

# Transgender Representation by the *People's Daily* Since 1949

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**Abstract** With a focus on Chinese literature of the dynastic period, previous studies on transgender representation in China demonstrated a dichotomy between the attitude of the uppermost class and that of the general public. Apart from literature representation, other studies on “deviant” sexuality in contemporary China tend to attribute this complicated attitude to the non-religious Confucianism-rooted culture that is tolerant yet intolerant. Especially since China entered socialism, this complexity was incorporated into socialist ideologies, leading to unique and distinctive treatment of sexual “deviance”. By examining transgender representation by the official newspaper of the Communist Party of China, the *People's Daily*, this study aims to disclose how sexual “deviance” has been regulated throughout the decades, how gender ideology changes over time under the influence of political, cultural and technological factors, and how a transgender identity was dismantled or facilitated by these factors in turn.

**Keywords** Transgender in China · Sexual culture in China · Transgender representation · Transgender regulation · Gender ideologies in China

## Transgenderism and Chinese Values

For the Chinese, Confucian thoughts have attached special importance to the primacy of the family, which can be briefly summarized by three well-known educative idioms “家和万事兴 [If the family lives in harmony, all affairs will prosper]”, “百善孝为先 [Filial piety is the virtue of prime importance]” and “不孝有三, 无后为大 [There are three forms of unfilial conduct, the worst of which is to have no descendants]”. Over thousands of years, these thoughts have contributed to

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shaping the Chinese into a nation, and they have been internalized by the Chinese who have the least identification with a sense of “Chineseness”. Chinese transgender people have been burdened with, as well as judged by, Confucian thoughts, in that the transgenders, without marriage and posterity, challenge “filial piety”, and, consequently, they become the target for social condemnation and ostracism. This leads to the widespread forced marriage of transgenders, and the devastating home rejection that Chinese transsexuals are experiencing today, which is done to avoid humiliation and maintain family glory.

## Historical Background

The most prominent and persistent transgender phenomena throughout China are concerned with:

- eunuchs who were castrated to provide secured service for the royal family
- theatrical *dan* performers who cross-dressed to fulfill female roles on the stage
- transgender prostitution culture in dynastic China
- *nan chong* [male favor] of the Emperors and the aristocracies.

According to Zhang (2001, p. 505), *dan* performers in modern Chinese operas can be traced to the male *you ling* [performer] profession as early as China entered slavery. Since *Xian Qin* [twenty-first century B.C.], there have been *you ling* who occasionally performed sex services to the aristocracies, particularly in the Ming dynasty when the *nan dan* [male *dan* performers] system was established<sup>1</sup>, and “for the sake of their profession, they are generally more feminine and pretty, with a strong entertaining charm” (p. 506). Zhang observed that some of the *dan* performers were involved in homosexual relationships with their male masters and that this could be made public (p. 8). In the Song and Yuan dynasties, a *nan feng* [homosexual] culture prospered and male prostitution became a profession, as he cited from *Houji Jin Nanchang*, “[male prostitutes] were powdered, splendidly dressed up, and had female names” (p. 6). The aristocratic practice of adopting male favors also lasted for the entire dynastic period and left the Chinese with some well-known romances, such as *long yang* [name of the Emperor Wei’s male favor], *duan xiu* [the cut sleeve], and *yu tao* [the leftover peach], to name just a few. However, it might be controversial whether some of them were transgenders or homosexuals as no clear distinction can be drawn between them.

## Literature Review

As a common practice, scholars included all of them into homosexuality even when the subjects were cross-dressed or feminine, as demonstrated by five groundbreaking books *Zhong Guo Wen Hua Li De Qing Yu Se* [Erotica in Chinese Culture], *Xing De Li Cheng: Cong Liang Song Dao Ming Qing* [A History of Sexuality: From

<sup>1</sup> See Zhang Zaizhou’s collection of historical documentation, pp. 505–651.

*Song to Ming and Qing*], *Passions of the Cut Sleeve*, *The Male Homosexual Tradition in China*, and *Ai Mei De Li Cheng [A History of Intimacy]*.

Nevertheless, in the book *Passions of the Cut Sleeve*, Hinsch (1990, p. 12) gives an account of “transgenderal homosexuality” in which “one partner acts or even dresses as a woman, thereby allowing the relationship to be structured according to masculine/feminine roles”. Examination of transsexuality in dynastic China has to rely on what Hinsch termed as “transgenderal homosexuality”.

