The London School of Economics and Political Science

Performative Authenticity: Chinese Transgender People's Digital Gender Practices

Songyin Liu

A thesis submitted to the Department of Media and Communications at the London School of Economics and Political Science for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

London, March 2023

Declaration

I certify that the thesis I have presented for examination for the MPhil/PhD degree of the London School of Economics and Political Science is solely my own work other than where I have clearly indicated that it is the work of others (in which case the extent of any work carried out jointly by me and any other person is clearly identified in it).

The copyright of this thesis rests with the author. Quotation from it is permitted, provided that full acknowledgement is made. This thesis may not be reproduced without my prior written consent.

I warrant that this authorisation does not, to the best of my belief, infringe the rights of any third party.

I declare that my thesis consists of <95781> words.

Statement of use of third party for editorial help

I can confirm that my thesis was copy edited for conventions of language, spelling and grammar by Dr. James Mason and Joseph Staines.

Abstract

In the post-socialist Chinese context, where the state retreats from private sectors and the families and market intervene in reproducing the gender norms under the gender binary system, transgender people have limited visibility and marginalised social space. Against this backdrop, this study seeks to understand how digital technologies mediate Chinese transgender people's everyday gender practices and shape online trans communities. To answer how such mediation works, I conducted fieldwork in three Chinese cities for 12 months from 2019 to 2020 including 75 semi-structured interviews and observation online and offline.

This study finds that Chinese transgender individuals actively use different digital platforms and applications to articulate transgender terminologies within the online trans communities and negotiate with cis-normative gender regulations on non-conforming gender practices through alternative meaning-making and appropriation of linear temporality and liminal spatiality. Their everyday mediated and lived experience of time and space challenge both the cis-normative truth regime and the queer critiques of everydayness. And yet, trans-normativity emerges within online trans communities in the form of knowledge hierarchy and emotion regulations hierarchising the intelligibility and liveability of transness. In the growing normative online trans community, transgender individuals develop alternative relations with various forms of gender scripts through self-naming, -writing and -visualisation practices.

Transgender authenticity is performatively constructed and experienced in the very digital gender practices which develop alternative relations with gender norms dominant in the cisgender society and trans communities. I propose the framework of performative authenticity to understand transgender individuals' struggles, collective meaning-making and everyday resistance in depth, instead of transgender identity discourses. Hence, this thesis contributes to digital trans studies through complicating the boundary of man/women, materiality/discourse and essentialism/constructivism by centring understudied Chinese transgender people's experiences against the backdrop of the imagining of an inclusive and progressive landscape of gender and reality.

Acknowledgements

Table of Content

Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 Transgender at the crossroad of digital utopia and queer utopia

Since 1990s, the interdisciplinary trans studies have developed into a field of its own by drawing on the legacy of humanities and social science studies, among which digital media studies and queer studies seemed to provide gender and sexual minority people with utopian visions of a transgender future (Stryker, 1998). Richard Ekins and Dave King argue that the "paradigm shift coincided with developments in Internet technology that made the Internet an increasingly accessible resource for trans people" (Ekins & King, 2010, p. 28). Likewise, without making obvious the causal relationship between transgender and digital use, many researchers have argued that Internet technologies revolutionised transgender ideology from medical-psychiatric narratives to destructive postmodern subjectivity which offers new ways of gender identity promulgation and development (Bornstein, 1994; Farber, 2017; Hegland & Nelson, 2002). A popular belief among transgender media and communication studies scholars is that the Internet served a "life-saving role" by providing a "safe space" for transgender people (Austin et al., 2020). But others argue against such a utopian view by warning about the cyber-violence, surveillance and normative regulation brought about by the seemingly progressive Internet technology (Bivens, 2017; Schoenebeck et al., 2021). Either way, Internet and digital technologies have intervened in people's everyday practice in the mediatised world (Couldry & Hepp, 2018), and the digital tools "are at the heart of many elements of contemporary transgender experiences" (Ruberg, 2022, p. 203). In this sense, classical gender theories and empirical trans studies should respond to the changing techno-social context today.

This thesis thus asks, how can we understand (trans)gender in an increasingly mediatised world without falling into a utopian or totally techno-sceptical view of the relationship between technology and gender practices? Do gender and related concepts

such as sex, sexuality, social gender, gender expression and identity politics, in the first place, remain the same in the digital era? This question has become important in the overlapping field between (trans)gender studies and media studies of contemporary digital lives (Ruberg, 2022). As Steinbock astutely puts it, "trans studies is media studies, and media studies is (or could be) trans studies" (2022, p. 170). A popular Chinese feminist scholar, Jinhua Dai, suggested in a public keynote speech that "when gender is just a marker online, this means gender is becoming more like a kind of role play, more like cosplaying…The role-played men and women, however, are sustaining and strengthening the stereotypes of gender".[1] In another conference where she talked about Donna Haraway's cyberfeminism, she further stated the revolutionary effect of digital technologies on gender, "The virtual being online, our ID, persona and 'avatar', might be more or at least as important as our so-called 'true identity' and our real name"[2]. Dai's argument represents a classical revolutionary perspective of gendered being mediated by digital technology and a binary-based feminist understanding of gender. It provokes more questions: Is gender just a marker online without concrete material or symbolic substance? In which ways and to what extent does the "virtual being" matter regarding making gendered "true identity" and "real name"? Does the relationship between gender performance and gender norms change in a digital world? Ultimately, to find answers to these questions we need to rethink the subjective formation and truth claims of gender in the digital reconfiguration of everyday life.

Gender has long been deeply intertwined with technology, perhaps most prominently biotechnology. Engaging with Haraway's theorisation of the posthuman, Preciado considered gender in the twenty-first century as a "posthuman phenomena" that "functions as an abstract mechanism for technical subjectification; it is spliced, cut,

---

[1] Jinhua Dai, "On the Internet, nobody cares whether your true identity is a man or woman", 2018 Annual Faces · Women's Power Submit. (戴锦华,"在网络上，没有人在乎你的真身是男是女", 2018年度面孔·女性力量盛典). Retrieved from https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1623360072609540605&wfr=spider&for=pc. All translations from Chinese into English are mine.

[2] Jinhua Dai, "Gendered imaginary is no more important, some kind of liberation is happening", *Directtube*. (戴锦华,"'性别的想象'不再重要，某种解放正在发生", 导筒).
Retrieved from https://www.sohu.com/a/490943663_100048878, 18/08/2022. All translations from Chinese into English are mine.

moved, cited, imitated, swallowed, injected, transplanted, digitized, copied, conceived of as design, bought, sold, modified, mortgaged, transferred, downloaded, enforced, translated, falsified, fabricated, swapped, dosed, administered, extracted, contracted, concealed, negated, renounced, betrayed . . . It transmutes" (2013, p. 129). The medical intervention of the human body, and the medicine and the body itself seem to be the ultimate, if not sole, meaning and goal of doing gender in the posthuman condition. In other words, becoming a certain gender is deeply shaped by and related to the knowledge production and consumption of corporeal transformation. This was described by Hilary Malatino as "bio-hacking" that biology is manipulated through "biomolecular, medical and technological innovations" (2017, p. 179). By differentiating the disparate forms – posthumanism and transhumanism – of biohacking, Malatino made the criticism that some people are "systematically prevented from accessing the technological, medical, and scientific procedures that would enable them to lead more livable lives", and gender reassignment surgery could be seen as an iconic example of the technological, medical and scientific matrix. Thus, it is worth questioning how medical treatment limitation and control signify the systematic repression at the intersection of gender, race, class and age, and how this repression is experienced and reproduced by gender minorities in their struggle for a livable life.

The questions asked so far, foreground the empirical and theoretical challenges of emerging technologies, including digital and biomedical ones, to the post-structural gender theories which are accused of overemphasising the symbolic power of discourses. Judith Butler's (1999) performativity theory has been very powerful in gender studies for the last few decades, revealing the relationship between gender and social norms. In the digital era, however, the competing paradigms of gender norms, as well as the multi forms of performative speech act afforded by digital technologies, have drastically complicated the performative reiteration of social norms. Performativity theory is also criticised for downplaying the corporeal experience and embodied resistance, especially those of gender minorities. While drag queens' gender parodies are deemed as a radical rebellion against the heterosexual matrix in queer politics, and gender is constructed through the reiteration of norms, transsexual and the

broader transgender population's corporeal struggle might be diminished. In the social conditions where the bodily transition is essential for subjects to obtain recognition, a more dialectical investigation of discursive and material doing of gender could benefit our understanding of gender in a new techno-social era. Transgender people's deep engagement with both biomedical and digital technologies, and their struggle in the authenticity claim/deception accusation, require interdisciplinary examinations. (Goetz, 2022)

While there have been many thought-provoking studies of how trans lives are mediated by technologies in the western context (Cavalcante, 2018; Thach et al., 2022), this thesis focuses on the more invisible transgender individuals and communities in China. To address both the digital utopian and queer utopian approaches for a critical trans study, a study of Chinese transgender people's digital gender practices is needed. Petrus Liu has made a strong manifesto that queer theory needs China because Chinese queer study has the potential to reveal the mutual constitution of political economy, geopolitics and sexuality (2010). Critical Chinese queer theory, with its focus on glocal Chinese/Sinophone knowledge and concerns, goes beyond both Chinese-exceptionalism and queer universalism. As Liu argues, "queer identities are as much about private sexuality as they are about the political tensions, cultural exchanges, and economic inequalities" between China, Sinophone societies and America (Liu, 2010, p. 297). The examination of Chinese queer experiences provides the possibility of expanding and transforming queer theory with its complex political, social and cultural context, rather than supplementing western-centric queer theory with non-western anthropological specimens. This thesis joins Petrus Liu by focusing on transgender experiences, with the ambition of answering the question: why does trans studies need China? By situating digital trans studies in this decidedly different cultural, policy, and technological context, I further ask: Can Chinese transgender people's mediated gender practice in the digital world supplement or fulfil their identity exploration, which is difficult in the offline world? How would their experience tell a different story from those engraved in western-centric gender theory and empirical study? How is transgender agency possible as afforded by their digital engagement? And most

importantly, how to understand the relationship between gender, technology and authenticity practice?

Queer studies, framed as the "evil twin" of trans studies (Stryker, 2004, p. 212), have also been applied in examining gender non-conforming subjects. A utopian lens on trans experiences derived from queer theories and activism is influential in studies of transgender people, absorbing the perceived nonnormativity of transness into queer discipline (Keegan, 2018). The "universalizing trend" of queer theory is criticised by Keegan for using trans as "a sort of usefully disposable guest" to "provisionally broaden the applicability of queer studies' claims" (2020, p. 351). Queerness recognises the marginalised non-normative gender and sexual experiences as the provocation to the dominant heteronormative matrix (Ahmed, 2006; Edelman, 2004; Muñoz, 2019). Highlighting the anti-normative and radical feature as the essence of queerness, queer scholars depict an emancipatory and utopian vision for the queer community that disrupts the regulations of norms and celebrates the fluidity and instability of identity (Cavalcante, 2018). Trans studies and politics have been drawing on queer theory and discourse in knowledge production and community movement. However, as Susan Stryker and Talia Bettcher (2016) argue, it is important to note that the current body of trans studies is pretty much Anglo-European centric. To decentre the queer-utopian literature requires not only an intersectionality perspective that goes beyond the queer/normative dichotomous lens but also more empirical studies of diverse queer/trans experiences from the Global South which is underexplored and derecognised in the "Eurocentric gaze of queer theory" (Wong, 2014, p. 126; see also Bao, 2013; Puar, 2013). The sex/gender alignment has been criticised as a colonial epistemology hegemony (Snorton, 2017), making it urgent for trans studies to contextualise and re-examine the defaulted (trans)gender concepts and theories in the very social-political-historical background. As Howard Chiang argues, "Chinese transgender identity, practice, embodiment, history, and culture" are notably absent from the lens of queer studies (2012, p. 6). Danial Burton-Rose's (2012) work on the gender androgyny in Chinese Buddhist, Daoist and Confucian canonical texts have suggested the richness of gender-integrating symbolism and gender fluidity in the

Chinese tradition. With the long aesthetic history and gender governing of androgynous bodies and performance, conducting Chinese trans studies requires cautious distance from the Western-centric knowledge production based on utopian queer politics. This thesis echoes Howard Chiang's assertation that the "most radical approach to developing something that we might want to call Chinese trans studies is perhaps by leaving behind Western-derived meanings of gender altogether" (2012, p. 10). This does not mean to romanticising pre-colonial China as utopia free from transphobia and sexism, as critical decolonial trans studies suggest (Matebeni, 2013; Tudor, 2021). Rather, it requires a careful mapping out of the context upon which Chinese transgender people can be understood as historical-cultural beings or becoming.

Moreover, the post-socialist context queer/trans people encounter today has complicated the understanding of queerness and trans experiences within the political-economic, social and cultural transformation of China (Bao, 2013; Bernotaite et al., 2018; Huang, 2015). A more useful approach to understanding contemporary Chinese trans experiences is to capture the nuance and ambiguity in Chinese trans individuals' border-crossing of sex/gender/sexuality categories, rather than radical gender transgression (Chiang, 2012). The context-based examination of Chinese transgender experiences helps to complicate the western-centric knowledge production in trans studies by asking what the everyday life of Chinese transgender people is like in post-socialist China and how they manage to arrange their gender expression and build connections in Chinese trans communities. As such, in this chapter I first provide a historical account of transgender-related subjects and cultural phenomena to trace the transformation of how transgender subjectivity is understood, presented and experienced in pre-modern and pre-reform China. Then, I introduce the policy and institutional conditions Chinese transgender people are facing today. With the discussion of historical background and institutional context in China at hand, I make clear why the research focus on digital gender practice is vital for studying the everyday Chinese transgender experiences and to rethinking gender in a digital era.

1.2 The Chinese transgender subjects in history

Yinyang (阴阳) might be the most well-known Chinese philosophical conceptualisation of gender for its oriental cosmology phantasm in western eyes. In fact, *yinyang* thought is still a vivid thinking resource for Chinese people to imagine and depict gender, such as the discriminatory term *yinyangren* (阴阳人, androgynous people)[3]. By examining the classic of traditional Chinese medicine, *Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon* (黄帝内经) and the hexagram Tai in Daoism, Zairong Xiang argues that the *yinyang* theory in East Asia cosmology is "more than just another heterosexist cosmologic dualism" as many misreadings would suggest (2018, p. 427). Different from the western dualistic metaphysics, Xiang's decolonised and destraightened reading of *yinyang* that yin femininity and yang masculinity, to put it simply, is "never and can never be the same, although … they are constantly becoming each other" (2018, p. 436). The *yinyang* mutual transition is disparate from the homophobic and misogynous understanding of reducing masculinity as emasculation, instead, yang masculinity has to reach its full potentiality to approach yin and vice versa. Xiang describes the "either different and the same" relationship of *yinyang* as "transdualism" (2018, p. 437) which overcomes the material-discursive dichotomy in understanding body and gender. But it is noteworthy that although *yinyang* theory has been a guiding thought regarding medicine, body and sex/gender system, the Confucian value of family, marriage and gender has always been the dominant and official thought after Dong Zhongshu's reform of Confucianism. Dong incorporated *yinyang* into the Confucian patriarchal and hierarchical sexual dualism of yin and yang, which Robin Wang (2005) interpreted as fixing the heteronormative gender roles. The notion that *yin* femininity, mostly regulated as social gender roles like wife or daughter-in-law, is affiliated and subordinated to yang masculinity became dominant in a thousand years of imperial China.

---

[3] YinYangRen (阴阳人) means androgynous people and has a discriminatory tone. This word was previously used to refer to anti-revolutionary party officials who betrayed the communism ideal. In the post-reform era, this word was de-politicised and used to discriminate against transgender people with its original meaning in pre-modern China.

While the dominant *yinyang* transduality thinking contains a sense of gender fluidity and transformation, gender nonconformity and androgyny had long been the object of political and moral regulation in imperial China. Mann (2011) argues that the state investment in regulating gender-expansiveness has become the unique state-crafting feature of late imperial China. The state's definition and ideology of gender is a binary moral system based on the normative interpretation of sexual behaviours rather than anatomical distinctions (Rocha, 2010; Sommer & Lu, 2013). The moral regulation of gender in imperial China was "contingent rather than foundational or uncontestable" and functions upon Confucian marital and family values (Chiang, 2012, p. 55). In this sense, gender nonconformity signifies the moral decadence of society and the state (Chiang, 2018). Among the moral discourses of gender and moral regulation of gender nonconformity, *renyao* could be seen as a rich signifier through which the transgender subject and culture navigates among mainland China and Sinophone societies throughout the pre-modern and modern history of China. In pre-modern China, *renyao* (人妖, human monster) had long been related to fraud criminality of male-to-female and nonhuman queerness that troubled the biological and social reproductive order (Chiang, 2021, p. 98). In late imperial China and the early Republican era, *renyao* started to gain the modern scientific meaning of biological deformity and psychological perversion in the epistemological impingement of western medical-science hegemony (Chiang, 2021). With the development of Western medical science and sexology, modern China witnessed an epistemology shift regarding gender nonconformity – from moral issues to pathology.

Far more complicated than a moral or medical construct, gender non-conformity was framed and governed in modern Chinese as an essential (geo)political issue. Chiang's influential book *After Eunuchs* (2018) unveiled a fascinating and unknown history that sex transformation and western biomedical epistemology of sex were a popular topic in the press, fiction and public discussion when the Nationalist regime of Republican of China was still in power in mainland China (1912-1949). The visibility of transsexual discussion ended in mainland China and migrated to Taiwan together with the Republican government. Howard Chiang introduced Shu-mei Shih's

conceptualisation of the Sinophone[4] into Chinese trans studies to address the political tension embedded in queer/trans bodies. The first reported Chinese *bianxingren* (变性人, transsexual) case was in Taiwan under the Nationalist governmental regime of the Republic of China (Chiang, 2014). The first Chinese transsexual woman, Xie Jianshun (谢尖顺), was framed by the Republican China government as a symbol of the advancement in Western medicine, science and liberty in comparison with the communist regime of the People's Republic of China on the other side of the Taiwanese Strait. Thus, the discussion of Chinese transgender culture should be embedded in the colonial and geopolitical history of modern China. Sinophone articulation of transsexual and transgenderism, according to Chiang (2014), has developed a different path with a legacy not only from traditional Chinese culture but also the Anglophone cultural-imperialism and neighbouring Asian cultures which, in turn, has influenced the trans communities and culture in mainland China in recent decades.

The withdrawal of the Republic of China from the mainland and the founding of the People's Republic of China marked not only the abrupt regime change but also the ideological upheaval regarding gender. While gender equality at work and in the family was promoted as a significant socialist achievement in Mao's era, some feminist scholars believe that uniformity in gender expression did not guarantee the diminishing of gender discrimination and inequality. Historian Tina Mai Chen argues that the gender ideology of Mao's China was neither degendering nor promoting a progressive agender and gender-fluid agenda, but, rather, "feminizing the undesirable, by conflating woman, bourgeoisie, and colour" (2001, p. 161). It is debatable whether the state-promoted female masculinity challenges or reinforces the gender hierarchy, but one thing for sure, and understudied even in feminist studies, is the ever-more solid binary gender system in the revolutionary era when gender nonconformity is deemed anti-revolutionary. In the 1950s, Guoxiong Wan (万国雄) was widely reported by the state media[5] as the

---

[4] Chinese-speaking areas and communities outside mainland China. Sinophone study focus on the complicated and taken-for-granted relationship between language, culture, ethnicity, nationality, geo-politics in Chinese-speaking communities at the margin of mainland China.
[5] In the article "Making Gender Crisis: Gender Nonconformity and the Maintenance of Sex/Gender System in Contemporary China (forthcoming in *Social Problems*)" which I co-authored with Xiaogao Zhou, we examined

cross-dressing spy working for the Nationalist regime across the Taiwanese Strait. Wan's transsexual identity was denied and reframed as a disguising cross-dressing strategy for anti-revolutionary subversion of the socialist state and a capitalist conspiracy (Zhang, 2014). The politicisation and criminalisation of transgender subjects in pre-reform socialist China might still have its legacy today, embodied in the gender reassignment surgery regulations that requires transgender people to submit proof that they have no crimial record in order to undergo surgery.

The post-reform China has witnessed, if not revitalisation, then the complicated discursive and ideological entanglement of the pre-PRC gender nonconformity discourse. *Renyao* discourse can be seen as a vivid case. As aforementioned, the genealogy of *renyao* originated from mainland China and influenced all Chinese-speaking societies, it was rearticulated by Sinophone areas in Taiwan and Hong Kong as a hybrid of western science and cultural imperialism and Chinese culture legacy and, in turn, reintroduced to mainland China in the post-reform era. From redtop performance in Taiwan to the *renyao* show in Hong Kong, such commercialised and discriminatory framings connect transgender people with sensational and sexual industries. This has been introduced to mainland China and thus familiarised the trans community and folk Chinese people with a new epistemology complementing the anti-revolutionary and sex-malformation framing of transgenderism in the mainland. Today, *renyao* has become a polysemous signifier referring to verified signified subjects with a different meaning, epistemology and value orientation. For instance, Chow (2018) studied a transgender sex worker in Hong Kong who took on a vernacular Chinese term rather than transgender to self-categorise. By reclaiming the dehumanised and discriminatory Chinese term "*renyao*", Chow argues that *renyao* discourse was used to transcend medicalisation and legalisation embedded in the umbrella terms of transgender (Chow, 2018, p. 464). In mainland China, *renyao* remains the dominant terminology for the folk Chinese to understand and refer to transgender people and is

---

the state media coverage of transgender related issues, and found out that gender non-conforming people were taken up by People's Daily as anti-revolutionary crime and social management crisis rather than gender identity,

rejected by the trans communities for its dehumanisation, sexually commercialised and discriminatory connotation. Through the historical and modern *renyao* discourse, it is salient that the repression of Chinese transgender individuals is not identity-based discrimination or abuse, but rather existential denial of their being.

In sum, the history of transgender subjectivity and culture in pre-modern and pre-reform China is imbricated by different strands of the traditional Chinese philosophy of sex/gender, western culture and science hegemony, China-Sinophone geopolitical tensions, and the domestic revolutions. These epistemes and forces impact the formation of the Chinese transgender identity and community disproportionately and to different levels. In the marginalised social and institutional environment, which I will explain later, the Chinese trans communities have developed an extremely diverse identification landscape by attaching to different cultural, political, and historical sources of (trans)gender norms. Therefore, instead of applying western identity politics or self-orientalised culturalism to conceptualise transgender in this dissertation, I follow Susan Stryker's approach that considers transgender as a "movement away from an initially assigned gender position" to include "the widest imaginable range of gender-variant practices and identities" (2008, p. 19). Meanwhile, transgender people's variant moving away from social norms in different historical periods entails different social regulation and state governmentality.

1.3 Transgender subjects in contemporary China

Against the larger historical backdrop aforementioned, I discuss the current and changing institutional context in China. I start with an analysis of gender governance in the post-reform era and then turn to the specific policies affecting Chinese transgender people's everyday lives. I refer to the online and offline living status of Chinese transgender people as "the double exile" enacted by repressive forces of the state that drove transgender people to limited social space and self-organisation without necessary social support. While scholars argue that the trans movement had been growing rapidly in the mid 2010s (Bernotaite et al., 2018), the last five years have seen

significant state surveillance and shutdown of LGBTQ+ activism. The institutional marginalisation and social denial of transgender subjectivity mark the everyday suffering of Chinese trans individuals and communities. As such, government policy, trans activism and the trans communities are in rapid transformation, making the study of Chinese transgender issues a more urgent and important topic than ever.

1.3.1 Gender governance in post-socialist China

Reform era China witnessed a significant withdrawal of the party-state from the private sectors in the late 1970s (Yang, 2019). Compared to the holistic intervention and supervision of the party-state into people's personal and private life in the Maoist era (Rofel, 1999), the state has drastically withdrawn from the micro-social level along with the privatisation of public spheres such as health, care and education (Bray, 2005). The state's retreat left a responsibility vacuum of providing social welfare to non-governmental institutions, such as families and companies. To fill these gaps alternative social welfare and care providers have gained more influence, marking the familisation and marketisation of the private spheres (Hildebrandt, 2019). Such familisation, moderated by the highly interdependent economic relationship between generations (Huang, 2011), yields a neopatriarchy that reproduces the unequal gender hierarchy (Hu, 2018). Lee Sangwha (1999) studied the "women return home" discourses in post-reform China and argues that the revival of familisation resonates with the renaissance of the Confucian value of gender roles and domestic relationships. Drawing on Hildebrandt's (2019) argument of the heterosexual bias in the studies of familisation, I suggest that there is a cis-gender blind point too in the feminist examination of familisation. According to the 2017 Transgender Survey, familisation has also affected transgender people deeply in the sense of their suffering from high domestic violence and economic control. Parents' control over transgender kids and adults is also endorsed by medical regulations that parents hold the veto power to prohibit their offspring from receiving medical treatment. Market and commercial media, according to Yang (2016), further extrude into the civil society and private sphere by reinforcing the traditional gender norms and ideology. The developed economy and marketised media thus did

not bring about gender equality and progressive gender ideology.

Untied from the private sector of trans personal life, the state's presence in terms of leading ideology, social management and population control remains solid. The state's retreat is embodied by reducing the public investment and welfare provision under the neoliberal logic, rather than upending the authoritarian regime. Terry Eagleton describes post-reform China that: "we are witnessing a spectacular contradiction between a still highly authoritarian political superstructure and a progressively capitalized economic base" (1997, p. 5). Zhou and Liu studied the representation of transgender in state media and discovered that the regulation of gender nonconformity has been expanding not only in the medical realm but also in policing, education and morality since the 1980s [6]. From the perspective of a socially marginalised group, including sex and gender minorities, Eagleton's framing of "contradiction" might not be contradictory to the perfect cooperation of political marginalisation and neoliberal erosion of welfare and human rights.

1.3.2 Limited public and policy space for Chinese transgender people

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)[7] estimated that 0.3% of the population in the Asian-Pacific area are transgender, which means there could be as many as four million transgender people in mainland China (see also Winter 2012). But without a nationwide survey data on the transgender population and adequate public or academic interest in transgender issues, there is no reliable data or general agreement on the exact number of the transgender population in China. Nonetheless, the large population of transgender people remains relatively invisible in policy making and the public sphere in China.

In 2018, UNDP and China Women's University published a report on policies and regulations 'related to gender recognition' in China [8]. This report concluded that

---

[6] Xiaogao Zhou and Songyin Liu, *Making Gender Crisis: Gender Nonconformity and the Maintenance of Sex/Gender System in Contemporary China* (forthcoming in *Social Problems*).
[7] APTN, UNDP. "Lost in Transition: Transgender People, Rights and HIV Vulnerability in the Asia-Pacific Region". Retrieved from https://www.snap-undp.org/elibrary/Publications/HIV-TG-people-rights.pdf.
[8] UNDP & China women's University (2018), *Legal Gender Recognition in China: A Legal and Policy Review*.

transgender people were neglected in regulations related to employment protection, discrimination and violence from campuses, and family and sexual harassment. Indeed, Bernotaite, Berredo and Zhuo (2018) conducted a thematic analysis of the data collected in a two-day conference held for trans activists and advocates in China, and found out the essential agenda for trans activism in China is that the laws and policies regarding trans health care, gender marker alteration and employment discrimination against trans people need to be modified to protect the basic rights of transgender people. In the same year the Chinese delegation made their stance on LGBT issues clear at the third Universal Periodic Review of the Human Rights Council, for the first time[9]. The delegation stated that the health rights of the LGBT+ community was highly respected and protected by the Chinese government, including their rights to receive gender reassignment surgery, whereas LGBT+ people's right to marry others of the same sex was not granted based on "historical cultural values".

Although transgender people are highly pathologised and medicalised in China, their rights and needs for obtaining fair medical treatment are not well guaranteed, as the medical policies and related regulations set a high threshold and rigid precondition to gender reassignment surgery. Weng and Wan (2016) estimated that the number of people seeking gender-confirming treatment was 10,000, among which 1,000 people had received gender confirmation surgery, while the numbers were estimated 10-40 times more according to the *People's Daily* in an interview with a medical professional in 2014[10]. In 2022, the National Health Commission published new guidance on gender reassignment surgery, similar to the previous two versions released in 2009 and 2017, regulating that patients need to provide evidence of having no criminal record, a "gender identity disorder" diagnosis[11], permission from the next of kin and they should

---

Availble at: http://www.cn.undp.org/content/china/en/home/library/democratic_governance/legal-gender-recognition-in-china--a-legal-and-policy-review-.html

[9] http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1126355.shtml

[10] People's Daily, "Sex change? Here are the rules", Retrieved on June 17, 2009, http://en.people.cn/90001/90776/90882/6679958.html.

[11] Gender affirming surgery was called "Sex Change Surgery" in the Notice Regarding the Publication of Sex Change Surgery Procedural Management Standards issued by the General Office of the Ministry of Health (Health Office Medical Care Administration File No. 185 (2009)). In 2017, the National Health and Family Planning Commission used another terminology of "Sex Reassignment Surgery" in the Sex Reassignment Procedural Management Standards (2017).

not be married. Changing names and gender markers in official documents such as identity cards and passports is an important reason why transgender people choose to undergo surgeries. Although the Chinese regulations do not abandon gender marker changing, the requirement of alteration is also rigorous. The Reply to Questions Concerning the Alteration of Assigned Sex on Household Registration for Citizens following Sex Change (2008) and the Ministry of Public Security Reply to Questions Concerning the Alteration of Assigned Sex on Household Registration for Citizens following Sex Change Surgery (2002) regulated that only those who have undergone gender reassignment surgery could apply for gender marker alteration and need to provide a certificate from their family, a hospital, a psychologist, the local Police office, and institutions which the individual belongs to[12]. Despite the fact that China had agreed to adopt the International Classification of Diseases (ICD 11) which de-pathologized transgender by terms like "gender incongruence", transgender people in China are still identified as having mental diseases in medical institutions. The limited medical access and pathologized recognition in the public sphere have contributed to the marginalised living status of Chinese transgender people.

1.3.3 Media regulations of gender nonconformity

The governance of LGBT people in China, according to Lin Jiao, performs a "distinguishing insiders and outsiders" strategy that the state media constructs as a positive image of the Chinese state regarding LGBT issues for foreign audiences, one that "values freedom, openness, and tolerance", while the state media's framing and representation of LGBT community in the domestic field was quite the opposite (2021, p. 54). In traditional media, such as newspapers and television, transgender people have long been underrepresented, or mispresented as criminals or spies in the revolutionary era, glandular hermaphrodites in the late 20th century and having a sex/gender disorder

---

[12] United Nations Development Programme. (2018). Legal Gender Recognition in China: A Legal and Policy Review, provides an important resource for the inclusion of transgender people in Chinese laws and policies. Available at: https://www.undp.org/china/publications/legal-gender-recognition-china-legal-and-policy-review

today[13].

In the past, the public tended to attach transgender to androgynous cultural figures or gender performers, which has a long history within the confines of entertainment and spectacle. Since females were not allowed to perform on stage in many genres of traditional Chinese opera, male actors performing female roles were common throughout pre-modern history. Today, male singers with feminine voices such as Li Yugang (李玉刚) and Zhou Shen (周深) are extremely popular in the Chinese mass media. Studies have captured the growing visibility and potential transitional force of androgynous or *zhongxing* representation in post-millennial Chinese popular culture, as Eva Li's (2015) analysis on female pop star Chris Lee (Li Yuchun) suggests. Yet these examples of androgynous cultural performances do not fundamentally challenge the cisgender gaze through which non-normative gender expressions are still treated or criticised as a spectacle (Wu, 2012; Chen & Feng, 2018). There are limited discussions or representations of transgender issues or rights in mainland China's mainstream media, and transgender-identified subjects remain almost entirely invisible. Perhaps the only openly out transgender celebrity in China is the dancer Jin Xing (金星), who hosted several shows until they were cancelled and all of her images were removed from TV in 2021. In an interview, Dr Ting Guo from Hong Kong University stated that the reduced visibility of Jin Xing might be attributable to the state's surveillance of gender-related issues and its promotion of traditional values and the Common Prosperity agenda[14]. Being the most famous transgender woman in China, Jin's situation showcases the censorship of transgender-related culture production. While Jin Xing stands out as currently the only trans celebrity in Chinese mass media, she is criticised by scholars and also ordinary trans people (Davies & Davies, 2010) for normalising transsexuality and affirming gender conformity. It is fair to say that Jin Xing's relationship with Chinese trans communities is complicated and estranged.

---

[13] Xiaogao Zhou and Songyin Liu, *Making Gender Crisis: Gender Nonconformity and the Maintenance of Sex/Gender System in Contemporary China* (forthcoming in *Social Problems*).
[14] Joy Dong, *She's One of China's Biggest Stars. She's Also Transgender*, The New York Times, 16/07/2021. Retrieved https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/16/world/asia/china-transgender-jin-xing.html?_ga=2.267597838.1211254925.1661181049-1291900162.1661181049.

Considering the censorship of Jin Xing, who used to be affiliated to state cultural institutions and was active in the mass media, it is not surprising that the more marginalised and grassroots ordinary Chinese trans communities are under censorship and far less visible. The censorship against gender nonconformity is not restricted to traditional mass media but is also extended to the Internet and social media.

Beyond specific regulations around transgender identity and the medicalisation thereof, recent changes in China's regulation on the Internet are also likely to affect transgender individuals. Since 1994, the Chinese government has started to put forward a series of laws and regulations to implement a real-name Internet policy. On 16th March 2012, the Real Name Registration System was officially launched, which Fu et al. (2013) argue will have a "chilling effect on online comments, especially on political criticism and other sensitive topics" (p. 43). Users are required to register their real name and personal identity information in order to use Internet services (Lee & Liu, 2016). Internet service providers are not allowed, according to the Cybersecurity Law of the People's Republic of China，to provide Internet access and comment permissions to users who have not registered with their real identities. In this sense, China becomes the second country in the world, after South Korea, and is now the only one in the world to adopt a real-name Internet policy (Fu et al., 2013), which makes the Chinese Internet an extremely special context to study anonymity and pseudonymity essential to transgender identification and daily gender practices (Haimson & Hoffmann, 2016; MacAulay & Moldes, 2016). Chinese trans users might fear unsafe and bear anxiety when posting trans issues and discuss medical transition that are reckoned as sensitive and even illegal, since their real identity is made transparent to the platforms and surveillance institutions. Also, when using any kind of digital applications trans people have to registered with their citizen identity information and thus be marked with their sex assign-at-birth in the digital platforms. Some trans lesbian interviewees were rejected to register and log in lesbian dating apps because their identity card information automatically indicated male sex assign-at-birth and "male" users were excluded by the app registration regulations.

In addition, in June 2017, the China Netcasting Services Association, directed by

China's State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT), issued the "General Rules For Reviewing Netcasting Content" [15] which banned service providers from presenting 'abnormal sexual relations or behaviour' including "incest, homosexual relations, sexual harassment and sexual violence." (Shaw & Zhang, 2018, p. 273) SAPPRFT was sued for this guidance on content censorship by a 30-year-old man named Fan Chunlin, and the Beijing No. 1 Intermediate People's Court has already accepted this case [16]. In tandem with this regulation, Sina Weibo launched a "clean-up" campaign of homosexual content and blocked hundreds of LGBT relevant accounts on 13th April 2018. A hashtag campaign "I am homosexual", consisting of 170,000 posts which got 240 million views, was then carried out with thousands of users protesting against Weibo's censorship and sharing their gender identity or sexual orientation online. *The People's Daily*, a party journal in China, published a commentary article online arguing that everyone should respect other people's sexual orientations. After this official response, Weibo withdrew its censorship policy on homosexual content. Although the state's attitude toward sex and gender minorities is ambiguous, inconsistent and sometimes self-contradictory (Jia & Zhou, 2015; Zhao, 2022), the censorship of LGBTQ issues in both traditional media and mainstream digital media is in general prevailing and getting stronger in recent years, resulting in an ever-more-restricted information environment for LGBTQ communities.

While there has been more gay/queer content strategically produced to avoid state censorship in various media forms and popular cultures, the commercialisation and normalisation of LGBTQ visibility is criticised for "not acknowledging the existence, political importance, and equal right of gender and sexual minorities" (Zhao, 2022, p. 16). The way Chinese trans people and communities manage to make their own names, voices and embodiments outside state censorship and commercial media remains

---

[15] The censorship policy issued by SAPPREF can be found here:
http://media.people.com.cn/n1/2017/0630/c14677-29375326.html
[16] https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/chinas-censors-required-justify-gay-content-ban-beijing-court-says-1071517

unclear. The everyday meaning-making of denied trans authenticity through digital gender practices in a dehumanised social context and censored media environment is underexplored in the existing literatures of (trans)gender studies and queer/LGBT communication studies. By examining the alternative transgender practices mediated by digital technologies, this thesis contributes to how the denied authenticity is reconstructed, negotiated and experienced by Chinese transgender people. Without falling into techno-utopian and normative queer comprehension of trans authenticity construction, this thesis presents a nuanced examination of the dialectical articulations, alternative doing and stratified performativity of trans authenticity. I show in this thesis how performative doing of trans authenticity can both afford transgender agency and nurture emerging transnormativity. The dialectical approach of performative authentcitiy also re-examines digital technologies' role in mediating trans authenticity negation and complicates the queer/conventional understanding of transgender experiences in a digital and non-western context.

1.4 Overview of the thesis

This thesis proceeds as follows: The first chapter examines the digital trans studies amid the development of Internet studies and queer studies and explains the urgent need for empirical studies of Chinese trans people's digital gender practices by highlighting the historical, policy and social-techno environment they face in contemporary China. In doing so, I provide the macro context for this thesis.

Chapter 2 provides a review of gender theory in the western context, especially the postmodern theorisation of gender performativity. I then introduce three strands of criticism from materialist feminism, gender and queer studies and argue that digital trans studies have the potential to address the criticism of poststructuralist gender theories in the digital era. Through the critical reading and discussion of these different bodies of literature, I position this research as a critical and de-westernised digital trans study. This chapter ends with a clarification of the conceptual and theoretical framework for addressing the research questions I raise after the literature review.

Chapter 3 explains the methodological consideration and my reflection on the

fieldwork. I first introduce the queer methodology approach I employ to address the research question, based on which I elaborate on the specific research design. The data collection methods are justified to shed light on qualitative research on transgender people in a non-western context, as well as the analytical framework that I used to present data and my analysis. I then move on to further reflect on the impact my outsider and privileged positionality might have on doing trans study in China and remind the readers of the ethical issues and my critical reflexivity of this project.

Chapter 4 explores the discursive production of transgender authenticity in the online trans community. I discuss the genealogy of transgender terms circulated in online trans communities and the articulation of terms, community, platforms and surveillance. By examining multiple types of data (including interview data, online observation records and policy documents), this chapter paves the overarching discursive foundation for understanding the polysemous transgender subjectivities in contemporary China. The genealogy transformation projects how the Chinese trans community contested the definition of transgender subjectivity and produced mainstream and common discourses on the accountability of transness. The discursive genealogy of transgender subjectivity reflects the transformation of the gender episteme and norms of what counts as trans and is thus a polysemous alternative dissolving a unitary narrative of gender. The meaning-making and definition work in online trans groups, as this thesis finds, allows negotiation among different trans groups and non-trans, and formulates collective resistance to truth regimes that reproduce the definition and hegemonic knowledge of transness. Interestingly, the Chinese transgender genealogy echoes the development of digital platforms and derived state governance. As I demonstrate in this chapter, the genealogy of Chinese transgender discourse is deeply mediated by the state surveillance policy, trans online diaspora, domestic transgender activism and, most importantly, the collective and native meaning-making of the trans communities. In other words, the contested truth claims of (trans)gender are entangled with the performative authenticity praxis embodied in digital platforms in the Chinese context. In the following chapters, I will lay out the discussion of the emerging truth regime of cisnormativity and transnormativity regulating the

accountability and realness of (trans)gender, and transgender individuals' agentic praxis of performative authenticity afforded socially and technically by their digital engagement.

Chapter 5 argues that transgender people's mediated experience of liminal temporality and spatiality embodies their alternative praxis of gender authenticity. Focusing on time and space as the two keyframes to understanding gendered reality, this chapter discusses how their digital engagement with the liminal temporal and spatial reconfigures alternative ways of gendered living. Drawing on liminality theory, I question the queer critiques of linear temporality and binary spatiality that some sexual/gender minorities might inhabit. Queer studies tend to highlight the antinormative resistance of queer community against the heterosexual matrix while overlooking the lived everydayness and ordinariness of transgender people (Cavalcante, 2018). Through examining how Chinese transgender individuals negotiate realness against the online/offline border thinking, and reflexively do gender through claiming and inhabiting linear temporality afforded by digital use, this thesis rethinks the divide between normative and queer. Transgender people's lived experience of liminal space and linear time, which are bound to hetero- and cis-normativity, allow resistance to emerge in their parody, misdoing and challenging of gender norms. Transgender people's mediated experience of temporality and spatiality is thus liminal but agentic in the sense that it is rejected by the mainstream, processual rather than occupying, parodying rather than reassuring. This is by no means simply saying that the Internet is a utopian identity infrastructure for transgender people. Instead, I discuss how transnormativity emerges in online trans communities in the next chapter.

Chapter 6 discusses the formation and forms of transnormativity in online trans communities, with a specific focus on online chat groups which are currently the most important and common networking place for Chinese transgender individuals. The discursive power dynamic within the online trans community is reified by the technological and social affordance of digital platforms, including gatekeeping, agenda setting and group regulations. Two forms of transnormativity construct the doing of transgender as hierarchical knowledge construction and regulating the in-group

emotional sphere. The scientific and identity-politics discourses of transness are deemed intelligible ways of doing transgender, and the positive emotion and binary-gendered affect stereotype are deemed promising for a liveable transgender life. In other words, transnormativity works as a hegemonic interpretation of transgendered reality consisting of intelligibility and liveability. This chapter takes an intersectional perspective on how transnormativity might benefit/marginalise transgender people differently. I argue that transnormativity has a close relationship with not only the internalised cisnormative hegemony of the gender truth regime but also the social-economic background of trans individuals and their self-positioning in the international sex/gender identity politics. It also echoes the neoliberal myth of individual success and an ideal transgender path where collectivity and community bonds have no space. The authenticity hierarchy configured by the growing transnormativity, if not resulting in, can be linked to the ongoing fragmented online trans communities landscape I observed. In the name of community norms, transnormativity leads to the impossibility of solidarity and breaking of the trans community. In the last empirical chapter, I will discuss individuals' responses to the truth regime derived from cisnormativity and transnormativity and how collective resistance might be possible in transgender individuals' agentic mediated praxis of gender authenticity.

In the last empirical chapter, I turn the focus towards transgender individuals' online self (dis)embodiment. Drawing on Foucauldian conceptualisation of the technology of the self, I contend that their online self (dis)embodiment reifies their mediated praxis for gender authenticity. Through self-naming, self-writing and self-visualisation, Chinese transgender individuals experience and practice gender in various means and develop reflexive relationships with the cisnormative and transnormative regulation on the accountability of transness. Instead of claiming gendered realness, transgender individuals' mediated praxis of transgender authenticity emphasises the lived everydayness and diverse experiences that matter for transgender living.

In Chapter 8, I conclude this dissertation by wrapping up the findings and analysis in resonance with the research questions and the reviewed literature. The contribution

of this thesis is far beyond filling the empirical gap in Chinese trans studies. Instead, the presented and discussed complexity between social marginalisation, transgender agency and mediated gender authenticity shed light on understanding the implication of ongoing digitalisation of everyday life on people's perception, experience and practice of gender authenticity in a non-western modernity imagination. I end the thesis by reflecting on the limitations of this study and providing some possible theoretical and empirical paths future research might follow.

Chapter 2 Theoretical Foundations

Academic discourses on transgender issues start from a medical perspective, focusing on the symptoms, diagnosis and treatment of transgender subjects. 'Transvestite' was coined to refer to those who dressed in the clothes of the 'other sex' while 'transsexual' refers to those who have received hormone treatment or surgery to alter their genitalia or sex to claim a certain gender identity other than the one assigned at birth (Benjamin et al., 1966). In the 1970s, 'gender dysphoria' was facilitated by sexology and psycho-medical discourses to replace 'transsexual' as a more sensitive term connoting the misalignment between gender and the sexed body, which involved the metaphor of inhabiting the 'wrong body' (Bettcher, 2014; Meyerowitz, 2002). Transsexualism refers to people in pretransition, transitioning or post-transition statuses of hormonal or gender reassignment surgery (Hird, 2002). Together with the development of medical technologies, discourses of body alteration transformed from sex reconstruction /gender reassignment surgery that assists transition to self-identified gender to gender affirmation/confirmation that aligns gender identity with determined sex (Bettcher, 2014). These medical discourses have made the trans communities and transgender rights more visible but in a pathological or medical way, reproducing and reinforcing the dominant heteronormative matrix (Hines, 2007, 2020). The biomedicine techniques and discourses constitute the meaning-making, gender practices, community histories, and power relations of transgender. What is covered in these medical discourses is the compulsory and dominant gender dichotomy that excludes other transgender practices (Irni, 2013). Transgender identities in the medical framing are thus physical and mental disorders and require medical intervention to make them 'normal' and socially acceptable.

In the 1980s, the term 'transgender' emerged in North American gender-variant communities and was expanded to a more inclusive term encompassing the whole spectrum of gender diversity (Stryker, 2006). This term witnessed a dramatic increase

in usage globally after Leslie Feinberg used it in the title of a pamphlet and Virginia Prince used it to refer to an identity located on the spectrum between transvestite and transsexual. The new term transgender is celebrated as a transgression against the medical and binary models and the political coalition of the wide spectrum of gender-variant people (Bornstein, 1994). The idea that transgender consists of a set of non-binary gender categories remains widely accepted by trans scholars, activists and trans people. As Susan Stryker concluded, transgender is:

an umbrella term for a wide variety of bodily effects that disrupt or denaturalize heteronormatively constructed linkages between an individual's anatomy at birth, a nonconsensually assigned gender category, psychical identifications with the sexed body images and/or gendered subject positions, and the performance of specifically gendered social, sexual, or kinship functions. (Stryker, 1998, p. 149)

I follow this definition of transgender in this thesis because it redefines gender from a de-pathologized and non-essential perspective and allows diverse gender categories, performance, and social-sexual positions to claim autonomy of naming against the institutional power of the binary gender system. Hongwei Bao also takes a post-identitarian context-specific approach to Chinese transgender terminology that "refers to a wide range of gender-crossing embodiments and practices" and includes both the globally circulated terms and indigenous trans identities (2022, p. 1278). Such an approach recognises the rich Chinese/Sinophone transgender heritage that also encompasses the local stigmatised and pathologized trans discourses used in Chinese-speaking trans communities. Based on the inclusive and embodied practice-based understanding of Chinese transgender people, I position this thesis in the theoretical debate of gender and transgender in feminism, queer and trans studies and the emerging conversation between Western-centric and Chinese/Sinophone trans studies. Trans Studies have undermined pre-existing, oppositional sex/gender binaries by focusing on the fluidity and malleability of gender identity and expression (Baeza Argüello et al., 2021; Halberstam, 2018; Noble, 2006; Worthen, 2021). Trans Studies, therefore,

destabilise and complicate many of the debates about the social, biological, and cultural constructions of gender and sexuality (Miguel & Tobias, 2016, p. 2). The destabilisation of gender binarism, however, also make trans people struggle over legal rights issues and institutionalised psycho-medical pathologization (Roen, 2013). While this thesis joins this collective effort, what I highlight in this research – informed by post-structuralist gender theory and trans studies – is a context-specific and trans-experience-informed examination of the performative doing of transgender authenticity to understand the intertwined everyday oppression, struggle and agency of Chinese transgender people. The performative authenticity, as I will further elaborate, does not promote essentialist or indigenous self-determination of gender authenticity but foregrounds authenticity discourses and practices at the centre of understanding contemporary Chinese transgender people's lives. This post-identitarian framework allows a dialectical reading of the discursive, digitalised and performative gender practices of Chinese transgender people as a reaction and in relation to the cisnormative and transnormative regulations over gender. With its two conceptual layers – trans technology of the self and social technology – the framework of performative authenticity help to theorise the nuanced and stratified transgender experiences in societies which trans visibility and identity politics works differently from the West.

To give an overview, this chapter sets key theoretical foundations for the thesis in three main sections: I first lay out the gender debate in Western gender, feminist and queer studies, and explain my critical application of performative theory to examine gender in a non-Western trans studies. While performativity theory has been a powerful way to overcome the discursive/material and essentialist/constructivist binary thinking of gender, non-Western and digital trans studies have the potential to push forward the knowledge production in trans studies informed by poststructuralist gender theories. I then review trans media and communication studies, including transgender media representation and digital trans studies, to engage with the key challenges digital technologies bring to rethinking (trans)gender. My critical reading of the trans media and communication studies calls for an ecological perspective to understand digital technologies' reconfiguration of discursive, temporal and spatial context for gender

authenticity construction. Chinese trans studies contribute to the existing literature on trans studies by re-anchoring the post-identarian conceptualisation of transgender in the historical and cultural context of Chinese-speaking societies. Based on the analysis of the strengths and limitations of these studies, I raise theoretically informed research questions. At the end of this chapter, I provide the theoretical framework of performative authenticity to answer these questions. I illustrate the significance of understanding Chinese transgender people's everyday experiences and struggles through the performative authenticity framework.

2.1 Theorising gender from a trans perspective

2.1.1 Departure from the ongoing debate on gender

Sex and gender: these two concepts have long been the core of gender and women's studies, feminist strains and queer theories debates. Trans studies and laymen's understandings of transgender more or less draw on these theorisations of sex and gender (Elliot, 2010). However, transgender subjectivity and experience are rarely centred in the theorisations and debates of gender as we can see from the bio-essentialist/social constructivist dichotomy and cisgender bias in feminist and queer studies. This section starts with a brief sketch of the essential and ongoing debate of sex/gender between different strands in the literature of gender, feminist, and queer studies, wherein I position my approach to gender in this study of transgender issues.

During the sexology movement from the 1800s to the 1940s, anatomical sex was used to explain individuals' behaviours, preferences and abilities based on biological differences (Davidson, 1992). Finding the sexology terms insufficient to explain intersex people, Money (1995) applied the term gender to distinguish femininity and masculinity from anatomical sex. The term gender is derived from the Latin word genus, which originally meant 'type' or 'category'; it rose to prominence in the sexology of the early 1960s (Glover & Kaplan, 2008) and was used to refer to the specific distinction between "classes of nouns corresponding to distinctions of sex in the object denoted" (Connell & Pearse, 2015, p. 9). It is noteworthy that from the very beginning

of the academic coining of gender, that intersex or other gender-expansive subjects were mobilised as both the object of regulation based on a binary sex/gender system and as the outlier haunting the very binary boundary made to marginalise them.

The ongoing debate between bio-essentialism and social constructivism marks the underlying gender epistemological differences of and within (trans)gender, feminist and queer disciplines. As Dietz argues in her discussion of the ontological controversy of different strains of feminism, differently theorised gender subjectivity "persists as a seemingly ineradicable, perpetually problematic spectre haunting feminist thought" (2003, p. 414). Biological determinism and biological essentialism argue that biological differences are innate and fixed and account for the essential differences in other non-biological attributes between men and women (Bem, 1993; Jagose, 1996). Derived from biological determinism theorisation and biosocial experiments, essentialists used evolution, hormonal exposure and genetic codes to make sense of gender differences, identity formation and gender roles (Money & Ehrhardt, 1972). With the growing visibility of transgender subjects, medicine and studies, the binary gender-based assumption and debate on biological essentialism have been further complicated, if not challenged, by the overlooked gender-expansive community. As a response, transgender exclusive radical feminists entered the debate by targeting transsexual bodies and trans subjectivity. In her controversial yet influential book *The Transsexual Empire: the making of the she-male*, Janice Raymond (1994) contended that transsexualism and the ideology of transsexual medical treatment reinforces patriarchal gender stereotypes and invades women's identity, politics and sexuality. Accusing all transsexuals of raping "women's bodies by reducing the real female form to an artefact", Raymond constructed an essentialist wall not only between biological men and women but also between artefact and reality (1994, p. 104). Being criticised as a biological essentialist, Raymond claimed in her recently published book *Doublethink: A Feminist Challenge to Transgenderism* that she took a political materialist stance rather than bio-essentialism to unpack the origin of women's oppression and men's domination of women's bodies. Likewise, the bodily experience of women, including menstruation and reproduction, is deemed by radical feminism as the only fact-based definition of

womanhood that is irreducible.

The major refutation of biological determinist theorisation of gender came from the sociological study of gender and other feminist thoughts. Social constructivism centres on social interpretations of physical experience and cultural phenomenon as the basis of human behaviours, which have the effects of "shaping the material realities of sex/gender" (Lane, 2016, p. 186). Bem (1993) concluded three main threads in the sociology of gender – gender socialisation theory, social structure theory and psychodynamic theory – that emphasise the impact of gender norms and social structures in reproducing gender identity and shaping the abilities, motivations and expression of masculinity and femininity. Although different theoretical perspectives and concerns are present in social constructionist arguments regarding the study of gender, a common belief, as Teresa de Lauretis (1987) suggested, is that gender is the product of social technologies, such as institutionalised discourses and daily practices. In general, social constructivist theories define gender as a position obtained by psychological, cultural and social methods (West & Zimmerman, 1998), echoing a feminist understanding of social gender. While some feminist strands still hold biological and essentialist stances, the social constructivist conceptualisation of gender has been "integral to contemporary feminist discourses and research programs" (Dietz, 2003, p. 401).

The bio-centric explanation of gender is critiqued by feminist scholars for justifying the unequal gender order between men and women (Lane, 2016). Oakley (2016b) made a clearer distinction between sex and gender by arguing that 'sex' referred to the biological difference between male and female, whereas 'gender' referred to the social classification of masculine and feminine. Disconnecting the natural sex/gender alignment, gender is considered by social constructivist feminism as the differences between individuals, with different biological characteristics of social roles and behaviours attributed to societal and cultural factors adopted through practice (Hausman, 2001). Dietz (2003) identifies two modes of difference feminism – social and symbolic – both of which invest in theorising gender as a male/female binary and attribute female's subordination to the psychic structure rooted in gender binary

social/symbolic system. The distinction between gender and sex emancipates gender from the constraints of biological narration and makes gender a powerful concept to reveal the inequality between different gender identities. Gender is also used by feminists to emphasise the regulation and normalisation imposed on women's behaviour and sexuality. Rejecting the neutral and asymmetrical assumption of sex difference, as Teresa de Lauretis (1987) claimed, the notion that gender reflects sexual differences constrains critical thinking around gender within the framework of a universal sex opposition. Based on a binary understanding of gender, social constructivist feminism allows the exploration of the power inequality between men and women in moral, political and social meanings that structure the construction of women, as indicated in Beauvoir's famous argument: "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (1973, p. 301).

Braidotti criticises that social constructivist feminists adopt the Cartesian assumption of mind-body to build binary sex/gender distinction where "gender is to culture as sex is to nature and mind to body" (2011, p. 262). Social constructivism, although opposed to bio-essentialism, also enhances the duality of the sex/gender nexus without reflecting on its hidden binarism. The polarisation of biological determinism and social construction produces a dichotomy of sex and gender which overlooks the constructive nature of sex and the materiality of gender. Both biological essentialism and social constructivism discussed above reflect a default binary understanding of sex and gender. On the one hand, this sex/gender dichotomy has been shaping how gender is binarily theorised in gender and feminist studies and, therefore, further influencing the theorisation and knowledge production of transgender. Reflecting the sex/gender dichotomy, the 'wrong body' framing has been popularised both in academic and mainstream media representations of transgender, which flattens and limits trans experiences (Latham, 2019). Thus, defining gender as the social-cultural interpretation of sex or distinguishing gender from sex may simplify the complicated nexus of sex and gender and the lived experiences of transgender people. On the other hand, the lived experience of transgender people, transsexuals or transvestites has been haunting and challenging this non-useful gender debate by "making explicit the failure in the

binary ideology" (Harsin Drager & Platero, 2021, p. 419). A deconstructive approach to the feminist theorisation of gender has pointed out the pre-discursive bias and heterosexual matrix concealed in the bio-essentialism/social constructivism and feminist strains built on unnegotiable gender differences. Judith Butler's critique of feminist theorisation of gender and analysis of the gender parody of drag performers addressed the debate by providing a poststructuralist and deconstructive feminist understanding of gender: the theory of performativity.

2.1.2 Gender as performativity and its critiques

First elaborated by Austin (1962), performativity is the linguistic declaration that performs actions. For instance, utterances like 'I claim' and 'I bet' are performative, which could have some effect on reality and could be brought into being. Post-Austinian theorists, such as Jacques Derrida and Judith Butler, attempted to broaden performativity. Derrida argued that all utterances in a language are performative and that "no performative can work without the force of iterability" (1986, p. 18). Similarly, Butler suggested that performative speech acts, such as the declaration of gender, could "bring into being that which they name" through repetition (1994, p. 33). Performativity theory is a radical way to theorise gender as constructed reiteratively through (re)citational discursive processes.

There are three key aspects of Butler's performativity theory: gender norms, that regulate and naturalise the intelligibility of gender; discursive practices of imitation, repetition and recitation; and the speech act effect of reiteration. Specifically, gender performativity demonstrates that gender is enacted by enduring discursive recitation and reiteration of gender norms "within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeals over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (Butler, 1999, p. 43). The argument that genders come into being by 'doing' gender suggests that gender is unnatural, imitative and, thus, fluid and unstable, and that the construction of gender identity is a temporal process. Butler's theory differs from other constructivist gender theories in two ways. Firstly, it argues that gender expressions and embodiments construct the very subject. There is no ontological prior interiority and pre-discursive

subjectivity that people are born with and cannot be questioned. Secondly, it questions the naturalness and originality of sex and thus rejects the sex/gender dichotomy together with the biology/social construct binary. Performativity theory takes a step further than social constructivism by not only questioning the sociocultural constructs but also positing that the naturalised 'fact' (e.g., body and sex) is also constructed or endowed through the iteration of social norms. Constructivists believe gender is the final product of social-institutional power and technologies, while on the contrary, performativity theory highlights that gender requires continual and citational maintenance with the discursive resources of social norms. In *Undoing Gender,* Butler questions the biological determinist and constructivist understanding of the assumption of sex, gender and body:

> *Yet, it is through the body that gender and sexuality become exposed to others, implicated in social processes, inscribed by cultural norms, and apprehended in their social meanings. In a sense, to be a body is to be given over to others even as a body is, emphatically, 'one's own,' that over which we must claim rights of autonomy. (2004, p. 20)*

By disenchanting the body as a fixed and inviolable matter, Butler provides an alternative way to approach gender besides bio-determinism and social constructivism. In Butler's theorisation, the body is where the social meaning of gender and sexuality is embodied, and the border of the body is not the skin's surface but is produced discursively. Like the common critiques of poststructuralism for its discourse-centric epistemology, opponents have criticised Butler for overlooking the materiality of the body and reducing innate desire and bodily experience to merely discursive practices (Jagger, 2008; Prosser, 1998; Namaste, 1996). Among these critiques, new materialist feminism and posthumanism launched prominent attacks that expanded the scope of materiality to not only the human body but also non-human techno materials. Braidotti (2013) called for a post-anthropocentric approach to recognise that human bodily matter and that of other species are both sexed. By saying both human and non-human species are sexed, neo-materialist and posthuman feminists in a sense stay aligned with

Butler by saying that "Matter is not mere being, but its ongoing un/doing" (Barad, 2015, p. 41). Their major argument is more concerned with the reconfigured condition in which both human and non-human actors participate and are influenced.

Lane asserted that new materialism deconstructed the clichéd duality of nature/culture and real/constructed by emphasising the "nonlinearity, contingency, diversity, and open-endedness" of gender formation, which is "an intertwined biological and social process of transformation" (2016, p. 189). Indeed, performativity theory has been losing sight of the new material conditions that human beings are facing, including digital and medical technologies, that structure the very performative doings of gender. It is time to push forward the performativity understanding of gender by including discussion of how gender norms and practices might be reconfigured and remediated by digital technologies, and what new ontological questions regarding performative gender doings might arise through such reconfiguration. Studies that foreground transgender experience are thus urgently needed to push forward this knowledge. Jack Halberstam argued for transcending the constructivist understanding of bodily experience, especially that of trans* people:

> we need to place transgenderism firmly within new biopolitical regimes where bodies are not simply the effect of performativity or social constructions or gender ideologies but also repositories for new chemical scripts in which bodies can be energized or quieted, made fertile or infertile, awakened or numbered, made to feel more or to feel less. (2016, p. 29)

The new biopolitical regime Halberstam advocated for equals the desire for and the results of gender reassignment medicine with the desire for claimed gender identity. Bodily materiality and non-human technology materials, therefore, are argued to be as significant as social construction and discourses in understanding gender. In response to the new materialist critique of overlooking the body and the materiality of sex and gender, Butler further explained in *Bodies That Matter* that:

> Against the claim that poststructuralism reduces all materiality to linguistic stuff, an argument is needed to show that to deconstruct matter is not to negate or do away with the usefulness of

the term… I suggest that prized materiality may well be constituted through exclusion and

degradation of the feminine that is profoundly problematic for feminism. (2011, p. 5)

Instead of denying the existence of body and materiality, Butler suggested that the knowledge production and epistemological bias of feminism on which feminists base the category of woman rely both reinforces the compulsory heterosexual matrix and excludes the diverse being of subjects. There is no denying the existence of the bodily substance in performativity but, instead, performativity theory questions the naturalness discourse of materiality. In other words, performativity theory emphasises the history and alternatives of bodily meaning-making and regulation. Genealogical inquiry into the irreducibility of the body challenges the feminist ontological assumption and argues that the material irreducibility is constructed and also enhances the problematic heterosexual matrix (Butler, 2011). Therefore, it is not to say that the body can be merely reduced to a set of signs, but that gender materiality is closely linked to social signification from the very beginning. Thus, what Butler is concerned with is not the dichotomy between discourse and material, but the power relations embodied in the materialisation of materials that defend normativity and cover-up oppression in the name of nature and irreducible materiality. Drawing on the new materialists' emphasis on materiality, and Butler's response to the body-blind accusation, I approach materiality as the materialisation of both the human body and non-human technology in discussing the performative formation and doing of gender, without essentialising materiality as naturally given and irreducible. It is thus important to further ask what and how materials (the body, technologies) matter in materialising (trans)gender, and how the changing techno-social condition and process of materialisation both affect the meaning-making and socialisation of (trans)gender performativity in the digital era.

Aside from the critique around materiality/discourse in performativity theory, another strand focuses on the lack of context-based empirical studies and thus fails to recognise and explain the systematic shift of gender norms through which gender is performatively constructed. To elaborate on the imitative feature of gender identity, Butler used drag as a metaphor and special case. Drag, according to Butler, is a cultural

practice uncovering the imitative nature of gender, although there is no original gender to imitate. In other words, drag is not imitating females as a kind of gender model because both males and females are unnatural and unoriginal. Aside from denaturing gender identity, the example of drag indicates that the impossibility of imitating an 'ideal' sex/gender model de facto creates the space for subversion and resistance to emerge. Determining to what extent drag is a performance or reiteration subversive to the sex/gender system has sparked heated debates. As Butler clarified, drag does not necessarily oppose or threaten the heterosexual matrix, but it can be the "allegorisation of heterosexuality" (1993, p. 237). Indeed, some drag performances can be attributed to the commodification and materialisation of gender and related to the heterosexual gaze. Whether there is intentional resistance and subversion in gender performance or not, the practices of transgender performance reveal that gender is neither essential nor natural. This is partly why performativity theory has become pivotal in trans studies (Sullivan, 2003). By recognising the subversive potential of transgender practices in challenging the epistemological hegemony of the heteronormative matrix and the nature discourse in gender dichotomy, performativity theory is powerful in questioning the natural, stable and immutable assumption of the sex and gender system embedded in the heteronormative matrix.

Queer studies also engage deeply with the performativity theorisation of gender for its promise of subversion and resistance. Transgender subjects are mobilised by both queer scholars and popular queer culture to promote the antinormative political ideology, as we can see from the popularity of genderqueer claims among non-trans queer communities. The antinormative framing and mobilisation of transgender subjects have both been criticised by trans studies scholars, however, as consolidating the subversive/normativity dichotomy which over-simplifies transness without really paying attention to the lived and diverse experience of transgender people (Bettcher, 2014; Billard & Zhang, 2022). While some queer scholars have started to reflect on the utilitarian use of trans as a case study in knowledge production, the way-outs normally lead to adding other identity layers such as culture and ethnicity into trans analysis (Roen, 2013). Without really foregrounding transgender in the centre of knowledge

production, some scholars have criticised how performativity theory has become so powerful and universal that it marginalises and excludes other gender experiences and possibilities and has become as hegemonic as biological essentialism theory, which it contests (Schep, 2012). Chen criticised Butler's performativity theory by noting that it "flattens the multiple spatial-temporalities, nonlinguistic gestures, and circuitries of internal sense and bodily material" (2018, p. 38). Although it is arguable whether non-linguistic gestures, internal sense and bodily material are independent of the iterated social norms that Butler centred in developing performativity theory, Chen's critique directs us to rethink the spatial-temporal landscape in which gender is performatively constructed. In this critique, I see the theoretical convergence allowing possibilities of pushing forward rather than denying the strength of performativity theory in explaining the relationship between bodily experience, gender identity and social norms of gender. As Jackson suggests, performativity theory embeds a 'corollary' whereby shifting rituals of gender involve shifting forms of gender subjectivity (Jackson, 2003). Capturing the shifting relationship between ritualised gender norms and the performative construction of gender will shed light on the performative theorisation of gender.

This study draws on performativity theory as the major approach to understanding and analysing gender practice for its strength in explaining the discursive construction of gender through reiteration and repetition of norms, thus allowing agency to emerge. Nevertheless, the lack of engagement with the material conditions and context-specific examination of trans experiences, especially in non-Western societies, form a blind spot in contemporary gender studies informed by the performativity lens. In this sense, empirical trans studies taking into consideration digital and non-Western contexts of trans lives have the potential to address the critiques of performativity theory. Both carry theoretical heritage from deconstructive feminism and the post-structuralist theorisation of gender, queer theory and trans studies are framed as an "evil twin" (Stryker, 2004, p. 212). Before reviewing the large body of trans studies, mapping the complex between trans studies and its 'evil twin' it is necessary to understand the tensions and agendas found in trans studies. I start the next section by discussing queer

theory from a trans studies perspective to position this thesis within the field of trans studies.

2.1.3 Beyond queer theory and on trans studies

Queer, in Sedgewick's terminology, is "the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality, aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically" (Sedgwick, 1998, p. 208). Queer theory formulates an anti-heteronormative political coalition for sexuality and gender minorities. Some scholars criticise queer theory for generalising all non-normative identities into a collective one at the cost of downplaying the diverse lived experiences of minorities (Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2010; Sullivan, 2003). I disagree with the critique of queer lens' flattening of diversity, for queer theory as an analytical approach provides powerful sensitivity around the queer struggle and resistance to normative regulations on gender identities and sexuality. That said, some queer studies do have a limited theorisation and understanding of transgender. Queer or post-queer readings of transgender highlight the permanent incoherence of transgender bodies that haunt the sex/gender system (Noble, 2006). For trans people who seek gender body-identity alignment through transition or crossing over, whether medical or social, such reading might provoke a devaluation of the struggle of the crossing for congruence and intelligibility. Through the metaphor of 'evil twin', Susan Stryker (2004) considers trans studies as the disrupting force against queer theories' focus on sexual identities over gender categories. In this sense, the queer utopian in academia and activism fails to revolutionise mainstream understandings of gender and is thus unable to include the marginalised gender beings.

Without foregrounding the lived marginalised gender experiences in theorisation, queer studies are criticised by trans scholars for appropriating trans as examples showcasing an antinormativity agenda, resulting in the establishment of a queer hierarchy further marginalising trans experiences that desire a sense of gender congruence and intelligibility (Rubin, 1998). By highlighting the incompatibility of transsexuality with queer theories' celebration of antinormativity, gender incongruence

and instability, trans critics have pointed out the limited political agenda of queer theories which are de facto creating a radical/conventional hierarchy simplifying and devaluing lived experiences of trans people. A more trenchant viewpoint comes from Viviane Namaste's critique of queer readings of transgender. Based on her study of Canadian transsexual lives, Namaste (2011) criticises queer theories for erasing transsexual people by ignoring their effort and suffering in approaching body/gender alignment and material conditions structuring trans lives, such as the intersectional repression axes of class and race. Elliot (2010) gave a fairer comment on the debate between trans queer scholars such as Halberstam and Rubin and their critics, noting that in essence there is no disagreement on the argument that transsexuality does not guarantee affirmation or subversion of hegemonic gender norms. Nevertheless, the former might grant alternative potentials to those more pathologized and marginalised who intentionally or contingently challenge heteronormativity and hegemonic gender norms (Elliot, 2010). Through a critical reading of Namaste's critique against queer trans scholars, Elliot (2010) argues that a complex understanding of (trans)gender is needed to avoid creating a progressive/conventional hierarchy and reducing the trans experience to the reinforcement of hegemonic constructions of gender. I agree with Elliot's argument because I find the queer/conventional and transsexual/transgender dichotomy taken up in the debate on the queer reading of transgender less constructive. It is clear from the inclusive understanding of transgender in this thesis that trans people's perceptions of the body, embodied practices of gender norms and the agendas in local communities where they exist vary drastically. Therefore, empirical trans studies of the meaning-making of gender intelligibility in diverse transgender experiences, to which this thesis also takes a non-Western perspective, may contribute to understanding the complexity of (trans)gender performativity.

