

Trans Ventures: Trans/Formations of Gender in Sinophone Culture
**An Interdisciplinary Conference on Chinese Articulations of Transgenderism
in Comparative, Post-Colonial, and Transnational Perspectives**

Time: 9:00am to 6:30pm on 2 May 2009

Location: 202 Jones Hall, Princeton University

Organizer: Howard H. Chiang (hchiang@princeton.edu)

Faculty Advisor: Benjamin A. Elman (elman@princeton.edu)

Event Core Sponsor:

Program in East Asian Studies, Princeton University

In the recent attempts to excavate a field of scholarly inquiry in queer Asian studies, relatively little attention has been paid to transgender issues. Meanwhile, despite its growing focus on expressions of gender non-conformity, Western queer studies (with a few notable exceptions) exhibits an equally pressing problem: the lack of empirical and theoretical investigation on transgender articulations in Asian society and culture. These parallel problems are highlighted in some of the most recent scholarships in both fields. The first conference of its kind hosted by the East Asian Studies Program at Princeton University, *Trans Ventures: Trans/Formations of Gender in Sinophone Culture* provides a unique forum that bridges this intellectual gap. This one-day workshop brings together experts from various disciplinary and institutional backgrounds, featuring a timely conversation between emergent Sinologists working on queer/trans issues and Western gender/queer theorists who continue to develop the field since the 1980s. The event is made possible by the additional generous support of the Department of History, the Shelby Cullom Davis Center for Historical Studies, the Program in the Study of Women and Gender, the Program in History of Science, and the Department of English at Princeton University. Pre-registration is required for attendance.

List of Invited Participants:

Daniel Burton-Rose, Graduate Student in Asian Languages and Civilizations, University of Colorado

Ta-wei Chi, Assistant Professor in Residence of Chinese, University of Connecticut

Howard H. Chiang, Graduate Student in History of Science, Princeton University

Benjamin Elman, Professor of East Asian Studies and History, Princeton University

David L. Eng, Professor of English and Comparative Literature, University of Pennsylvania

Larissa N. Heinrich, Associate Professor of Literature, University of California at San Diego

Helen Hok-Sze Leung, Assistant Professor of Women's Studies, Simon Fraser University

Susan Naquin, Professor of East Asian Studies and History, Princeton University

Carlos Rojas, Assistant Professor of Modern Chinese Cultural Studies, Duke University

Gayle M. Salamon, Assistant Professor of English, Princeton University

Tze-lan Deborah Sang, Associate Professor of East Asian Languages and Literatures,
University of Oregon

Joan W. Scott, Professor of Social Science, Institute for Advanced Study

Susan Stryker, Associate Professor of Gender Studies, Indiana University

Schedule on 2 May 2009:

9:00 **Breakfast**

9:25 **Introductory Remarks**

9:30-10:45 **Panel 1: Literary Transcendence**

Chair: Susan Naquin

Larissa N. Heinrich, "Transgender and Transgenre Desire in Qiu Miaojin's *Testament from Montmartre*"

Daniel Burton-Rose, "Gendered Androgyny: Alchemical Ideals of Transcendence"

10:45-11:00 **Break**

11:00-12:15 **Panel 1 (continued)**

Tze-lan Deborah Sang, "Embodiment, Identity and History in *The Fin-de-siècle Boy Love Reader* (1996)"

Commentator: David L. Eng

12:15-1:30 **Lunch**

1:30-3:15 **Panel 2: Historical Narration**

Chair: Benjamin A. Elman

Howard H. Chiang, "China's Manhood on Trial: Between a 'Castrated Civilization' and a Culture of Transsexual Glamour"

Ta-wei Chi, "Undressing History: Unwrapping the Marriage of Transgender and Grand Narratives"

Commentator: Joan W. Scott

3:15-3:30 **Break**

3:30-5:15 **Panel 3: Queer Signification**

Chair: Susan Stryker

Helen Hok-Sze Leung, "Trans Locations in Queer Chinese Cinema"

Carlos Rojas, "Naked Signification: Gender Performance in Contemporary Art"

Commentator: Gayle M. Salamon

5:15-5:30 **Break**

5:30-6:30 **Concluding Roundtable: Trans Ventures**

Chair: Howard H. Chiang

Panelists: David L. Eng, Gayle M. Salamon, Joan W. Scott, and Susan Stryker

7:30 **Dinner (by invitation only)**

Abstracts:

1. Larissa N. Heinrich, “Transgender and Transgenre Desire in Qiu Miaojin’s *Testament from Montmartre*”

Testament from Montmartre, a nonfiction, experimental, semi-autobiographical modernist-style novel by the late Taiwanese author Qiu Miaojin 邱妙津 (1969-1995) which may be situated within a tradition of queer "testimonial" or "confessional" novels, takes the form of a series of letters from the author-narrator to her lover in Taipei and to friends in Tokyo and elsewhere in Taiwan. The book begins with a description of the death of a beloved pet rabbit and ends with an ominous expression of the author's own resolve to kill herself. In between we follow the narrator along the streets of Paris to mail letters and go shopping; into descriptions of affairs with both men and women, European and Chinese; into rhapsodic musings on the works of Angelopoulos and Tarkovsky; and into wrenching and clear-eyed outlines of what it means to exist between genders, as well as among and between cultures.