By examining ancient literature, Hinsch found that the Chinese culture towards male homosexuality is “one of general tolerance [...] viewed in a broad historical perspective” (p. 4). As he employed a typology to include trans-genderal homosexuality, his book widely cited male-to-female (MtF) transvestites, transgender romances, and transgender cultures. Therefore, his conclusion suggested a wider tolerance towards sexual deviance beyond the narrow sense of male homosexuality. Nevertheless, as Hinsch admitted, there were constraints in his study, in that it dealt with “sexual practices of the uppermost elite” and his “description of ancient history” was drawn “primarily from a few official histories” (p. 5). The gap has to some extent been made up by Liang Ming Yu’s study of ancient Chinese literature of approximately the same period. Liang (2012, pp. 37–41) examined transgender representation in literature ranging from official histories to folk tales, aristocracies to ordinary people, and revealed a multi-faceted attitude towards transgenders, which complements Hinsch’s findings. Liang (2012, p. 38) found transgender phenomena were taken as a sign of political decay in the Han dynasty whereas Hinsch’s (1990) research focused on the Han Emperors’ romances with their feminine male courtiers. On the individual and family level, Liang (2012, pp. 38–39) also observed that attitudes towards MtF was in a strong contrast with female-to-male (FtM), typically among ordinary people, in that the former was regarded as a shame and humiliation by transgenders, their family, and the general public, whereas the latter was a positive change worth showing off and celebrating.

While the disparity may be attributed to the different sources they studied, the social status possessed by their subjects, as well as the authors who wrote them, it nonetheless shows that transgender culture in ancient China is a complicated one, as its manifestation varies over time and space, and among people of different backgrounds.

## Methodology

Primary data for this study were retrieved from the online database of the *People’s Daily* at the National Library of China, where readers have access to a complete version of this newspaper. Key-word search was used to locate relevant materials for further identification. To do this, the widest variety of terms were employed, among which include:

- a. terms addressing transgender/transsexual people, cross-dressing, cross-dresser and sex reassignment surgery, such as 变性人, 人妖, 男扮女装, 女扮男装, 伪娘, 伪爷, 男人婆, 改性手术, 变性手术, 性别转换[手术], 性别更改[手术], 性别变更[手术];

- b. terms indicating gender change such as 变性, 性别转换, 转换性别, 更改性别, 性别更改, 变更性别, 性别变更, 改变性别, 性别改变, 男变女, 女变男, 男化女, 女化男;
- c. pathological terms such as 易性病, 易性癖, 易性症, 性变态, 性别错位, 性别颠倒;
- d. descriptive terms indicating feminine male, masculine female and hermaphroditism, such as 阴阳怪气, 娘娘腔, 雌雄莫辨, 雌雄同体;
- e. other terms that may point to a description or discussion on “deviant” sexuality, such as 性别角色, 性倾向, 性别认同, 性别身份, 中性人, 同性恋, 双性人.

The results were then carefully checked for relevance. To ensure disinterestedness of this study, all relevant articles were subsequently mentioned, summarized, or discussed without exception. Articles were translated literally where important information was connotated, for instance, gender specific nouns and pronouns, ideology-embodied terms and expressions, etc.

### Thesis Concern

In “new China” where newspapers have been one of the major media for the Communist Party of China to deliver information to the public over the past 63 years, a review of transgender representation therein allows us to see how transgender images were represented, how ideologies were embodied, how transgender representation was influenced by extrinsic factors, as well as how transgender identity was dismantled or facilitated both literally and in practice. All these shed light on how sexual culture has been shaped in contemporary China.

Known as the official newspaper of the Communist Party of China and also China’s biggest newspaper, the *People’s Daily* has been the ideological leader responsible for delivering updated values and directing ideologies to the public. The newspaper is also well known as the spokesperson of the State Council. Views therein are believed to reflect the voice of authorities. Therefore, a review of transgender representation by the *People’s Daily* is expected to produce a dynamic and panoramic view of how transgenderism has been officially treated since 1949. Nonetheless, in such a comprehensive mainstream newspaper, occasions where transgender issues were reported or discussed are very limited. Where scarcity hinders a coherent understanding, materials from elsewhere will be borrowed either to fill in the gaps or to explain the incoherence; and where contradictory views are detected, comparisons will be made to understand the contradiction to the utmost.

### A Brief Summary

Generally, transgender representation has experienced three distinctive stages in the *People’s Daily* since 1949. The first stage is the Maoist period from 1949 to 1976, during which transgenderism was largely silenced, and in rare cases represented as a shame or humiliation. The second stage starts from the implementation of the

“reform and opening up” policy in 1978–2000. During this period, transgender representation was overwhelmed by debates and discussions on the transgender medical condition and its moral challenges. The last stage starts from 2001, when homosexuality was no longer classified as a psychiatric disorder in *Zhongguo Jingshen Jibing Fenlei* [*The Chinese Classification of Mental Disorders*]. From then on, the *People’s Daily* has adopted a more open attitude, dedicated to questioning gender conventions, reporting transgender legal progresses, and indicating transgenderism as part of human rights.