Trans studies by and large derived from feminist and queer activism and benefit from the latter in terms of knowledge production and political visibility (Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2010). Many feminists and queer scholars have reflected on classical gender theories through the case of transgender, as noted earlier. As Hausman (2001) criticized, queer theories may also consolidate gender stereotypes for their underlying and implicit

binary thinking around gender. I am not blaming these studies for objectifying transgender as merely a case or tool (Heyes, 2003), but instead highlighting the studies that use transgender experiences as the purpose and focus of their research to understand transgender oppression, resistance and everyday gender practices. There have been thought-provoking trans studies published in the last three decades that address the existing theorisations of gender and reflect on the knowledge production of (trans)gender from a transgender perspective. Trans studies problematise the binary sex/gender categories and heteronormativity, and interrogate the assumed intelligibility of gender and coherent wholeness of the body (Elliot, 2010; Halberstam, 2022; Stryker, 2006).

In *The Transgender Studies Reader*, Susan Stryker (2006) argues that trans theory should deal with the mimetic epistemology that strictly regulates the relationship between appearance and substance and renders transgender practices as false representations. Transgender knowledge production seeks to disrupt the existing rigid projection rules between appearance and substance. The disruption makes the remaking of meanings of body/sex/gender possible and allows diverse subjective experiences to be intelligible and recognisable. This echoes Kristen Schilt and Danya Lagos's categorisation of the shift from the "gender deviance paradigm" to the "gender difference paradigm" in trans studies (2017, p. 426). In the first paradigm, dating back to the 1970s to 1990s, researchers used trans as the objects of sociological inspection of gender nonconformity, such as Garfinkel's conceptualisation of "passing" (Schilt & Lagos, 2017). In the second paradigm of 'gender difference', transgender lives become the subject of study through "destabilizing binary classifications and extending knowledge about the diversity and fluidity of gender identities" (Schilt & Lagos, 2017, p. 437). It is through the gender difference paradigm that trans studies became a stand-alone field from feminist, queer and pathological social sciences (Billard et al., 2022) The paradigm shift resonated in trans philosopher Paul Preciado's (2021) call for an epistemological revolution, moving away from reducing trans people to the object of medicalised/psychiatric pathology to the subject of knowledge production outside the patriarchal-colonial realm.

Body and bodily embodiment lie at the heart of transgender theorisation, and the most heated debate is without doubt around transsexual bodies. While sexologists in the 1960s characterised transsexuality with clinical meanings and medical interventions (Green & Money, 1969; Harry, 1966), transsexuality was targeted with hostility as the pale imitation of femininity and invasion of women's spaces and bodies in the works of exclusionary feminists, such as in Daly's *Gyn/Ecology* (2016) and Janice Raymond's *Transsexual Empire* (Daly, 2016; Raymond, 1994). It seems transsexuality is confined to transsexual women whose bodies and lives threaten and thus provoke fierce criticisms from exclusionary feminism. Trans scholars question the essentialist understanding of gender identity, specifically female and femininity, by de-pathologizing transness and calling for an inclusive and intersectional approach to recognise the multiplicity of trans identities. In *The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto* (1992), in which she strikes back at Janice Raymond, Sandy Stone considers the trans body as a contested site where biomedical science discourse, radical feminism and embodied trans lives meet, allowing the rethinking of gender, body and trans identities. The re-examination of gender and body is not only a gesture against trans-exclusive feminism or transphobia but a critical reflection and adaption to the challenges brought about by diverse trans bodies and experiences afforded by emerging technologies and material conditions.

The new biomedical-pharmaceutical system and socio-technological condition mediate a transgender turn in the knowledge production of body/sex/gender theory that considers the body not as naturally given but as processual and editable. The reemphasising of editable body and materiality allow alternative practices and meaning-making of gender to emerge, especially for gender-expansive people. This is by no means a backlash against social constructivism or a return to haunting bio-essentialism. The body Halberstam discusses, aligning with Foucault and Deleuze, is always in a state of flux which can no longer be the fixed and natural foundation which bio-essentialism builds upon. The body in the transgender turn also interrogates the passive understanding of the body which is entirely inscribed by social norms and other power forms. Nagoshi and Brzuzy (2010) criticised the social constructivism

epistemology in feminist and queer theories by arguing that transgender people's embodied discontent toward the purely social constructivist assumption of gender be taken seriously. Different from bio-essentialism, emphasising bodily materiality questions the body/mind dichotomy and the implicit mind-over-body hierarchy that has long haunted Western philosophy. Bodies and embodiment should be emancipated from the theorisations of gender which allow little epistemological recognition of the former. Trans studies' re-examination of body and gender materiality should turn to the multiple meanings of the gendered body produced and perceived at the margin, not only by transsexual women but also by other nonconforming and denied gender beings.

It is time to turn to what Billard and colleagues (2022) called applied trans studies that address material, social and economic conditions structuring the existence of transgender lives (Johnson et al., 2021; Namaste, 2000). To address the realist account of trans issues, trans studies started applying trans-disciplinary approaches from critical social sciences beyond the traditional domains. In *Invisible Lives,* Namaste calls for attention to the erasure of trans lives in queer theorisation and activism and the administration in medical and cultural institutions. In a roundtable discussion, Cotten (2014) argued for attention to be paid to how trans experiences and knowledge productions are taken up and appropriated for the interest of global capitalism and commodity society rather than trans communities. These researchers redirect trans studies to the intersectional interrogation of the systematic marginalisation and violence against trans communities, and recognition of the different forms of exposure to violence of trans individuals. Echoing the second paradigm of gender difference identified by Schilt and Lagos (2017), recognising the difference in trans experiences and struggle is not to segregate the trans communities but rather a step forward in formulating a minorities coalition for mutual understanding. This requires a context-specific empirical turn in trans studies that engages with the "intersecting realities" shaping trans lives from multiple social, historical, political and cultural axes and transgresses sex/gender/sexuality identity-based academic accounts (Boellstorff et al., 2014, p. 431). Only by rejecting the political and academic tendency to reduce trans issues to gender identity issues can trans studies become a site of critical knowledge

production for trans people.

Critics of the existing literature on trans studies also target the underacknowledged whiteness in transgender theorization (Namaste, 2000; Roen, 2013). Racial and post-colonial perspectives have been emphasised by a burgeoning body of trans studies that foregrounds the non-Western trans multiplicity and challenges the Western-centric knowledge production of transgender. Decolonial approaches to trans studies should be sensitive and resistant to the pathologization of transness derived from the "medical-industrial complex and Western notions of gender and sexuality" (Boellstorff et al., 2014, p. 421). Tan's (2014) work on Kathoeys in the Thai transsexual tourism industry showcases the non-applicability of Western transgender terms in interpreting the complexity of Asian trans experiences while revealing the flourishing postcolonial oriental gaze on the local gender non-conforming bodies. Chinese transgender context echoing with Tan's research on Thai Kathoeys both in the sense that Kathoeys tourism culture has transnational influences on Chinese-speaking societies and that the similar semi-colonial context of China and Thailand where Western imperialism imposes immutable and medicalised sex/gender binary (Tan, 2014; Chiang, 202; Billard & Nesfield, 2020). Inspired by Hongwei Bao's (2021a) study on how queer theory travels and translates to the Chinese context, the travel of trans studies and theories to China is also not a one-dimensional trajectory, but a back-and-forth reverberation through which the assemblage of trans studies and the specific Chinese historical and social context creates unpredictable contributions to the literature of trans studies.

2.2 Chinese Trans Studies

What might a Chinese trans studies add to the trans studies? Although scarce, studies on gender nonconforming subjectivities and experiences in China are mainly visible in literature, history and film studies in addition to pathologic health and psychology research. [17] Methodologically, these humanities and social science studies analyse

---

[17] Most of the Chinese language research on transgender issues tends to frame transgender in a

mediated data and text, such as historical photographs and documents, newspapers and cinema and other forms of media production. This may relate to the invisibility of transgender individuals and difficulties of reaching out, and also to the culturalist lens in studying Chinese transgender in conversation with international and Western-centric trans studies. The methodology and disciplinary majority of Chinese trans studies leaves a salient empirical gap that focuses on the everyday mediated gender practice and meaning making of trans individuals. The existing literature on Chinese trans studies nevertheless suggests that the cultural, social, and political conditions in China make gender identity a less applicable theoretical concept for understanding the daily experiences of transgender people. For instance, Ye (2016) studied the tension between rejected gay femininity and the claimed essential womanhood in the Chinese trans women community and argued that the essentialist gender identity claim is both transphobic and homophobic. A progressive political transgender agenda thus also requires an expansive view of transgender as not merely a kind of gender identity. Instead, I argue that what Chinese transgender people encounter and suffer every day is the denial of trans authenticity in social and cultural interactions rather than identity-based violence. To be more specific, authenticity denial is derived from the dehumanisation discourses of transness in the Han-Chinese psyche and is also related to post-socialist conditions that structure the authenticity struggles of transgender people in China today. This thesis dedicates itself to addressing the empirical gap in Chinese studies on transgender with a depathologized and porous lens on transgender people's digital gender practices and sense-making of authenticity. It also draws on Howard Chiang's (2014) call to surpass both the linear and progressivist gender identity politics lens and the self-positioning of non-West trans experiences as merely a supplement to the Western focus.

2.2.1 Transgender in imperial China

Transgender has been used to refer to a diverse group of people whose gender identity

---

pathological way or links trans with prostitution and public health issues such as HIV.

and/or expression differs from social expectations, including transsexuals, crossdressers and gender non-conforming people (Bauer et al., 2009). While the identity-based trans* politics in the Global North and West, as Nay asserted, "has achieved important social changes for some gender-variant people, it at the same time participates in neoliberal notions of equality" (2019, p. 64). Originating from the Global North and West, the conceptualisation and politics of transgender identity have expanded globally. Concepts such as 'transsexual', 'transgender' and 'trans' are rejected, appropriated, translated or transformed by de/colonized societies and scholars to find opportunities for agentic action (Stryker, 2012, p. 287). An abundance of research on non-Western transgenderism tends to position non-Western transgendered people and their practices as 'strange' and a 'separate 'category, even if in their gender cultural context non-Western transgenderism is considered 'normal' (Stryker, 2012). Shaped, on the one hand, by the Western theorization of gender, and, on the other, by local gender history and culture, transgender landscapes in non-Western countries differ considerably. A study on the paradox of the proliferation of transgender and other sexual minority identity categories in Thailand demonstrated that the disruption of traditional Siamese gender culture caused by the state's response to the combined challenges of English, French, Japanese and American imperialisms dramatically changed the performative norms of masculinity and femininity and contributed to the proliferation of new forms of gender identities (Jackson, 2003). In Iran, homosexuality is illegal, while sex reassignment surgeries are framed as "a religion-legally sanctioned option for heteronormalizing people with same-sex desires or practices" (Najmabadi, 2008, p. 24). These studies indicate that while Western modernity and globalization have influenced the gender practices in non-Western regions, local social norms and culture still have power in regulating gender/sexuality and intervening in the globalisation process. Research on local transgender experiences in Vietnam and India has demonstrated a drastically conflicting socio-cultural landscape from that in the West and Global North, where the living status of trans subjects in South and East Asia should be understood as being at the intersection of gender, religion, social ritual, class and (post)colonial relationships rather than merely through the lens of identity and

recognition politics (Nguyen, 2019; Dutta et al., 2019). In general, non-Western trans studies require a cautious investigation of local context and critical reading of the Western-based modern theorisation of gender and transgender in order to transcend "the universalization of transgender as a transnational 'umbrella term'" (Dutta & Roy, 2014, p. 320). More importantly, knowledge production about transgender discourse and praxis in the Global South should transcend hegemonic Anglophone discourses of gender in the LGBTQIA+ identity and developmental sense to push forward the decolonisation of (trans)gender study. This thesis dedicates itself to the decentring knowledge production project, echoing historian Howard Chiang's argument that Chinese trans studies should be freed from western-originated meaning of gender (2012, p. 10).

In the social and historical context of China, as He articulated, "the category of transgender is intersected with art, identity and ideology" (2014, p. 622). The 'transgender question' that Namaste asked in Anglo-American feminist knowledge production, is addressed not only as gender identities but "the new changing and problems in our globalizing and globalised society and culture" (He, 2014, p. 623). Like He, Chinese scholars have invested substantial intellectual effort in producing decolonialised, localised and historical knowledge of Chinese transgender through a genealogy approach, film study and other textual analyses of the cultural representation of transness since sexual and gender transgression is a cultural concept and act in China (Nguyen, 2019; Dutta, 2013). As argued by Ye (2016), there exists a long history of androgynous aesthetics from the very beginning of Chinese culture. Reviewing the official history texts, Hinsch (1990) suggests that Chinese culture is generally tolerant toward what he called "transgender homosexuality" which signifies the cultural and sexual practices of the literate elites. He (2014) investigated the Dan (males performing female roles in Chinese Opera) and theatre scripts with transgender performances, such as Mulan, and argued that Chinese transgender performance should be comprehended as an ambiguous cultural phenomenon rather than an identity politics that challenges the heterosexual patriarchy. The historical investigation of transgender phenomena

illustrates a culturalist episteme of transness and a longstanding androgynous aestheticism in traditional China.

Aside from aesthetic and cultural representation of transness, ancient Chinese legal and moral institutions frame transgender people as moral deviants threatening Confucian social values. In *Sex, Law, and Society in Late Imperial China* (2000), Matthew Sommer suggests that Chinese transgender people are understood as moral predators and religious heterodox in history. Wenjuan Xie, in her doctoral thesis research on historical Chinese transgender people, seconded this comment by framing earlier Chinese transgenders as "ethical objects" and subjects of "the strange" (2014, p. 202). Xie's close reading of the historical discourses of transness also indicates the overlooked malleability of ethical objects and the for potential moral compromises. In her book, *The Disposition of Hierarchy and the Late Qing Discourse of Gender Equality* (2000), Liu Jen-peng uses Chuang Tzu's philosophical allegory "Penumbrae Questions the Shadow" to develop her theory on the subsequential and hierarchical relations of different speaking subjects. The allegory contains three speaking positions: the form (*xing*, the form or substance), the shadow of the form (*ying*, the shadow) and the penumbrae (*wangliang*, the subtle shade of the shadow). In the conversation between shadow and penumbrae, the form is absent but also present since the presence of shadow and the penumbrae can only be represented by the form. By adopting this allegory, Liu reveals the unequal structure in the gender equality discourse based on Yin/Yang dialect in the late Qing dynasty. Men and women are mutually complementary to each other on the surface, however, women rely on men to speak, think and present, as revealed in the shadow-form metaphor (ibid., p. 23). The other deviant sexual subjects are thus the penumbrae that cannot exist outside the shadow-form framework. Kuan-Hsing Chen further develops Liu's analysis and argues that,

> *For the Han, the position of human at the top of the hierarchy applies not only to gender relations but also to race and class relations. "We are equal, yet you are not quite human enough to take over my speaking position as a saint" is the psychic mechanism constantly*

mobilized in encounters with the Other, basic formula of self-defence through the maintenance

of psychic superiority. (2010, p. 264)

In Chen's critique of the psyche of the Han Chinese, dehumanisation or half-humanisation of the other is the essential logic in the hierarchical and discriminatory conceptualization of humans. People at the top of the intersectional hierarchy become the authority determining the realness and authenticity of human beings. These Sinophone studies emphasise the importance of taking non-humanisation or dehumanisation as the essential lens to understand the discourse, experience and struggle of Chinese gender-expansive subjects over identity and visibility concepts. The form-shadow-penumbrae metaphor in the Han-Chinese psyche challenges the mainstream framing of the living status quo of Chinese transgender people as the result of identity-based discrimination. It is not only the problem of globalised transgender identity politics but rather the authenticity denial of humanity and gender intelligibility faced by Chinese transgender individuals that forms their struggle as well as their resistance. As Jack Halberstam articulated in *Skin Shows*, "The monster always represents the disruption of categories, the destruction of boundaries, and the presence of impurities" of the truth regime that regulates our aesthetics, humanity and identity (1995, p. 27). Thus, the culturalism tradition of framing transness as stage performance (ambiguous, entertaining and unserious) together with the dehumanisation psyche other the deviant subjects to maintain the truth regime and discursive power in favour of cisnormative patriarchy. This truth regime formulates the unfriendly social attitude and atmosphere inhabited by Chinese transgender people, and this social attitude and atmosphere are especially significant given "the lower exposure rate and public ignorance" (Zhang, 2014, p. 194) of transgender identity in Chinese society.

2.2.2 Transgender in modern China

The concept of sex/sexuality/gender is a colonial construct, especially imposed on those of coloured races (Snorton, 2017). This is also true in the modern history of China where gender identity together with gender transgression was produced by (post)colonialism and a Western scientific-medical-knowledge hegemony. In his book *After Eunuch* (2018), Howard Chiang examined the genealogical discourse and representation of "premodern transsexual" bodies and revealed how sex/gender in modern China has been created and reformulated by Western hegemony and modern scientific knowledge. Western-modern hegemony has produced an epistemological break in China: "from a culturalistic to a nationalist style" that suggests transgressive sex and gender praxis are constructed as "human difference and social identity" (2018, p. 284). Recent studies on transgender experiences in contemporary China have arrested the identity turn in understanding and narrating Chinese transness. Examining the transgender representation in *People's Daily* since the founding of the People's Republic of China, Zhang contended that "discrimination against transgenders in China, as anywhere else, has its deep roots in heterosexual hegemony" (2014, p. 194). However, considering the social status quo of transgender people as the universal discrimination against trans identity is not convincing enough in response to Jun's observation that "Chinese people seldom harm the transgender; instead, they constantly marginalize them, making it hard for this group to live in the society themselves" (2010, p. 350). Susan Mann argued that "the Chinese state or government has historically played an overwhelmingly important role in defining the criteria for performing gendered identities" (2011, p. xvii). The modernisation of China witnessed a more pervasive and prominent role for the state in defining gender and sexuality, from Nationalist Party China to Communist China. Mann believes the active and leading role of the modern state in medically-pathologically defining and politically governing deviant gender makes China unique from other industrial nations. However, the post-socialist and post-opening-up China might tell a different story.

Contemporary China can be seen as a post-socialist state for its state-led marketisation and its remaining socialist ideology and aspirations (Bao, 2020). Along

with the opening-up policy and economic reform, the Chinese state withdrew from providing social care and promoting gender sameness as it did in the socialist era (Meng & Huang, 2017). The state-led marketisation resulted in the revitalisation of the patriarchal gender order and intersectional gender and class inequality. Against this historical and political-economy backdrop, both culturalist and post-socialist lenses offer conceptual tools for Chinese queer studies. The Chinese term *tongzhi* – literally meaning people of the same will and comrades in both republican and socialist China – has been appropriated to produce queer identity, culture and knowledge in China (Wong, 2018). In *Queer Comrades* (2018), Hongwei Bao traced the genealogy of *tongzhi* discourse and subjectivity in China, changing from revolutionary comrades in the socialist era to queer in post-socialist time. *Tongzhi* was queered in Hong Kong as a de-pathologized and de-stigmatised creation of indigenous identity for Chinese sexual minorities in place of *tongxinglian* (homosexuality) and was later introduced to mainland China and other Sinophone societies. Bao insightfully considered *tongzhi*, queer comrade, as a signifier denoting "different types of subjectivity created by different power relations and governmentalities, or the rationality and techniques used to govern people in a society" (2018a, p. 33). The post-socialist condition combines the shifting governmentality of today with "the continuing existence and gradual erasure of China's socialist past and the state's active incorporation of neoliberal capitalism" (ibid., p. 4), shaping the subjectivity, social imaginaries and power relations of queer comrades. Queer comrade, together with the post-socialist condition in which it is embedded, forms a theoretical and linguistic disruption of the international LGBTQ ideology and agenda. As declared at the 1996 Chinese Tongzhi Conference:[18]

Certain characteristics of confrontational politics, such as 'coming out', mass protests, and parades may not be the best way of achieving tongzhi liberation in the family-centred, community-oriented Chinese societies, which stress the importance of social harmony. In

---

[18] The first Tongzhi Conference was held in Hong Kong in 1996, with approximately 200 people from the Chinese-speaking world in attendance.

formulating the tongzhi movement strategy, we should take the specific socio-economic and cultural environment of each society into consideration.

Different from the Western-centric scholarly and medical gaze, *tongzhi* discourses pay more attention to the special social, cultural and economic conditions in post-socialist China. The sex/gender system in post-socialist China experienced an epistemological shift and the emergence of alternative truth regimes. Scholars' views on the gender truth regime in the new social and cultural conditions in post-socialist China derive from two perspectives: cultural logic and neoliberal political economy. The former strand focuses on the new forms of subjectivity developed with the post-socialist transformation from singular socialist collectivity to heterogenous, discontinuous and unified eclectic culture, operating in a centralised political and media structure (Berry, 2004; Lu & Lu, 2001), while the latter strand marks the withdrawal of the state in regulating sex, gender and sexuality and providing social resources in this regard (Rofel, 2020). The diverse culture and ontological sources of subjectification in post-socialist China merge the socialist (dis)articulation of the self with the neoliberal ambivalent, self-reliant and marketized self, yielding a special discourse network for the formation of subjectivity. Individuals, especially marginalised groups like transgender people, must rely on the kinship community, family and the self rather than on social institutions and the state to gain access and resources for gender transition and recognition. In this sense, the post-socialist condition of transgender people's authenticity claims in response to dehumanisation and other social marginalisations can be placed in dialogue with the broader body of (trans)gender studies in post-welfare societies which emphasise familiarisation and neoliberal responsibility.

In contemporary and post-socialist China, both Chineseness and transness are cross-cultural and multi-sourced concepts in theory as well as practice, related to new cosmopolitan trans cultures in neighbouring Asian countries and Sinophone societies.[19]

---

[19] The imagination and popularity of *renyao* among ordinary Chinese people originated from crossdressing performances in Hongkong and Taiwan and is closely bound to the transsexual sex/tourist industry in Thailand. The sensational subculture of *Weiniang* (fake girl) in China is deeply influenced by Japanese ACG, crossplay and Otokonoko subculture.

An emerging body of Sinophone trans study has made an essential contribution to trans studies and Chinese trans issues. As US-based queer historian Howard Chiang argues, "transness has always (already) been produced from multiple geographical and temporal sites" (Chiang, 2021, p. 221). The knowledge production at the margins of the Chinese mainland and Sinophone societies such as Taiwan and Hong Kong deconstructs a totalised imagination of Chinese transness (Chiang, 2021; Chow, 2018; Lin, 2020). Through the provincialized examination of the diverse trans discourses and multi-histories in Sinitic-language communities, a complicated and de-mainland-centric transtopian landscape presents itself. The historical and prevalent framing of transness as *renyao* (human monster, or human prodigy) (Sommer, 2002), dating back no later than Ming dynasty Chinese, is a vivid example of the refashioning of traditional beliefs and modern medical-science narratives in post-socialist China. In *Transtopia in the Sinophone Pacific*, Howard Chiang states that the connotation of *renyao* was transformed in Chinese-speaking societies from dehumanised queerness threatening the bio-social order to "gender dislocation, sex transformation, same-sex relations, the boundaries and meaning of humanism, and prostitution" (2021, p. 97). This occurred following the drastic epistemological shift influenced by Western medical science in the 1920s and 1930s and the transsexual sex industry in East and South-East Asia since 1990s. The meaning shifts of *renyao* signify the dominant dehumanisation and commodification of transgender subjects and channel authenticity denials against transness in contemporary China.

Bringing together the trans study of imperialist, modern and post-socialist China, shifting the focus of Chinese trans studies from a gender-identity lens to the investigation of gender authenticity practices is not only a gesture that resonates with the post-identitarian turn. Instead, the authenticity lens brings Chinese trans studies back to the very cultural, historical, political and discursive context in which Chinese transness is situated. It allows knowledge production to happen and flow elsewhere that is different from the more theorised transgender experiences. The authenticity lens looks at the construction of authenticity both in how Chinese transgender individuals present their practices to normative beliefs of gender identities and how their

experiences present themselves to Western (trans)gender theories. As Jen-Peng Liu and Naifei Ding's metaphorical application of the form-shadow-penumbrae suggests, lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgender peoples in Chinese history and gender culture were marginalised in a ghostly and non-human position without full subjectivity (Liu & Ding, 2005). In the continuous interrogation between the shadow and penumbrae (the shadow of shadow), the originality and subjectivity of form are at stake. In this sense, the ghostly and dehumanised position works both as the de-subjectification and critical subversion of the further marginalised subjects, such as Chinese transgender people. Non-conforming gender subjects in history have long been framed as non-human and deprived of ontological intelligibility. This subjectivity and authenticity denial of transgender people is prominent across historical and geopolitical borders and still structures the intelligibility of transness today. A great deal of research has captured the revitalised heteronormative gender order and enlarging gender inequality between men and women in post-socialist China (Anagnost, 2008; Meng & Huang, 2017; Sun, 2014). Inspired by Liu and Ding, this thesis investigates a highly invisible and marginalised penumbrae in the binary gender system: gender non-conformity.

Some scholars, especially those from Sinophone societies, have made important contributions to understanding the subjective experiences of sex/gender minorities living in dehumanised ghostly positions. Taiwanese scholar Josephine Chuen-juei Ho (2009) creatively captured the phenomenal copycatting production mode "*Shanzhai*" in the Chinese mainland in the late-capitalist globalisation chain and appropriated *Shanzhai* to conceptualise the possibility for non-normative people to (re)produce the self and alternative gender culture.[20] Mediated by globalised marketisation, media, information technology and communication platforms, non-normative and variant sex/gender production is made possible through the modularisation and articulation of individuals' bodies, sex, and gender. The flexible appropriation of modularised gender components resonates with the *Shanzhai* production that is neither necessarily

---

[20] Professor Ho published the article "SZ Gender/Sexuality: Modulisation and Contemporary Sex/Gender Production" (山寨性／別：模組化與當代性／別生產) on her personal archive website in 2019. Retrieved from https://sex.ncu.edu.tw/jo_article/2009/12/.

subversive nor merely imitative. Through the modularised articulation of the inconsistent body, identity, desire and gender practices, gender non-conforming individuals can disrupt the dichotomous boundaries between mainstream/marginal and truth/fakeness. *Shanzhai* productions of the gendered self pose challenges to essentialist discourses of gender originality and lead to a post-human liberation from the heteronormative gender-binary truth regime. Taiwanese queer media scholar Chwen-der Lin's study of a *Yao* community in North-eastern China provides a contemporary and provincialized theorisation of transness in the Chinese mainland. *Yao* (monster) refers to "people who make a living by male-to-female cross-dressing prostitution" (Lin, 2020, p. 67). Adopting Ho's *Shanzhai* conceptualisation of gender/sexuality production, Lin argued that the gender practices of *Yao* can also be understood as a parodic challenge to international transgender identity politics and ideology and the bio-essentialism/social-constructivism dichotomous framing of gender. The copycatting and creative modularisation in *Yao*'s gender practices transforms fakeness into a transcending gesture against the originality of bio-centric and cisnormative binary genderism. These Sinophone scholars have provisionally diverted Chinese trans study from the identity politics-based lens and redirected it to examining the truth regime that regulates transgender intelligibility and the authenticity struggle and construction of transgender individuals.

As Hines (2006) reminds us, the authenticity question about in what sense transgender identity is true is very likely to fall into the trap of universalism and is unhelpful in accounting for the diversity of transgender identity and experience. What this study tries to contribute to the literature is to ask what truth regime haunts transgender discourse and praxis and how transgender individuals negotiate authenticity with/against the truth regime. Davy (2010) considers the agentic negotiation of authenticity as intrinsic to trans subjectivity and the negotiation of trans authenticity often takes the form of medical-legal discourses. The macro-social structures and gender norms which make the negotiation of authenticity 'intrinsic' to transgender individuals and the mediation of technology and discourse through which

transgender individuals negotiate and make sense of their identity, need to be examined to reveal the performative process of transgender identity construction.

Ferrara (2016) proposes the notion of reflective authenticity in response to the debate between essentialists and constructivists on what is meant by authenticity in the age of identity politics. For Ferrara, the concept of authenticity with an emphasis on reflexivity brings together self-recognised individual "difference" with normativity shared with others "without sacrificing one to the other" (2016, p. 26). This concept is useful in the sense that agents are neither unconscious in their identity construction through the repetitive reification of social norms nor actively practising a pre-discursive essential self without social constraints. Individuals possess agency in positioning themselves and gaining the feeling of authenticity from different, competing, and sometimes contradictory paradigms of knowledge, norms and structure. This agency is also experienced in the recitation, misuse, and production of knowledge based on existing and accessible knowledge. This is important in the sense that transgender people are not only reciting norms but living with the constant questioning and denying of their gender authenticity. This thesis aims to investigate how trans individuals practice and make sense of gender authenticity in the digital and dehumanising context found in China. By arguing that Chinese transgender experiences could be better comprehended as an authenticity-related issue and struggle rather than gender identity, it is thus essential to reflect on and respond to the "crisis in authenticity" (Turkle, 2007, p. 501) and "fascination for authenticity" (Syvertsen & Enli, 2020, p. 1269) that claims to be provoked by digital technologies. The interdisciplinary field of trans media and communication studies is inspiring in this regard.

2.3 Trans media and communication studies

As discussed previously, performativity theory reveals the processual and dynamic construction of gender through the discursive repetition of norms, while it is very difficult to capture the change of the norms through what has been said about performativity. The performativity lens helps to identify agency from the "break and

ruptures" of existing gender norms in transgender people's practices (Gambetti, 2022, p. 66). Yet, it is unclear how breaking and rupturing might be made possible and what effect might ensue, especially in new techno-social environments. Trans media representation studies have made a major contribution to understanding the ways in which trans representation on mass media, social media, and alternative media productions shapes the (in)visibility politics of trans communities and reinforces/challenges the symbolic system of gender binarism and cisgenderism (Billard, 2016; Barcelos, 2019; Abbott, 2013; Barker-Plummer, 2013). Aside from the mass media representation and cultural production of trans, the self media of trans people afforded by digital platforms are also a key agenda in trans media and communication studies. Digital trans studies have written extensively about the digital gender practices of trans individuals that diverge from the conventional gender order through alternative means of embodiment and expression. This emerging field contributes to rethinking classical gender theories by examining the complexity of performative gender practices and the new techno-social conditions and gender order people engage with in today's digital era.

Schilt and Lagos (2017) identify three areas in the 'gender difference paradigm': identity and social location, organisation and institutional context, and methodological transformation. The phenomena these three subareas address have been, if not reconfigured, at least expanded in the digital and mediatised world. I see potential in my close reading of trans media and communication studies, which might lead to a third paradigm subsequent to Schilt and Lagos's two-paradigm model. I tentatively name the third paradigm the 'gender expansive paradigm' to identify the emerging literature focusing on the diverse (dis)embodied gender experiences of transgender people in digital and mediated forms. The gender expansive paradigm extends the gender difference paradigm by focusing on how digital platforms afford technologically and socially alternative or new ways of doing (trans)gender. For instance, we are witnessing an extending list of options for gender identity on Facebook that allows new expressions of gender identity in virtual spaces, while at the same time recodifying gender variety into binarism (Bivens, 2017). The organisational and institutional

context in the digital world also transforms transgender people's strategic use of social media as a counter public and safe space (Jenzen, 2017). Transgender practices online are deeply influenced by the growing intervention of algorithmic platform powers in trans communities (Gieseking, 2017). The expansive forms of data transgender people produce in their digital gender practices, and the roles of new stakeholders such as platforms and digital surveillance, urge scholars to keep pace. In general, the ongoing mediatisation of daily life has afforded reconfiguration of the lived human experiences of time and space (Couldry & Hepp, 2018). The mediatisation of transgender everyday life, on the one hand, influences the gender practices of transgender people worldwide and, on the other, compels researchers to rethink the theoretical challenges new empirical findings might bring about. Trans media scholar Thomas Billard, in their recent contouring and reflection on trans studies as a post-discipline, calls for relocating trans studies at the junction of humanity, social science and biomedical inquiry (2022, p. 3). Transgender media and communication study captures the important juxtaposing lines of digital mediatisation and transgender experiences with a node that critically examines the boundaries of materiality/discourse, normative/subversive and virtual/real.

2.3.1 Transgender media representation

A popular line of trans media and communication study focuses on transgender people's representation in the mainstream, social, or alternative media (Billard, 2016; Steinbock, 2017; Theunissen & Favero, 2021; Kraidy, 2013). Within this body of work, researchers recognise media representation as the powerful meaning-making process that reproduces stereotypes and gender norms or embodies subversive intervention into the mainstream picturing of transness. As Koch-Rein, Yekani and Verlinden state, transgender people are "no longer represented as spectacular signifiers of gender variance", but instead "populate diverse narrative universes" in TV series, cinema, and digital media (2020, p. 3). Indeed, the representation of transgender people in various forms of media has become more diverse, especially on social media, as transgender people have more autonomy over the desired representation of themselves. These media

representations deviate from the previous sensational, psychological and problematic images of trans people in the transphobic media gaze (Koch-Rein et al., 2020). Moreover, trans representation has been deemed essential to the trans identity politics that seek to obtain visibility, gain voices, as well as establish community (Raun, 2015, 2016; Stryker & Aizura, 2013). Many transgender individuals rely on these media representations to get to know the terminology to describe themselves and build connections with other trans people (Beemyn & Rankin, 2011).

However, researchers have criticised this body of work by warning that media representation does not alone solve the social crisis of transgender people and that higher visibility does not signify better social conditions (Gossett, 2017; Koch-Rein et al., 2020). Representation of transgender people in mainstream media is argued to be reproducing normative transgender citizenship and regulating the trans communities by excluding certain trans lives (Kunzel, 2014). In addition, such visibility and media representation is disproportionately distributed throughout the trans communities, such as among under-represented trans males (Raun & Keegan, 2017). Some scholars draw on neoliberalism, queer nationalism and post-feminism critics to argue that the visibility of transgender people in popular media has only made transness a more marketable target for commercial purposes and individualised successful myth (Booth, 2011; Enke, 2012). Some transgender scholars have labelled contemporary Western transgender politics as a "time of trans visibility" (Lee, 2020, p. 562) when the trans communities no longer lacks visibility in media representations but rather suffers over-visibility, leading to violence and inequality. In sum, critical studies have raised vital challenges towards identity-based transgender politics and visibility promises through examining the normativity, in-community inequality and over-visibility of transgender media representation.

A growing normativity trend has become visible together with the booming visibility of transgender people in political, social and cultural sectors (Barcelos, 2019; Bradford & Syed, 2019; Jones, 2019). It is time to decentralise the representation/identity/visibility frame in transgender knowledge production and expand the boundary thinking to take foreground diverse transgender experiences from

different classes, sexualities, ages, ethnicities and nationality backgrounds. I second Aren Aizura's call for a theoretical turn in trans studies to redirect identity politics in an "anti-identarian direction" and refocus on bodily experiences and moments when fixed identity categories are disrupted, be they binary genders or transgender identity categories (2012, p. 135). Many of the studies in the discussed literature are Western-centric with "implicit whiteness, U.S.-centricity, Anglophone bias, and sometimes the suspect ways in which the category transgender has been circulated transnationally" (Stryker & Aizura, 2013, p. 4). Stryker's assertation of transgender's "First world origin that is currently being exported for Third World consumption" (2006, p. 14) might be the most trenchant critique, and global media and cultural industries play an essential role in its trajectory (Billard & Nesfield, 2020; Chiang, 2014). Paying more academic attention to underexplored non-Western trans communities and experiences may help digital trans studies scholars to detour from the classical path of an identity/visibility lens and expand the knowledge of displaced, unsettled and unrecognised gender practices.

Chinese queer/trans media scholars have made a thought-provoking contribution with a context-specific analysis of the complexity of media, identity politics and Chinese queer/trans communities. Baril considers the contemporary booming media representation of trans people in the news, film, TV, and various forms of cultural and artistic production in the West as "the period of trans* hyper-visibility" (2018, p. 19). This hyper-visibility is related to the open and commercialised media system and more active trans civic movements and identity politics (Billard, 2022). However, such Western media and political contexts vary drastically from the Chinese media ecology and the high invisibility of trans communities in China. Hongwei Bao's (Bao, 2018b, 2021b) work in queer/trans community media, such as the Beijing Queer Film Festival and documentaries, convincingly shows how the intensified media surveillance system restricts LGBTQ visibility and queer activism in China. The media censorship shapes the queer communities into a "culturally sensitive type of political activism" characterised by community-led cultural production and expression of queer identities rather than a political rights-oriented agenda (Bao, 2021b, p. 49). This highlights the

special role of the Chinese media system in creating liminal gender and sexual minorities, requiring a revaluation of the visibility and identity politics vocabularies in trans media and communication studies. Chinese trans media and communication studies employ mainstream media and state media as the key research objects to investigate the dynamic between state governing and framing of transgender lives and the formation of gender non-conforming subjects (Zhang, 2014; Y. Zhang, 2023). Both Yunying Zhang (2023) and Qingfei Zhang (2014) chronologically embed the transforming media representation of trans in the history of the PRC, and similarly segregate the chronology into three different political-economic phrases by pinpointing important political events: the socialist or Maoist era, the post-reform and opening-up policy era, and the post-Tiananmen Square era. Such a chronological approach, however, takes a progressive view on the transforming media representation in the PRC that frames the socialist era as purely oppressive and the post-socialist era as "trans-positive" and tolerant toward trans communities (Zhang, 2014, p. 194). I join Bao's (2018a) call for ceasing the coherent and transhistorical reading of nonconforming gender and sexuality which might make invisible the diverse historical queer/trans practices and simplify socialist China as purely concerned with sexual repression. The progressive framework has foregrounded state or mainstream commercial media in framing transness while overlooking the multiple meaning-makings of trans communities and individuals that are alternative to mainstream discourses. To summarise, Chinese trans media and communication studies show the limited visibility and problematic media representation of Chinese trans people, suggesting a different dynamic in its media system and gender identity politics from those found in the West. Against the specific media and political background, it has become urgent to understand the bottom-up discourses and self-curated embodiment of trans communities and individuals mediated by social media and various forms of digital platforms.

2.3.2 Digital trans studies

Digital trans studies contribute to the virtual/real and embodiment/disembodiment debates in (trans)gender studies by examining the mediated lives and digital use of

transgender people. Having said this, my critical reading of this literature suggests that there exists a tendency to overemphasise either technology or transgender people as the sole and absolute agent shaping transgender digital experiences. To surpass such binary thinking, I apply a trans media ecology lens and focus on the meaning-making and negotiation of gender authenticity afforded by digital media ecology to understand trans digital gender experiences.

Early studies on transgender digital use took on a relative techno-utopian perspective. A large body of research has focused on the intersection or 'coupling' of cyber and queer issues that attempted to both rethink and reconfigure materiality, subjectivity and identity since the mid-1990s (Berry et al., 2003; O'Riordan, 2007). The virtuality of the digital world afforded by the Internet and other technologies has allowed scholars to imagine possibilities of progressive gender orders and project an ideal gender landscape for transgender subjects. Several utopian theoretical discourses on the cyber subject have become influential in academia. Wark's (1997) transhumanism and Turkle's (1997) identity play theory assumed the cyber subjects to be elective and free-flowing, in collusion with the fluidity of identity suggested in queer theory. In the early literature on Internet studies, the Internet was argued to have benefitted vulnerable people by providing a safe space for identity experimentation, passing and performance and making space for the fluidity of identity and community creation (Ben-Ze'ev, 2005; McKenna & Bargh, 1998; Lewis, 1995). For instance, passing, which refers to the erasure or assimilation of 'trans' traits and performing legible cisgenderness, is easier to practice through 'gender swap' filters (Goetz, 2022). In general, scholars advocate for the Internet's utopian perspective through the narratives of safer spaces and more autonomy given to trans individuals and free identity exploration with fewer gender norms (Buss et al., 2021; Cannon et al., 2017).

These ideal theorisations of the queer subject and the cyber subject seem to intersect and share some common arguments, such as the fluidity and disembodiment of identity. However, empirical studies on the post-1994 commercialisation of computer-mediated communications have suggested that queer subjects were stratified into fixed identity hierarchies, even online, and that the bodily embodiment and anxiety

about authenticity were still important factors in cyber-subjectivity and queerness formation (Munt et al., 2002; O'Riordan, 2007). Internet-mediated communication may allow individuals to transcend embodied gender identity categories, but filter, category, and grouping functions and affordances have helped to fix non-normative gender identity and sexual orientations into hierarchal or stratified categories within a sexual and gender minority. Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), according to Karl (2007), are a part of the heterosexual normative society, constituting and reproducing gender binary norms in everyday practice. From this viewpoint, cyberspace projects the offline world and mediates the reproduction of social norms (Helsper, 2021). A dystopian perspective is emerging in trans media and communication studies, which suggests that queer users are suffering online violence, censorship and harassment (Wakeford, 2000; MacAulay & Moldes, 2016).

The questions of whether the Internet does good or bad to a socially marginalised group, whether it unites the trans communities, or whether it provides a brand-new utopia seem to fail in offering a comprehensive and constructive understanding of the digital lives and authenticity praxis of transgender people. This is because both utopian and dystopian viewpoints of the roles the Internet plays in transgender digital interactions show a techno-determinist perspective that totalizes the identity-shaping power of digital technology and ignores the agency and affordances of transgender people. The techno-determinist perspective fails to address the complicated and nuanced everyday life and digital practices of transgender individuals.

Another line of thinking goes to the other extreme and deems transgender individuals as being fully strategic and empowered users who use digital platforms to gratify certain needs. Taking online self-representation as an example, the Internet is argued to empower transgender individuals' gender performance and self-representation in multiple forms, such as textual autobiography, graphic documentation and video streaming (Prosser, 1998). Coining the term 'computer cross-dressing', Stone (1994) suggested that online communication enables people to experiment with gender by passing in a safe environment because gender identity is detached from the physical body. In these studies, the Internet affords and thus empowers socially marginalised

people in online communication by making the physical body absent or unnecessary. Without the presence of the body, transgender people, for example, can express and speak freely without fear of judgement or violence based on the citation of other's bodies and gender expression. These arguments for the empowerment of body absence in communication have been heavily contested regarding the relation between body absence, identity expression and related aggression and oppression (Wood & Smith, 2004). Online embodiment and self-representations are argued to constitute real/actual identities (Van Dijck, 2013), which challenge the concept of virtual identity and the distinction between public and private, claiming that an online identity mediated by social media platforms is real and has concrete and tangible consequences (Zhao et al., 2008). However, Haraway (1991) utilised a performative lens and transcended the debate on virtual/real identity to argue that the emerging digital communication technologies and online space could mediate performative play through which queer identity is constructed. The available functions and affordance of users shape how transgender people may practice, experiment with and perform gender and how they negotiate identity and interact with the (imagined) audience through online representation. Investigating transgender people's vlog use, Raun (2010) came up with the concept of screen-birth to claim that media has become not only an archiving tool for documenting and manifesting the 'reborn' transition but also a space enabling learning and experimenting with the performance of gender identity and even the transformation and production of identity. From this viewpoint, the Internet or social media, specifically, are more than just mediating the process of identity construction as the affordances of technology are deeply involved in the rebirth or production of gender identity. An ethnographic study of Chinese live streamers and gender performativity demonstrated that the gender ambiguity and queer body of heterosexual male cross-dressing performers were celebrated by fans and even the platform, destabilising the gender norms of the audience and blurring the line between parody and authenticity (Zhang & Hjorth, 2017). These cross-dressing performers perfected their performances by improving their make-up skills and learning feminine gestures and facial expressions. Although these streamers' performances and bodies were consumed by the heterosexual

male gaze, the performers expressed their agency by maintaining control over their representation and visibility.

A common characteristic shared by different forms of self-representation is documenting and making gender performance and complex, diverse gender identities visible to certain audiences. It is through visibility that self-representation plays a specific role in identity construction, as argued in the literature discussed above. Considering that the Chinese trans communities are mostly silent in the official discourse and the public sphere, being seen may be essential for transgender individuals, as well as the community as a whole, and the Internet contributes to increased visibility (Stryker, 2006; Whittle, 2006). According to Ferreday and Lock (2007), gender performances are not simply created by individuals but are constantly reproduced through the (privileged) gaze. The media representation of transgender has been argued to pathologize and even terrorise trans in the name of increasing trans visibility (Fischer, 2019). In this sense, the intervention of self-generated online representation by transgender people is important not only at the individual identification level but also at the community and societal level. Some researchers, however, have provided a different interpretation of the empowerment effect of online representation and communication. Harrison (2010), for instance, investigated queer people in virtual chatrooms and revealed that the conversation in these chatrooms was reduced to superficial and stereotypical speech, which reinforced rather than disrupted gender-binary norms and limited rather than complicated identity exploration. Vlogging on YouTube has been a popular way for young transgender people to document body transformation, but normally, these transgender vloggers celebrate how their life has improved after receiving hormone therapies and surgeries and consuming certain products that help to embody rigid femininity or masculinity. Siebler (2012) critiqued that these online performances reveal how the capitalist culture pushes transgender people to believe that they can embody their 'authentic' identity only by consuming certain products, such as hormones, and undergoing surgeries. From this viewpoint, trans self-representation online has not created a subversive narrative of the traditional gender regime but, instead, regulates and educates transgender individuals with norms

of how to be a standard and acceptable transgender person. Either way of thinking, be it positive or negative toward online self-representation of transgender individuals, takes on a user and gratifications lens which sees transgender people as users rather than gendered agents and digital gender practices as means rather than performativity.

Bringing my critiques of the two lines of thinking together, I find the "trans* media ecology" (Hatfield, 2021, p. 6) framework insightful to reach a situational and contextual understanding of transgender individuals' digital gender practice. Drawing on the media ecology theorisations of Neil Postman and Strate, Hatfield considers media to be the technologies that mediate transgender people's "experiences of time, space, culture, and power" as well as the social organisation of the transgender cultures and communities (2021, p. 6). The trans* media ecology lens focuses on the co-constitutive relationship between media technology as ecology and environment, mediated trans culture and community, and trans people's bodily experience and gender practice. The media ecology lens turns the research focus to the phenomenological examination of transgender individuals' gender construction through their alternative experiences and perceptions of temporality and spatiality in digital media ecology. While temporal and spatial gender practices are the keywords in trans/queer studies, the social and technological affordance of digital applications complicates and moderates the trans time and space significantly.

> *We are dissociated from our bodies, our loved ones, and our general environment. This dissociation throws us into a far future in which we are safe after we have passed and found a bodily and social home. However, this future is imagined and unreachable, resulting in us being out of time.* (Israeli-Nevo, 2017, p.38)

Trans scholar Israeli-Nevo's auto-ethnographic reflection considers the imagined trans futurist temporality and unreachable bodily and social home as essential forms of trans suffering. In her manifestation, transphobic violence takes the form of depriving the epistemological presence of the temporal living and home feeling of trans individuals. Being detached from the general environment becomes the footnote of transgender

intelligibility. Digital technologies, however, have been argued to reconfigure the relationship between the body (physical and data), sensual environment (digital time and space) and reality about the self (Couldry & Hepp, 2018).

The sensibility of temporality, essential to trans identification, might transgress the material border in the digitally mediated environment, allowing diverse experiences of time. Horak (2014) introduced the concept of "hormone time" to refer to the linear and teleological understanding of transition and subjectivity in popular transgender discourse. In the hormone time discourse, utopian futurism is implied, and medical intervention is deemed necessary. Similarly, Raun (2015) investigated trans man YouTube vlogs on transition and argued that these videos convey a developmental and progressive view of transition. Malatino highlighted that hormone time and other temporality metaphors, such as 'it gets better', represent "an affective orientation to futurity" (2019, p. 635). The trans discourse of hormone time and being reborn after the transition, in this sense, is a structured feeling that creates a divide between pre-transition and in-transition time as undesirable and post-transition time as promising. The enchantment with the future as a liveable and valuable life, however, produces a backwards discourse of the present and the past and creates the subjectivity of "lag" as Malatino states (ibid., p. 641). Indeed, the linear, directional and teleological understanding of trans temporality is not only the utopian anticipation of futurity but also a kind of neoliberal affection. Miller (2019) critiqued the linear discourse of time in transcultural production on YouTube as transformative, arguing that these discourses are dominated by privileged white straight and binary trans people. Those who have no access or willingness for bodily transition of any kind are stigmatised as the left-behind and their diverse lives and sufferings are framed as lagging. Adopting Berlants' conceptualisation of cruel optimism, Malatino calls for a reconsideration of the deferred and lagging interregnum as "multiply enfolded" (2019, p. 645). What Malatino argues here is for an alternative perspective that recognises the relationship between body, temporality and gender identity as an ongoing negotiation that encompasses and opens up a diversity of possibilities. Examining the structure and inequality that control or deny trans temporality and the agency that individuals practice making sense of

temporality on both the individual and community level can broaden our vision in discussing the negotiation and mediatisation of authenticity.

Trans/queer geography offers another vital axis for unpacking trans authenticity. David (2020, p. 132) argued that "the time has come for trans studies to think more critically about spatiality". In *Mobile Subjects* (2018), Aren Aizura shifted the theoretical focus away from the overemphasis on chrononormaticity and linear time in trans studies and the uncritical obsession with temporal metaphor in the popular and mainstream discourse of transgender. Through a close reading of spatial metaphors of the geographic journey, Aizura revealed the political economy of inequality and neoliberalism embedded in the spatial logic of mobility and migration which produces a normative imaginary that "the Global North is more livable than the Global South, and the metronormative assumption that urban areas are more livable than rural areas" (ibid., p. 96). In the critical analysis of Western transgender clients' global journey to Asian countries for gender reassignment surgery, Aizura identified the orientalism in transnational transgender mobilisation and the biomedical stratification of trans bodies in the global sense. Aizura's recalling of spatiality studies and conceptualisation of metronormativity are very useful theoretical tools to investigate the political economy of transgender knowledge production and unevenness, as well as transgender normativity. The discussion of spatiality and mobilisation is closely connected to the medical journey and the geographic imaginary of body modification; it overlooks, however, the discursive and material role of spatiality in trans individuals' meaning-making and negotiation of identity. Further questions can be asked in this regard: how do transgender people attach meanings to migration and mobility as a creation of a feasible discursive field for authenticity and identity negotiation? How do they celebrate or grieve the diaspora from rural to urban and local to global, as well as the status of being stranded?

The Internet is often imagined or narrated with a geographic connotation such as cyberspace. Applying a critical reading of the spatiality of the Internet and the offline world may also be helpful in understanding the authenticity negotiation of transgender individuals. A large body of research on the influence of the Internet and emerging

communication technologies on the trans communities has argued that the Internet is an important site for transgender individuals and communities to increase visibility, provide more access to information and resources, build networks and to increase positive representation (Phillips, 2006; Shelley, 2008; Ghazali & Nor, 2012). In addition to the resources the Internet has been argued to offer, some researchers have suggested that documenting the transition process and gender performance in online spaces is essential to transgender individuals' identity construction (Mclnroy & Craig, 2015). As a result of offline restrictions and online benefits, many transgender people, as argued by Whittle (1998), tend to hide their identity and gender performance offline to avoid sanctions and are deeply involved with their identity in the digital world. This creates an ironic situation where transgender individuals may experience and perceive 'realness' in the virtual world. In an ethnographical study of the transgender online community, Marciano (2014) argued that the online space created and inhabited by transgender users is a 'VirtuReal' sphere where virtual experiences compensate for offline inferiority and where offline constraints coexist.

For Pfitzmann and Hansen, virtual identity refers to personal data stored and interlinked by digital applications but contains the connotation of "unreal, non-existent, seeming" (2010, p. 32). However, many empirical studies regarding the relationship between the online and offline worlds have demonstrated that the split between 'virtual' and 'real' is artificial (Taylor, 2022; Marciano, 2014), that there is a connection between the cyber self and the 'real body' (Siebler, 2012). As Zizek wrote, "the vision of cyberspace opening up a future of unending possibilities of limitless change, of new multiple sex organs, etc., conceals its exact opposite: an unheard-of imposition of radical closure" (2004, p. 802). To be specific, the physical body may mimic the cyber self or adjust the body to match the simple and narrow descriptions of their physical bodies presented online and vice versa. The multiple and diverse gender practices in different mediation landscapes have created a tension between self-mediatisation and identity justification.

There exist opposing arguments against the widely articulated understanding that online space affords a more fluid and flexible being, while identity in the offline world

is more stable and fixed. For instance, Ferreday and Lock (2007) studied transvestite representation in blogs and argued that online cross-dressing is stable in the blog format, while offline experiences of the transvestite were presented as fragmented and flexible. This is probably true in transgender issues considering that transgender individuals may practice and express gender identity mainly online. As I will further argue in Chapter 5, greater perceived self-control over online spaces and practices has offered more possibilities for self-mediatisation in comparison with the limited and regulated offline space. Specifically, the online space may have become a major platform on which transgender people experiment with or practice their durable and reiterative gender performance according to social norms, although these social norms and rules of gender performance originate from the social and cultural context of the offline space in which they were brought up. Therefore, it is important to ask whether and how transgender people's gender practices are structured and mediated since they seem to inhabit a different ecology of time, space, discursive culture, and politics online. And most importantly, how do they performatively navigate the construction of gender authenticity through mediated experiences of time, space, discursive culture, and politics when digital gender practices are often unrecognised and deemed virtual/fake?

2.4 Performative authenticity as the technology of the self and social technology

Digital trans studies address transgender digital gender practices from the lenses of media representation and self-embodiment, foregrounding identity politics and trans visibility as its key agenda. Techno-determinism and user and gratification theory orientations inform the separation of technology, transgender and gender performativity. It is essential to employ a trans media ecology lens to understand the fundamental role of digital technologies in shaping or shifting the social-technological conditions for gender performativity. Moreover, this thesis asks how transgender people practice and make sense of gender authenticity through their everyday digital use in new social-techno conditions. Section 2.3 explained the importance of the authenticity lens from a historical and empirical perspective. Chinese transgender people do not simply suffer

from rigid gender categories/identity-based violence, but rather from authenticity denial that is related to both the dehumanising cultural framing of transness in history and the post-socialist social-political condition. What lies at the centre of inquiry in this thesis is thus how transgender people live with authenticity denial culturally and socially, and how they manage to construct alternative senses of authenticity through digital gender practices. In what follows, I elaborate on my approach to performative authenticity as the conceptual framework for this study.

2.4.1 Performative authenticity as trans technology of the self

The notion that authenticity reflects the ideal self comes from Western philosophic and historical traditions (Guignon, 2004). Kreber and colleagues (2007) identify authenticity as multidimensional through their topology of moral, humanist, existential and critical conceptualisations. For moral philosophers like Charles Taylor, authenticity is believed to be the ideal, natural and morally pure inner self as distinct from the external world that tries to pollute the noble inner self (Taylor, 1992). The moralists consider authenticity as a moral behaviour of the self, emphasising the importance of acting in accordance with one's true values. Aside from moral conceptualisations of authenticity, the humanist ideal of authenticity presumes the existence of "an inner, untouched, and untouchable authentic individual core not impacted by the external world" and asserts that the authentic core "can be expressed, unmediated, and untainted, despite the expression requiring mediation by, and interaction with, the outside" (Dubrofsky, 2022, p. 3). For Heidegger (1967), authenticity is an existential matter. Heidegger believes that authenticity and inauthenticity are two different living states in which one chooses to accommodate the self. If a person chooses to be the real self rather than the presented self in everyday life, then they are in an authentic state. Inauthenticity, and vice versa, refers to the state of losing the self to daily performance and environmental influences (Heidegger, 1967). The demarcation between the true self/performed self implies that authenticity does not come from performance, but rather the expression of the true/real self. In this sense, inauthenticity seems to emerge in the incoherence between the expression and the expressed. Authenticity is thus an

existential experience of being true to oneself (MacNeil & Mak, 2007). Existentialists frame authenticity as the life choices of being that are determined by how people take responsibility for themselves (Kreber et al., 2007). As a post-structuralist, I join critical questioners, such as Adorno (2013), of the assumed untouchable and ahistorical authentic core, while at the same time I extract some useful points from these moralist, humanist and existential conceptualisations of authenticity. Firstly, becoming or achieving a sense of authenticity is the inner motivation and desire of people (Jung, 1973). Secondly, authenticity is a process of becoming, a method of achieving a certain sense of the ideal, be it moral or by choice.

That authenticity in the action of becoming relies on the specific context and individuals' critical awareness of the context and action itself (Adorno, 2013). In other words, authenticity is approached through the reflection on the self in everyday life, the norms from the surrounding environment, and the agentic doing or choices made. Since authenticity is a context-dependent action, be it self-expression, speech acts or other forms of acts, it is sensitive to the changing norms in a certain context and is thus contingent and in flux (MacNeil & Mak, 2007). It is thus performatively constructed in the very practice of the self instead of a given and waiting-to-be-disclosed self. Authenticity is also performative in the sense that it is constructed through the repetition or parody of social norms or the common sense of realness/truth. The wrongdoing, distortion or ironic parody of what is commonly believed to be realness can also be a deductive way of constructing authenticity (Rorty, 1989). The performative lens puts at stake the originality, non-imitation, and legal trustworthiness doctrines of authenticity. Therefore, performative authenticity differs from conventional understandings of authenticity, be it the untouchable core of the inner self or the pure effect of social construction, in the sense of viewing authenticity as a processual, unstable and transforming meaning-making of the self.

Charles Taylor's theorisation of authenticity is very useful for understanding the performative self-construction and self-configuration of authenticity. In *The Ethics of Authenticity*, Taylor (1992) argued that authenticity contains the construction of autonomy and originality and produces the meaning of the self through conversation

with and challenges to social norms and moral regulations. Taylor recognised the potential of socially marginalised individuals and certain communities to actively intervene in the construction of authenticity and recognition of difference. The emphasis on the importance of recognition of difference and autonomy of authenticity construction makes Taylor's authenticity conceptualization an empowering lens, especially for gender and sexual minorities (Orlie, 2004). This echoes the Foucauldian conceptualization of the technologies of the self that show the truth about oneself. Foucault reviewed the self-disclosing genealogy in Hellenistic and Roman periods and early Christianity and coined the concept of "technologies of the self" to refer to the "reflected and voluntary practices by which men not only fix rules of conduct for themselves but seek to transform themselves, to change themselves in their particular being, and to make their life an oeuvre" (Foucault, 2005, p. 10). Combining Taylor's and Foucault's discussions of self-crafting, authenticity is the technologies of the self through which individuals reflect on and practice the ideal self. Technologies do not mean specific tools or certain forms of media, but rather the assemblage of practices and discourses that mediate the expression of the self.

More importantly, authenticity does not equal individualism but rather connotes intersubjectivity in Taylor's theorisation. While Taylor emphasised people's autonomy and self-construction of authenticity, he also argued that authenticity relies on the conditions of conversation, recognition, and the horizon of meaning (Taylor, 1992). Individuals' construction of authenticity gains its meaning and social substances from a certain social group where members share the same horizontal meaning system and agree on the common values for recognition. Therefore, authenticity has both individual and social or community layers. Marlon Bailey's study on the Black queer community could be a good example of double layered understanding of authenticity. In his analysis, epistemological inventiveness is embodied in black queer people's ballroom performance, but also forms a strategic community challenge to the sex/gender/race-based violence in the name of realness (Bailey, 2013). In other words, the construction authenticity can only be interpellated based on a specific and situated set of knowledge and common meaning-making systems. Authenticity as the technology of the self, in

this sense, is not refined to self-innovation or individual meaning-making. Instead, it involves the community horizon of meaning that socialises collectively-made values and provides recognition among both individuals and the community as a whole. This positions the processual construction view of authenticity in the relationship between the self, community, social context, and broader structures.

2.4.2 Performative authenticity as social technology

It is noteworthy that Foucault elaborated on 'technologies of the self' in a specific context where there are fewer power institutions than modern societies regulating and intervening in how authenticity should be crafted. As Adorno's critique of the existentialists' inward-looking framing of authenticity indicates, we should be sensitive to the blind spot of positioning the individual in the centre of authenticity construction without paying attention to the specific social context and structural forces within which individuals express and construct the self (2013). Authenticity is not a self-defined individuation experience achieved merely by the self, but rather a reflexive becoming with a critical awareness of the context that structures the very authenticity construction. Guignon (2004) compared the authenticity discourses throughout history and found that the old belief of authenticity in Christianity related to the ideal self which could be achieved by transforming the current self, while the modern framing of authenticity is to realise and reaffirm the existing pure inner self. Ironically, the promoted inward-looking and crafting of authenticity in modern times has been deeply arrested by ever-more powerful outward forces such as capital, educational, political and cultural institutions.

Guignon's distinction emphasises the emerging culture of authenticity in modern societies. Guignon (2004) contended that there is a culture of authenticity driven by the self-help and self-transformation industry that encourages people to recover how to be their authentic selves. As Sarah Banet-Weiser argued, "authenticity remains central to how individuals organize their everyday activities and craft their very selves" (2012, p. 10), while authenticity has become an essential discursive resource in the branding and consumer culture of today. The discourses of authenticity have been utilised by

capitalism, consumerism, and market logic as the key ingredients for the construction of the neoliberal self. In *Authentic^TM: The Politics of Ambivalence in a Brand Culture* (2012), Sarah Banet-Weiser argued that the authentic self and commodity self are both deeply intertwined in today's brand culture. In her historical analysis of the co-evolution of information technology and commodified gender authenticity culture since the mid-20th century, Banet-Weiser suggested that we should pay special attention to the complex political-economic conditions, information technologies and culture in understanding the making of authenticity.

Media industries have been argued to be another key authenticity production and reproduction force (Adoni & Mane, 1984; Gamson et al., 1992). Enli (2015) proposed the concept of mediated authenticity to elaborate on the relationship between authenticity and media. Enli stated that authenticity is constructed through illusion, contract with the audience, scandals and puzzles as mediated by the media production of trustworthiness, originality, and spontaneity (Enli, 2015). Media frame the meaning-making process and thus shape how people construct, understand, and perceive authenticity. The mediatedness of authenticity is paradoxical in that it is performatively constructed through the disclosure of its own constructed-ness, fallibility and temporariness. Enli described authenticity as mediation that connotes "predictability, spontaneity, immediacy, confessions, ordinariness, ambivalence and imperfection" (Hellwig, 2017, p. 84). Following Teresa de Lauretis's (1989) argument that gender is the product of social technologies, authenticity is also a kind of social technology in transgender people's everyday digital gender practice. It is social technology not only in the sense that social institutions such as capital forces and the media industry enact the social effect of authenticity through mediation. In Varga's (2011) idea of authenticity as a social technology, performative authenticity also assists individuals in presenting the self and authenticity arises performatively in the very action and discursive practices of self-presentation. While authenticity is performatively constructed as informed by social norms and cultural standards, the techno-social codes enforced and mediated by digital media are just as significant. Haimson and Hoffmann (2016) examined Facebook's administrative identity registration and 'real name'

policies and argued that authenticity has become identity enforcement promoted by the platform identity registrar mechanism. Digital platforms can promote a more rigid authenticity code through surveillance and other administrative means, enforcing the users to perform authenticity in certain ways, such as coherent gender expression with gender markers and consistent representation between past and present self (Haimson et al., 2016).

Varga differentiates this productionist social technology of authenticity with the inner sense model of authenticity to highlight the tension between the inner and outer self. Without presuming an abrupt distinction between the binary selves, I highlight in this thesis the two dimensions of authenticity as both the technique of the self and the social technology in discussing the digital gender practice of transgender people. On the one hand, authenticity in digital media allows individuals to demonstrate their selves with agency in a way that is difficult to obtain in the so-called real world. On the other hand, authenticity practices on social media have been argued to be under public surveillance, platform control and the regulation of traditional gender norms (Helsper, 2021). To thread together the two dimensions, I combine performativity and authenticity and take on Taylor's argument of "authenticity as performativity" (2022). For Taylor, authenticity is not a given status embedded in the inner self but a continuous doing of the self and it has a "reality-producing effect" on the self and the world when it is enacted (2022, p. 10). Authenticity is performative also in the sense that it is not the conscious will of the performer who intentionally chooses to act in a certain way to achieve the specific social effect, as Butler's distinction between performance and performativity indicates (Butler, 2011). This is especially insightful when discussing Chinese transgender people's social, cultural or political practices of authenticity on social media. In a society where visibility and collective movement is less possible and social spaces are highly limited, digital gender practice can be seen as individuals' and the community's "expression of the authentic as a reaction to the coercive inauthenticity at large" (Taylor, 2022, p. 5). Through the performative doing of authenticity, transgender subjects reflect on the truth regime that renders their existence intelligible and works on their own meaning-making while at the same time being structured by

the norms and social-techno affordances as mediated by digital technologies.

2.5 Conclusion and Discussion

This chapter has explained the theoretical consideration and positioning of the thesis in its contributions to the trans media and communication studies literature. The positioning is both theory-driven and empirical gap-driven. Performativity theory overcomes the bio-essentialist/constructivist dichotomous theorisation of gender and puts the naturalised and cisnormative belief of the sex/gender nexus at stake. It provides the critical vocabularies of speech act, reiteration, discourse and norms to understand the formation of gender, making possible the knowledge production of non-normative gender. However, both Butler and Butler-informed feminist/queer theories have been criticised for using gender non-conforming experiences as objective evidence rather than subjects in knowledge production. Trans studies have actively engaged in the knowledge production of gender through radical interrogation and lived reflection on materiality/discourse dichotomy. Trans media and communication studies, especially those addressing the digital gender practices of transgender people, launch a new layer of interrogation into the realness/virtuality of gender and configure a radical push for gender theory to take into consideration technology, materiality, and authenticity by centring the digital experiences of transgender people in gender theory.

China makes a complicated and interesting empirical field for studies of this kind because of its historical, cultural, political and social contexts. Chinese studies on non-binary gender subjects in history have shown that transness is understood as a moral predator and theatrical phenomenon, while Western medical science has transformed the traditional epistemology of the gender non-binary into one of disease and sickness in the modernisation process of China. The medical discourse has attached substantial material aspects to the long-existing human monster narrative of transness and further dehumanises transgender people in current public awareness in China. Instead of the identity-politics-based framing that is popular in Western-centric trans studies, this thesis argues for a focus on authenticity struggles and constructions to understand the

everyday gender practices of Chinese transgender people. The authenticity struggle that Chinese transgender people encounter is threefold: discursive-cultural, economic-political, and socio-technological. In terms of discourses, the dominant discourses of transgender in mainstream Chinese society are human-monster and fake girls deriving from Chinese cultural beliefs of transness and modern popular commercial culture from neighbouring Asian and Sinophone regions. Either of these mainstream and popular discourses, whether monstrous or fake, deny the existence, humanity, intelligibility and authenticity of gender non-binary subjectivity. Secondly, the post-socialist condition is marked by the State's retreat from private sectors and welfare support systems. While we are witnessing a more visible return of the state to reclaim the regulation of gender nonconformity offline and online, this thesis is written in and captures a transitional moment when Chinese transgender individuals and communities are managing to self-organise in the liminal digital world. The self-organised authenticity construction is curated in individual and community levels alternative to the truth regime's dehumanising and marginalising of transness. This also leads to the last point of the socio-technological context which is shaped by the State's surveillance and real-name policy while at the same time reconfiguring the everyday gender practices of Chinese transgender people. The socio-technological affordances of digital platforms have been essential to the performative construction of transgender authenticity in the reconfigured discursive temporal and spatial context. Taking these empirical features into consideration, this thesis employs performative authenticity as the framework to examine Chinese transgender people's everyday digital gender practices.

Through a critical reading of the existing literature and the organic process of fieldwork-based reflection, I propose in this thesis the fieldwork-informed conceptual framework of 'performative authenticity' to thread the two dimensions of authenticity – both as technologies of the self and social technologies. Authenticity is performatively constructed through the very discourses and doings of the self and the performative construction of authenticity is mediated by the norms and discursive context. As Butler argued in *Undoing Gender*, the theoretical focus of performativity theory is also on the ever-changing space-time context which is constantly shaped and signified by the

sensual web of "visual, discursive, and tactile relations" (2004, p.217). It is thus processual, temporary, and situated in a localised social context mediated by technologies (Marwick & boyd, 2011). This means in order to understand authenticity practices and meaning-making, we need to pay attention to the norm of authenticity that is deeply shaped by the social and technological context afforded by the digital world. How is (trans)gender constructed through digital practices, and in what sense are these digital embodiments an authentic account? Why and how should we take seriously transgender practices and meaning-making in the so-called virtual world? The performative authenticity framework is situated in the very social-technological context Chinese transgender individuals inhabit in their online and offline interactions. From the fieldwork-informed framework, trans authenticity has both individual and community layers in that trans individuals practice authenticity in and with the specific community or social groups which provide the discursive grounds for meaning-making and recognition. Based on the performative authenticity framework, this thesis asks:

1) What is the techno-social-discursive environment that shapes the norms and conditions of Chinese transgender people's doing of authenticity in digital age?

2) How do Chinese transgender individuals from intersectional positions constitute and negotiate authenticity in such a digital techno-social-discursive environment?

3) How is the authenticity praxis of Chinese transgender people mediatised by digital technology?

Chapter 3 Methodology

I explain in this chapter the methodological rationale and conducts of data collection and analysis methods used to investigate the digital gender practices of transgender people in China. A queer methodology principle employed in conducting sampling, interviewing, observation, and data analysis is discussed in detail in order to make clear how the research questions are operationalised in this project and how I address the methodological dilemma I encounter in the fieldwork. By unpacking the process and learnt lesson of my research journey, I also provide a reflective account of doing empirical trans studies in China in terms of research design and ethics.

