine women, feminine men, same-sex desiring subjects, transvestites, and all sorts of gender-variant people under the category of 'inversion' (Rosario, 1997; Bland and Doan, 1998; Halberstam, 1998; Terry, 1999). Furthermore, the distinction between 'passing women', butches, and gender-normative same-sex desiring females had never been so clean and simple, but developed across the span of the entire twentieth century (Faderman, 1991; Kennedy and Davis, 1993; Meyerowitz, 2002; Faderman and Timmons, 2006; Valentine, 2007: 46). In the 1970s and 1980s, gay male activists pushed American psychiatrists to acknowledge the private nature of their sexual orientation, and anti-pornography and lesbian feminists condemned the public representation of female sexuality and non-normative genders. Together, the gay activism in the aftermath of the *DSM* victory and the 'sex wars' that eventually fractured the feminist

movement began to define homosexuality against what was visible among gender and sexual subcultures.[2] These debates, in other words, began to distinguish the contemporary meaning of 'transgender' from 'homosexuality' by casting the former in terms of what the latter negated (Valentine, 2007: 53–57; Stryker, 2008b).

By the 1990s, transgender studies came to be consolidated and widely recognized as an independent area of academic inquiry. Of course, debates ensued among activists, popular authors, academics, and other writers regarding what 'transgender' precisely means (and the more general question of who fits into what categories has deeper historical ramifications in gay activism, feminism, and the civil rights movement). But with an expansive (even ambiguous), institutionalized, and collective notion of transgender, these actors nonetheless shared a commitment to advancing the political and epistemological interests of gender-variant people. Moreover, as the twentieth century drew to an end, it seemed rather useful – and perhaps helpful – to distinguish the range of community, political, and intellectual work centered on trans folks from those centered on gays and lesbians. In the emerging field of transgender studies, transgender-identified scholars took the lead in breaking the ground of research (Stryker, 2006); contributors came from diverse disciplinary backgrounds with a heterogeneous set of theoretical, rhetorical, and methodological positions; and, most importantly, fruitful conversations have been largely enriched by self-reflexive insights on and a unique preference for novel interpretations of the meaning of embodiment, specifically, and the possible boundaries of human experience more broadly (Valentine, 2007: 143–172). As Valentine (2007: 39) puts it, 'The capacity to stand in for an unspecified group of people is, indeed, one of the seductive things about "transgender" in trying to describe a wide range of people, both historical and contemporary, Western and non-Western'.

Despite Valentine's promising remark, the considerable measure of enthusiasm that fueled the making of transgender studies has been confined mainly to North American and European academic circles. It logically follows that this area of scholarship is heavily oriented toward exploring Anglo-American society and culture. The only exception is the still growing literature that uses anthropological data on gender diversity to elucidate the limitations of Western-centric frameworks of gender dimorphism. But even here, the primary focus has been Native America and Southeast Asia (Williams, 1986; Nanda, 1990; Roscoe, 1991; Ellen-Jacobs et al., 1997; Lang, 1998; Blackwood and Wieringa, 1999; Jackson and Cook, 1999; Jackson and Sullivan, 1999; Kulick, 1998; Nanda, 1999; Manalansan and Cruz-Malave, 2002; Manalansan, 2003; Sinnott, 2004; Wilson, 2004; Gopinath, 2005; Reddy, 2005; Wieringa et al., 2007; and Fajardo, 2011). Scholarly, activist, and creative work on transgender issues in Northeast Asia remains relatively scarce. With a few notable exceptions, gay and lesbian topics – alongside the translation of Western queer theoretical texts – continue to dominate critical studies of gender and sexuality in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and mainland China (e.g., Ho, 2003; Li, 2003; Martin and Ho, 2006; Sang, 2006; Cheung, 2010). Particularly missing from the field of queer studies is a sustained critical engagement with Chinese transgender identity, practice, embodiment, history, and culture.

