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Chinese Trans Women in Japan and Their Embodied Search for Gender Identity in the Online–Offline Continuum

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Abstract

This article addresses the intersectionality of digital connectivity, international mobility, gender, and ethnicity among Chinese trans women in Japan. Drawing on interviews with seven interlocutors residing in five prefectures in Japan, it illustrates a rather complex picture regarding how gender identities are interpreted and performed in various ways. Specifically, this article argues that their gender identities reflect their individualistic quests for a sense of wholeness and ontological security when dealing with the tension and fusion between online and offline realities. In this way, their gender identities are spatially realized and ultimately linked with and shaped by the movement of the queer body across different online and offline locations.

Keywords

digital media, gender, intersectionality, queer migration, trans woman

With the technological revolution, digital media have become not only an embedded part of today's social structure but a continuum that incorporates the digitalized and physical life experiences.[1] Against this backdrop, this article explores the everyday online and offline lived experiences of Chinese trans women in Japan so as to see how they interpret and perform their gender identities. In particular, I explore the way their understanding and performance of gender identity are mutually shaped by various continuous or conflicting realities that are emerged from various digital and physical realms. I focus on one subgroup, namely trans women, who come from a particular population (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer people [LGBTQ+]). While I use "LGBTQ+" as an umbrella term to refer to the broader community of gender minorities, I designate the informants as "trans women" and use the pronouns "she" and "her(s)" when referring to them, as these are the gender labels with which they most strongly identify. In addition, I use the word "queer" to signify my standpoint, that I see their lived experiences as the outcome of the interplay among numerous systems that privilege heteronor-

Transfers Volume 12, Issue 3, Winter 2022: 28–46
doi:10.3167/TRANS.2022.120304
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ISSN: 2045-4813 (print) 2045-4821 (online)

mativity, such as family and national identity, instead of solely attributed to their gender.

One of the aims of this article is to further nuance our understanding of trans women's negotiation and performance of their gender identities by exploring their experiences from the perspectives of online–offline fusion and collision. Since the 1990s, queer migration studies has witnessed a shift in terms of scholars' understanding of the relationship between mobility and queerness. On the one hand, earlier studies' arguments are often based on the "move out, come out" logic, indicating that queers' ability to change their bodies, to access to online queer spaces, and to either internally or internationally relocate are the essential conditions for them to achieve and perform their desired gender identities and sexualities.[2,3,4] On the other hand, more recent research challenges this simplistic logic, with scholars such as Gorman-Murray pointing out that queers' gender identity performance as well as their motivations for migration are complex, hence "moving out" does not necessarily lead to, nor is it driven by "coming out."[5] Furthermore, in terms of queers' access to online queer spaces, scholars also illuminate how the digital realm can be an equally racialized and marginalized space just as the offline realm, and how "non-Western" queers' online gender performance and expression often encounter various forms of discrimination.[6,7] In this context, this study aims to align the online and the offline spaces together and investigates how queer migrants' articulation and performance of gender identities are shaped by their lived experiences derived from various localities within the online–offline continuum.

This online–offline fusion approach potentially allows me to see queers' gender identity articulation and performance as an identity quest—a process that involves constant negotiation. Seeing gender identity as something that is responsively and reflexively constructed represents my standpoint, which I understand as progressive and fluid, reflecting different sets of online and offline social contexts and structural power dynamics and their intersectionality. In this way, I aim to investigate how and to what extent Chinese trans women are connected with the local and transnational queer networks, both online and offline. How do these networks—given the different social attitudes towards the LGBTQ+ community in China and Japan—shape the ways in which they narrate their gender identities? And how do they perform their gender identities when facing different social contexts and audiences? To set the stage for this analysis, I first introduce how queers are portrayed in China and Japan, then illustrate that trans individuals experience online and offline spaces differently, leading to the creation of highly diversified and contextually performed gender identities. As this analysis shows, the gender identities of Chinese trans women in Japan are shaped by their daily digital and physical social engagements, as well as the tension and fusion of various online and offline realities.

Gender and Queerness in China and Japan

As I have detailed elsewhere,[8] trans women's online–offline life experiences in both China and Japan are often subject to a sense of "placelessness." While this feeling of "placelessness" commonly denotes their perceived marginality and discrimination in these two countries, the cause of it is rather different, representing how gender intersects with China and Japan's particular social contexts and national ideologies.