This study draws on Halberstam's queer methodology – a creative combination of different methods beyond traditional social sciences' approaches in studying queer people, such as applying problematic surveying trying to "squeeze truth from raw data" (Halberstam, 1998, p. 10). Considering the problematic body of Chinese-written transgender research, of which the majority takes on pathological perspectives, I follow a post-structuralist view of knowledge production by letting data emerge in the interactions between me and transgender participants and the multi sites that are traditionally overlooked or understudied in the existing literature of Chinese trans studies. In light of Butler's (1999) performativity theory, I argue that studies on transgender identity construction and gender practice should consider the interactive participation of respondents and researcher in the whole research process as performative and constructive. As Warner suggests, queer methodology should be a methodology of the marginal which "does not seek to make things intelligible in terms of the heteropatriarchy, but tries to find the words of the margins itself" (Warner, 2004, p. 335). This means researchers need to wander around at the social margins, wherever transgender people inhabit, and collect and analyse data in forms and ways non-conforming to academic doctrines in order to grasp the complexity of the everyday encounter of transgender individuals. In this thesis, entering and experiencing the transgender spaces, online and offline, are equally pivotal sources of data as interviews

and analysing multi-forms of media text produced by transgender interviewees. With what Raun called the "methodological collage" of trans studies (2016, p. 29), I intend to provide a multi-layered and deep scanning of the everyday life of Chinese transgender people in the digital world through engaging with different forms of data and corresponding analysis.

Research ethics are always of concern for studies that involve human subjects, but especially so with research on transgender people because of the vulnerability of the trans communities and the sensitivity of the transgender issue in China. In this thesis, which aims to give voice to the unheard, the questions of for whom, by whom and from what perspectives knowledge is produced lie at the centre (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2007). I consider my study as having an "ontological effect" for Chinese transgender people and intentionally allow agentic participation of transgender respondents through the research design (Dosekun, 2015). In this light, I discuss in detail the ethical and moral concern and reflexivity of doing transgender research in three ways: the agency of respondents; my positionality from a standpoint theory perspective; and the role of ambiguous and para-formal relationship in balancing between projecting anonymity of transgender individuals and making visible transgender everyday lives. I pay extra attention to the role of this study in presenting and thus shaping the identity and self-expression of transgender interviewees participating in my research. Although I take on a post-identitarian stance that refuses to reduce complex gender non-conforming practices into rigid transgender categories (Bao, 2020), transgender terms are used for the sake of communicating my analysis to readers and the fact that identity terms still matter discursively in transgender people's self-narration and gender practices. As defined before, transgender is understood, in line with Susan Stryker, as the gender boundary crossing moves that trouble the social expectations and norms constructed by culture, rather than a fixed gender category (2017). In the research, interviewees are encouraged to self-identify in terms of gender identity and sexual orientation, and I refer to interviewees by their self-defined identity and pronouns in this study. I also make sure to accommodate the possibility that some of the interviewees may use localised terms confined to certain small communities rather than widely used identities,

or refuse to identify themselves with any kinds of identity. In these cases, I describe in detail what they mean and what they do with self-identification. The methodological arrangement and the balancing work of addressing socialised gender identities also apply to my dealing with transgender individuals' names, which is an important kind of gender practice and a key theme of this research (VanderSchans, 2016). To balance presenting the sense-making practices in trans individuals' self-naming and in protecting their confidentiality, I negotiated case by case with interviewees about the thesis's reference to them, taking into consideration identifiability, social-recognisability, and translation. By doing so, this study sheds some light on how trans studies are done that serves a post-identarian and ethical agenda in a surveillance and trans-unfriendly context.

This chapter begins by stating my purpose of researching Chinese transgender people and the post-structuralist ontology/epistemology underneath. I then turn to the research design of interviewing as the main data collecting method and give details of sampling, settings and implementation. Drawing on Pillow's (2003) call for "uncomfortable reflexivity", I highlight the challenges and dilemma I encountered in the fieldwork and decisions made based on my self-reflection. In the next sections, I discuss the analytical framework and explain the way I account for the discursive text as data in this research. The last section discusses the ethical concerns and my reflexivity of doing trans studies.

3.1 Interview and beyond

The transgender subjects' gender formation through performative doing of gender norms structures my post-structuralist approach of studying transgender digital gender practices. Since the research questions are about Chinese transgender people's experience and perception of doing gender online, in-depth interviewing is a promising approach to capture the life experience and lived meanings of people's everyday life world (Kvale, 1994). Understanding the day-to-day experiences and structuration of transgender individuals' lives is essential to gauge the processes of gender

performativity and self-representation. Interviewing transgender people is undertaken in a semi-structured, face-to-face format because, unlike highly structured interviewing and non-structured open discussion, semi-structured interviewing allows the researcher to explore both topics of interest to the researcher and uncharted areas (Aberbach & Rockman, 2002). Interviewing is not uncovering and documenting the hidden truth extracted from the interviewees' words, but instead allows self-narration to be drawn out and the meaning of individuals' everyday life to be negotiated between interviewees and researcher (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). My epistemological approach treats interviewing as the meaning-making process co-constructed during the interaction between transgender respondents and the researcher myself. This means interviewing works for this study as a situated and co-constitutive knowledge production interface where transgender research subjects, researcher, discursive context, and material co-presence encounter each other.

Sally Hines highlights the "queer sociology" approach for trans studies that addresses the identity transgression in the "lived experiences of difference" (2006, p. 64). The emphasis on different gendered experiences encourages the transcending of binary framing of gender as queerly either fluid or conforming, as well as the binary understanding of online/offline space. I approach the difference in queer sociology in two layers: the diversity of sex/gender/sexual practices mediated by (dis)embodied means and divergent demographic, and the social-cultural backgrounds of gendered individuals. The diversity requires a creative combination of methods to capture the nuance and rich life experiences out of the reach of a doctrinal approach. As my fieldwork and analysis will further elaborate, Chinese transgender people's gender practices, especially online, vary drastically among different groups and individuals. Ranging from self-naming, self-writing and self-representation to making their own platforms and games, digital transgender practices transcend the scope of single method and require researchers to make the research design open, flexible and adaptive to unexpected data. Inspired by Pryse's transversal feminist methodology, a trans methodology should also be a transversal methodology overcoming the limits of researcher-centric design and crossing doctrinal methodological boundaries. To be

more specific, a critical methodology design for trans studies should bridge multiple kinds of methods and develop strategies based on the diverse trans lived experiences.

In this light, I involve online and offline observation and media-text-based elicitation interviews into interviewing as both context and sources of data. Through online and offline observation, I am able to immerse myself as an outsider in the discursive and material environment where my interviewees inhabit and extend their participation in this research. The observation in online and offline trans spaces, such as offline gatherings and online chatgroups, allows me to situate the interview data and fieldwork notes in a richer context. The interviewing experiences and interaction with one of my interviewees[21] during fieldwork is a vivid illustration of this point. In the interview, they described herself more as a cross-dresser performer while being relatively reluctant to elaborate on their gender and sexual identification. Following up on the interview, I participated in several private recreation events, including tea house, home party and karaoke, with them and their friends from a local trans community. In these gathering activities, some of their friends gossiped to me that they liked girls but kept it as a secret although most of their friends knew. Based on my post-structuralist approach and epistemology, I consider neither side to be lying or telling the truth. Instead, the seemingly countering "truth" yields a discursive window for me to look into and be more sensitive to the norms of being trans in the local context and the gendered power-structure implicitly that existed between the lines in the interview transcription. These more informal interactions and observations draw me and the interview transcripts back to the environment where transgender interviewees live, think, and speak. In addition, elicitation interviews provide a similar research interface allowing meaning-making to emerge through interviewees' self-narration of the media text they produced and eliciting conversation between me and interviewees. By examining the interviewees' elicitation of the various forms of media text they produce, I had the opportunity to scan the diverse digital gender expressions of transgender

---

[21] The interviewee will remain anonymous even in a pseudonymous sense because there is third party information involved that might compromise identifiability.

people and situate the interviewees' narrations within a personal and material base.

Taking on an intersectionality perspective, this thesis addresses the diverse transgender digital practices by taking into consideration sex/sexual/gender identification together with other social-economic-cultural factors both in analysis and the sampling/recruitment process. The intersectionality approach uncovers the oppression structure functioning through differentiation and categorisation based on gender, class, race, age and ability (Crenshaw, 1991; de Vries, 2015; Gill-Peterson, 2014). Moreover, the intersectionality perspective looks into how marginalised people in the intersecting structure of dominance, experience and internalise gender norms that further reproduces marginalisation (Hatchel & Marx, 2018; Johnson, 2013). Thus, trans studies should centre the "embodied knowledge of people who experience and resist multiple intersection oppressions" to capture the differentiation of transness (Wesp et al., 2019, p. 289).

3.1.1 Sampling and Recruitment

As defined before, transgender is understood in this paper as the practice of crossing and troubling gender boundaries and social expectation, rather than a fixed gender category. This understanding resonates with the diverse identification landscape of the Chinese/Sinophone trans communities where transgender individuals and communities use localised and indigenous gender terms that might not fit well into the mainstream transgender identity categorisations (Chow, 2018; Lin, 2020; Liu, 2022). When interviewees were not sure about the terminology to use in their self-identification, I explained the different terms to them to see if they were comfortable with any of these descriptions. I recognised the possibility that some of them may refuse to identify themselves with any kinds of identities and if so, I describe them in the dissertation through whatever gender performance they experienced in the interview. Although many of the Chinese transgender interviewees were aware of "proper" transgender identity terms such as transgender and trans, many of them used these terms regularly in ordinary conversation. Local terms such as *yaoniang*, MtF/FtM, CD/TS, *Yao'er* were more widely used in different trans communities and the understanding of these terms

varied drastically by person.

Considering the complex identification landscape of Chinese trans communities and the research focus on digital gender practices and meaning-making of transgender authenticity, I applied a post-identitarian approach in conducting sampling and recruiting. To be specific, the sampling and recruiting process was not based on identity categorisation but on events/activities trans individuals took part in and different online/offline trans communities they belonged to. This thesis thus does not aim to present a fully representative study covering all the gender identification terms in the western-centric lists (Bivens, 2017), since this would be impossible and non-applicable in the Chinese context. Instead, it seeks to address the diverse gender authenticity formation and sense-making practices of transgender individuals in different social media platforms, collective events, communities, and regional sub-cultures. In the practice of sampling, gender identity, age and social stratification were seen as the major variables in relation to the diversity of gender practices and social-cultural backgrounds of interviewees. An age threshold was set to being born before 2000 to make sure all the respondents were adults and could take part in the research without permission from a third person or party. The social stratification criteria in China mainly include income, education and occupation (Bian, 2002) and I take all these criteria into consideration when reaching out to potential respondents. Based on the sampling strategy, my fieldwork brings eligibility concerns of interviewees to the fore. Some interviewees expressed their worry about whether they count or are representative as the trans that "I needed" before, during and even after the interview. Before easing their doubt and encouraging their participation, I probed in detail asking why they were not sure and what kind of label, if any, made them feel more comfortable. It turns out that these "eligibility" conversations were valuable moments, revealing how different discourses form the power dynamics in individual identification and help to zoom in on the everyday identity negotiation of transgender individuals. I also reframed my ad text by using less rigid terminology and adopting a more ambiguous tone to encourage participation and ease the identity crisis that my research might provoke. Moreover, the eligibility talks are conducted reflexively as a kind of speech act that has a potential

"ontological effect" (Dosekun, 2015) on interviewees and provides important empirical data to investigate transgender performativity.

In the sampling stage of research and for the convenience of those who were not familiar with some terms, however, a set of more specifically defined identities was provided in both my recruitment ad and here to form a recognition base.

Table 3.1. *Transgender Identification Terminologies Used in this Thesis*

Transgender identification terms used in Chinese trans communities	Translation in English	Description	Note
药娘	*Yaoniang*, drug girl	Transgender women and non-binary people who have undergone or are undergoing hormone replacement therapy (hrt).	*Yaoniang* community consists mostly of younger transgender people and has some overlap with *Weiniang* (fake girl) ACG subculture
妖儿	*Yao'er*	Refers to feminine male-assigned sex workers in north-eastern China who reject the mainstream urban transgender discourses and celebrate eroticism and non-normative sex/gender practices.	Chwen-der Lin (2020)
FtM	FtM	Acronym for female-to-male transgender people who are assigned as female at birth but identify on the male spectrum.	
MtF	MtF	Acronym for male-to-female transgender people who are assigned as male at birth but identify on the female spectrum.	
跨性别	*Kuaxingbie,*	Transgender is an umbrella term of	Susan Stryker (2017)

	Transgender	people whose gender identity differs from their sex assigned at birth and cross over the gender boundaries set by their cultural norms.	
跨儿	*Kua*, Trans	A more inclusive umbrella term for gender non-conformity including transgender, transsexual, transvestite and so on.	
跨男	*Kuanan,* Trans men	those who are assigned at birth as female but self-identify as male and are maybe waiting for or not intending to undergo gender reassignment surgery.	
跨女	*Kuanǔ*, Trans women	those who are assigned at birth as male but self-identify as female and are maybe waiting for or not intending to undergo gender reassignment surgery.	
变性人/TS	*Bianxingren*, Transsexual	Transsexual has the medical and psychological connotation of people who applied or are undergoing medical transition.	TS is considered discriminative and highly stigmatised for some transgender people. According to some interviewees, it is more often used by older transgender people and transgender sex workers.
女装/CD	Crossdresser	those who dress in a way that is typically associated with a gender different from the one they were assigned at birth but may not identify themselves with that gender or intend to live full time as that gender.	Some transgender people and organisation would deny crossdressers' identity as transgender.

非二元/性别酷儿	Non-binary/gender queer	those who disrupt and challenge the ontology and veracity of gender dichotomy.	Richards et al (2016)
性别流动者	Bigender, or gender fluid and pangender	those who incorporate both aspects of male and female into a fluid identity.	
第三性	Third gender, or other gender	those who identified as additional to male and female.	
无性别	Agender, or gender-neutral, non-gendered and genderless	those who claim to have no gender.	
demigender	demigender	those who feel their gender identity partially connected to a certain gender, including demiboys and demigirls	

As Table 3.1 shows, I engaged with not only the internationally recognised transgender identity terms in this research, but also the local terms that circulate in various Chinese trans communities. In a study which foregrounds and acknowledges all forms of trans experiences, I remained cautious about imposing judgement upon the intelligibility of transness, even though many of my interviewees sought verification from me about whether they were "trans enough" (Ruberg, 2022). In my fieldwork, although the above explained terms are often used by my respondents to refer to themselves, their understanding of the same term differs greatly. The different approaches and narrations formulate a discrete set of identity definitions, and in some cases even contradict with

mainstream framing. The terminological dispersion seems to create a dilemma between the nominal and the factual. Writing from a post-structuralist perspective, I suspend decisive definitions and focus on performativity of identity discourse and practice. In other words, I pay attention to the difference embedded in the self-naming, other's naming, collective naming and mainstream naming of individual identities and the phenomenological experience of transgender identity.

The fieldwork consisted of two phases: 1) online interview and observation during covid-19 quarantine from March 2019 to August 2019 and 2) offline interviews and observations in three Chinese cities from September 2019 to March 2020. In 2017, I participated in the first Chinese national transgender survey as one of the report authors. As shown in Table 3.2, 89.2% of the survey respondents knew and filled the survey from social media platforms, such as QQ and WeChat. This research experience inspired me to choose online social media channels to approach potential interviewees. Indeed, WeChat groups have become the major way by which Chinese LGBT NGOs set up social networks for gender minorities to communicate and participate in community activities. Unlike WeChat groups, QQ groups are independent of the mainstream NGO-based communities and show a more grassroots feature in terms of organisation, member's heterogeneity and entry criteria. In the first phase of fieldwork, I picked 5 WeChat groups run by the top three organisations – Beijing LGBT Center, Trans Life and Guangzhou Trans Center – and 20 private transgender QQ groups to get in touch with the group admins and send out the interview recruitment advertisement. I also sent out recruitment advertisements in other online transgender spaces where transgender people may gather, such as Baidu Tieba, Douban and Zhihu, through keywords searching of the identification terms listed in Table 3.1.

All the gatekeeping and identifying processes in the recruitment are considered comprehensively to form a context-rich and performative understanding of individual transgender identity. In practice, recruitment is influenced by several factors: the text of the recruitment ad explaining whom this research is looking for, the channels through which I posted the ad, the moderators deciding who counts as a potential interviewee, the potential interviewees' understanding of their eligibility. Therefore, I consider not

only feasibility issues in sampling but also the gatekeeping effects of the sampling and recruitment on the self-narration and identification of my interviewees. In the groups that had less entry certification and moderating, I introduced myself as a researcher and my research purpose to the groups at least twice during my fieldwork to remind the members of my existence and arouse their interest to participate in my research. There were some cases where the moderators were more cautious of my request. I thus provided my personal LSE web page, school registration letter and my information sheet (see Appendix IV) to build rapport. After these steps, I sent out my recruitment ad. However, the first round of approaches did not work ideally because some group members were still hesitant about me and considered me a suspicious "outsider" even though group owners or admins helped to justify my honesty and researcher identity. According to one of the trans group admins, they had been approached by some transphobic and condescending self-claimed researchers who made the community sceptical and even hostile to trans studies scholars. Learning about this episode, I decided to become more deeply involved in the trans communities through volunteering and doing NGO work so that I could build trust within local communities more smoothly during my quarantine in London and China's lock down. Luckily, I had been working for transgender NGOs since 2017 and had already good networks and a reputation in China's trans NGO world. I was appointed to worked as an intern in a new trans NGO where I was in charge of writing media articles about transgender issues for their WeChat account and lead a fortnightly online open discussion forum. The articles I published on the NGO WeChat account gained wide influence in trans communities and soon made my pseudonym well known to many trans people. The approaching and recruitment process benefited later on from my visibility in the community. Moreover, my job as the producer and host of the fortnightly online discussion forum "Trans Roundtable" allowed me to set the agenda for discussions that were both related to trans people's concerns and my research interests. In the 8 roundtable discussions that I hosted, I observed the diverse opinions and lived experiences of transgender individuals closely, and had the chance to advertise my project to the participants from different demographic backgrounds. Via these participatory experiences as a half-researcher-

half-volunteer, I was able to conduct targeted sampling of transgender people with diverse gender practices and demographic backgrounds, and had quite a successful interview recruiting outcome.

Table 3.2. *Respondents' Access to 2017 China National Transgender Survey*

Access to 2017 China National Transgender Survey	Percentage (%)
Email from Relevant Institution	1.5
Website of Relevant Institution	4.9
Social Media Platform (e.g. QQ Group, WeChat Group, WeChat Official Account and WeChat Moment)	89.2
Advertisement or Flyers	0.7
From Friends, Relatives, Classmates or Teachers	10.1
Approached by NGO staff	1.5

Note. Data retrieved from 2017 Chinese Transgender Population General Survey Report. It was published by Beijing LGBT Center and Sociology Department of Peking University on November 20th, 2017. This was the first nation-wide report of transgender people in China with over 2000 valid cases. I served as co-author of this report. Available at: https://chinadevelopmentbrief.org/publications/2017-chinese-transgender-population-general-survey-report/.

I flew to China to conduct the second phase of fieldwork in late August 2020 when the border re-opened and the nationwide lock-down ended. According to the 2017 China National Transgender Survey, most respondents lived in cities or towns in developed regions such as the east coast and the south. As shown in Table 3.2, Chinese transgender people, wherever they come from, tend to live in more developed regions and major cities. This phenomenon may be related to the fact that it is easier to find a job and have access to medical resources in large cities and there are more transgender NGOs and public spheres in large cities. Given the linguistic and cultural differences between southern and northern China, Beijing and Guangzhou, the two first-tier cities in the south and north respectively, were chosen as research fields. I lived in Beijing for 6 years and worked for the Beijing LGBT Center, an influential NGO in Beijing serving sexual and gender minorities, for 2 years. My experience in the Beijing LGBT Center

benefitted this study in terms of access to moderators and potential interviewees. Shenyang, the capital of a north-eastern province, was also selected because of its unique trans communities culture and concentrated trans population in north-eastern China (Lin, 2020; Yang et al., 2016). The multi-sited fieldwork allowed me to reach out to interviewees from diverse communities and gender culture backgrounds.

Table 3.3. *Long-term Residence of Chinese Transgender people*

Long-term Residence	Percentage (%)
First-tier City (Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou or Shenzhen)	23.2
Province capital or central City	29.7
City	29.7
Town	14.1
Village	1.8
Foreign country or Hongkong, Macau, Taiwan	1.5

Note. Data retrieved from 2017 Chinese Transgender Population General Survey Report, published by Beijing LGBT Center and Sociology Department of Peking University, November 20th, 2017. Available at: https://chinadevelopmentbrief.org/publications/2017-chinese-transgender-population-general-survey-report/.

Reaching out to transgender individuals in offline conditions was difficult, considering their invisible and marginalised status discussed in the introduction chapter. My research experience in the 2017 China Transgender Survey suggested several approaches which made the recruiting easier. I asked for a letter of recommendation from several trans NGOs showing my service and contribution to transgender issue as an intern and researcher, and I used this to reach different transgender organizations to gain trust and participate in their daily activities, and make connections with transgender individuals. If I needed to break the ice, I shared my queer identity as a way to create a sense of common experiences and understandings as sexual and gender minorities. In the second phrase of interviewee recruiting, I relied on my NGO networks and key moderators in local trans communities in Beijing, Guangzhou and Shenyang to send out the research advertisements. Snowball sampling was adopted to recruit more

interviewees. All interviewees were asked if they knew other transgender people and, if so, asked to pass on the researcher's contact details. Beside the NGO networks, I participated actively in many informal NGO events and private transgender gatherings such as anime convention, movie nights, Halloween party, karaoke, club, trans art exhibitions and voguing competitions. These informal encounters with transgender individuals helped to balance the NGO network bias in the sampling, and broaden my vision on the diversity of transgender experiences. My presence in private activities proved to be the most effective recruitment and rapport-building approach.

In the end, I managed to interview 75 interviewees. Two thirds of them were interviewed face-to-face, and 25 of the interviewees were interviewed online. The age range of interviewees was from 19 to 60, and the interviewees came from all parts of China and were from diverse social-economic backgrounds. The interviewees' information list can be found in Appendix II.

3.1.2 Interview settings

The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format to encourage a flowing exchange and story sharing. The first part of the interview focused on the context in which transgender individuals were brought up and are currently living, which is crucial in understanding the local social-cultural norms and the intersection of region, class and gender (Helsper, 2021). Life stories research was adopted to understand how transgender individuals view, perceive and tell the story of their life and struggles with transgender identity and performance (Rosenthal, 1993; Goodson & Sikes, 2001). The way they narrated and structured their stories, as well as what was told and what was not, revealed how transgender individuals accounted for their lived experience, realness and their identity. A biographic-narrative interview approach invited interviewees to recount their lives with a minimum of guidance and intervention, and to elaborate on their narratives. The storytelling of informants can be performative and the ways in which informants tell their life stories reveal not only how informants experience their past but also how they experience the present and the future in the contemporary context and discourse (Brannen, 2013). To elaborate on this, informants tell their life stories in

certain ways not only to make sense of their experiences and maintain the coherence and continuity of their narration but also to serve their current or future needs, such as impression management. Understanding the performativity in informants' narrative production, what they tell and do not tell, the way they structure and present their life stories and engage an audience, is essential for analysing qualitative interviews.

In biographical interviews which study life stories, the interviewer needs to step back and not set any frame of questions or ask for a chronological timeline; this enables the interviewee to construct the story in their own ways and raise those events that they consider important (Rosenthal, 1993; Adriansen, 2012). This method is critiqued because interviewees may tend to tell a coherent and sense-making story and thus their narratives will be full of purpose (Petersen et al., 2007). A self-narrated life story and lived context can empower interviewees with the right to provide what they consider as important in the research process and construct realness on their own. These narratives provide important empirical and contextual data and set performativity research in a more context-rich background, and provide insights into the social norms transgender individual reiterate and recite in everyday life. Many of the Chinese transgender interviewees moved to big cities to escape their home town and the past; therefore, obtaining comprehensive information about their past and present from diverse sources was necessary to grasp the different lived experiences and turning points in their lives. As argued by Brannen (2013), context is inevitable for life story analysis and thus multi-source data needs to be collected to help to assess whether the primary data is typical or deviant, what counts for citational reiteration and the troubling of norms.

From the performativity perspective, gender comes into being or is interpellated through the discursive recitation and reiteration of gender norms (Butler, 1999). Therefore, understanding transgender practices should be situated in the understanding of gender norms. To operationalise research questions into interview questions, the second part of an interview mainly addresses the perception of gender norms and the digital gender practices of transgender individuals, including transgender individuals' daily gender practices, Internet use, experiences of living as trans online and offline and perceptions of gender authenticity. An interview guide (see Appendix III) was used as

a hook to start the conversation, and was adjusted based on individual circumstances and updated according to data collected in the course of the research. The questions were open-ended to invite self-reflection and allow further probing. After each interview, I asked all the interviewees about their feelings on this research and their previous participation in other research programs. Several interviewees reported surprise about the loose structure and chatty atmosphere of the interview with me. Compared with their previous experience of survey and structured interviews, respondents revealed that they were more open to exposing their quotidian life. The interviewees who had more connection with NGOs and activism were especially concerned about the usefulness and representativeness of their life detail for my research. The NGO agenda and framing is related to their identity narration in this sense that the collective image and accountability were more salient in their self-representations during research. Although semi-structured interviewing was unfamiliar for some respondents, most of them reported a "talking to a friend" effect which is a good sign of rapport building.

The media profiles and posts are another important data source in this research which potentially enriches my understanding of their routines and the ways in which they arrange self-representation and communicate with others. For those interviewees who consented to use their media data, I conducted elicitation interviews in which participants showed and discussed their textual and visual profiles and posts. Elicitation interviewing is strong in supporting sexual minorities in describing abstract and emotional experiences and facilitating their reflection in a non-Western context (Bowling, et al., 2018). The strength of elicitation interviewing in provoking sense-making through describing and interpreting a given material has made it an increasingly popular qualitative method, especially in studying socially marginalised groups (ibid). Elicitation interviews are normally used with a focus on understanding how people contingently make sense of the visualisation of their past experience by "actively seeking for personal connections, rich meaning, and stories" (Hogan, et al., 2016, p.2). However, these "sense-making" and interpretative approaches to elicitation interviews overlooks the special power dynamics of interviewing circumstances and the co-

presence of the researcher. In this project, the elicitation interview is used not merely to inspect how interviewees justify their past experiences through telling a story based on their visualisation, but to understand how they recode and project these materials to narrate contemporary thinking in a co-present interpellation. The exposure of media posts is also related to private and emotional experiences, which need a sensitive and ethical scholarship in the research process.

3.1.3 Conducting fieldwork

Inspired by Halberstam's queer methodology, this study applied flexible and spontaneous interview techniques through the negotiation with research participants. In normal circumstances, interviews are conducted in the semi-structured face-to-face/video and one-to-one format. Meanwhile, I suspend the standard format in some cases and allow the respondents to co-decide the ways in which the interview should be conducted. For instance, one participant, Fragrance, reported her traumatic experience of an interview she accepted in a China Central Television (CCTV) show, which turned out to be transphobic, humiliating and discriminatory against her. In the approaching process, I felt her strong rejection of the traditional interview and decided to shift to textual interviewing instead. Some interviewees had strong preference for certain communication forms to control the extent to which they were visible to me and to manage the risk of governmental surveillance. Among those who I interviewed through social media applications, interviewees who had higher levels of media literacy (their knowledge about digital technology and their sensitivity to privacy and surveillance) were more active in proposing foreign social platforms like telegram and skype for interviewing. To appropriate McLuhan's famous line "the medium is the message" (1964, p. 9), the negotiation of communication means and the interviewees' preference for certain media is information-rich in regard to their thinking about visibility, transness and agentic participation in the trans study.

There were also some cases where the interviewees requested the company of their trans friends or even the moderators for safety or convenience reason. The first time I encountered such a circumstance, I was worried that the presence of others may ruin

the interview and break my ethical commitment to protect their privacy. I realised that these moments were precious opportunities to allow interviewees to practice agency in my research and conduct reflexive research although this might have made my interview format messy. I also grounded this methodological negotiation process in the post-structuralist viewpoint that the different interview settings reveal the diverse understanding of identity and are part of their gender performativity.

This research spans a year from March 2020 to March 2021, during which I was in a lock-down situation in the first half because of the Covid-19 pandemic. Among the 25 online interviews (including textual chat, audio calls and video calls), most of these interviews were conducted during the pandemic. On the one hand, I tailored my research plan to also apply online interviews as a flexible solution to the pandemic. On the other hand, the online interviews during the pandemic provided a valuable record of the special social circumstances that transgender people encounter in lock-down. The influence of the pandemic on transgender people can be viewed from three perspectives: medical resources, financial crisis and family issues. Although these are problems transgender people normally face in everyday life, the pandemic dramatically intensified and amplified the difficulty of transgender lives and their affective response. In several online interviews, the parents of my interviewees "invaded" our conversation unexpectedly and I had opportunities to observe identity negotiations, conflict, and even verbal abuse in the family setting closely. I paused recording on these occasions and make sure that interviewees feel safe and comfortable enough to continue. In radical cases, I offer contacts of professionals for the interviewees to seek help and deleted all the content which can be identified to unconsented others. Online interview approaches are argued as cost-saving and ease-to-conduct (Weller, 2017). However, this is complicated in trans studies because many trans gender people may not have stable and safe digital networks under their control and may face the surveillance of their colleagues, partners and family members. The methodology observation of different online interview cases contributes to enriching my understanding of the context and relation of spatiality with transgender identity.

Aligned with the queer methodology, I opened up the decision-making with

interviewees regarding the interview site and view this negotiation process as performative. The offline interviews turned out to be conducted in a mixture of three types of locations: my home, their home and public spaces such as cafés and parks. Each of these sites has its pros and cons and special dynamics, among which I found household interviewing (in interviewee's accommodation) an especially fruitful approach. The household setting provides the researcher with rich data to understand their quotidian life, which would be inaccessible in any other space. The information embedded in the household setting is a filtered self-representation arranged by the interviewee before the entrance of the researcher, which is a multi-dimensional performative act aside from the verbal interaction recorded in audio format. The backstage of their private space was turned into the frontstage of gender performativity. The household interviews also provided the research with many material resources to probe more deeply into the interviewee's unknown and unshown life, such as the books, decorations and room layout. In this sense, the researcher is not only a clueless stranger. The special communication vibe afforded by household interviews forms a relaxed and familiar conversation environment for the interviewees. The relationship between interviewer and interviewee is disrupted or enriched in household settings by the guest/host relation. Being invited to an interviewee's accommodation facilitates a kind of rapport building and transforms the typical power dynamics of research.

3.2 Data Analytical Framework

In the postmodernist and poststructuralist tradition, narrators are not simply the agentic storyteller but instead, their subjectivity is shaped in the production and interpretation of narratives within certain social formations (Andrews, Squire & Tamboukou, 2013). The Goffmanian concept of performance and Butlerian theorisation of performativity can be applied in narrative studies to address the performative nature of narrative and the relationship between subjectivity, identity and performativity. Narrators make sense of their experience through storytelling or reconstruction of the story (Ricoeur, 2010; Frosh, 2002). The storytelling and reconstruction of personal experience take the

narrator's personality, experience, identity and transformation into being by orally or textually representing it. From this perspective, narrative is both a lived life and a told story (Chamberlayne, Rustin & Wengraf, 2002).

The data collected in the study includes interview transcripts, field notes and media documentation about transgender people's experiences of gender identity formation and negotiation, online and offline self-representation. As discussed above, performativity and performance are combined to understand how transgender identity is constructed in the process of citation, recitation, mis-citation and troubling of social norms. Morison and Macleod (2013) argue that narrative performance needs to be supplemented to the notion of performativity to study gender construction and troubling moments, and narrative-discursive methods can be used to study performativity and narrative performance. The narrative-discursive approach is adopted to understand how discursive context is implicated in interviewees' biographic talk about life story and experience and examine how identity is constructed through performative citation and troubling of social norms (Taylor & Littleton, 2006). According to Morison and Macleod (2013), the narrative-discursive analysis contains two dimensions: a) performance dimension aims to explore contextually how interviewees use these discursive resources to position, trouble and repair their citation of norms; b) performative dimension aims to identify common elements as discursive recourses that occur across interviews and within the same interview, and to examine what and how social norms are troubled. In the performance dimension, the life stories told by transgender people together with their elicitation of their media use constitute the major forms of data. The narrative analysis is thus crucial for capturing stories or accounts of personal experiences and perceptions of experience "across time within the context of dynamic lives" (Seelman et al., 2017). Taking observation note into the analysis of the performance dimension, narrative analysis reveals how transgender people give meaning to their lives through storytelling and interpreting their own stories to further construct gender identity.

In the performative dimension, thematic analysis was used to identify the common experiences shared by interviewees and their alternative gender practices. Thematic

analysis is helpful in identifying themes or patterned meaning within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Guest, MacQueen & Namey, 2011), offering the possibility to capture the lived experiences, interaction patterns and common meaning-making of Chinese transgender people within the broader socio-cultural discourse structure (Braun & Clark, 2022). Thematic analysis was used on the interview transcripts – the major data of this project – in an inductive manner without tailoring the data into existing theories. Interview transcripts were pseudonymized and imported into NVivo Software. I familiarised myself with the data first and identify some key analytic points related to my research questions. This was followed by clustering dozens of codes into workable numbers, and, after reviewing the codes and the data again, I developed an analytical structure with four themes capturing different yet logically related aspects of the data (Braun & Clark, 2022). The four themes are complimentary under the theoretical framework of *performative authenticity*, which encapsulates the cardinal points of Chinese transgender people's everyday negotiation and mediated doings of gender.

3.3 Uncomfortable reflexivity of doing trans studies in China

While reflexivity has been argued to be essential in social science research which calls for transparency and honesty in revealing the process of data collection and processing (Ryan & Golden, 2006), this box-ticking methodological inertia is criticized by Pillow as a "tool of methodology power" (2003, p. 192). Drawing on a post-structuralist perspective, Pillow (ibid) proposes the approach of "uncomfortable reflexivity" to call for the embracement of messy and humble scholarship and foregrounding the sensibility to the discursive power relationship construction during research. Uncomfortable reflexivity gives priority to challenging the truth regime by which power is enacted, instead of the pursuit of neat scholarship (Pillow, 2003, see also Dosekun, 2015). The research passed the ethics review of LSE. Beyond this, this research embraces methodological messiness and lets in complexity in the uncomfortable reflection on the power relation between researcher and participants and the positionality of the former.

3.3.1 Visibility politics of naming

I use pseudonyms and obscure identifiable information to maintain interviewees' confidentiality (Liamputtong, 2007). Protecting the privacy of transgender participants is especially important to prevent grave consequences such as violence or discrimination. Ensuring the confidentiality of all participants is also important because, otherwise, participants might not be willing to share their experiences. Where details were crucial to understanding a life story and participants were comfortable in revealing potentially identifiable details of their lives, after appropriate reminders of the consequences of unwanted exposure, and mutual agreement on wording, such information was recorded. In the cases in which interviewees wanted to or did not care about being referred to by their chosen name used in everyday life, I explained the possible risks that their commonly used pseudonyms might be identifiable and might have unexpected outcomes if presented in my thesis.

Since this dissertation applies a performative lens to understand authenticity and gender identity, there is a tension between visibility and confidentiality. Throughout the fieldwork, I often came across the dilemma situation where transgender interviewees treated research participation in my project as the opportunity to be heard and visible. Being referred to as their preferred pronoun and identity and being interpellated by their chosen names they used in daily life was important to some transgender interviewees. This is related to their lack of visibility as an individual and as a member of Chinese trans communities. Being mentioned in a doctoral thesis at a prestigious university can bring about a sense of recognition from academia and international readership. Moreover, being visible and even identifiable in my dissertation has the "ontological effect" on their performative doing and construction of gender authenticity.

The dilemma resides also in terms of my research purpose and data analysis. Transgender pseudonyms and self-naming practices are one of the essential empirical materials in this research because I regard naming as important "trans technology of the self" through which they manage to construct desired gendered self and rebuild social relations. Although the focus in not on the symbolic content of their names,

examining the process and perception of transgender self-naming requires discursive engagement with the connotation of names. In practice, I negotiated with interviewees to see if they would like me to use another name similar in connotation or pronounciation to their chosen names and, if not, if they would like to voluntarily pick a new pseudonym to be used in this study. While recognising the dilemma mentioned here, I still feel uncomfortable assigning names or requesting additional self-naming practices to transgender interviewees as these naming practices resonate with the naming-related oppression they already suffer in their lives. Naming is related to and can project the unequal power relationship even though it is consented and agentic.

3.3.2 Power relationship derived from my class, urban and intellectual habitus

There were many moments when the demarcation between me and the interviewees became notable, making tangible the unequal power relationship in the research interaction. My positionality and my social-economic background had deeply shaped my interaction with interviewees and thus the co-construction of meaning throughout interviews and observation.

Coming from a middle-class family in a south-eastern coastal city, I grew up with full parental financial and emotional support without worrying too much about essential everyday living expenditure. On the one hand, this made me well aware of the life trajectory and living status of interviewees from middle or upper middle class and urban areas. On the other, the difference in class and place of origin made my fieldwork encounters with interviewees from extremely poor backgrounds and more rural areas estranged and sometimes othered. I can still recall my uneasiness when I was invited by Katherine to her rented shared flat which was in a crumbling old building in the far end of Beijing Metro Line 16. Katherine grew up as a 'left-behind child'[22] with her grandfather in a poor family in South-Eastern China. Without any financial support from her parents, she dropped out of high school and went to Beijing to live with her

---

[22] Left-behind children (*liu shou er tong*) refers to children who are left alone in the rural hometown and taken care of by people other than their parents who are working elsewhere in the urban region (Fan et al., 2010).

boyfriend who broke up with her a year after. She had to move to a derelict flat in terrible condition to save money for her medical transition. We did the interview in a dark tiny room where we could barely stretch our legs, I was shocked by her living conditions in Beijing – the city where I lived for 6 years in the downtown area. I had to hide my uneasiness since Katherine was quite satisfied about her money-saving plan and financial independence. At that moment, I realised that I could never understand their everyday struggle even though I have full empathy. There were other shocking accounts of extreme poverty and precarity in my fieldwork, such as conducting a self-castrating operation with kitchen knife on their own body or walking over 100 kilometres back home after surgery to save the train ticket money in Winter. Listening to these stories was heart breaking, I cannot imagine what it is like to live in extreme poverty as a trans person in China.

Offering sympathy and care were all I could do in these "shocking" moments, while emotional resonance and involvement were needed. When Laurel shared her darkest time relating to when her FtM flat mates, whom she had met accidently at a bar and with whom she ended up living in Guangzhou, chose to commit suicide one by one, I could not help but cry silently with her. I was prepared for these sad life stories, since committing suicide was prevalent in the trans communities (Budge et al., 2013), but listening to such tragic realities in the flesh was extremely emotionally demanding. In the story, I heard how their transtopian shelter and intimacy fell apart and they were overwhelmed by despair. I had no smart way to react properly to interviewees' exposure of their suicidal stories other than to feel sympathy and sometimes give way to sorrow. I had to try very hard to step out and heal myself from the depression and shock every time. Yet it is the emotional indulgence and my distance from tragic trans experiences that strengthened my acute insight into diverse trans practices and perceptions. As middle-class and socially "other", exposing myself to this diversity helped to destabilise my biased and limited standpoint.

Another tangible feeling of "difference" derived from my researcher identity and educational privilege. From time to time, I was referred to as "the scholar" and "that PhD researcher" by moderators, and participants often called me "you good student" in

my online/offline participatory observation. The constant highlighting of my researcher identity is double-edged in that some interviewees doubted my purpose and were afraid of being sensationalised research objects while others looked up to me and treated me as trans authority. Either way enhanced the unequal relationship between me and the interviewees. And the relation between validating my researcher identity and rapport-building was significantly ambiguous. I was thus quite cautious about situations where I was required or expected to perform my professionality not only as a trans studies scholar but also as someone who has authoritative knowledge and a final say. It is understandable, that transgender individuals sometimes seek identity confirmation, recognition and even education from "experts" since the trans discourses and Chinese trans communities are marginalised and far from forming a unified collective meaning. While politely explaining my role as researcher rather than judge or pedagogical therapist (although I did provide some useful links and contacts for consultation), my post-structuralist stance urges me to transform such moments into a co-constitutive meaning-making process through which I looked closely into their understanding and practice of authenticity and transgender terms.

The opposite situation to my being a PhD researcher doing trans media and communication studies at a prestigious overseas university also occurred in the fieldwork. As a trans studies scholar trained in the UK, I was regarded as bearing the intellectual legacy of western gender and queer theories and liberal feminist thinking. The defaulted academic and political image of me had triggered intellectual tension between me and some interviewees who were well aware of, yet hostile to, western gender theory and LGBTQ politics. For instance, in my interview with Kathey who used to work in a trans NGO and left due to ideological incompatibility with NGO values, she frankly expressed her dislike of Judith Butler because performativity theory "tries to kill the subjectivity of transgender people". In her mind, these west-originated gender theories overlooked how bodily transition and materiality matter for trans people. Kathey was quite defensive while talking about her understanding of transness to me and requested me not to quote some of her comments on transsexuality and trans bodies, worrying that I might distort her original thinking about the body being the

medium for trans people. At that time, I was a little uncomfortable about being misunderstood in terms of my different reading of Butler and transgender theories, and also anxious about losing the rapport and the whole interview. I knew Kathey long before I started my PhD and had worked with her previously in the NGO. Kathey quit her job soon after I left for the UK. I decided to suspend my own defensiveness and wait for more explanation as to why she had left, as it might relate to the strong rejection of Butler and the NGO altogether. With my follow-up questions and discussion, it became clear that the divergence came from her perception of the assimilation of domestic NGOs within international trans agendas, and the growing marginalisation of local trans subjects who relied on bodily and medical approaches and understandings of transness. While I disagreed with Kathey's dichotomous demarcation of discourse/materiality, I was indeed inspired by my intense discussion with her into trying to rethink what Spivak and Harasym (2014) called "strategic essentialism", which could be seen in Kathey's expressed discomfort with the mainstream values in the NGO world. This also helped to suspend my intuitive discomfort when confronting essentialist and normative trans discourses and practices, leaving the space for reflection before jumping into critique. The reflection finally led me thinking about trans normativity and agency as expressed in chapter 6.

3.3.2 Sex/gender positionality: doing trans studies as a cis queer researcher

Since I am neither an insider nor a complete outsider as a cis queer researcher, conducting this research provided me with the opportunity to reflect on my own body, gender expression, gender identity and sexuality. There is a considerable number of studies on the influence of the gender dynamics between interviewers and interviewees on gender performativity, co-constructed narrative and information disclosure during interviews (Broom et al., 2009; Sallee & Harris, 2011). The researcher's role in the interviews is a collaborative narrative (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009) or co-construction (Riessman, 2008) in storytelling and sense-making, and a re-narrator in the processes of selecting particular cases or experience for analysis and reshaping the life stories told by interviewers which are structured by them already. From this point, as a cis-gender

male, I bear in mind that my gender/sexual identity may influence the research in various ways. For instance, there were several cases when the interviewees, including trans men and trans women, and I became closer after the interviews or interactions at events, and they expressed their romantic and sexual feelings towards me. Beyond feeling flattered and offering polite rejection, these love confessions created difficult ethical issues to deal with and reflect on. Were their narrations in interviews biased or swayed? Was the relationship between me and them equal during interviews? I have no answer to these questions. Maybe their words can provide a positive interpretation. They said they liked me because I was the first one who offered to listen to their life story and embrace their true self in a gentle way. A different trans man adored my speech at a reading group and my fight for trans rights and visibility. I believe these comments can be seen as signs of successful trust building.

This research experience also made me reflect on my own sex, sexuality and gender identity. In a private trans man offline gathering event which I signed up noting my identity as a cis male researcher, I got many eyes on me when I showed up in the small club. I was approached by a trans man sitting next to me commenting on my "passing appearance" before the official introduction session. My bone structure, hair and facial characters appeared like the bodily features of a "successful" trans person. After my exposure of cisgender identity in the official introduction session, I felt less stereotypically masculine than many trans men. This was one of the enlightening moments when I experienced the crumbling boundaries set by the cultural norms of body, sex and gender and reflected on the defaulted yet performative identity that I have been living with for 27 years. More importantly, the gender troubling moments also brought me to a better understanding of transgender individuals' sensitivity to bodily/material traits in their daily life, and the performative construction of gender that is related to all human beings.

3.4 Discussion and Conclusion

In this chapter, I firstly discuss the consideration and fieldwork practices of data

collection for this study, as well as sampling and participant recruitment. Considering the Chinese transgender context, where trans individual identification is more local-community-based rather than bound to internationally recognised transgender terms, this thesis adopted a community-based sampling technique. I diversify the community-based sampling by combining multi-sited offline trans communities in three major cities, online communities based on keyword searching of popular trans terms used in China, and issue-based group in NGO networks. I suspended the international and imported transgender identity terms both in the recruitment process and when referring to interviews, as I treat identity naming and self naming as important ways for transgender voice-making and agency practicing. Inspired by Halberstam's queer methodology (1998), I employ combined approaches to understanding diverse and relatively invisible transgender experiences, and collected data in various forms, including semi-structured interviews online and offline, media text elicitation interviews and observations in online and offline trans communities. The forms and locations of interviews were up for negotiation between interviewees and myself for two reasons: firstly, it worked as an empowerment for trans interviewees allowing the power relationship between us to be reworked; secondly, the negotiation process and interviewees' diverse choices of interview forms and locations turned out to be informationally rich for me in understanding the context of their everyday lives. The negotiation process helped to build rapport and encouraged me to be more aware of the concerns and living circumstances of interviewees. The data analytical framework used in this research is based on a post-structuralist discourse-narrative analysis approach to the various sources of data I collected in fieldwork.

The uncomfortable reflection on my positionality in doing Chinese trans studies formulates an essential part of this thesis and talks to the other chapters when I discuss visibility, naming and transgender agency. The reflexive thinking of fieldwork, which was indeed an emotional, personal and academic journey, sheds light both on the ethical issues and power relations that future Chinese trans studies scholars might need to consider, and my own sex/sexuality/gender identities that I self-interpellated daily without reflection before this study.

Chapter 4 Articulating transgender in online trans communities

4.1 Introduction

This chapter lays out the discursive landscape of transgender discourses in China, depicting how transgender issues are presented, articulated and understood in the mainstream Chinese society and bottom-up transgender terms in online trans communities. The discursive landscape is formulated not by paralleling the mainstream society and trans communities as independent context, but rather as the conjunction of both. I show in this chapter how bottom-up transgender articulations are articulated by articulating individual Chinese transgender people 's perception and interaction with the mainstream transgender discourses and developing their own articulations of transgender terms and understanding of trans authenticity. It is also highlighted in this chapter that the transgender articulations are transforming rather than fixed, and the transformation of transgender articulations are mediated and accompanied by the changing online trans communities and derived digital surveillance.

To understand discursive articulation of transness in online trans communities, this chapter firstly presents the discursive encounters of the state, social media, NGOs and trans communities. The discursive encounter mediates the mainstream imagination and public understanding of transgender people, shaping a pathologised and normalised discursive environment for the trans community (Zhang, 2014). The post-socialist state has muffled public discussions of LGBT issues and implemented medical policies that re-normalise trans subjects. This has not only left discursive power to the commercialised and sexualised media's own sensationalist discourse on trans, but also deteriorated the living conditions for the extremely diverse trans community. Although emerging trans-related NGOs initiate and enact inclusive and non-binary discourses following the western tone, local community and trans individuals are critical of these NGO discourses and name their community through their own engagement with trans identity and culture. It argues that repressive and forced invisibility in the political

agenda, toxic visibility in media representations, and normative visibility in mainstream NGO discourses have, on the one hand, provided some discursive resources for identity negotiation at the individual level, but on the other hand, compel strategic self-naming of grassroots trans communities to articulate their own articulation of transgender terms.

This chapter discusses performative authenticity construction through the collective self-naming and articulation of transness in online trans communities. Naming is important, especially for gender minorities like trans, for defining who they are and how they are to be seen, called and understood (Pyle, 2018). Alternative terminology and discourses of gender identity are pivotal in producing discursive power and providing spaces for resistance and visibility (Nixon & Givens, 2007). Under restrictive political-economic conditions in developing countries such as China, alternative articulation of collective names and related strategic in/visibility is central to the LGBTQ communities to forge discursive power and promote desired articulations (Hildebrandt & Chua, 2017). Creating or circulating an alternative way to name identities reflects the desire and practice of resistance to mainstream discourses. For instance, both indigenous and non-indigenous people claim a trans* temporal kinship to the Two-Spirit identity in Ojibwe and Cree culture to challenge the belief that queerness and transness are colonial inventions and gifts (Pyle, 2018). This is especially salient today as trans communities and movements in different parts of the world are deeply influenced by the Western transgender agenda and identity politics. In Asia and the Pacific region, the discursive resistance in local trans identity politics represents a "utilitarian" character in trans individuals' engagement with the discourses originated from the West (Dutta & Roy, 2014, p. 300). In the recent ethnography work of Shehram Mokhtar, the Pakistan Hijra community strategically applies English terms of "transgender" and engages with transnational discourses of visibility to gain some economic profit "from funders, NGOs, activists, and scholars based in Western or postcolonial metropolises" (Mokhtar, 2021, p. 967). This is also echoed by a study of Indonesian Warias which reveals that Warias people regard media participation as merely a job and dismiss the significance of mainstream visibility and naming project (Hegarty, 2017). The articulation of the Chinese grassroots trans community can also

be understood as passive resistance to political censorship, societal stigmatisation and international trans discourses, and their agentic creation of self-recognised gender terms. But it can also be related to the very character of trans identity that many trans individuals try to pass unnoticed and avoid being gazed at in everyday life. This bottom-up self-naming of Chinese trans community is different from the "scandalous equivocation" strategies of queer naming that utilises and redefines the stigmatised terms as a surviving approach in the queer movement (Akiko, 2007). It also distances itself discursively and ideologically from NGO discourses applied in international transgender activism and movements originating from the west. However, bottom-up self-naming cannot be understood solely from a de-westernisation or de-colonialism framework that aims to resist the anglophone discourse by local queer naming (Dutta & Roy, 2014). Considering the bottom-up and loosely organised feature of the online trans community, this chapter focuses on the vernacular and diverse collective self-naming practices of trans communication in order to examine their resistance to and articulation within mainstream discourse. This chapter, therefore, provides a nuanced analysis of the trans discursive encounter in China and reveals how Chinese trans people navigate community-led self-naming through the discursive encountering between online trans community and mainstream society.

The findings of this chapter suggests that the community-led self-naming of transness is connected to the online trans communities' diasporic transformation across different platforms and trans groups. It is the intertwined collective self-naming and collective online diaspora due to surveillance that shape the discursive context transgender people inhabit in contemporary China. To understand the formation of trans authenticity through collective naming of transness, this chapter draws on Stuart Hall's (1985) articulation theory to analyse the discursive relationships between different transgender discourses, Chinese trans communities and individuals' perception and application of mainstream discourses, and their own articulation of transness with competing gender epistemes and signs. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, articulation has the meaning of a man-made joint structure connecting things together, and the utterance of speech or expression. As Hall explained in an interview with

Grossberg, "it is the articulation, the non-necessary link, between a social force which is making itself, and the ideology or conceptions of the world which makes intelligible the process they are going through, which begins to bring onto the historical stage a new social position and political position, a new set of social and political subjects." (Grossberg, 1986, p. 55). I highlight three key aspects of articulation theory that contribute to this chapter's discussion of Chinese trans discourses and performative authenticity: self-articulating subjects, ideological systems which assign intelligibility to certain discourses, and the linking process in between. In Hall's definition, the new social and political position which might not be rendered as intelligible in the dominant ideology can be brought onto, or in my word interpellated into, subjectivity through the making of itself and the interaction with the ideology. This strongly resonates with performativity theory but with a focus on the discursive process and interaction. Thus, the articulation lens allows the examination of how trans authenticity is performatively constructed and narrated by trans communities by their own articulations that are alternative to and dialectically connected to the mainstream trans discourses which deny the accountability and intelligibility of trans subjects.

Moreover, through the articulation lens, this chapter looks into the transforming discourses of trans authenticity in the discursive encounters of competing transgender discourses, community-led vernacular narratives and trans individuals' agentic practices and negotiation with the dominant beliefs of transness. The lens of articulation is especially useful in specific contexts where the paradigm of knowledge or the culture shifts (Grossberg, 1986). Articulation is always changing and diverse, and to rearticulate something means to come across the historical or dominant articulations and break existing connections by new elements, discourses, and practices (Hall, 1985). Articulation theory helps to analyse the discursive relationships of mainstream transgender discourses, Chinese trans communities and individuals' interpretation and their own articulation of transness with competing gender epistemes and signs. The discursive relationship is dialectical and transforming, along with the creation, rearticulation and appropriation of meanings in diasporic online trans communities.

Articulation theory is also essential for this study because David Morley and Roger

Silverstone's development of articulation theory brings in ICT technology and a media lens to contextualise further the communication elements in the discursive process of articulation (Morley & Silverstone, 1990). Hartman considers "technological objects, symbolic environments and Individual texts" as the key facets of articulation theory (Hartmann, 2006). These new theorisations of articulation highlight the important lens of media for both its materiality and contextual meaning. Drawing on the triple articulation model, this chapter emphasises the roles of digital platforms, media environments regulated by governmental surveillance, and transgender individuals' affordance in the articulation of transgender. Through the lens of articulation, the analysis of transgender discourses in online trans communities is situated in the techno-social-discursive context together with the consideration of generation, surveillance, and digital iteration. This chapter focuses on how the sense of community authenticity is performatively imagined, articulated and shifted via discursive rejection or appropriation of previous articulates and how this articulation is mediated by different connected stake holders. The articulation of transgender discourses in online trans communities are neither subjugated nor subversive to mainstream discourses of the public, media and NGOs. The articulation of trans community authenticity is itself a conflicted and competitive discursive encountering, where camouflaged, contradictory and opposite discourses are strategically connected with the mediation of digital technologies and surveillance in China. It is noteworthy that the articulation of online transgender discourses is made through the connected discursive practices of gender authenticity, which allow the articulated to be recognisable and collectively authentic.

4.2 Being articulated by the mainstream transgender discourses

The nationalist revolution and socialist revolution mark two gender epistemology shifts in modern Chinese history. The traditional non-normative gender subjects and phenomena are rendered as oriental sickness and perversion in the western medical-science and colonial gaze internalised by the nationalist political and cultural agenda of sexology and free love since the 1900s (Chiang, 2018; Kang, 2009). The socialist

revolution in Mao's era upholds a different equality vision on gender structures via the de-gendering of femininity and by celebrating female labours' expression of masculinity (Chen, 2001; Rofel, 1999a). Many scholars argue that post-Mao China has gone through a state-sanctioned re-gendering of femininity and a totalised return to a "natural" understanding of sex (Rofel, 2020). In *The Gender of Memory,* Gail Hershatter (2002) argues that the cultural and social history of marginalised village women is missing in the socialist era. But, as I suggest in this chapter, the history of gender non-conformity is also missing. Such lack of representation of Chinese queerness/transness in the public sphere relates not only to systematic media censorship but also the socialist-post-socialist turn (Jiao, 2021; Wei, 2020). The retreat of the post-socialist state from the private sector, together with its remaining power in the public sector, leaves a discursive vacuum to marketisation forces and traditional Confucian gender norms such as familisation (Kong, 2019). In post-socialist China, the articulation of transness characterises with the re-sexualisation and regendering, ahistorical and non-activist appropriation of Western-originated international trans discourses, and the commercial transgender culture influenced by surrounding Asian countries and Sinophone societies (Liu, 2022). This section examines the mainstream discourses of transgender subjects in state governance and the public health level and mass media, and most importantly, trans individuals' and the community's perception and appropriation of these transgender articulations.

4.2.1 Normalised and invisible trans in the state's discourses

The fast marketisation of and the government's general retreat from the private sector has created a distinction between official statements and private discourses on gender issues (Dasgupta, 2003). In today's China, LGBT related terminologies and discussions can hardly be found in the public or official sphere and are systematically censored on the Internet. Respondents reported experiencing the shutdown of many online trans-related platforms such as the Zhihu account[23], Baidu Tieba forums and trans-related

---

[23] Zhihu is a question-and-answer website similar to Quora.

websites. As Rachel, a 34-year-old trans woman and trans opinion leader, said, "Those Zhihu accounts named 'trans' or 'transgender' were all blocked by the platform in 2018 without policy explanation. This also happened to Tieba trans forums." The duality of state retreat and governmental censorship marks a post-socialist feature of gender governance, that is to make gender minority and diverse sex/gender identities invisible to the public. Talking about sexual and gender minorities in the public sphere becomes a taboo in mainstream media (Liu, 2022).

In contrast to domestic censorship and invisible discourse control within China, the Chinese state has applied the human rights and NGO discourse to establish the image of an open-minded global power while engaging more and more with globalism and international affairs. As shown in Figure 4.1, China has agreed to five recommendations on LGBT+ issues made by the UN Human Rights Council and for the first time responded to LGBT issues in the United Nations on November 6, 2018. In the Chinese government's statement, discrimination against gender minorities is not allowed and sex reassignment surgery is permitted in China. *Global Times*, a hawkish state-owned media, reported this statement and emphasised the applause from domestic LGBT NGOs and activists, while only the English version of the Party-led media reported these to the overseas audience. This coverage could not be found in the Chinese version of *Global Times* or any other state-owned media, and none of my interviewees were aware of China's LGBT-friendly statement and promise on the global stage.

Figure 4.1. *State Media's Coverage on Chinese Delegation's Stance on LGBT Issues*

Note. Retrieved from Global Times (2018, November 7). https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1126355.shtml.

The discursive difference between domestic coverage and external propaganda around sexual and gender minorities echoes Jiao Lin's interpretation of China's LGBTQ-related media policy as "distinguishing insiders and outsiders" (Jiao, 2021, p. 54). The official discourses strategically recognise LGBT rights and transform them into a discursive resource in favour of establishing a positive national image on the global stage, while simultaneously limiting its media exposure and potential influence on domestic discussion and trying to normalise and tame the trans community. Although scarce, transgender media representations are instrumentally and selectively adopted in public health and legal issues to reproduce normative transgender subjectivity. As the three trans employment discrimination lawsuit cases in recent years indicate, the censorship of the trans community in official discourse has shown a productive aspect beside the surveillance. Mr. C, Miss Ma and Miss Gao sued their ex-employer for illegal termination and gender discrimination in 2016, 2018 and 2020 respectively. As shown in Figure 4.2, Miss Gao's case was reported by China Central Television in a relatively positive way with the citation of a verdict which promotes social diversity.

Figure 4.2. *CCTV-12 Reporting Miss Gao's Case*
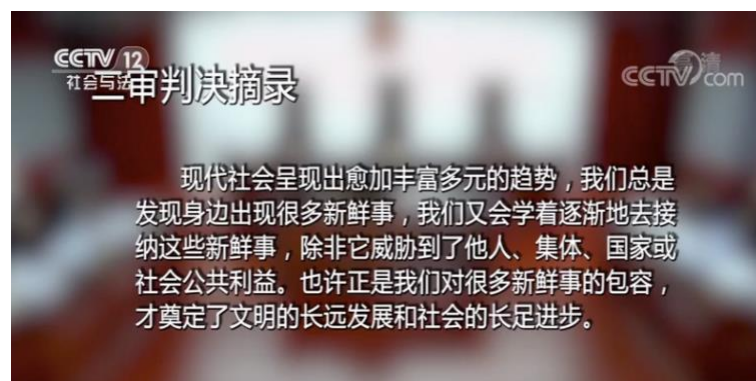
Note. Retrieved from "《现场》 20200919 跨性别者与当当网劳动争议案." (2020). Society and Legality, CCTV-12, Beijing (China). http://tv.cctv.com/2020/09/19/VIDE2u9kfi447IfxTMKVHXqq200919.shtml.

(Translation of the verdict in the screenshot: Modern society has shown a diversity trend where we can always find new things. We learn to accept these new things unless they threaten others, collectivity, state or public interest. It may be our tolerance toward new things that paves the way for the prolonged development of our civilisation and progression of society.)

The salient improvement in friendly and inclusive discourse of the latter two verdicts has inspired the trans community, compared with the judgement of Mr. C's case in which the judge denied the discrimination charge. The difference between Mr. C's and the latter two cases might be related to the fact that Ms. Ma and Ms. Gao were both legally recognised women, as they had completed surgery, while Mr. C had not done so when his case was issued. Edward, a trans man activist, commented on the verdict that:

> *The basic right for the trans majority who were still struggling for legal hormone trade and identity recognition was never mentioned in such successful cases. Also, the community was still seen as 'something new' and was told to not to disobey 'the interest of others, collective, state and society' in the 'friendly' verdict. (Edward, trans man, 24-year-old)*

Edward was sensitive to the official articulation of transness in the seemingly trans-friendly verdict that frames trans communities as "something new" that awaits societal acceptance and tolerance. In his eyes, the real needs of transgender people such as medical resources and legal recognition were downplayed by the celebration for the trans-tolerant society. The verdict differentiated the trans communities as separate based on public interest, and utilised these trans subjects as signifiers of societal progression in the queer-nationalist sense. The diverse living experiences and urgent needs of the trans majority are invisible in domestic public discussion, except for those who have undergone the strict legal process fully and are re-accepted in the gender binary vision of the state (Greenberg, 2020). Beside the state-recognised transgender subjects, the official articulation of transness either links it to invisibility and intelligibility, or even worse, false consciousness swayed by western ideology and culture which tries to 'brainwash' and 'poison' Chinese youth. As Yasmine, an MtF freelancer said, "The public either don't even know what is trans or believe Chinese trans are brainwashed by western ideology." Yasmine is not alone in perceiving the public articulation of transness as denying transgender individuals' authentic gender claims. Snow, who came from a conservative countryside village but received her

higher education in the US, encountered overwhelming difficulty in explaining to her parents that transgender was not West-specific ideology, and she was not being swayed by western propaganda:

It was very hard to convince my parent that transgender was not a western-unique lifestyle or political conspiracy to destabilise our regime. They deeply believed that I was influenced by western culture product and propaganda because there were no such things (transgender identity) in the past. (Snow, trans lesbian, 21-year-old)

Snow's parents' stubborn conspiratorial understanding of transgender identity is proliferating for ordinary Chinese people, while the articulation of trans as western-conspiracy can date back to the Maoist period when homosexualism and transsexualism was associated with spying and anti-revolutionary crime (Chiang, 2012, p. 58). Since the government has retreated from providing an official statement and leading public opinion, the wide-spread scepticism toward global LGBT agenda in the post-cold war moment continues to function as a basic epistemic framework for Chinese folks. The stigmatisation of transness as western brainwashing denies the local and lived experience of self-claimed trans identity and becomes a strong barrier to identity negotiation and the coming out of trans individuals.

Articulating transgender with medical and pathological discourses is another line of official framing. Medical discourses regulate and reproduce transgender subjectivity through rigid definition of transgender sexuality, mental and physical health, and gender expression.

The doctors won't give you the certificate if you are not trans heterosexual. They couldn't understand trans lesbian or trans gay. You also need to be very cautious when filling the depression scale. They won't give you the diagnosis of transsexualism if you are mentally depressed. Luckily, I have a psychology degree, and I know how to fake it. (giggling) (Gabriel, trans man, bisexual, 21-year-old)

Diagnosing and certification are both discursive strategies to define and create "normal"

trans people. And in the medical discourse, being normal means heterosexually normal and mentally normal. The discursive strategy contains two processes: confession and conversion. In order to get the diagnosis, one needs to confess abnormality and show the wish to be normal. According to Gabriel, many trans people are not heterosexual, and most of them are suffering from depression and other mental health issues. This means many trans individuals have to "fake it" like Gabriel and show the conversion to official and medical discourses which aim to reform the abnormal into a state-recognised heterosexual and mentally normal.

Surprisingly, these state normalisation discourses are actually welcomed by some trans people. The diagnosis of transsexualism pathologises trans identity according to most of the respondents, but some mentioned that those doctors were helpful and authoritative in convincing the parents that their trans children were born this way and could not be changed by conversion therapy.

I've spent two years negotiating with my parents because I need their approval to undergo the surgery. But they refuse to understand and even refuse to talk about it. Every time I tried to open the conversation, it ended up with a fight and conflict. I was so depressed because of their unwillingness to listen to my feelings. I have no choice but to hurt myself and cut my balls to force them to face this. After talking with Dr Pan, they accepted that I had gender disorder and needed medical treatment because the doctor said so. (Kim, 32-year-old, gender queer)

The medical discourse of gender disorder functions as an identity certification that transgender exists and is medically recognised. The diagnosis of mental illness convinces the parents of trans that their children are ill just like other patients, and that there is a way to treat them. Also, being recognised by an authority, no matter how pathologised or stigmatised, can be a symbolic resource for socially marginalised groups to build a sense of social belonging and acceptance. This was the major way for elder trans individuals to meet and build connection with other trans, according to many respondents. The trans medical policy and discourse implies the governmental intention to reform minorities, such as LGBT and disabled people, into eligible and abled normal

citizens who can work and contribute to the economy and socialist construction (Dauncey, 2020, p. 187). This resonates with some trans people's expression of their wish to fit into the gender-binary system and live in "normality", such as Rayray.

> *I used to be very active in the trans circle. But since I have completed the surgery, I am fading out gradually from that circle as others are. We have this word Tui Keng[24], which means quitting from the transgender trap. I am now a shy girl so I cannot behave as openly as before. (Laugh). I just wanna live as a normal girl and don't wanna remind myself of my trans past. (Rayray, MtF)*

Many of the respondents used the metaphor of *Keng* (trap) to refer to their status as an out transgender person hanging out actively in trans community. This trap metaphor is often adopted in two conversational situations: to convince others not to undergo gender transition with the backdrops and difficulties of being a trans person, and, secondly, to express the wish of conforming and passing to desired binary gender without exposing their transgender past. Quitting from the "transgender trap" requires the demarcation of material and discursive doings of gender that on the one hand completes or reaches an ideal bodily transition status and, on the other, stops using transgender terms and keeps a distance from the discursive and social environment of trans communities. In essence, the metaphor of *Keng* indicates the suffering sentiment of being an identifiable and visible trans and the ensuing stigma and discrimination against transgender people. Medical gender transition has become the way trans individuals get rid of the hardship brought about by trans identity and successfully pass to "normal" men or women by eliminating transgender traits.

To sum up, as China has paid increasing attention to its role as a major power in the international arena and its consideration of human rights issues in recent years, it has also begun to use some friendly NGO terms in official statements. But these discourses are often only focused on special cases that are not well-known to the general

---

[24] *Tui Keng*, literally means get out of the trap. In the context of the Chinese trans communities, it normally refers to those who no longer hang out with the trans communities and choose to live a passing and secret life without outing their transgender-identified past.

domestic public (Jiao, 2021). The argument that government is retreating from the private sector is partially correct only in the domestic context. The state's retreat from and censorship of transgender articulations leads to the lack of public awareness and social support, as well as the concrete marginalisation that ensues with the misrepresentation of transness. This relatively invisible transgender people and their everyday struggle in official discourse and public discussion results in extremely limited social care and resources provided to trans communities and continuous pathologisation and stigmatisation of the trans community (Cai et al., 2016). In Cai et al.'s study of Chinese trans women sex workers, they strongly advocate for policymakers to pay urgent attention and provide social care to trans communities (2016). In an NGO event that I participated in, a local public health department representative said that they did not know of the existence of trans community before. This might relate to the blind eye toward trans communities in state policy-making and governance sothat most of the HIV and public health resources were distributed to the gay community and groups (Hildebrandt, 2012). The state and its media system frame transness from the perspectives of socio-political instability and public health issues (Zhang, 2014), contributing to the medicalised discourses of transness. Trans communities have developed complicated articulation strategies with the mainstream medicalisation discourse of transness that on the one hand reject the pathology connotations, but on the other, manage to build a sense of recognition on the state-led medical discourses and institutions. These mainstream articulations, albeit limited, forge what Joseph Massad (2002) calls "incitement to discourses" that institutionalises the public awareness of trans communities in a medical-pathological way. Commercial media's representation of gender non-conformity has filled in the discursive vacuum together with revitalised Confucian norms in the state-led marketisation context and further contributes to the sensationalisation and de-humanisation of transgender subjects.

4.2.2 'Human monster' and 'fake girl': trans representation in commercial media and popular culture

With the retreat of government from the public sphere, the representation of gender non-conformity in commercial media and sensationalist tabloid anecdotes mediates laypeople's understanding of transgender subjects. Among the media representations of transness, *renyao* consists of the most popular articulation in public sphere. As aforementioned, *renyao*, which literally means human monster, has a long genealogy in pre-modern China but gains its contemporary meanings from the famous transsexual and cross-dressing industries in Thailand and Sinophone societies such as Hong Kong and Taiwan. The composition of *renyao* culture, as Lin (2020) argues, is related to China's opening-up economics policy, medical technology and plastic surgery development, sex industries, gender and sexuality minority community and inter-asian cross-cultural interactions.

Figure 4.3. *Commercial Media's Coverage of renyao*

Note. An article published on the Sohu Portal with more than one hundred thousand views warned people not to hang out with renyao because of HIV and robbery. Retrieved from: "Never mess around with Thai renyao otherwise you will regret it your whole life" (2016, July 8). Sohu.https://www.sohu.com/a/285448772_120078003.

With the growing popularity of the cabaret (ladyboy) shows in Thailand, crossdressing shows have become famous in Sinophone societies since the 1990s. Along with the reform and opening-up policy, many night clubs in mainland China introduced

crossdressing shows under the economic and commercial cultural influence of Sinophone regions and started using *renyao* to refer to these performers (for instance, see figure 4.3). Media coverage in gossip tabloids has made the term well-known in every corner of China, and creating an image of *renyao* as poor, ill, sexually deviant, and abnormal.