My paper will provide a general introduction to some of the literary and theoretical innovations of *Testament from Montmartre* as well as a more focused discussion of transgender and transgenre desire in the novel. As the novel progresses and the momentum of the narrator's inevitable self-destruction builds, for example, various chapters begin to incorporate French or Chinese alter-egos and shifts in perspective such that the reader often has to relearn, several pages in, who the narrator is, what the nature of his/her gender is, and to whom she or he is referring. Simultaneously with this chronicling of the disintegration of the self, the novel likewise chronicles the disintegration of genre itself, so that, by the end of the book, we have followed the author-narrator not only deep into splintered conversation with her ex-lover and friends, but with a number of other writers, genres, and genders. My paper will provide a preliminary outline of some of these conversations.

2. Daniel Burton-Rose, “Gendered Androgyny: Alchemical Ideals of Transcendence”

This paper seeks to provide an overview of conceptions of physical sexual transformation from the Six Dynasties period through the Qing. In so doing I aim to present the complex of precedents that the modern transgender ideology of the 1950s encountered upon contact with the Chinese cultural sphere.

Both anomaly accounts and certain dynastic histories preserve numerous tales of the blurring of gender division and of outright sex changes in which in marital union and reproduction results, linking these occurrences to the state of the empire and the relative favor of Heaven. Buddhist scriptures, of both Indian and native Chinese origin, posit a transformation from female to male over the course of rebirth as the only means by which women can eventually achieve enlightenment, while bodhisattvas change their sex when they judge it an expeditious means of guiding a troubled ward. Church Daoism and literati Inner Alchemy proffer a mystical ideal of a productive male body capable of birthing a transcendent replicant. By the Qing a literature exists explicitly adopting these practices for women, who must first make their bodies like those of men in order to progress.

Throughout this survey I draw attention to the misogyny inherent in both Buddhist and Daoist gender ideals, arguing that even the androgynous body of which medical practitioners speak is presumptively male. I conclude that for this reason contemporary efforts to deploy any of this material as a nativizing strategy for internationalized sexual identities can only be selective and problematic.

3. Tze-lan Deborah Sang, “Embodiment, Identity and History in *The Fin-de-siècle Boy Love Reader* (1996)”

Taiwanese writer Wu Jiwen is one of a handful of contemporary Chinese-language writers who have revisited premodern Chinese literature on same-sex union and desire and tried to appropriate it for present-day purposes. In *The Fin-de-siècle Boy Love Reader* (1996), Wu rewrites Chen Sen’s mid-nineteenth-century novel, *A Precious Mirror for Ranking Flowers* (first printed 1849). Wu chooses to narrate the story from the perspective of a teenage boy, whose existence is theoretically embedded in Chen’s original text but is completely identitiless. I argue that Wu’s decision to abandon the third-person omniscient perspective common in late imperial Chinese novels to refocus on and imaginatively reconstruct the voice and subjectivity of an underling bespeaks a contemporary need to see the possibility of voluntary, egalitarian same-sex unions in some premodern sexual relationships notoriously shot through with class inequalities and age and gender hierarchies. Is Wu’s project so overdetermined by late-twentieth-century political concerns as to lose interest as a historical and hermeneutic effort? Or has it surprisingly brought to light a much neglected dimension of traditional Chinese man-boy love? This paper will carefully read *Boy Love Reader* against its urtext, to interpret their contrasting configurations of embodiment, identity and history.

4. Howard H. Chiang, “China’s Manhood on Trial: Between a ‘Castrated Civilization’ and a Culture of Transsexual Glamour”

Next to footbinding, castration has come to represent one of the most powerful symbols of backwardness, oppression, and national shame in Chinese historiography. Historian Dorothy Ko has recently invited us to re-evaluate this impression of footbinding. She shows that women as much as men participated in the perpetuation of this cultural practice with complex and nuanced historical agency. Taking cue from Ko, this paper attempts to go against the grain of similar historiographic condemnation. Situating the departing frame of my analysis outside the anti-castration discourse, much like how Ko neither defends nor denounces footbinding at the outset of her narrative, my study explores the formation of the historiographic apparatus that helped shape that very discourse in modern China.