In the last decade or so, a number of Sinologists from different disciplines have begun to rectify this analytical imbalance in transgender studies. A perspective rooted in Chinese culture makes it possible to expand the scope of transgender scholarship in terms of historical nuance, cultural-geographical coverage, and methodological refinement.[3] It is in

the spirit of providing this long-overdue perspective that the volume I edited, *Transgender China* (Chiang, 2012b), brought together many of these China scholars for the first time. The path-breaking essays collected in that anthology can be taken as a joint endeavor that explores the possibility (and potential limitations) of excavating a field of scholarly inquiry that we might assign the label of 'Chinese transgender studies'. The rest of this chapter will take that volume as a point of departure for reviewing the latest research trends in the field.

There is a consistent double bind in trying to consolidate a field under 'Chinese transgender studies': the prospect of such an ambitious project brings with it key intrinsic perils or conceptual problematic. In the broadest sense, this merely echoes Susan Stryker's (2006: 14) earlier comment that 'the conflation of many types of gender variance into the single shorthand term "transgender", particularly when this collapse into a single genre of personhood crosses the boundaries that divide the West from the rest of the world, holds both peril and promise'. Although Chinese case studies promise to break new ground and balance the existing insufficiencies in the broader field of transgender studies, they confront a politics of knowledge not unlike the set of problems they claim to exceed in the face of Western transgender studies. For instance, if the field of transgender studies was institutionalized only in the 1990s and, even more crucially, in North America, how applicable is the category of 'transgender' – even with its widest possible definition – in Chinese cultural and historical contexts? It should be added here that even in Western studies of transgenderism, scholars often traverse between treating the concept of gender as an analytical, thematic, topical, theoretical, historical, and epistemological category.[4] So the interest of venturing into new terrains of analysis is inherently fraught with questions of methodological assumption, categorical adequacy, and how they confound the fine line between research prospect and disciplinary closure. Independently and interactively, each of the studies synthesized below reveals some of these major pitfalls and the corollary intellectual promises.

GENDER-CROSSING

One way to imagine Chinese transgender studies is by adopting a focused definition of 'transgender' to refer to practices of embodiment that cross or transcend the normative boundaries of gender. This approach lends itself easily to identifying specific trans figures based on their self-representation, bringing to light concrete historical and cultural examples in which such identification occurs, and stressing the importance of agency both in cultural production and with respect to the historical actors themselves who self-identify as trans. In his essay 'Gendered androgyny: transcendent ideals and profane realities in Buddhism, Classicism, and Daoism', for instance, Daniel Burton-Rose (2012) takes a huge chronological sweep over a period of nearly 2500 years in isolating 'concrete references to biological intersexuality as well as gender identities not necessarily paralleled in the physical body that did not conform to the available dominant categories; that is, which were considered "neither male nor female"' (ibid.: 68). The examples that he uncovers in Buddhist, Daoist, and Classicist and Confucian sources – including most notably the Buddhist notion of *pandaka* ('without testicles'), Daoist male pregnancy, and stories of sex change in anomaly accounts (*zhiguai*) – serve as a pivotal reminder of the surprising

fluidity of the gender and sexual ideations as depicted in traditional Chinese texts. Perhaps there are scholars for whom some of these historical examples should be more appropriately absorbed into the category of gay. Yet, this preference bears striking similarity to earlier competing efforts in Western lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) studies that only helped to stabilize, rather than undermine, the field of transgender scholarship.[5] Burton-Rose carefully pitches his study as 'an inoculation against superficial attempts to locate an indigenous transgender discourse in Chinese culture', but only so as 'to enhance the potency of transgender and allied social movements' (ibid.: 69).

In contrast, Pui Kei Eleanor Cheung's (2012) essay on 'Transgenders in Hong Kong: from shame to pride' offers a more contemporary perspective and marshals an even more identification-based approach to chart the structural transformations of the sociohistorical context in which trans individuals in Hong Kong have reoriented their subjectivity, from shame to pride. Even though general attitudes toward transgender people have become less negative and less hostile, many of Cheung's informants still experience great emotional distress and trauma on a daily basis, much of which could be attributed to the discriminations and prejudices that have survived from an earlier generation. The development of transgender subjectivity in Hong Kong corresponds to the 'model of gender identity formation and transformation', or the 'GIFT' model, which Cheung (2011) first delineated in her doctoral dissertation. Like Burton-Rose, Cheung not only relies on a nominal notion of transgender to extend its analytical nuisance and possibility, but she also brings to light rare voices of Chinese transgender subjects that constitute a goldmine of thick ethnography.