In China's case, this sense of placelessness is largely due to the Chinese state's portray of queers as "others" within Chinese society, because it sees queers and queerness as "foreign" and "western," something constantly at odds with "Chinese values," which are timeless and indigenous to the Chinese people.[9] Based on the Chinese state's arbitrary reading of Confucianism, the so-called "Chinese values" are essentially a set of ideologies that privilege heteronormative gender and sexuality.[10] As Liu[11] manifests, some particular Confucian ideologies, such as *xiao* (孝, meaning filial piety) and *chuan zong jie dai* (傳宗接代, meaning to carry on one's ancestral line), are strategically picked up by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to associate heterosexual normativity, that is, heteronormative families that are biologically reproductive,[12] with its political interests as well as the Chinese nation's social and economic development. For instance, through its implementation of one-child—and now two-child and three-child—birth control policies, CCP largely associates the notion of heterosexually reproductive family with the survival, development, and continuity of the Chinese nation. Consequently, genders and sexualities that are not aligned with this heteronormative value are positioned as opposing China's "traditions, morals, and values," hence deemed to be essentially incompatible with Chinese society, hindering the development and reinvigoration of the Chinese nation.[13]

Following this, while heteronormativity and heterosexuality are politically constructed as "timeless Chinese values," as Lee[14] points out, these ideologies also become a symbol of cultural relativism. In this context, non-heteronormativity and the population associated with it are reduced to Western cultural imperialism and are promulgated by the CCP to be a result of Western invasion of Chinese society, hence threatening the nation's harmony and stability.[15] In this context, while one may find it difficult to identify the state's explicit antagonistic stance towards queers in official documents or legislation, the state contributes to the formation and popularization of public discourses that discriminates against and marginalizes queers.

However, it is worth mentioning that while there are no laws that explicitly harm the queer community, CCP does implement various "off-the-record" policies to remove the community from public gaze. For instance, one of the informants, Mayumi, who closely follows news concerning queer communities in China, informed me that starting from July 2021, online LGBTQ+ communities/accounts have been removed in bulk from popular Chinese social media platforms, such as WeChat and Douban. Meanwhile, in offline China, circumspect strategies, such as public propaganda that associates trans individuals with sexually transmitted diseases and mental illness,[16,17] the silencing of queer literary, audio, and visual works,[18] and the approval of heterosexist education policies[19] contribute to maintaining and reinforcing repressive and discriminatory sociocultural frameworks towards the queer population. In this sense, Chinese trans women's sense of placelessness also reflects how their existence is heavily censored, restricted, and prohibited, both online and offline.[20]

Compared with China, existing literature exploring trans women's daily experiences in Japan illuminate that queers' gender identity negotiation and performance are often space- and/or context-sensitive matters.[21,22,23] While queers' existence in Japanese society is documented and has been tolerated throughout history, they are often regarded by the heterosexual majority in a reductionist manner as a "fetish," "hobby," or "roleplay"—something that should only take place in certain spaces that are explicitly queer, such as the "kagema-chaya" back in the Edō era[24] and the "Shinjuku Ni-chōme" in modern Japan.[25] As Mitsuhashi manifests, working as a sex worker catering to cisgender, heterosexual male clients in the "kagema-chaya" pre-adulthood and forming a heterosexual family post-adulthood was a rather well-documented life course for many queer Japanese back then, just as how nowadays, being a breadwinner at home does not conflict with performing trans identity in Shinjuku Ni-chōme for many queer salarymen, as observed by McLelland.[26]

In this sense, while queers' existence is tolerated, they are expected to live in a way that does not confront the gender ideology of "being productive in the workplace and reproductive at home" that mandates and dominates Japan's heterosexual public space.[27] In this way, queers' sense of placelessness in Japanese society is mainly contributed by their virtual non-existence in mainstream society. Therefore, although Japan does not associate the queer population with being the nation's "others" like China does, one can hardly argue that it is a more queer-friendly society compared with China, because such tolerance is based on the pre-condition that the queer space is essentially cut off from and unseen by the mainstream. With the development of digital media, the queer space now also includes digital realms such as smartphone applications, online chatrooms, and bulletin boards that are designated to cater to the queer community. While this means that queers who are digitally connected can more easily access the queer community, scholars point out that these exclusively queer online communities are just like the offline ones in a sense that they reinforce queerness' space sensitivity, and act as a foil to set off the heterosexual code that defines how women and men "should" live their public life in the hegemonically masculine Japanese society.[28]