## First Stage: Suppression of Transgenderism

### Social Background

Throughout the Maoist period, China had constantly introspected its socialist route and deployed class struggles to make sure that “capitalist backwardness” had been thoroughly eradicated and not revived to influence the country’s communist future. This led to the government’s sensitive regulation of people’s words and behaviors, which was enforced through arbitrary investigations and penalties on “ideologically and politically backward” minds, particularly on these suspected to be secret agents and citizens with capitalist or landlordist background. Due to enormous involvement in such accusations and investigations, a strong political sensitiveness developed among the public. Words or behaviors that were not in line with socialist ideology would be subject to such an investigation, and people were encouraged to report suspects. This atmosphere reached its climax during the Cultural Revolution when peeping and revelation had merged into the daily life among people of all levels. Especially, to report others’ “deviant” secrets could gain the reporter exemption from the cruel tortures imposed by the Red Guards.

In terms of culture, the Maoist period embraced the “red” revolutionary culture and degraded the exotic Western. To make such a distinction, a binary opposition was constructed between the capitalist and the socialist. For instance, pop songs and modern dances were considered pornographic, decayed, and base. They were largely suppressed in the name of avoiding contamination and maintaining the purity of the revolutionary songs; representation of romances was widely linked with revolutionary comradeship [*tongzhi*] friendship whilst showing a profound disapproval towards signs of the “capitalist lust”. In other words, it was not only a period when China strongly resisted capitalist ideologies through its seclusion from capitalist countries but also a period when sexuality was suppressed, and regulated under moral integrity subject to a system of administrative and Party sanctions (Li 2006).

### Politicizing Cross-dressing

Before 1978, the word *bian xing* had not appeared in the *People’s Daily* with the meaning of gender change. It is obviously a newly imported word as it implies an

innate sexual essence that could not have previously existed in Chinese terminology (Hinsch 1990, p. 7). Because of this, transgenderism was mainly represented during this period as cross-dressing, with descriptive terms like *nu ban nan zhuang* [woman in men's clothes] and *nan ban nu zhuang* [man in women's clothes].

Mostly, MtF cross-dressing was reported with reference to stage shows, which either created comic effects or fulfilled the theatrical female role *dan* in traditional Chinese operas, and as disguising strategies, which people employed to commit crimes or, in rare cases, to defeat enemies. In contrast, FtM cross-dressing was unanimously reported in praise of heroic behaviors of Chinese women. To my knowledge, the only occasion where non-fictional cross-dressing was reported is in the case of the “anti-revolutionary” Wan Guo Xiong. In the article “*Tian Luo Di Wang* [Tight Encirclement]” published on 15 October, 1957, the author writes:

The sinful anti-revolutionary Wan Guo Xiong lurked into Shanghai in 1950. In order to hide his identity, he has been dressed in women's clothes and changed his name to Wang Xiu Juan. He perms his hair, powders his face, puts on lipsticks, wears a gorgeous high-necked cheongsam, and carries a small delicate handbag. His breasts shake when he walks. What a splendid and coquettish woman! Nonetheless, no matter how scheming the anti-revolutionist is, no matter how much effort the anti-revolutionist make, he cannot hide himself from his neighbors who had contacts with him. Some are curious why this ‘woman’ has such long hairs on her legs, which are very conspicuous even under silk stockings. Some are curious why this ‘woman’ has Adam's apple. Some once discovered that this ‘woman’ was wearing a bra on a flat chest. The mask of this ‘woman’ is being removed little by little and truths are gradually being revealed.

In accordance with the social atmosphere of that period, cross-dressing was suspected primarily as a disguising strategy of the anti-revolutionary Wan. Made parallel to revolutionary acts—the then biggest threat to the socialist country—cross-dressing was degraded. In making this comparison, it assumed public attitude towards transgenders as being unacceptable, and the author also aimed to arouse readers' uncomfortable feelings towards Wan through depiction of a sexually awkward ‘Other’.

Meanwhile, as cross-dressing was regarded as something as fake as a mask, the transgender identity which Wan constructed through cross-dressing was literally disillusioned, dismantled and denied, especially as the author brought out a clash between Wan's biological identity and the female look with a satirical tone.