> *Even my father, an illiterate peasant from ethic minority autonomous region on the China-Vietnam border, knew this group of people (renyao). And they worried that I would become a renyao and have a short-lived miserable life as a prostitute. (Yasmine, 31-year-old, MtF)*

Media coverage of Thai ladyboys often depict the tragic life of *renyao*: Stories are often told of the *renyao* who uses hormones at a very young age to become a performer and sex worker in order to support their poor family, they die young. The commercial media and tabloids' articulation of transgender as *renyao* further dehumanises transgender people via problematic association with prostitution, drug addiction, and anything but sincere gender claims. The authenticity-denying articulation is so profound that many respondents reported suffering from having to deal with this problematic stereotype. As Grace stated, "the biggest problem is not people calling me *renyao*, but my parents worrying that if I use hormones like *renyao* I will live to only 40" (Grace, 30-year-old, MtF, undergoing hormone replacement therapy). The articulation of *renyao*, in this sense, not only frames how ordinary Chinese people understand transgender identity in an extremely problematic way but also makes coming out and gender authenticity negotiation even harder for trans individuals because of the limited vocabularies. The stigmatisation of transgender is pretty much enacted by the reiterative articulation of *renyao* in the media presentation of transness and the problematic terms and derived marginalisation thus become the discursive target which trans community need to address through rearticulation of their own terms as most of the respondents asserted.

The *renyao* (human-monster) has a long etymology history in pre-modern China but gains its contemporary stigmatised connotation and prominence as the dominating public understanding of transgender subjectivity from the commercial transsexual sex

industry and culture of neighbouring Asian regions and subsequent domestic appropriation. The human monster discourse denies transgender individuals' authenticity discursively through its iterative reproduction in media and other public mainstream spaces and is thus rejected by the Chinese transgender majority. However, in North-eastern China, where I conducted part of my fieldwork, there exist trans communities and culture that embraces *Yao* (Monster) as their identified transgender articulation in resistance to the normative transgender subjectivity construction work promoted by transgender NGOs and mainstream trans communities in the *Guannei* area (inland China) (Lin, 2020). Through the articulation of *Yao,* this group of transgender women in North-eastern China "trouble the gentrified local LGBT activism" with their "vulgarity, lewdness and backwardness" (Lin, 2020, p. 67). This, interestingly, echoes with Yiu Fai Chow's (2018) research of transgender sex worker in Hong Kong where they queer the medicalisation and legalisation discourses of transgenderism further by reclaiming the derogatory term of *Yao* in a playful way. Despite such critical appropriation of dehumanised trans discrouse, *renyao* is far from a subversive self-referential slur adapted by mainstream trans communities in mainland China like "queer" in the Western context. Therefore, before rushing into any totalised and simplified understanding of transgender discourses, it is vital to analyse transgender discourses through the articulation lens to contextualise the discursive creation and transformation in the interconnected relationship of discourse, space, gender ideology, and technology.

The *renyao* image was imported in the 1990s with China increasingly engaging in globalisation and regional economic and cultural communication. This image, according to Yasmine, is more influential among older and less-educated generations, while *Weiniang* (fakegirl) is a more well-known and frequently-used term for young people. Originating from Japan and gaining popularity among Chinese young generations since 2000s, ACG (animation, comic and game) subculture has become an influential way for youths to perform the affect, fulfilment and transformation of themselves and negotiate between reality and fantasy (Rahman et al., 2012). There are diversified interest groups involved in ACG culture, with cosplay as one of the most

well-known in east Asia. A portmanteau of costume play, cosplay refers to wearing costumes to perform a character from ACG culture production. The male cosplayers performing a female character are called *Weiniang* (meaning fakegirl), and the *Weiniang* sub-culture community has developed fast and gained traction among Chinese youth (Lavin et al., 2017). In Bilibili, a popular UGC video sharing platform formerly an ACG site, there are more than one thousand videos about *Weiniang*. An online *Weiniang* group called "Alice Cos Group", which consists of male assigned performers cosplaying cute femininity, has nearly two million followers on Weibo and their own fan club. As such, scholars applaud the *Weiniang* subculture for delivering a "theatrical queerness" that challenges the norms of gender expression in the heteronormative society of China (Chao, 2017, p. 21). The *Weiniang* subculture, as Chao (2017) argues, has become influential not only in online youth subculture but also gains high visibility outside cosplay fandom and on mainstream mass media such as Hunan Satellite Television since the 2010s.

Figure 4.4. *The Weibo Blog of Alice Cos Group*
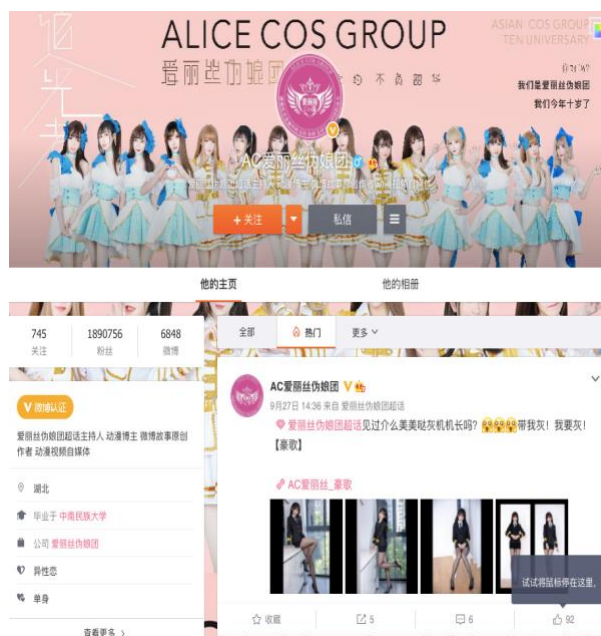
Note. This figure is retrieved from the official Weibo page of Alice Cos Group. (2021, September 27). Weibo.

https://weibo.com/alice520cosplay?is_hot=1.

Despite the fact that *Weiniang* subculture and the online trans women youth community

overlap quite much, the popular discourse of *Weiniang* has not gained much recognition and usage among transgender people. Some respondents complained that cisgender young people often refer to trans people as *Weiniang* and found the word *Wei* (fake) offensive for denying the authenticity of male-to-female subjects. Natalie, an MtF said that, "*Weiniang* are male-identified and are only fond of female costumes. This is by no means trans or MtF." The articulation of *Weiniang* connects the femininity expression of male-assigned bodies with the performance of the particular mainstream aesthetic of cuteness. *Weiniang* contain "fakeness" in the sense that the feminine cuteness or girliness is performed by male bodies, which queer scholars interpret as queerness for it interrupts conventional gender scripts (Chao, 2017). Moreover, the *Weiniang* subculture is in essence a gender performance subculture, connoting insincerity and inauthenticity from the gender performativity perspective. For MtF like Natalie, what identifies them is the *Nu Xin* (woman's heart) but not appearance. In the appearance-body-heart hierarchical discourse, being defined by clothes and called a fake is insulting and unforgivable. The explicit and implicit meaning of fakeness and gender performance in the articulation of *Weiniang* links to non-normative gender expression rather than non-normative gender, thus being referred to as *Weiniang* essentially launches an attack on trans women's authenticity claims through misnaming.

Given the criticism of some trans interviewees, ACG culture and *Weiniang* discourses do function as a bridge for some MtF individuals to reach out to the trans or trans-friendly community and the outside cisgender world. To be specific, *Weiniang* articulation connects different communities where *Weiniang* is a recognised and socialised identity, including transgender people, cosplay ACG subculture community, and cisgender people who have aesthetic, romantic or sexual fantasies about the gender non-binary and cross-dresser. Kilo, who self-identified as agender with more female characteristics, discovered their identity and built a connection with other trans people through engaging with cosplay's *Weiniang* community. The discursive bridging of the *Weiniang* term is noticeable, especially for those who do not have knowledge and discursive access to the trans community. The bridging is also important when the trans community and NGO discourse have not developed their own discourse and consensus

nor reached out to trans individuals. Both Jiaqi and Rin reported that the engagement with the *Weiniang* community provided them with the initial space for self-identification and the buffer zone to negotiate their trans identity. Sometimes they would tell outsiders that they are *Weiniang* for communication convenience or social acceptance.

Weiniang discourse also functions as a normalising or passing tool for some MtF to engage with mainstream society or youth communities. Since *Weiniang* is widely acknowledged among youth and still fits into the binary gender system, self-identifying as *Weiniang* is sometimes more convenient in both online and offline communication. For instance, Kilo flexibly used *Weiniang* in different contexts to prevent unwanted conversations and complicated identity explanations for outsiders. To cater to the popularity of *Weiniang* in ACG platform such as Bilibili, some MtF bloggers tag their video content with "*Weiniang*" to gain more likes and views which can bring them economic profit. For Zhike, an FtM Bilibili blogger, these behaviours were a betrayal to the community although he also admitted that tagging as *Weiniang* could make the trans community more visible. The dilemma between promoting community visibility and promoting individual interests by playing with stigmatised media discourses haunts the trans community. Visibility is important for this still-marginalised and unknown community to develop but is also a double-edged issue that needs nuanced and critical enquiry.

4.3 NGO discourses on transgender

The translation of western-origin discourse around transgender identity is mediated by NGOs and online activism and has formed new gender norms in the trans community. To a certain extent, NGOs are controlling the discursive and political power of defining gender and have become educators of the growing community. The NGO discourse of transgender is also acting as a threshold creating a boundary between the NGO-related institutionalised community and free-ranging private communities.

Kim's experience illustrates this well. It was only after receiving gender

reassignment surgery in 2018 that Kim first encountered the term "transgender" and thus began to see the term "transsexual", with which she self-identified for years, as a "disrespectful" word; "transgender", to her, seemed more "scholarly". According to Kim, being aware of the NGO discourses, such as "transgender" or "trans", was essential to get access to NGO communities and certain resources since NGOs rarely use transsexual in their discourse. In other words, the distinction between NGO discourse and grassroots or non-NGO terms has become a kind of discursive power stratifying the trans community and it ultimately relates to one's media literacy and trans-related knowledge base. Indeed, the most common transgender terms in Chinese NGO discourse are *KuaXingBie* (transgender), *Kua'Er* (trans), MtF, FM and genderqueer, while transsexualism and gender disorder are used in government statements and the healthcare domain. Before her surgery, Kim spent two years convincing her parents that she was ill so that she could be permitted to receive medical treatment. For Kim, NGOs act like hospitals that authorise the authenticity of her gender claim as transsexual. The medical discourse is helpful in convincing others of the authentic feelings of gender anxiety while the NGO discourse is authoritative in making sense of the gender variance identity for the individuals.

NGOs are not just reiterating international trans discourses, theorisation and activism. Instead, trans-related NGOs selectively adopt and creatively translate the western discourses according to their own framework, community agenda, political practice and profit. For example, in Catty's QQ group which she intends to shape into an NGO in the future, Core Socialist Values are used as the guiding principle to resist the traditional Chinese mindset on gender, and a non-political rule is implemented. This is the case for most of the trans-NGOs, online or offline, to operate in a non-radical and less sensitive way. Iris, a higher-educated non-binary transfeminine who engages deeply with foreign English-speaking trans communities, criticises the domestic trans-NGOs as conservative. The cause of these non-activist features of NGO-like trans communities is twofold. First, the Chinese trans NGO world is derived from but

independent of original gay and lesbian NGOs[25] which have a tradition of cooperating with the government and being a bridge connecting international organisation and funding, the Chinese government and the local queer community (Hildebrandt, 2011). Second, the censorship and monitoring policy has shrunk the space for the public sector, and the lack of resistance in the community history has limited the imagination of activism as a radical or local social movement. In the post-socialist context, these LGBTQ NGOs solidify the community by recalling the socialist revolutionary discourse such as "*Tongzhi*" (comrade) in the gay community (Bao, 2018a), and *Xiongdi* (trans brothers) and *Jiemei* (trans sisters) in the trans community.

Figure 4.5. *Induction Poster of a Trans Men Community*

Note. Induction poster of a trans men community with identifiable information removed. This poster is made and circulated in an online trans men community in 2020, and it manifested the values, ambition, and regulations of their community.

The induction poster of an NGO-like trans men community is a good example of how Chinese transgender NGOs set an agenda of depathologisation, social recognition and

---

[25] For instance, Beijing LGBT centre launched its transgender department in 2017 and Guangzhou Zhitong started its transgender executive team in 2020.

inclusiveness, and articulate their gender ideology on behalf of transgender individuals. As shown in 4.5, the FtM NGO "Rainbow of Zhenzhen" defines FtM brotherhood as transgender men, non-binary and gender non-conforming female and highlights "equality, respect and support" as the trans community doctrines. In the NGO articulations, breaking the binary gender matrix and gender stereotype is the key agenda. Through the institutional narratives, NGO discourse gains the most visibility and social resources and thus constructs its leading and normative role in the community. For Kim who does not have the chance to get access to terms like transgender, and Luna who does not even know how to pronounce transgender in English, NGO discourses, networks and resources are not easily accessible. NGO discourses on transgender are, therefore, moderated for the higher socio-economic trans communities. The benefit of normative power is disproportionally distributed to the more privileged minority. As such, this leads to the stratification of the community.

The new norms constructed by NGO discourses can also other, marginalise and re-pathologise some trans subjects' alternative naming and life experiences. For instance, the local Chinese transgender term *Yaoniang* (drug girl), which many young transgender women self-identified with, is rarely used in NGO environment based on my online and offline observation, and is even discouraged by some trans NGOs according to their inclusivity and diversity doctrines. *Yaoniang*, literally means drug girl, and refers to anyone who uses female hormone replacement therapy. Although some young trans women use this term interchangeably with MtF, *Yaoniang* is the more popular one for it is a new term and indicates youthness with *niang* (young girl). Didi, a trans woman programmer, engages with both the NGO-based community and a private-relationship-based QQ group. She considers "transgender" as a gender identity while considers *Weiniang* (fake girl) as a "creepy kink" and *Yaoniang* (drug girl) as drug addicted. Didi regrets using the latter two labels to describe herself when she was younger as she now believes these two labels to be "ignorant and abnormal". Ophelia and Lemon, 18-year-old trans women and NGO participants, also resist the wide use of *Yaoniang* in the online trans community and youth culture. For them, *Yaoniang* refers to those who rely on and are addicted to drugs (hormone medicine), and those who are

not intelligent and educated enough to use hormones scientifically and are, therefore, easily swayed. Another reason why Lemon dislikes *Yaoniang* is that this term is exclusively used in the Chinese-speaking world and is thus not useful in a global context. In the othering of *Yaoniang*, the intersection of educational background, media literacy, financial status, and body management forms a hierarchical discourse of alternative naming of gender and signify the division and stratification of the trans community. I further elaborate on transgender people's articulation of *Yaoniang* in the next section.

The translation and localisation of some mainstream transgender identity terms in NGO discourses meets resistance and dis-esteem in the grassroots trans community. Many trans individuals are aware of these terms but refuse to be represented by such an imported identity discourse.

We rarely use those terms (trans and transgender) in our community. In fact, I hate the term 'trans' because it constantly reminds me of my imperfectness. Who wants to be called trans if he or she wants to be a pure man or woman? Also, I hate the introduction ritual in NGO activities. I really don't wanna go through the self-exposure process as trans woman again and again. (Penny, 24-year-old, MtF)

I met Penny the first time in an indie-film-watching event organised by an LGBTQ NGO and became friends after attending several private activities like Halloween parties. We watched the award-wining queer film *Moonlight* which told the story of an African American gay man Chiron. After watching this nuanced queer film, everyone was asked by the host to introduce themselves and talk about their feelings about the film, according to the routine of this event series. The cohort was quite diverse in terms of gender and sexual identity representatives, and everyone seemed acquainted with the NGO routine of self-introduction except for Penny. She was reluctant to expose herself as a "transgender woman" in the self-introduction ritual and had little to respond to about the queer film. Penny's reluctance was substantially visible in the safe space NGOs claimed to offer, and was different from her outgoing personality I found in other

private activities. Her silence did not relate to her perceived unsafety of the space or a transphobic environment, but rather, as the quote indicates, related to the discursive and ritual alienation she felt in the NGO activities. By using the strong word "hate", she expressed emotional rejection of the transgender discourses and the derived gender ideology promoted by trans NGOs. And this "hate" sentiment is not rare among trans communities, even in those NGO-led ones.

> *"In the name of sexual and gender minority, these (NGO) communities preach and enforce their stubborn ideology rather than communicating with different voices. Their mansplaining makes me sick and speechless. Unlike them, I choose to be a real person who has true feelings."*
> *(A retweet from an anonymous twitter user, by an interviewee)*

The above quote was retweeted from an anonymous twitter user, who self-identified as a TS (transsexual) sex worker, by one of my interviewees[26] who used to work at the very trans NGO this tweet criticised. NGO discourses were considered as fake ideological preaching that diverted from the authentic discourse, experiences and feelings of transgender individuals. This is not to imply that NGOs are alienated from ordinary trans individuals, given that many respondents voluntarily participated in and benefited from NGO activities. However, it is worth pointing out the existence of disagreement and resistance towards the NGO transgender agenda and the niched articulations that trans individuals found estranging. Since gender is performatively constructed, being referred to by transgender terms and requiring repetitive self-exposure in NGO environments forces transgender people's self-interpellation into a subjectivity position within rigid NGO and gender ideology terms. In other words, NGO-promoted transgender terms and the international transgender agenda has become a universal calliper to measure and rename the local/historical gender non-conforming subjects. As Chatterjee's examination of the tension between NGO-promoted transgender identity terms and local transgender terms in post-colonial India indicates,

---

[26] I anonymised this interviewee's pseudonym for the confidentiality reason because the quote was from third party and the interviewee's pseudonym is relative identifiable with the additional NGO information.

certain groups of trans people's adoption of the former is related to the reproduction of their intersectional privilege (Chatterjee, 2018). While recognising the emancipatory opportunities that international transgender discourses might bring, it is also important to stay sensitive to how a "category of First World origin" (Stryker, 2006, p. 14) can have an erasing effect on other local discourses. For trans men and trans women whose claimed genders are binary, the term 'transgender', both in English and in Chinese translation, threatens their desire for an authentic or strategical essentialist feeling of binary genders. This somewhat contradicts the identity politics in NGO discourse which seeks to raise the visibility of transgender as a challenging force opposing a gender binary system. Penny (24-year-old, MtF) chose to identify herself as MtF, although MtF (Male-to-Female) is de facto a problematical bio-essentialist term emphasising rigid transition between binary gender in English, as well as a fairly meaningless acronym for non-trans people which does not indicate any gender transition in the Chinese context. Through the de-articulation of transgender terms, Chinese transgender people disconnect from the NGO agenda and gender ideology.

In general, the Chinese trans NGO agenda promotes a non-binary inclusiveness in the trans community in the same way the mainstream international transgender activism and NGOs do (Bergman & Barker, 2017). However, it is common for my interviewees who engage less with the NGO community to maintain a relatively stronger endorsement of gender binary and normativity. Natasha bluntly expressed her aversion to ChaoXiaomi, a publicly out genderqueer celebrity who had close relationship with trans NGOs, and thought genderqueer people were "non-male-non-female" "monsters" and were "too mentally ill" to understand themselves. From the perception of grassroots trans individuals, political right of gender queer discourses, the "trans" prefix in NGO terminology which emphasises transition, and the socio-economic stratification of NGO discourse access are important, causes of the discursive distinction and the split trans community. In sum, the identity terms and labels circulated in different trans communities have become a discursive tool and a powerful means to set up boundaries and performatively create a closed and self-contained circle. The NGO-based communities are more established and equipped in terms of visibility, discourse power

and resources. The othered communities, mostly based on online groups and networks, cover the majority of trans individuals from the lower classes and develop alternative discourses from pan-Asian or native culture and history. Some transgender individuals engage with both communities but reported rather distinct ideologies, discursive environments and interaction modes.

4.4 A media archaeology of the self-articulation in online trans communities

In this section, I employ Zielinski's media archaeology to examine the continuity and rupture between existing and emerging transgender articulations mediated by different digital platforms (2006). Media archaeology takes a Foucauldian historian lens to articulate alternative genealogy of the marginalised and even failed media materials and affordances to make a heterogenous narration of history and reality. It also highlights the media materiality stance to articulate discourse, body, space, and media technology together. Drawing generally on media archaeology, I position my examination of transgender discourses coined and used by trans communities with an analysis of their perception and narration of the changing digital platforms that online trans communities inhabit. The transformation of transgender articulations should be situated in the social-techno context where the iteration of digital platforms, discursive surveillance and different generations and groups of trans communities all play essential roles in shaping the transgender discourses adopted by Chinese transgender people.

4.4.1 The dichotomous discourse of TS/CD

In the late 1990s Hazeline became the very first website for the trans community in China. The site served as a means for members of the community to connect, communicate, and find information. Early age transgender activist pioneers translated English articles on hormone use, surgery processes, and explained trans identities for the newcomers who were still struggling and confused with homosexual identities. The widely used terms of TS (transsexual) and CD (crossdresser) in this website became the only identities known to the early generations. The TS/CD discourses soon

provoked heated debates on the authenticity of true trans and ended up with the split of Hazeline into two separate webs for each identity exclusively. The TS/CD dichotomy is deeply rooted in the early generation of the trans community and became the only typology used to understand and express trans identity at the time.

The definition and application of TS/CD dichotomy in China are different from its western origin. In the narrative and daily usage of some elder trans respondents, the difference between TS and CD is that the former wish to undergo gender reassignment surgery. At a time when surgery was accessible only to upper class trans, the discussion and debate around the TS/CD dichotomy referred more to what trans respondents called the possession of a *Nv Xin* (woman's heart) rather than the actual bodily transition or gender expression. The TS/CD dichotomy in the Chinese context is related to psychological perception and financial condition. CDs who don't have a "woman's heart" or cannot afford the surgery are deprived of transgender identity in comparison to TS. TS/CD identities connotates a double-layered body/mind essentialist meaning of trans authenticity, including woman's heart that requires a self-determined and consistent assertation of authentic femininity, and the desire or acceptance of gender transgression through medical means. The woman's heart and surgery combined work to perform essentialist mind/body coherence by which trans authenticity is defined in the CD/TS dichotomy. Because woman's heart and surgery are too difficult and expensive for older and poorer trans people, some of them have to employ wearing female clothes secretly as the only way of gender expression and internalise the CD label. What excludes CDs from trans communities is not only the medical-centric and essentialist interpretation of trans authenticity, but also the class and age based inequality. While this dichotomy is so influential among elderly trans individuals, the CD/TS dichotomy is abandoned by younger generation and mainstream trans communities. Most of the trans people who identify as CD/TS are older and poorer, and have a narrow and outdated interpretation and practice of trans authenticity, this has made them isolated from and left behind by the current trans communities with their transformed discourses.

Along with the shutting down of Hazeline by the government due to accusations of illegal drugs trading, the TS/CD discourse lost its circulation environment and original ecology. As a result, the discourse is no longer used by the majority of the trans community today. As interviewee Rayray stated, "TS/CD is like an unearthed cultural relic" (MtF, 30s). As the early transgender generation in the 2000s who gather in online spaces begins to age, some of the older transgender people who identified as TS/CD rely on sex work to make a living because most of them are excluded from the job market. TS/CD discourses have become a cypher for the sex trade and is reborn in today's trans communities with an erotic and stigmatic image. Younger transgender individuals who participate in the sex industry utilise the TS/CD articulation as a keyword implying the service they offer and the password to reach out to potential customers who are only familiar with TS/CD discourses. Many of my respondents showed a strong aversion toward the TS/CD discourse for "contaminating the trans community" (Rayray, MtF, 30s). The diffusion and application of TS/CD discourse are now visible in QQ chat groups consisting of young trans sex workers and what they call "straight men" who look for sex with trans women. The term "straight men" has nothing to do with homosexuality, nor do transgender people identify their sexual relationship or themselves as gay. Rather, it is an appropriated term to indicate the sexual relation between cisgender male and queer community members. With the new connotations and social relations attached to the TS/CD articulation, the TS/CD binary framework of transgender subjectivity has been transformed. Along with the shutting down of Hazeline and the decline of original TS/CD discourses, older transgender people who self-identified with TS/CD binary are disappearing from contemporarily visible online trans communities.

4.4.2 *Yaoniang* (drug girl) discourse and digital diaspora

With Hazeline censored and the older TS/CD identified transgender people becoming invisible in the trans community, the growing popularity of *Baidu TieBa* (Baidu blog and forum) in the late 2000s provided a new space for younger trans to establish their cybercommunity. *Baidu TieBa* is a set of online forums for people who share similar

interest or identities. *Yaoniang Ba* (a forum for drug girls) replaced Hazeline and became the major online space for trans people. Unlike the fierce identity debate on Hazeline in the decade prior, people in *Yaoniang Ba* emphasise individual lives and experiences more; the name of this forum, *Yaoniang*, has come to be a widely accepted identity for those who engage and communicate within it.

Yaoniang Ba* is an open discussion space and has attracted many "tourists", individuals who are curious but do not identify as trans people. Outside this digital space, *Yaoniang* has also become a loose identity label encompassing diversified self-claimed identities. Although *Yaoniang* is still a bio-deterministic and somewhat pathologized term, the funny and cute characteristics counteract the normative and serious NGO trans discourse, thereby, creating a space for people from different social groups to communicate and reach a mutual understanding. *Niang* refers to cute underage girls in ACG culture and is often used as a word root to create identities such as *Weiniang* (boys who like to wear female clothes) and *Loniang* (people who like to wear Lolita costume). *Yaoniang*, according to my respondents, normally means people who use female hormones. This identity includes male-to-female who use hormones, crossdressers who want to look more natural in female dress, patients who use sex hormones for health reasons or anyone who uses hormones for any reason. *Yaoniang* discourse is thus familiar not only to the trans communities but also many outsiders such as curious "tourists" and straight men who are sexually attracted to trans people. *Yaoniang Ba* was once voted as one of the "top 10 creepiest *TieBa*" for its popularity.

Accompanied by this popularity and visibility is the censorship. With the shutting down of trans-related *TieBa* beginning in 2014, *Yaoniang* had to migrate to QQ chat groups to inhabit their community. However, compared to *Baidu TieBa*'s open access, many trans QQ chat groups are more closed and are intentionally based on private relationships to prevent potential censorship. In the digital diaspora from *TieBa* to QQ, the trans community converted from an online public space to thousands of fragmented and closed online chatgroups. The private relationship-based chatgroups become homogenised and normative according to many respondents. The rules, rituals, agenda,

information and even emotions are controlled or swayed by the group owner or the majority of group members.

> *In those [QQ Yaoniang] groups, people normally share their selfies and everyday routine. This is very boring because I am not interested in their private life. Also, the group owner will never intervene into horrible sayings like 'people who don't take hormone are not allowed to self-claim as trans'. But the most important reason why I withdraw from all these groups is the overwhelming anxiety and depression.* (Atiz, MtF, 33-year-old)

Due to the dissatisfaction with the QQ *Yaoniang* groups, some respondents with higher socioeconomic and educational status, such as Atiz, have gravitated in a second diaspora to other digital diasporic spaces through WeChat, Twitter, Telegram, Signal and other social media apps. Except for WeChat, the usage of these apps requires VPN networks. Some trans with overseas education backgrounds even launched a website called "Translives" to share and translate scientific research and gender studies in English academia. In other words, the digital divide is used to guarantee a higher-quality discussion and maintain a higher- "suzhi"[27] membership for people like Atiz. Together with the second diaspora, Atiz's abandon the identity as *Yaoniang* for this term represents those whose self-identification relies on hormone usage and embrace a more NGO and transnational trans identity.

With the *Yaoniang* community becoming more and more closed and fragmented, the struggle of *Yaoniang* and the second diaspora of more privileged trans reflects the forced invisibility of *Yaoniang* discourse under censorship and the formation of an exclusive and normative understanding of transgender in grassroot online trans communities. The alternative naming of *Yaoniang* as resistance to mainstream and unfamiliar NGO discourses gradually loses its power with the fragmentation of the trans community.

---

[27] Suzhi (素质) refers to the social, educational and political hierarchy (Kipnis, 2006, p.295). People of High suzhi are seen as possessing more income, power and social status.

4.4.3 MtF and FtM: professionality and discursive boundary building for invisibility

Since 2016, Zhihu has become another trans space decidedly different from *Yaoniang Ba*. Zhihu is a question-and-answer knowledge sharing site (like Quora) that is dominated by well-educated users. Some trans people start to answer trans-related questions and gain popularity in the trans community. In answering questions, they turn trans identity into a kind of solid and scientific knowledge and a public education program. If Tieba is an identity negotiation space with vague border and guidelines, trans discussion spaces in Zhihu helps trans users to gain a sense of professionalism and obtain discursive and interpretive power to establish a set of self-recognised trans knowledge.

The discourse of MtF/FtM (Male-to-female/female-to-male) is often used in Zhihu discussion and posts. Unlike transgender and its Chinese translation, these acronyms are less familiar terms to the outsiders. Recently, a pair of new terms were proposed and circulated in the trans community: *Fei Tian Mao* (flying cat) and *MuTongFan* (cask rice). These terms are the more obscure expression of transgender identities via further appropriation and localisation of MtF/FtM terms. By applying such jargon and pseudonymous terms, the community sets a discursive and recognition boundary to exclude uninformed people, including some transgender people from outside these communities. The self-naming strategy of these online Chinese trans communities resonates with the queer counter-conduct against everyday digital surveillance, what Lingel called "dazzle camouflage" (Lingel, 2020, p. 1). *Fei Tian Mao* and *MuTongFan* disconnect trans communities from the potential cisgender gaze of outsiders and state intervention into online trans communities. Much more complicated than hiding from the public eye, it is also the playful counter doing of the problematic terms through the creative appropriation of MtF/FtM and the rejection of mainstream transgender articulations by adopting confusing and empty signifiers. These queer camouflage acronyms allow trans communities to rearticulate transness with their own agentic meaning-making and boundary work to consolidate the community and connect their own people (Lingel, 2020).

Also, these terms are superficially irrelevant to trans identity, which emancipates trans individuals from constantly being reminded of their inauthenticity by the NGO terms of "trans" and "transgender". The attempt to create a safe space by using professional and jargon terms can be seen as an effort to pursue invisibility in public, which is against the visibility agenda of NGOs. In a campaign collecting ideas of naming for an FtM NGO group, *FeiTianMao* was excluded for being too vague and uncommunicative according to an informant working for this group.

The evolution and genealogy of the online trans space bears witness to Chinese transgender people's exploration of transgender articulations and collective authenticity construction through discursive competition with the mainstream transgender discourses. The Internet space has been important and often the only way for transgender subjects to articulate their own definition and understanding of transgender in the Chinese context. Through strategic community naming, transgender people are able to connect to people with similar interests, beliefs and gender ideologies. Chinese trans communities rely on these online spaces to form and circulate identity consensus, which is hard to fulfil in offline life, mainstream media narratives, and institutionalised NGOs. The affordance of these digital technologies and the characteristics of different platforms shape the way transgender subjects express and negotiate identity.

4.5 Discussion and Conclusion

This chapter depict the discursive landscape of transgender articulations in China and positions trans communities' collective self-naming within the discursive encounter of different mainstream trans discourses in China. By mapping out the discursive landscape, I present the tension and complexity of trans articulation in China. The articulation of Chinese transgender discourses in online trans communities is a conflicted and competitive discursive encountering where camouflaged, contradictory, and opposite self-naming are strategically connected with mainstream discourses, surveillance, gender norms and different recognition mechanisms of transness. This chapter resonates with Butler's argument of gender terms, that beyond revealing how

gender terms are institutionalised as social doctrines it is also important to trace the very moments when gender beliefs are challenged, proved transformable and "resignified through collective terms" (Butler, 2004, p. 216). A collective sense of trans authenticity is constructed through the articulation of competing transgender discourses, community-led vernacular narratives and trans individuals' agentic practices and negotiation with the dominant beliefs of transness. Through the collective articulation of transness in appropriation or resistance to the mainstream discourses, trans people are able to legitimise their dehumanised and denied authenticity from the trans-exclusive society and dominant cis-centric ideology (McLean et al., 2018). Through the lens of articulation theory, this chapter has demonstrated how the sense of community authenticity is performatively imagined, articulated and shifted via discursive rejection or appropriation of previous articulations and the reiteration of their own.

The lack of transgender visibility and the retreat of official national discourse around trans from the public sphere in the post-socialist condition, and the stigmatised and pathologised representation in media, have resulted in an ambiguous and biased understanding of transgender groups by the mainstream Chinese public today. Filling the discursive blank left by official intervention, media sensationalism represents trans subjects with toxic visibility and mediates the public discourse on trans people. Transgender is imagined by the public with the image of a human monster and fakegirl, which poses a discriminatory and stereotypical burden on the trans community and individuals. Both human monster and fake girl are the product of commercial culture (sex and the sub-cultural industries), so the identity of transgender people is often misunderstood as related to the sex trade or certain abnormal sexual habits, rather than a person's foundational, gender authenticity claims. Through sexualisation and stigmatisation, transgender discourses on media and public spaces make transgender subjectivity unintelligible and inauthentic. At the same time, these two images are also seen as coming from overseas, creating an inauthentic discourse and understanding of the transgender identity in the eyes of the Chinese trans people. By reducing trans experiences to erotic, exotic and entertaining gender performance, the media discourses of transgender subjects ignore subjective experiences of trans and deny their claimed

gender identities.

The public and institutionalised discourse and media representation of trans has pushed the trans community to name themselves in alternative ways. While NGOs have gained normative discursive power to define and officially represent the Chinese trans community, grassroots trans communities and individuals depend on digital technologies and spaces to create and circulate their own community culture and identity claiming. As Halberstam (2016) argues, the existing naming system makes clear the ways in which the dominant knowledge-power nexus controls the body and gender ideology. In vernacular naming of trans community, Halberstam saw the end of medical/psychiatric control of the discourse and the birth of a new paradigm of naming which comes from the community. I see two potentials in vernacular naming. On the one hand, vernacular naming is a bottom-up way in which individuals and local communities explore and explain themselves. Since vernacular naming comes from diversified bottom-up discourses, it is by no means naturally anti-normative or reversive. However, I argue to see vernacular naming not in the normative/queer dichotomy but as a collective authenticity construction project. The collective articulations of transgender terms not only connect the transgender individuals together to form discourse-based communities, but also extend the link to non-trans people, such as cisgender *Weiniang* from ACG subculture and "straight" cismen. Understanding and recognising grass-root trans individuals and communities through their self-naming and discourse is a more promising and constructive way to benefit and contribute to the community. Moreover, vernacular naming is local and provincial but not a totalised one that tries to generalise difference with a single standard and perspective. The provincialisation of naming is geographical, historical and ideological and thus tells a different and context-rich story of local trans experience. The provincialisation of collective-naming functions as a window to understanding the history and discourses which construct the status of the contemporary trans community and to look for potentials for a trans future.

The discursive transformation and tension in online trans communities have further complicated the discursive encounter through the mediation of media platform and

trans communities' strategic naming against surveillance. Responding to the digital surveillance of trans online spaces and terms known to the public, such as *Kuaxingbie* (transgender) and *Bianxingren* (transsexual), online trans communities develop creative self-naming strategies in resistance to mainstream trans narratives and rearticulate their own terms of constructed community authenticity. Strategic self-naming, on the one hand, creates a discursive boundary free from governmental censorship and public discrimination, and, on the other, works as playful exploration of transness and parody of the normative gender ideologies promoted by both cisgender-centric society and trans NGOs. The discursive encounters of public discourse, NGO values and self-naming have complicated our understanding of the articulation of transgender in China as the competitive and vernacular doings of transgender authenticity. The different transgender articulations come from and also shape the definition, boundary, practice and collective identity for different communities. Moreover, the transformation of trans articulations in different online trans communities and platforms complicates the dichotomy of "cisnormative master narratives and transnormative alternative narratives" (Bradford & Syed, 2019, p. 323). This chapter shows that dominant/normative trans discourses can become marginal along with the digital and discursive diaspora of online trans communities. An anti-normative and decentring meaning-making potential is embedded in the shifting articulations in the hybrid trans discursive encounter (Chatterjee, 2018). Through the lens of articulation, the performative authenticity discursively constructed by Chinese trans people and communities has a dialectical feature that creates negotiation space in between different discourses, interpretations and social groups.

Last but not least, this chapter takes on the media archaeology lens and emphasises the role digital platforms and digital surveillance play in the iteration of existing and emergent transgender articulations. The transgender articulations are not only identity terms used by transgender people, but rather the discursive hook connecting and embodying social relations, gender ideologies, discursive context, and group members sharing similar gender practices. With old platforms, where online trans communities gather, disappearing, existing articulations lose their circulation environment and

meaning-making field together with the communities bonded by those transgender terms. Thus, the transformation of transgender articulations is mediated by and have a symbiotic relationship with digital platforms, which rarely get enough academic attention in the discussion of transgender identity work and meaning-making. The affordance of digital platforms shapes the articulation process as well, such as the closed web of Hazeline which only early-generation transgender people from the late 1990s know, the open discussion forum in Baidu Tieba where both trans and cisgender people encounter each other to make meaning of trans terms, and the more private-relationship-based QQ chat groups where boundaries work through empty signifiers like *Feitianmao* and *Mutongfan.* In the next chapter, I will further explain how digital technologies might allow transgender people to experience liminal time and space alternatively.

Chapter 5 Liminality: Chinese transgender people's gender praxis of time and space

5.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, I discussed the discursive encounter of mainstream discourses, NGOs and grassroots online trans communities that try to seize the discursive power to construct authentic definitions of transness. The lack of inclusive public awareness and social acceptance of transness brings challenges for trans communities in China, which struggle to mobilise discursive and digital resources to construct and negotiate their own manifesto of transgender authenticity. I have so far explained how Chinese transgender articulations interweave with the diaspora of trans communities among different online platforms, which also shapes the understanding and negotiation of trans authenticity in online trans communities. This chapter further explain Chinese transgender people's digital and mediated temporal/spatial practices of gender authenticity which are excluded and made marginal in the offline world. The in-betweenness of digital gender practices allow trans people to construct alternative sense of authenticity in terms of gendered time and space. I start by elaborating on the role of digital technologies in mediating alternative trans spatiality and temporality practices, which are essential in constructing trans authenticity in a transphobic and discriminatory society. I join Howard Chiang's call for the "collaborative thinking of what transgender can do across time and space" (Chiang, 2021, p. 22) by considering trans individuals' fights for gender authenticity as temporal and spatially existential issues. Transgender authenticity is bound up with the binary-gender context in which gender norms are reproduced through the gendered regulation of time and space (Burke, 2018; Massey, 2013). This chapter turns the focus to Chinese transgender people's experiences and practices of time and space in their digital interactions. As trans media communication studies have suggested, digital technologies allow transgender people to creatively and alternatively do gender through temporal compression and spatial

practices online (Gieseking, 2017; Horak, 2014). This is by no means implying digital technologies thoroughly revolutionise time and space for the benefit of queer communities. Instead, this chapter examines whether the reconfigured digital time and space afford the possibility of undoing gender norms and what kind of transgender digital time and space practices can be seen as constructing alternative trans authenticity. To answer the question of how transgender authenticity is formulated in the digital age, I draw on the concept of liminality to move beyond the queer/normative dichotomy and to capture the nuance in the reflexive digital spatial and temporal practices of transgender individuals.

Liminality is a concept that was first introduced by anthropologist Arnold van Gennep (2013) and developed by Victor Turner (1988; 1979). It refers to the in-between status in a transitional stage. Liminality is characterized by ambiguity and indeterminacy, as individuals in the transitional state are neither fully part of the previous social order nor fully incorporated into the new one (Turner, 1979). Victor Turner (1988), who revived the concept of liminality, centred liminality in his postmodern lens of emancipation and referred liminality to the plural and experimental status at the social margins or interfaces. In Thomassen's critical reading of the liminality literature, he described liminality as "a loss of home and a ritualized rupture with the world" (2014, p. 17). It is in this sense – of displacement and forced rupture – that I connect the analysis of transgender authenticity construction with their liminal gender practices online. The liminality is connected both with the sense-making of gender transition and the navigation of authenticity through digital social spaces. I adopt liminality in this chapter to capture the in-between, boundary-crossing, and transitional digital spatial experiences of Chinese transgender people. Digital technologies accommodate transitional and passing-through gender practices of transgender individuals.

Queer scholars have expanded the concept of liminality from a critical geographical concept to the interconnected space-time nexus that refers to the alternative spatiotemporal experiences of queer people (March, 2021; Sember, 2003). March (2021) reviewed the queer and trans studies literature on liminality and argued

that queer experiences of time and space disrupt linear temporality and gender-binary spatiality. However, most queer and transgender geography and temporality studies have applied the queer/normative dichotomy to highlight the subversiveness of the transgender experience, risking romanticising certain transgender subjective experiences and excluding others. In this sense, I agree with Thomassen's critique of the refashioning of this concept in studies of socially excluded groups which use liminality interchangeably with marginality as this "has nothing additional to offer" (2014, p. 7). Thomassen (2014) suggested that the understanding of liminality should go beyond the good/evil dichotomous frame which either connects liminality to upheaval or celebrates liminality as an innovative tool and emancipatory force. Instead, it is important to recognize the complexity of this concept in the context where it occurs and not simply reduce liminality to a transformative or normative aspect.

In this chapter, I therefore focus on the mediating role of digital technologies in trans authenticity construction in terms of time. Rather than seeing the emergence of digital technology and the rapid growth of trans community visibility in China since the 1990s as coincidental, the contingent configuration and development of trans communities are deeply shaped by digital infrastructures which afford alternative temporal and spatial gender practices. The lens of liminal trans spatiality and temporality, in my interpretation, contributes to understanding alternative authenticity construction of trans people by challenging the binary/non-binary space and linear/queer and emphasising the temporal and spatial in-betweenness in everyday trans digital practices. In other words, trans authenticity emerges neither in the inhabiting of binary/non-binary space nor living in linear/queer time. It is through the transitional and in-between practices of time and space that transgender individuals construct their sense of authenticity.

5.2 Liminal spatial practices of Chinese transgender people

In this section, I start by discussing why it is important to examine spatiality in the context of Chinese transgender authenticity construction. By conceptualising trans

spatial experience through queer relational space and liminality based on the critical comparison between the online and offline experience of space, I call attention to the concrete role of digital technology in affording not only the space for trans community establishment and networking but also the recognition apparatus for authenticity claiming and interpellation. Transgender people's experiences in online and offline spaces can be understood as liminal spatialities that project their attempt to transcend the gender binary reified by space and spatial experiences. By appropriating the realness of the defaulted and assigned gender binary spaces, transgender people construct and negotiate gender authenticity in their everyday online/offline spatial experiences and liminal space crafting to accommodate various non-binary and in-between gender practices.

5.2.1 Recoding the normative gender space

From the perspectives of feminist and gender geographies, space links closely to the body, gender roles and sexual regulations (Browne & Lim, 2010). As Gray (2012) argued, the anonymity of digital spaces does not guarantee online communities a utopian and safe space because advanced technologies allow online avatar to be visually and audibly related to identity politics and gender/race based discrimination, repression and violence, especially for gender and sexual minorities. My interviewees' experiences and narratives of offline space echo this argument from a counter viewpoint. Institutionalised spaces, such as schools, workplaces and medical centres, work as a gender-binary assigning and regulating force shaping the gender geographies in the cisgender-centric society and generating norms-abiding subjects. Apart from the regulating and normalising effect of space, gender-binary places like public baths and toilets are also experienced by trans individuals as constraining and punishing forces that inflict physical abuse and mental depression on trans bodies. Most of the interviewees reported negative experiences and emotions when talking about toilets. The relation between the gendered nature of spaces and trans people's suffering perception of space is not unique to the Chinese trans community. In their analysis of transgender people's perceptions of urban spaces in the US, Doan (2010) pointed out

how the gender binary tyranny embodied in the form of gendered space, including in so-called queer spaces and neighbourhoods, shapes and constrains the public and private life of trans people. In general, social and institutional spaces are designed and run in line with binary-gendered regulations, leaving limited space for gender non-conforming practices. These binary-gender spaces are liminal to transgender people in the sense that it is the binary-encoded space that produces and reproduces the marginality of gender-nonconforming subjects. In the meantime, the perceived and lived liminal spatial status allows transgender people to develop alternative relations with gender norms in certain spaces by crossing over or occupying the borderland.

Doan outlined "successful" discursive space-making in the US, including "online chat rooms and list serves, annual conventions, periodic public protests, and regular political lobbying" (2010, p. 70). In the Chinese trans communities, unlike their American counterparts, online discursive space-making is loosely organised as a transgender space without clear transgender identity political agenda. Taking Atiz as an example, when asked about their early experience with Hazeline and later experiences in QQ chat groups, they compared the relational and spatial elements of these two spaces:

> *In Hazeline, I had their IP address so I could meet them offline. But I was a very introverted person, I didn't dare to meet them even though they were willing to meet. I know that other people on QQ might know each other well. But you know QQ is an odd and dangerous mixture of good and evil, you know how risky that environment is. It is hard even for heterosexual people to find someone who likes you back, not to mention trans people. Moreover, it is harder to find decent people in those special kinds of QQ groups. (Atiz, 33-year-old, MtF, programmer)*

Atiz's hesitation towards grassroots QQ groups and their members is dramatically different from the interviewees who had a lower educational background and social-economic status and depended on this kind of trans space for relationship development. While I discuss the stratification and hierarchies in Chinese trans communities in the next chapter, here I want to emphasise the hybridity and potential of these "risky" and

"indecent" online trans spaces. Many of these online trans spaces seem bio-essential and heteronormative on the surface, but de facto accommodate diverse sex/gender/sexuality practices. As Grace, an MtF who self-identified as a gay man until she was introduced by a "straight man"[28] to an MtF QQ group, said, "I've been looking for the (MtF) community all the time, but there are no channels available for me except QQ groups and DangGuai Web". The QQ groups Grace joined mainly consisted of MtF people and 'straight guys'. The literal meaning of the dual typology of MtF-Straight guy in such space suggested a double binarism: gender binarism and the binary between straight/gay sexuality. However, the spatial practice and the social relations of the group members in such spaces facilitate boundary crossing and transitional gender practices. Before joining these QQ groups with the invitation of her 'straight' sex partner, Grace hung out in gay communities only to find herself marginalised for her feminine gender expressions. The gender/sexuality identity dislocation she felt in gay online groups was relocated in her crossing over between gay groups and MtF-'Straight' chatgroups. The MtF-'Straight' chatgroups can be seen as cisgender heteronormative in the normative queer eyes and languages, while such chat groups turned out to be important liminal spaces for many trans women like Grace who previously identified as gay. The 'straight guy' who sought sexual relationships with trans women like Grace in gay groups and introduced the latter to the MtF-'Straight' chat groups became the bridge linking the dislocated and relocated spatial experiences together for Grace. In MtF-'Straight' chat groups, straightness signifies gender affirmation in a blurred and ambiguous imagination of binary gender and heterosexuality.

---

[28] In the community of trans women, 'straight men' are not equivalent to heterosexual males, but rather, refers to those men who have a sexual preference for sex with trans women or men with female gender expression. Generally, 'straight men' are understood by trans women as a non-traditional sexual preference of men rather than a kind of sexual identity.

Figure 5.1. *Front Page of DangGuai.com*

Note. Front page of DangGuai.com with the slogan "my place your rule, for alternative relations"

Retrieved from: https://www.dangguai.com/index.asp

Similar ambivalent spatial-identification practices can be seen in Grace's experience on DangGuai.com. DangGuai.com self-identified as the largest Chinese dating web for alternative relationships and sexual/gender minorities, including BDSM, gay, lesbian and *bianzhuang* (cross-dressing) communities. The *bianzhuang* page of DangGuai.com categorises its user members into "*weiniang*" (fake girl), "*weinan*" (fake man), "ZN" (straight guy) and "*bianxingren*" (transsexual). As introduced in Chapter 4, the CD/TS (crossdressing and transsexual) typology is considered problematically outdated and bio-essentialist and thus abandoned by mainstream trans communities. With such essentialist categorisation, however, the platform provides space for trans people to linger or explore the identification journey. These spaces were neither cisgender-centric nor normative queer spaces, but instead ambiguous in terms of their seemingly essentialist yet diverse gender practices and relationship-building. Such spaces can be seen as liminal, allowing chaotic, vague, uncertain and flux gender practices and alternative social relationship building. This resonates with Doan's examination of queer spaces, which found that queer spaces could result in "continued high levels of harassment and violence" to trans people for their gendered nature (2007, p. 57). Queer space does not guarantee the inclusion of transgender people. By allowing hybridity and the co-presence of people with diverse understandings and practices of gender/sexuality, the QQ chat groups and DuanGuai.com afford co-place-remaking between cisgender and transgender people, and thus the renegotiation of transness. In-

between the cis-centric place and queer spaces, spaces like MtF-'Straight' chatgroups and DangGuai.com merge the clear boundaries in the binary sex/gender/sexuality system. These spaces also allow undefined or misdefined gender practices and social interactions to happen beyond the coded yet nominally fixed gender terms, such as *weiniang* and 'straight guy'. In other words, transgender people can re-signify and negotiate the binary and essentialist norms within vaguely bordered and loosely defined spaces.

The liminal spaces are not confined to transgender people's digital spatial practices. In the physical world, Trevor's experiences of spaces were in the hospital – the typical gender segregation space in Westbrook and Schilt's sense (2014) – where he received top surgery,[29] is a good example of how the binary gendered space is inhabited by transgender people as liminal space. Trevor came to the hospital alone in 2020 with an eagerness to "get rid of the boobs" but ended up deliberately staying two more weeks than expected in the hospital to take care of and communicate with other trans men undergoing the same surgery. As Trevor emotionally stated,

> *It was a bit like ShiWaiTaoYuan [utopian space][30]. It was so painful at first when I was given intravenous fluids after the surgery. But when they said I was okay to leave, I said 'no, I need more.' I was willing to bear the pain if only I could stay for more days. Once I left the hospital, it would be hard for me to meet these brothers again since they were far apart.*

Trevor's perception of the gender segregated hospital space shifted drastically from a "lonely strange" place which produces binary bodies to a utopia for trans people where they share the identity and bodily transitional journey together. Suffering from his gender dysphoria for many years, quick-tempered Trevor had been longing to finish up his top surgery and start his new life as a passing trans man as soon as possible. He quit his job before the surgery and planned to move to a new city where nobody knew his

---

[29] Top surgery is a medical phrase.
[30] *ShiWaiTaoYuan* is a fictional paradise created by a Chinese poet, Tao Yuanming. It literally means the land of peach blossoms outside the secular world and refers to a Utopian land of peace and happiness away from the turmoil of the world.

past. He never imagined or expected to linger at the hospital, but it turned out he stayed for an extra month (even though the doctor dismissed him) to recover and hang out with other people in the hospital who had also received top surgery. In Westbrook and Schilt's sense, a hospital is a place that "determines" a human being's gender based on biology-based authentication (2014, p. 33). Hospitals reproduce and reassign trans bodies into the binary sex/gender/sexuality system, while at the same time becoming a liminal space for transgender people. Between entering and leaving the hospital, Trevor was for the first time experiencing a bodily recovery and transitional identity journey that was uncertain and not yet determined. The liminality is also related to the solidarity and brotherhood he managed to construct with other people in the same transitional status. During Trevor's voluntary stay, he benefited from other trans fellows' kind care during his recovery and also offered care to others. During the recovery, Trevor and his fellows shared feelings of bodily transition, experiences of being trans and imagination of living a trans life in the future, collectively remaking the space as an inclusive utopia for diverse bodily and identification statuses and for their imagination. The solidarity connects deeply with the liminal space that is otherwise difficult to maintain when the transition is carried out, and the trans past is deliberately repressed for passing in the Chinese transgender context.

From the perspective of transgender individuals' meaning-making and perception of spaces, it is high time to suspend the fixed understanding of space. Online and offline spaces, if demarcated, can both be liminal to transgender people in the sense that the binary sex/gender/sexuality system is dominant in both spaces in marginalising non-conforming gender practices. The spatial experiences of transgender subjects are made intelligible and unstable by spatial power, resulting in an always transitioning liminal status. As Homi Bhabha has argued (1990), the ambivalence and hybridity on the borderland of liminality make spaces for negotiation and meaning remaking the hegemonic social norms and challenging the overwhelming binary systems from a third perspective. In the online and offline liminal spatial practices of transgender people, there are also potentials to accommodate vague, undefined, transitioning or in-between gender nonconforming subjects and to afford alternative relations to occur between the

ideal self, expressed self, trans communities and cisgender others.

5.2.2 The ritualised gender interpellation in digital spatial practices

One key feature of liminality is its close relationship with ritual. More specifically, the liminal stage emerges during the performed ritual practices and moments which normally contain the transition from one state to another (Turner, 2017; Van Gennep, 2013). Through the ritual, people dis-embed from the previous social identity, relations and culture, and transform into another status with a new sense of belonging and solidarity. Liminality has been powerful for studies examining socially marginalised groups, while less attention has been paid to the concept of 'rites of passage' based on which Arnold van Gennep constructed liminality theory (2013). In Haimson's (2018) theorisation of social media as transition machinery, online reconstruction of gender identity during life transition can be understood as a rite of passage. From the performativity perspective, ritual moments are essential to alternative authenticity construction through self-interpellation in the liminal spaces where individuals experience the transformation of terminologies, social identity, perceptions and behaviours. Liminal spaces facilitate alternative social relationships, cultural conventions and ritualised practices, which include operational and symbolic practices.

Operational practices include grasping the knowledge of entering certain platforms, creating an online avatar, and maintaining in-group interactions obeying the norms. Symbolic spatial practices relate to exposure to certain identities and discursive beliefs, acceptance of mainstream norms, conversion to the in-group gender ideology, and integration into ritualised networking. For trans people who are not aware of transgender discourses and thus have no access to institutionalised social spaces, entering the online trans space is essential not only in the community-seeking sense but also in the gender exploration sense, wherein the self is performatively interpellated through discursive engagement with certain localised transgender articulations. In other words, space provides a specific context for the discourse circulation for self-exploration and thus shapes gender performativity. Hines (2010) argues that access to queer subjectivity formation is constrained by spaces like the workplace and the local

community. The experience of Chinese transgender people and the social context in China, however, highlights the important role of digital platforms in shaping access to trans subjectivity formation. Kim, a post-operation trans person, was not aware of their transgender identity even after they underwent gender confirmation surgery. They then joined the online patient group for transsexuals and were introduced to transgender chat groups on WeChat and found themselves 'awakened':

> *When I was receiving the operation, I didn't even know what is transgender. After the surgery, I saw my fellow patients browsing a trans group and I finally found my community! The trans groups were all our people! I started to chat like crazy, I chatted with so many sisters. I went crazy chatting and joining different chat groups. I was so excited in my mind, so thrilled but also happy at the same time. I finally knew other sisters and I was not alone anymore. (Kim, 32-year-old, genderqueer)*

From Kim's suddenly high-pitched voice and quivering body when they described the experience, I could tell how thrilling finding out about trans chatgroup for the first time was. Such a space-discovering experience solidly illustrates that medical transformation does not necessarily guarantee a transformed self-acknowledgement of gender, but community discovery and space-entering do. Kim's excitement is related to the censorship of transgender representation in mainstream media and the lack of trans visibility in public discourses. Institutional forces, such as schools, civic affairs departments and medical centres, also work on a gender-binary discursive system that is detached from transgender identity discourses. It is the discursive annihilation in offline spaces that makes online trans spaces so essential for many transgender people like Kim, who cannot self-'awaken' on their own, to approach, recognise and accept transgender identity. The space discovery relates to the trans-identification journey, while the discovery moment is not necessarily as magical as Kim's.

> *I used to think the trans communities was remote from our life. You can only find them in media coverage of renyao in Thailand. It was not until I encountered many drug girls posting things and telling stories of themselves on Zhihu, then I found this [transgender] community existed*

in real life. It was not that I suddenly realised I was a trans person. I don't think people in the community suddenly realised their trans identity overnight. It is a process, starting with disliking their social gender and then desiring to be recognised as the other social gender and fancying the clothes and stuff of the other side. [Trans] people have this process in advance and then realise that they belong to the trans communities once they get access to the concept of transgender. (Zico, 22-year-old, panromantic asexual demiboy)

There are two things Zico emphasises about their identification journey: the chronological and logical processual feature of transgender identification, and twice denying the possibility of a 'sudden' transformation that they thought I might misinterpret. It is the encounter with drug girls' posts on Zhihu rather than the misrepresentation of Thai *renyao* on media that catalysed a long-repressed transgender identification. In other words, what Zico tried to convey was the causal relationship between the ritualised moment and the trans-identification journey. For them, transgender identification is a life-long becoming process not confined to the very dramatic moment of exposure to the living online trans community. However, the censored media system and cis-centric social context did make online encounters with trans others an important ritual in the identification journey as the ritual reifies the unspoken into reality and ushers trans individuals into a sense of belonging through witnessing. Their denial of the dramaticism of the ritualised moment connects to the fear of degrading the real struggle in the pre-ritual stage and the sincerity of the post-ritual transition. Without reducing the authenticity of trans identification into the magic dramatic moment, the rites of passage in the liminal trans space contain the pre-ritual state, ritualised moments and post-ritual identification.

Entering online trans space is ritualised in the sense that transgender subjectivity is officially and socially interpellated at the catalytic moment of entering as accepting and self-enrolling certain gender identities. Ling, a freshman-year art college student, struggled for months before applying for entry into an NGO-based chat group. The group required all candidates to fill in a form explaining their assigned sex and gender identity. At that time, Ling was not sure about her gender identity and feared her answer

was not legitimate. After several attempts at form filling and deleting, they finally submitted the form with a gender marker of MtX when they found this term best described her gender. The ritualisation of entering a trans space indicated Ling's identity struggle and conversion, which was marked as a milestone in their transgender journey. The identity interpellation implemented in online trans space is also enacted through the acquired rituals of doing gender. As Kilo stated,

> *Using the language in the CD [crossdresser] community, the bud of my 'woman heart' began to germinate [after joining the online CD community in XiDi[31]]. It [the woman's heart] has been re-awakened slowly ever since. I had the same feeling when I was in middle school, but I didn't dare to let it burgeon. (Kilo, 28-year-old, CD/agender)*

The different spatiality of the online crossdresser dating app 're-awakened' the already exited "woman heart" in Kilo's narrative. Compared with their repressed self in middle school, the dating app afforded the blossoming of Kilo's identification bud. The repressed self is performatively reconstructed in Kilo's experiences in XiDi where he learnt make-up and body management from other cross-dressing live streamers and practised developing romantic relationships as a trans person with 'straight guys' on the app. The "woman heart" of Kilo was installed and interpellated in the name and format of CD when she entered XiDi and converted to the ritualised norms of doing gender on the platform. I met with Kilo several times before and after the interview, and every time Kilo dressed and acted like a 'cisgender straight guy', different from what she looked like on XiDi. Kilo deliberately maintained a different appearance on Xidi and in ordinary life where she performed "like a normal man". In her mind, her gender was a cute girl rather than a trans woman, and she would rather be agender if she could not perfectly perform her ideal image of the self. Xidi had become the temporary shelter and performance stage for her to practice her "woman heart", where she could really

---

[31] Xidi (西蒂) is the Chinese spelling and direct translation of 'CD', which refers to crossdresser. It is a dating app and live streaming platform for crossdressers and people who are sexually attracted to crossdressers and trans women.

be a cute girl through make-up, dress and *weiyin* (voiceover). The liminality of such online space is located at the very function of ritual performing.

The rituals she acquired in the specific space shaped her online persona and offline appearance and the online space is closely linked to offline spatial practices. In the local CD community where Kilo met on XiDi, they had some conventions including regular congregation in a local trans-friendly costume shop and hanging out together in commercial shopping centres. The local costume shop was not trans-only but served trans people as other cosplay lovers providing make-up, wigs, dresses, photo-shoots, and storage. It was in this space that Kilo and her friends completed their appearance transition, prepared for re-entering the physical world and temporarily stored their assigned gender identity. The transitional stage was so important for Kilo and her friends that they later rented a flat not for living but only for storing their clothes and make-up and for the transition rituals. The ritualised space discovery and entering thus not only enacted transgender interpellation but also performative gender practice in a certain space with specific gender conventions and cultural norms.

It is noteworthy that the ritual of space entering is normally not a one-off but an ongoing process along with the gender exploration journey. Similar to Kilo and her friends' shuttling between XiDi and offline liminal spaces to practice their desired selves in multiple and virtual/material places, the ritualised spatial transforming between different spaces might be the ontological essence of trans identification, which is transitional without ever settling down with a fixed and affirmed identity. The centripetal spatial forces of 'LGBT inclusive' urban spaces as Browne and Lim (2010) conceptualised or other safe and affirmative trans spaces where trans individuals can settle down might not apply entirely to Chinese trans communities. The notable mobility can be observed in digital spaces where trans individuals migrate between different platforms and chatgroups to explore gender identities. For instance, Matvei's self-identification developed with his digital presence on different online trans spaces:

This kind [transgender-related] of information at that time, around 2017 and 2018, were mostly hospital doctors' answering. They admonished [transgender people] to stop thinking

about it [gender transition] and to self-block. You couldn't find many related materials online. One day I entered a group of 411 hospital[32] patients. There was a collective of people of the same kind and for the first time I knew: wow, we had a collective outlaw land. Then I thought the information might be censored, so I went to Tieba and there were all kinds of sayings, such as KUA.[33] (Matvei, trans man, master student at a top Chinese university)

From being ontologically 'denied by professionals' to a 'curable patient' framing of transgender, Matvei encountered different gender discourses of trans men and experienced his gender-exploration journey through migration between different online platforms. Through the ongoing migration, common among Chinese trans individuals, between various online 'outlaw lands', it is not only the fixed and essentialist determination of gender that is disrupted but also the unified definition of transgender identity. What matters more for transgender individuals may be the transitional ritual itself, rather than the post-ritual settlement with a stable identity. The processual crossing over different spaces enables trans individuals to connect to different discourses and social networks and stay in an in-between status without fully conforming to deterministic beliefs of transness, be it cisgender or transgender normativity. Being nomadic, in this sense, allows diverse transgender people with different understandings and practices of gender authenticity to stay connected with each other.

5.2.3 In-between *WeiJie* (faking in the street) and real space

Theorists have separated the material space from the symbolic, representational and sensual spaces as useful conceptual tools to anatomise the meaning of spatiality (Harvey, 2006), while today the creative spaces based on digital technologies are comprehended and referred to as classical virtual spaces, countering the material spaces people experience. As Paul Levinson (2014) argued in *Real Space*, touch, sense and mobility

---

[32] The No. 411 Hospital of the Chinese People's Liberation Army, which is famous among the trans communities for its expertise in transgender treatment and therapy.
[33] *KUA* (跨), the abbreviation of *KUAXINGBIE* (跨性别, transgender).

in the real world are necessary and intrinsic needs in our lives. The dichotomy of real-virtual spaces deeply influences how people and scholars understand diverse experiences in a different world. While Doan (2007) recognised the success of discursive spaces American trans people built online, she highlighted the uniqueness and necessity of 'physical spaces' in increasing the visibility and solving the physical issues of gender-variant people. Chinese transgender people's experiences and narratives of online and offline spaces challenge the real-virtual and discursive/physical dichotomy of space. The challenge not only targets a determinist and simplified dichotomy but also the epistemic privilege dominating the realness of certain spatial practices and excluding other experiences and perceptions of space as fake. While I do not deny Paul Levinson's argument that touch, sense and mobility in material space are different to those in other spaces, I do argue against equating conforming to gender practices in physical spaces with realness. Transgender people's liminal spatial gender practices online and offline complicate an exclusive understanding of space, gender and authenticity.

Many interviewees mentioned their migration from their hometowns to big cities to find spaces where they could live as their desired gender and become their ideal selves without violence and discrimination from their family, schoolmates and local gender regulations. Manna, a 50-year-old crossdresser who had no stable job and lived in an urban village, left her family and her hometown and migrated to a first-tier city in order to "experience the feeling of walking around in a dress" on dark nights. Her family, neighbours, weather and limited public spaces for crossdressing in her hometown compelled Manna to travel around different metropolises in China to find spaces to live a transgender life. In the big cities where no one knew her past, Manna temporarily got rid of her assigned gender identity and wore dresses in public spaces, although only at night when she felt safer and looked more able to pass in her mind. Manna chose to inhabit a space in-between the unreturnable home and never-fitting-in city just to "walk around in a dress" at the cost of living in extreme poverty and precarity. What matters most is free gender expression in public spaces, which has nothing to do with how many people there are or how good one looks. Through this kind of spatial gender practices,

trans people like Manna develop alternative relationships and negotiate their gender with the public space, which is normally dominated by cisgender people and marked by inspection of variant gender practices (Currah & Mulqueen, 2011). At night, the cisgendered public space becomes a liminal space for Manna with the binary gender apparatus shut down, leaving a dim corner for variant gender practices. In such liminal space, trans individuals achieve a state of passing through passing by, acquiring a sense of recognition and acceptance and most importantly, trans authenticity.

Manna's late-night walking in a dress was quite a solitary and personal practice. Nevertheless, gender passing through passing by was an important individual and community spatial gender practice for younger trans women. Among Chinese transgender women and crossdressers, there is an insider jargon called *WeiJie* which literally means 'faking in the street' and refers to dressing in a feminine way and wandering around in public or commercial spaces such as parks, high streets, and shopping malls. The look could be ordinary women's clothing or a special costume such as a Lolita dress,[34] JK dress[35] or traditional Han Chinese costume, *Hanfu*. *WeiJie* is a popular form of gathering activity in the public space for transgender feminine people to hang out with their trans sisters. Interviewees who had *WeiJie* experiences dealt with the 'fakeness' connotation of *WeiJie* in a dialectical way. The conversation with Jasmine (31-year-old, trans woman/CD) below showcases trans people's complicated practices, feelings and narrations of *WeiJie*:

> *Jasmine: I don't care how others see me. I often dressed dramatically in Lolita just like the last time when we met. Some people suggested I should be more lowkey, but I don't need to be lowkey. I think I don't care at all.*

> *Me: Who were these people giving you advice?*

---

[34] Lolita is a kind of clothing subculture originating from Japan and influenced by Rococo Victorian clothing styles. Lolita is an aesthetic of cuteness, and can be further categorised into classic, sweet and gothic.
[35] A JK dress is a kind of clothing style derived from the Japanese-style high school (JK) uniform.

Jasmine: Some 'fake girls' and crossdressers like me. They prefer wearing normal women's dresses and hiding in the crowd as a woman without being recognised as a man in a dress. I have to say I don't enjoy the gaze of the crowd, but I just don't care.

Me: Did you ever care before?

Jasmine: I did care when I was not proficient at make-up. I asked some friends to take me away when I wanted to WeiJie, mostly my male schoolmates. Because I am scared till now even though I don't care.

Me: What specifically are you scared of?

Jasmine: Hard to tell. If I had to find an adjective, I think it is awkward. If I had a guy by my side, I would feel comfortable and brave. If I go out with you, for example, I am not scared. But if I go out with her [her crossdresser friend who presented in the interview as requested by Jasmine], more or less I will be scared of being looked at. I think it would be awkward.

WeiJie is both an embodiment of gender expression and a practice of desired social relations in specific public spaces. Jasmine's liminal sentiment between "don't care" and "scared" is bridged by a feeling of "awkwardness", indicating her ambiguous and contradictory attitude toward and experience of the fakeness of *WeiJie*. For Jasmine, *WeiJie* is all about expressing the self in the desired outfit rather than 'hiding' as a passing strategy. Rejecting her friends' advice, she was proud to show authenticity in a fabulous Lolita costume. However, the streets on which she 'faked' were still scary so she needed to perfect her make-up skills and have male company to address the internalised fakeness of *WeiJie*. The whole spatial practice of *WeiJie* is a thrilling one which might provoke fakeness. The company of her kind, namely other crossdressers, could risk exposing her cover and her assigned sex beneath the costume.

WeiJie is referred to as 'fake' in transgender people's narratives for passing as cisgender in the offline world and for fear of being exposed, while the gender practices during the spatial experiences of *WeiJie* are seen as an authentic exploration of the desired self. The spatial experience of *WeiJie* provokes both fearful feelings related to

liminality and the excitement of successful gender passing through passing by on the streets. In this sense, *WeiJie* experiences in the offline world are as liminal as online spatial gender practices in that it is a transitional space connecting material presence deemed as fake with authentic gender expression. In other words, 'fake in the street' bridges the authentic self with ideal passed expression – but ironically, through fakeness. After the interview, Jasmine and her friend invited me to accompany them to *WeiJie* a nearby shopping mall and a comic expo. I noticed the gaze of the passers-by and the weird looks of the waitresses in the clothes stores. Many times, they hovered in a doorway of a Lolita shop and could not step in even though I encouraged them to do so. The Lolita shop was full of cis-gender girls looking for cute dresses, while Jasmine and her friend escaped quickly: they told me that they actually bought Lolita online. This experience made me aware of how offline space is incompatible in design with gender-variant people, including the toilets, dressing rooms and the unfriendly gazes of the surroundings. The fakeness connotation of *WeiJie*, in this sense, is a compromised and internalised devaluation of the embodied spatial experience of transgender expression. However, *WeiJie* also enables trans people to renegotiation with the cis-centric spatial regulation through their spatial interaction with and within the public space (Greaf, 2016). The real socio-spatial discourse of the material world is thus a heteronormative and cis-centric epistemology that excludes the spatial experience of gender minorities through material and discursive othering of the latter. The so-called real space in the physical world others trans people as fake through spatial gender norms, while the space is experienced diversely by trans individuals to performatively embody authenticity. In contrast to the real space discourse of the physical world which excludes gender nonconforming peoples' spatial presence, the space appropriately inhabited and used by trans people to renegotiate marginal social positions and the meaning of realness can be seen existentially as a space of the real.