Another well-discussed characteristic of queers' gender identification and performance in Japan is its intersectionality with racial, ethnic, and national boundaries.[29] This is partially the result of Japan's ethno-nationalist discourse that narrates Japan as a mono-ethnic society with a nationhood based on ethnic homogeneity.[30] While fewer studies have focused on the experience of trans migrants in Japan, existing literature indicates that the myth of Japan's ethnic homogeneity contributes to the cultural, social, and institutional marginalization of queer migrants,[31] as well as promoting an ethnic divide in the queer community—something Nagel[32] describes as the "ethnosexual frontier." It encourages the formation of a sense of equivocal racism, stimulating a racial and racialized desire for Japaneseness and whiteness. This consequently leads to the rejection of queer migrants who belong to other racial groups, portraying them as "ethnosexual invaders" of and a threat to the status quo of the "ethnically homogeneous" Japanese queer community.[33]

The above-mentioned trans studies situated in the East Asian context provide us with much-needed empirical evidence to understand how queers and queerness are marginalized to privilege the interests of the heterosexual, non-migrant majority in China and Japan. However, most of the studies are situated in a specific digital or physical site, tend to document queers' experiences of interacting with a particular online community[34] or offline venue/neighborhood,[35] and in some cases, these sites are also particularly queer. In this context, I argue that it is necessary to observe queer migrants' actual lived experiences so to nuance the ongoing study of queers in Asia, because being queer does not mean that they only interact with or live within a specifically queer space.

Therefore, in this article, in order to grasp the nuances of Chinese trans women's lived experiences in Japan, I explore their negotiation and performance of gender identities in different online and offline spaces, whether queer or not. Furthermore, as the title indicates, I approach their gender identities as something dynamic and reflexive, and as a process that is continuously revised in response to their surrounding realities derived from various online–offline localities.

To this end, I adopt the term "embodied search" to acknowledge my standpoint of seeing Chinese trans women's gender identity negotiation and performance as a process with agency. In other words, I aim to show that queer migrants' gender identity is not simply an "outcome" of their experienced struggle or discrimination, nor something that is passively produced at the mercy of cisgender, heterosexual women and men.[36] In this way, this article is an attempt to grasp queers' role as an active agent in their gender identity negotiation and performance, to see how they actively incorporate different online and offline resources in order to make sense of who they are and how they want to live their lives.

Researching Chinese Trans Women in Japan

For this research project, I recruited seven first-generation Chinese trans women residing in five prefectures of Japan, namely Ibaraki, Mie, Niigata, Tokyo (four), and Saitama. The interviews were conducted between April 2019 and April 2022. Due to the limited sample size, I avoid drawing any definitive conclusions from this research, nor is it my intention to generalize the experiences of my informants and apply them to wider queer communities. Instead, the aim of this article, in Howard Chiang, Todd Henry, and Helen Leung's words, is to contribute to the discussion of queer migration in the Asian context, so that the spotlight in this field does not always focus on the West.[37]

All the seven informants initially migrated to Japan from mainland China as students, and now work in various industries, such as trade, service, and manufacturing. They are all in their later twenties, with an average age of twenty-seven and an average seven and a half years of residence in Japan. Given that all of them have lived in Japan for a rather significant amount of time, ranging from five to thirteen years, they have "high proficiency in Japanese" and enjoy a "financially stable live in Japan," as they acknowledged during their interviews. While all of them had received gender confirmation surgery (GCS), only two of them, Sakura and Gumi, were able to legally change the sex indicated on legal documents, such as passports and insurance cards. As a naturalized Japanese citizen, Gumi was able to do so by following the procedures indicated in Act No. 111 of 2003[38]—after the GCS, she filed an application to the family court requesting to change her sex, together with a doctor's certificate indicating that she had completed the GCS, did not have minor children at the time of application, and was unable to have children. And in Sakura's case, as she had already come out to her parents pre-surgery, she was able to change her legal documents, such as ID card and *hukou* (family registration) in her hometown Shanghai with her parents' consent. It is worth mentioning that while parents' consent is not something that is legally required in China for those who want to change their legal documents, given that one needs to provide their *hukou* and that it is often kept by the head of the household—usually their parents—many informants mentioned that it is almost impossible to change their legal documents without coming out to their parents.[39]