In trying to imagine China in a transgender frame, Sinologists have famous examples with which to work. The area of Chinese culture in which cross-gender behavior has made the most prominent presence is none other than the theatrical arts. The best-studied example is perhaps the *dan* actors of traditional Peking opera. These actors start their professional training at a relatively young age and are the only qualified actors to perform the female roles in traditional Peking opera. Several scholars have explored in depth the historical transformation of their profession, social status, and popular image in the twentieth century (Goldstein, 1999; Li, 2003; Goldstein, 2007; Kang, 2009; Zhou, 2006; Goldman, 2008; Wu and Stevenson, 2010). In addition, although much has been speculated about the homoerotic subculture embedded within the broader social network of these opera troupes, we must not lose sight of the gendered implications of this male cross-dressing convention (see especially Kang, 2009: 115–144; Wu and Stevenson, 2010). After all, the *dan* roles were traditionally played by men precisely because women were excluded from performing on the public stage. Since the early twentieth century, the most celebrated *dan* actor has been Mei Lanfang, whose cross-dressed performance turned him into a major icon of modern Chinese nationalism (Zhou, 2006; Tian, 2012). The parallel development of female cross-dressing performance can be found in '*ping* opera' (*pingju*), which flourished in Tianjin; *yue* opera, which became the most popular theater in Shanghai for half a century from the 1930s through the 1980s; and the 'boy-singers' opera' (*gezaixi*), which thrived in Xiamen and, later, Taiwan. These feminine opera cultures primarily grew out of their Qing period masculine predecessors. *Yue* opera, for instance, underwent two major transformations: from a rural to an urban entertainment, and from all-male to all-female performers (Jiang, 2009).

Considering the important role of the theatrical arts in Chinese culture and history,

recent work has begun to shed new light on their transgender elements. Here, the purpose has been to move beyond the well-known *dan* figure by highlighting other explicit examples of cross-dressing in Chinese theatrical life. A series of essays written by Chao-Jung Wu (2012, 2016) accomplish this by bringing our attention to the other side of the Taiwan Strait. In 'Performing transgender desire: male cross-dressing shows in Taiwan', Wu (2012) provides a systematic ethnographic analysis of the Redtop artists in Taiwan, a group of male cross-dressing artists who took the Taiwanese theatre culture by storm in the 1990s with their infamous *fanchuan* (cross-dressing) shows. Based on their public performances and personal interviews, Wu argues that the Redtop artists provide a most telling example of the cultural performativity of gender as theorized by Butler and others. The homosexual subculture that saturated the troupe's quotidian rhythms and structural underpinnings also troubles straightforward interpretations of the gender-subversive acts as conveyed by the actors themselves, especially since these behavioral patterns were highly imbued with misogynist attitudes and hidden hierarchies of power relations defined around the normativity of gender orientation. In 'Performing hybridity: the music and visual politics of cross-dressing performance in Taiwan', Wu (2016) calls attention to the music and visual politics of these *fanchuan* shows, which squarely situate contemporary Taiwanese culture at the intersection of the historical legacies of Japanese colonialism, Chinese nationalism, and United States neo-imperialism.

Of course, the identitarian method of transgender studies discussed so far raises important questions about the politics of representation, some of whose origins can be traced to an earlier generation of debates in gay and lesbian studies. What forms of practice or embodiment ultimately 'count' and should get represented as authentically transgender? Who get to be singled out as full-blown trans figures? And whose voice has the authority to properly address or even resolve these issues? In light of the above examples, we might add, how do we avoid holding up the *dan* actors of Peking opera, the male impersonators of *yue* opera, or the Redtop artists in Taiwan as 'role models' or the ultimate yardstick for calibrating the degree of transgenderness in other examples of potentially subversive Chinese figures, histories, embodiments, and cultural and artistic productions?

As scholars, activists, and others debate these questions in the American and European contexts, the reconfiguring of our analytical prism with a focus on China would invariably complicate the politics of queer representation and its underlying ideological and social agenda, as well as the practical and political implications. A main objective of this growing field is precisely to make a critical intervention in unpacking these kinds of issues and debates. Any conceivable answer to the above set of questions would be inherently problematic in one way or another. Perhaps this squarely marks both the ugliness and the flexibility of identity politics. Nevertheless, this should not dissuade us from thinking more creatively about different ways of conducting Chinese transgender studies and how they might make a broader impact on Chinese studies, transgender studies, and other cognate fields of scholarly inquiry.