The other time when Wan Guo Xiong was condemned in the *People's Daily*, Wan was categorized by the two labels—“cross-dressing” and “anti-revolutionary”—in the article “*Tie Zheng Ru Shan* [Irrefutable Evidence]” published on 5 October, 1957. Repeated paralleling between cross-dressing and anti-revolutionary acts was probably based on a common feature both shared, that is, a violent subversion of what the socialist ideology would then define as “the natural”, with one drawn from essentialist biological theory and the other from Marxist social development theory. In a poem attacking an anonymous “traitor”, “*Mai Guo Zei Jian Yan Wang* [Traitor, Go to Hell]”,

one of the four sentences reads, “*nan ban nv zhuang diu ren yang* [what a shame for a man to wear women’s clothes]!”

The stereotypical view of cross-dressing as a shame coincides with Liang’s finding from his study on ancient literature mentioned previously, as well as Li’s recording of a retold story in his essay “Regulating male same-sex relationships in the People’s Republic of China”. One of her informants recalled:

in the 1970s, a friend of his had gone to a certain city on business and heard a story that was causing something of a sensation at that time. The story centered on an old couple, originally cousins, who were already between 50 and 60 years old. One evening, a neighbor of the elderly couple had visitors and sent her young daughter to stay overnight with the old woman (the old man being away on shift-work). The next day the girl revealed that the old woman was actually a man, whereupon the old woman was subsequently detained and investigated on suspicion of being a secret agent. [...] In the case of the old woman, after a process of verification, it was demonstrated that ‘she’ was indeed a man. Whilst in detention, the ‘old woman’ decided that he could not live with the humiliation that would accompany public knowledge of his circumstances, i.e. he had no ‘face’, and therefore committed suicide (Li 2006, p. 84).

The primary concern here should be why such news of a sensation had never been represented in media. Apart from the consideration that reporting this particular case would add a stigma to the Party’s rule, transgender representation in general was constrained by the political and cultural atmosphere. During this period, all the media were under the strict control of the Party and the Party was devoted to propagandizing the positive sides of socialism in the hope of consolidating its rule. No wonder transgenderism, classified as capitalist for its negative image, would not be reported, as it would threaten to blur the boundary between socialism and capitalism and thus also reduce people’s confidence in socialism. Besides, society generally held a conservative attitude towards sexuality. Even heterosexuality was taboo to talk about, not to say “deviant” sexuality, which was labeled as shameful and something unreal, fake and deceiving, under monitoring and investigation of administrative units, and subject to a series of administrative and Party sanctions (Li 2006).

In addition, it gives an insight into how institutionalized gender exerts power to regulate transgender individuals under the universal patriarchy. The little girl’s revelation, the police’s detention, the verification process, and the protagonist’s fear over losing face—they all function as regulatory forces to constrain “deviant” sexuality so as to maintain heterosexual hegemony. These reactions were a result of the implementation and internalization of gender ideologies of that time, which subsequently produced taken-for-granted assumptions that in turn initiated and justified such reactions. Particularly, internalization of transgenderism as a humiliation led in the end to the protagonist’s suicide.

It can be seen that, in such a cultural atmosphere, many transgender individuals received unbearable pressures and had to keep their transgender identity in the “closet” as did the protagonist. Alternatively, some others conformed to Chinese

conventions in order to avoid heavy social pressure. They got married and had descendants to “fulfill their filial obligations and also to deflect public suspicion” (Li 2006, p. 82), as demonstrated by the recently “outed” transgender Qian Jin Fan, who was born in 1928.

## Summary

Generally, the Maoist period is a period of ignoring and silencing transgender representation. The *People’s Daily* did not give much space to the cross-dressing phenomena except for those that were fictional. Frequent suspicion of transgenderism as a political strategy gives a glimpse as to how people’s lives were associated with politics during that period. As for ideology, the public knowledge then was negatively stereotyped against transgenders, as transgenderism was seen as shameful and a moral crime comparable to anti-revolutionary acts. Besides, sexual “deviants” during this period were also subject to “extra-legal” sanctions (Li 2006, p. 82). Under these circumstances, the identity that transgender individuals personally or privately constructed through cross-dressing was dismantled by public ignorance.

## Second Stage: Pathologization of Transgenderism

### Social Background

Since the implementation of the “reform and opening-up” policy in 1978, China has been under rapid development in economics and technology as well as in people’s thoughts. Westernization was re-started at an even greater speed after several decades of seclusion. This period was marked by China’s hasty catch-up with modern technologies and urgent involvements in the global economy, leading to China’s following of the West in many aspects. Though warnings were widespread reminding people not to take in the “capitalist decayed ideologies”, there was enough evidence showing that the West had been a symbol for modernity. Modernity, with sex reassignment surgery being a breakthrough in the field of medical science, gave rise to transgenderism and meanwhile introduced heated moral debates.