I argue that the period from the Self-Strengthening Movement to the May Fourth era witnessed an increasing disparity between two registers of eunuchism as a mode of historical experience: on the macro level of global narration (or collective-public experience) on the one hand, and on the micro level of individual embodiment (or personal-private experience) on the other. An anti-castration/anti-eunuchs sentimentality emerged accordingly from this growing tension between a collective-public history of nationalist teleology and a personal-private history of preternatural corporeality. This historic sensibility that casts the practice of castration and the existence of eunuchs as indicators of national shame that demasculinized China would reverberate through the rest of the twentieth century. The period between the 1870s and the 1930s thus constituted a transitional phase when the castrated male body, much like women’s bound feet, seemed out of sync with the Chinese body politic at large. In studying how China *became* a “castrated civilization” and eunuchs a “third sex,” rather than condemning or praising them as such transhistorical objects of knowledge, I conclude by relating these historical precedents to the emergence of transsexuality in post-colonial Sinophone culture. I trace the cultural history of transsexuality in post-colonial Taiwan in particular to the highly sensationalized case of Xie Jianshun, heralded as the “Chinese Christine” and the “first” Chinese transsexual in the early 1950s.

5. Ta-wei Chi, “Undressing History: Unwrapping the Marriage of Transgender and Grand Narratives”

In contemporary Chinese culture, the narratives of transgender themes are often—wittingly or not—national allegories. Chen Kaige’s film *Farewell My Concubine*, routinely taught at American universities, and *Mei Lanfang*, a recent box office success in China, are considered to reveal modern Chinese history with the transgender bodies. By transgender bodies, I refer to the embodiments of transsexuals, transvestites, and other transgressions yet to be defined.

I wonder why instances of grand narrative about China are often built on the transgender bodies, and why the “petite” transgender narratives are frequently appropriated for “grand” causes, such as the nation or national history. In this presentation, I will explore the (un)happy marriage of transgender and grand narratives by reading Gu Junzheng’s “Sexual Transformation,” a 1940 science fiction story, Ni Kuang’s 1988 science fiction novel *Betrayal*, and Yan Geling’s 1998 short story “White Snake.” These three texts illustrate different relations to national history: the first text appears oblivious to national history; the second relegates national history to the background; whereas the third, a post-Cultural Revolution narrative, is meticulously interwoven with national history.

6. Helen Hok-Sze Leung, “Trans Locations in Queer Chinese Cinema”

This paper locates and considers articulations of “transgender” in Chinese-language film, particularly the works of queer filmmakers. My framework intersects two recent theoretical developments: (1) the “turn” in transgender theory to consider not only identitarian forms of transgender narratives and experiences, but more broadly also processes of body modification which transform and realign boundaries between gendered notions of self/other and of identity/desire; (2) the methodological imperative in Queer Asian studies to avoid simply “applying” LGBT frameworks to non-Western phenomena of sexual and gender variance but rather put the two into conversation. In the paper, I will map the topography of where and how “transgender” emerges in queer cinema. I will pay particular attention to historical representations of pre-modern form of gender variance, including coercive forms of gendered body modification and their relation to subjective identification. I will explore these representations’ convergence with as well as departure from the modern, clinical discourse of transsexuality, and discuss their impact on our understanding of gendered subjectivity, sexual desire, and contemporary queer identity formations in Asia. Works discussed include films by Stanley Kwan, Yon Fan, Cui Zi’an, and Zero Chou, amongst others.

7. Carlos Rojas, “Naked Signification: Gender Performance in Contemporary Art”

Breaking from Chinese artistic conventions that generally discouraged a focus on nudity (outside of the tightly circumscribed genre of illustrated *chungong hua*, or “spring palace pictures”), a tradition of performance art emerged in early 1990s Beijing in which young artists often used their own naked bodies as a virtual canvas for social and aesthetic expression. A recurrent concern in many of these avant-garde performances concerns the boundary zones at the margins of social, cultural, and aesthetic institutions, as well as of hegemonic constructs of sexual and gendered identity. In this essay, I will consider the gendered implications of this contemporary tradition of bodily performance, focusing in particular on the work of Ma Liuming, who established his reputation during this period with a series of works in which he would often pose nude as a hermaphroditic figure—with his prominent male genitalia standing in stark contrast to his otherwise effeminate appearance. I consider the implications of these transgendered performances, both for the challenge they pose to facile homologies between sexual anatomies and gender constructs, as well as the implications of Ma Liuming’s own reluctance to speculate on the gendered implications of his own works.