GENDER ANDROGYNY

An alternative approach to Chinese transgender studies is to build on case studies of gender ambiguity or androgyny, rather than concrete examples of gender transgression.

This method considers transgender practices not simply as the root of cultural identity, but also in terms of their relationship to broader circuits of knowledge and power. A surprising example comes from the work of Zuyan Zhou (2003, 2012), who delves into a familiar genre of Chinese literature, namely, the scholar-beauty romances of the late Ming and early Qing periods. But unlike previous studies, Zhou highlights an underappreciated androgynous motif lurking in the otherwise renowned narrative of heteronormative romance between a *caizi* (talented scholar) and a *jiaren* (beauty). This literary genre often construes its protagonists as embodying the attributes of both genders (perfect combination of masculinity and femininity) to project a persistent ideal of androgyny. Contrary to the dominant interpretations of this androgyny craze, which tend to trace its origins to the gender fluidity of the broader historical and cultural context of the late Ming, Zhou explains the pervasive literary presentation of *caizi*'s and *jiaren*'s gender transgression in relation to the contemporaneous development of the cult of *qing* (sentiment), noting that such gender transgression instead 'originates from literati scholars' recalcitrant impulses to assert their latent masculinity as institutionalized yin subjects' (Zhou, 2012: 121).

Centering on the Beijing-based artist Ma Liuming, Carlos Rojas's (2012) essay 'Writing the body' carefully unravels the creative, social, and aesthetic expressions of Ma's androgynous embodiment. Along with Zhang Huan, Ma is a representative figure of a newly emerging group of Chinese performance artists whose work continues to subvert hegemonic constructs of gender and sexual identity. Rojas takes Butler's understanding of the iterative performativity of gender as a theoretical starting point and reflects more generally on the semiotics of corporeality – or the meanings and language of the body – based on a series of texts in the realm of cultural production, tracing the indigenous resources for Ma and Zhang's aesthetic creativity to the literary depictions of male homoromance in the Chinese opera field. Central to his study are the following questions: 'How may subjects use their bodies to challenge the representational regimes within which they are embedded? What is the role of these semiotic systems in demarcating the systems' own conceptual limits?' (Rojas, 2012: 202). In the examples found in Zhou's and Rojas's chapters, ideas and norms of gender are unsettled on the level of artistic genres, through manifestations of gender liminality that are embedded within the form of art (literature or performance), rather than appropriations of the completely opposite gender in public appearance.

But perhaps the most famous example of gender androgyny that critics have put their finger on is the figure of *renyao* (人妖). In the historiography of Chinese gender and sexuality, the category of *renyao* has been a subject of close scrutiny by scholars adopting various thematic, chronological, and methodological orientations. The major thematic components according to which *renyao* has been indexed include gender dislocation, sex transformation, same-sex relations, the boundaries and meaning of humanism, and prostitution. The chronological depth of this existing body of research spans from the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) to the Cold War period, and the sources on which these studies are based include official records, anecdotal notations (*biji*), literary sources, medical treatises, mainstream journalism, and urban tabloid presses.

One of the earliest lenses through which scholars have studied the history of *renyao* is gender dislocation. Judith Zeitlin in her seminal study of Pu Songling's *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* (*Liaozhai zhiyi*; written in the early Qing dynasty) proposes that the best translation of *renyao* is 'human prodigy' (Zeitlin, 1993: 98). *Strange Tales* comprises

nearly 500 marvel stories (written in classical Chinese, starting in the Tang dynasty), in which the boundaries between reality and the odd are blurred and a whole cast of ghosts, foxes, beasts, and spirits is introduced to contrast and thus call into question the status of the human, as exemplified by the more conventional characters of scholars, court officials, and husbands and wives. One of these stories is precisely titled '*Renyao*', in which a man disguised as a woman in order to seduce another woman is ultimately castrated by the woman's husband and becomes his concubine. As Zeitlin acknowledges, the most important message of this story concerns the ways that castration helps to reinstate normative social order: 'The important thing is not a search for truth and revelation but a search for rehabilitation and order' (ibid.: 102). Indeed, the removal of the protagonist's gender dislocation 'can thus be seen as a perverse Confucian "rectification of names"', because 'the prodigious has [now] been cut off from the human prodigy; what remains is merely the human being' (ibid.: 102). Castration therefore becomes 'the means for [the protagonist's] reintegration into normal human society – as a concubine, he becomes a permanent member of the family and is even buried by the family tomb. The "monster" is domesticated' (ibid.: 103).