The informants were identified through two channels. Four informants (Coco, Gumi, Isabelle, and Raki) were recruited through the gay dating app "9Monsters," one of the most popular queer social media platforms in Japan. I created a profile on this app, indicating that I am a queer researcher and an ally to the LGBTQ+ community, trying to get in touch with trans migrants in Japan. Consequently, Coco, Gumi, Isabelle, and Raki reached out to me and expressed their interests in joining the research project.

In addition, Ivy was introduced to me by a personal contact (Japanese) in Niigata, and Mayumi was referred to me by one of the participants (a Japanese trans man) from a different research project. None of the participants in this study were identified through snowball sampling, nor was I able to recruit more informants using this method. As I detail in the following sections, this is partly because many Chinese trans women in Japan prefer not to disclose their gender identities to others but keep a cisgender, heterosexual female's profile.

As guided by the literature review, topics that were covered during the semi-structured interviews include (1) the informants' overall life experiences in Japan, (2) the factors that motivated them to migrate to Japan, (3) their use of digital media in daily life, and (4) their migratory trajectories and how they express their gender identities.

Finally, to protect my informants' privacy and ensure their anonymity, no identifiable information—such as their real names and residential addresses—was collected. All names mentioned in this article are therefore aliases provided by the interviewees.

The Digital–Physical Continuum and the Negotiation of Gender Identities

To understand the informants' embodied search for gender identity in the online–offline continuum, this section begins by illustrating the role of digital media in their everyday diasporic lives. Not surprisingly, all the interviewees indicated that digital tools—especially smartphones and tablets (devices that are easily portable)—have become parts of their bodies that contribute to shaping their lived realities. As Isabelle neatly articulated, "I have my phone, therefore I am" (機在人在 in Chinese, can be directly translated as "my phone is here, so I am here"), which underlines how the use or possession of a smartphone contributes to the way in which she makes sense of her existence, as well as life experiences in general. Isabelle's experiences with smartphones were echoed by other informants. Ivy, who works in a local factory in Niigata, a prefecture famous for its rice production, underlines that she rarely parts from her smartphone: "I often put my phone in my pocket at work . . . though I'm not allowed to use it . . . I don't (use it), but at least I can feel it so I'm reassured." While Ivy did not state how often she uses digital media on a daily basis, it is clear that they mean much more to her than simple communication tools. On further enquiries, she indicated that this sense of reassurance is not simply because digital media allow her to feel close to her friends and family while abroad. More importantly, things like the smartphone give her a sense of security, that she knows "I always have someone to talk to while being probably the only trans woman here."

From Ivy's experiences, we can see how digital media holds an emotional value, in the sense that she feels a sense of reassurance by knowing that she is connected with her close ones as well as the queer community online. Therefore, to a certain degree, the digital connectivity compensates for the lack of connectedness offline, for being abroad, and for being "the only trans woman here." Her experiences and perceptions of digital media not only illustrate how the online and offline experiences often fuse with each other,[40] but also indicate how such fusion may create new possibilities for queer people to reinterpret their migratory experiences, something that is complicated by the intersection of gender.

Move Out, Come Out?

Guided by the literature review, I often started the interviews by enquiring about the informants' migratory paths between China, Japan, and other remote locations. While many agreed that "moving out"—or international human mobility—had indeed constituted a crucial part of their gender-identity-actualization processes, it had not necessarily led to "coming out." As Coco explains,

> I'm not convinced by the "move out, come out" idea, or at least this was not the case [for me] . . . Shanghai is quite liberal, but of course you don't tell people that you have had this [the GCS] . . . And Mie is in the countryside and very conservative. People here don't even like ordinary foreigners [*futsūno gaikokujin*], not to mention being a foreigner *plus* a trans [*gaikokujin purasu toransu-jendā*]. So, no—no "coming out" for me.