### Conceptualizing and Re-conceptualizing Transgenderism

During this period, a few terms addressing transgender identity were added to the Chinese vocabulary. They were all imported and translated from the West, such as *yi zhuang zhe* [cross-dresser], *bian xing ren* [transsexual], and *kua xingbie zhe* [transgender]. However, words of this kind were minimal compared with the abundant and specific Western designations. Until now, some of the imported terms were still regarded as quite technical and the ordinary people prefer to use descriptive phrases for reference. For instance, when addressing pre-surgery



transgenders, instead of saying they are *kua xingbie zhe* [transgender], people prefer to say that they are self-identified male/female, male/female in a female/male body, male/female with a female/male heart, etc.

The first mention of *bian xing* [gender change] in the *People's Daily* occurred in an article reflecting a medical dilemma published on 21 September, 1982, in which a surgeon protested against irresponsible propaganda of new medical technologies. The surgeon writes:

During a period of time, I received a number of letters asking me to change their sex. One of the reasons is that a newspaper reported my treatment of a patient with a defective sexual organ (known as hermaphrodite) but the newspaper didn't make it clear. For those with defects, they can indeed be cured according to their own actual gender. However, it doesn't mean that we can change the sex of normal individuals as they wish by any means. Coincidentally, approximately at the same time, a translated foreign article entitled 'Gender Reassignment School in Britain' was published, with its content on treatment of hermaphrodites. This wrong title deepened some readers' misunderstanding. It took us unimaginable efforts to explain why it was inappropriate for them to undergo medical treatment as reported. Despite our efforts, we could hardly be understood by our patients and their families. They even considered us conservative.

As always, breakthrough technologies brought both excitement and fear. While transgenders sought to "correct the mismatch" between body and psyche through sex reassignment surgery, some others apparently felt it a severe threat to morality and social order, which is manifested by the doctor's incomprehensible attitude and his fear over their medical requests. Ideologies were so taken for granted that the doctor and author attributed the rise of transgenderism to irresponsible propaganda of medical sciences. Primarily, the doctor assumed biological essentialism and a rigid boundary on gender binaries. These ideologies helped to create an interesting dialectic in that the doctor felt victimized by irresponsible propaganda whereas he was actually denying and suppressing the real social victims.

An editor commented below the article, asserting that reports on sciences should adopt a "responsible, scientific and cautious attitude", evading the topic of transgenderism. In any case, this must be a typical response to transgenderism at that time when viewed from a broader historical spectrum. The emergence of sex reassignment surgery contributed to the pathologization of transgenderism. With the help of modern technologies, transgenders started to break away from the traditional label of "*long yang* [homosexual]" and seek a distinctive identity characterized by transgression and by conforming at the same time. The first sex reassignment surgery (MtF) in mainland China was conducted in 1983.

Soon after that, on 8 October, 1982, the *People's Daily* published an article entitled "A Glance at Social Problems in Taiwan". The article mentioned *ren yao*, a term specifically designated to transgender performers. It briefly criticized Taiwan for importing such a "foreign and base" culture. This critique echoes a similar but more significant work published at the request of the Ministry of Public Security by the *People's Daily Press*. In the book *Xifang Shehui Bing* [*Social Diseases of the*

West], transgenderism, under the umbrella term *tong xing lian* [homosexuality], was labeled as a social disease exclusively pertaining to the Western capitalist society (Wang 1992). In this book, as well as in the article, sexual “deviants” became a target of abjection serving China’s political ends to defend its socialist system and to maintain its moral excellence, but above all, it reinforces transgenderism as a *bing* [disease], overlooking life experiences of the transgender individuals under a broader social mechanism.

Both in consistency with and in contrast to the 1980s, the 1990s reinforced the pathologization of transgenderism. Transgenderism started to be presented from both surgical and empirical perspectives. On the one hand, surgical reports and scientific findings accumulated as domestic surgeons made breakthroughs in sex reassignment surgery. On the other hand, doctors tried to reduce social condemnation by reinforcing transgenderism as a disease and exposing experiences of transgenders.

The article “Male to Female: No Way”, published on 12 August, 1990, reported a piece of “sensational news” abroad that parents had decided to change the sex of a two-year-old boy after his loss of his penis in a medical accident, but when he grew into a beautiful girl, he found that he was only interested in females and wanted to be male again. It comments at the end of the news that:

Though the experiment failed, it nonetheless has great scientific significance. Researchers found that a person’s gender is not only determined by sexual organ, but the key determinant is hypothalamus. Entering puberty, human body will develop accordingly with the pre-determined gender under the force of hypothalamus. Whilst how hypothalamus functions is determined by sex genes of human nucleus chromosomes, gender expressions of the human body take form once sex genes are activated. Since sex genes are determined at the very moment of insemination, even a brilliant doctor cannot change this pre-determined fact.