In historicizing *renyao*, Zeitlin explains that the author Pu is drawing on an existing tradition of Chinese historiography that interprets social anomalies such as dislocations in gender as implicative of moral disruption in the broader political cosmos:

> The Chinese term *renyao* (human prodigy) originally denoted any human physical anomaly or freak. It was first employed in the philosophical writing of *Xunzi* (third [century] BC), where it designated 'human prodigies or portents' as implicitly opposed to 'heavenly prodigies or portents' (天妖, *tianyao*). Alongside this general meaning of human freak or monster, the term came to acquire an additional, more specialized usage: an impersonator of a member of the opposite sex. It was first used in this sense in the *History of the Southern Dynasties* ([南史,] *Nan Shi*) to criticize a lady named Lou Cheng who for years masqueraded as a man and held official post. The historians considered her an evil omen of a subsequent rebellion, for in their words, 'you cannot have yin acting yang'. Their interpretation follows the tradition of meticulously correlating irregularities in gender with specific political disasters. (Zeitlin, 1993: 104)

In this historiographical tradition, correlative thinking – the linking of natural to social (dis)order based on interrelated cosmological foundations – determines the epistemic filtering of *renyao* through the historical differential of gender dislocation.

Another related definitional coordinate of *renyao* is sex transformation. Charlotte Furth's (1988) essay 'Androgynous males and deficient females: biology and gender boundaries in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century China' stands as the classic reference on the topic. In mining through a series of male-to-female and female-to-male sex reversal cases that cropped up in the medical tracts, official notices, and informal writings of the Ming dynasty, Furth suggests that many of these should be more properly understood as examples of 'hermaphroditism' according to the modern standard of Western biomedicine (ibid.: 19). Furth also makes the interesting observation that starting in the second half of the Ming dynasty, female-to-male changes attracted a lesser degree of social hostility than transformations in the opposite direction:

> Significantly, narratives of female-to-male changes were marked by a total suppression of the sexual in favour of the social . . . the transition to male gender was presented as a psychologically

> unproblematic shift of role. Thus the discourse about transformations of sex subtly genderized the different protagonists' relationship to their bodily changes. (Furth, 1988: 18)

Building on this insight, Zeitlin (1993: 107) suggests that stories of female-to-male transformations in the Ming–Qing period probably had a lesser impact on Pu's imagination. Instead, both Furth and Zeitlin agree that the most obvious source for the '*Renyao*' story in *Strange Tales* was none other than the famous case of Sang Chong (Furth, 1988: 22–24; Zeitlin, 1993: 109–116). An orphan, Sang Chong of the Taiyuan prefecture in Shanxi was raised as a girl with bound feet during the Chenghua reign (1465–88). Although Sang Chong stayed predominantly in women's quarters, his bodily biology was eventually discovered after a failed attempted rape by another man. According to Furth (1988: 22), 'exposed, physically inspected and hauled before the magistrate's court, [Sang Chong] was pronounced a male "monster" (*yao* [*r*]*en* [or prodigious human]) – one who treacherously manipulated his genitals to appear female to the world, but male to the girls he lived to debauch'. In contrast to other accounts of the Sang Chong case that often ended with the public prosecution of the human prodigy, Pu's narration defies a strictly demonic view of this scandal of sex transmutation (Furth, 1988: 22; Zeitlin, 1993: 114).