Online spaces allow the rupture between real space and space of the real to emerge saliently from the transgender perspective. From the perspective of relational space, it is relationship bonding with desired gender identities or expressions afforded by online platforms that made the embodied experience and perception of the 'virtual space' a

space of the real. Summer, a well-educated 25-year-old trans man, joined a grassroots QQ group for trans men when he was in high school and bought hormones from a dealer in that group. But he seldom chatted with others and never used the hormone as he was unsure about his identity and felt 'disconnected' from the medical treatment-oriented others in the group. Later, he was introduced to an NGO-run WeChat group and gained a more 'real' perception of online trans space:

> *The QQ group that I joined is not active, so I seldom check QQ recently. Now we have this WeChat group where I know some people, including Mr C [a trans man activist]. Although I haven't met most of the group members, I feel that they are right there close to me.*

Summer comprehended and expressed the realness of online trans space through the narrative of a perceived and imagined short geographical distance. In contrast to the 'dysconnectivity' in the grassroots QQ group, the closeness he felt on WeChat related to the connection with other members who shared similar gender ideologies. Spatial palpability thus mediates self-perception and a narrative of realness, which is embodied and experienced through relationship formation and connection with others. Relationship formation mediated in specific digital space is not confined to the same trans identity or community. As Chris stated,

> *At first, I had no plan to reach out to the FtM community. Gradually, I became acquainted with this community, and everybody knew me as an MtF. Then I felt lazy to reach out to a new community and put effort into getting to know others as a strange nobody. (Chris, not 100% FtM, 20-year-old)*

Although Chris was an FtM, he hung out with friends from the online MtF community on QQ. From the early days when he self-identified as trans, he joined an MtF QQ chat group because he mixed up MtF with FtM. He also found MtF people attractive and became active in that group where he was the only FtM. He was able to express his desired gender as a trans man in the group and build romantic relationships and friendships with MtFs he met in the group. Acquiring his self-recognised authentic way

of doing gender in the MtF group, Chris did not find the FtM community necessary for gender expression and networking.

Summer's and Chris's embodied experiences of online trans spaces, together with the fake discourse in *WeiJie* activity, indicate the non-applicability of the real-virtual dichotomy in understanding socially marginalised communities like Chinese transgender people. It is non-applicable in the sense that the dichotomy designates material space as real and virtual space as fake while neglecting the diverse embodied experiences and perceptions of spaces through the material and discursive exclusion. Adopting the concept of relational space, the space of the real should be related to where people can build relationships with the desired identity or in a self-deemed authentic way. Cyberspace is, in this regard, not a substitution for or inferior to the material space, but rather a field that allows a diverse form of embodiment and experience of authenticity to emerge. However, transgender spatial experiences do not imply a reverse and counterintuitive real/virtual dichotomy of online and offline gender practices. As indicated in the discussion of *WeiJie* practice and narrative, the spatial experiences of fakeness in the 'real space' bridge transgender people's performative and reflexive doing of gender authenticity. In this sense, online/offline or real/virtual dichotomous frameworks fail to explain the spatial experiences in relation to transgender authenticity construction and negotiation. Rather, it is the liminality of online and offline spaces, be they chatrooms or the high street, which accommodate the non-binary, transitional or in-between subjects that really make transgender authenticity construction through spatial practice possible. To conclude, Chinese transgender peoples' liminal spatial practices resonate with Aizura's call for an anti-identitarian examination of "where and how bodies escape or act clandestinely outside those categories" (2012, p. 135). It is through their liminal spatial practices online and offline that the boundaries of real/fake and gender binary systems become incoherent and inconsistent.

5.3 Unfolding linearity in digital transgender temporal practices

This section moves the focus from spatiality to temporality, another fundamental but related dimension that characterises the transformation of transgender lives in the digital era. I first discuss the agentic value transgender people attach to linear temporality in their narratives and everyday digital experiences, based on which I provide a critique of the mainstream queer framing of linear temporality. With the critical understanding of linear discourses in trans temporality, I then analyse transgenders' liminal perceptions and experiences of linearity as multi-temporality from two perspectives, including the discourses of rebirth online and the reimagining of time through queer kinship. I argue that liminality in trans digital temporal experiences has become the ideal ingredient for transgender authenticity construction through appropriation of normative temporality. Through the "heterochronic" practices of linear temporality imagination in the digital world (Bal, 2011), transgender people are able to moderate gender dysphoria and negotiate authenticity against the hegemonic truth regime which embodies a binary-gendered linear temporality. I conclude by reflecting on the queer/normative dichotomy in the trans temporality literature and the potential for crafting temporal linearity as mediated by digital technologies in affording authenticity construction.

5.3.1 The digital making of linear trans temporality

Temporality is a key gendered issue in transgender lives, in relation to, among others, ageing, puberty, medicine, body, health and appearance (Amin, 2014; Owen, 2020). Being able to experience linear and wholesome gender growth was important to many transgender people I interviewed, especially transgender youth. The development of medical science has allowed transgender youth to pause puberty by using puberty suppression medicine so that they can enter their desired sex/gender growth later, when they are ready (Rew et al., 2021; Vrouenraets et al., 2016; Mahfouda et al., 2017). Hormone therapy and some stages of gender affirmation surgery for young transgender people also function as blockers to the growth of the gendered body. As Rew et al.

(2021) have argued, the status quo of puberty blocker medicine varies between developed countries. In China, it is difficult for ordinary trans people to get prescriptions and buy hormonal medicine, not to mention puberty blockers for pre-puberty trans youth.[36] Many presurgical interviewees and those who had not received hormone therapy expressed anxiety about ageing or reported gender dysphoria in puberty development. Doge's words express the anxiety of puberty:

I got my first hormone on June 31st of 2017 when I was in junior high school. I got to know this [transgender identity] on Zhihu that June and added a trans men QQ group through Zhihu. I bought hormones that same day. I was so impatient because the period of puberty is harsh and causes much suffering for trans people. (Doge, 18-year-old, FtM)

Bodily alterations during puberty are a source of anxiety and confusion for many trans youths. This is because puberty growth without medical intervention is an irreversible process that might make passing, medical transition, or body alteration difficult and less satisfactory. Besides biological time, adapting to normative social rhythms such as entering gender roles or getting married in time are also believed to formulate transgender people's temporal gender practices, although at the same time they become sources of anxiety (Halberstam, 2005). As Ling stated,

My anxiety level is high, and I don't know if I should be transgender. But if I am not a trans person, to be honest, I cannot bear it. I cannot stand living and ageing as a man or as a stereotypical male. Even though I don't want to marry someone or have babies, I am reluctant to work and interact in society with others having the male gender. (Ling, 19-year-old, undergraduate student, non-binary transfeminine)

From Ling's anxious narrative, ageing as the desired gender becomes the precondition and main driver of being transgender. At the time I met Ling, they were torn between lingering as a non-binary transfeminine or starting medical transition to be an MtF.

---

[36] In 2022, a group of trans-friendly doctors drafted a guideline of puberty block prescription for the first time in China and fewer than 5 hospitals offered puberty block medicine according to a leading doctor

Ling's reluctance to age and socialise as a male indicated how temporality matters in their transgender identification – many other interviewees also discussed how it is urgent to live and express the desired gender when they are not too old. In the Chinese context, trans people's desire and anxiety about linear temporality is never a biological issue but rather a conjuncture of what Horak calls "hormone time" and social rhythms such as Halberstams' family time (Halberstam, 2005; Horak, 2014). Interestingly, the lives of older trans are considered to be genderless to a certain extent by many interviewees, including one of the oldest, Manna. In her 50s, Manna was satisfied with crossdressing as their only form of gender expression, and categorised hormone therapy, gender affirmation surgery and plastic surgery as "the young people's thing". Medical transition to pause pubescent growth and intervene in the ageing of the sexed body makes little sense to older trans people since the hormones their bodies produced were already low and the medical treatments were not going to make them more beautiful. Both the urgent need to pause puberty and older trans people's nonchalance towards medical transition suggest that the hormonal transition of transgender people is far more complicated than paralleling a cisgender and bio-essential linear temporality (Eckstein, 2018). The trans experiences of linear temporality have everything to do with the meaning-making of gender authenticity for different transgender persons.

Chinese trans individuals' desire for linear temporality counters the non-linear time felt by queer individuals, which is 'asynchronous' to straight time (Dinshaw et al., 2007, p. 185). Rather, it is a complex liminal temporal practice in-between the linear cisgender time and non-linear queer time. Transgender and other sexual and gender minorities' experience of temporality has been mobilised in queer intellectual production to criticise the dominant cisgender heteronormativity. Non-linear queer time is celebrated as it offers "more than linear" ways of doing and perceiving time (Andrucki & Kaplan, 2018) and a horizontal approach to disrupting normative linear time through strategic unremembering (Muñoz, 2019). In contrast, the temporality related to reproduction and biological maturity is rejected as futuristic and normative (Edelman, 2004; Stockton, 2009). To generalise, the queer literature on temporality has distinguished the post-modern anti-future and asynchronous sense of queer time from the linear progressive

hormone-dependent sense of what Horak called "hormone time" (2014 p. 573).

However, as Muñoz (2019) argues, the celebration of queer anti-futurity temporality discourse risks overlooking the experience of Black trans subjects who are not guaranteed a future and suffer from non-linear temporal status. Therefore, it is crucial to suspend the queer critique of linear temporality when enquiring into transgender temporal experience, especially in non-Western countries or non-white contexts. Based on the investigation of Chinese transgender individuals' experiences, perceptions and narratives of temporality, this study is not opposing the argument that the transgender or queer doing of time is an "unscripted" life course, as Halberstam described it (2005, p. 2). Instead, the normative forces of conventional temporality imposed by medical, family and education institutions regulate the gender practices of Chinese transgender people. However, this study also recognises the variety and complexity of transgender digital temporality practices by presenting how linear time is perceived, imagined and narrated by transgender individuals alternatively as mediated by techno-social affordances of digital technologies. I thus emphasise the importance of examining diverse forms of temporal linearity practices beyond the hormonal and bodily transition lens.

I found a shared preference for chronological storytelling style among the interviewees when asked the general question "tell me something about you". Although this might relate to chronology as a common form of storytelling, telling a story chronologically was uncommon among my interviewees as many of them mentioned that the interview with me was the first time they had sorted out their lives in such a way. The other occasions they chronologically told their life story, as the well-educated trans man Cabbage stated, were with therapists or through online diary keeping. Being able to narrate their story as a transgender person has a healing and sense-making effect on their contemporary status in their life-long transgender journey. In their storytelling, it was surprising for me to find how clear and detailed their memories were about dates or events related to transitioning through hormone therapy or surgery. Compared with the exact remembering of transition-related experiences, their memory about life events such as romantic relationships and the deaths of important others were vague. This

mnemonic gap indicates trans people's diverse sensitivity and narrative towards time, which, as Hershatter (2011) has argued, is related to the extent of importance that the mnemonic subjects attach to different fractures of temporality. The folding of different mnemonic temporality can be seen as an agentic way of discursively forming and organising an authentic narrative of gender.

Online digital diary keeping and recording of the hormone transformation process were common ways to discursively experience linear temporality. These are helpful to understand how transgender individuals weave and fold temporal fractures together in the construction of a desired authentic temporality. The elicitation interview with Luna and her Weibo timeline highlighted the importance of digital storytelling as a material footprint and certification of her transgendered existence which is denied in her offline life, dominated by cisgender and transphobic social apparatus. In Luna's narration of linear temporality, the digital genealogy of the life she created strung her fragmented life slices together in a sensemaking and meaningful story which was impossible to tell and to be heard offline. Although her Weibo blog had hundreds of followers, she deliberately maintained her Weibo as a discrete and secret place where she recorded her daily thinking about gender and relationships. Compared to her frequent Weibo posting, she posted things on WeChat Moment monthly and only shared songs she liked. Luna explained the different affordances of these two social media platforms.

> *I think if I post things and share my life too often on WeChat Moment, it will be a burden for my WeChat friends, and I don't think most of them care about my life status. In terms of Weibo posting, on the one hand, my audiences are all strangers so I don't have a sentimental obstacle. I don't care if they want to see it or not. On the other hand, my memory is getting worse. I hope I can have a thing to reflect on or to remind me of the past. I don't even remember the things that happened last year. (Luna, 24-year-old, trans woman, small online influencer)*

Luna hid her Weibo from her boyfriend who still thought Luna was a gay man. This was because Luna was afraid that her boyfriend would leave her if he knew that she was transgender through browsing her Weibo. The transgender subject that Luna tried

to hide and made invisible was presented online in a dual timeline. The first set of time was embodied in the online recordings of her daily thinking. These online temporal traces constructed her complete memory and felt time as a woman, which was closely linked with her offline practices. For instance, she attempted suicide three times but failed, while the end of her life was actualised in the form of deleting all her digital memory on Weibo. The second set of time consisted of her desired life course from a "girl with a penis" to a "slutty mature woman". The transformation was made possible through her intentional personal and pronounced shift, such as from "little girl", "a kind virgin", to "stripper" and "mama". In this imagined narrative linear retelling, her innocent and asexual childhood and fallen ages as a prostitute were saved by her imagined reproductivity as a mother. In the offline world, her life course was not linearly developed in her narration because she could not live as a transgender woman and her life was turbulent with her several suicidal attempts. On Weibo, Luna managed to weave together both the impossible linearly developed temporality in the offline world and an imagined 'straight woman' life course.

It was what Eckstein (2018, p. 32) calls the "temporal entanglement" of complex and fractured temporality practices that made Luna's desire for and digital practice of a linear 'straight woman' life course a transcendence of the cisgender framework of transition. Crossing over the multiple temporalities, the temporal entanglement constituted Luna's authentic feeling of her gender identity, clearly realised in her Weibo timeline. Malatino commented on the interregnum of the trans body as "multiply enfolded, rather than merely delayed or deferred" (2019, p. 645). However, the choice to interrupt biological time is impossible for the majority of Chinese trans people who live in poverty. Thus, experiencing and imagining a linear heteronormative reproductive time through digital mediation digital helped to create an enfolded discourse and perception of temporality. The folding of time, in this regard, offers a possible way to negotiate transgender authenticity in the form of discursive temporality practices. Moreover, Chinese transgender people's digital temporality practices show polysemous understandings and doings of linearity through which they project their own desire and operationalisation of gender authenticity. It is noteworthy that these

digital temporality practices are neither self-deceiving nor deluding fantasies. No matter how much medicine could delay the development of biological sex, Louis, who had undergone top surgery[37] and received hormone therapy, still perceived after-transition temporal experiences as "unoriginal" and considered cisgender linear time to be "impossible" for transgender people. However, the internalised beliefs of the impossibility of having linear cisgender temporality do not reduce their meaning-making to nonsense. Instead, it is through the playful appropriation of linearity that transgender people performatively construct a sense of authenticity.

5.3.2 Reborn online: personal calendar and digital kinship creation

'Born again' or 'rebirth' are common metaphors in transgender discourses (Horak, 2014). The rebirth discourses of transgenderism are technology-mediated, be it medical or digital. Raun coined the term "screen birth" to conceptualise how medical and network technology cocreate "media bodies" in the YouTube video production of transgender vloggers (2010, p. 113). I suggest Raun's argument is not only about the celebration of the agentic discourse of rebirth mediated by vlogging but more concerned with the ritualised visibility and co-present readership as the key ingredients of the rebirth of trans media bodies. Screen birth, therefore, is a participatory event that consists of presenting, recording and witnessing.

The interviewees in my research echoed this 'rebirth' discourse through various digital technologies, but in a much more invisible or indirect visualisation. These rebirth discourses and practices of Chinese transgender individuals, due to media censorship and social context, provide a different lens of understanding transgender screen rebirth from the transition video made by Western-based trans Youtubers that Horak examined (2014). Dew, a trans woman programmer who was in her 20s, updated her WeChat pseudonym each day with the time span from the day she received hormone therapy the previous year. Her pseudonym, in the form of "Day100Year3" (allocated by the

---

[37] Female-to-male top surgery, also known as subcutaneous mastectomy, refers to the female breast removal operation for trans men.

researcher for confidentiality purposes), consisted of two numbers encompassing hormone time and identification time. The first part of her pseudonym functioned as timekeeping for her hormone therapy both to remind her to take medicine routinely and to record her transition in hormone time. The number for hormone time had a symbolic meaning for medical rebirth as well as the concrete function of adjusting the hormone rhythm of her body to become a trans person. The last part of her pseudonym referred to another calendar memorising the milestone identification moment when she self-identified as a transgender person. The dual calendar created by Dew represented her complicated understanding of transgender identity, which took the form of temporality. For Dew, hormone time was differentiated from identification time in a dialectical way. Identification time was calendared on an annual level as a monument to the temporality of her rebirth as a transgender woman, mediated by medical means. The complicated operation of the dual calendars acknowledged the medicine-dependent means of gender transition and the ideal gender identity concretised in counting time. In this sense, transgender rebirth is not a ritualised moment of completion, but rather a continuous process of becoming and critical negotiation between medical treatment and gender identity. As Dew stated, the WeChat pseudonym by which she created an alternative personal calendar was "confusing" to her WeChat friends because she never explained the meaning, which varied from the manifestation of screen rebirth in YouTube trans vlogs with its tacit and negotiating gesture. Although both Dew and the trans YouTubers in Horak's study embody linear temporality through medical/hormonal timing, the relatively invisible and ambivalent way of experiencing linearity is more liminal at the margin of social visibility and the temporal truth regime. As Horak argues (2014, p. 581), transition videos on YouTube depict a positive yet generic self-determination picture that is "not only possible but viable and even joyful" to transgender youth. The Chinese peers' practice of linear time tells a different story of hormone time which is far from positive, visible and self-deterministic. Instead, their rebirth with the desire for linear temporal practices does not aim at determining or acquiring the social recognition of alternative and appropriated cisgender linear temporality. The ambiguous rebirth thus bypasses the critique against the transition videos for reproducing a medicalised

normative script of affirmed transgender authenticity.

Another rebirth discursive practice of Chinese transgender individuals could be witnessed in their collective temporality experiences. Queer identity formation in China is not solely based on individualised identity but also on social relations and the performativity of social roles, especially in the family and clanship accounts (Chou, 2001; Rofel, 1999b). Chinese queer sociologist Wei Wei (2023) argues in his newly published article that in the neo-familism and post-patriarchal intergenerational context of contemporary China, family is both the major source of pressure and the potential social integration and identification approach for queer people. While family remain the major source of pressure and even violence against transgender people, it is still difficult for trans individuals to seek social integration and identity recognition from their original family compared with their gay peers, as observed by Wei (2023). However, the central role of social integration in identity construction applies to Chinese transgender individuals in terms of their imagination and practices of trans identification and digital rebirth as alternative kinship establishment.

Naomi, a 20-year-old MtF who was in her junior year at nursing school, established a QQ family with some elderly trans men and trans women. A QQ family is an online community bonding application produced by Tencent, where a group of users with the same interests organize an online virtual group. Normally, a QQ family is composed of clan leaders, elders, messengers, protectors, hall masters, guards, instructors, disciples, and clan members, and the QQ family members are bound to behave according to certain conventions. Naomi met her QQ family members in online gaming and decided to establish a kinship system using the QQ family. They granted a traditional Chinese surname to their family and segmented the family members into generations instead of game hierarchies, based on their actual ages and the sequence of entering the QQ family. Experiences of collective temporality in the form of a virtual trans family, as Naomi's case suggests, is another alternative doing of trans temporality. Through the establishing of digital kinship and the important events of this virtual family, such as 'newly born' members and family migration timeline in a long run, transgender individuals merge their gender journey into the broader life course of constructing a

trans family and experience individual gendered time within the self-reproduced digital kinship system. Halberstam (2005) considered family time to be marked by birth, marriage, reproduction and death as opposite and asynchronous to queer time. The QQ family practices of Chinese transgender people, however, provide an in-between temporality between family time and queer time through the parodic creation of digital kinship.

The discourses of 'rebirth' online can be seen in trans communities worldwide. The Chinese transgender individuals' discursive practices of 'rebirth', however, vary from the visible online rebirth discourses seen in the YouTube transition videos. Through ambivalent personal calendar-making and alternative kinship creation, the digital rebirth of Chinese transgender people diverges from the affirmative claim of linear temporality. Instead, the linear temporality is embedded in a vaguely presented and alternatively socialised imagination of time, blurring the queer time/family time dichotomy. While Halberstam conceptualised 'queer time' as the "potentiality of a life unscripted by the conventions of family, inheritance, and child-rearing" (2005, p. 2), the experiences of the Chinese trans communities indicate that the appropriation of linear and familism temporality formulate liminal temporality through which trans individuals negotiate gender authenticity with hegemonic linear time and normative queer time in ambivalent and collective ways.

5.3.3 Scripting lives: digital avatars and gender rehearsals

Through the unconventional practice of temporality, queer subjects manage to experience another possibility of subjectivity formation which is 'unscripted' or excluded from the mainstream practice and discourses of the time. Gender script is understood as a normative ideal type regulating transgender selfhood construction and is believed to be framed by media representation and social sanctions (Johnson, 2016; Lampe et al., 2019). In this section, I examine how gender script can be creatively appropriated and experienced by trans individuals in a digital world as the renegotiation of gender authenticity.

Born and raised in a wealthy family by strict parents, Jessica received a high

standard of education and became a successful businessperson. She was given a personal computer by her parents in the late 1990s when she was a middle school student. She taught herself computer programming and started to realise her desired transgender self by creating a biographical game. The game was made based on a novel manuscript that she secretly wrote and stored on her computer. In the manuscript, she had outlined the times when she would start to take hormone therapy, undergo gender affirmation surgeries and several steps of plastic surgeries. In addition, she also scripted her life after the transition, including building a family with her wife and having babies. The game programming afforded her the chance to perfect and visualise the script with very detailed transformation traces of her facial and body characteristics as well as an outfit that she thought was reasonable and sense-making in a different stage of transition. This game took her years to complete and debug, according to her developing understanding of transgender and self-identification as a trans lesbian. When she graduated from a top university in Europe and started her career, she managed to fulfil her dreams scripted in the game and in her digital avatar. "I have finished most of the stages that I've designed, and now I have only several plastic surgeries to go", she stated proudly.

The game was not only a rehearsal for Jessica's gender transition but also accompanied her for decades in her hard transgender journey and had been integrated as an important part of her understanding of transness. Jessica's game programming of her ideal life journey from an enforced castration victim to a beautiful trans woman with a female period represented her desire for wholeness as a trans person and her biological understanding of time and growth.

The wholeness, genealogical timeline and kinship growth addressed in these transgender experiences of temporality seem to be a target of queer critics on the transgender linear discourse of temporality. Rather than framing the linear discourse of trans temporality as a kind of normativity oppressing other possibilities, instead I contend that this critique is itself an epistemic oppression overlooking the complex context of transgender temporality and denying the agentic practice of alternative experiences. Linear trans temporality online, facilitated by technological affordances,

practices and negotiates gender authenticity through the mimicking and appropriation of a stereotypical cisgender life course, which transgender individuals generally find impossible or are deprived of. The linear discourse and the fragmented and limited life of trans intertwine to form an alternative way of living and to counter the oppressive structure of institutional time.

I adopt 'fold' to conceptualise the temporality practice of transgender individuals in the digital age. One of Deleuze's (1993) essential concepts, the fold refers to the dialectical tensions between the various copresences of the exterior and interior worlds. Chinese transgender individuals' practices of temporality can be seen as a folding of multi-temporalities across the queer/normative and real/virtual boundaries. The time folds are the conscious recognition of the tension and inter-configuration between the individual's internal perception of time and the external uncontrollable and imposed temporality. It is experienced through the individual's elastic memory and narration of different time segments in the lifecycle of the self. The time fractures are mobilised differently by transgender individuals to form an authentic sense of time, in which some temporalities are linear and mechanical, and some are vague and negotiable. As Hershatter's (2002) concept of "the gender of memory" reminds us, the linear narration of history is influenced by the dimension of gender, and people of different genders possess different temporal perceptions and measures of the linear temporality and life course. In addition, individuals also possess different perceptions of time in their own lives, and it is vital to recognise how transgender people in the digital age use technology and discourse to string together different temporalities with folds to constitute a self-negotiated authentic self. As argued in this section, digital technology allows such time folds to be more clearly recorded and materialized as a temporal practice that can be perceived and spoken. At the same time, this temporal practice allows for the negotiation with and interpretation by others, thus imbuing transgender practices with a socialised meaning-making of authenticity.

5.4 Discussion and Conclusion

Digitally reconfigured time and space lie at the centre of this chapter's discussion around digital gender practices of Chinese transgender people. Different from the material world, the transforming digital spatial and temporal landscape in the deep mediatisation era shifts the way the self is constructed, as argued by Couldry and Hepp (2018). Specifically, I ask whether digital technology use affords the possibility to resignify and reconfigure the meaning-making of gender authenticity. Moreover, I examine in what way the temporal and spatial experiences of Chinese transgender people can be considered worldmaking through resistance to hegemonic gender norms and the formation of transgender authenticity. To answer these questions, liminality theory was adopted to capture transgender individuals' reconfiguration of digital time and space in-between the boundaries of real/fake, online/offline, and binary genders.

Marginalised transgender temporal and spatial experiences were interconnected although presented separately in this chapter. This is not only because time and space are the two fundamental analytical concepts social science researchers normally draw on. Instead, I showed in this chapter how gender binarism and cisgender-centrism as embodied in the interconnected time and space norms regulate transgender people's gender practices both online and offline. Gender norms take the form of normative temporality and spatiality that define gendered reality and marginalise non-binary gender practices as intelligible. The marginal space and time transgender people inhabit lead to liminal experiences of trans spatiality and temporality. For instance, transgender individuals interpret their transgender exploration journey by migrating between online spaces in a chronologically linear way to make the transition and identification coherent. Similarly, the alternative temporal experiences are in tandem with the affordances, context and social relations of specific spaces. In general, the interconnectedness of temporality and spatiality are essential to understand gender regulation in the form of temporal/spatial realness and gender performativity of transgender people. It is through this that they negotiate the temporal and spatial realness for the construction of gender authenticity. By arguing that violence toward trans people in the real world is enacted

184

by depriving the time and space experience of trans people, the digital world offers an opportunity to reconfigure authenticity by allowing alternative ways of doing gender through digital temporal and spatial practices. Authenticity for transgender people is constructed at the margins through their liminal experiences of space and crafted linear time as mediated by digital tech.

Liminality is embodied in trans people's transitional spatial and temporal everyday practices of gender. In the binarily encoded and bio-essentialist gender spaces online and offline, trans individuals negotiate with the hegemonic gender norms by lingering around and moving across boundaries. The mobility between different gendered spaces formulates a transitional ritual in which transgender people experience and practice the identification journey performatively in the liminal spaces. The offline spaces are normatively constructed as real in comparison to online spaces in laymen's perceptions. For instance, transgender people's *WeiJie* culture disrupts the boundary of gender realness and fakeness through their alternative practices and reflexive narratives of passing cisgendered spaces with a 'passed' look and presence. Through the creative doing of internalised fakeness, which might be criticised as obeying norms, their spatial parody allows the negotiation of authenticity to occur within blurred boundaries. By crossing over the boundaries of real/fake, online/offline and gender binaries, the sense of gender authenticity is reflexively constructed by transgender individuals.

The online temporality practices of Chinese trans people are also liminal in their impossible mimicking of cisgender linear time and entanglement of different fractures of time. Pursuing linearity in temporal gender practices, such as online rebirth discourses and digital gender avatar programming, is a key theme in projecting the ideal image of the self. Although linearity has been criticised extensively by queer scholars as reproducing repressive norms against queer people, transgender people's online temporal practices can be understood as an appropriation of linearity deemed by them as impossible in the physical world. Their paradoxical doing of linearity puts the queer critique at stake and overlooks the potential of appropriation and resistance. Transgender people's liminal spatiality and temporality experiences complicate the normative/queer dichotomy prominent in queer geography and temporality studies. In

sum, liminal space and time experiences allow transgender people to reproduce alternative authenticity discourses and experiences in reaction to the gendered reality regulated by normative temporal/spatial institutions and criticised by queer literature.

Having said this, liminal space and time do not guarantee a utopia for trans individuals, at least not all of them. Firstly, the relational spaces, both online and offline, embed stratified social relations, which trans individuals from diverse social backgrounds have distinct experiences and perceptions of. Secondly, it is noteworthy that online trans spaces are not contingent. Although the Internet offers hyperlinks connecting different platforms technically, access to specific online communities and trans spaces is deeply influenced by the intersectional social order of gender, sexuality, class, region, culture and beyond. Therefore, it is important to introduce stratification and intersectionality to deconstruct any whole understanding of the relationship between trans space-time practices and trans authenticity. Not recognizing stratification in our understanding of transgender people's digital gender practices risks a generalised and totalised argument. As I will further argue in the next chapter, the asymmetric extension of space-time mediated by the uneven resources, availability and distribution of digital technology have an impact on stratified experience and comprehension of trans authenticity, which is essential for unpacking and complicating our knowledge of transgender authenticity construction.

Chapter 6 Authenticity Stratification: Emerging Knowledge and Emotion Normativity in Online Chinese Trans Communities

6.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, I showed how trans people manage to negotiate gender authenticity through the reconfiguration of spatiality and temporality at the liminal margin of cis-centric space and time. I consider the liminal transgender practices of time and space, especially online, as providing new conditions for transition, transformation and transgression of the binary sex/gender system that regulates gender nonconforming subjects. The conditions are ambiguous but not necessarily as anti-normative or resistant as techno-utopian transgender or queer studies may claim gender-nonconforming practices to be (Chou, 2001). Instead of confining the liminal time and space to queer-utopian world-making (Muñoz, 1999), I demonstrate that the intersectional social structures are sustained and reconfigured in online trans communities, mediated by digital platforms, leading to the emergence of trans-normative authenticity.

In this chapter, I turn to the meso-level formation of trans-normativity and stratification of trans authenticity in online trans communities. Contradictory to a utopian framing of digital intervention in transgender people's authenticity construction, I emphasise the stratified understanding and doings of transgender authenticity in this chapter to unpack and recognise the diversity of transness under the umbrella term of transgender. As Simpkins has argued, "discussing trans* as separate from 'other' categories fundamentally misconstrues the operation of power and paints a simplistic picture of identification" (Simpkins, 2016, p. 232). To complicate the understanding of the authenticity norms enacted in the doings of transgender lives, I apply an intersectional approach not by adopting rigid social axes but rather by emphasising the in-community knowledge and emotion regulations over trans bodies through which the inequality of gender, sex, class, age and education is embodied. In *The Order of Things*,

Foucault (2000) highlighted ideology, scientific knowledge and everyday experience as the foundation for the making of the world. This chapter shows that the intersectional stratification of trans authenticity discourses cracks along the fault lines of knowledge and emotion as the normative power regulating and reinforcing the hegemonic understanding of trans authenticity among trans communities, othering the different forms of gender doings as deviant and inauthentic. These hierarchical norms of knowledge and emotion function as normative powers and have produced a set of norms assigning trans individuals to different levels of authenticity. Through the lens of knowledge and emotion regulations, this chapter complicates the intersectional understandings of everyday transgender life which are normally leveraged by the classical axis of gender, class and race in Western-centric trans studies.

Adopting the lens of the intersectionality of gender, class and education, I approach authenticity stratification from the perspectives of knowledge and emotion to unpack the tension between the state, professional institutions, trans communities, NGOs, elites and grassroots transgender people. Thus, this chapter not only depicts the norms and stratification that exist in Chinese trans communities, but also takes a close and critical look at how Chinese trans communities are stratified in relation to the shaping force of norms and discursive power in the making of transgender accountability, or transgender normativity of authenticity. Under the surface of narrating what kinds of knowledge and emotion counts as proper transgender practice, transgender elites, in class, education and activist senses, reinforce class and gender inequality and reproduce privilege and discursive power by asserting the significance of mediation for transgender individuals in doing transgender. This mediation is narrated through the dis-embodiment of knowledge production and enforced heteronormative positivity.

Trans-normativity has gained more scholarly attention in recent years. Existing studies focus on the discursive production of and resistance to trans-normativity in mass communication or user-generated-content platforms like YouTube vlogging (Johnson, 2016; Jones, 2019; Miller, 2019). Media representation of trans is argued to be essential for providing normative understandings of transgender authenticity (Johnson, 2016). The lived experiences of bottom-up community-based norms production, however, are

relatively overlooked in the literature. Different from the conceptualisation of trans-normativity as a merely hegemonic narrative countering or alternative to a cis-normative narrative (Bradford & Syed, 2019), this chapter understands trans normativity through the embodied experiences of transgender individuals' knowledge and emotion norms. It is in their very interaction with trans-normative discourses rather than discourse itself that the discursive power of trans-normativity enacts the stratification of trans authenticity. By focusing on in-community knowledge and emotion regulations, this chapter answers questions of how trans-normativity is constructed as knowledge and emotion norms structuring trans individuals' authenticity praxis. In addition, I ask what kind of transgender agency can be identified in the stratified quotidian experiences of Chinese transgender people as a countering force to not only the societal institutionalisation of transgender in China but also to the ongoing normalisation within trans communities. In general, these questions are asked and answered in relation to the broader research question that tries to understand the structures and agency involved in the emergence of Chinese transgender norms in the digital world. By analysing transgender individuals' experiences and interactions with the norms and others in online trans communities, I show the possibility of trans agency in the trans-normative discursive environment. As Butler (2002) indicated in *Gender Trouble*, there is no original gender script for the non-original to mimic. Rather, all truth claims and doctrines of gender are performatively constructed. The performative parody of normative beliefs of transness by gender non-conforming people challenges the originality claim in both cisgender heteronormativity and trans-normativity. The findings in this chapter call academic and social attention to community-based stratification and regulation that structures trans individuals' perceptions and performative doing of authenticity.

6.2 Doing transgender right: knowledge production in trans communities

Gagné and Tewksbury noted that the "popular, experiential, subcultural, mediated, and linguistic understandings of gender and transgenderism have been largely colonized by

science" discourses in Western societies (1999, p. 64). Scientific transgender knowledge from natural-medical science and social science contributes to the establishment of a normative truth regime dominating the explanation of gender authenticity. Medical-scientific knowledge profoundly shapes and grants legitimacy to mainstream subculture understandings of gender authenticity in trans communities (Gagné & Tewksbury, 1999). The web of transgender knowledge also applies to the Chinese context. Transgender identity and discourses in contemporary China have been argued to be part of the modern knowledge production of a sex/gender system that originated from Western medical science and gender ideologies (Chiang, 2018). Drawing on Gagné and Tewksbury's (1999) typology of the web of transgender knowledge, this section discusses the formation of subculture knowledge hegemony in relation to scientific discourses in online trans communities and the encounter between experiential embodied knowledge of transgender individuals with trans-normative knowledge. Both the scientific and the 'right' knowledge about transgender medicine and transgender identity privilege transgender elites by claiming particular knowledge as the one and only truth (Dame, 2016, p. 35). By examining the hierarchy of knowledge production and practices in the online trans communities, I showcase how certain ways of doing transgender are granted as scientific and right, and whose knowledge claims are more established/excluded.

Medical treatment and conceptualisation of transgender identity, as Gonsalves (2020) has argued, was and has become the new regime of gender truth. Medical treatment was mentioned and practised by most of my interviewees as the major way of aligning the sexed body with gender identity and undergoing gender transition. However, the strict preconditions for receiving hormonal and surgical therapy in China makes the practice and knowledge of gender reassignment medicine a scarce resource unequally distributed among different classes, regions and even sexes. According to the 2017 Chinese Transgender Population General Survey,[38] 55% of respondents found it

---

[38] The translation of this report can be found at: ttps://chinadevelopmentbrief.org/publications/2017-chinese-transgender-population-general-survey-report/

difficult to access information about gender reassignment surgery. The main issue for most Chinese transgender people is not only the scarcity of medical resources available to them, but most urgently the basic access to medical information.

Knowledge of transgender medicine, according to interviewees with more formal education such as Miss R, contains 'know what' and 'know how'. Having scientific knowledge has become essential for transgender people, ranging from pharmaceutical knowledge about doses, side effect, hormone level tracking and key body indicators, as well as knowing how to create/approach medical information. On the disadvantaged side of the transgender knowledge gap, interviewees reported limited sources of knowledge or learning. The available knowledge sources include personal consulting, private group sharing and some knowledge-sharing platforms such as Zhihu and Tieba. There is a transgender knowledge-sharing platform that aroused debates among interviewees from different generations, gender identities and educational backgrounds: TransLives. Through the vivid case of TransLives, I show the stratified knowledge production and practices of Chinese trans individuals and map the dramatic shift in transgender knowledge production and the formation, circulation and hierarchisation of knowledge norms.

TransLives is a web/app-based platform created and run by transgender people that is "committed to public advocacy and community service, to educate the public about transgender issues, to share information and resources with the community, and to provide skills training to community members for their life development."[39] Jessica, a translesbian woman in her late 30s, claimed to be one of the first to push forward a TransLives project, saying:

> *I suggested that they share experiences and medical schemes. There was one platform,*
> *TransLives, being formulated under this context. I shared some of my experiences on that*
> *platform, as well as my medication regimen. Yeah, all were done selflessly without asking for*
> *reward and without any political or religious stance… because the baseline I adhered to was*

---

[39] The quotation was retrieved from the website introduction on TransLives.net during my fieldwork; it was shut down later in 2021.

my objectivity and justice and I did not judge others and I respected others. But not all knew how to use drugs and surgery scientifically, I could share my experience.

Jessica came from a wealthy family and went to a top university in Europe in the early 2000s. She had a high enough media literacy to easily collect information through reading English academic papers, medical dictionaries and online searches at a time when there were few transgender cases and information and she was active at an early age in the online trans communities. She suffered from serious gender dysphoria and thus tried all possible replacement medical regimens, including levonorgestrel tablets (contraception), as a self-human-trial given the strict drug administration situation. The knowledge she shared based on her own experience and understanding can be conceptualised as what Corfman called "embodied knowledge" which "proliferates the knowledges at play" and allows bodily extension of the knowledge boundary defined by institutionalised knowledge (2020, p. 10). Jessica emphasised the selflessness, objectivity and scientificity of the embodied knowledge she produced based on her high media literacy and self-experience-based human trial of the medical effects. This kind of experience-based medication regimen is influential not only in an age when no standard and official medical guideline was available but also today for many transgender individuals without diverse and authorised information sources. As Ophelia, a then-18-year-old trans woman who had not undergone hormone therapy, stated, "All the knowledge I got was from other trans or the website TransLives." Although Ophelia had support from her mother who holds a PhD degree in Computer Science (and was even accompanied by her during the whole psychological consultancy process), the personal experience-based knowledge-sharing platform TransLives was still an important information source.

However, not all interviewees had a similarly positive attitude towards TransLives. Edward, a trans man who was studying neuroscience in the US and working at a transgender NGO, was critical of and embarrassed by the knowledge and content on TransLives when I asked him about his opinion of it:

Edward: Oh, I knew that website, but... their content is a bit... [awkward facial expression and gesture]

Me: No worries, just say it.

Edward: [The shared content on TransLives] is just not that regular, proper and formal... It seems like some stuff is made up by those people from trans communities who have not received all-around education.

Me: Do you mean that their content is not scientific?

Edward: Yes.

A similar comment was made by a transgender woman, Rayray (MtF, civil servant), who dropped out of her undergraduate programme from a university in the US and received her surgery in China. She scorned the operators of TransLives at an NGO event, saying that "They [staff from a gay-targeted NGO 'PFLAG China'] asked me what is wrong with TransLives and why didn't I like it. I mean… you do not even know what they did? They stole others' photographs and did not admit it. They also reprint others' articles at will without even signing the authors' names". Edward and Rayray, both of whom received expensive higher educations in the US and are active in the Chinese transgender NGO community, questioned the scientificity and reliability of TransLives in two ways: content curated based on personal experience, and informal knowledge production. The contrast between self-curated embodied knowledge with the 'all-round education' on which proper knowledge production should be based, together with the critique of the inobservance of citational standards and the disrespect of intellectual properties, were mobilised by these global elite and well-educated transgender people to set up norms about what kind of transgender knowledge counted as 'regular, proper and formal'. In this regard, the 'scientific' knowledge production highlighted requires proper information sources (institutional rather than 'those people from trans communities'), formal knowledge production (citing proper medical-scientific academic work) and mainstream knowledge reproduction (NGOs or proper platforms

rather than privately-run websites). The formation of transgender knowledge normalised by transgender elites in essence calls for the institutional mediation of academia, hospitals and NGOs in creating and circulating proper knowledge. Through the institutional mediation of transgender knowledge, the connection between individually embodied experience and knowledge was severed and the privilege of elites is reinforced for they are already embedded in institutional privilege.

The in-community critique towards grassroots transgender knowledge-sharing outlets, like TransLives, targets not only its lack of rigorous scientific citations but also its incompatibility with the trans communities' ideology and strategy of avoiding (sometimes imagined) surveillance of transgender medical information and drug sales. During my fieldwork from 2019-2020, I witnessed gradual and widespread shutting down and censorship of online transgender information sharing and digital platforms, including TransLives. The institutional censorship of these transgender platforms shaped, reinforced and accelerated the formation of knowledge normativity. According to many interviewees, the online trans community migrated from original platforms such as Hazeline to Tieba and then to Zhihu and ended up on foreign platforms like Twitter. The migration tallied with the progression of the state surveillance process. Many of the interviewees believed that the transgender-related forums on Tieba were closed because of the open discussion of banned drugs and extreme transition means such as self-castration. The sensational embodiment and knowledge of gender transition on transgender-related Tieba forums gained huge visibility among other sub-culture groups on Tieba and were even selected as the top 10 popular Tieba forums. After the shutting down of transgender-related Tieba forums, the self-generated popularised transgender knowledge and experiences of well-educated trans users were also influential on Zhihu among youth. Many of the Tieba users had to transfer to Zhihu transgender discussion pages which were dominated by trans influencers and individuals with more formal education. However, both the sensational embodied knowledge created by trans people with less formal education and the mainstream popularised knowledge of trans people with more formal education were censored. The eye-catching and publicly visible transgender knowledge on social platforms made

transgender terms as a whole the target of state censorship. State surveillance forces thus disrupted bottom-up knowledge production and community-led knowledge sharing and circulation processes. However, the surveillance of transgender embodied knowledge did not atomise the collective production of transgender knowledge but rather left a discursive power vacuum for institutional transgender knowledge production, such as activists and NGOs.

Strategically adapting to the systematic surveillance of transgender content, institutional knowledge production, including activists and NGOs as well as transgender-friendly professionals, transformed the previous pattern through the professionalisation of transgender knowledge and the dis-platformisation of knowledge communication. Ivonne shared a copy of an NGO-led WeChat group rule with me when complaining about the strict and politically correct strings attached to in-group communication, as shown in Figure 6.1.

Figure 6.1. *Screenshot and Translation of a NGO-led WeChat Group's Rules*

Translation:
Welcome to our group! This is a platform serving the transgender community and for communication. We have online events held monthly, join us! This community hopes to provide a harmonious and ordered chatting environment. So:
1. Please everyone change their group nickname in the format of "Region-gender/identity-nickname"
2. We ask everyone to consider other transgender people's feeling, so do not overly share your negative feeling
3. Please do not discuss too much about the self-HRT or self-SRS content. HRT and SRS practices should follow doctors' advice
4. Please consult the group administrator for issues like transgender-related promotion, inharmonious confrontation, seeking support, etc.

The following contents are prohibited in this community:
1. No discrimination, hate speech, instigation, personal abuse, and talking arbitrarily about politically sensitive issues
2. No criminal information or spreading rumours
3. No commercial ads or unknown links
4. No drug sale
5. No prostitution, hook-ups or pornography
If you need help, please contact: private WeChat; entrepreneurial WeChat and administrator

Note. This figure, collected on March 2020, showed the management regulations of a WeChat group led by a trans

NGO. Translation was done by the researcher.

The rules contained two parts: regulations to maintain a "harmonious and ordered chat environment" and banned content. The discussion of self-HRT (hormone replacement therapy) and SRS (sex reassignment surgery) was not encouraged in this WeChat group because "HRT or SRS should be conducted following doctors' advice". In other words, only knowledge produced by medical professionals was allowed in the group, while the embodied knowledge shared by individuals who have no access to institutional medical knowledge and resources was excluded as that knowledge was not supposed to be produced by the self. Aside from embodied knowledge, five kinds of content were also banned from the group chat, including arbitrarily discussing politically sensitive issues, spreading rumours, commercials, drug sales, prostitution, hook-ups and pornography. Ivonne was upset about the rules and decided to withdraw from all the chat groups run by this NGO. Instead, they set up their own community on WeChat:

> *The point is not the restriction of political discussion but the word 'arbitrarily'. In my cohort [a transgender chat group that Ivonne built], the discussion of DIY HRT is less restricted because we believe it is our basic right to obtain HRT and other medical resources and it is also the representation of our bodily autonomy. When the system cannot protect rights, people have the right to save themselves on their own even though it violates the existing regulations. But we don't allow open drug trade because of the legal risk and currently don't accept NSFW [not safe for work] content because it violates the platform regulation of WeChat. We have no choice. (Ivonne, 25-year-old, non-binary, undergraduate student)*

In NGO-led chatgroups, self-generated embodied knowledge is unscientific and unsuitable for circulation. While this kind of knowledge is denied in NGO and institutional epistemes of correct transgender medicine and gender transition, Ivonne and their cohort see the discussion of DIY HRT as an important medical resource and a human right to body autonomy. In response to the same situation of surveillance and platform regulation, Ivonne's grassroots group and the NGO-led chat group developed disparate transgender knowledge and socialisation. While banning the circulation of incorrect transgender knowledge, trans-relative institutions, including NGOs, doctors,

psychological consultants, scholars and even some private hospitals, cooperate in constructing authoritative transgender physical and mental knowledge. As Gagné and Tewksbury (1999) have argued, scientific knowledge is deeply incorporated into mainstream trans communities' ideology and both gain enhanced hegemony through the link-up. During my fieldwork, I witnessed the deep cooperation between NGOs and doctors in various forms, such as hosting seminars, co-conducting research reports, setting up funds and cooperative commercial services. The shift is understandable considering the increased restrictions on foreign donations and funding for domestic NGOs serving sexual and gender minorities (Hildebrandt, 2012). However, as Rayray commented,

> *I think they [NGOs] have their thoughts, and their starting points are also good. But the grassroots community has its own reality, this cannot be denied. If the NGOs are divorced from the community reality, then it will really be a very awful thing. (Rayray, 30s, MtF)*

From Rayray's narration of the 'reality' gap between NGO and grassroots trans communities, it is arguable that knowledge production (embodied vs. professional) and knowledge socialisation (online platform-based circulation vs. deplatformisation and being constrained to direct personal connections to institutions) project the formation and transformation of normative believes of transgender authenticity. Embodied knowledge expressed through personal experience and non-academic knowledge production and reproduction is excluded from proper and professional transgender knowledge production in the eyes of trans individuals and activists who are well-educated and from a higher socio-economic background, which was dramatically expressed in the awkwardness of Edward and anger and disparagement of Rayray. The embodied knowledge produced by individuals is devalued and made inferior to that of institutional knowledge in the mediation of medical and psychological professionals, academics and NGOs. These norms intensify the stratification between elites, well-educated transgender people and others, and reinforce the oppression of the latter who have less or no access to institutional medical treatment and information. The exclusion

functioned through disconnecting embodied experiences from knowledge and upholding the property of mediated knowledge. The censorship of transgender medical information and sales enhances the mediator role of institutions in producing proper transgender knowledge.

So far, I have investigated the stratification of transgender knowledge in online trans communities, about medicine and the right way to do transgender. Normative transgender knowledge works as boundary work that frames a normative idea of correct and acceptable knowledge and excludes embodied knowledge curated and practised by individuals. The discursive power of such knowledge functions through assigning certain sources, mediations and circulations of knowledge as intelligible. In the normative discourses around correct knowledge and scientific knowledge production, the stratification of trans communities is solidified. Certain groups of transgender people obtain more discursive power to define and make legible their ways of doing gender and constructing authenticity. The formation of knowledge stratification creates authenticity structures regulating trans people's gender practices, while at the same time, we can see a bottom-up counter-doing of 'correct' transgender knowledge. I call attention to the role of all participants, including elite and privileged transgender people as well as those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, in transgender knowledge production and knowledge-based stratification. This participatory and co-generative approach to transgender knowledge production highlights not only the structural processes of in-community demarcation, discursive bordering and tech-based exclusion but also the agentic negotiation of the underprivileged.

Connell contended that transgender experiences of doing gender "centers on recognition and the relationship of embodiment to recognition" (2009, p. 109). Recognition, and the relationship of embodiment with recognition, projects knowledge and affect into the online-based trans communities. Transgender people rely on internalised knowledge and vocabularies to understand and recognise each other and rely on textual and photographic interaction to affectively embody this recognition. Thus, knowledge becomes an especially important subject of normalisation. Based on their resources and access to institutional knowledge, transgender elites become the

mediators of collective transgender knowledge production, which is claimed to be more scientific and correct.

6.3 Emotion norms in online trans communities

Section 6.1 demonstrates that the normative understanding of transgender authenticity is iterated through ongoing institutionalised knowledge production and dissemination. Normative knowledge regulates how trans bodies should be made through medical transition, what kind of space is safe for transgender people, and how transgender people should be understood and narrated. In the socialisation of this normalised knowledge, some trans bodily knowledge is constructed as authentic and privileged in mainstream conceptualisations of trans medicine, spaces and gender ideology. Apart from the tangible knowledge of transgender authenticity, a more intangible normative order in the Chinese trans communities exists around emotion. Like normalised transgender knowledge mobilised by institutional forces in constructing authenticity authority through stratification, emotion regulation in online trans communities is a more subtle technique for downplaying negative emotions and promoting positive emotions. As Hil Malatino's new book *Side Affects: On Being Trans and Feeling Bad* (2022) convincingly state, the emotional lives of trans people are deeply shaped by the structural powers. This section reveals that emotion regulation enacts the stratification in which negative feelings are devalued and even banned while positive emotion is guided, required or encouraged in online trans communities.

6.3.1 Negative emotions in online trans communities and their regulation

According to the 2017 Chinese Transgender Population General Survey Report, 61.5% of surveyed transgender people were experiencing various levels of depression, and the figures for anxiety and suicidal ideation were 73.2% and 44.5% respectively. The higher prevalence of depression among trans communities is also reported in other countries and is influenced by social support, violence, transition status and gender identification (Budge, Adelson & Howard, 2013). These survey-based reports and psychological

studies have suggested an overwhelming melancholy phenomenon among the transgender population worldwide. In this section, I take on a micro-social perspective to discuss how transgender melancholy is perceived, narrated and regulated in online Chinese trans communities.

Transgender melancholy is argued to be a gendered issue and trans women are believed to suffer more from depression than trans men (Budge, Adelson & Howard, 2013). This is also a commonly mentioned phenomenon in the interviewees' narrative of their engagement with others in online trans communities. A higher level of sadness and depression haunts trans women's online communities compared with trans men communities, as many interviewees reported. The difference between trans men and trans women in this melancholic affect may partly be related to their internalisation and performative doings of social gender norms whereby men are not allowed to be sensitive and emotion-exposing while women are "naturally" sentimental (Davis et al., 2012). Nathan described his experience in a trans men community after he graduated from an American college and returned to China:

> *When I came back to China, I was overwhelmed. I expressed that I felt lots of pressure basically each day in a local NGO-led group. But I found that people in the group did not like what I was saying, and then I stopped [sharing negative feelings]… I did not want to chat in that group anymore. (Nathan, demiboy, gay, 28-year-old)*

This was Nathan's first experience with Chinese trans men communities – before that he had only built connections with other trans men in the US. He was surprised by the unwelcoming atmosphere towards negative feelings and the norms of not expressing personal issues in this local chat group. The restraining of negative emotions in the trans men chatgroup was enacted through passive responses and indifferent engagement with other's expressions of negative emotion, which resulted in a collective and purified emotional atmosphere. This is similar to what Hochschild (1979) referred to as emotion rules. Emotion rules are essential for understanding the construction of norms in trans communities and how these emotion norms serve to establish the hierarchical and

stratified discourse and perception of transgender authenticity. Emotion restraint was mentioned and celebrated more by trans men interviewees in my fieldwork: both Matvei (trans man, 23-year-old) and Trevor (trans man, 27-year-old) similarly narrated trans men's masculine sentimentality in a decisive way, noting that "true men should be tough, and moaning is useless". It is notable that being tough by restraining emotion was demarcated with moaning in their narratives where positive emotion expression has no place in the dichotomy. Also suffering from systemic transphobic social marginalisation and pathologisation, trans men presented a different way of processing trans melancholy, rather than being free of moaning and suffering. In this sense, the less visible negative emotion expression in trans men communities can be seen as a kind of gender performance which is structured by the normative understanding and mimicking of cisgender masculinity. In trans men's emotion expression, the imagination of heteronormative cisgender masculinity always presents. As Matvei stated,

> *I think you already naturally lack advantages compared to others; you are disadvantaged. And you don't work hard but instead, feel bad about this and that. If you have the time to feel bad, hurry up and get the work done! (Matvei, trans man, 23-year-old)*

The "others" in Matvei's narrative referred to cisgender males who were "naturally" advantageous. His words conveyed a competitive paradigm between cis and trans people. Emotion became a key resource to be mobilised in doing gender and the cisgender male is made in the model of positive emotions repressing negative emotions. Mimicking cis-male sentimentality requires trans men to remove individual difficulty and melancholy as a source of emotion and express emotion in a cisgender male way. Chris is a transgender man who had undergone hormone therapy and was active in both online trans men and trans women communities. He devalued the negative sentimentality among trans women although he was more acquainted and willing to hang out with them:

Chris: The ways men and women chat are of course different. In the brothers' group, they talk just like men's way of chatting, direct in tone. While in the drug women's group, sometimes they have some fu nengliang [negative energy],[40] *and many of the drug women are sentimental.*

Me: Sentimental? Do you mean they are more willing to express negative feelings?

Chris: Yeah, brothers will not be as melodramatic as drug women. They are more straightforward, do you understand? Just like the way men talk.

It was notable how my cisgenderness was subtly questioned here by Chris asking if I understood men's ways of talking and self-expression. The 'men' Chris referred to were of the cisgender masculine stereotype and my queer masculinity did not count in this formula. Comparing trans men and trans women, Chris devalued the sentimental way emotion was expressed in the trans women community as "melodramatic", implying an exaggeration and dramatization of negative feelings. While critiquing the overly expressed feelings, a better form of sentimentality was appraised by Chris as "straightforward". The contradiction between seeing emotion expression as "melodramatic" and feeling-restraining as "straightforward" can be explained by the desire to experience gender authenticity through stereotypical cis-male sentimentality. To Lee's eyes, a 28-year-old trans man in the PR industry, "You can't just come and complain, right? You should communicate normally like normal… other people. You don't want to bring your unhappiness to others, right? People have no duty to hear your stuff. So, my point is you should be sanguine wherever you go." Subconsciously assigning the cisgender 'other' as normal, Lee idealised the cisgender male mentality and sociality as always "sanguine". Through the intense wording of "can't", "don't" and "should be", sanguine status is defaulted to as the sanction of trans men's emotion by abandoning individually felt and experienced unhappiness for the sake of others and

---

[40] *Fu Nengliang*, literally meaning negative energy, is an online catchphrase in antithesis to *Zheng Nengliang* (positive energy). In the contemporary Chinese context, it refers to negative power and emotions. In contrast, *Zheng Nengliang* connotes the uplifting power and emotion which represent the optimistic and hopeful aspects of society (P. Yang & Tang, 2018).

being normal. While restraining negative emotion had become the norm, individual trans men self-censored themselves to performatively construct masculinity, and negative emotion was more prevalent and more collectively expressed in trans women communities.

Some trans men interviewees compared their perceived emotional state in different trans communities and expressed their scorn over the prevalent sadness in trans women communities, such as Doge (FtM, 18-year-old): "The atmosphere in the MtF [male-to-female] community is more depressing. Their general atmosphere is rather sad, and I don't like it". The metaphor of "atmosphere" in trans men's narrations indicates the high levels of depression and sadness perceivable in trans women communities. Prevalent negative emotion expression was believed by both trans men and trans women interviewees to be the collective feature of online trans women communities. Studies of feelings differentiate personal-originated, unconscious affect perceived by individuals from the reflexive and conscious expression of emotion in a certain social environment (Papacharissi, 2015). Negative emotions were expressed and perceived in a community sense in online trans women communities compared to trans men ones. The metaphor of 'contagion' was often mentioned by interviewees, indicating the internalised negative attitudes toward negative emotion expression and the common emotion atmosphere in trans women communities. Ahmed (2004) conceptualised emotional contagion to identify the dynamic process of shared emotion expression and suggested that it was the circulated objects of emotions that enacted the circulation of shared emotion. In this sense, restricting/encouraging certain content can be understood as removing/making visible the object of transgender melancholy emotions circulated by the majority of transgender women who are anxious about passing and gender expression. An important factor in the emotional contagion of transgender melancholy is related to the communication environment in online chat groups. The online presence of trans people in these digital spaces is mostly based on texting and lacks multi-modal representation; not all facets of trans women's affect could be effectively expressed, valued and responded to online. For instance, interviewees reported antagonistic attitudes towards overly positive or bragging information posted by others, while they

were more engaged with the melancholic quotidian life details and hardship story-sharing. Therefore, the digital space defaults to a sad affect that shapes the emotional landscape of the online trans community. Emotional contagion, as Ahmed (2004) contended, is enacted through the circulation of the objects of emotions. It is thus vital to highlight the role of the interaction in online trans spaces in shaping and regulating the presence and absence of the object of emotion.

While negative emotion expression was 'contagious' and common in online trans women communities, it was not necessarily the ideal emotion expression mode for some elite and privileged trans women. In their narration and perception of the prevalent negative emotion expression, a stratified discourse of emotion was clear.

Shila is a well-known transgender woman among the local trans community, NGO circle and foreigners. She had completed her medical transition and was a self-employed businesswoman who owned a design studio and export trade business. Speaking fluent American-accented English, she established her brand offering design and marketing services mainly to foreigners. With shoulder-length hair and a sweet voice, Shila passed successfully in my eyes although she refused to identify herself as one of the "gifted party" – transgender people whose appearance is more aligned with their identified gender or pass more smoothly with or without medical treatment and plastic surgeries. In her home-workplace, Shila commented on the prevalent melancholy among the transgender women community:

> I find there is too much negative energy in this community, they are like this [being negative] every day… I withdrew from many chat groups because when you were in the groups you would find that people were talking about the same thing every single day: being excluded by workmates, being humiliated by their boss as bu'nan'bu'nv [non-male-non-female] and saying I had better die, I would stop taking drugs and returned to the life in male clothes. They had this kind of atmosphere where people said the same thing and repeat it every day. I think in my mind that if you have so much time to type [interviewee used the English word 'type'] in so many stuff, why don't you spend the time planning your life? I just think this [negative energy] should not hinder your progress.

Shila's critique of the negative energy echoed many trans interviewees' attitudes who passed more easily or had a better socio-economic status. Some trans interviewees also showed strong disapproval of the nature of chatting in these trans digital spaces. Shana, who had completed her surgery two years earlier, further framed those trans "idling about in the group instead of working hard to save money for the hormone and surgery" as "lazy".

Both Shila's and Shana's attitudes towards "leisure trans" was not unusual among middle-class and well-educated trans interviewees. For them, leisure time could have been spent on saving money or perfecting their passing or medical transition and socialising in trans groups was the least useful thing for making progress in the trans journey. Their critiques highlighted the meaninglessness of "repeating" and "sameness" of negative emotion expression, remarking on a progressive ideology of transgender. The right ways to do transgender, in this sense, are connected to economic success and social independence through individuals' positive participation in mainstream society rather than drowning in negative emotions. Transgender, in Shila's narrative, is a personal project that must be planned to be achieved. Negative emotions, in relation to abuse and discrimination in transphobic workplaces, are believed to hinder the progress and success of personal transgender projects. Doing transgender positively is detached from systematic inequality and discrimination against transgender people and framed as individuals' own hard work and success. The individual success discourses of doing transgender correctly leads to the devaluing of trans sociality and results in an emergent neoliberal normativity in trans communities

The hierarchical norms of negative emotion promoted by more elite trans women as such were well perceived but disagreed with by other trans women. Many trans women interviewees stated their experience of anxiety provoked by bragging content and some groups restricted/encouraged such content to direct and shape the emotion atmosphere:

In all circumstances, I think people had better not send in the chat group something more, emmm, like WeChat Moment posts… how to say it? People don't want to see some self-

bragging stuff. After all, this is a very pessimistic… this is majorly a pessimistic community… People might choose to ignore [bragging posts]. (Penny, 24-year-old, MtF)

In a closed and private online chat group like Penny's, the digital space provided a more interaction-based and communication-intense place where emotion circulation is highly dependent on response and expectation of interaction. Content like bragging and anything which could provoke gender anxiety was not banned but would not receive responses or provoke discussion. This might indicate the collective rejection of bragging or positive emotion expression, while the positive expression of personal success disrupted or stirred the common ground for negative emotion expression. It is noteworthy that the hierarchical discourses that disvalue negative emotion are not linearly related to socio-economic and passing status. Atiz went to a top university, had a high-income and could afford to undergo hormone therapy and plastic surgery, yet she provided a reflexive comment on the normative hierarchy of positive emotion over negative emotion:

Actually, I don't know what kind of things mean negative energy to them. As I said, I might have been in a good mood the other day but suddenly someone posted a beautiful selfie. The photo might not be real, she might have photoshopped it. This can make me uncomfortable, and is it negative energy? There are some flaunting elements in [photo posting] and that might mean negative energy to me. It doesn't bring me a good feeling. But when someone complains about their difficulties or feeling terrible about themselves, I would be willing to listen and comfort her. For me, this is not my negative energy because I have the experience of sharing feelings without a good response. I know how suffering it is, so I don't want others to experience the same feeling. (Atiz, 33-year-old, MtF)

Atiz intervened dialectically in the negative/positive dichotomy and emotion norms with her reflection on "real". In her narrative, promoting the sharing of beautiful selfies as positive energy was not "real" as it excluded the embodied emotion expression of trans women as negative energy. There are two layers in Atiz's dialectic thinking of negative/positive dichotomy that point to the key argument of this section. On the one

hand, as the beautiful selfies case indicates, positive energy is performed through the self-representation of individuals' edited looks. The encouraged and celebrated positivity is thus individualised, which provokes competitive tension in the group. In contrast, negative emotion arouses emphatic collectivity because many transgender people can relate to such negative feelings based on their everyday experiences. Negative emotion has the potential to mediate community solidarity. On the other hand, emotion norms are related to authenticity experiences and construction in the sense that positive emotion expression through the very means of posting edited selfies can be 'unreal' for some transgender individuals while the negative emotion is the felt and embodied expression of transgender selves. At the core of this paradox lies the in-community normativity of transgender authenticity.

To sum up, online trans men and trans women communities seemed to develop different norms of negative emotion expression that was prevalent for trans individuals. In trans men communities, restraining and self-censoring the negative emotion was internalised by individual trans men as a way of constructing masculinity and gender authenticity. In contrast, although elite trans women promote positive energy through pursuing individual success over expressing negative emotion in online communities, it was a collective emotion expression mode in trans women communities. To the narrative that positive energy could be a provocation that interrupts the common ground for collective negative emotion expression online, many reflective and less privileged trans women turned against the hierarchical norm of positive over negative emotion. It is thus fair to say that one of the differences between online trans men and trans women communities is located in the acceptance of negative emotion expression in a collective space for sympathy and solidarity. However, it is salient that viewing negative emotion expression as time-wasting and promoting individual positivity as a way out has become the normative belief of addressing negative emotion properly among trans men and elite trans women. Reflexive practices of trans individuals resisting such normative beliefs resort to questioning the negative/positive emotion hierarchy and emphasising sympathetic solidarity. Through these reflections, a trans authenticity that is an alternative to normative beliefs emerges at the conjunction of freedom of individual

expression and community allowance of negative emotions.

6.3.2 Mapping the positive emotion regulation in online trans communities

Having discussed the negative emotion contagion among Chinese trans communities, I now turn to unpack the discourses of positive energy in relation to the emerging normativity of authenticity in the form of emotion rules. The diverse emotional experiences in the Chinese trans communities yield a clear picture of the stratified discourses and perceptions of negative/positive energy that emotion rules in online trans communities have close relationship with neoliberal values of personal success. Negative emotion is implicitly connected to laziness and indulgence in melancholy emotions in transgender people's narratives of their perceived emotion environment in the online trans community. While most trans people who can pass and have a higher socio-economic background frame negative energy as hindering personal progress and damaging successful gender transition, the emotion rules are also internalised by other less-privileged transgender individuals. In comparison, positive energy is highlighted and practised through the valuing of a progressive and forward-thinking attitude towards transness, which further contributes to the construction of authenticity normativity in online trans communities.

Considering the restricted nature of physical social spaces for Chinese transgender people, online trans spaces are the primary place where emotion, experience and thinking are both expressed and heard. Excluding the haunting melancholy emotion expression in online trans communities contributes to making this space what Ahmed called "intense" (2004). Ahmed described the intense space in relation to her experience: "I have experienced numerous social occasions where I assumed other people were feeling what I was feeling, and that the feeling was, as it were, 'in the room', only to find out that others had felt quite differently" (ibid., p. 10). The normative belief of the negative/positive dichotomy has been promoted by and, in turn, has shaped the trans men majority. Rejecting and ignoring the prevalent existing negative feelings in trans men communities, many trans men groups regulate negative emotion by promoting positive energy. The sanguine sanction of the trans men mentality was often mentioned

by interviewees in the form of fun and joy. Happiness, however, is further hierarchized. Matvei described his first impression of a trans men group:

> *There was a brother [transgender man] sharing his terrible experiences and bad feelings. At first, I wanted to comfort him, but I found group members took an entertaining look at his emotional expression. For instance, when he said: 'I feel so bad', someone would comment below, 'go find a girl'. They were not teasing him, but they were fond of making fun of him. (Matvei, trans man, 23-year-old)*

The majority in the trans men group denied personal sadness as the correct object of emotion while turning personal sadness into the object of group happiness by making fun of and ignoring the expressed personal issue. In other words, the contagion and circulation of happiness in the trans men group are both based on the objectification of personal sorrow.

In the trans men online community, another salient characteristic of the communication pattern and style was identified by many interviewees as *gao ji* (do gay things), which means doing gay stuff with each other. According to an interviewee who was a group supervisor in a trans men chat group,

> *We all know the existence of trans-gay, and sometimes people would pretend to be gay but just for fun. Haha! I think… People have a lot of gay memes such as selling ass and the affirmation of Soviet Comrades.[41] Gay memes are used quite often but the majority are not gay. We did a survey, and actually, only a small portion was really trans-gay. (Nathan, demiboy, 28-year-old)*

Many interviewees shared the same observation that homo-joy had become more and more popular in the transgay community in recent years. Alex was quite confused: "The groups are flooded by these *gao ji* memes, I don't understand. I have been in this community for ages, but the tendency is becoming stronger and stronger in the last two

---

[41] The pronunciation of comrade is *Tongzhi* in Chinese, which is also used to refer to gay people in popular culture, with origins in Taiwan and Hong Kong (Bao, 2018).

years." Through the circulation of porn stickers and gay memes, the overwhelming hegemonic masculinity community has been transformed by *gao ji* culture into a more "active and fun" place. The joyful bromance and the homo-joy masculinity vibe are both integrated into the formation of trans homosociality, through which the normative discourses of trans authenticity are made.

Aside from the homo joy, strong hegemonic masculinity discourses are still pervasively circulated in trans men groups, echoed with the popular buzzword "straight cancer" which is used to criticize the toxic masculinity of heterosexual males. Chris, a trans man who was active in the local trans community and NGO-led chat groups, complained that many trans men groups on QQ were still toxic: "I feel that they [grassroots trans men community] are stereotypical and lack enough cognition. Their cognition is still binary. And if you say stuff like 'I am bottom', they will regard you as fake trans people. They will." Chris was excluded from a trans men QQ group that he called a "heavy trans group" for his homo joy because he was a bottom and would like to be penetrated. "So, I think they are commonly intolerant on the QQ groups", said Chris, "while in the WeChat groups people are more comprehending, and no one would say this is fake trans or you are not manly enough." Homo joy is not only quashed in grassroots QQ trans groups but also critiqued by some well-educated and progressive trans men in NGO-led WeChat groups, such as Matvei:

> *People are making fun, and they are not really talking about gay identity. I can't catch up with them and I don't want to engage. This is such a waste of time. I treat it [an NGO-led WeChat group] as an information channel, and I think it is nice in terms of sharing information and experiences like changing gender markers in official documents. But sometimes the homo topics and memes will flood out the useful information.*

While homo joy has become a popular form of sentimentality in the trans men community, the regulating forces constrain this kind of emotion in two ways: regarding homo as inauthentic trans-masculinity and joy as a time-wasting barrier to progressive transgender temporality.