Sakura initially migrated from her hometown of Shanghai to Tokyo, where she completed her postgraduate studies. After a few years working in Japan, she traveled to Bangkok alone for the GCS and then moved back to Shanghai to change her gender status on various official documents, such as her passport, ID card, and household registration (*hukou*). Her narratives illustrate the importance of understanding queers' identity quest not as a one-off achievement followed by their emigration. On the one hand, she has been able to gradually actualize her gender identity through the movement of the embodied subject herself,[41] in the sense that her body is both the site for actualizing her gender (through GCS) and the vector of her international mobility (by moving back and forth between different geographical locations). On the other hand, heteronormative realities in the offline realm in both China and Japan impede her willingness to "come out." As she explains, while her hometown seems to be a modern city with an inclusive attitude towards queer people, "coming out" risks losing intimate ties with family and friends, because such inclusiveness "is only possible when it's not with someone you know or are close to." This opinion was common among the other informants as well, such as Ivy, who stated, “like my family, if they read a story about a trans person on the news, they seem to be fine with it. But when it comes to me, their open-mindedness just evaporates into nothing.” The contrast and collision between the seemingly inclusive social environment and the heteronormative-centered surrounding reality highlights how heteronormativity remains a regime of power that mandates Chinese society. Reproductive social institutes, such as the heteronormative family, act as normalizing regimes that all Chinese citizens must negotiate, which consequently makes queers the marginalized subjects within Chinese society and more importantly, within their familial and social networks, too.

In this context, “coming out” is commonly seen by many informants as a highly risky, or as Coco said, a “low cost-performance” activity with little payback. For them, it requires some careful consideration and thorough evaluation, and is therefore not something that is simply achievable by “moving out.” As a matter of fact, among the seven informants, Coco and Sakura are the only two who came out to their parents. While Coco stated that she feels “much lighter and freer” after “coming out,” she also mentioned how her parents no longer allow her to join family reunion events, such as the Lunar New Year dinner, which is,

> One of the most important things we do as a family. All members of the family would gather round in my grandmother’s house, but I’m no longer attending because my parents wouldn’t allow me to. They keep telling my grandmother and aunts that I’m too busy working in Japan to go back . . . actually, I may never go back home again for this reason.

While various studies point out how the clan culture in the context of Chinese society could be seen as a powerful informal institution that regulates individual behaviors,[42,43] Coco’s experiences illustrate how this patriarchally and patrilineally characterized system makes “coming out” less appealing to many trans women. As her narratives imply, given that members within the same clan are so closely connected to each other, “coming out” is therefore a process that requires not only her parents but also her relatives’ approval. If we combine her experience with that of Sakura’s, it is therefore not difficult to understand why most of the informants indicate that they are determined to remain “in the closet.” To them, being marginalized in both Japanese society and their families seems to be too much of a price to pay to just “feel lighter and freer” at heart.

In addition, Sakura’s post-migration experiences illustrate how the intersection between sexuality and ethnicity can produce complex forms of marginality for Chinese trans women in Japan. For her, living in heteronormative Japan does not simply mean to find a way to deal with the masculine hegemony, but also her status as an ethnic minority in a society that emphasizes the myth of ethnic homogeneity.[44] While various studies have documented

Chinese migrants' experiences of marginalization and discrimination,[45] this in turn means that Chinese trans women in Japan are often subject to double marginality for being both an ethnic and a gender minority, or in her own words—"a foreigner plus a trans."

In addition to Coco and Sakura, Gumi, who has been receiving hormone therapy for nine years and had her GCS three years ago, shared with me how she sees "coming out" not as a one-off event nor as something that one can simply measure by "levels of outness,"[46] but as something emotional and intimate:

> I don't think I'm out. My friends in Japan know about it [her identity as a trans woman], but my family in China still don't . . . So, I wonder, if I need to keep my [trans identity] a secret from people who matter the most to me, then how can I say I'm out?

Gumi's narration clearly shows that the expression "to come out" involves something emotional. "Coming out" is not simply a question of to do or not to do it, what matters more is to whom one can come out. More importantly, since Gumi still considers herself as "in the closet" given she needs to keep her trans identity a secret "from people who matter the most to me," this in turn points out the pivotal role that family and familial ties play in trans women's negotiation and performance of gender identity in the Chinese context, and how such importance does not seem to be relaxed by "moving out."