Adding to the historical residues of gender dislocation and sex transformation in the historiographical interpretation of *renyao* is the theme of same-sex relations. Building on the works of Zeitlin and Furth, Wenqing Kang extends the investigation of *renyao* into the Republican period (1911–49). In *Obsession: Male Same-Sex Relations in China, 1900–1950*, Kang (2009: 33) argues that, 'in China during the first half of the twentieth century, men who were engaged in same-sex relations, especially those who were assumed to play the passive sexual role, and particularly male prostitutes, were sometimes called *renyao*'. Indeed, Kang brings forward a number of examples in which male prostitutes and especially the *dan* actors (male actors playing female roles) of Peking opera (including the notorious Mei Lanfang) were called *renyao* in the tabloid press, as found in the Tianjin-based *Heavenly Wind* (天風報, *Tianfengbao*) and *Crystal* (晶報, *Jingbao*) (ibid.: 36–38). But he also notes that the category of *renyao* did not apply only to men: 'During the first half of the twentieth century, the prevalent understanding of *renyao* was one of men and women who appeared as the opposite gender, representing a potential threat to society and a bad omen for the country' (ibid.: 34). In many of the examples that Kang provides in his book, the label of *renyao* applied to both women and intersex individuals (ibid.: 35–36). To the extent that Kang's study sheds light on male social outcasts, at least in the cases of male prostitutes or *dan* actors being directly labeled as *renyao*, male same-sex sexuality was foregrounded as a major conceptual component in the popular understanding of this category as it appeared in the tabloid press of the Republican period.

GENDER TROUBLE

The most radical approach to developing something that we might want to call Chinese transgender studies is perhaps by leaving behind Western-derived meanings of gender altogether, or at least problematizing them. This would make an important step in identifying and understanding Chinese 'gender' variance on its own unexpected terms. By making a distinct departure from a 'trans/gender' epistemology rooted in Western culture,

we are also reconceptualizing our categories from a fundamentally global viewpoint. Scholarship exemplifying this approach draws on two main types of cultural data: ethnographic data and textual or media data.

Based on ethnographic data, scholars have shown that regional inflections represent the most conspicuous mechanism by which 'trans/gender' gets troubled. In *Conditional Spaces: Hong Kong Lesbian Desires and Everyday Life*, Denise Tse-Shang Tang (2011a) provides one such account from her fieldwork conducted in Hong Kong between 2004 and 2008 with 30 women with lesbian desires (two of whom self-identify as transgender). Tang's study shows the ways in which Hong Kong's highly dense and compact living spaces engender a kind of cross-gender experience unique to individuals living in this postcolonial city. An incident that happened in 1979 to the 43-year-old Edith, who identifies as a male-to-female transgender person and a lesbian, illustrates this powerfully:

> Once my family all went out except me. So I secretly took my mother's dress and tried it on. Who knew when I was trying it on, my mother and my sister came back! I was in a panic and I didn't know what to do. I rushed into the bathroom without taking my boy clothes. Dead meat! They came inside the flat and I couldn't come out of the bathroom. Then I realized that my mum had to go to a banquet that night and coincidentally, she needed to wear the dress that I had on. I really had no solution and my mum asked me why I took so long in the washroom. I said I had no clothes on and finally, I gave them the dress but I still couldn't come out cos' I had nothing on. Anyway, at the end I had to come out and my mother scolded me . . . I only knew to cry. I couldn't say anything. (Tang, 2011a: 27)

The tight living conditions so common in Hong Kong made it difficult for Edith to hide her transgender expression. Edith took serious risks, which could lead to mistreatment by her family members, in order to explore her transgender identity.

Similarly, based on her fieldwork in Beijing and Shanghai between 2006 and 2008, Ana Huang (2015: 114) has argued that the Chinese masculine lesbian identity, *T*, 'blurs the distinction between butch and transgender identities and occupies a social position that accommodates both same-sex desire and gender variance'. For instance, many of her informants in the Chinese lesbian community have watched the Hollywood adaptation of the Brandon Teena story, *Boys Don't Cry* (1999), directed by Kimberly Pierce. What surprised Huang was that even though the film is notorious for featuring a narrative presentation of the protagonist as transgender-identified, every Chinese informant with whom she spoke about the film interpreted the main character as a *T*. As she explains it, 'Their interpretation of Brandon Teena's identity into a Chinese category reflects the expansive capacity of *T* to absorb all sorts of people' (Huang, 2015: 119). This example goes a long way to show the potential of *T* imagination to destabilize the transgender/lesbian binary and amalgamate gender and sexuality into one categorization system.