Written from the perspective of biological essentialism, the article cited a scientific finding to reflect on gender issues. Without doubt, it brought pressure to transgenderism as it defended and propagandized the rigid boundary of the institutionalized gender. While this argument is rather weak and can easily be refuted by the existence of transgenderism, it nonetheless shows how deep-rooted gender assumptions were. And this was and has always been one of the major obstacles to transgenderism in China, as anywhere else in the world.

Under huge surgical demands, both transgender persons and surgeons achieved a consensus in pathologizing transgenderism, as it was the only effective way to reduce negative stereotyping of transgenders and meanwhile justify the surgery so as to reduce social condemnation of the surgeons. Surgeons were faced with an embarrassing dilemma at the beginning in that they were actually providing medical services but they were accused of committing the biggest offense to traditional moral values. In the eyes of the public, instead of fulfilling the doctors’ mission to *jiu si fu shang* [heal the wounded and rescue the dying], they destroyed healthy bodies and cut off the patients’ posterity, which was believed to be a big offence to a family and a threatening challenge to traditional values. In this situation, the

medical circle, represented by the pioneering surgeon He Qing Lian, started to diagnose it as an illness, *yi xing pi* [transgender cacothesis].

In December 1992 came a report about the first domestic FtM sex reassignment surgery in the *People's Daily*. It states:

The First FtM Sex Reassignment Surgery Successfully Performed. China's first FtM sex reassignment surgery has been successful. It was conducted by the nation-renowned plastic surgeon Professor He Qing Lian. The girl diagnosed with *yi xing pi* [transgender cacothesis] was 26 years old. For long she had been anxious and depressed for not being able to change her gender. Professor He Qing Lian and his assistants in Shanghai Changzheng Hospital believed her illness had already reached a severe status; she would lose working ability and even her life would be endangered if sex change had not been duly conducted. The surgery was performed in October 1991. Now the patient has got used to the male role both physically and psychologically.

Though the title suggests the article aims to introduce China's breakthrough medical technology, it does not forget to defend the doctors as being consistent with their original mission—to save transgenders from a fatal mental status. It was accompanied, naturally, by an effort to help transgenders gain understanding among the readers, and hence the article assumed a sympathetic tone. Only in doing so can the surgery be justified, as I argued above. Even so, Professor He Qing Lian received numerous negative critiques and moral condemnations from the public.

A report came soon afterwards, in March 1993, boasting China's cutting-edge medical technology, that is, successful organ implantation in sex reassignment surgery.

## Summary

In short, transgender representation during this period is characterized by medical interference. Particularly, this period witnessed doctors' struggles over moral concerns, which ended up with reinforced pathologization of transgenderism for the doctor's and transgender's mutual interests. Meanwhile, pathologization contributed to the making of a distinctive transgender identity and brought transgender phenomena into public view.

## Third Stage: Legalization of Transgenderism

### Social Background

The “reform and opening-up” policy brought democratic thoughts to the Chinese people and politically contributed to the students' movement in 1989, which the government then labeled as anti-revolutionary, suppressed it and attributed it to provocation by the West and the influence of the capitalist “decayed” ideologies. Nevertheless, the suppression was not able to change China's route towards a more

free, equal and democratic country. Entering the new century, the China government considerably loosened its regulation of citizens' speech and behaviors. Media reports began to cover a wider range of topics. Right at this time, China entered the information age when everything could be at the fingertips. Transgender, as then a fresh phenomenon, attracted considerable media attention. Especially for those "new media" who were trying every means to catch netizens' attention, transgenderism was duly employed. Controversial as it has always been, the majority of the mainstream media still held a "not mentioning, not asking" policy and took it as a negative side of society. Even when transgender stories were told, they usually assumed educative purposes to "prevent and correct" (Deng 2003), as shown by Deng Ying Ru's documentary novel *Nu Ren Meng* [*Dreaming to Be Female*].

In April 2000, the Ministry of Public Security commented on a transgender case that citizens had the right to choose their gender (Gao 2001). This is a great leap forward following the removal of the crime of hooliganism and sodomy in 1997, under which sexual "deviants" were arbitrarily penalized (ibid.). In 2001, *The Chinese Classification of Mental Disorders* published its new version, which removed the reference of homosexuality—an umbrella term for sexual "deviants", including transgenders—as a psychotic disorder (ibid.). Though regulation of transgenderism had always existed, it had never been prescribed into China's law. This opened up space for legal progress on transgender issues. In 2003, the State Council passed a revised version of *Regulation on Marriage Administration*. According to the new *Regulation*, transgender marriage will be legally recognized as per their identification card, which can be changed after sex reassignment surgery. These circumstances, together with changing ideologies, relieved the transgender community, and this century is highlighted by transgender public figures, among whom are the world-renowned dancer Jin Xing, 2004 Miss Universe participant Chen Li Li, transgender autobiography narrator Zhang Ke Sha, and world-renowned make-up artist Ji Mi. Ever since the Hong Kong superstar Leslie Cheung attracted massive admiration through his own charm as well as his queer roles on screen, traditional views on sexual "deviance" among the Chinese community have been under challenge. Social reception of gender-bending has been getting better as demonstrated by the increasing popularity of Li Yu Chun, an androgynous-looking singer, as well as of Jin Xing. During this period, the *People's Daily* occasionally reported transgender legal progresses, re-directed gender ideologies, and announced transgenderism as a part of human rights.