The regulation of negative emotion by promoting positive energy also occurred in online trans women communities, although with different norms and stratification. Miss R and Miss F were a translesbian couple; both went to top universities and were quite aware of gender/queer theories. They run a "positive chatgroup" on QQ together which focuses on dressing and make-up without any negative emotion expressions. In their couple interview,[42] they stated that they purposefully monitored the group through using regulation authority and agenda-setting powers granted to group owners:

> *Miss F: We don't set much regulation currently. I think there are many trans in this chat group, so I require group members not to discuss hormone use and surgery and things like this and encourage people to share something of their lives. I just want it to be more positive because there are many trans communities with all kinds of issues and the majority of us are emotionally down. Although I have this original intention, I might not do it successfully. Actually, there are other chat groups which are quite good at this, people share food every day and most of them are trans!*

> *Me: In what sense do you think those groups are good?*

> *Miss F: I don't know how they manage to achieve this: all are there to share good food, and all are happy. The group members only send food pictures or share food information, nobody shares their daily hassles and worries they encounter in their own life. People in the group are happy every day.*

> *Miss R: It became a vicious circle. Sometimes there was someone who was in a bad mood would say something [negative] and they would be scolded – of course I didn't think this was good – by some extreme group members for breaking the atmosphere in this happy food-sharing group.*

---

[42] A couple interview, also called a dyadic interview, refers to the type of interview in which two interviewees who have a romantic relationship participate and interact (Mavhandu-Mudzusi, 2018). Conducting a couple interview with Miss F and Miss R was requested by them due to safety concerns, and it also allowed me to observe the dynamic and interaction between the two interviewees.

Although highlighting the lower regulation and thus lower success of their own chatgroup, Miss F and Miss R did set rules for group chatting and promoted the happiness and food/clothing consumption information in their community. The dressing and food groups mentioned in this quotation demonstrate the contours of the subtle emotion-managing techniques and discursive power of emotion afforded by digital platforms. Through controlling the membership, banning negative emotion expression and agenda-setting of emotion, the group owners managed to maintain an atmosphere in which "people in the group are happy every day". The "vicious circle" Miss F frames refers to the implosion of negative emotion which can be contagious and is considered vicious. The internalisation of the group regulation, which was essential for maintaining group membership, of emotion and volunteer abjection of negative expression of daily feelings was key to the establishment of a virtuous circle. The resonance between the 'vicious circle' and the spiral of negative emotion projects Lutz and White's (1986) argument of the ideologically prescribed emotions as false consciousness and depressed emotion as the representation of the true material interest of a group. The relation between the ideological structuring of emotion and the distribution of discursive power is in this sense related to the normalisation of transgender authenticity. Hochschild (1979) highlighted the norms of emotion as being deeply influenced and directed by social norms. Norms regulate the ways in which emotion should be expected and expressed properly in an implicit way. In the case of the 'positive group', norms regulate emotions by making and institutionalising positive emotion as an attractive resource. In prevalently melancholic trans communities, as many of my interviewees stated, the dressing and food-sharing groups restricted negative expression to construct a rare 'good' and 'happier' atmosphere. Expressing positive emotion can thus be understood as an emotional resource that gained its value through emotional scarcity. By transforming positive emotion into a scarce resource through membership maintenance and agenda setting, positive emotions become normative in this emotion economy and community resources.

The regulation forces of positive emotion are also enacted through the false consciousness of ideologically prescribed emotions: the collectively performed

happiness. Happiness is less an individual's perceived and expressed emotion but a collective project that requires the emotional labour of all group members, in which the totality of a positive atmosphere is built on the abjection of individualised melancholy. This is related to the historical affective project of 'telling bitterness' in the revolutionary period. The importance of 'telling bitterness' in public lay in its capacity to link the speaker's individual experience and emotions with those of the collective, forging an imagined collective identity and building the affective community that the revolutionary regime demanded (Hershatter 2002; Rofel 1999a). Similarly, the collective project of expressing positive affect in limited ways helps to form a sense of social identity shared by transgender group members but also reinforces the normativity that being positive is essential to doing transgender.

In summary, emotion norms consist of a struggle between the prevalent negative affect of transgender individuals and the modelled positive emotion promoted by privileged trans people and NGOs. The emotion norms that aim to regulate and construct a positive emotional atmosphere, like the mediation of institutional knowledge production, highlight the importance of the mediation of community for transgender individuals to express their personal feelings. The emotion norms are related to gender and class structures that suggest the emotional expression of heteronormative and socially successful people is more proper. The mediation denies the connection between individual and negative emotion expression (which is shared and has the potential for mutual understanding and socialisation), while at the same time creating and reproducing atomised and disconnected individuals through the norms of forming a collective positivity in which people are banned from expressing feeling derived from their personal life. Instead, positive emotion rules were mobilised to regulate individuals' emotion expression in online trans communities. Although in different ways, both trans men and trans women communities normatively frame positive emotion as better than negative emotion expression and as an ideal mode to properly reach authentic transness. In trans men communities, positive emotion was embodied as homo-joy mimicking the masculinity performance of cisgender heterosexual males. The emotion norm per se, however, was at stake in the homosocial

relationships among trans men members, because the performance of para-bromance homosociality endangered the very normative trans masculinity that such norms promoted. Differently in trans women communities, positive emotions became a scarce emotion resource in an atmosphere in which negative emotions expression was prevalent and deemed less desirable in normative discourses.

As Farnel has argued, "The affective force of the crowd, I contend, is both amplified and restricted by particular platforms" (2015, p. 227). The emotion norms circulated in online trans communities construct what Papacharissi called "affective publics", which "have been transformed by networked technologies to suggest both spaces for the interaction of people, technology, and practices and the imagined collective that evolves out of this interaction" (2015, p. 125). The affective public polarises the diverse sentimental experiences into a positive/negative dichotomy and requires transgender people engaged in certain online communities to perform emotion positively. As Farnel contended, digital media "is increasingly playing a role in defining, producing and challenging the modes of normativity that determine the livability of life for precarious subjects" (2015, p. 215). The networked essence of doing transgender in the digital era and the limited affordance shaped by technology support the importance of understanding transgender normativity through a mediation lens.

6.4 Discussion and Conclusion

The previous chapter highlighted the ambiguous opportunities provided by digital platforms that afford liminal space and time for transgender individuals to negotiate authenticity with cisgender and queer normativity through appropriation and contestation. While transgender people's digital practices of time and space indicate a "social and technical classification system" as an alternative to the offline world (Dame, 2016, p. 35) for transgender identity construction, this chapter shows that trans-normativity is emerging in online trans communities along the stratified authenticity praxis of transgender individuals. In this chapter, I foregrounded "the stuff of identity" – knowledge and emotion – to investigate the formation of trans-normativity in relation

214

to neoliberal conditioned norms of individualist success and positivity over negative emotion expression (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 49). It is also related to the heteronormative and cis-centric regulation of emotion. Similarly, the knowledge norms of online trans communities echo the truth regime enacted by the medical science discourse-power nexus and professionalism. In this sense, this chapter does not argue that the norms regulating (trans)gender communities vary drastically between offline society and online or that there are new forms of gender norms emerging in the digital world for transgender people. On the contrary, this chapter presented the continuity and extension of gender norms from the offline material world into online trans communities and individual practices. Transnormativity in online trans communities, however, does tell a more complicated story of gender order and trans authenticity stratification from the intersectional perspectives of gender, class, educational background, NGO engagement, and bodily privileges such as appearance and medical transition status.

Previous studies have condemned the medical model of gender reassignment, which creates "an unspoken hierarchy" in the trans communities (Bornstein 1994, p. 67), and marginalises other transgender people as "not 'trans' enough because of lack of surgeries or hormones" (Mog & Swarr, 2008). However, in the non-Western context such as in Chinese trans communities, the hierarchy might not come from the misalignment between medical and transgender bodies, but rather from the lack of access to knowledge about medical treatments and knowledge production skills. It is in this sense that I discuss the knowledge hierarchy, and I roughly differentiate embodied knowledge and mediated knowledge to highlight the normalisation of transgender knowledge production. Individual and experience-based knowledge is excluded by formal online chat groups, NGO discourses and state surveillance, while institutionalised knowledge production is privileged as the scientific and proper form of medical transition. The knowledge hierarchy further excludes and marginalises most Chinese transgender people who have neither access to nor the practical resources of institutionalised knowledge. In the case of TransLives, the bottom-up community is formed based on individuals' sharing of their personal experiences because many ordinary transgender people rely on this embodied knowledge which is aligned with

their status and possible in practice. The normalisation process of transgender knowledge interrupts community formation by privileging institutionalised knowledge as the necessary mediation of the relationship between individual, knowledge and community. With a stigmatized and dehumanized gender identity, transgender elites utilise institutionalized means such as medical and academic, to be recognized as proper and normal in the mainstream sense. The state is also an active actor in the normalisation of transgender knowledge production for, on the one hand, implementing strict conditions for sequential transgender medical treatment and censoring online discussion of transgender medicine on the other. Therefore, the normalisation of transgender knowledge production is two-fold: 1) strategic reorganisation in response to state and societal marginalisation; and 2) re-ordering and reinforcing in-community discursive powers in accordance with the interests of socio-economically and educationally privileged transgender people.

The normalisation of positive emotion in Chinese trans communities tells a similar yet implicit story that positive emotion is framed as an important way of being involved and recognised by society, and privileged transgender people seize the discursive power to define positive emotion and practices. Thus, emotion becomes another object and source for the normalisation I investigate in this thesis. The discussion of emotion norms in both trans women and trans men communities echoes Bao's concept of the heterosexual affect project in China: "It is the cultural intelligibility of heteronormativity and of an affect project that privileges heterosexual desire as necessary to participate in the regimes of family, marriage, and community that marginalise any desire that threatens heterosexual normativity" (2018, p.112). By depreciating the melancholy of trans women as hindering personal success and celebrating homo-joy of trans men in doing gender, emotion norms in trans communities embody a heterosexual affect project that further marginalises non-positive affective practices. On the one hand, privileged transgender people are more likely to take on positive heterosexual affect because they have more affective resources (e.g., psychological consultancy or social-emotional support) and are more successful in emotional passing. On the other hand, based on the intimacy with heterosexual affect,

privileged transgender people can obtain intelligibility from the emotional hierarchy. The negative emotions experienced and embodied by transgender individuals are marginalized as improper and obstructive for doing gender and thus the mediation of certain forms of positive emotion is needed for all to express the transgender self correctly.

In the concluding remarks of *Transgender China,* Susan Stryker argued that elite knowledge provokes asymmetrical relations of power and Chinese trans studies "should not imagine that knowledge flows in one direction only – extracted from the bodies of the subaltern, the underclass, the coloured, the colonized, the uneducated, the unsophisticated, the deviant, and the improperly socialized – for the benefit of a privileged elite for whom that knowledge becomes an instrument or technique for the profitable management of difference" (2012, p. 292). This chapter echoes and extends this argument based on a knowledge-emotion nexus. Elite transgender people, as I contend, claim their authority and reproduce discursive power in mediating the correct channel of becoming trans through norms, resulting in the formation of in-community stratification and order. The normalisation of the trans communities is featured by the dynamic formation of self-organised collectivity under state censorship and social marginalisation and the emergence of in-community ordering. In the emerging social group of Chinese transgender people, transgender elites take over the discursive power vacancy, connect the community with norms, and mediate the relationship between individual experience and the normative sense of doing transgender.

The in-community normativity is based on the destruction and rejection of the similar embodied knowledge and affect that many transgender individuals shared. The mediation of certain ways of doing trans authenticity results in stratification and alienation of the other. On the one hand, the experience of the majority is excluded and suspected, and the other's experiences become dominant and visible, representing the authentic way of doing gender. On the other hand, the mediation of knowledge and emotion cuts off the connection between individual experiences and the embodiment of authenticity. Individuals must rely on institutional knowledge and heteronormative emotion to approach and construct a sense of authenticity.

The mediation of normativity is highlighted to understand the Chinese trans communities, which has developed through and depends upon digital technologies. Expressing the self in online groups and interacting with others on digital platforms have become essential for transgender people in their identity construction. The identity constructed and socialised through interaction is thus highly mediated by the common knowledge and collective emotions in the Chinese context. Mediation is not only related to discursive power, but also to the technological context in which in-community interaction emerges. This aspect of mediation is explored further in the next chapter.

Chapter 7 Trans Technologies of the Self: The Reflexive Digital Practices of Gender Authenticity

7.1 Introduction

...technologies of the self, which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality.   *(Foucault, 1988, p. 18)*

In the previous chapters, I reflected on how transgender people interact and negotiate with the cisgender hegemony and normative queer critiques through liminal time and space practices, and the emerging trans-normative discourses of trans authenticity formulated in online trans communities. Drawing on Foucault's typologies of technologies of the "game of truth" – the rules based on which truth is constructed – previous chapters echoed his discussion of the technologies of sign systems, "which permit us to use signs, meanings, symbols or signification" and the technologies of power, "which determines the conduct of individuals and submit them to certain ends or domination" (Foucault, 1988, p. 18). In this chapter, I adopt his notion of "technologies of the self" to discuss the conditional agentic and reflexive "operations" of authenticity through the performative making and representation of the self. In other words, this chapter turns to the individual and everyday life of Chinese transgender people by showing how the sense of trans authenticity is performatively constructed in their digital self-representation and reflection on the self and digital technology use.

Foucault coined the concept of *technologies of the self* through the historical examination of self-writing in the Ancient Greek-Roman period and self-training Christian societies (Foucault, 1997). Technologies of the self in Greek and Christian times mark the shifting relationship between the self, others and power authorities. In the ancient Greek context, technologies of the self signified the autonomous engagement with power when the social institutions were less powerful compared to

the Christian era. Therefore, instead of functional tools, I apply technologies of the self in the sense that the selves develop alternative relationships with authority and practice a certain level of conditional agency and autonomy. Some feminist studies have adopted the theoretical lens of 'technologies of the self' as a potential tool to "reconceptualize the self, agency and resistance", especially the gendered self (Markula, 2003, p. 87). Burkitt, however, provided a critical understanding of technologies of the self that "are forms of production as well as means of domination" (2002, p. 235). The self is thus both the means and object of technology practice, and the knowledge of producing self is indicated and constrained by technologies of the self. The technology of the self "forms both the practical aspects of the self that can operate non-reflexively, and the reflexive aspects of the self that can discourse upon and attempt to change the self and its practices" (Burkitt, 2002, p. 224). Through technologies of the self, authenticity is approached in reflexive ways, while the habitual condition of the self is also reproduced, constraining the conditionally agentic technologies of the self. It is in the conditional embodied agency expressed "on a spectrum of conformity and resistance" that trans individuals construct authenticity (Banaji, 2017, p. 193).

In the emerging area of "transgender communication studies" (Spencer, 2015), a growing body of research focusing on the intersection of digital communication and trans studies has foregrounded the role of technologies in affording transgender identity construction. Cavalcante argued that social media can be a "testing ground for identity", where transgender users can explore and manage different identities and personas (2016, p. 115). In Cavalcante's phenomenological conceptualisation, technologies for transgender are "'ready-to-hand'-available, participatory, and taken-for-granted" (2016, p. 115). Haimson and colleagues coined "trans technology" to conceptualise digital technologies for trans users that allow "changeability, network separation, and identity realness, along with the queer aspects of multiplicity, fluidity, and ambiguity, needed for gender transition" (2019, p. 2). In another study of digital technologies designed for trans uses, Haimson and colleagues (Haimson et al., 2020) expanded the concept to any technologies trans people use to project part of the self to the outside world. While the metaphor of projecting self to the outside world diverts from my performative

authenticity perspective, the concept of trans technology, and its extended explanation, is especially helpful to identify the agency of transgender users afforded by digital technologies in terms of fluid and partial presentation of the self. In the Chinese discursive-techno-social context which I discussed previously, trans individuals inhabit liminal time and space online where the platforms are not designed for them and they are far from mastering the accessible technologies to claim authenticity to the public. Given this, I discuss trans technologies in this chapter on trans individuals' agency and appropriation of cis-centric platforms.

Combining Foucault's technologies of the self and trans technology, this chapter does not merely address how transgender people use digital technology to achieve a desired self or how digital technology affords transgender people's doing of gender. Instead, I pay attention to the interactive moments when online gender practices, self-reflection and gender norms encounter each other. It is high time to rethink transgender agency and gender norms dialectically and position performative construction of authenticity in between. Based on this understanding of conditional agentic and reflexive practices of trans technologies of the self, I specifically ask how transgender individuals (re)present themselves on social media, how is self-representation related to the agentic and reflexive formation of authenticity, and how is self-formation mediated and constrained by the affordance of digital technologies? As I will elaborate on later, the performative interpellation of self through online self-naming, self-writing and self-mediatisation of the body are conceptualised as 'technologies of the trans self' that performatively instrumentalise the embodiment of transgender authenticity. In the conclusion, I will discuss how the authenticity construction of Chinese transgender individuals is afforded and compromised by using digital technology.

7.2 Online transgender naming: self-interpellation and re-socialisation

Naming is considered essential in identity construction and social interaction, and self-naming is becoming more important in online interactions because online names are usually the key information people use to "recognise and identify each other"

(Hagström, 2012, p. 81). Self-naming practices are argued to be the construction and socialisation of the idealised self in a specific social encounter (Ducheneaut et al., 2009). Crenshaw and Nardi criticised the notion of the "idealised self" in online naming practices for being simplified and contended that online naming characterised the "sincere representation" of identity and extended online relationships into/across related contexts (2014, p. 67). While the 'idealised self' conceptualisation considers online avatars as the end product manufactured through naming, sincere representation regards naming as the means and ability to do socialisation. Transgender naming studies echo the duality of naming by highlighting the importance of transgender self-naming in trans identity interpellation and social recognition (Arielle, 2016; Russell et al., 2018).

Names can be the indicator of class, nationality, religion and other social identities, among which sex/gender categories are also made salient and accountable through the social practices of naming (Westbrook & Schilt, 2014). The assigned names signify and continuously remind transgender people of their assigned gender at birth (VanderSchans, 2016), and many of the interviewees expressed discomfort when talking about their original names. As Stone, a 28-year-old trans woman, stated, "As far as I know, some [transgender people] intend to change names to say goodbye to their past. Some names are too masculine or feminine and they want to change them to align with their gender." It is the gendered apparatus of naming that allows name change to be a core identification step for transgender people that projects the 'true' self and gender identity (Emmelhainz, 2012; VanderSchans, 2016). Renaming the self different from their original names which were assigned at birth or registered legal names is believed by some queer/trans communities to be the decisive threshold of transition (Mowitt, 1996). Joining Mowitt's question of the decisive power of self-determination and sovereignty through self-naming, I consider transgender online self-naming to be a kind of transgender technology of the self that embodies both the transgender reflection on authenticity through naming practices and performative self-interpellation that connects the self with certain communities and gender norms.

7.2.1 Mechanism and meaning-making of online transgender naming

In the fieldwork, I asked interviewees to self-introduce and talk about their experiences and perceptions of self-naming practices, and many of them directly referred to their online names or the pseudonyms they picked and used in everyday life rather than their original assigned names. Cheese, an FtM who was active in local trans communities and NGOs, used his self-chosen name mostly on the Internet and in local trans communities. His experience represented the most common situation for transgender self-naming since most of the name changes were not legally registered and the online and offline trans communities were the major spaces where their names were used and recognised. The names were also derived from multiple sources, which related to the socialisation field of names and the identity persistency arising from naming. Online self-naming and offline self-naming are complicatedly intertwined practices, and three types of online/offline naming could be roughly categorised: online initiated, offline initiated, and plural naming.

In most cases, there is a sequential relationship between online and offline name practices. An individual first adopts an online name, then later, after some time, it is increasingly used in offline encounters. Penny's[43] naming practice best explained the case:

When I played an online game, I was thinking about what ID should I make. I was fond of a cartoon cat, but someone had already taken up the name. So, I named myself after that cat with a slight change. After that, I used the name in all social media accounts as well as in local trans communities. I used my original name only on official occasions. (Penny, MtF, 24-year-old)

---

[43] Considering that trans people use pseudonyms to refer to themselves in daily life, their pseudonyms can be highly identifiable. To protect the privacy of interviewees according to consent and to avoid unexpected exposure of identifiable information, I replaced the pseudonyms that interviewees used daily with another pseudonym that I asked them to create with a similar connotation or pronunciation with their permission. Without specific explanation, all names that used to refer to interviewees in my thesis were further pseudonymised in this way.

The first type of name initiated online, for Penny, was indirectly linked to the gender identity that she was picking in a game rather than choosing an ideal name that would best represent her transgender identity. Though somewhat randomly picked for use in an online game, the pseudonym implicitly reflected her desired gender image of self as a "cute catty girl". In this way, transgender online naming cannot be explained entirely by serious naming practices in which "individuals put a great deal of effort, time and consideration", as VanderSchans has argued (2016, p. 18). Subtly different from proper naming, self-naming practices like Penny's, initiated by online pseudonym-naming, do not pursue legal recognition and solid affirmation or a guise as original names. Such online-initiated naming can be seen as what Crawford called radically affirmative name-changing through which people "could – rather than unfold identities and properties that are already possible – pursue the impossible instead" (2016, p. 62). The online-initiated naming – in the relatively pseudonymous environment of the digital world – of Chinese transgender people is a playful doing of names without over-attaching truth claims and authority to the signifier. The playfulness, however, does not reduce the online-initiated names to nonsense because, as we can see in Penny's case, trans individuals used such names in different social circumstances and partially projected their desired gender image of the self through these names.

The second type of self-naming is offline initiated and extended to self-referencing in different social encounters, and on online platforms. These offline-initiated names are often more unique and thus identifiable with implicit or explicit gender connotations than online pseudonyms. For instance, both Alex (trans man, gym trainer) and Phel (trans woman, foreign trade salesperson) used names which looked like proper legal names with clear gender connotations at work. Trans individuals used such names in public and official offline occasions such as workplaces, which might arouse others' perceived confusion and thus require courage to face the potential risks of unintentional coming out and any ensuing discrimination. Most interviewees attached relatively proper and serious meanings to offline-initiated naming and intentionally pursues a persistent and recognisable identity through using the same names in both online and offline social interactions. Offline-initiated names enable transgender individuals to be

recognised with a homogenous identity in different environments and communities.

The third kind is a more plural naming in that transgender individuals create different names in different social spaces. This differs from online-initiated and offline-initiated naming in terms of singularity, cross-space consistency and identification. Phoenix, for instance, strategically arranged their relationships between social media use, naming and identity. She used her original name (with a clear male character) when interacting with people she met and knew in real life and changed her original name to a feminine name with similar pronunciation when hanging out with transgender friends. In online spaces, she named herself on WeChat after a Ki-duk Kim[44] movie implying her identity as a Christian trans sex worker and strategically used randomly picked names on dating apps to avoid policing and to attract potential customers.

The self-naming of transgender people with diverse spatial initiation conditions presents different understandings and operations of self-interpellation. Drawing on Goffman's performance theory, VanderSchans (2016) has suggested that transgender online naming is an essential symbol marking the transition to or birth of a new gender identity, and a technique to maintain the performance of the true self. However, the diverse self-naming practices of Chinese transgender people showcase the complexity and nuanced disparity in the relationship between self-naming and authenticity construction. Trans naming, in this sense, is a strategic balancing of social recognisability, identity fluidity and identifiability. It is a plural and contingent technology of the self by which individuals express individual agency through strategic socialisation and self-interpellation of self-chosen names in context-specific spaces and communities.

Negotiation through online naming can sometimes be a strategy to maintain ambiguous gender expression or even a compromise. Althur, a trans man who had received hormone treatment and was about to undergo transition surgery with his parent's permission, was quite frank about his deliberately vague self-naming:

---

[44] Ki-duk Kim was a South Korean film director whose movies explored antinormative and marginalised sex with religious metaphors, according to my interviewee Phoenix.

I use this name [WeChat name] when communicating with other trans people. The name is chosen from a famous Chinese poem expressing my wish to insist on doing what I want from all perspectives. For me, it has no clear gender characteristics. Some would think it's a boy's name while other might think it is a girl's name. (Althur, trans man, 20s)

In VanderSchans' notion, online naming is an intentional and direct gender performance that transgender individuals use on digital platforms to express desired gender identity and to convince their audience (2016). Althur's strategic and ambivalent naming challenges VanderSchans's argument in two senses: over-emphasising naming as salient gender performance, and overlooking the significant relations of self-identification, gender identity expression, and the character of social encounters. Althur and I first met at an offline trans men social event. Although a bit reticent, Althur attracted much attention for his relatively passing appearance, voice and style, according to other cohort trans men whom I later interviewed. Gender-aligned naming is thus a less urgent agenda for Althur since his gender expression could be conducted in other ways. Being born into an academic family and studying art in a prestigious school, Althur's social interactions on WeChat involved complicated real-life-based relationships and thus the strategic ambiguity of online naming was a rational identity negotiation. Having gender-neutral names might not be as radical as Connell (2010) argued when referring to transgender naming as resistance to the gender binary system. By maintaining a vague gender image through online naming, however, transgender individuals can create a balance between sustaining current social networks and the strategic doing of gender.

Online self-naming is also a negotiation between real and virtual, rather than an authentic representation of the self, as some scholars argue (De Pina-Cabral, 2010; VanderSchans, 2016). Although online names are quite commonly used in different social spaces online and offline, the interviewees used pseudonyms, net names, nicknames or fake names to describe and define their online naming. For instance, Grace still considered her commonly used name in the online community, her personal live stream and other social media to be "unreal". The contradiction between nominal

real and practical real in online naming thus requires cautious investigation of what negotiations transgender individuals make through self-naming. Gabriel's naming practice is a useful example: he named himself after a memetic male character from a Hong Kong movie and used it in an online game that also engages in offline geo-based actions and interaction.

Me: Did people from the game actually believe this was your real name?

Gabriel: There were some guys who did not know the meme and they thought this was my real name.

Me: Did you intend to create such a misunderstanding?

Gabriel: Yeah. And I also felt that this memetic character fit my self-positionality: relatively ordinary but also quite tempered.

Me: Did you also pick this name because you share the same surname with this male character?

Gabriel: No, my surname is different. It is just, the name came up to me and I thought I would like to use this to name myself in the future.

The reason I asked about whether Gabriel had the same surname as the character was that the character's name was a proper and mundane Chinese male name. It was rare for trans interviewees to take up a random yet proper Chinese name which has no relation at all with their original names. Based on the follow-ups, Gabriel's naming practice could be understood as a parody of proper and gendered naming. Gabriel played with the memetic naming to create a tricky social recognition situation where his name would be considered as either apparently fake or seemingly real in the same time and space. Instead of the real representation of the true self, I frame the transgender naming practice as the negotiation between real and unreal through which they construct a sense of authenticity based on the real social relationship (named by or after family members or intimate others) and embodied social experiences.

As Cheese's understanding of online names as a 'cover' of the self indicates, online naming should be understood as performative negotiation of identity rather than performance in Goffman's sense. Building on Goffmans' notion of the identity document, Pilcher argued that "authenticity of identity is arrived at through the verified matching of names with bodily appearance" (2016, p. 4). The online self-naming practices of Chinese transgender people, however, complicates the argument in the sense that they construct a sense of authenticity through flexible and sometimes compromised naming rather than a self-affirmed gender identity performed and announced in online naming. The agency of transgender subjects is not implemented through the free requisition of social norms and self-interpellation of desired identity, but on the performative construction of a sense of authenticity and ability through strategic negotiation across different social identities and in diverse social encounters. I therefore consider naming to be a kind of technology of the self, not in the sense that individuals could utilise online self-naming to construct an ideal self and perform identified self-representation. Rather, online naming is practised as a technology of the self to negotiate and navigate authenticity between identifiable and unidentifiable, past and present, real and virtual.

7.2.2 Self-naming as a connection over differentiation

Studies on transgender self-naming consider it to be the way transgender individuals conduct free gender expression and construct desired self-representation (Pilcher, 2017; Shilling, 2010). Emphasising naming as a self-identification issue, these studies overlook how naming is not only a desired representation of the self but also the configuration of social figurations. The Chinese trans people's naming practices, as shown in this section, are deeply connected to socialisation and positioning of the self in a specific social and techno context. The names of Chinese transgender individuals are no less about connection than differentiation.

Eve (MtF) and Chris (FtM) shared a similar naming experience in that the online trans communities and its naming regulations played a key role in their self-naming. Eve chose her then commonly used name when she was asked by an MtF chat group

owner to pick one name in an online form. The naming form required group members to use duplicated words to name themselves, such as Mei Mei, which Eve understood as a way to create a cute representation of the self. Chris was named by the first trans friend he met and then reduplicated the first Chinese character of the name to fit into the naming custom in a chat group. Naming in a similar form was not only an embodiment of self-identification but also a collective practice forming a sense of group identity, intimacy and belonging between members. The naming of the self, in this regard, echoes individuals' conforming to, acceptance of and active integration into certain forms of socialisation. Shila, a post-operation trans woman who ran a design studio serving foreigner-targeted bars, emphasised the link between her naming and her foreigner-based social circle: "you can call me Shila, or my Chinese name, but few people know my Chinese name. People normally call me Shila because my friends here are mostly foreigners." The naming preference of Shila resonated with her intentional distancing from her Chineseness and her identity connection with a Western (majorly American) lifestyle, and language. She highlighted that she only dated and mainly hung out with foreigners, and her transgender identification, as well as her business, benefited from the network with the West culturally, sexually and financially. Self-naming both mobilised and performatively embodied her socialisation of gender, class and even ethnic identity with a specific social group. The technologies of the self thus can be understood as the reflexive agency and ability of individuals in building, shaping and conforming to a certain social connection where a sense of self-desired authenticity is performatively constructed.

A more radical and intercultural collective name change can be seen in the self-naming practice of my interviewee Kagura (MtF/drug girl, 24-year-old, live streamer). Kagura named herself after the Japanese surname *Kagurazaka* (神楽坂 in Japanese Kanji and traditional Chinese, かぐらざか in Japanese Hiragana). *Kagurazaka* is originally a normal Japanese surname but has been appropriated by Taiwanese cosplay cross-dressing youth[45] with special cultural connotations in Eastern Asian trans

---

[45] *Kagurazaka* culture and its unique history is also introduced in an ACG encyclopaedia

communities and ACG culture. According to Kagura, due to the strict real name policy on Google since 2011, many cosplayers' accounts were blocked except those named after *Kagurazaka.* To avoid censorship, many cosplayers and young crossdressers in Sinophone societies started to take up this surname and soon formulated an influential sub-culture phenomenon in ACG communities and gender and sexual minority communities. For Kagura, using the collective surname to name herself worked both as a shelter free of surveillance and outsider gaze, and a signifier of transgender identity which can be easily recognised by other trans insiders. As Marco Deseriis' (2015) work on improper names has suggested, the collective naming made available by technology use allows individuals to enter into a trans individual relationship with one another that shapes the community. Through the collective naming of *Kagurazaka*, Chinese trans individuals construct the self in a form of collective enunciation which formulates a transnational and cross-cultural imagination of identity and community.

The connection of self-naming is not only between self and community or culture, but also between the multi sense of selves. Naming is understood as an essential, meaningful landmark in transgender identification – what Tournier (1975) called a "break" cutting off the continuity of one's past and present. But this 'break' narrative overlooks the complicated continuity and interconnection in transgender people's identity journey and reflection. Ling explained her commonly used name online and offline:

> *My previous ID was an English name my foreign teacher gave me at primary school. I used that name since then because I am not good at choosing names. But I didn't like it because it was a boy's name and quite tacky. I changed it recently to a name which is actually the romanisation of my family name in Japanese. I don't like my first name, but I like my family name not only because of its Chinese character but also because it belongs to me. My parents handed it down to me. (Ling, 19-year-old, gender nonconforming)*

Mengniangbaike. More details can be found at: https://zh.moegirl.org.cn/zh-hans/%E7%A5%9E%E4%B9%90%E5%9D%82

The link between past and present was embodied by Ling's online name choice. The reference and material for the self-naming came from her assigned surname as well as the attached kinship system. Ling's cherishing of her family heritage echoes Phenix's nostalgic feeling about her originally registered name: "if I change my name, the old me will disappear. I cannot stand this." Although Ling disliked this first name, the appropriation of her surname discursively bridged her pre-transition and in-transition, maintaining a continuous sense of self and social belonging. The appropriation of her surname in Ling's online self-naming can be understood as what Pilcher called "doing we" (2017, p. 820) rather than a self-technique of doing gendered self. Sam also named himself after his mother's surname in almost all social accounts, relating his post-transition identity to an anti-patriarchy mentality kinship rearrangement. The historical continuity and social belonging embodied in naming were both especially important for Ling's identification journey in which she was struggling with what gender to claim and looking for a sense of certainty. From the perspective of gender performativity, subjects construct a sense of the self through the reiteration and requisition of social norms. The norms are experience-dependent, and individuals rely on the available discursive resources which cannot be created from nowhere. It is thus decisive to frame transgender online naming as a breaking of the past and present. Instead, online naming enables negotiation of the pre-transition or pre-trans-identified experience and contemporary reflection of self-identity.

To conclude, the online self-naming of Chinese transgender people is afforded by digital platforms to create a different avatar, manage self-representation, and maintain a certain level of fluidity and privacy. Online self-naming is a performative form of authenticity construction through connecting the self with chosen symbolics and gender culture. However, the representation of transgender online naming cannot be simplified and totalised as a kind of gender performance that individuals can choose and conduct freely and independently. The diverse types of online naming practices that I identified earlier complicate the previous research on transgender naming in two ways: the self-techniques of negotiation and socialisation. Transgender authenticity is not constructed through the performance of the ideal self, but rather through negotiation between

identifiable and unidentifiable representation, past and present continuity, and the play with real and virtual. Secondly, online self-naming, instead of merely an individual issue and choice, reflects transgender people's identification within a specific social environment. Through the socialisation of self-naming, transgender people can approach and formulate a socialisation context where they are willing to be interpellated in certain ways and in certain forms. The picking, sense-making and circulation of transgender online naming is realised based on an assemblage of technological conduct, such as self-exposure, privacy control, naming standards and uniqueness requirements. All these technologies of the self, however, function on a social level whereby individuals practice self-naming as the process of being interpellated by a selected range of people, in special discursive manners, and become re-socialised gender subjects.

Butler (1999) suggested that the performative effect of an utterance is closely linked to the discursive power and social position of the utterer. For instance, 'you are married' obtains legal effect only by being spoken by judges or officials. Aside from the social position, the geographical setting in the civil affairs departments and the bodily appearance of the judge both contribute to forming the utterance authority. Considering the different forms of naming and its initiation and socialisation, trans self-naming practices show diverse strategic negotiation of identity coherence, singularity and identifiability with the discursive, spatial and representational context where they performatively construct the sense of self and authenticity. Although in many Chinese cases transgender people pursue coherence of the presented self in different social encounters, their naming practices vary from the truth regimes' entitling of authority legal names. The self is interpellated and negotiated through the strategic articulation of the self, chosen names, cultural-social symbols, and communities.

Online names, for their virtual setting, self-initiation and changeability, are treated as unserious and less accountable, even by some transgender people themselves. The compromising awareness of online self-naming is related to unofficial and non-legally recognised naming in digital spaces. This strongly resonates with the unrecognised gender identity of trans people in an exclusionary society and institutional environment.

However, unofficial naming has power exactly in the sense that transgender individuals can utilise the self-technique of online naming to construct an alternative discursive system for name recognition, negotiation and socialisation. The sense of authenticity is discursively constructed through the naming based on real social relationships and experiences, which are not recognised in real life, on the one hand, and the ability to socialise and manage how selves are interpellated, on the other. It is in this sense that I identify the technologies of the self (online self-naming) of Chinese transgender people as reflexive agency. In the next section, I discuss online writing as another form of technology of the self that is highly related to naming and identity.

7.3 Alternativity and ambiguity in online trans self-writing

7.3.1 Making alternative gender scripts

Text-based digital communication behaviours, such as blogging, are argued by scholars to be an important way for transgender people to practise and claim gender identity (Payne, 2013). Media technology is dialogically related to gender performativity in that new media technologies enable new gender performativity and new gender performativity facilitates new media technologies to emerge and function (Hatfield, 2021). In this section, I delve deeper into how textual digital communication affords new potential for transgender people to do gender alternatively without being constrained to normative forms of gender expression. Text-based self-representation further dissolves the boundaries between the human body and media in which bodily gender scripts can be extended, transcended or replaced. Aside from adopting alternative approaches to doing gender performatively, self-writing allows transgender individuals to creatively explore alternative gender scripts outside the normative and socially recognised norms of gender. Put succinctly, there exists the potential for doing gender alternatively in diverse ways and norms in Chinese transgender people's online self-writing.

In the elicitation interview with Lily in which she gave consent for me to browse her Qzone account, I found that Lily's Qzone was dominated by textual posts and many

classical Chinese poems that she wrote and cited rather than photographic selfies. Her poem writing and citational referentiality crafted intertextuality between the stylised authentic self and alternative gender script.

Me: Oh, you write poems?

Lily: Yes, I wrote a lot.

Me: You also post Qingzhao Li's [李清照] poetry.

Lily: I am quite fond of her.

Me: Why is that? How do you find her poetry?

Lily: What I like about this poem, is the confidence expressed by the verse "Zi Shi Hua Zhong Di Yi Liu [自是花中第一流]". With confidence, you don't have to care what others think [about you].

Me: And what is the reason you like her?

Lily: First of all, her life experience and personality; secondly, her love story. I like her poem because the language she used is plain while the rhyme scheme is strictly conformed to. The rhythm is especially good, as well as the WanYuePai [the Graceful and Restrained School] poetry style.

Qingzhao Li (1084-1155 BC) is one of the most famous female poets in Chinese history for her outstanding achievement in poetry and also her legendary love life with her husband. The poem Lily cited is titled *ZheGuTian·GuiHua* (鹧鸪天·桂花, Partridge Sky·May Flower), praising the independency and transcendence of the fragrant May Flower as a metaphor to figure the self. The verse "何须浅碧轻红色,自是花中第一流" literally means "why does it (May Flower) need the decoration of the light green (leaves) and the pale red (petals)? It (May Flower) is already premier among all flowers for its fragrance." By citing this verse on her Qzone, Lily expressed her admiration for

independence and confidence in femininity and compared herself with Qingzhao Li as a literate woman. In this way, the reading and citing become forms of self-writing that represent Lily's desire and understanding of what femininity should be. Li's poem, together with her love story and personality, offers an alternative gender script for Lily to imagine and experience not only her gender identity but also sexuality, romance and personality that contribute to the construction of her transgender femininity. The transcending and independent grace of May Flower resonates with Lily's self-awareness and the sense-making of her 'unpassed' appearance. On the one hand, she was unable to pass, even though she was taking hormone therapy, on the other, "a woman's heart" was more important than appearance, according to her. Through textual self-writing, transgender people, especially those who find it hard or are unwilling to pass, are able to take on alternative and diverse ways of doing gender unconstrained by resistance to "the idea of a clear, cohesive and enduring sense of gender identity" (Lodge, 2017, p. 49). The intertextuality of Lily's self-writing and her recitational reference to Li allowed Lily to move beyond the normative bodily representation of the transgender self and take up an alternatively stylised script.

Beyond the creative recitational self-writing, Chinese trans people performatively express their gendered selves through stylised wordplay and manipulation of writing style. Self-writing is always already gendered between the lines. My conversation with Cabbage on his WeChat textual posts revealed the correlation between self-writing and the performativity of masculinity:

> *I think I might be… In my own conceit, I innately express myself in a boy's way. I think ordinary boys seldom post YangJian [positive narration] things on WeChat. Boys just post odd things or memes or something like roasting. Less informational or meaningful. Sometimes I would post the censored version that looks less depressive. (Cabbage, trans man, 20s)*

Instead of posting *YangJian* things – which literally means the living world human beings inhabit in opposition to *YinJian* (infernal world) and indicates a more active and positive attitude – Cabbage's writing style on WeChat is "innately" like other boys that

are less serious, less informational, bullshitting, cynical and odd. Emotionally censoring the depressive things that he wrote on WeChat Moments, the active affect is related to prevalent emotion norms of heterosexual affect structure in the trans communities, as discussed in the previous chapter. Being *YangJian*, however, is more complicated than being positive here since it is narrated by Cabbage as a gendered or masculine way of self-writing. In the *Oxford English Dictionary*, bullshit is "an informal conversation or discussion, esp. of a group of males". Frankfurt (2005) disagreed with this definition of "bullshit" that emphasises gender rather than the play of realness in bullshitting. Drawing on both understandings, I position Cabbage's self-writing as both stylised gender performativity and the playful destruction of the boundary of *yin/yang* and human/non-human through *YinJian* self-writing in a *YangJian* discursive space. Language use and wordplay, together with the gendered features and socio-culture norms attached to them, allow transgender people to experience discursively the stylised gender script. Although the stylised discursive reiteration of gendered language use may reinforce the binary gender system and the cis-normative gender culture remains unchallenged, transgender people's stylised language play constructs the gender parody that undermines the default relationship between binary gender and natural language. Aside from Lily's textual expression of femininity and Cabbage's masculine wordplay, Jonathan's story indicated another ambiguous way of mobilising self-writing as a way to make and adopt alternative gender scripts for the self. When asked about how he felt about simultaneously managing two different personas online separately as a male and a female, Jonathan (trans man, 31-year-old) compared his profile writing on two dating apps:

Jonathan: A little schizophrenic, you know? You need to make up a different persona for the

male account and female account respectively. The male one is actually closer to my real

personality. I just wrote in my profile that I had ZhiNanAi⁴⁶ and asked them to reach out to me if they wished.

Me: Did you make up the data such as height and weight as well?

Jonathan: No, the height must be true otherwise if you really met the guy offline… I also joked that my dick was injured in a car accident. Haha. In my male account, there were more girls approaching me because I wrote my economic status on my profile which is quite appealing actually. I just directly put my annual income on it [the dating app]. And this was especially serious in TanTan and MoMo47 where many Internet celebrities with plastic faces had the fantasy to pick up sugar daddies, right?

Me: What about your persona in the female account?

Jonathan: That was kind of awkward, so I seldom used it later. There would be some men approaching me. My persona was not like other women's on TanTan and Momo, and surprisingly there would be some curious guys…

Me: In what way do you find the female account awkward?

Jonathan: That was not the real me after all. It was just for fun, and I was curious.

Me: Did you also disclose your annual income in that account profile?

Jonathan: No.

Jonathan was a financial engineer and, according to him, his annual income was around £120,000. Without seeking medical transition, Jonathan did not pass as a man in his everyday life. Dressed in a yellow cartoon costume, he maintained an androgynous appearance while making up two different 'cis-gendered' personas in dating apps to

---

⁴⁶ *ZhiNanAi* (直男癌) literally means straight cancer and refers to toxic hegemonic masculinity.
⁴⁷ Both are dating apps designed for heterosexual people and are widely considered to be hook-up-oriented.

fulfil his bisexual desires. Through strategic self-writing on dating apps, he managed to create 'appealing' masculinity online through dirty jokes as well as income exposure, which resonates with Song and Lee's (2010) argument that hegemonic masculinity in today's China is primarily defined by virility, power, wealth and class. Transgender online self-writing thus creates a discursive space where gender is practised in disembodied ways and reaffirms the notion that gender is a social construct. These text-based self-representations open up alternative and disembodied forms of gender performativity. Besides bodily presentation, self-writing enables multi forms of gendered symbols to be synthesised for transgender individuals like Jonathan to do gender alternatively, approaching self-desired authenticity. Transgender individuals' autobiographical writings "legitimate a claim on their truth" (Hawley, 2013, p. 141). Leaving spaces for others to imagine and transgender individuals to negotiate identity, online self-writing allows alternative gender scripts to emerge without being constrained to fixed forms of bodily presence.

7.3.2 Autographical coming out and ambiguous self-writing

Developing Bruss's conceptualisation of "autographical acts", Wang (2021, p. 211) considers life narration as autographical because it creates "a situation for disclosing the self and establishing expectations about the stories to be told". The autographical self speaks and performs with certain identities and imagines the audiences which are essential in the truth construction of life narration. The imagined audiences, as well as forming a controllable social interaction, empower transgender people with agency through self-writing. A typical genre of trans self-writing is the coming out event which is normally conducted through social media posts for Chinese trans people.

Miss F chose to come out on social media when she returned to college after a year's leave of absence because of gender dysphoria and depression.

I wrote a long piece and posted it in my WeChat Moments directly. It was visible to all; I didn't hide it from my relatives, friends and teachers. That was my birthday, and I thought I want to do this after thinking for a long time. Actually, my psychological status at that time was a little

better because I was on HRT [hormone replacement therapy] for a while, and everything seemed to become better. I thought I could finally face my transgender identity above board and calmly. It was just a feeling that I could be proud of it rather than self-contemptuous. Being a member of this community, I also wished I could live a good life. I didn't treat this identity as something special, but rather as a thing that would happen in ordinary life and needed to be explained. Just a simple illustration. (Miss F, trans woman, lesbian, college student)

It was through the coming out post on WeChat that the pride and progression of Miss F's bodily transition and psychological status were embodied, socialised and performatively enacted. Self-writing in a strong tie social relationship dominant environment, such as WeChat, enables the depathologisation and destigmatisation of the transgender identity by talking publicly about it proudly (Zimman, 2009). In the dichotomous 'special' and 'ordinary' framings of transness, transgender online coming out is a proud gesture and creates a discursive public act that intervenes in the everyday conversations mediated by social media – which tend to leave little space for transgender narratives. Miss F describes "Just a simple illustration" – through the illustration of transgender identity, on the one hand, the self is reflexively and performatively enacted, and the claimed gender is intelligible, explainable, negotiable and comprehensible (Butler, 1999). Being able to write in comfortable ways makes the negotiation of gender identity possible between transgender individuals and the imagined audience.

The self-writing experience of Nathan, a trans man activist and illustrator, highlights the nuance between real name, identity, and social platform. He talked about his coming out moment after an unpleasant experience with a White gay man, A, whom he liked before he went back to China from the US:

I met A downstairs in his office. A was always polite and courteous to me, but I felt he... I felt wronged deep down. I wanted to say he was hypocritical, but I thought it would be too capricious. He didn't have to be nice to me, just polite. Anyways, I felt somewhat angry deep down, and said on Facebook after I went back home that 'there are many ways to become a

boy'. I didn't write 'man', I wrote 'boy' instead. Then I thought that counted as coming out, and I didn't know why I was so desperate to do this [coming out on Facebook]. I should have had no contact with him after all, but my will was strong. It should mean something; it could illustrate something. (Nathan, demiboy, gay, 28-year-old)

Nathan was frustrated by the indifferent and insincere feedback of his crush, A, and attributed A's passive rejection of his life confession to Nation's androgynous gender. Nathan felt the urge to come out publicly on Facebook where his confession could be recognised as serious and official by Facebook friends who knew him. Emphasising the diverse ways of becoming the male gender, Nathan continued the conversation with unspoken anger and a desire for recognition from A. The real-name communication environment on Facebook, similar to WeChat, allows self-writing to be synchronically communicative and recognisable compared to co-present communication offline. However, as Nathan also acknowledged, this post on Facebook counted implicitly as a public coming out. Through the subtle writing and word choice of boy over man, Nathan desperately wished the subtle expression could speak and illustrate 'something' for him. Compared with his other coming out self-writing practice, it seemed fair to say that Facebook was less autobiographical than he intended. Nathan managed to come out more explicitly on other platforms:

I used Grindr and Blued only to make people aware of transgender. Yes, yes, yes. And I seemed to write on Grindr's profile that I was not here for hook-ups but rather to tell others of my existence. That's it. I put my personal Instagram link on dating apps. Yes. And I wrote on Instagram about my preferred pronunciation: he/him/trans/nonbinary/gay. Something like this. (Nathan, demiboy, gay, 28-year-old)

By dissolving the boundary between a somewhat pseudonymous platform and a real-name-based platform, Nathan's self-writing across different social media amplified his gendered existence in diverse social encounters. Self-writing allows transgender individuals in practice to solidify individual reflections of gender identity and to performatively experience transness through text. Bringing together these different

coming out stories, it is vital to recognise the nuanced difference of self-writing practices derived from trans people's strategic arrangement of identifiability and visibility in different self-writing places in the Chinese context. As Summer stated,

> *I feel like performing on social media like WeChat. Normally I would set my posts to only be visible to certain people. But on the occasions that the content is visible for all, I would also not post anything against my will. Weibo is more like a little vest [pseudonymous account] for roasting or like a tree hole where I go for catharsis. WeChat is like [where] performing different personas assigned [to me] by society. (Summer, trans man, 25-year-old)*

Self-writing is deeply affected by the awareness of the readership and social relationships embedded in different social platforms. On WeChat, where assigned social identity and real name hindered him from self-expressing freely, self-writing for Summer seemed to be a non-voluntary performance of assigned social roles. He had to be cautious about self-writing by carefully managing the content and readership apart from his offline life. Under the cover of the pseudonymous account as a sock-puppet, self-writing on Weibo was perceived to be lead to authentic self-expression through roasting and catharsis. This indicated a notable situation of self-writing practices for Chinese transgender people where pseudonymous platforms afford performative doing of authenticity compared to social-relationship-based platforms. It is thus important to take into consideration the perceived features of the platform and potential readership when studying the self-writing practices of Chinese trans people. This is not to imply that self-writing based on assigned social identity, such as on WeChat, goes against the authentic self. I thus identify another mode of self-writing besides autobiographical: ambiguous self-writing and textual interaction.

Ambiguous self-writing and commentating inspires reflection on the public coming out as a ritualised social media performance. Different from frank coming out, ambiguous self-writing entails negotiation between the self and others. Cabbage (trans man, college student) came out in a poetic yet obscure coming out post as shown in Figure 7.1.

Figure 7.1. *Screenshot of Cabbage's WeChat Post*

	He went into that room, feeling a sudden urge to break the woman's skull
他走进那间屋子 突然很想打碎那个女人的后脑勺	He went into that room, feeling a sudden urge to break the woman's skull
他想象着骨骼碎裂的脆响 她血肉模糊的错愕	He imagined the breaking sounds of her bone, as well as her bloody astonishment
他知道这不是她的错	He knew it was not her fault
那束射穿他的阳光是罪孽	The sunlight that punctured him was the sin
我是错误	
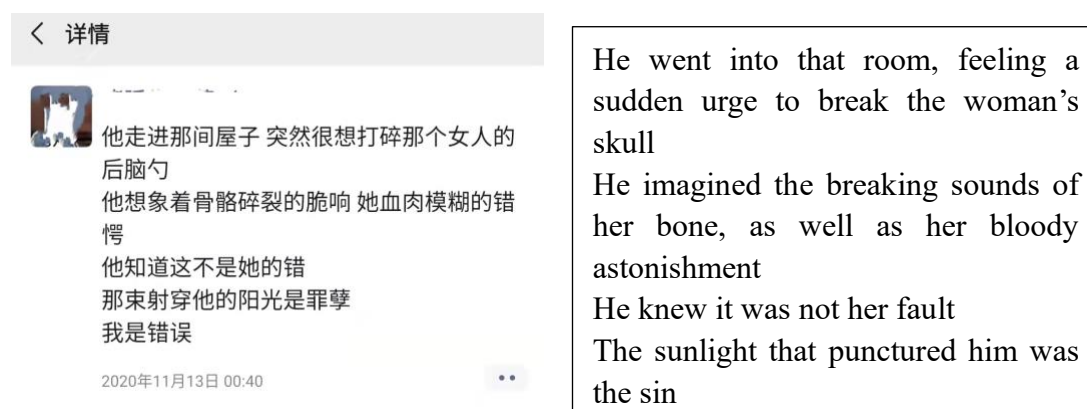
Note. This figure was Cabbage's WeChat post uploaded on November 13th, 2020. It was screenshotted and collected during the interview on December 8th, 2020, with Cabbage's consent. Translation was done by the researcher.

The struggle expressed in this piece, according to Cabbage's explanation, was derived from the perceived paradoxical combination of the all-female living environment in the dorm and the supportive surrounding these people gave him: "I have a mythical anger toward others and myself… The sunlight stands for the encouragement I received. If all people told me to be a cis girl, maybe I would feel less gender anxiety and weirdness". Suspecting the supportive surrounding and self-questioning through bullshitting, Cabbage reflected continuously on the ambiguity and instability of the self. Bullshitting, as Frankfurt argued in *On Bullshit* (2005), is the retreat from the ideal of correctness to a different sort of reality imposed by the pursuit of an alternative ideal of sincerity and the honest representation of the self: "Our natures are, indeed, elusively insubstantial – notoriously less stable and less inherent than the natures of other things. And insofar as this is the case, sincerity itself is bullshit" (ibid., p. 67). The self-writing of transgender individuals, in this sense, enables the creation of an alternative sincerity by cynical play with sincerity and the manifestation of the unstable essence of the self. Cabbage elaborated on his reaction to some supportive comments from his fellow students on his coming out post on WeChat:

I didn't know how to react [to the supportive comments], so I just replied with a doggie face emoji. [Laughs] I really did! The doggie face emoji was the neutral and less formal expression of "I receive your kindness". As I said, I was kind of suspicious of this [kindness]. I was not suspicious of their support, but I had the feeling that they were showing pity. Sometimes when I was in bad mood, I would conjecture that were they accepting me from the perspective of a cisgender male or that they did not mean it.

The suspicious and informal reaction of Cabbage could be comprehended as trans masculine self-writing that addresses both gender expression as a man and the ontological insecurity as a trans person. Bullshitting through the doggie face emoji renders the media ritual of coming out as a less serious conversation that accommodates the transgender subject with the deep-rooted cisgender normativity. Aside from obscure and uncertain meaning-making in self-writing, slang and in-community jargon also offers discursive resources to express the self in ambiguous ways, which in turn influences how trans individuals experience transness. For instance, taking hormone pills is called "eating candies", while bottom surgery is "digging a hole" or "planting a tree". According to Gabriel, these vocabularies in trans-self-writing work as boundary moderating because only LGBTQ+ people know what they mean while others have no idea, echoing what Lingel (2020) called 'dazzle camouflage'. Feeling safe to express under cover of discursive dazzle camouflage encourages transgender individuals to self-write publicly online. Moreover, transgender jargon employed in self-writing creates a friendly discursive communication space where LGBTQ+ people or allies who recognise such vocabulary are invited to respond and celebrate the self-writing of transness. Such ambiguous and jargony self-writing allows the management and negotiation of how the self-writing could be seen and interpreted on the one hand, while also enabling trans individuals to express the self with strategic ambiguity that creates discursive spaces for resistance and multiplicity. Most importantly, the ambiguous self-writing, through tacit expression, community-specific jargon and strategic management of communication forms, shows the gesture of trans authors stepping back from the text. The gesture echoes Foucault's (1998) discussion of author and subjectification whereby

the author is circumscribed in a specific discursive structure and yet is not constructed as a real subject by discourses. The Chinese trans authors, to appropriate Foucault's discussion, that I examine here do not declare the definite and authoritative authorship of their self-writing, but instead, invite the readership to participate in the ambiguous decoding and meaning-making. The sense of authenticity of authorship is performatively constructed within the very ambiguity they write about the self.

Social media has been more and more important in affording transgender people's coming out practices (Haimson & Veinot, 2020). The self-writing in coming out rituals echoes Wang's conceptualisation of an "autographical act" that creates "a situation for disclosing the self and establishing expectations about the stories to be told" (2021, p. 211). Coming out, as a genre of online self-writing, on social media allows transgender individuals to shape their audience and draw on an audience which is amenable to the texts, no matter what the reaction might be, into a conversation field which emerges and would otherwise never exist. Providing a controllable audience and self-exposing format, self-writing online affords transgender people the affordance to perceive transness as writable, negotiable and normal. The disembodiment of making gender scripts online and controllable self-exposure both indicate the potential of transgender self-writing as an alternative way of expressing and negotiating gender. Next, I will talk about another (dis)embodied form of trans technologies of the self: the self-visualisation of the transgender body online.

7.4 Visualisation of the transgender self

7.4.1 Visualisation rather than visibility

Visibility, as Hatfield argued, "has long been a key point of contention in relation to gender nonconforming bodies" (2021). Media representation has been argued by transgender media scholars to be central to transgender people for it extends the meaning of gender intelligibility and allows trans communities to reshape reality by being visible (Keegan et al., 2018; Koch-Rein et al., 2020). While some scholars and transgender activists consider transgender visibility to be a strategic intervention into

the mainstream and normative discourses of gender (Stone, 1992), others highlight the value of undetectability and invisibility for transgender lives as the right to hide (Austin, 2016; Lee, 2020; Monahan, 2016). Keegan, Horak and Steinbock have criticised how the growing visibility of transgender characters in popular culture does not contribute to "transgender people as a whole" (2018, p. 6). Whatever the perspective, transgender visibility is both an essential theoretical vocabulary and an empirical central target. The framework of visibility in these studies focuses on the identity politics of transness, the wholeness of trans communities, and the collective movement in resistance to transphobic reality. As Raun's study on transgender YouTubers highlighted, visibility becomes the prerequisite for "engendering them with a voice, an image and a community" (2015, p. 126). But what if the social, cultural and political environment does not provide enough inclusive prerequisites for trans visibility? What if digital technology affordance and trans people's usage are not dedicated to visibility politics?

Conceptualizing trans issues through visibility risks downplaying the conditional agency of trans people in their everyday self-embodiment in a different socio-political context, especially in the Global South. In China, there is a long aesthetic history of androgynous subjects and cultural phenomena, while transgender identity terms have only gained visibility in the past decade (Chiang, 2012; Ye, 2016). Chinese trans communities at large, together with identity-based trans activism in China, are still far from formulating public visibility representing "trans people's embodied life struggles" in China (Ye, 2016, p. 262). In their critique of transgender media representation studies, Billard and Zhang argued that the critical study of digital media representations of transness "is not to critique regimes of representational power or the machinations of hegemonic media systems. Rather, it is to critique how transgender people choose to represent themselves and the identities they hold" (2022, p. 194; Ciszek et al., 2021). In this section I second their call for refocusing in trans media and communication studies on how transgender people represent themselves.

Being visualisable is more important practically and politically than being visible for Chinese transgender people. The dilemma of visibility and invisibility of representation politics and the related autocratic surveillance of visibility, surprisingly,

was not the key concern for many of the interviewees compared to their emphasis on self-visualisation.

> *Yes, why not? I posted my cos [cosplaying] photo on WeChat Moments. The photos were not unsightly, why wouldn't I post them online?… What should I be scared of? People who have access to my Qzone have high suzhi48 and are recognised by me. It [her Qzone account] was previously open to strangers but there were too many harassers. I then set a gatekeeping question for those who want to access my Qzone asking them their purpose. I only allow applications with good answers. (Eve, trans woman, 20-year-old)*

In practice, as Eve's gatekeeping suggests, Chinese transgender individuals' online self-representation was mostly conducted within trans communities or perceived trans-friendly circles. Through active moderating settings, Eve was able to control the scope of her visible self to those who had already recognised or celebrated her visually. In other words, her self-representation was not intended to expand her visibility but rather the visuality of her "not unsightly" self in a limited way. Similarly, Nathan (trans man) expressed a carefree attitude about being visible online: "There is nothing to worry about. Why and where can it [his photos] be circulated?" Nathan expressed clear acknowledgement of his self-representation, which was not going to be circulated and thus be visible to the wider public. Indeed, most Chinese transgender people I interviewed represented themselves in limited and relatively closed online spaces normally confined to the online trans communities they engaged with. Austin has argued that in a context of oppression and invisibility trans self-representation practices are "complex and often protracted journeys toward self-knowledge, authenticity, and self-acceptance" (2016, p. 228). Therefore, the trans self-representation should be better understood as trans technology of the self instead of a collective visibility project.

I asked all interviewees whether they posted their photos or selfies on social media, and many were concerned more about the visual effect of the self rather than the

---

48 *Suzhi* (素质) refers to the cultural, psychological and conscious quality of human beings.

surveillance, privacy and discrimination connected to the visibility of trans identity.

Me: Would you post your photos online?

Laurel: I used to post my face pics on Qzone but not now. [My] face is not beautiful now.

Me: Could your previous friends see your photos?

Laurel: I don't know. It [her Qzone account]) is a mess, but I don't care to be seen. I just don't care. (Laurel, trans woman, 24-year-old)

Laurel, a trans woman truck driver who fled her life in her rural hometown, was concerned more about the visual effect of her self-representation rather than being visible to people outside trans communities. The impossibility of being integrated into mainstream society and the hardship of being socialised in the desired way within the community foregrounds the importance of visualisation in transgender online self-representation. The quoted articulations of transgender self-representation neither concern visibility in relation to pride and coming out nor invisibility in relation to privacy and security considerations. Rather than thinking about the potential effect and outcome of making visible the self in a collective or public sense, the online self-representation of transgender people embeds the intention of gender expression through the visualisation of the self in all forms: in the form of a photograph or a selfie. At the heart of this is the struggle of whether the self is visualisable or not.

Me: Did you post anything about your transgender identity on WeChat or QQ?

Lily: Nothing about transgender, never did I post any. I seldom post my selfie because I think I look ugly.

Me: What if you think you are beautiful?

Lily: Then I will post my photos in all probability. (Lily, trans woman)

Once the self is ready to be visualisable, as Lily's words indicated, visibility is not a problem. I was surprised by the lack of resonance that the academic discussion around visibility/invisibility had with Chinese transgender people's experiences of self-representation. It is the context of transgender socialisation that renders visibility a pseudo-proposition in the everyday lives of transgender individuals. The socialisation of transgender living emerges in but is also constrained within trans communities online and offline in China, visibility issues are thus not on the essential agenda for transgender individuals there. Instead of visibility and identity-based politics, both Laurel's ceasing posting selfies and Lily's hesitation to post selfies correlated to the politics of visuality and the hierarchical aesthetic norms of what kind of trans body is visualisable.

Mirzoeff's theorization of countervisuality provides a dialectical way to understand the agency of Chinese trans individuals expressed through visualisation praxis. Mirzoeff considers visuality as the right to look, the right to be seen and the right to the real, and categorises two forms of visuality with different positions in the visuality structure (2011, p. 4). Visuality 1 refers to the domains of visual authority, be it capital or imperialist state, which produce "docile bodies" by "disciplining, normalizing and ordering vision" (Mirzoeff, 2011, p. 23). While visuality 1 frames the structure of visuality, visuality 2 is the "picturing of the self or collective that exceeds or precedes that subjugation to centralized authority" (Mirzoeff, 2011, p. 23). In other words, visuality 2 is the embodied experience in the visuality structure and is deemed by visuality 1 to be unworthy of visualisation. Visuality 2, surpassing the normative and anti-normative dichotomy in queer theorisation, has "intimate and plural relationships" with the visuality authority and thus cannot be simplified as conforming or resistant (ibid., p. 24). Among the various forms of embodied praxis of visuality 2, Mirzoeff coins "countervisuality" as the alternative realism claim that radically challenges the visual authority and reconfigures visuality as a whole. As he states, "The 'realism' of countervisuality is the means by which one tries to make sense of the unreality created by visuality's authority" (2011, p. 26). Compared with counter-visuality, visuality 2 is a spectrum of diverse visualisation practices which are not necessarily radically countering the normative visuality 1 but are marginalised and embodied as alternative

ways of representing the self. Drawing on the dynamic spectrum of visuality 2, I position my examination of Chinese transgender people's online self-representation by focusing on the ways in which they negotiate and experience trans authenticity with the normative beliefs of transness through their alternative self-visualisation praxis. This study does not intend to create a dichotomy between visibility and visuality. Rather, it aims to showcase transgender agency by foregrounding the visuality of trans embodiment in a context where visibility is made impossible. By investigating visualisation practices as a kind of trans technology of the self, I present transgender people's alternative ways of online self-representation and discuss how they practice and reflect on alternatives as related to transgender authenticity construction.

7.4.2 Visualising the self as an alternative way of doing (trans)gender

In contrast to visibility, visualisation embodies the performative and processual becoming of transgender individuals in the mediation of the body. Visualisation is the important performative embodiment of processual transition and the bodily becoming of transness. It is through the transition that transgender individuals make sense of claimed gender authenticity through bodily performativity. As Louis, a 24-year-old trans man who was undergoing hormone therapy, stated, "Previously, for instance, if we grew an Adam's apple or beard, people would show their body. After receiving the hormone treatment, people would post photos from skinny to fat or from fat to skinny." The visualisation of processual becoming echoes Haimson and colleague's argument that social media allows trans people to depict "multiple real identities during liminal stage of gender identity" (Haimson et al., 2019, p. 11). Beyond crystalised freeze-frame pictures representing fixed identity, self-visualisation is more important as a performative doing of gender allowing trans individuals to explore alternative ways of representing the self and plural meaning-making of 'multiple real identities'. It also allows negotiation to emerge in self-visualisation as a platform. Alex, a trans man fitness coach, related his self-affirmation experiences through visualisation:

I never thought about this [the consequence of showing photos of the self in the group], I thought people didn't hate me at least. I did not realise others' interest in me. But in recent two days, I found a bit… I posted my photos in a [transgender] gym group and they would show up and applaud me. Actually, I was kinda suspecting this: was I that good? Before this, there was less applause because the people surrounding me were so fit and I thought I was a noob. (Alex, 30-year-old, trans man)

Although Alex expressed his suspicion about the compliments he received, his proud smile when showing me the details of being applauded in the gym group and on WeChat Moments by his trans friends and cisgender male trainees was a vivid depiction of how visualisation practice is far more empowering than just individuals posting pictures online. For Alex, the visualisation of his masculine body allows others to participate in constructing a confirmed sense of becoming 'good'. Those who have access to the photos are curated by transgender individuals by applying the afforded visual setting and online friend circle management functions. In this sense, visualisation contains the intention to gain recognition, visual curation and control, audience management, and interaction around the visual images. In this section, I show how performative doing and negotiation of gender authenticity are implemented in Chinese transgender people's alternative self-visualisation praxis.

Partial

In the online self-representation of transgender people, the partial exhibition of the trans body constitutes a significant form of visualization, such as hands, feet and hair. The partial exhibition is practised as a controllable form of self-exposure. Cabbage explained his selfie posted on WeChat: "I will post faceless photos. It is weird to say this, but I will, especially at night, take a photo facing the mirror. The flashlight of a smartphone camera can block out the face and I can show my hand in the picture." Uncomfortable about exposing his face and whole body, Cabbage chose to highlight the knuckle of his hands in the online self-representation. Through the possibilities of digital cameras and online representation transgender individuals can control and select

parts of their bodies to visualise themselves. Aside from self-controlling the form and framing of visualisation, it is also important to stay partially hidden in the self-visualisation as some transgender people do not pursue total or complete transition of their body or passing in their appearance. Willow and Lily, who both identified as transgender women, met me offline dressed in stereotypical male clothing. Lily could not attempt to pass since she was living with her parents and Willow did not want to pass openly by dressing and using make-up. However, both voluntarily showed me their colourful socks as a sign of their 'woman's heart', which they also posted on their social media accounts.

Figure 7.2. *Trans woman Interviewee Willow Showing Her Socks During Interview*

Note. Willow showed her socks to showcase how she expresses gender daily during our interview on 28th

November 2020. Photo taken and used with her consent.

As shown in Figure 7.2, Willow expressed her ideal gender expression through cute socks and manicured nails as an alternative and compromise. She stated that, "I do wanna wear those female clothes, then… but… I would [dress up] the inconspicuous part of my body with socks and gloves. These are my little dodges". By framing the

minor gender expression as dodges, Willow expresses intentional avoidance of visibility in public spaces. Self-representation through partial exposure is thus related to the unwillingness and hardship involved in passing with the whole embodiment of the self, and resistance to the idea of consistent and integrated gender expression. While visibility requires a homogeneous representation of a group of people or a consistent image of individuals that could be conveyed in a stable way, the visualisation allows the unstable, inconsistent and partial visual strategy of self-representation to be understood. By visualizing the parts which are difficult to highlight and be recognised offline, transgender people are able to practice alternative ways to represent gender and sexualise their bodies. The visualisation of the transgender self enables theoretical deviance from the visibility discussion around transgender identity, while the conceptual comparison between visibility and visualisation offers an insightful understanding of the performative becoming and everyday politics of transgender people in China. Afforded by mediated technology, the partial visualisation of transgender bodies poses a critical challenge to integral and organic fetishism in cis-normativity. In *Thousands of Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari abstracted the body without organ (BwO) as distinct from the organism: "You will be organized, you will be an organism… You will be a subject, nailed down as one, a subject of the enunciation recoiled into a subject of the statement" (1988, pp. 176-177). BwO, however, refers to the unfixed, inconsistent, nomadic and uninterpretable assemblage on which the self remains when all the meaning and significance of the organism is dismantled. The possibility of self-visualisation in partial forms can be understood as an even more radical practice of corporeality in comparison to BwO: organ without body. Organ without body disassembles the BwO as well as the organism by attaching value, desire and authenticity to the fractured body in the performative doing of transgender subjectivity. In their reflection on online self-representation, privileging visualisation of the self over visibility constitutes a 'personal as political' response to the limited socialisation opportunities. Visibility is instrumentalised for the sake of visualising the self. Visualisation of the self indicates the alternative, if not new, mode of performative formation of transgender identity.

Becoming an avatar
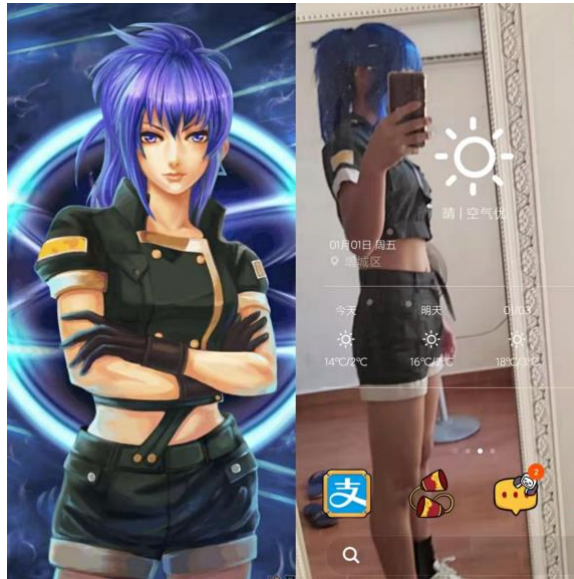
Note. Leona Heidern is a character from the game "The King of Fighters' 97". During the interview on 25th October 2020, Laurel showed me the picture of Leona Heidern and her cosplay photo of the character which she set as the background photo of her smart phone. The pictures were consented and were edited and put together by the researcher for better visual effect.