In scrutinizing media phenomena or textual sources, scholars have similarly troubled Western notions of gender and transgender by drawing attention to the indigeneity of Chinese culture. In *Undercurrents: Queer Culture and Postcolonial Hong Kong*, Helen Hok-Sze Leung (2008) shows that in films such as *Swordsman 2* (1992) and *Portland Street Blues* (1998), the protagonists Dongfang Bubai and Street Thirteen self-fashion a relational transgender agency that problematizes the intelligibility of hetero- or homonormative understandings of romance (Leung, 2008: 65–84). In an essay elsewhere, 'Trans on Screen', Leung (2012) begins with a conventional analysis of trans figures in Chinese cinema, but she quickly departs from it and launches a radically suggestive interpretive

strategy that restructures the very meaning of 'trans' with respect to Chinese body modification practices. In 'Transgenderism as a heuristic device: on the cross-historical and transnational adaptations of the Legend of the White Snake', Alvin Wong (2012) focuses on the cross-historical adaptations of a famous Chinese story, the 'Legend of the White Snake'. By following how this story 'transgendered' across its adaptations in different cultural venues over time, Wong reveals the promise of these transhistorical variants to produce unruly moments of transgender articulation.

If Wong's heuristic suggestion is based on historicity-crossing, Ari Larissa Heinrich's (2012) essay, 'Begin anywhere: transgender and transgenre desire in Qiu Miaojin's *Last Words from Montmartre*', invites us to reconceptualize gender-crossing through the framework of literary genre-crossing. This innovative rendition of transgender aesthetic demands an inherently fluid definition of gender and demonstrates its concurrent transformative possibility across literary and geocultural divides. Finally, my own revisionist study of Chinese eunuchism offers a cautionary tale of the tendency to universalize transgenderism as a category of experience. 'How China became a "castrated civilization" and eunuchs a "third sex"' (Chiang, 2012a) exposes the power, logic, and threshold of historical forces operating beyond the category's analytical parameters, especially considering the modernist/nationalist bias of even the most reliable sources on Chinese castration. In the 1950s, the stories of Zeng Qiuhuang, Xie Jianshun, and other gender-variant individuals that commanded an astonishing measure of interest in the Taiwanese media, function as discrepant genealogical afterlives of Chinese eunuchism that decenter a universal understanding of intersexuality and transsexuality (Chiang, 2014, 2017a, 2017b). Taken together, these studies reorient the imagining of a transgender China by not assigning Western notions of gender and transgender an epistemologically and ontologically privileged position.

PARTING THOUGHTS

If cultural data from non-Western societies are useful for reflecting on Euro-American orderings of trans/gender, that certainly should not be the sole purpose of this new wave of scholarship. The scholars mentioned in this chapter did not simply collect exotic 'anthropological' data about China and report back to us what they found 'out there' (although some of their work does engage with ethnography on the level of disciplinary practice). Even the familiar debates on the North American '*berdache*' or other 'third sex/gender' people are oftentimes less about their experience, than about the theoretical preoccupations of Western academic discourses and identity politics (Valentine, 2007: 157). Perhaps one of the major strengths of doing research on non-Western cultures is the ability to capture a grid of knowledge and experience that exceeds the categorizations of gender, sexuality, and even transgender. Insofar as 'the very constitution of the field of transgender studies *as* a field must remain a central question *in* the field', the findings in the emergent files of Chinese transgender studies should be viewed as having some central bearing on the definition and practice of (trans)gender studies itself (Valentine, 2007: 172). Again, what matters less is how Western (trans)gender theory or framework 'works' in China, or whether or not it applies to a non-Western context. Yet precisely because transgender studies is enabled and complicated by the indeterminacy of such key

concepts as gender, sexuality, and transgender, the study of transgender China points to different possibilities of transforming the field vis-à-vis the very reorientations of these concepts. And perhaps these potential transformations also have something to offer for the rethinking of area studies. For example, one of the underexplored areas in Chinese feminist studies and historiography that this chapter addresses concerns individuals who do not conform to – and practices that put pressure on – hegemonic norms of gender.