### Normalizing Transgenderism

A piece of picture news on 19 March, 2004 reported government approval of a transsexual's identification card change, as well as her marriage. It briefly introduced it thus:

On 15 March, 2004, Zhang Lin, a transsexual from Pengzhen, Shuangliu County, Chengdu City, received a new identification card, with the gender category clearly labeled as 'female'. This marked the ending of Zhang Lin's

male identity which had caused agonies to *the self* for 37 years. On the same day, Zhang Lin and *spouse* received a red and bright marriage certificate from a staff of the civil administration section of the town. The union of the special couple marked legal recognition of transgender marriage.

Though transsexuals had successfully changed their identification card as early as the 1980s, transgender marriage had not been legally recognized until the implementation of the new *Regulation on Marriage Registration* in October 2003. Not only is this incident a milestone in transgender history<sup>2</sup>, but the report itself is also a breakthrough in media representation of transgenders. Compared with the previous article about the first domestic FtM surgery, in which the author consistently and repeatedly stuck to the female pronoun *ta* [she/her] and noun *guniang* [girl], this article was carefully worded in non-sexist language, and evaded gender-specific pronouns and nouns. This more careful handling of words reflects a better understanding of and a more respectful attitude towards the transsexual in the Party's official newspaper.

Moreover, it is the first time that the *People's Daily* had published a picture of the transgender and represented a transgender individual in a positive way. It indicates that some transgender individuals had become more confident, starting to break away from moral and ideological burdens and to come out of the "closet".

Later, an editorial was published on 12 November, 2005 entitled "*Cong Xingbie Shuo Kai Qu* [Starting from Gender]". It is a short book review of the writer Wu Xingren's *Jiuzheng Shangdi de Cuowu* [*Correcting the God's Mistakes*], a book telling life stories of the transsexuals treated by He Qing Lian. It states:

After I read the writer Mr. Wu Xing Ren's new book *Correcting the God's Mistakes*, my feeling can be summarized by a word: Fresh! Fresh stories, fresh knowledge, fresh ideas.

Whenever it comes to human beings, people just think of male and female, either male or female. We were often told that family background is something we cannot choose, and gender is even more rigid. Now, *Correcting the God's Mistakes* tells us that gender can be changed, and it is thus something that we can choose. Gender as a choice means that the scope of human rights has been expanded to choice making. It is not only evidence of advanced medical science in our country, but it also signifies that gender has made a leap forward from destiny to freedom. It is a success of dialectics.

More than 30 years ago, I went to do survey in a welfare house, and saw a few hermaphrodites who were sometimes male and sometimes female. Those hermaphrodites were talented and capable, in charge of their own teams of the disabled. Certainly, they were born to be that. Over 100 transsexuals in the book *Correcting the God's Mistakes* were born with the opposite body, and they changed it according to their own will. Is there anything wrong with that? They like the gender role and want to play that role. They must have done some research and they pursue the role they want to be. Research and pursuits

<sup>2</sup> Another report announced the first transgender marriage was at the end of 2003. [http://hunan.voc.com.cn/gb/content/2004-01/21/content\\_2299153.htm](http://hunan.voc.com.cn/gb/content/2004-01/21/content_2299153.htm).

are positive forces. There is reason for us to believe that, once they change their sex successfully, they can play the role well.

Some people may say that those who want to change their sex are abnormal. No doubt a small number of them are mentally abnormal. However, they can feel being concerned by society after their sex is changed, and will thus shift from an abnormal to a normal status. Is that not also one of their rights that we should respect? 'Reform and opening-up' have brought changes in a rounded manner. Society is progressing and human rights are being increasingly respected. Therefore, reasonable requirements of all people should be respected and valued.

*Correcting the God's Mistakes* can also help change some of our notions. Today, there is a severe gender imbalance in China: males outnumber females by 30 million. How can we deal with that? Why not draw on Professor He Qing Lian and Mr. Wu Xing Ren's views, and change our traditional gender notions and our life views at large?