The visualisation might not only be about representing the self but also about a performative becoming of a self-chosen virtual avatar that does not exist in the physical world. Rather than going as far as the sci-fi image of the cyborg, expressing gender through mimicking certain gender ideals is a sincere and playful doing of the self and is also a performative reiterative practice that shapes the construction of transgender authenticity. For example, Laurel was fond of online gaming and decided to cosplay as the character Leona Heidern as shown in Figure 7.3:

> *I dress up in accordance with this anime character and give myself a Renshe [persona design]. Anyway, my body and my face shape are based on this. It is a character from the game The King of Fighters' 97; you good students might not know this [laughs]… My ideal status shall be like this. The [hair] colour is my favourite since I was young. (Laurel, 24-year-old, trans woman, freelance truck driver)*

A two-layer performative becoming of the self can be identified in Laurel's visual practice: the ideal embodiment and the prototype for performative becoming. When Laurel sent me the picture of Leona Heidern during the elicitation interview, the character was described as the visual embodiment of her ideal appearance. Rather than deeming the cosplay picture as virtual and meaningless, Laurel internalised the visual prototype as a signifier to design and become her designed persona. The visual is thus related to the becoming of the self in the sense that visualisation mirrors the self and the self is performatively constructed through visualisation. Echoing Berry and Dieter's (2015, p. 5) notion of "neo-analogue" in the post-digital condition, the performative relationship between subjectivity formation, social norms and gender scripts, as well as gender practices in the digital age, obfuscates the linear border between virtual and real. Becoming the self-chosen character through visualisation is thus political in the sense of what Dame (2016, p. 30) called "crossplay" that merges quotidian playing moments with complex reflections on the self. The crossplaying of the self crosses both the boundary of binary genders and the real/virtual divide, allowing the visual space for reflexive doing of transgender authenticity to occur. Through boundary-crossing visualisation, a hybrid idealised subjectivity is interpellated through playful visual representation (Jimroglou, 1999).

Multiplicity

Visualisation is the strategic negotiation of gender authenticity through diverse digital use and self-representation skills. The visualisation of the transgender body functions as the medium through which the self could be reflected and negotiated. Remo's body was visualised diversely on two dating apps, where their gender was assumed and negotiated differently, allowing the body, self, sexuality, gender structure of the dating app as well as the other users to act on a visual interface.

> *On JiMu, I only have one picture of me. It is a selfie in which I use my phone to cover half of my face. Yeah, I don't know why [the selfie attracted many followers]. I think as long as you are a girl, you can obtain a lot [of follower]. Yeah, this is not fair. (Remo, gender non-binary,*

make-up artist)

JiMu is a Chinese dating app, and most of its users are heterosexual males, according to Remo. Remo was quite successful in that they had approximately 10,000 followers on their JiMu account. Intentionally covering half of their face, Reno passes as a woman in the heterosexual-relationship oriented dating app. The perception of unfairness derives not only from the comparison between their unequal popularity on gay and heterosexual dating apps but also between cisgender girls and gender non-binary people. Remo used a gay dating app, Blued, at the same time, where they received relatively little popularity in comparison to that on JiMu. Their visualisation strategy of the self varied across platforms, mediating different ways of practising gender as well as sexuality. Remo self-identified as genderqueer but was often "misrecognized stereotypically" as a woman for their look. Distraught about the misrecognition and mispronunciation, Remo posted pictures of their body with the intentional exposure of part of their penis on WeChat accounts as a micro-resistance to the default accordant and linear relationship between gender identity and gender expression. As a non-binary person who insists on promoting the idea of non-binary in daily life, Remo enjoyed the confrontational moments when their non-binary gender encountered binary expectations from others. On Blued, where all users defaulted as cisgender males, their female look posed a visual shock to the users of gay dating apps. While on JiMu, they adopted what Lingel (2020) called queer camouflage to pass while resisting heteronormativity, although in a vague way. The successful visualisation effect of passing as a woman made the potential identity negotiation with straight male followers possible, while the failed visualisation effect of being considered a sissy gay man restricted possible social interactions. Remo's body thus invites and allows different social interactions as well as negotiation through diversifying their self-visualisation.

Counter-visuality

As argued in previous chapters, heteronormativity is prevalent in the trans communities. In the trans men community, the heteronormative structure intersects with hegemonic

masculinity which regulates the behaviour, emotion and gender expression of trans individuals. Through the remediation of the pre-transition look, Nathan's visualisation practice initiated a radical counter-presence to the growing trans-normativity.

> *I know that someone would delete the old pictures with their female appearance on, but I don't. I think I don't fear [female look] being seen by others. Also, when I just came back to China, I started downloading Grindr[49] and I deliberately noted that I was transgender, although I didn't know if they can tell. Anyway, I just didn't want them to think I am cisgender, although my picture was not that misguiding for others. Anyway, I just wanted others to know that I am transgender. But, on the other hand, I feared that they might ask such questions as do you have a dick. So, I said [in Grindr's profile] 'should you have any questions, you can go directly to my Instagram', and a lot of people watched my Instagram. My hair was longer than now in the photo I posted on Grindr, I looked like Jarhead, and wore a shirt with a tie. That was the time when I thought I was the manliest. I shared that photo with a dating group consisting of cis and trans gay men because they asked me to expose myself. Several of them commented that I was effeminate, I was outraged then and withdrew from that group. Someone in that group knew me and said to others that there was no need to look at my photos because I wouldn't be these people's type. (Nathan, demiboy)*

Nathan was inspired by Edward, a trans man activist, who was open about his pre-transition look and shared his photos with long hair and so-called female exterior in online trans men groups. The remediated visualisation of the past self was employed as an important way to embody Edward's investment in resisting the stereotypical understanding and normativity of transgender men's gender expression. The visualisation strategy for Nathan to negotiate his transgender identity was to co-present his pre-transition look and new photos that he thought were "manliest". While highlighting his transgender identity in his profile, the cross-platform visualisation approach functioned as a more effective and indirect way to convey his self-identification. In this sense, direct textual coming out as transgender works in the spaces

---

[49] A hook-up-oriented dating app used mainly by gay men.

where transgender is not a part of common knowledge, such as on gay dating apps, while the indirect but visual form of identity negotiation works better for trans men like Nathan. Although the discriminatory comment made Nathan angry and resulted in self-exile, he insisted on not deleting the pre-transition photos. The visualisation of the self, be it pre-transitional or ideally 'manly', stands for the antinormative resistance to the trans-normativity through being seen.

> *Before I joined the trans communities, I would post some selfies on Tieba and the so-called CD [crossdresser] groups. Then, after, I felt that I'd posted many photos, I asked myself a question: 'I am a woman, what is the point of posting my pictures that frequently?' And because I dressed as a woman often, I got used to my appearance, looking at myself often. I thought a normal girl would not post her schedule and life daily, this was boring. I got this feeling, I thought normal girls would feel this way. So, I turned out to post less, only on my Qzone. Just occasionally. (Jasmine, trans woman/CD)*

Certainly, there are diverse reflections and counter practices of visualising the self online among transgender individuals. Jasmine considered over-visualisation of the self to be the desperate sentimentality of transgender women in pursuing and practising self-identified gender. By contrasting "so-called CD", "transgender" and "normal girls", Jasmine perfectly exhibited her identification journey and struggle with the meaning of authenticity. Forms of visualising the self have become the key medium through which reflection on the gendered self is embodied. Contrary to studies on binary gender differences in taking a selfie that found "Females were more likely to take personal and group selfies" (Dhir et al., 2016, p. 549), Jasmine invoked the cis/trans difference in a cis-centric way to relate overexposure of the self with abnormal and thus inauthentic doing of transgender identity. However, the cognition shift was mediated by the reiteration of self-visualisation and the constant self-gaze through which she "got used to" her appearance and constructed a sense of authenticity independent from visualisation. In this sense, the seemingly counter-conduct of visualisation – relying on visualisation for self-confirmation while devaluing self-visualisation as inauthentic –

enriches the connotation of the body as the medium that the visualisation of the trans body mediates in the identification process and affords self-reflection on authenticity.

7.4.3 Reflecting on visual technology-mediated authenticity

As an assemblage of technologies, bodies, space and networks, media scholars consider selfies to be the articulation of the "self that is read to be authentic but that also displays the uncertainty and fragmentation of the self" (Hess, 2015, p. 1643; see also Iqani & Schroeder, 2016). Technology and circulation, as the indispensable components of the selfie, are entangled within the discussion of authenticity through self-expression. Adopting an audience study approach, Lobinger and Brantner argued that the authenticity of self-representation is evaluated in relation to photographic work, filter use and editing techniques (2015). For socially marginalised groups, especially, selfies could be practised as self-empowerment in resistance to social discrimination but also disempowerment if they are being abused online (Senft & Baym, 2015). The ambiguity and complexity of the relationship between authenticity and selfies are leveraged by visual technologies. Based on the investigation of transgender people's daily usage of visual technologies, such as Photoshop and AI, this section complicates the discussion of the visual construction of authenticity as mediated by technologies.

Kilo disidentified themselves from other MtFs who sought to transition gender medically or socially. Kilo's gender identity was more look-based in that they would like to be a woman if they looked good, otherwise, they would prefer to remain self-identified as agender. Reluctant to go through medical treatment and the plastic surgery route, Kilo's gender expression was mainly embodied in everyday dressing-up and online self-representation:

> *I feel that although I don't look good – I think I am not good-looking – I can obtain a trace of*
> *satisfaction with the help of BeautyCam… I think my identity emerges too late. If I paid*
> *attention to the [bodily] details more and exercised less when I was little, my physical*
> *development might be better. But standing at this moment when the [developmental] phase has*
> *passed, you can only, say, fulfil your wish through using some photoshop technologies on the*

smartphone… I pursue the feeling as a shaonü [少女, young girl], but in reality, it is hard to achieve the ideal… I can only rely on illusion and photoshopping to see if I could approach… [the ideal self].

For Kilo, the ideal gender is not so much female as the specific stylised imagination of *shaonü*. It is thus reflective of Kilo's compromised identification with agender that the stylised gender existence can only be realised through edited visualisation. Photoshop helps to reverse the irreversible biological development and creates an imagined nostalgic body. Both illusion and Photoshopping were the mediating instruments through which the subject approaches the ideal self without claiming self-determined gender truth (Butler, 2004). It is noteworthy that the ideal is approachable but never realisable in this sense. It is in the process of approaching the ideal that transgender individuals experience and inhabit authenticity. However, we cannot simply assign photoshop as another reality augmentation tool and the edited self-representation as sub-real because the manipulated visualisation requires the active participation of the human body rather than generating things out of the void. In transgender individuals' practices of visual editing techniques, the body and corporal presence are invoked to better serve the visual effects of manipulated photography. As Kilo articulated, "Because I think it is not beautiful when your photo has the trail of a moustache on it. Although I could Photoshop off the moustache, I think I need to try it [depilation] anyway." Visually speaking, visual editing techniques work perfectly as an equivalent to artificial depilation in taking a selfie. Corporeal modification, such as depilation, in turn, augments the visual effect of edited visualisation. Comparing the corporeal techniques with visual editing techniques, Kilo gave priority to the former, "anyway". Without hesitation and explanation, this intuitive preference can be related to the ontological superiority assigned to the more persistent fleshy experience, while Kilo's experience with AI portrait modelling techniques further complicates the corporeal-technique dilemma. Going viral in 2017, FaceApp is a photo editing application famous for its 'sex-change' modelling of photos. Many people, including me, participated in the FaceApp challenge by posting their sex-changed photos on social media. The AI-

based facial transformation technology of FaceApp was pretty much advanced that the edited photo was lifelike enough for me to pass as a woman visually.

> *Kilo: FaceApp seems to be able to change sex for you directly. I think the sex-change effect is a more ideal status for me. Yeah, it would be ideal if I underwent cosmetic surgery and look like that. It is because, first of all, its AI modification is based on your original look. The modification is not too much, but its effect is just good enough to make you feminine.*

> *Me: If the effect is great, does everyone in your CD [crossdresser] cohort use it?*

> *Kilo: Of course not. In the CD circle, if you are really beautiful, sometimes… Unless you post only one photo and don't hang out a lot in the circle, otherwise people would ask you to go live. That kind of unreal look of you, sooner or later, will be debunked.*

> *Me: Are you saying that FaceApp sex-change photos are unreal?*

> *Kilo: Yes, MeiTuXiuXiu[50] is fine. See [showing me the photoshopped studio photography of them on the phone]?*

> *Me: Your face looked rounder in the photo.*

> *Kilo: This is the power of MeiTuXiuXiu [speaking in a high and excited tone]! Girls' facial outline is more tender.*

Kilo's attitude towards AI image editing seems contradictory. On the one hand, AI provides ideal scripts about what they would look like if they had been born and developed in their identified gender. The effect is ideal both in the sense that it effeminates users 'just enough' and its editing is based on one's 'original look'. On the other hand, AI image-editing is widely suspected to be so ideal as to be unreal in the crossdresser community. As Kilo argued, the live stream techniques were perceived as less compatible with face filtering (which is not actually the case), so the visualisation in live streaming was more real. Live stream techniques are employed by crossdressers as a surveillance mechanism to inspect the authenticity of other visual editing

---

[50] A Photoshop-like app that Kilo commonly used.

techniques, such as FaceApp. It is reasonable to assume that being debunked as using FaceApp would be considered an authenticity-questioning moment for those asked to 'go live' in the community. Drastically different, the substantial and visible modification trace of using *MeiTuXiuXiu* – I could tell from the photo that the face was rounder – was said to be more powerful and empowering than the "not too much" modification afforded by FaceApp. *MeiTuXiuXiu* is powerful in augmenting the visual effects of the corporeal modification, including depilation, make-up, studio dressing and photograph services that target transgender people in Kilo's case, while at the same time exposing the hints of modification.

> *I feel like doing make-up is like disguising yourselves [laughing]. So, I didn't wear make-up that day [when we met at a private trans woman gathering]. Of course, I look good with make-up, but it just does not feel like me. Just like photoshopped pictures. I don't Photoshop, at most I retouch my skin. Skin buffing is no better than making up. (Eve, trans woman, pansexual, 20-year-old)*

In Eve's narrative, there existed an authenticity hierarchy between make-up and photo-editing even though she found both inauthentic for 'disguising' the self. Based on her occasional making-up and photo-editing practices, the flesh-involved retouching of the facial appearance was more acceptable than the revisualisation of self-visualisation through Photoshop. However, both technologies deviated from the authentic representation of the self in Eve's discursive rejection of mediated self-representation. Looking good through mediation was contrasted with an authentic feeling of the self. Phel made another hierarchical ordering of FaceApp and Photoshop.

> *Phel: I mostly hang out in private lesbian QQ chat groups, while I only dive [stay without active participation] there in TS chatgroups. In lesbian chatgroups, I chat with them and post selfies, which is fine in those groups. Thanks to photo-editing apps.*
>
> *Me: Have you ever tried FaceApp?*
>
> *Phel: Long ago. Several months ago, no, last year. I tried it and quit because I didn't find it playful. You can do it [transition via photo editing] with Photoshop. (Phel, trans woman,*

lesbian, 34-year-old)

While Photoshop was effective enough to pass successfully in lesbian chatgroups, the more effective simulation application FaceApp was described as not playful. With its deepfake algorithm, FaceApp is argued to be too realistic and can only be detected by exposing traces on the image (Guarnera et al., 2020). In this sense, adopting FaceApp for self-representation might be too serious, losing the strength of parody in the doing of gender.

Through online self-visualisation, Chinese trans individuals reflect on authenticity within the assemblage of technique affordances, users' power in controlling self-representation, artificial work required, the difference to the original look, and the simulation of the ideal self. Based on trans interviewees' narratives of the perceived authenticity/inauthenticity of digital technology and the mediated self-representation online, it seems that there is an authenticity ordering of different visualisation techniques among Chinese trans people. The ordering is configured around two axes: the extent the simulation matches ideal imaging, and the presence of artificial technologies' traces in self-representation. The ideal simulation and presence of techniques in transgender individuals' narratives of authenticity are correlated in that fewer traces of technology present and better simulations of ideal self-imaging may lead to a sense of inauthenticity among Chinese trans people.

Advanced visualisation digital technologies, such FaceApp and 3D imaging, can make the traces of technological modelling and editing less visible to create a perfect simulation of the ideal image of transgender selves. Trans narratives indicate a diverging of perceptions, suggesting that perfect simulation provokes internalised worries about the unideal gender or bodily status quo. Perfect simulation as mediated by visualisation digital technologies mirrors the projection of the ideal imaging of the self in contrast with the unideal contemporary self. Instead, the less perfect simulation of the ideal self and visible traces of technology present, such as obvious editing and make-up, and the traceable self-visualisation allows the trans individuals to transfer imposed gender inauthenticity to the imperfect visualisation. The imperfection of trans

self-visualisation is extremely meaningful for the performative construction of transgender authenticity. I thus argue that the exposure of modification serves the implicit negotiation of the visualised self with others in the visual-normative politics of trans communities that I outlined in the last chapter. Visual imperfection is also employed as a negotiation with the self:

Me: So, the profile photo is yours? Let me see, oh, it is beautiful!

Anny: It was photoshopped.

Me: What is your ideal status?

Laurel: My ideal status should be like this [showing me her selfi]). This is edited. This is what I look like with web glow.

My interviewees often emphasised the edited features of their online self-representation when showing me their photos. Their highlighting of the mediating role of technologies in self-visualisation serves not only as a reminder for me as the viewer to recognise the editing element and their honesty but also as a reminder for themselves of their perceived bodily imperfections as well as the technology they rely on when representing the self. Articulating the presence of Photoshop, or other visual modification techniques, is a sign of being aware of the technological condition, in my understanding, resonating with the deep and reiterative moaning about the assigned body and gender of transgender individuals. Without saying 'but', both Anny (in her 60s with no medical transition due to poverty and little social support) and Laurel (a truck driver who found it difficult to transition due to her work) expressed an adversarial tone in response to my praise or their showing of photos. It was important for them to maintain a cautious and purposeful distance from the idealised self and inhabit imperfection. The impossibility of being ideal and the process of approaching ideal thus mediate the construction of authenticity for transgender individuals above anything else. The advanced digital technologies combined with medical transition and plastic surgeries have made possible an approximation approach to ideal imaging of the

self. Atiz went through many plastic surgery consultancies in which advanced visual technologies had been available to assist trans people in reifying their ideal selves:

> *The consultant said a smaller nose could make my face look more delicate and a pointed chin could make me look exquisite. He drew on paper for me to have an overview of the effect of plastic surgeries. In the more advanced hospitals, they have this 3D imaging technique to visualise the post-operation look. They can adjust the parameters to meet your requirement and produce the data for doctors to operate plastic surgery. In general, it [the visual effect of 3D imaging] is just some data for the doctors, rather than the ideal look of me. Of course, the effect is good, and I look better. But it is difficult to achieve via surgery. The plastic surgery might make me look more passing, but I don't feel that way. Deep down I tend to believe I am not beautiful enough; it makes me feel safer. It is not good to be a narcissist, I need to maintain not being beautiful enough. I need such status to feel I need to rely on my ability rather than solely on beauty. (Atiz, MtF, 33-year-old)*

Approaching perfect imaging of the self did not guarantee authenticity, but for Atiz the perception and inhabiting of imperfectness did. As Atiz stated, although 3D imaging helps to produce an ideal image of the self, the making of the ideal self was impossible to achieve through the normative aesthetics imposed by doctors and their adjustment parameters. The awareness of never being able to be so-called natural and ideal existed in many of the interviewees' narratives. Without being reduced to 'data', Atiz was reflective about the distance between perfect imaging and their lived authenticity as a transgender person. The ideal look produced by digital visual technologies like 3D imaging brings about a fantasy which is never achievable and conversely increases the sense of unsafety. Transgender individuals experience authenticity through 'deep down' hesitancy and questioning of the ideal image mediated by artefacts and technologies. It is notable that many interviewees attributed their narrative and experiences of digital technology-mediated self-representation to the discussion of authenticity and inauthenticity. It is through labelling the visual digital technologies as artefacts and thus unreal, that the rejection and disdain of the inauthenticity of edited self-representation can lead to the construction of a sense of authenticity.

7.5 Discussion and Conclusion

In this chapter, I introduced the Foucauldian concept of 'technologies of the self' to identify the reflexive agency in the self-naming, self-writing and photographic self-representation of Chinese transgender individuals. This is a popular concept, especially in post-modern and post-structuralist studies on identity and subjectivity and new media studies (Poletti & Rak, 2014). As Abbas and Dervin (2009) have argued, the notion of 'technologies of the self' is inspiring for investigations into new forms of self-expression and identification as mediated by digital technologies. The discussion in this chapter is also committed to this body of knowledge production, although from a more contextual perspective. Foucault developed the concept of 'technologies of the self' in his later years, with a dramatic shift from the formation of modern subjectivity shaped by the power-knowledge nexus in the 17th century through ancient society and Christianity. The shift marked a refocus of different spaces and time, from social institutions such as hospitals and prisons to the self and temporality, and from post-renaissance modern times to ancient times when the self is not transformed and shaped excessively by external power mechanisms and social institutions. Thus, 'technologies of the self' is rooted in the spatial and temporal context that the self is more in charge of transforming the self, rather than merely an additional path for technologies that shape the self. It is in this sense that talking about Chinese transgender people's everyday experiences in digital times through the lens of 'technologies of the self' is pivotal and inspiring. As discussed in previous chapters, the transgender identity and community are ontologically and epistemologically invisible in public discussion and common knowledge (Liu, 2022), and are also excluded from the social welfare system, juridical protection and public health resources. Although Chinese transgender individuals still depend on social institutions to receive medical treatment and obtain legal recognition, they largely depend on themselves and the mediation of the online trans community and NGOs to gain access to social institutions and resources and to self-organise the meaning and ways of being transgender. Against this social-cultural

backdrop, digital technologies offer trans individuals important tools to operate, organise and transform themselves towards an authentic self. Their practices and experiences of self-naming, self-writing and self-visualisation, in this sense, help us to understand the negotiation between the social institutional knowledge-power nexus and the self-organised practices of trans authenticity. Without the contextualisation of trans technologies of the self, the agency of Chinese transgender people cannot be comprehended. I thus argue in this chapter that trans technologies of the self are the performative doing of trans authenticity and conditionally expressed agency as mediated by digital technology use. I identify Chinese transgender people's online self-naming, self-writing and self-visualisation as trans technologies of the self through which trans individuals reflexively and performatively construct trans authenticity.

Online self-naming practices of Chinese transgender individuals showcase how the performativity of naming "exposes the name as a crisis in referentiality" (Butler, 2011, p. 139). Transgender individuals develop alternative forms of identification and recognition by using desired symbolic resources and establishing diverse social relationships through self-naming. Without claiming their chosen names as proper, real and sincere, transgender individuals practice re-gendering of the authentic self through re-naming in a process Crawford calls "radically affirmative" (2016, p. 62). As Crawford's critical engagement with Beckett's, Foucault's and Derrida's theorisation of naming/renaming/namelessness suggests, the "naturalization and sanctification of new names" with an illusion of originality and stability that queer allies and trans communities might claim about trans naming practice leads to the normative expectation of trans individuals to be coherent and proper (Crawford, 2016, p. 50). Crawford defined the unnameable as owning "nothing of his own save for his displaced names" (2016, p. 59). The displaced names refer not only to the original names assigned at birth with their social gender norms, but also to the expectation of normative queer/trans communities to own a coherent and stable name. In this sense, the fictionality and transferability in trans naming practices discussed in this chapter embody the agency of 'the unnameable' Chinese transgender people who do not claim authoritative and proper ownership over the names they have picked and flexibly used.

To recap, pseudonym naming is an alternative trans naming practice that does not claim property and proper legal recognition but rather constructs authenticity through sincere signification of the non-originality and de-sanctification of their names. Through alternative naming, a gesture may cause difficulty in the referentiality of proper names (Butler, 1993, p. 193). To summarise, the self-naming practices of Chinese transgender people reveal the performative essence of the name itself, which is groundless, with no origin, and "can never attain full presence" (Crawford, 2016, p. 60).

Chinese transgender individuals' authenticity construction through fictionality and transferability can be found in other trans technologies of the self, as this chapter discussed: self-writing and self-visualisation. Through self-writing, transgender people attach their performative gender practices with non-normative and non-traditional gender scripts. Self-writing is not free of normative gender norms from a post-structural and intertextual perspective. However, it is the diverse forms and meaning-making of online self-writing that enable trans individuals to express conditional agency by choosing alternative gender scripts and writing with ambiguous author roles and tones. The online self-writing of Chinese trans individuals is not a way of claiming the truth of self-determined authority and recognition. Instead, the self-writing is plural and ambiguous allowing multiple interpretations and negotiation space to emerge. The self-visualisation practices also relate to the alternative performativity of gender through which trans authenticity is constructed outside the normative doctrines. The partial, multiple, avatar-becoming and counter self-visualisations carve out diverse ways of doing gender alternatives to the singular, coherent and persistent representation of the self. The alternative visualisation practices of Chinese transgender individuals thus go beyond the theoretical scope of transgender visibility, which focuses on privacy, identity politics and autonomy over the embodiment of trans identity (Freeman & Acena, 2022). Instead, trans self-visualisation can be seen as the technology of the self through which trans individuals negotiate authenticity with the self, trans communities and gender norms.

The alternative doings of gender can be seen as trans technologies of the self for enabling the trans agency to be conditionally expressed. As interviewee Nutalie noted,

transgender agency is the condition whereby "transgender people face all the given meanings and context of gender and choose to turn our heads away. Rather than power, it is more like a kind of willingness" (Nutalie, trans woman, 20s, college student). Existing gender epistemologies and ideologies in Chinese society provide limited space for transgender identities to be recognised and constrain discursive subjectivity for trans people, which renders transgender meaningless but also leaves the possibility for trans communities to develop their own alternative gender practices, experiences and scripts. The trans technologies of the self, such as online pseudo-naming, bullshitting in self-writing, and partial self-visualisation, afford minor resistance and personal political acts in the cisnormative society and growingly transnormative communities. Transgender authenticity is constructed through 'turning-away' from the truth regime that is assigned as gender-binary. Maintaining a reflexive distance from power and empowerment narratives, transgender people practise technology of the self in negotiation and sometimes compromise with the 'ideal' and 'realness' that are imposed on non-binary genders. Aware of the impossibility of becoming the ideal gender and of the limitations of bodily existence, transgender agency is reflexive in playing with while at the same time questioning the given gender scripts in the mediation of digital technology.

Parodic reiteration of social norms is considered the very practice through which gender is performatively formed. As Butler argued, "Although the gender meanings taken up in these parodic styles are clearly part of hegemonic, misogynist culture, they are nevertheless denaturalized and mobilized through their parodic recontextualization" (Butler, 1999, p. 176). The alternative self-representation of Chinese transgender people shows a complicated relationship with gender norms and agentic and reflexive doing of authenticity. The trans agency is expressed through the creative invocation of alternative gender norms and scripts which are traditionally not available or allowed to gender nonconforming people. Digital technology in transgender people's practice of the technology of the self – such as the multi-sourced self-naming initiated for identification in different social encounters, controlling of audiences and negotiation in online transgender self-writing – allows transgender individuals to reiterate norms and gender scripts in diverse ways. For instance, Chinese trans online self-naming mobilises

symbols from fiction, Korean cinema and Japanese ACG culture to not only define the self but also articulate with diverse cultures and communities where the socialisation of gender identity occurs outside the traditional kinship social system. Moreover, trans self-naming is not necessarily confined to constructing an ideal and consistent self in the present which proper names normally afford. As the diverse naming practices of Chinese trans people show, self-naming can represent the redoing of the past, the parallel of the present or the projection of the future, accommodating alternative imaginations of the self.

Aside from the alternative doing of authenticity that challenges the truth regime and norms of being transgender in China, the performative practices of doing gender discussed in the digital usage of Chinese transgender individuals also provides a vision to rethink how gender is experienced and practised in the digital age. The performative practice of transgender people in digital China indicates that the reiterative doing of gender engages subject, networked audiences and digital platforms. As discussed in the multifarious adoption of gender scripts and creative means of (dis)embodied representation of trans bodies, forms of gender reiteration have been opened up by the affordances of digital technologies. Most importantly, a diverse landscape of transgender beings could be envisioned through the close reading of the technologies of the transgender self in the Chinese context. Hatfield (2021) argued that trans digital usage creates socio-technological ecologies in which gender constantly interfaces with bodies and technologies. As this chapter also demonstrates, the new gender-body-technology relationship can be formulated in the alternative performative doings of gender.

So, what is trans authenticity as the mediated self-representation of Chinese transgender people show us? It is a genuine performative doing of the self, be it trans-identified or in claimed femininity and masculinity. It is not another hegemonic truth claim in opposition to cisnormativity, but rather is an alternative way to make sense of the denied transgender intelligibility and liveability. It is transgender people's critical reflection on their (dis)embodied relationship with the body, mediation of digital technology and the cisnormative regulations of gender. This calls for us to pay more

attention to a post-human performativity understanding of gender and reality through which all human beings might imagine and inhabit a gendered body and future.

Chapter 8 Discussion and Conclusion

8.1 Summary of the findings and contribution

This thesis aimed to understand Chinese transgender people's everyday gender experiences with a particular focus on how trans practices and perceptions of gender authenticity are reconfigured by the changing digital media ecology conditions. Transgender subjects have become increasingly essential for understanding gender and there are diverse theoretical approaches to (trans)gender. As discussed in Chapter 2, debates about sex, gender and sexuality have long been heated in women's studies, feminist theories, LGBT and queer theories, medical-sexology, and sociological studies of gender. While gender nonconforming bodies and experiences have been employed in the debate for their challenging of default and proliferating binary ideologies of gender, trans subjects are often presented as tools, targets or evidence for theorising gender (Namaste, 2000, 2009). Butler's (1999) performativity theory, for instance, addressed the bio-essentialism and social constructivism dichotomy with a close reading of drag queens' gender practices as revealing the unoriginality of cisgender norms and the fluidity of gender per se. Gender performativity, however, is criticised for lacking a nuanced discussion of the transformational relationship between gender norms and gender non-conforming subjects as mediated by shifting material conditions. Empirical trans studies push forward the theorisation of gender by centring trans experiences of bodily transition, medical discourses and non-conforming gender identities in knowledge production (Billard et al., 2022; Johnson et al., 2021). Through highlighting the multiple, material and intersectional conditions to understand transgender struggle and resistance, trans studies contribute to deconstructing and complicating normative understandings of gender. While the performativity lens remains helpful for addressing the dialectical nexus of discourse and materiality of trans subjectivity formation, trans studies have shown that analysis of gender should be context-specific and capture the multiplicity of meaning-making found in gender/the

body. Technological development, including medical and digital technologies, has been argued to change the context, norms and gender doings of transgender individuals. I have highlighted two important strains within trans studies that contribute to understanding the transforming transgender performativity in the new material condition: Chinese trans studies and trans media and communication studies.

Chinese and Sinophone trans studies echo the collective efforts of decolonial non-Western trans studies that see trans articulations as a historical and cultural construct in the tensions between global and local trans discourses and practices. The literature studies have shown the long androgynous aesthetic history in China, juxtaposed with the juridical and moral regulations over nonconforming gender expression and bodies in imperial times. Trans subjects were dehumanised as human-monsters symbolising the moral decadence not only of trans individuals but also of the nation in traditional China (Chiang, 2012c; Liu & Ding, 2005). Modern Chinese history has witnessed a medical and political take up of trans subjects in relation to modernity and nation-state construction (Chiang, 2018; Zhang, 2014). Both the medical pathologisation and anti-revolutionary framing of transgender people reinforce the denial of trans intelligibility. While some scholars have argued that post-socialist China seems to have retreated from private sectors and loosened regulation over transgender rights, in Chapters 1 and 2 I discussed the growing limitation and marginalisation of trans people in mainstream society and policy-making. By banning private trade and medicine, the state has erased the possibility for many transgender people to transition medically. Moreover, socialisation based on the sharing of transgender experiences online has also been prohibited. Wang and Bao (2023) convincingly suggest that non-conforming gender is not only impacted state digital censorship and cultural regulations but also becomes the means by which the state exercises power in controlling digital platforms. Combining the historical-cultural dehumanisation in imperial China and subjectivity-denial and censorship in modern China, the Chinese transgender issue is very much an issue of authenticity. It is the double exile of transgender people in the online and offline worlds that has driven me to investigate how Chinese transgender people inhabit liminal gender positions at the social margin since Chinese transgender individuals and communities

are impelled to self-organise and make sense of trans authenticity in the online world. Trans media and communication studies address the material conditions and context for doing transgender from the perspectives of discourse and media representation of self-embodiment. Questions regarding media and digital technologies' influence on transgender discourse and identity construction emerge, such as: to what extent do digital technologies shift the ways of doing (trans)gender, do digital media afford a new gender order, what transgender discourses and practices have become dominant, and do digital technologies create utopias or reproduce inequality for trans communities? Major contributions have been made in digital trans studies in recent decades to tackle the questions. Different digital platforms, such as Tumblr, have been argued to enable trans users to explore gender identity, form community networks, mobilise collective events and represent transgender selves in various forms (Dame, 2016; Haimson, Gorrell, Starks, & Weinger, 2020; Oakley, 2016). Existing studies tend to view the digital platform as mediating a new mode and order for doing (trans)gender, downplaying interconnected online-offline trans lives and reconfiguring gender norms in digital trans communities. Moreover, focusing on a specific platform might risk lacking a holistic viewpoint on digital technologies' implications. As a new field, research in this regard mainly touches on the media representations of transgender people and Internet-mediated transgender visibility and activism. Billard and Zhang critiqued this body of research by emphasising the transformative force of social media and argued that we should focus more on "how transgender people choose to represent themselves" (2022, p. 194). This critique is especially on point considering the non-Western transgender experience in different social-political environments and community agendas. Although scarce, several excellent studies have examined transgender people's digital practices. These studies have tended to focus on specific digital platforms and consider transgender people as purposeful users who use digital technologies to fulfil their needs and identity claims (Ahmed, 2018; Baeza Argüello et al., 2021; Buss et al., 2021).

My work contributes to this emerging body of research with a focus on Chinese trans people's everyday digital gender experiences across time and platforms, and the

dynamic in online trans communities regarding discursive contestation and normativity. Specifically, I take up two different theoretical focuses. First, instead of viewing digital technologies as functionally assisting alternative gender performance, I focus on the social and technological affordances of a wide and changing range of platforms to understand Chinese trans individuals' daily digital use and related gender performativity. This requires a broader investigation of transgender peoples' daily digital use rather than a specific platform, as well as treating transgender people not as users but as embedded in digital media ecology. Second, this research considers digital gender practices, not as intentional identity work but rather as the performative doing of gender through which transgender individuals make meaning of the gendered self. By proposing the framework of performative authenticity to understand trans experiences in China, I seek to push forward the existing literature from post-identitarian and context-specific perspectives that emphasise the performative construction and multiple struggles of trans authenticity. This allows me to combine transforming norms formulated in trans people's online interaction, technology and social affordances of the digital platforms together with trans individuals' performative doing of the self. Performative authenticity contributes to complicating the understanding of digital transgender experiences in terms of the (re)articulation of mainstream discourses, the liminal sense of time and space, how knowledge and emotion norms formulate in online trans interactions, and agentic and reflexive trans technologies of the self. The four facets discussed separately in empirical chapters in turn enrich the nuance of the framework. In what follows I am going to elaborate on how the framework of performative authenticity as promoted in this thesis contribute to the discussion of transgender everyday experiences, as well as their agency and challenges, as mediated by the transforming social and technological context in China.

8.1.1 Rearticulations of transgender discourses

Diverted from the long Chinese history of androgynous aesthetics and gender non-conforming subjects, transgender as an umbrella term – Western word for variant gender identities – is a recent construct localised in China. However, global transgender

terms and identity politics, on the one hand, have hardly entered mainstream discourses and public awareness. Identity-based trans politics and movements, together with the history of trans discourse transformation, are estranged from the Chinese transgender context. While some Chinese scholars believe the Chinese historical, religious and social context is somehow tolerant of trans/queer people (Chou, 2001; Jun, 2010), I suggest a de-humanisation framing of gender non-conformity in Chinese culture following a literature review and analysis of trans individuals' perceptions of the two commonly-used terms *renyao* and *weiniang* by the non-trans public. Globally recognised transgender terms to correctly describe non-binary gender identities are also not employed by grassroots transgender individuals in daily situations. Thus, the social marginalisation transgender people encounter every day is experienced through ontological and methodological denial and misrecognition of their existential being and doing. This study thus intentionally kept a distance from the popular identity politics and visibility lens commonly adopted in mainstream trans studies because transgender identity cannot fully explain and represent the prevalent existential denial and practice-based marginalisation of Chinese transgender people. In this sense, the bottom-up articulation of local transgender terms should not only be seen as another gender identity creation, such as gender fluid, gender bender or gender punk, but in the way Chinese trans people and communities strategically deal with the assigned inauthenticity and intelligibility in the Chinese context and make their own meanings of authenticity.

The Chinese trans discourse creation is not based on growing diverse and segregated transgender identities, but through strategic articulation, rearticulation and parody of mainstream discourses, medical and subcultural symbols, such as *Yaoniang* (drug girl) and *Fei-Tian-Mao* (flying cat, with implication of FtM). Such articulatory terms, in turn, enable diverse trans and non-trans social groups to join in meaning-making and thus creates a "rhetorical landscape" allowing ambiguity, negotiation and connection to emerge (Rawson & Williams, 2014). As I discussed in Chapter 4, many local trans terms involve the appropriation or rearticulation of problematic, mainstream discourses and cisgender youth subcultures. Through the rearticulation of such terms,

trans communities develop an ambiguous relationship with other social groups while maintaining their autonomy of meaning-making of trans authenticity at the community level. Trans articulation of authenticity is thus performatively constructed through the reiteration of multiple discourses and norms, and through discursive connection with diverse groups and contexts in a social and political conventional context. The findings in Chapter 4 show the transforming articulations of transgender with floating signifiers and changing paradigms. The way Chinese transgender people describe themselves or the identity terms they feel a sense of belonging to vary among trans communities of different social-economic backgrounds, gender practices, generations, and other intersectional social identities. This indicates that the performative authenticity in trans articulations is not a fixed and self-determined claiming of identity truth but instead the contested and transforming collective meaning-making.

While performativity theory is useful for understanding norms, speech acts and gender formation in a relatively static and horizontal sense, I present the dynamic between trans articulation and the digital diaspora of Chinese trans communities. The transforming Chinese transgender articulations captured in this thesis have a dialectical relationship with digital ecology and regulations. Through setting up trans websites and other technological affordances, transgender people manage to form collective meaning-making sites where they discuss, debate and circulate their understandings of what it means to be transgender and how to do gender as transgender people. These platforms also work as alternative media that allow trans people to appropriate and rearticulate trans terms alternative to mainstream discourses (Bao, 2021). The meaning they attach to their definitions of transgender have changed drastically over the past few decades. This is partly because the platforms where transgender people gathered and communicated have been censored and thus often shut down by the state. Every closure and community dispersal is accompanied by a paradigm shift from the existing dominant discourses to a new one as circulated and popularised on new platforms. Converging with the continuous diasporic movement of the online trans communities, the genealogy of Chinese transgender discourse signifies Chinese transgender people's reiteration and rearticulation of hegemonic identity terms and a broadening of the trans

articulations encompassing diverse trans speech acts and interpretation. The performative authenticity of trans articulations is constructed through the dynamics within the transforming online trans communities, mediated and shaped by the shifting digital ecology.

8.1.2 Constructing authenticity from liminal positions

Feminist and queer scholars have revealed how space and time can embed gender regulation and control over nonconforming bodies and how crafting queer time and space is important to resist the heteronormative structure for queer worldmaking (Halberstam, 2005; Muñoz, 1999). Likewise, trans studies emphasise the worldmaking role of digital technologies in affording alternative spaces for identity construction and activism and queer temporality that disrupts the hegemonic cisgender ideal (Eckstein, 2018; Rawson, 2014). While I am in line with the empowering argument of anti-normative queer worldmaking, existing literature risks undervaluing and neglecting the complexity of the othered trans experiences with a simplified queer/normative hierarchy. My thesis contributes to the field by bringing liminal trans experiences to the fore and reading closely about authenticity construction in trans people's performative reiterations of normative narratives of time and space.

In Chapter 5, where I examined transgender people's liminal online experiences of time and space, I emphasise that living in normative spaces and performing linear temporality constitutes an important part of performative gender doings in trans everyday life. Such time and space experiences, however, are conducted from liminal positions at the margin. Instead of alternative and affirmative worldmaking, Chinese trans people are marginalised to the liminal but manage to negotiate authenticity through appropriation and parody of the normative space and linear time from within the cisgender-dominant world. Chinese transgender people's liminal experiences of time and space mediate their imagination of and reflection on authenticity, which is always in-between and transitional. Transgender people employ digital technologies to fulfil the denied and impossible linear experience of gendered time and space in a cisnormative society, while their linear attempts in the digital world enact the

transfiguration of linearity. In other words, their linear experience mediated by digital use is transfigured (thus unsuccessful) for the mediated linear experience and is neither recognised by cisnormative society nor self-determined by transgender individuals. However, it is the transfiguration of linear time and space that challenges the default and normative beliefs of linearity as natural and normal. This is what Butler called "a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition" (1988, p. 520). In this sense, I do not intend to demolish queer celebration and antinormative worldmaking and readings of gender that are, in essence, fluid. Instead, I call for suspending the assertation of trans peoples' seemingly normative gender performativity as naturally subversive to cisgender norms. A more nuanced perspective is needed to understand trans authenticity through close reading of transgender sufferings and struggles in liminal time and space and in the multiplicity of their performative doing of cisgender norms.

8.1.3 Emerging normativity of stratified trans authenticity discourses

Performative formation of trans authenticity is context-specific and thus deeply related to the norms in the very social and technological environment trans people inhabit. While the articulation of trans authenticity is a contested discursive encounter, together with the liminal time and space experiences in relation to normative spatiality and linear temporality, cisgender and heteronormative regulations are always in place, structuring gender nonconforming bodies and subjects. In the transfigured and alternative discourse, the temporality and spatiality afforded by digital technologies are, however, integrated into the formation of transgender normativity in the Chinese online trans community. The social regulations and digital censorship of Chinese trans communities fundamentally destroy bottom-up socialisation and collectivity, and individuals are atomised. In this political context, transgender elites are more able to reorganise the community while avoiding risks and are thus taking over the power of mediation. The reorganisation based on normativity, however, should be interrogated as it denies individual experience and embodiment and highlights the legibility of the institutional mediation. As I elaborated in Chapter 6, NGOs and trans elites have dominated the

discourses of proper trans identity and gender practices. Using their moderator role of managing the online transgender groups and the privileged power brought about by their social positionality, the transgender elite manage to create hierarchies of scientific medical knowledge and promote positive emotions of joy and empowerment.

Transgender normativity is the hegemonic discursive power that promotes certain ways of doing gender and excludes other alternative gender practices. As the findings in Chapter 6 suggest, transnormativity emerges and is mediated by the online trans communities' and trans elites' promotion of limited scripts for trans authenticity. Transnormativity produces and reproduces structural inequalities and gender order, resulting in the stratification of trans communities along with knowledge production and emotion expressions. The transnormative regulations on embodied knowledge and negative emotions also project and embody cisgender and heterosexual norms. In this sense, the dialectical relationship between the structures in cis-centric society and trans normativity structure the performative doing of trans authenticity. It is thus essential to embed the discussion of the transgender struggle and agency of constructing authenticity within the cis- and trans-normative context.

8.1.4 Alternative performativity of trans authenticity

Proper naming, full authorship and well-rounded representation of the authentic self are essential to identity construction and authenticity performance in modern society, while at the same time are easily taken up by population governance, censorship and commercial culture (Banet-Weiser, 2012b; Pilcher, 2016). While trans subjects are often denied the right and freedom of proper embodiment of themselves, trans digital studies have invested in examining the potentials of digital platforms affording transgender people's self-representation and visibility politics (Austin, 2016; Horak, 2014; Vivienne, 2011). This thesis contributes to the field based on a context-specific reading of trans (dis)embodiment and alternative gender performativity in a social and media context where the collective visibility of trans is extremely limited (Hildebrandt & Chua, 2017).

In the last empirical chapter, I discussed how the authentic self can be constructed

and negotiated by transgender individuals through online (dis)embodiment. I identified three forms of authenticity (dis)embodiment among Chinese transgender people: pseudonymous self-naming, self-writing, and self-visualisation. Different from the deindividualisation approach of anonymous self-naming, transgender people chose pseudonyms not to hide their assigned sex and real identity, but rather to experience their claimed authentic gender and to build alternative social connections by using these apparently 'fake' and 'non-original' names. Pseudonymous self-naming has a profound effect on transgender individuals' social lives and gender practices since most of them use a pseudonym to develop recognisable, identifiable, and coherent identities and relationships. Pseudonymous self-naming is also a parody of the real and official gendered naming that signifies the cisnormative and transphobic truth regime. Similarly, online self-writing and self-visualisation are also strategies to experience alternative gender authenticity that is unrecognised in offline social life and to challenge both the cisnormative and transnormative regulation of how (trans)gender identity should be properly expressed and narrated. The invocation of alternative gender scripts, such as ancient poems and strategically vague expressions, in self-writing allow trans people to performatively shape the self in diverse articulations connected to non-normative gender symbols. Likewise, self-visualisation through the partial embodiment of the body and a creative digital avatar are alternative forms of gender embodiment. Trans technologies of the self thus do not fully aim at passing but rather embodying alternative ways of representing the self. Not all these alternative self-embodiments challenge cis-/transgender norms, and some of these performative gender doings present complex reiteration relationship with hegemonic beliefs. However, these alternative gender authenticity practices denaturalise and recontextualise the original myths of gender through parody, alternative imitation and even intentional faking (Butler, 1999). Trans authenticity is embedded in such imperfection and in the failure of imitation and reiteration. Authenticity is performatively constructed in the failing, and the failing and faking can be understood as the practice of authenticity. Through failing, unrecognised imitation and parody, trans individuals create alternative ways of doing gender authenticity and explore diverse relations with different gender scripts.

What do these findings tell us? As stated above, this thesis aims to have a theoretical conversation with digital trans studies from a non-Western empirical focus. I will now elaborate on this from three perspectives: performative authenticity as the theoretical framework for trans media and communication studies, rethinking (trans)gender theory in the digital era, and what is next for Chinese trans studies.

8.2 Performative authenticity

Chinese transgender people's experiences and struggles are an issue of authenticity. The suffering and struggle of Chinese transgender people indicate the weak explanatory power of (trans)gender identity discourses in uncovering the true problem, which I describe as the dehumanisation of gender non-conformity in the Chinese context. In China, transgender identity terms are not recognised in official and public discussion and thus the cisgender/transgender identity divide has not been established as discursively and systematically as we might see in the West and in many countries in the Global South, such as India and Thailand. The discursive boundary that reproduces violence and discrimination against Chinese transgender people is not that around gender identity but is based on discourses around the so-called realness and naturalness of humanity that results in the ontological denial, medical pathologisation, and dehumanisation of transgender subjects.

Authenticity has been a key philosophical term in relation to self, identity and truth since the Enlightenment. For both Rousseau (1999) and Heidegger (2010), authenticity was something natural about the self without being influenced by the outside world. In the dichotomy of the inner self and the outside world, authenticity is always at war with external forces. Although these philosophers believed in the existence of a noble true self, the true self is not given but requires efforts to be made to create it. Authenticity is the effort to approach the true self. Modern theorists suspend the individual inner truth model and take on a cultural sociologist view of authenticity as a by-product of the social media era. Authenticity, in this line, is understood as the discursive trap sold or enforced by authorities and commercial companies as the reachable ideal (1999).

Authenticity becomes an artificial construct, a mediated illusion, self-branding, and enforced identity registry management (Salisbury & Pooley, 2017; Enli, 2014; Banet-Weiser, 2012a; Haimson & Hoffmann, 2016). Varga (2011) observed that authenticity can be understood as a social technology that enhances social and economic production through mobilising individual capacities. Authenticity, whether from the philosophical or modern social science perspective, connotes the actions taken to approach the ideal prototype. The distinction centres on whether the ideal prototype comes from the natural pure inner self or the socio-discursive structure. Each of the two approaches to authenticity, however, leaves limited space for understanding the complexity of transgender's in-between self-determined 'be true to the self' discourse and the imposed regulation of authenticity.

Moreover, digital technologies have been taken up, complicating the discussion of authenticity, suggesting that self-representation mediated by digital technologies may reduce the genuineness, self-loyalty and originality connotations of authenticity (Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006; Berman, 2009; Adorno & Horkheimer, 1997). While trans people worldwide employ digital platforms for autonomous and alternative worldmaking, to what extent the so-called virtuality of digital technologies affords transgender authenticity claims, which are denied or difficult to make in the physical world, remains questionable.

The authenticity issues of transgender digital gender practices require a porous approach that transgresses the genuineness, self-loyalty and originality frames and allows individuals' conditional agency to be recognised. Drawing on both sides of the individual/social authenticity dichotomy – I see authenticity both from the perspective of the technology of the self in a Foucauldian sense and from the perspective of it being a social technology. Technologies of the self are neither certain types of technology nor specific matter or actions. It is a set of context-specific meaning-making and self-organising discursive practices aiming at reshaping the self. From a post-structuralist stance, I suspend the existence of the pre-discursive self and focus on how authenticity is normalized through the performative production of social technologies. Many social actors participate in authenticity competition to seize the discursive power of naming

and defining transness as discussed in this thesis. In the Chinese transgender-related context, state surveillance, cisnormative social norms, NGO ideologies and trans elites' beliefs are the competing gender scripts that produce trans authenticity discourses that structure transgender practices. Both social norms and trans individual performative doings participate in the articulation of transgender authenticity and transgender authenticity is performatively constructed herein. Therefore, I approach authenticity by combining contextual understanding of technologies of the self and social technologies of authenticity that shape the meaning and effect of the self.

Performative authenticity encompasses the norms of intelligibility and performative doings and the dialectical relations and effects of both. It fundamentally questions the originality claim of authenticity and the independent/pre-discursive assertion of an authentic self. Instead, it recognises authenticity formation in the very reflection and agency practised by individuals in their complicated and multiple interactions with the authenticity norms. Butler used performativity theory to explain how gender is constructed in the reiterating speech acts of gender norms. Speech acts have concrete social effects that legitimate boundaries by defining things and systemise inequality by saying what is normal and what is not. It is the speech act of heterosexuality that creates the abnormality of homosexuality in Butler's view. By claiming that transgender authenticity is performative, I go further to not only question the naturalised boundary between binary genders or the cis/trans divide but also the hegemonic boundary of real and fake based on the examination of transgender people's digital gender practices.

While the Chinese trans communities remains unnamed in public spaces and mainstream society, transgender people in China have developed what I call trans technologies of the self to construct a sense of authenticity in reaction to realness-based discursive marginalisation. As discussed in the empirical chapters, transgender people manage to self-organise alternative articulations of transness. Although these discourses are unrecognized and invisible in mainstream society, transgender people have been able to make meaning and build connections within and outside their communities. Similarly, although the gender practices in the virtual world are often

deemed fake and insincere, transgender people manage to craft the liminal but alternative experience of time and space through which they challenge both the cisnormative and queer definitions of realness. My analysis suggests that these trans technologies of the self are neither self-determined truth claims of gender identities, nor independent of the social technologies, but are instead an embedded part. Their articulations of the self transform in resonance with the shifting dominant discourses in online trans communities, which are in constant spatial and paradigm flux. Their practices and efforts toward authenticity through spatial, temporal and digital embodiment, although sometimes connected to the normative illusion of authenticity, challenge the wholeness and coherence norms of authenticity by performative doing of authenticity in fractured, fragile and liminal ways (Taylor, 2022). While Butler argues that gender can be "neither true nor false, neither real nor apparent, neither original nor derived" (1999, p. 180), this thesis further complicates such utterance by showing how the sense of trans authenticity can be performatively constructed through mixing all the attributes together.

In this way, the performative authenticity of transgender people, rather than claiming truth, is reflexive thinking and struggling towards reconfiguring the self which is denied elsewhere. It is the configuration of what Foucault called "a critical ontology of ours" that does not seek to establish a new definitional doctrine or theory but rather is "an attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life" that acknowledges the imposed limits and looks to go beyond (1984, p. 49). Suffering through the imposed truth regime, transgender people, critical or not, are aware of the impossibility of their reaching the truth defined by authorities. It is the perceived and imposed inauthenticity that structures and makes gender performativity the path towards the reflexive and agentic doing of the self. Performative authenticity is not a radical subversion of the truth regime, but polysemous and ambiguous meaning-making. It is the articulation of alternative possibilities and the struggle to survive ontological denial. The digital gender practices of Chinese transgender people can be seen as discursive exploration (they can be joyful and hegemonic, painful, exclusive for the self and others) with realness/fakeness assigned by gender norms and through which they reflexively and

performatively create the sense of transgender authenticity. More specifically, transgender people performatively construct authenticity via the reflection of fallibility derived from normative discourses of (trans)gender and experience disillusionment and impossibility of being 'real'. Drawing on Butler's argument of fantasy that "is not the opposite of reality; it is what reality forecloses, and, as a result, it defines the limits of reality" (2004, pp. 28-29), performative authenticity does not oppose the cisgender truth regime but rather shows the constructed and exclusive contour of the latter from within and at the margins.

8.3 After Butler: rethinking gender theory in the digital era

My reading of Butler's (2004) *Undoing Gender* resulted in the following questions: What sort of performance could invert the inner/outer distinction and compel a radical rethinking of the psychological presuppositions of gender identity and sexuality? What kind of performance could compel a reconsideration of the place and stability of the masculine and the feminine? And what kind of gender performance could enact and reveal the performativity of gender itself in a way that destabilizes the naturalized categories of identity and desire? Butler mobilised drag as her case for how non-conforming gender practices might challenge the originality claims of cisgender and heteronormative hegemony and extensively discussed gender minorities who must rely on social and institutional norms to maintain a liveable life. Goetz (2022) claimed that performativity theory could be transgressed through self-recognition by mirroring the true self without internalization of norms. This thesis suspends such belief about authenticity that is external to the outside world by showing how recognition and self-expression are deeply mediated by symbols and media in the digital era; this hints at the rethinking of gender theories should be discussed as situated in the digital context.

In Baudrillard's (1994) conceptualisation of simulacra, simulation means a repetition or copy that loses its original or does not have any original prototype. Baudrillard worried that the hyperreal character of the modern or postmodern society constructed by simulacra blurs the boundary between real and simulation. By

reproducing and consuming various signs and labels to signify or represent the selves, be it gender or other social identities, we lose contact with the deep reality of the self. In the digital era, it seems more pessimistic that the boundary between real and simulation is further blurred as people's quotidian lives are mediatised day by day. From Baudrillard's words, transgender performative authenticity might seem like it fits the concept of *simulacra*, which refers to the copy or copying that loses or has no originality. Worried about overwhelming copying and mimicking in modern society, Baudrillard used the term hyperreal to describe the blurred boundary between simulation and reality. This begs the question: are trans digital gender practices the reproduction of a meaningless hyperreal that threatens the man/women and cis/trans boundary? Just as Butler's argument that the drag performance serves only to reveal the unoriginality of the heterosexual gender matrix, the lived experience of transgender people also invites a suspension of real/fake boundaries of gender constructed discursively. The lived digital gender experience of transgender people is not a cynical mocking of the real, but rather a compromised negotiation with gender norms in a limited social environment wherein they are not allowed or able to express gender freely. This unrecognised authenticity is their existential way of doing gender through incoherent, fractured, multi-status, incomplete or unstable articulations of body, embodiment, community, discourse and technology use. It is a genuine performative doing of the self, be it trans-identified or claimed femininity and masculinity. It is not another hegemonic truth claim in opposition to cisnormativity, but rather an alternative way to make sense of their denied gender intelligibility and liveability. It is transgender people's critical reflection on their (dis)embodied relationship with the body, mediation of digital technology and the cisnormative regulations on gender. This calls for us to pay more attention to a post-human performativity understanding of gender and reality through which all human beings might imagine and inhabit a gendered body and future. To a certain extent, transgender performative authenticity practices remind us to take a non-doctrinal attitude towards the so-called truth or realness of gender and be open and sensitive to the future where these truth claims might be accepted as an illusion.

Without hypothesising a deep reality of the self, Butler convincingly argued that

gender is the kind of human construct that does not have an original prototype. Gender is performatively constructed through gender norms which are neither original nor natural. This means gender norms mediate what people believe to be real and original. Gender norms, however, are constructed by cisnormative and hegemonic discursive powers as real and original, marginalising gender non-conformity or, even worse, dehumanising transgender people in the Chinese context. The truth regime, including official names, legal gender markers and medical diagnoses, ontologically and epistemologically denies the intelligibility of other living statuses and truth claims through the material and discursive monopoly of biological gender determinism. The mediated expression or artificial production of gender without a biological sex embodiment would be marginalised as 'unreal' and 'fake'. Although some transgender people would internalise the 'unrealness' of their mediated gender practice online, the mediated expression or artificial production of gender has been an essential means of gender practice within the limited social space and has revealed the ideological violence and unoriginality of cisnormative gender norms.

No matter what kind of gender norms people believe or deny, gender has become about debatable truth rather than a given human nature. This thesis has revealed that trans studies and research on digital gender practices have the potential to make gender an even more debatable authenticity issue. The Chinese transgender experience of performative authenticity indicates that nothing is un-mediated, including the corporeal. The superiority of corporeal over techno real in defining gender has been proven to be a myth (Halberstam, 2016). Today, the human body is deeply transformed, interrupted, suspended, intervened, or distorted by various technologies. The dichotomy between body and technology cannot be maintained in that body and technology are mutually reliant and inseparable in the social process of subjectification. The de-anthropocentrism embedded in posthuman theories might offer a way out of the debate between biological determinism and extreme social constructivism in understanding gender. Transgender subjects might shed light on the possibility of imagining a post-gender human society where multiple gender existences can be achieved through a combination of corporeal, technological and discursive playing of gender norms.

This requires scholars to rethink classical gender theory in the digital era and by taking transgender subjective experience into consideration, rather than as an add-on. As Butler observed, "If the ground of gender identity is the stylised repetition of acts through time, and not a seemingly seamless identity, then the possibility of gender transformation is to be found in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style" (1988, p. 520). My thesis critically engages with and complicates Butler's viewpoint by arguing that rather than arbitrary relation between acts we should understand gender (trans)formation through the structured, agentic and stratified articulations of individuals, norms, acts and, last but not least, affordance of technologies. In other words, focusing on speech act itself risks losing sight on other material factors and conditions that shape the doings of gender. Moreover, the relation of acts is not entirely arbitrary but rather ordered and organised by the hierarchies of authenticity, originality and intelligibility. This thesis highlights that digital technologies and contexts have played an essential role in mediating alternative experiences and making possible alternative ways of doing gender. Both the available digital technologies and digital regulations afford technologically and socially Chinese transgender people's the liminal inhabitancy of linear time and normative space (Chapter 5), community diasporic together with the shifting gender ideology (Chapter 4), and making possible new ways of doing gender scripts as elaborated in Chapter 7. These findings indicate that 'the breaking or subversive repetition' might be mediated by not only human agents but also other factors such as the changing technological context. By presenting transgender people's alternative gender practices as mediated by digital technologies, such as disembodied gender expression, partial self-embodiment, pseudonymous naming, and editable self-representation, I showcase that the social and technological affordances of digital platforms allow diverse relations between gender practices and norms as well as alternative gender scripts to emerge. The findings suggests that the normative beliefs of whole, complete, flesh-based embodiment and gender expression as the only sincere way to represent the true self can impose authenticity-based regulation on gender non-conforming bodies. Trans people's diverse

digital gender practices suggest that disembodied or partially embodied ways of doing gender can have material effects and are extremely important for many marginalised people who are deprived of the right to do gender in a certain way. Meanwhile, this thesis complicates utopian understandings of digital technologies by capturing emerging trans normativity around authenticity in online Chinese trans communities. The discourse, knowledge and emotion norms of proper doings of transgender in online trans communities, mediated by digital platforms and moderated by trans elites, suggest the stratification of trans authenticity in China. Using digital platforms properly to name and express the self, as well as to interact with others, have consisted of salient parts of doing transgender and thus trans normativity in the Chinese trans communities. In this sense, the digital communication studies lens can bring important insights to the knowledge production of (trans)gender.

8.4 Becoming trans: trans normativity and trans agency in China

Chinese trans communities are witnessing the emergence of transgender normativity. The past and old-school discourses and practices of transgender identity have been reformed and further marginalised within the online trans community as 'politically incorrect and scientifically wrong' in the technological and social environment of post-socialist China. The withdrawal of the state from the private sector and the highly regulated policy environment have contributed to the emergence of transgender normativity. Thus, studies on the Chinese trans communities should be situated against the post-socialist background with its characteristics of marketisation and familisation. The growing political repression and censorship and the reduction of social welfare has forced gender non-conforming people to construct alternative public spaces and mutually supportive networks for the performative construction of trans authenticity. However, trans authenticity is not necessarily entirely celebratory or positive to perform or experience. Unlike other more celebratory interpretations of agency and authenticity, Chinese transgender peoples' performative authenticity is fraught with and embodied with negative emotion and disillusionment. In-community norms regulating embodied

transgender experiences have emerged as what I frame as 'trans-normativity'. The norms are reproduced along the social axes of class, gender, age, ability and sexuality, and regulate transgender individuals through the hierarchical discourses of knowledge and emotion. Trans normativity has a double meaning, as Butler (2004) argued: on the one hand it is formulated through in-community interactions and provides a common code for action; on the other hand, trans normativity normalises how trans authenticity can be desired and recognised. Transnormativity functions as stratification apparatus that segregates diverse trans experiences into hierarchies and assigns some trans lives as being less valuable and intelligible.

It is also noteworthy that the formation of transnormativity is related to both the existing social order of class, gender/sexuality, age and region, and also the digitally mediated transgender experience of transfigured time and space. For the former, for instance, knowledge privilege and positive emotion become the moderators of in-community social hierarchies and gender order. For the latter, the production and reproduction of gendered hierarchy are afforded technologically and socially by the platform design under political surveillance and online trans community management on social media. The transnormativity formulated along the social axes and in online trans communities presents individualistic and self-responsibility-oriented normalisation of personal success and bodily aesthetics as the authentic way of doing transgender. Notably, the individualism orientation is conveyed to individuals through the collective meaning-making process in the online trans community. Meanwhile, it is transgender individuals' complex relationships with the structural regulations derived from cisnormativity and transnormativity that allow the agency to emerge.

So, how does Chinese trans people understand and experience transgender agency in an unfriendly society and the growingly normative community? One of my interviewees gave the perfect answer: it is knowing all the structures and turning your head away (Nutalie, trans woman, 20s). This echoes what Mirzoeff says about the right to look and the right to be seen (2011). Agency locates itself in the cracks between structures where individuals achieve autonomy through reflexive thinking and actions. The Foucauldian concept of technology of the self echoes transgender individuals'

autonomy in their pursuit of the authentic self in a context where the social institution and official organisation do not provide guidance and resources for self-identity exploration. This conceptualisation and its contextual precondition make Chinese transgender people's online gender practices a perfect case study. The sense of autonomy is embodied in two forms: constructing the liminality of gendered spatiality and temporality; and practising gender authenticity through mediated gender practice. The liminal social positions of transgender people represent their efforts to survive cisnormative liminality and alternative imaginations of the in-between, trans-figurated, and fluid being of gender (March, 2021). Thus, transgender people's alternative experiences of occupying a spatial and temporal position at, or on both sides of, a boundary or threshold of the gender binary connote a marginal yet revolutionary force challenging the cisnormative hegemony that regulates how people engage with gendered time and space. The technology of the self can also be seen in Chinese transgender individuals' mediated gender practices, including pseudonymous self-naming, self-writing and self-visualisation. This is especially important for Chinese transgender people who cannot fully pass in the transphobic and cisnormative society. Through these mediated gender practices, they are able to apply non-embodied forms of gender expression retrieved from traditional Chinese gender culture, such as the fetishism of gendered objects and traditional gender expression of "*yin* (淫, lewd), *se* (色, lust) and *pi* (癖, obsession)" different from the Western conceptualisation of (trans)gender (Howard Chiang, 2018, p. 9). In the meantime, articulating Chinese transness with Western medical discourse and identity terms and the subcultural symbols from Sinophone societies and neighbouring Asian countries complicates the dehumanisation context in Chinese culture.

In this sense, this thesis seeks to talk to a broader literature of trans studies not only based on Sinophone or other Chinese-speaking societies but also those societies with a relatively conventional political context. While this study focuses only on the trans communities in PRC, I recognise the tension between mainland China and Sinophone societies in the Sinophone critique (Shih, 2007). Instead of trying to generalise the findings to other Chinese-speaking societies, I draw on and echo Sinophone scholars

Chuen-Juei Ho's (2009) and Chwen-Der Lin's (2020) studies on PRC trans communities and cultures that demonstrate the rapidly industrialised yet politically conservative post-socialist China has provided material conditions and cultural multiplicity to imagine gender authenticity from the grassroots and variant gender practices. Invoking the *Shan-Zhai* metaphor of cheap and module-producing copycat made-in-China products, Chuen-Juei Ho (2009) argued that gender subjects in China, which was in the process of globalisation and industrialisation, had the potential to do gender alternatively by articulating and mixing different gender modules, sexual components, cultural symbols and technology materials. While I do not think the post-human cyborg and free gender bending lenses apply fully to Chinese trans communities considering the political-economic changes in recent years, I find strong resonances between my performativity authenticity framework and Ho's *Shan-Zhai* metaphor that both point to trans performativity which neither is nor claims to be original and self-determined truth. Different to Ho and other Sinophone scholars, I capture the complexity of and call for attention to be paid to the emerging trans normativity in the transforming Chinese trans communities that results in hierarchical stratification and regulations over discourse, emotion, knowledge and embodiment. The resonance and difference between my thesis and Sinophone scholars' studies on Chinese trans issues emphasises that the political economy and social context matter as much as, if not more than, the historical-cultural norms of gender. In this regard, this study may shed a broader light on the trans studies based on rapidly changing society and trans communities.

8.5 Limitations and future directions

This thesis represents one of the first attempts to examine the underexplored Chinese transgender experiences, which was conducted in the special circumstances of the global Covid-19 pandemic. It is more exploratory than explanatory and has some limitations and lessons for the consideration of future work in this regard.

First, as discussed in the methods chapter, this thesis adopted snowball sampling when

recruiting interviewees. Although I tried to balance the sample by taking different demographic factors into consideration, the representation of certain more invisible sub-groups is still relatively lacking. For instance, the generation issue: I did not include non-adult transgender people because of the ethical complications and did not manage to reach enough older transgender people. However, trans youths are far more likely to suffer from severe gender dysphoria and are facing different social pressures and bodily growth issues (Gill-Peterson, 2018; Olson, Durwood, DeMeules, & McLaughlin, 2016). Older generations of trans people are also under-represented in this thesis, although I managed to recruit some. This may relate to older trans people's lesser visibility, gender identification means and lower will to be reached out to. Based on my empirical data, older trans people are further marginalised within trans communities because of their lower social-economic status and their 'outdated' identification and gender expressions. Future studies can benefit from foregrounding intersectional examinations of more marginalised trans people. Trans people from underrepresented generations, rural and remote areas, physically challenged and neurodivergent statuses, from cultural and ethnic minorities, and different religious influences are all important demographics to be taken into consideration.

Second, due to the difficulty of conducting trans studies in China during the pandemic, I relied on admins from transgender NGOs to get access to the trans community. The sample could be biased in the sense that a larger proportion of the interviewees maintain a closer relationship with these NGOs. While I made some adjustments to the sampling for my fieldwork to even the representation bias as much as I could, the difficulties of recruiting people who were totally isolated from NGO networks and trans communities made the sample bias an unavoidable weakness. It is thus an urgent topic for future trans media and communication studies to explore the role of digital connectivity in the everyday life and gender practices of trans people who are out of NGO and mainstream trans community reach. Another essential issue with the sampling is that a few of the interviewees had been interviewed by scholars before and were familiar with and thus could be considered semi-professional in terms of research participation. Thus, transgender interviewees' narratives and their interactions

with me might have been performed through and in front of a perceived academic gaze. Considering the invisibility of Chinese trans communities and the sensitivity and thus difficulty of doing Chinese trans studies, addressing data collection and analysis issues of professional interviewees is important to future studies to advance knowledge production.

Third, translating from local experiences of Chinese transgender people into English academic writing is challenging and far from satisfying. This is not solely a literal language translation issue, but also the difficulty of balancing writing for a wider readership who is not familiar with the Chinese trans communities and presenting the context-rich and provincialized discourses and experiences of trans individuals in China. For instance, it was almost impossible to avoid categorising fragmented personal gender narratives into rigid identity terms to generalise and reach an overall conclusion. This causes distortion, although this thesis does not claim to represent the Chinese trans communities as a whole or as homogenous. I hope that this research will lead to more ethical attention being paid to Chinese transgender people from diverse cultural, regional and generational backgrounds so that more localised and detailed empirical studies can build and create a more vivid landscape for the Chinese trans communities.

Fourth, my research focuses on the digital gender practices of Chinese transgender people and contributes to the literature on trans media and communication studies. My fieldwork involved 6 months of offline observation and 50 in-person interviews, alongside the interviews with 25 trans individuals online. However, I did not touch much on the offline lives of transgender people due to the research interests and design. This thesis could be deepened further by asking how Chinese transgender people's online and offline lives intersect, and how potential online/offline divides work in their daily lives. Moreover, this thesis contributes to trans media and communication studies by examining the trans survival and struggle presented on digital platforms and online interactions. Future studies should continue the transgression of the identity/visibility politics lens and extend this knowledge by studying how medical/public health policies and social policies materially shape trans bodies and communities.