In the emerging field of queer Asian studies, scholars are envisioning an ever more expansive apparatus that could account for the myriad potentials and possibilities within cross-cultural configurations of gender and sexuality as they play out in Asia and elsewhere, in scholarly discourses, subcultural practices, grassroots movements, or otherwise (Altman, 1996, 1997; Drucker, 2000; Berry et al., 2003; Garber, 2005; Najmabadi, 2006; Blackwood, 2008; Martin et al., 2008; Ho, 2008; Jackson, 2009; Sinnott, 2010; Liu and Rofel, 2010; Yau, 2010; Tang, 2011b; Chiang and Wang, 2016; Chiang and Wong, 2016). Studies are leaving behind the homogenizing/heterogenizing debate on global identity categories (e.g., Martin, 2011),[6] looking for new avenues of research that transcend traditional disciplinary and methodological constraints (Chiang and Heinrich, 2013) and, above all, addressing and building new alliances across the globe to make post-Orientalist regimes of cross-cultural thinking possible.[7] If the animating force of transgender studies comes from a broad, collective, and always mutating definition of transgender, the view from China only makes the promise of transformation all the more meaningful to our imagination.

In the twenty-first century, the issue of kinship and the state sanction of queer unions have taken different Chinese societies by storm. If this chapter has shown that our 'imaginations' of transgender China must always remain open and resist epistemic fixity, these imaginations hold at least two significant implications for contemporary understandings of marriage, the family, and kinship (none of which ought to be defined around blood ties). First, as the anecdotal evidence presented in this chapter helps to illustrate, an individual's decision to undergo gender transitioning oftentimes involves tacit and cautious negotiations with immediate family members. Such a decision has profound effects on the daily routines of relatives, while it may likely result in unsuccessful familial communications and bring dire consequences for the individual. Therefore, the range of challenges a trans person faces (from coming out as trans, to the actual process of transition, and then being fully integrated into the family with a new gender) must be resolved through a positive collaboration among different family members if the individual in question is to live a happy and satisfactory life. Second, the right of transgender individuals to marry in their acquired gender rather than their biological sex at birth has formed the basis of several legal battles in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the People's Republic of China (Guo, 2015; Chiang, 2017c; Friedman, 2017). Yet, the broader implications and contributions of transgender rights must avoid stopping at expanding heterosexual privilege alone. In other words, the present juncture should allow both gay and lesbian groups, and transgender groups, to fight together for a radical expansion and reorientation of the meanings of civil union and kinship, given their shared history of social oppression. It is short-sighted to dismiss outright a connection between transgender marriage rights and the legalization of same-sex marriage, as this may simply bolster the state's heteronormative logic to set apart homophobia and transphobia, when they almost always figure in social discriminations in overlapping ways. Ultimately, both sets of legal transformation, when working in concert, promise to create a more diverse

social environment for the discrepant manifestations of human intimacy and the ways in which different forms of gender relate and are brought to light.

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NOTES

1. This is all the more striking considering Valentine's claim that 'the "gender" that underpins "transgender" and marks it as distinct from the "sexuality" of mainstream gay and lesbian politics is one rooted in a sexological rather than feminist tradition' (Valentine, 2007: 59).
2. On the history of American Psychiatric Association's decision to remove homosexuality from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (*DSM*), see Bayer (1987). For a more recent reappraisal, see Chiang (2008). On the feminist 'sex wars' see, for example, Wilson (1983), Willis (1983), Ferguson (1984), Philipson (1984), Vance and Snitow (1984), and Duggan and Hunter (1995).
3. The most poignant articulation of a 'China-centered' approach to modern Chinese history can be found in Cohen ([1983] 2010).
4. An example is the disagreement on the historical and epistemological salience of gender in the history of transsexuality. See Hausman (1995) and Meyerowitz (2002).
5. See, for example, Katz ([976] 1992) and Feinberg (1996). The most famous example of this reclamation politics between lesbians and trans men is probably Brandon Teena. See Hale (1998) and Halberstam (2003). For an overview of the border wars between butch lesbians and female-to-male or trans men, see Valentine (2007: 151–153).
6. For the earlier debate on globalized gay identity in the China field, see Altman (1996, 2001) and Rofel (1999, 2007).
7. On the implication of this effort for the field of Chinese studies, see Chow (1998), Ang (2001), Shih (2007, 2010), and Chu (2008).

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Chinese

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