This article, as its title indicates, starts from transgender issues but has concerns beyond transgenderism. As the last paragraph reveals, the article also serves to promote the government's long-implemented policy aiming to balance male and female genders, which had been hardly fruitful as a result of parents' persistence to give birth to a male child, both to provide family support and to carry the name of the family. Such an imbalance was further aggravated by China's "one-child" policy. Therefore, this article aims to bring fresh thoughts to the audience so as to shake up the biased birth practice. As a result, the article deliberately set arguments to: (1) challenge gender binaries and biological essentialism; (2) problematize normality; (3) advocate human rights on gender identity; and (4) propagandize fluidity of gender.

Now that transgender legal issues have been solved, that human rights on gender identity have been admitted by the Ministry of Public Security, and that efforts have been made to re-direct gender ideologies in the country's ideological leader, the *People's Daily*, China has done all the things a domestic transgender movement would have appealed for. In "2010 *Nian Meiguo de Renquan Jilu* [A Record of Human Rights in the US, 2010]", published on 11 April, 2011, the government of China briefly criticized the widespread harassment that 90 % of homosexual, bisexual and transgender students suffered at school in the US, "urging the US to face up to its own human rights problems".

## Observation

As transgenders hold a stronger conforming desire to gender binaries and heterosexuality, their issues are comparatively easier to handle on both moral and legal sides. In line with their expectation, the government of China has helped transgenders to be accommodated into gender binaries. However, it is worth noting that, for transgenders in mainland China, the culture is more tolerant on legal issues than on moral values, and policies concerning transgenderism, as it has always been, are influenced by external factors beyond gender ideologies.

## Conclusion

Overall, under the influence of political, cultural and technological factors, transgender representation in the *People's Daily* has experienced three distinctive stages since 1949. During the Maoist period, transgenderism was negatively stereotyped and largely silenced. "Deviant" sexuality at large was regulated by the joint force of socialist ideologies, sex culture of the time, and administrative penalties and the Party disciplinary sanctions, until modern medical technology brought transgenderism into serious discussion. For the next two decades, transgender representation was characterized by medical interference for which doctors had been struggling and mediating between such a "disease" and traditional moral values. As a result, a consensus was reached between the two parties to pathologize transgenderism and, as a consequence, reports during this period produced a sympathetic narrative to promote public understanding of transgenderism. Since the new millennium, the *People's Daily* has occasionally reported transgender issues and their legal processes. It can be seen therein that authorities in China have made special efforts in legalizing transgenderism by accommodating transgender persons into gender binaries, and also delivering trans-positive information to the public.

However, positive changes made in or perceived through media representation do not mean that transgender persons are treated accordingly in practice. Even views on the *People's Daily* are far from representing China's mainstream. Instead, transgender individuals have been suffering from enormous discriminations, distortions and depressions. Here are a couple of recent events that can demonstrate such an impasse. On 4 July, 2011, the actress Lu Li Ping asserted on her micro-blog that homosexuality is a sin and a shame, which attracted critiques on an unprecedented scale. Mainstream media and public figures in China released large volumes of homo-positive information, including China's Central Television news channel. However, just 2 months later, in September 2011, Zhejiang TV expelled Jin Xing, a transsexual dancer, from a judges' panel, which turned out to be a governmental discrimination according to subsequent revelations from an insider. The two events form a strong contrast in that, despite the overwhelming homo-positive views released 2 months previously, when confronted with a transsexual, China seemed to be struggling with conflicting emotions between the "elite" and the general public, between speech and act.

Discrimination against transgenders in China, as anywhere else, has its deep roots in heterosexual hegemony, out of which individual identity was sexualized, heterosexuality was made compulsory, "deviant" sexuality became the target for human abjection, marginalization of sexual "deviants" turned into a cultural practice, and gender ideologies rule and regulate. Apart from this, the lower exposure rate and public ignorance in China contributed to creating a tolerant illusion towards sexual "deviants".

In any case, the social context of China during this period resembles that of many other countries, and particularly seems to be following the footsteps of the West, as the West might also have experienced suppression, pathologization and legalization stages. This may be true, as Western technologies and ideologies have poured into

China since implementation of the “reform and opening-up” policy. Nevertheless, the China political, non-religious and cultural context is a unique one in that, on the one hand, China has a more tolerant culture in the federal dynasties, no religious suppression, and no legal punishment compared with the West, but on the other hand, moral values emphasizing primacy of family and collectivism, contribute to persistent emotional abuse imposed on transgenders. Exactly as Pi Jun describes in his biographical essay, “Chinese people seldom harm the transgender; instead, they constantly marginalize them, making this group hard to live in the society themselves” (2010, p. 350).

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