International Mobility and the Embodied Search for Gender Identity

The fact that many informants perceived Japan as a heterosexist and culturally exclusionist society in which gender-identity expressions are often oppressed intrigued me and inspired me to explore the motivations behind their China–Japan migratory trajectories. During the interviews, many of them indicated that their decision to move to Japan had not been driven by their gender, though some—such as Raki—pointed out that human mobility (the physical movement itself) provided the crucial context for her gender-identity affirmation process:

> I'm not from a wealthy family, so coming to Japan . . . was the only possible and viable option . . . Then I started receiving hormone replacement therapy [HRT] a few years later [migrating to Japan]. And of course, my parents still don't know [about the HRT], so every time I move back and forth between the two countries is like switching on and off my gender.

Similar to other informants, such as Coco and Ivy, Raki said she kept her gender a secret from her left-behind family because "I'm sure my parents won't be able to take it." And for this reason, she felt necessary to dress up and act in a way that matches the stereotypical image of a cisgender man when traveling back to China, hence the "switching off" of her gender identity as a trans woman. Raki's experiences of performing different genders show how physical spaces can provide different contexts in which to ground and affirm her gender identification. While the precise social traits of Japan and China that inform her decisions to "switch on and off" her gender identity were not fully explored, her experiences indicate a dynamic correlation between gender and mobility. Importantly, Raki's continuous context-based affirmation and performance of gender identity—even after the HRT—implies that the formation of gender identity is not only actualized through the queer body but is also a psychic quest.[47] This psychic quest is spatially realized, in the sense that it is ultimately linked with the movement of the body through different geographical locations, leading to an essentially fluid queer identity. As a result, the gender identification of Chinese trans women like her is interwoven with different spaces' social contexts and power structures, reflecting their own life stories, experiences, and mobilities.

Discussing the affirmation and performance of gender identity together with their diasporic experiences, Mayumi—who received her GCS in Beijing three years ago—narrated stories quite different to those of Raki. In particular, she explained the reason for revealing her trans identity to her family and close friends back in China while keeping it a secret from her contacts in Japan:

> It's not because I'm afraid of discrimination or peer pressure. I just want to live a life as an ordinary woman. I mean, I went through so much, so why do I have to be proud of being a *trans person*? . . . This [meaning her life in Japan] is a fresh start, as no one knows my past . . . My [body] is also a new chapter [of my life].

It is clear that, for Mayumi, her gender identity is multidimensional and shaped by her offline social engagements. Although she is comfortable with openly identifying herself to her left-behind contacts as a trans woman, she voluntarily maintains a cisgender female profile in Japan, so she can have "a fresh start." When I further enquired about this claim of "a fresh start" in Japan, Mayumi stated that, to protect her cisgender identity, she had transferred to a different university and moved to a different city after the GCS so she could truly open "a new chapter" in her life. For Mayumi, whether she performs or acknowledges her trans identity is less about whether to "come out" or not and more about an autonomous search of ontological security and ways of being in different social settings. In this sense, the offline realm is not only a site in which she can momentarily ground her gender identity in accordance with her physical movements and surrounding realities; it is also a space in which she can materialize various genders so as to make sense of her diasporic life and ever-changing desires.

Although Mayumi and Raki perform their gender identities differently, their stories illuminate that trans Chinese's gender identification is indeed negotiated and generative, and has an intrinsic link to their international mobility experiences. For them, "moving out" is not simply a step towards "coming out," and gender identity formation and performance are not—in all instances—a linear journey towards being "out." Instead, the so-called "moving out"—or the peripatetic movements among different physical spaces—are a way for them to experience, actualize, and validate their multidimensional gender identifications.

Digital Media, Transnational Connectivity, and Gender Identity

While Isabelle's "I have my phone, therefore I am" statement may appear to be a rather unique case of how the "ongoing material reality" of Chinese trans women is empowered by digital media, her opinion resonated with other informants. For instance, Gumi—who has naturalized and owns a tea-trading company in Tokyo—showed me some old photos posted on her Ameblo[48] and Instagram:

> These are [photos] I took when I was still a man . . . This one, I took it in Thailand before the grand surgery . . . This one is when I was in Seoul for plastic surgeries to make my face appear more feminine . . . I'm quite open and happy to share my multinational, transformational journey with my followers [on social media platforms] . . . Those [previous experiences] made me who I am.

Gumi's narration shows how digital media form an embedded part of her diasporic experiences, as the mutual influence of digital and physical interaction puts her diasporic life into a global context—or, in her words, a "multinational, transformational journey." While Gumi travels to different geographic locations to seek out and progressively actualize a desired gender identity through the body, the use of digital media serves a crucial role in revealing that such movements are indeed an embodied quest for identity formation. By re-mediating memories of the past into the ongoing everyday reality, her transnational migratory paths are no longer simply territorial displacements among various geographic points.[49] Instead, multiple remote localities are reinterpreted and reimagined through the digital realm, and experiences derived from specific geographical points are brought together, becoming synchronized and interrelated. Therefore, Gumi is able to collectively interpret and internalize her variant migratory paths through digital media as something that is "transformational" and that "made me who I am." In this way, digital media are intrinsically linked with the physical, as they provide queer migrants with new possibilities for narrating and negotiating their gender identities by bridging and infusing digitally mediated memories with current, ongoing, physical realities. Digital media transform the social actions and perceptions of gender identities, forging links with the static geographical demarcations in the fluid topography of the transnational landscapes,[50] so they are complementary and equally legitimizing of Gumi's identity-actualization process.

While digital media help the informants to make sense of their transnational human mobility in relation to their gender identity, they also endow them with a sense of transnational connectedness. When I asked Isabelle about the factors that encouraged her to go through GCS at a young age (19), she explained,

> Because this [MtF transition] topic is deeply discriminated against in mainland China, so since I was young, like junior high, I've been reading blogs and forums from Taiwan and Hong Kong using a VPN[51] . . . Later on, I also visited some English forums—that's how I obtained information about GCS and hospitals in Thailand … When I saw the before and after pictures shared by others, I thought, oh, they look so pretty and happy after the surgery. So, I felt that if they could handle it [GCS], then I should be able to do so as well. I guess it's like I'm encouraged by my own people.

Before I analyze Isabelle's narration, it is worth mentioning that other informants—such as Coco and Gumi—also talked about the difficulties they had experienced back in China in terms of obtaining information related to gender transition. According to Coco, this is largely because Chinese online platforms for the trans community are often banned inside China or filled with pornographic content. In this context, for Isabelle, non-mainland Chinese digital media were clearly crucial for both negotiating information scarcity and searching ontological security in a non-hostile environment, where she could be connected with her "own people." Although I have argued elsewhere that, for many non-queer Chinese migrants in Japan, their transnational consciousness and sense of belonging have an ethnic boundary,[52] Isabelle's narration potentially demonstrates that belongingness and transnationalism can also be gender-based concepts. Gumi's feelings of solidarity with her "people"—that is, with queer people living in other regions—not only implies that transnationality is reflective of intersections between digital accessibility, ethnicity, and gender, it also underlines that gender may be just as validating as ethnicity in terms of providing individual queer migrants with a basis on which to collectively and transnationally ground their identities.

However, it is important to note that queer Chinese's understanding of their membership in the trans community is a constantly and continuously negotiated outcome, reflecting the collision and coincidence between online and offline realities. For instance, Ivy's statements below manifest how her perceptions of her membership in the trans community shifted following her movement from Tokyo to Niigata:

> You know that on Naimon [the gay dating app "9Monsters"], you can see people near you . . . I made friends with so many trans women on that [app] . . . and we sometimes hang out in Ni-chōme, meeting other trans people . . . but Niigata is just a conservative countryside. No queers live here. Well, I met one trans person, but she's Japanese.

When I asked Ivy why she had specifically underlined the ethnicity of this trans person she met after moved Niigata, Ivy explained that,

> Umm, it's just different. In Tokyo, I felt there was a community for me, and I never thought about [ethnicity]. Maybe it's because the closest person to me is several kilometers away?[53] I don't know.

By using digital media to build new social connections with other queer people and navigate through the city, Ivy's experiences—like those of Isabelle—reflect the interdependence of online and offline realms and their intersection with gender identity. However, the way she defines the boundary of the queer community indicates how the contradiction between digital and physical realities—such as feeling connected to the queer community via 9Monster, while the "closest person to me is several kilometers away"—can lead to the construction of a simultaneously inclusive and exclusive notion of queer membership. When she lived in Tokyo, Ivy was constantly connected to the queer community—both digitally (through the gay dating app) and physically, when she hung out with friends—according to Ivy, both Chinese and Japanese—in Ni-chōme. This continuity between online and offline realities allowed her to see the queer community as relatively inclusive, and its membership is not necessarily ethnically defined. However, since moving to Niigata, the absence of a sense of connectedness in the physical realm and the visualization of her being distanced from the queer community through the dating app's technological affordance has led to a change in her individual subjectivity towards the queer community, membership of which is now ethnically defined. This shift in membership drawing, while reflecting the online–offline fusion, in turn points out how such continuity should not be understood as a gridlock model. This means that although various axes of differentiation derived from both online and offline realms amalgamate with each other, such amalgamation as well as the importance of each axis to this particular amalgamation are not static but dynamic, reflecting the (change in) surrounding reality that queer migrants are dealing with. In this sense, Ivy's relocation from Tokyo to Niigata is not simply a process of relocation, but a process of re-evaluating the importance of gender and ethnicity to her queer community membership and re-composing them in a way that illuminates how she has been gradually isolated from the queer community following her Tokyo–Niigata move.

Conclusion

Chinese trans migrants in Japan continue to be an underrepresented group in academic discussion, but this article sheds light on the way they negotiate their gender identities both across the online–offline continuum and in accordance to tension and fusion between the digital and the physical space. Qualitative evidence collected from seven Chinese trans women residing in Japan illuminates a rather complex picture regarding how gender identity intersects with various axes of differentiation, such as ethnicity, mobility, and connectivity. Therefore, this article argues that their gender identities are contextually negotiated, reflecting their personal quests for a sense of wholeness and emotional and ontological securities when dealing with a particular setting.

First, based on my informants' explanations of their transnational migratory paths, I argue that their gender identities have been largely shaped by the offline realities and informed by their international mobility. In particular, although all the interviewees had undergone GCS, most of them felt it was necessary to act like a stereotypical cisgender male when traveling back to their homeland, or to hide their trans identity so that they can live a peaceful life in Japan. Their experiences show that gender identity is not actualized nor performed through the queer body alone but is also a psychic quest—something that is spatially realized and ultimately linked with the movement of the queer body through different geographical locations.

Second, by focusing on the informants' online engagements, this article has revealed that digital media—as continuous with and embedded within the physical space—are a crucial tool for trans migrants to make sense of their international mobility in relation to their gender identities. On the one hand, by bridging and infusing the informants' previous experiences with the current, ongoing, surrounding realities, digital media shift social actions and perceptions of gender identity from something linked with static physical markers to the fluid topography of transactional landscapes.[54] On the other hand, the mismatch of the sense of connectedness between the online and offline realities has a considerable effect on queers' individual subjectivity towards the queer community. In this way, within the online–offline continuum, tensions and fusions generated through the collision of various digital and physical realities lead to different, context-based understandings of membership in the queer community.

The informants' diversified digital experiences and offline contexts illustrate the heterogeneity, fluidity, and non-universality of queers' negotiation and performance of gender identity. It indicates the importance of rejecting attempts that aim to categorize queer migrants' gender identities based on "levels of outness" or see their identity-actualization processes in a "move out, come out" reductionist way. Findings regarding the impact of the tension and fusion between online–offline realities on queer migrants' gender identity also offer grounds to question the meaning of "being connected," especially how the sense of digital connectedness may trigger a feeling or consciousness of disconnectedness in the offline realm. Given that queer migrants' gender identities are essentially fluid and highly diversified, one limitation of this study is its relatively small sample size. Therefore, further research with a larger sample base is necessary, not only to better understand the dynamics between gender identity and the online–offline continuum but more importantly to hear the voices of queer migrants in Japan, to see them as active actors in pursuing and actualizing their desired gender identities, instead of as the mere victims of the dominantly heteronormative Japanese society.

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Notes

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