This thesis captures the transformative moment of the Chinese trans communities,

as elaborated on in the discussion of the growing normalisation and socio-techno context shift. I have outlined the formation of transnormativity and the way in which it regulates transgender individuals. However, as I mentioned, the period when I conducted this research was one of rapid transformation. It is important for future studies to investigate how transnormativity will further interact with the cisnormative gender order and what the trans communities will be like in the ongoing normalisation process. Also, I have already touched upon the diverse vernacular naming of transness in different regions of China – it would be interesting to further study the discursive echoes and demarcations among different Chinese-speaking trans communities in the Chinese mainland, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and other areas. Examining the border-crossing not only in the gender sense but also from the perspectives of the transregional and historical symbolic flow of trans discourses, medical tourism, and transregional migration can contribute to complicating gender, transgender, Chineseness and the yet-to-come trans/queer nationalism among Chinese/Sinophone societies. Finally, this thesis looked into the everyday digital gender practices and interactions of Chinese transgender people with less visibility to the public, while there is a growing number of trans vloggers on Bilibili, TikTok and other emerging Chinese social media actively producing trans-related content. Critical visual analysis, comparative studies and political economy approaches can provide nuanced insights into the complicated relationships between censorship, prosumer agency, authenticity culture, neoliberal regulations on the body, commodity society and transgender visuality.

Reference

Abbas, Y., & Dervin, F. (2009). *Digital Technologies of the Self*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Abbott, T. B. (2013). The Trans/Romance Dilemma in Transamerica and Other Films. *The Journal of American Culture*, *36*(1), 32–41.

Aberbach, J. D., & Rockman, B. A. (2002). Conducting and Coding Elite Interviews. *PS: Political Science & Politics*, *35*(4), 673–676.

Adoni, H., & Mane, S. (1984). Media and the Social Construction of Reality: Toward an Integration of Theory and Research. *Communication Research*, *11*(3), 323–340.

Adorno, T. (2013). *The Jargon of Authenticity* (2nd Edition). Routledge.

Adorno, T. W., & Horkheimer, M. (1997). *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Vol. 15). Verso.

Adriansen, H. K. (2012). Timeline Interviews: A Tool for Conducting Life History Research. *Qualitative Studies*, *3*(1), 40–55.

Ahmed, A. A. (2018). Trans Competent Interaction Design: A Qualitative Study on Voice, Identity, and Technology. *Interacting with Computers*, *30*(1), 53–71.

Ahmed, S. (2004). Collective Feelings: Or, the Impressions Left by Others. *Theory, Culture & Society*, *21*(2), 25–42.

Ahmed, S. (2014). *Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Edinburgh University Press.

Ahmed, S. (2006). Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others. In *Queer Phenomenology*. Duke University Press.

Aizura, A. Z. (2012). Transnational Transgender Rights and Immigration Law. In *Transfeminist Perspectives in and beyond Transgender and Gender Studies* (pp. 133–150). Temple University Press.

Aizura, A. Z. (2018). *Mobile subjects: Transnational imaginaries of gender reassignment*. Duke University Press.

Akiko, S. (2007). Scandalous Equivocation: A Note on the Politics of Queer Self-Naming. *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, *8*(4), 503–516.

Amin, K. (2014). Temporality. *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, *1*(1–2), 219–222.

Anagnost, A. (2008). From 'Class' to 'Social Strata': Grasping the Social Totality in Reform-Era China. *Third World Quarterly*, *29*(3), 497–519.

Andrews, M., Squire, C., & Tamboukou, M. (Eds.). (2013). *Doing Narrative Research*. Sage.

Andrucki, M. J., & Kaplan, D. J. (2018). Trans Objects: Materializing Queer Time in US Transmasculine Homes. *Gender, Place & Culture*, *25*(6), 781–798.

Arielle, V. (2016). The Role of Name Choice in the Construction of Transgender Identities. *Western Papers in Linguistics*, *1*(2), Article 2.

Austin, A. (2016). "There I am": A Grounded Theory Study of Young Adults Navigating a Transgender or Gender Nonconforming Identity within a Context of Oppression and Invisibility. *Sex Roles*, *75*(5), 215–230.

Austin, A., Craig, S. L., Navega, N., & McInroy, L. B. (2020). It's my safe space: The Life-saving Role of the Internet in the Lives of Transgender and Gender Diverse Youth. *International Journal of Transgender Health*, *21*(1), 33–44.

Austin, J. L. (1962). *How to do things with words*. Oxford University Press.

Baeza Argüello, S., Wakkary, R., Andersen, K., & Tomico, O. (2021). *Exploring the Potential of Apple Face ID as a Drag, Queer and Trans Technology Design Tool*. Designing Interactive Systems Conference 2021, 1654–1667.

Bailey, M. M. (2013). *Butch Queens Up in Pumps: Gender, Performance, and Ballroom Culture in Detroit*. University of Michigan Press.

Bal, M. (2011). Video, Migration, and Hetero-temporality: The Liminality of Time. *Image & Text: A Journal for Design*, *2011*(17), 14–28.

Banaji, S. (2017). *Children and Media in India: Narratives of Class, Agency and Social Change* (1st ed.). Routledge.

Banet-Weiser, S. (2012). *Authentic TM: The Politics of Ambivalence in a Brand Culture*. NYU Press.

Bao, H. (2013). A Queer 'Comrade' in Sydney: Chineseness, Queer Desire and

Homonationalism. *Interventions*, *15*(1), 127–140.

Bao, H. (2018a). *Queer Comrades: Gay Identity and Tongzhi Activism in Postsocialist China*. NIAS press.

Bao, H. (2018b). 'Shanghai is burning': Extravaganza, Transgender Representation and Transnational Cinema. *Global Media and China*, *3*(4), 233–255.

Bao, H. (2020). *Queer China: Lesbian and Gay Literature and Visual Culture under Postsocialism*. Taylor & Francis.

Bao, H. (2021a). "A cool kid" Queer Theory Travels to China. *Translation and Interpreting Studies*, *16*(2), 219–239.

Bao, H. (2021b). *Queer Media in China*. Routledge.

Bao, H. (2022). Ways of Seeing Transgender in Independent Chinese Cinema. *Feminist Media Studies*, *22*(5), 1278–1281.

Barad, K. (2015). Trans Materialities. *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, *21*(2–3), 387–422.

Barcelos, C. A. (2019). 'Bye-bye boobies': Normativity, Deservingness and Medicalisation in Transgender Medical Crowdfunding. *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, *21*(12), 1394–1408.

Baril, A. (2018). Confessing Society, Confessing Cis-tem: Rethinking Consent through Intimate Images of Trans* People in the Media. *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, *39*(2), 1–25.

Barker-Plummer, B. (2013). Fixing Gwen. *Feminist Media Studies*, *13*(4), 710–724.

Baudrillard, J. (1994). *Simulacra and simulation*. University of Michigan press.

Bear Bergman, S., & Barker, M. J. (2017). Non-binary Activism. In C. Richards, W. P. Bouman, & M. J. Barker (Eds.), *Genderqueer and Non-Binary Genders* (pp. 31–51). Palgrave Macmillan UK.

Beauchamp, T. (2009). Artful Concealment and Strategic Visibility: Transgender Bodies and U.S. State Surveillance After 9/11. *Surveillance & Society*, *6*(4), 356–366.

Beemyn, G., & Rankin, S. (2011). *The Lives of Transgender People*. Columbia University Press.

Bem, S. L. (1993). *The Lenses of Gender: Transforming the Debate on Sexual Inequality*. Yale University Press.

Benjamin, H., Lal, G. B., Green, R., & Masters, R. E. (1966). *The transsexual phenomenon* (Vol. 966). New York: Julian Press.

Berman, M. (2009). *The Politics of Authenticity: Radical Individualism and the Emergence of Modern Society*. Verso Books.

Bernotaite, A., Berredo, L., & Zhuo, H. c. (2018). Chinese Trans Advocates Organize Nationally: A Conference Report. *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, *5*(3), 473–486.

Berry, C. (2004). *Postsocialist Cinema in Post-Mao China*. Routledge.

Berry, D. M., & Dieter, M. (2015). Thinking Postdigital Aesthetics: Art, Computation and Design. In D. M. Berry & M. Dieter (Eds.), *Postdigital Aesthetics* (pp. 1–11). Palgrave Macmillan UK.

Bettcher, T. M. (2014). Trapped in the Wrong Theory: Rethinking Trans Oppression and Resistance. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, *39*(2), 383–406.

Bhabha, H. K. (1990). *Nation and narration. London and New York: Routledge.*

Bian, Y. (2002). Chinese Social Stratification and Social Mobility. *Annual Review of Sociology*, *28*(1), 91–116.

Billard, T. J. (2016). Writing in the Margins: Mainstream News Media Representations of Transgenderism. *International Journal of Communication*, *9*(10), 4193–4218.

Billard, T. J. (2022). Together We Rise: The Role of Communication and Community Connectedness in Transgender Citizens' Civic Engagement in the United States. *Mass Communication and Society*, *25*(3), 335–360.

Billard, T. J., Everhart, A. R., & Zhang, E. (2022). Whither Trans Studies?: On Fields, Post-Disciplines, and the Need for an Applied Transgender Studies. *Bulletin of Applied Transgender Studies*, 1(1–2), 1–18.

Billard, T. J., & Nesfield, S. (2020). (Re)making "Transgender" Identities in Global Media and Popular Culture. In *Trans Lives in a Globalizing World*. Routledge.

Billard, T. J., & Zhang, E. (2022). Toward a Transgender Critique of Media Representation. *JCMS: Journal of Cinema and Media Studies*, *61*(2), 194–199.

Bivens, R. (2017). The Gender Binary Will Not be Deprogrammed: Ten Years of Coding Gender on Facebook. *New Media & Society*, *19*(6), 880–898.

Boellstorff, T., Cabral, M., Cárdenas, M., Cotten, T., Stanley, E. A., Young, K., & Aizura, A. Z. (2014). Decolonizing Transgender: A Roundtable Discussion. *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, *1*(3), 419–439.

Booth, E. T. (2011). Queering *Queer Eye*: The Stability of Gay Identity Confronts the Liminality of Trans Embodiment. *Western Journal of Communication*, *75*(2), 185–204.

Bornstein, K. (1994). *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women, and the Rest of Us*. Routledge.

Bowling, J., Dodge, B., Banik, S., Bartelt, E., Mengle, S., Guerra-Reyes, L., & Anand, V. (2018). Social Support Relationships for Sexual Minority Women in Mumbai, India: A Photo Elicitation Interview Study. *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, *20*(2), 183–200.

Bradford, N. J., & Syed, M. (2019). Transnormativity and Transgender Identity Development: A Master Narrative Approach. *Sex Roles*, *81*(5), 306–325.

Braidotti, R. (2011). *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*. Columbia University Press.

Braidotti, R. (2013). *The Posthuman*. John Wiley & Sons.

Brannen, J. (2013). Life Story Talk: Some Reflections on Narrative in Qualitative Interviews. *Sociological Research Online*, *18*(2), 48-58.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*(2), 77-101.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2022). *Thematic Analysis: A Pratical Guide.* Sage.

Bray, D. (2005). *Social Space and Governance in Urban China: The Danwei System from Origins to Reform*. Stanford University Press.

Broom, A., Hand, K., & Tovey, P. (2009). The Role of Gender, Environment and Individual Biography in Shaping Qualitative Interview Data. I*nternational*

Journal of Social Research Methodology, *12*(1), 51-65.

Browne, K., & Lim, J. (2010). Trans Lives in the 'Gay Capital of the UK'. *Gender, Place & Culture*, *17*(5), 615–633.

Budge, S. L., Adelson, J. L., & Howard, K. A. S. (2013). Anxiety and Depression in Transgender Individuals: The Roles of Transition Status, Loss, Social Support, and Coping. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, *81*(3), 545–557.

Burke, M. M. (2018). Gender as Lived Time: Reading the Second Sex for a Feminist Phenomenology of Temporality. *Hypatia*, *33*(1), 111–127.

Burkitt, I. (2002). Technologies of the Self: Habitus and Capacities. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, *32*(2), 219–237.

Burton-Rose, D. (2012). Gendered Androgyny: Transcendent Ideals and Profane Realities in Buddhism, Classicism, and Daoism. In H. Chiang (Ed.), *Transgender China* (pp. 67–95). Palgrave Macmillan.

Buss, J., Le, H., & Haimson, O. L. (2021). Transgender Identity Management Across Social Media Platforms. *Media, Culture & Society*, 22–38.

Butler, J. (1988). Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory. *Theatre Journal*, *40*(4), 519.

Butler, J. (1994) Gender and Performance: An Interview with Judith Butler, with Peter Osborne and Lynne Segal in London, 1993. *Radical Philosophy*, 67, 32–39. http://www.theory.org.uk/ but-int1.htm.

Butler, J. (1999). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge.

Butler, J. (2004). *Undoing Gender*. Routledge.

Butler, J. (2011). *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*. Routledge.

Cai, Y., Wang, Z., Lau, J. T., Li, J., Ma, T., & Liu, Y. (2016). Prevalence and associated factors of condomless receptive anal intercourse with male clients among transgender women sex workers in Shenyang, China. *Journal of the International AIDS Society*, *19*(3S2), 368-389.

Cannon, Y., Speedlin, S., Avera, J., Robertson, D., Ingram, M., & Prado, A. (2017). Transition, Connection, Disconnection, and Social Media: Examining the Digital

Lived Experiences of Transgender Individuals. *Journal of LGBT Issues in Counseling*, *11*(2), 68–87.

Cavalcante, A. (2016). " *I Did It All Online:* " Transgender Identity and the Management of Everyday Life. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, *33*(1), 109–122.

Cavalcante, A. (2018). *Struggling for Ordinary: Media and Transgender Belonging in Everyday Life*. NYU Press.

Chamberlayne, P., Rustin, M., & Wengraf, T. (Eds.). (2002). *Biography and Social Exclusion in Europe: Experiences and Life Journeys*. Policy Press.

Chao, S. (2017). Cosplay, Cuteness, and Weiniang. In M. Lavin, L. Yang, & J. J. Zhao (Eds.), *Boys' Love, Cosplay, and Androgynous Idols: Queer Fan Cultures in Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan* (Vol. 20). Hong Kong University Press.

Chatterjee, S. (2018). Transgender Shifts. *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, *5*(3), 311–320.

Chen, N., & Feng, L. (2018). Media Living Circumstances of Transgender Group and Communication Strategy. *Gender and Literature*, *3*(15): 113-117.

Chen, T. M. (2001). Dressing for the Party: Clothing, Citizenship, and Gender-formation in Mao's China. *Fashion Theory*, *5*(2), 143–171.

Chiang, H. (2012). *Transgender China*. Springer.

Chiang, H. (2014). Sinophone. *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, *1*(1–2), 184–187.

Chiang, H. (2018). *After Eunuchs: Science, Medicine, and the Transformation of Sex in Modern China*. Columbia University Press.

Chiang, H. (2021). *Transtopia in the Sinophone Pacific*. Columbia University Press.

Chou, W. S. (2001). Homosexuality and the Cultural Politics of Tongzhi in Chinese Societies. In *Gay and Lesbian Asia: Culture, identity, community*. Routledge.

Chow, Y. F. (2018). Yao, More or Less Human. *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, *5*(3), 464–472.

Ciszek, E., Haven, P., & Logan, N. (2021). Amplification and the Limits of Visibility:

Complicating Strategies of Trans Voice and Representations on Social Media. *New Media & Society*, *00*(0), 1–21.

Connell, R. (2009). Accountable Conduct: "Doing Gender" in Transsexual and Political Retrospect. *Gender & Society*, *23*(1), 104-111.

Connell, C. (2010). Doing, Undoing, or Redoing Gender? Learning from the Workplace Experiences of Transpeople. *Gender and Society*, *24*(1), 31–55.

Connell, R., Pearse, R. (2015) Gender Norms: Are They the Enemy of Women's Rights?. Geneva: UNRISD. Publicado en línea. Available at: http://www. unrisd. org/beijing.

Corfman, S. B. (2020). Melting Muscles: Cassils's Tiresias at the Intersection of Affect and Gendered Embodiment. *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, *7*(1), 5–19.

Couldry, N., & Hepp, A. (2018). *The Mediated Construction of Reality*. John Wiley & Sons.

Crawford, L. (2016). "I'll call him Mahood instead, I prefer that, I'm queer": Samuel Beckett's Spatial Aesthetic of Name Change. In Y. M. S. Miguel & S. Tobias (Eds.), *Trans Studies: The Challenge to Hetero/Homo Normativities*. Rutgers University Press.

Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color. *Stanford Law Review*, *43*(6), 1241–1300.

Crenshaw, N., & Nardi, B. (2014, October). What's in a name?: Naming Practices in Online Video Games. *Proceedings of the First ACM SIGCHI Annual Symposium on Computer-Human Interaction in Play*, 67–76.

Currah, P., & Mulqueen, T. (2011). Securitizing Gender: Identity, Biometrics, and Transgender Bodies at the Airport. *Social Research: An International Quarterly*, *78*(2), 557–582.

Daly, M. (2016). *Gyn/ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*. Beacon Press.

Dame, A. (2016). Making a name for yourself: Tagging as Transgender Ontological Practice on Tumblr. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, *33*(1), 23–37.

Dasgupta, R. (2003). Creating Corporate Warriors: The "salaryman" and masculinity

in Japan. In *Asian Masculinities* (pp. 118–134). Routledge.

Dauncey, S. (2020). *Disability in Contemporary China: Citizenship, Identity and Culture*. Cambridge University Press.

David, E. (2020). Fantasies of Elsewhere. *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, *7*(1), 132–139.

Davidson, M. (2007). Seeking refuge under the umbrella: Inclusion, exclusion, and organizing within the category transgender. *Sexuality Research & Social Policy*, *4*, 60-80.

Davies, G., & Davies, M. E. (2010). Jin Xing: China's Transsexual Star of Dance. *Celebrity in China*, *1*, 169.

Davis, E., Greenberger, E., Charles, S., Chen, C., Zhao, L., & Dong, Q. (2012). Emotion Experience and Regulation in China and the United States: How Do Culture and Gender Shape Emotion Responding? *International Journal of Psychology*, *47*(3), 230–239.

De Beauvoir, S. (1973). *The Second Sex*. New York: Vintage.

De Lauretis, T. (1987). The Female Body and Heterosexual Presumption. *Semiotica*, *67*(3-4), 259-79

De Pina-Cabral, J. (2010). The Truth of Personal Names. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, *16*(2), 297–312.

de Vries, K. M. (2015). Transgender People of Color at the Center: Conceptualizing a New Intersectional Model. *Ethnicities*, *15*(1), 3–27.

Deleuze, G. 1993. In T. Conley (trans.), *The Fold. Leibniz and the Baroque* (p. 132). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Deleuze, G., & Guattari, F. (1988). *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

Derrida, J. (1986). Signature, Event, Context. In G. Graff (Ed.), *Limited Inc* (pp. 1–23). Northwestern University Press.

Deseriis, M. (2015). *Improper Names: Collective Pseudonyms from the Luddites to Anonymous*. U of Minnesota Press.

Dhir, A., Pallesen, S., Torsheim, T., & Andreassen, C. S. (2016). Do Age and Gender

Differences Exist in Selfie-related Behaviours? *Computers in Human Behavior*, *63*, 549–555.

Dietz, M. G. (2003). Current Controversies in Feminist Theory. *Annual Review of Political Science*, *6*(1), 399–431.

Dinshaw, C., Edelman, L., Ferguson, R. A., Freccero, C., Freeman, E., Halberstam, J., ... & Nguyen, T. H. (2007). Theorizing Queer Temporalities: A Roundtable Discussion. *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, *13*(2), 177-195.

Doan, P. L. (2007). Queers in the American City: Transgendered Perceptions of Urban Space. *Gender, Place & Culture*, *14*(1), 57–74.

Doan, P. L. (2010). The Tyranny of Gendered Spaces–reflections from beyond the Gender Dichotomy. *Gender, Place & Culture*, *17*(5), 635-654.

Dosekun, S. (2015). For western girls only? Post-feminism as transnational culture. *Feminist Media Studies*, *15*(6), 960-975.

Drucker, P. (2009). Changing Families and Communities: An LGBT Contribution to An Alternative Development Path. *Development in Practice*, *19*(7), 825–836.

Dubrofsky, R. E. (2022). *Authenticating Whiteness: Karens, Selfies, and Pop Stars*. University Press of Mississippi.

Ducheneaut, N., Wen, M.-H., Yee, N., & Wadley, G. (2009, April). Body and Mind: A Study of Avatar Personalization in Three Virtual Worlds. *Proceedings of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems* (pp. 1151–1160).

Dutta, A., & Roy, R. (2014). Decolonizing Transgender in India: Some Reflections. *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, *1*(3), 320–337.

Dutta, S., Khan, S., & Lorway, R. (2019). Following the Divine: An Ethnographic Study of Structural Violence Among Transgender *Jogappas* in South India. *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, *21*(11), 1240–1256.

Eagleton, T. (1997). The Contradictions of Postmodernism. *New Literary History*, *28*(1), 1–6.

Eckstein, A. J. (2018). Out of Sync: Complex Temporality in Transgender Men's YouTube Transition Channels. *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking*, *5*(1), 24–47.

Edelman, L. (2004). *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Duke University Press.

Ekins, R., & King, D. (2010). The Emergence of New Transgendering Identities in the Age of the Internet. In *Transgender Identities* (pp. 39–54). Routledge.

Elliot, P. (2010). *Debates in Transgender, Queer, and Feminist Theory: Contested Sites*. Taylor & Francis.

Ellison, N., Heino, R., & Gibbs, J. (2006). Managing Impressions Online: Self-Presentation Processes in the Online Dating Environment. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, *11*(2), 415–441.

Emmelhainz, C. (2012). Naming A New Self: Identity Elasticity and Self-definition in Voluntary Name Changes. *Names*, *60*(3), 156-165.

Enke, F. (2012). *Transfeminist Perspectives in and beyond Transgender and Gender Studies*. Temple University Press.

Enli, G. (2015). *Mediated Authenticity: How the Media Constructs Reality*. New York: Peter Lang Verlag.

Fan, F., Su, L., Gill, M. K., & Birmaher, B. (2010). Emotional and Behavioral Problems of Chinese Left-behind Children: A Preliminary Study. *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology*, *45*(6), 655–664.

Farber, R. (2017). 'Transing' Fitness and Remapping Transgender Male Masculinity in Online Message Boards. *Journal of Gender Studies*, *26*(3), 254–268.

Farnel, M. (2015). Kickstarting Trans*: The Crowdfunding of Gender/Sexual Reassignment Surgeries. *New Media & Society*, *17*(2), 215-230.

Ferreday, D., & Lock, S. (2007). Computer cross-dressing: Queering the virtual subject. *Queer online: Media, technology & sexuality*, *40*(1), 155–174.

Fischer, M. (2019). *Terrorizing gender: Transgender visibility and the surveillance practices of the US security state*. U of Nebraska Press.

Foucault, M. (1984). What is Enlightenment? In P. Rabinow (Ed.), *The Foucault Reader* (pp. 32–50). Pantheon Books.

Foucault, M. (1997). The Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom. *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, *1*, 1954–1984.

Foucault, M. (1998). What Is an Author? In J. Faubion (Ed.), & R. Hurley (Trans.), *Aesthetics, Methods, and Epistemology* (4th ed., pp. 205–222). The New Press.

Foucault, M. (2000). *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences. In Posthumanism* (pp. 27–29). Palgrave, London.

Foucault, M. (2005). *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France 1981–1982* (Vol. 9). Palgrave Macmillan.

Frankfurt, H. G. (2009). *On Bullshit*. Princeton University Press.

Freeman, G., & Acena, D. (2022). 'Acting Out' Queer Identity: The Embodied Visibility in Social Virtual Reality. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, *6*(CSCW2), 1–32.

Frosh, S. (2002). *After Words: The Personal in Gender, Culture, and Psychotherapy*. London: Palgrave.

Fu, K., Chan, C., & Chau, M. (2013). Assessing Censorship on Microblogs in China: Discriminatory Keyword Analysis and the Real-name Registration Policy. *IEEE Internet Computing*, *17*(3), 42-50.

Gagné, P., & Tewksbury, R. (1999). Knowledge and Power, Body and Self: An Analysis of Knowledge System and the Transgendered Self. *The Sociological Quarterly*, *40*(1), 59–83.

Gambetti, Z. (2022). Queering Performativity. *Representations*, *158*(1), 64–76.

Gamson, W. A., Croteau, D., Hoynes, W., & Sasson, T. (1992). Media Images and the Social Construction of Reality. *Annual Review of Sociology*, *18*, 373–393.

Ghazali, S., & Nor, A. M. (2007). Media Roles in Male-to-Female Transsexual Identity Formation Among University Students in Malaysia. In *2012 International Conference on Humanity, History and Society* (IPEDR vol. 34, pp. 184–190). IACSIT Press.

Gieseking, J. J. (2017). Messing with the Attractiveness Algorithm: A Response to Queering Code/space. *Gender, Place & Culture*, *24*(11), 1659–1665.

Gill-Peterson, J. (2014). The Technical Capacities of the Body: Assembling Race, Technology, and Transgender. *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, *1*(3), 402–418.

Gill-Peterson, J. (2018). *Histories of the Transgender Child*. U of Minnesota Press.

Glover, D., & Kaplan, C. (2008). *Genders: The New Critical Idiom*. Taylor & Francis.

Goetz, T. G. (2022). Self(ie)-Recognition: Authenticity, Passing, and Trans Embodied Imaginaries. *Studies in Gender and Sexuality*, *23*(4), 256–278.

Gonsalves, T. (2020). Gender Identity, the Sexed Body, and the Medical Making of Transgender. *Gender & Society*, *34*(6), 1005–1033.

Goodson, I., & Sikes, P. J. (2001). *Life History Research in Educational Settings: Learning from Lives*. Open University Press.

Gossett, R. (2017). *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibilty*. MIT Press.

Gray, K. L. (2012). Intersecting Oppressions and Online Communities: Examining the Experiences of Women of Color in Xbox Live. *Information, Communication & Society*, *15*(3), 411–428.

Greaf, C. (2016). Drag queens and gender identity. *Journal of Gender Studies*, *25*(6), 655–665.

Green, R., & Money, J. (1969). *Transsexualism and Sex Reassignment*. Johns Hopkins University Press.

Greenberg, S. (2020). A Timeline of Our Own. *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, *7*(2), 288–295.

Grossberg, L. (1986). On Postmodernism and Articulation: An Interview with Stuart Hall. *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, *10*(2), 45–60.

Guarnera, L., Giudice, O., & Battiato, S. (2020). Fighting Deepfake by Exposing the Convolutional Traces on Images. *IEEE Access*, *8*, 165085–165098.

Gubrium, J. F., & Holstein, J. A. (2009). *Analyzing Narrative Reality*. Sage.

Guest, G., MacQueen, K. M., & Namey, E. E. (2011). *Applied thematic analysis*. Sage Publications.

Guignon, C. (2004). *On Being Authentic*. Routledge.

Hagström, C. (2012). Naming Me, Naming You. Personal Names, Online Signatures and Cultural Meaning. *Oslo Studies in Language*, *4*(2), 81-93.

Haimson, O. L., Brubaker, J. R., Dombrowski, L., & Hayes, G. R. (2016). Digital

Footprints and Changing Networks During Online Identity Transitions. *Proceedings of the 2016 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems* (pp. 2895–2907).

Haimson, O. L., Dame-Griff, A., Capello, E., & Richter, Z. (2019). Tumblr Was a Trans Technology: The Meaning, Importance, History, and Future of Trans Technologies. *Feminist Media Studies*, *0*(0), 1–17.

Haimson, O. L., Gorrell, D., Starks, D. L., & Weinger, Z. (2020). Designing Trans Technology: Defining Challenges and Envisioning Community-Centered Solutions. *Proceedings of the 2020 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems* (pp. 1–13).

Haimson, O. L., & Hoffmann, A. L. (2016). Constructing and Enforcing 'Authentic' Identity Online: Facebook, Real Names, and Non-normative Identities. *First Monday*.

Haimson, O. L. (2018). Social Media as Social Transition Machinery. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction* 2(CSCW): 63:1-63:21.

Haimson, O. L., & Veinot, T. C. (2020). Coming Out to Doctors, Coming Out to "Everyone": Understanding the Average Sequence of Transgender Identity Disclosures Using Social Media Data. *Transgender Health*, *5*(3), 158–165.

Halberstam, J. (1995). *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters*. Duke University Press.

Halberstam, J. (1998). *Female Masculinity*. Duke University Press.

Halberstam, J. (2005). *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. NYU Press.

Halberstam, J. (2016). Trans*—Gender Transitivity and New Configurations of Body, History, Memory and Kinship. *Parallax*, *22*(3), 366–375.

Halberstam, J. (2018). *Trans: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability*. Univ of California Press.

Halberstam, J. (2022). Gender Trouble in Paradise. *Representations*, *158*(1), 17–29.

Hall, S. (1985). Signification, representation, ideology: Althusser and the post-structuralist debates. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, *2*(2), 91–114.

Harry, B. (2006). The Transsexual Phenomenon. In S. Stryker (Ed.) *The Transgender Studies Reader* (pp. 45–52). London: Routledge.

Harrison, D. (2010). No body there: Notes on the queer migration to cyberspace. *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 43(2), 286-308.

Harsin Drager, E., & Platero, L. (2021). At the Margins of Time and Place: Transsexuals and the Transvestites in Trans Studies. *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, *8*(4), 417–425.

Hartmann, M. (2006). The Triple Articulation of ICTs. Media as Technological Objects, Symbolic Environments and Individual Texts. *Domestication of Media and Technology*, 80–102.

Harvey D (2006) Space as a Keyword. In: *David Harvey*. John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, pp. 70–93.

Hatchel, T., & Marx, R. (2018). Understanding Intersectionality and Resiliency among Transgender Adolescents: Exploring Pathways among Peer Victimization, School Belonging, and Drug Use. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, *15*(6), Article 6.

Hatfield, J. E. (2021). Trans* media ecology: The emergence of gender variant selfies in print. *Explorations in Media Ecology*, *20*(2), 151–174.

Hausman, B. L. (2001). Recent transgender theory. *Feminist Studies*, *27*(2), 465–490.

Hawley, J. C. (2013). Trans autobiographies as performative utterances. In *Transgender Experience* (pp. 149–164). Routledge.

He, C. (2014). Performance and the politics of gender: Transgender performance in contemporary Chinese films. *Gender, Place & Culture*, *21*(5), 622–636.

Hegarty, B. (2017). The Value of Transgender. *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, *4*(1), 78–95.

Hegland, J. E., & Nelson, N. J. (2002). Cross-dressers in Cyber-space: Exploring the Internet as a Tool for Expressing Gendered Identity. *International Journal of Sexuality and Gender Studies*, *7*(2), 139–161.

Heidegger, M. (1967). *Being and Time*. Blackwell.

Hekman, S. J. (2013). *Gender and Knowledge: Elements of a Postmodern Feminism*.

John Wiley & Sons.

Hellwig, M. (2017). [Review of the book *Mediated Authenticity. How the Media Constructs Reality*, by G. Enli]. *The Journal of Media Innovations*, *4*, 82.

Helsper, E. (2021). *The Digital Disconnect: The Social Causes and Consequences of Digital Inequalities.* Sage Publication.

Hershatter, G. (2002). The Gender of Memory: Rural Chinese Women and the 1950s. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, *28*(1), 43–70.

Hershatter, G. (2011). *The Gender of Memory: Rural Women and China's Collective Past* (Vol. 8). Univ of California Press.

Hess, A. (2015). Selfies| the selfie assemblage. *International Journal of Communication*, *9*, 18.

Hesse-Biber, S. N., & Leavy, P. L. (2007). *Feminist Research Practice: A Primer*. Sage Publication.

Heyes, C. J. (2003). Feminist Solidarity after Queer Theory: The Case of Transgender. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, *28*(4), 1093–1120.

Hildebrandt, T. (2011). The Political Economy of Social Organization Registration in China. *The China Quarterly*, *208*, 970–989.

Hildebrandt, T. (2012). Development and Division: The Effect of Transnational Linkages and Local Politics on LGBT Activism in China. *Journal of Contemporary China*, *21*(77), 845–862.

Hildebrandt, T. (2019). The One-Child Policy, Elder Care, and LGB Chinese: A Social Policy Explanation for Family Pressure. *Journal of Homosexuality*, *66*(5), 590–608.

Hildebrandt, T., & Chua, L. J. (2017). Negotiating In/visibility: The Political Economy of Lesbian Activism and Rights Advocacy. *Development and Change*, *48*(4), 639–662.

Hines, S. (2006). What's the Difference? Bringing Particularity to Queer Studies of Transgender. *Journal of Gender Studies*, *15*(1), 49-66.

Hines, S. (2007). *TransForming Gender: Transgender Practices of Identity, Intimacy*

and Care. Policy Press.

Hines, S. (2010). Queerly Situated? Exploring Negotiations of Trans Queer
Subjectivities at Work and within Community Spaces in the UK. *Gender, Place & Culture*, *17*(5), 597-613.

Hines, S. (2020). Sex Wars and (Trans) Gender Panics: Identity and Body Politics in Contemporary UK Feminism. *The Sociological Review*, *68*(4), 699-717.

Hinsch, B. (1990). *Passions of the Cut Sleeve: The Male Homosexual Tradition in China*. University of California Press.

Hird, M. J. (2002). For a Sociology of Transsexualism. *Sociology*, 36(3), 577-595.

Ho J. C. (2009, December 5). *Shanzhai Sex/Gender: Modularization and Contemporary Sex/Gender Produciton.* Available at:
https://sex.ncu.edu.tw/jo_article/2009/12/山寨性／別：模組化與當代性／別生產/

Hochschild, A. R. (1979). Emotion Work, Feeling Rules, and Social Structure. *American Journal of Sociology*, *85*(3), 551-575.

Hogan, S., Romaniuk, J., & Faulkner, M. (2016). Comparing Approaches to Elicit Brand Attributes Both Face-to-face and Online. *International Journal of Market Research*, *58*(1), 57-78.

Horak, L. (2014). Trans on YouTube: Intimacy, Visibility, Temporality. *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, *1*(4), 572–585.

Hu, Y. (2018). Patriarchal Hierarchy? Gender, Children's Housework Time, and Family Structure in Post-Reform China. *Chinese Sociological Review*, *50*(3), 310–338.

Huang, A. (2015). On the Surface: T and Transgender Identity in Chinese Lesbian Culture. In E. Engebretsen, W. Schroeder, & H. Bao (Eds.), *Queer/Tongzhi China: New Perspectives on Research, Activism and Media Cultures*. NIAS Press.

Huang, P. C. C. (2011). The Modern Chinese Family: In Light of Economic and Legal History. *Modern China*, *37*(5), 459–497.

Iqani, M., & Schroeder, J. E. (2016). #selfie: Digital Self-portraits as Commodity

Form and Consumption Practice. *Consumption Markets & Culture*, *19*(5), 405–415.

Irni, S. (2013). Sex, Power and Ontology: Exploring the Performativity of Hormones. *NORA-Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research*, *21*(1), 41-56.

Israeli-Nevo, A. (2017). Taking (my) Time: Temporality in Transition, Queer Delays and Being (in the) Present. *Somatechnics*, 7(1), 34-49.

Jackson, P. (2003). Performative genders, perverse desires. *Intersections: Gender, History and Culture in the Asian Context*, *9*.

Jagger, G. (2008). *Judith Butler: Sexual politics, social change and the power of the performative*. Routledge.

Jagose, A. (1996). *Queer Theory: An Introduction*. NYU Press.

Jenzen, O. (2017). Trans Youth and Social Media: Moving between Counterpublics and the Wider Web. *Gender, Place & Culture*, *24*(11), 1626–1641.

Jia, L., & Zhou, O. T. (2015). Regulation of homosexuality in the Chinese media scene. Available at: https://theasiadialogue.com/2015/07/28/regulation-of-homosexuality-in-the-chinese-mediascene/

Jiao, L. (2021). Distinguishing Insiders and Outsiders: Alternative Representations of LGBT in the China Daily (1991–2019). *Communication and Society*, *57*, 53–93.

Jimroglou, K. M. (1999). A Camera with a View: JenniCAM, Visual Representation, and Cyborg Subjectivity. *Information, Communication & Society*, *2*(4), 439–453.

Johnson, A. H. (2016). Transnormativity: A New Concept and Its Validation through Documentary Film About Transgender Men. *Sociological Inquiry*, *86*(4), 465–491.

Johnson, A. H., Rogers, B. A., & Taylor, T. (2021). *Advances in Trans Studies: Moving Toward Gender Expansion and Trans Hope*. Emerald Publishing Limited.

Johnson, J. R. (2013). Cisgender Privilege, Intersectionality, and the Criminalization of CeCe McDonald: Why Intercultural Communication Needs Transgender Studies. *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication*, *6*(2), 135–

144.

Jones, L. (2019). Discourses of Transnormativity in Vloggers' Identity Construction. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, *2019*(256), 85–101.

Jun, P. (2010). Transgender in China. *Journal of LGBT Youth*, *7*(4), 346–358.

Jung, C. G. (1973). *Collected works of CG Jung: The first complete English edition of the works of CG Jung*. Routledge.

Kang, W. (2009). *Obsession: Male Same-Sex Relations in China, 1900-1950*. Hong Kong University Press.

Keegan, C. M. (2018). Getting Disciplined: What's Trans* About Queer Studies Now? *Journal of Homosexuality*, *67*(3), 384–397.

Keegan, C. M. (2020). Against Queer Theory. *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, *7*(3), 349–353.

Keegan, C. M., Horak, L., & Steinbock, E. (2018). Cinematic/Trans*/Bodies Now (and Then, and to Come). *Somatechnics*, *8*(1), 1–13.

Koch-Rein, A., Haschemi Yekani, E., & Verlinden, J. J. (2020). Representing trans: Visibility and its discontents. *European Journal of English Studies*, *24*(1), 1–12.

Kong, T. S. K. (2019). Transnational Queer Sociological Analysis of Sexual Identity and Civic-political Activism in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Mainland China. *The British Journal of Sociology*, *70*(5), 1904–1925.

Kraidy, M. M. (2013). The Body As Medium in the Digital Age: Challenges and Opportunities. *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, *10*(2–3), 285–290.

Kreber, C., Klampfleitner, M., McCune, V., Bayne, S., & Knottenbelt, M. (2007). What Do You Mean By "Authentic"? A Comparative Review of the Literature On Conceptions of Authenticity in Teaching. *Adult Education Quarterly*, *58*(1), 22–43.

Kunzel, R. (2014). The Flourishing of Transgender Studies. *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, *1*(1–2), 285–297.

Kvale, S. (1994). *Interviews: An Introduction to Qualitative Research Interviewing*. Sage Publications Inc.

Kvale, S., & Brinkmann, S. (2009). *Interviews: Learning the Craft of Qualitative*

Research Interviewing. Sage Publication Inc.

Lampe, N. M., Carter, S. K., & Sumerau, J. E. (2019). Continuity and Change in Gender Frames: The Case of Transgender Reproduction. *Gender & Society*, *33*(6), 865–887.

Lane, R. (2016). Reading Trans Biology as a Feminist Sociologist. *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, *3*(1–2), 185–191.

Latham, J. R. (2019). Axiomatic: Constituting 'Transexuality' and Trans Sexualities in Medicine. *Sexualities*, *22*(1–2), 13–30.

Lavin, M., Yang, L., & Zhao, J. J. (Eds.). (2017). *Boys' love, cosplay, and androgynous idols: Queer fan cultures in Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan*. Hong Kong University Press.

Lee, C. J. (2020). Undetectability in a Time of Trans Visibility. *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, *7*(4), 561–572.

Lee, J. A., & Liu, C. Y. (2016). Real-name registration rules and the fading digital anonymity in China. *Washington International Law Journal*, *25*(1): 1–34.

Levinson, P. (2014). *Real Space: The Fate of Physical Presence in the Digital Age, On and Off Planet*. Routledge.

Li, E. C. (2015). Approaching Transnational Chinese Queer Stardom as Zhongxing ('Neutral Sex/Gender') Sensibility. *East Asian Journal of Popular Culture*, *1*(1), 75–95.

Liamputtong, P. (2007). *Researching the Vulnerable: A Guide to Sensitive Research Methods*. Sage.

Lin, D. C.-D. (2020). Flamboyantly Yao: Shanzhai Gender/Sexual Modularization among Contemporary Chinese Yaos. *Chung-Wai Literary Quarterly*, *49*(4), 67–124.

Lingel, J. (2020). Dazzle Camouflage as Queer Counter Conduct. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, *24*(5), 1107-1124.

Liu, J. P., & Ding, N. (2005). Reticent Poetics, Queer Politics. *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, *6*(1), 30–55.

Liu, P. (2010). Why Does Queer Theory Need China? *Positions: East Asia Cultures*

Critique, *18*(2), 291–320.

Liu, S. (2022). Negotiating the Non-Negotiable: Debating Transgender Issues on Chinese Social Media. In *LGBTQ Digital Cultures* (pp. 101–115). Routledge.

Lobinger, K., & Brantner, C. (2015). Selfies| In the Eye of the Beholder: Subjective Views on the Authenticity of Selfies. *International Journal of Communication*, *9*, 13.

Lodge, R. (2017). Trans sites of self-exploration: From print autobiographies to blogs. *Queer Studies in Media & Popular Culture*, *2*(1), 49–71.

Lu, H., & Lu, S. H. (2001). *China, Transnational Visuality, Global Postmodernity*. Stanford University Press.

Lutz, C., & White, G. M. (1986). The anthropology of emotions. *Annual review of anthropology*, *15*(1), 405-436.

MacAulay, M., & Moldes, M. D. (2016). Queen Don't Compute: Reading and Casting Shade on Facebook's Real Names Policy. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, *33*(1), 6–22.

MacNeil, H. M., & Mak, B. (2007). Constructions of Authenticity. *Library Trends*, *56*(1), 26–52.

Mahfouda, S., Moore, J. K., Siafarikas, A., Zepf, F. D., & Lin, A. (2017). Puberty Suppression in Transgender Children and Adolescents. *The Lancet Diabetes & Endocrinology*, *5*(10), 816–826.

Malatino, H. (2017). Biohacking Gender: *Cyborgs, Coloniality, and the Pharmacopornographic Era*. *Angelaki*, *22*(2), 179–190.

Malatino, H. (2019). Future Fatigue. *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, *6*(4), 635–658.

Malatino, H. (2022). *Side Affects: On Being Trans and Feeling Bad*. U of Minnesota Press.

Mann, S. L. (2011). *Gender and Sexuality in Modern Chinese History*. Cambridge University Press.

March, L. (2021). Queer and Trans* Geographies of Liminality: A literature Review. *Progress in Human Geography*, *45*(3), 455–471.

Marciano, A. (2014). Living the VirtuReal: Negotiating transgender identity in cyberspace. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, *19*(4), 824–838.

Markula, P. (2003). The Technologies of the Self: Sport, Feminism, and Foucault. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, *20*(2), 87–107.

Marwick, A. E., & boyd, D. (2011). I tweet honestly, I tweet passionately: Twitter Users, Context Collapse, and the Imagined Audience. *New Media & Society*, *13*(1), 114–133.

Massad, J. A. (2002). Re-Orienting Desire: The Gay International and the Arab World. *Public Culture*, *14*(2), 361–385.

Massey, D. (2013). *Space, Place and Gender*. John Wiley & Sons.

Matebeni, Z. (2013). Intimacy, Queerness, Race. *Cultural Studies*, *27*(3), 404–417.

Mavhandu-Mudzusi, A. H. (2018). The Couple Interview as a Method of Collecting Data in Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis Studies. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *17*(1), 1–9.

McLean, K. C., Lilgendahl, J. P., Fordham, C., Alpert, E., Marsden, E., Szymanowski, K., & McAdams, D. P. (2018). Identity Development in Cultural Context: The Role of Deviating from Master Narratives. *Journal of Personality*, *86*(4), 631–651.

McInroy, L. B., & Craig, S. L. (2015). Transgender representation in offline and online media: LGBTQ youth perspectives. *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*, *25*(6), 606–617.

McLuhan, M. (1964). *Understanding media: The extensions of man*. MIT press.

Meng, B., & Huang, Y. (2017). Patriarchal Capitalism with Chinese Characteristics: Gendered Discourse of 'Double Eleven' Shopping Festival. *Cultural Studies*, *31*(5), 659–684.

Meyerowitz, J. (2002). *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States*. Harvard University Press.

Miguel, Y. M. S., & Tobias, S. (2016). *Trans Studies: The Challenge to Hetero/Homo Normativities*. Rutgers University Press.

Miller, J. F. (2019). YouTube as a Site of Counternarratives to Transnormativity.

Journal of Homosexuality, *66*(6), 815–837.

Mirzoeff, N. (2011). *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality*. Duke
University Press.

Mog, A., & Swarr, A. L. (2008). Threads of commonality in transgender and
disability studies. *Disability Studies Quarterly*, *28*(4).

Mokhtar, S. (2021). Mediating Hijra In/Visibility: The Affective Economy of Value-
coding Marginality in South Asia. *Feminist Media Studies*, *21*(6), 959–972.

Monahan, T. (2015). The Right to Hide? Anti-Surveillance Camouflage and the
Aestheticization of Resistance. *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*,
12(2), 159–178.

Money, J. (1995) *Gendermaps: Social Constructionism, Feminism, and Sexosophical
History*. Continuum.

Money, J., & Ehrhardt, A. A. (1972). *Man and Woman, Boy and Girl: Differentiation
and Dimorphism of Gender Identity from Conception to Maturity.* Johns Hopkins
U. Press.

Morison, T., & Macleod, C. (2013). A Performative-performance Analytical
Approach: Infusing Butlerian Theory into the Narrative-discursive Method.
Qualitative Inquiry, *19*(8), 566–577.

Morley, D., & Silverstone, R. (1990). Domestic Communication—Technologies and
Meanings. *Media, Culture & Society*, *12*(1), 31–55.

Mowitt, J. (1996). Queer Resistance: Michel Foucault and Samuel Beckett's The
Unnamable. *Symplokē*, *4*(1/2), 135–152.

Muñoz, J. E. (1999). *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of
Politics*. U of Minnesota Press.

Muñoz, J. E. (2019). *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity.* New
York University Press.

Nagoshi, J. L., & Brzuzy, S. (2010). Transgender Theory: Embodying Research and
Practice. *Affilia*, *25*(4), 431–443.

Namaste, K. (1996). Theory's erasure of transgender subjectivity. *Queer studies: A
lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender anthology*, 183–203.

Namaste, V. (2000). *Invisible Lives: The Erasure of Transsexual and Transgendered People*. University of Chicago Press.

Namaste, V. (2009). Undoing Theory: The 'Transgender Question' and the Epistemic Violence of Anglo-American Feminist Theory. *Hypatia*, *24*(3), 11–32.

Namaste, V. (2011). *Sex Change, Social Change: Reflections on Identity, Institutions, and Imperialism*. Canadian Scholars' Press.

Nay, Y. E. (2019). The Atmosphere of Trans* Politics in the Global North and West. *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, *6*(1), 64–79.

Nguyen, H. T. (2019). From Silicone and Hormone Injecting to Sex Reassignment Surgery: The Precarious Road to Becoming Female of Transgender Funeral Performers in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, *21*(9), 999–1011.

Nixon, D., & Givens, N. (2007). An Epitaph to Section 28? Telling Tales out of School about Changes and Challenges to Discourses of Sexuality. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, *20*(4), 449–471.

Noble, J. B. (2006). *Sons of the Movement: FtMs Risking Incoherance on a Post-queer Cultural Landscape*. Canadian Scholars' Press.

Oakley, A. (2016a). Disturbing Hegemonic Discourse: Nonbinary Gender and Sexual Orientation Labeling on Tumblr. *Social Media + Society*, *2*(3), 1–12.

Oakley, A. (2016b). *Sex, Gender and Society*. Routledge.

Olson, K. R., Durwood, L., DeMeules, M., & McLaughlin, K. A. (2016). Mental Health of Transgender Children Who Are Supported in Their Identities. *Pediatrics*, *137*(3), e20153223.

Orlie, M. A. (2004). Taylor and Feminism: From Recognition of Identity to a Politics of the Good. In R. Abbey (Ed.), *Charles Taylor* (pp. 140–165). Cambridge University Press.

Owen, G. (2020). *A Queer History of Adolescence: Developmental Pasts, Relational Futures*. University of Georgia Press.

Papacharissi, Z. (2015). *Affective Publics: Sentiment, Technology, and Politics*. Oxford University Press.

Payne, J. G. (2013). Transgendering Mother's Day: Blogging as Citizens' Media, Reproductive Rights and Intimate Citizenship. *Citizenship Studies*, *17*(8), 928–941.

Petersen, R., Albright, J., Garrett, J. M., & Curtis, K. M. (2007). Pregnancy and STD Prevention Counseling Using an Adaptation of Motivational Interviewing: A Randomized Controlled Trial. *Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health*, *39*(1), 21–28.

Pfitzmann, A., & Köhntopp, M. (2001). Anonymity, Unobservability, and Pseudonymity — A Proposal for Terminology. In H. Federrath(Ed.), *Designing Privacy Enhancing Technologies* (pp. 1–9). Springer Berlin Heidelberg.

Pfitzmann, A., & Hansen, M. (2010). *A Terminology for Talking About Privacy by Data Minimization: Anonymity, Unlinkability, Undetectability, Unobservability, Pseudonymity, and Identity Management*. http://dud.inf.tu-dresden.de/Anon_Terminology.shtml

Phillips, J. (2006). *Transgender on Screen*. Springer.

Pilcher, J. (2016). Names, Bodies and Identities. *Sociology*, *50*(4), 764–779.

Pilcher, J. (2017). Names and "Doing Gender": How Forenames and Surnames Contribute to Gender Identities, Difference, and Inequalities. *Sex Roles*, *77*(11–12), 812–822.

Pillow, W. (2003). Confession, Catharsis, or Cure? Rethinking the Uses of Reflexivity as Methodological Power in Qualitative Research. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, *16*(2), 175–196.

Poletti, A., & Rak, J. (2014). *Identity Technologies: Constructing the Self Online*. University of Wisconsin Pres.

Preciado, P. B. (2013). *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era*. The Feminist Press at CUNY.

Preciado, P. B. (2021). *Can the Monster Speak?: Report to an Academy of Psychoanalysts*. MIT Press.

Prosser, J. (1998). *Second skins: The body narratives of transsexuality*. Columbia University Press.

Puar, J. (2013). Rethinking Homonationalism. *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, *45*(2), 336–339.

Pyle, K. (2018). Naming and Claiming. *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, *5*(4), 574–588.

Rahman, O., Wing-Sun, L., & Cheung, B. H. (2012). "Cosplay": Imaginative Self and Performing Identity. *Fashion Theory*, *16*(3), 317–341.

Raun, T. (2010). Screen-births: Exploring the Transformative Potential in Trans Video Blogs on YouTube. *Graduate Journal of Social Science*, *7*(2), 113–130.

Raun, T. (2015). Video Blogging as a Vehicle of Transformation: Exploring the Intersection between Trans Identity and Information Technology. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, *18*(3), 365–378.

Raun, T. (2016). *Out Online: Trans Self-Representation and Community Building on YouTube*. Routledge.

Raun, T., & Keegan, C. M. (2017). Nothing to Hide: Selfies, Sex and the Visibility Dilemma in Trans Male Online Cultures. In *Sex in the Digital Age* (pp. 89–100). Routledge.

Rawson, K. J. (2014). Transgender Worldmaking in Cyberspace: Historical Activism on the Internet. *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking*, *1*(2), 38–60.

Rawson, K., & Williams, C. (2014). Transgender*: The Rhetorical Landscape of. *Present Tense*, *3*(2). Retrieved from http://www.presenttensejournal.org/volume-3/transgender-the-rhetorical-landscape-of-a-term/

Raymond, J. G. (1994). *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-male*. Teachers College Press.

Rew, L., Young, C. C., Monge, M., & Bogucka, R. (2021). Puberty Blockers for Transgender and Gender Diverse Youth—A Critical Review of the Literature. *Child and Adolescent Mental Health*, *26*(1), 3–14.

Ricoeur, P. (2010). *Time and Narrative* (Vol. 3). University of Chicago Press.

Riessman, C. K. (2008). *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences*. Sage.

Rocha, L. A. (2010). Xing: The Discourse of Sex and Human Nature in Modern China. *Gender & History*, *22*(3), 603–628.

Roen, K. (2013). Transgender Theory and Embodiment: The Risk of Racial Marginalization. In *The transgender studies reader* (pp. 656–665). Routledge.

Rofel, L. (1999a). *Other Modernities: Gendered Yearnings in China After Socialism*. University of California Press.

Rofel, L. (1999b). Qualities of Desire: Imagining Gay Identities in China. *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, *5*(4), 451–474.

Rofel, L. (2020). *Desiring China: Experiments in Neoliberalism, Sexuality, and Public Culture*. Duke University Press.

Rorty, R. (1989). *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge University Press.

Rosenthal, G. (1993). Reconstruction of Life Stories: Principles of Selection in Generating Stories for Narrative Biographical Interviews. *The Narrative Study of Lives*, *1*(1), 59–91.

Rousseau, J. J. (1999). *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*. Oxford University Press, USA.

Ruberg, B. (2022). Trans Game Studies. *JCMS: Journal of Cinema and Media Studies*, *61*(2), 200–205.

Rubin, H. S. (1998). Phenomenology as Method in Trans Studies. *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, *4*(2), 263–281.

Russell, S. T., Pollitt, A. M., Li, G., & Grossman, A. H. (2018). Chosen Name Use Is Linked to Reduced Depressive Symptoms, Suicidal Ideation, and Suicidal Behavior Among Transgender Youth. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, *63*(4), 503–505.

Ryan, L., & Golden, A. (2006). 'Tick the box please': A Reflexive Approach to Doing Quantitative Social Research. *Sociology*, *40*(6), 1191–1200.

Salisbury, M., & Pooley, J. D. (2017). The #nofilter Self: The Contest for Authenticity among Social Networking Sites, 2002-2016. *Social Sciences*, *6*(1), 1–24.

Sallee, M. W., & Harris III, F. (2011). Gender Performance in Qualitative Studies of Masculinities. *Qualitative Research*, *11*(4), 409–429.

Sangwha, L. (1999). The Patriarchy in China: An Investigation of Public and Private

Spheres. *Asian Journal of Women's Studies*, *5*(1), 9–49.

Schilt, K., & Lagos, D. (2017). The Development of Transgender Studies in Sociology. *Annual Review of Sociology*, *43*(1), 425–443.

Schoenebeck, S., Haimson, O. L., & Nakamura, L. (2021). Drawing from justice theories to support targets of online harassment. *New Media & Society*, *23*(5), 1278–1300.

Sedgwick, E. (1998). What's Queer? In J. Lorber (Ed.), *Gender Inequality: Feminist Theories and Politics* (pp. 205–209). Roxbury.

Seelman, K. L., Lewinson, T., Engleman, L., Maley, O. R., & Allen, A. (2017). Coping Strategies Used by LGB Older Adults in Facing and Anticipating Health Challenges: A Narrative Analysis. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services, 29*(3), 300–318.

Sember, R. (2003). In the Shadow of the Object: Sexual Memory in the AIDS Epidemic. *Space and Culture*, *6*(3), 214–234.

Senft, T. M., & Baym, N. K. (2015). What does the selfie say? Investigating a Global Phenomenon. *International journal of communication*, *9*(Feature), 1588-1606.

Shaw, G., & Zhang, X. (2018). Cyberspace and gay rights in a digital China: Queer Documentary Filmmaking under State Censorship. *China Information*, *32*(2), 270–292.

Shelly, C. (2008). *Transpeople: Repudiation, Trauma, Healing*. University of Toronto Press.

Shih, S. (2007). *Visuality and Identity: Sinophone Articulations across the Pacific*. University of California Press.

Shilling, C. (1993). *The Body and Social Theory*. Sage Publications.

Siebler, K. (2012). Transgender transitions: Sex/gender binaries in the digital age. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Mental Health*, *16*(1), 74–99.

Simpkins, R. (2016). Trans*feminist Intersections. *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, *3*(1–2), 228–234.

Snorton, C. R. (2017). *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity*. U of Minnesota Press.

Sommer, M. H. (2000). *Sex, Law, and Society in Late Imperial China*. Stanford University Press.

Sommer, M. H. (2002). Dangerous Males, Vulnerable Males, and Polluted Males: The Regulation of Masculinity in Qing Dynasty Law. In S. Brownell & J. Wasserstrom (Eds.), *Chinese Femininities/Chinese Masculinities: A Reader* (p. 67–89). University of California Press.

Sommer, M. H., & Lu, W. (2013). The Gendered Body in the Qing Courtroom. *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, *22*(2), 281–311.

Song, G. (2010). Chinese Masculinities Revisited: Male Images in Contemporary Television Drama Serials. *Modern China*, *36*(4), 404–434.

Spencer, L. G. (2015). Introduction: Centering Transgender Studies and Gender Identity in Communication Scholarship. In M. Adams et al. (Eds.), *Transgender Communication Studies* (pp. 9-22). Lexington Books.

Spivak, G. C., & Harasym, S. (2014). *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*. Routledge.

Steinbock, E. (2017). Framing Stigma in Trans* Mediascapes: How does it feel to be a problem? *Spectator*, *37*(2), 48–57.

Steinbock, E. (2022). The Riotous State of Trans Visual Culture. *JCMS: Journal of Cinema and Media Studies*, *61*(2), 169–174.

Stockton, K. B. (2009). *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century*. Duke University Press.

Stone, S. (1992). The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto. *Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies*, *10*(2), 150–176.

Stryker, S. (1998). The transgender issue: An introduction. *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, *4*(2), 145–158.

Stryker, S. (2004). Transgender studies: Queer theory's evil twin. *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, *10*(2), 212–215.

Stryker, S. (2006). (De)Subjugated Knowledges: An Introduction to Transgender Studies. In *The Transgender Studies Reader*. Routledge.

Stryker, S. (2008). *Transgender History* (1st Edition). Seal Press.

Stryker, S. (2012). De/Colonizing transgender studies of china. In H. Chiang (Ed.), *Transgender China* (pp. 287–292). Springer.

Stryker, S. (2017). *Transgender History: The Roots of Today's Revolution* (2nd Edition). Hachette UK.

Stryker, S., & Aizura, A. Z. (2013). *The Transgender Studies Reader 2*. Routledge.

Stryker, S., & Bettcher, T. M. (2016). Introduction. *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, *3*(1–2), 5–14.

Sullivan, N. (2003). *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory*. NYU Press.

Sun, W. (2014). *Subaltern China: Rural Migrants, Media, and Cultural Practices*. Rowman & Littlefield.

Syvertsen, T., & Enli, G. (2020). Digital Detox: Media Resistance and the Promise of Authenticity. *Convergence*, *26*(5–6), 1269–1283.

Tan, Q. H. (2014). Orientalist obsessions: Fabricating Hyper-reality and Performing Hyper-femininity in Thailand's Kathoey Tourism. *Annals of Leisure Research*, *17*(2), 145–160.

Taylor, A. S. (2022). *Authenticity as Performativity on Social Media*. Springer International Publishing.

Taylor, C. (1992). *The Ethics of Authenticity*. Harvard University Press.

Taylor, S., & Littleton, K. (2006). Biographies in Talk: A Narrative-discursive Research Approach. *Qualitative Sociology Review*, *2*(1), 22–38.

Thach, H., Mayworm, S., Delmonaco, D., & Haimson, O. (2022). (In)visible moderation: A digital ethnography of marginalized users and content moderation on Twitch and Reddit. *New Media & Society*, *00*(0), 1–21.

Theunissen, E., & Favero, P. S. H. (2021). Veiling the Image/Framing the Body: The Labour of Enduring Ephemerals in the Context of Trans* Male Adult Camming Practices on Chaturbate. *New Media & Society*, *23*(4), 780–795.

Thomassen, B. (2014). *Liminality and the modern: Living through the in-between*. Ashgate.

Tournier, P. (1975). *What's in a Name?* (Vol. 222). SCM Press.

Tudor, A. (2021). Decolonizing Trans/Gender Studies?: Teaching Gender, Race, and

Sexuality in Times of the Rise of the Global Right. *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, *8*(2), 238–256.

Turkle, S. (2007). Authenticity in the age of digital companions. *Interaction Studies*, *8*(3), 501–517.

Turner, V. (1988). *The Anthropology of Performance*. PAJ Publications.

Turner, V. (2017). *The ritual process: Structure and anti-structure*. Routledge.

Turner, V. W. (1979). *Process, Performance, and Pilgrimage: A Study in Comparative Symbology*. Concept Publishing Company.

Van Gennep, A. (2013). *The Rites of Passage*. Routledge.

VanderSchans, A. (2016). The Role of Name Choice in the Construction of Transgender Identities. *Western Papers in Linguistics*, *1*(2), Article 2.

Varga, S. (2011). *Authenticity as an Ethical Ideal*. Routledge.

Vivienne, S. (2011). Trans Digital Storytelling: Everyday Activism, Mutuble Identity and the Problem of Visibility. *Gay and Lesbian Issues and Psychology Review*, *7*(1), 43–54.

Vrouenraets, L. J. J. J., Fredriks, A. M., Hannema, S. E., Cohen-Kettenis, P. T., & de Vries, M. C. (2016). Perceptions of Sex, Gender, and Puberty Suppression: A Qualitative Analysis of Transgender Youth. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, *45*, 1697–1703.

Wakeford, N. (2000). Cyberqueer. In D. Bell & B. Kennedy (Eds.) *The Cybercultures Reader* (pp. 403–415). Routledge.

Wang, R. (2005). Dong Zhongshu's Transformation of Yin-Yang Theory and Contesting of Gender Identity. *Philosophy East and West*, *55*(2), 209–231.

Wang, S., & Bao, H. (2023). 'Sissy capital' and the Governance of Non-normative Genders in China's Platform Economy. *China Information*, *0*(0) 1–21.

Wang, Y. J. (2021). Tabloid Female Sex Confessions and Everyday Pro-sex Feminism: The Case of the Apple Daily Taiwan. *Sexualities*, *24*(1–2), 208–225.

Warner, D. N. (2004). Towards a Queer Research Methodology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *1*(4), 321–337.

Weller, S. (2017). Using Internet Video Calls in Qualitative (Longitudinal)

Interviews: Some Implications for Rapport. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, *20*(6), 613-625.

Wei, W. (2020). The Normalization Project: The Progress and Limitations of Promoting LGBTQ Research and Teaching in Mainland China. *Journal of Homosexuality*, *67*(3), 335–345.

Wei W. (2023). The Familism Social Integration Pattern of Gay Community. *Gansu Social Sciences*, *1*, 165–176.

Weng, L., & Wan, X. (2016). Research concerning the rights of transsexuals to alter their sex and legal implications for marriage and family laws, *Ningxia University Journal*, 1, 101.

Wesp, L. M., Malcoe, L. H., Elliott, A., & Poteat, T. (2019). Intersectionality Research for Transgender Health Justice: A Theory-Driven Conceptual Framework for Structural Analysis of Transgender Health Inequities. *Transgender Health*, *4*(1), 287–296.

Westbrook, L., & Schilt, K. (2014). Doing Gender, Determining Gender: Transgender People, Gender Panics, and the Maintenance of the Sex/Gender/Sexuality System. *Gender & Society*, *28*(1), 32–57.

Whittle, S. (1998). The Trans-Cyberian Mail Way. *Social & Legal Studies*, *7*(3), 389–408.

Whittle, S. (2006). Foreword. In S. Stryker & S. Whittle (Eds.), *The Transgender Studies Reader* (pp. xi–xv). Routledge.

Winter, S. (2012) *Lost in transition: Transgender people, rights and vulnerability in the Asia-Pacific Region*. Thailand: UNDP Asia-Pacific Regional Centre.

Wong, A. K. (2018). When Queer Theory Meets Tongzhi in "China". *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, *5*(3), 507–513.

Wong, A. K. H. (2014). Queer Sinophone Studies as Anti-capitalist Critique. In H. Chiang & A. L. Heinrich (Eds.), *Queer Sinophone Cultures* (1st ed., pp. 109–129). Routledge.

Worthen, M. G. F. (2021). Why Can't You Just Pick One? The Stigmatization of Non-binary/Genderqueer People by Cis and Trans Men and Women: An

Empirical Test of Norm-Centered Stigma Theory. *Sex Roles*, *85*(5-6), 343–356.

Wu, C. J. (2012). *Performing Transgender Desire: Male Cross-Dressing Shows in Taiwan*. In H. Chiang (Ed.), *Transgender China* (pp. 225–262). Palgrave Macmillan.

Xiang, Z. (2018). Transdualism. *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, *5*(3), 425–442.

Xie, W. (2014). Queer[ing] Performativity, Queer[ing] Subversions: A Critique of Judith Butler's Theory of Performativity. *Comparative Literature: East & West*, *20*(1), 18–39.

Yang, J. (2016, April). *Marketization, Mass Media and Gender Ideology: China 1990-2010*. Population Association of America 2016 Annual Meeting, Washington, D. C., United States.

Yang, L. (2019). Tiny Times, Persistent Love: Gender, Class and Relationships in Post-1980s Bestsellers. In *Love Stories in China* (pp. 151–167). Routledge.

Yang, P., & Tang, L. (2018). 'Positive Energy': Hegemonic Intervention and Online Media Discourse in China's Xi Jinping Era. *China: An International Journal*, *16*(1), 1–22.

Yang, X., Wang, L., Gu, Y., Song, W., Hao, C., Zhou, J., Zhang, Q., & Zhao, Q. (2016). A Cross-sectional Study of Associations between Casual Partner, Friend Discrimination, Social Support and Anxiety Symptoms among Chinese Transgender Women. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, *203*, 22–29.

Ye, S. (2016). Reconstructing the Transgendered Self as a Feminist Subject: Trans/feminist Praxis in Urban China. *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, *3*(1–2), 259–265.

Zhang, G., & Hjorth, L. (2019). Live-streaming, Games and Politics of Gender Performance: The Case of Nüzhubo in China. *Convergence*, *25*(5-6), 807-825.

Zhang, Q. F. (2014). Transgender Representation by the People's Daily Since 1949. *Sexuality & Culture*, *18*(1), 180–195.

Zhang, Y. (2023). The Transgender Community in the Changing Times of China: The Image of Transgender in Chinese Common Media. *Journal of Education, Humanities and Social Sciences*, *8*, 1411–1416.

Zhao, J. J. (2022). Queer Chinese Media and Pop Culture. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Communication*.

Zielinski, S. (2006). *Deep time of the media: Toward an archaeology of hearing and seeing by technical means*. MIT Press.

Zimman, L. (2009). 'The other kind of coming out': Transgender People and the Coming Out Narrative Genre. *Gender and Language*, *3*(1), 53–80.

Zizek, S. (2004). What Can Psychoanalysis Tell Us About Cyberspace?. *The Psychoanalytic Review*, *91*(6), 801–830.

Appendix I Glossary

跨性别 (kua xing bie): transgender

跨儿 (kua er): trans

人妖 (ren yao): human monster or human prodigy

变性人 (bian xing ren): transsexual

变装 (bian zhuang): crossdressing

女装 (nv zhuang): male-to-female crossdressing

妖儿 (yao'er): monster, refers to cross-dressing sex worker in North-eastern China

药娘 (yao niang): drug girl, refers to young transgender women who use hormone replacement therapy

糖 (tang): candy, refers to the sex hormone transgender people use for transition

非二元 (fei er yuan): non-binary

性别酷儿 (xing bie ku er): gender queer

天赋党 (tian fu dang): gifted party, refers to transgender people with privilege on gender passing, appearance and gender expression.

天残党 (tian can dang): crippled party, refers to transgender people who have difficulty passing even after gender reassignment surgery or hormone replacement therapy.

家长党 (parent party): transgender people whose parents or family members are supportive to their transgender identity or gender transition.

直男 (zhi nan): straight guy, refers to males who have sex with or find attractive of transgender women. The "straightness" is therefore not about heterosexuality but the non-normative sexual practices and desire objects.

观光党 (guan guang dang): tourist party, refers to those who seek novelty of trans communities by sneaking into transgender spaces.

Appendix II Demographic information of the respondents

Number	Interview Space	Pseudonym	Gender Identification	Age	Occupation	Education Level	class
1	Audio Interview	White	trans man	30s	Social worker	professional education	lower class
2	Audio Interview	Purple	trans woman	30s	Marketing staff	undergraduate	lower class
3	Video Interview	Nicky	trans man	20s	College student	undergraduate	middle class
4	Text Interview	Fragrance	trans woman	35	worker	middle school	lower class
5	Video Interview	Dew	trans woman	20s	programmer	drop out from master program	middle class
6	Video Interview	Ivonne	trans woman	20s	College student	undergraduate	middle class
7	Video Interview	Naomi	MtF	20	College student	undergraduate	lower class
8	Text Interview	Nutalie	trans woman	20s	College student	master	middle class
9	Audio Interview	Ophelia	MtF	18	High school student	highschool	middle class
10	Video Interview	Kim	gender queer	32	staff	undergraduate	lower class
11	Video Interview	Yumi	trans lesbian	33	civil servant	undergraduate	middle class
12	Video Interview	Snow	trans lesbian	21	College student studying overseas	undergraduate (overseas)	upper middle class

13	Video Interview	Luna	trans woman	26	self-employ	professional education	lower class
14	Video Interview	Zico	panromantic assexual demiboy	22	College student	professional education	middle class
15	Video Interview	Jessica	trans lesbian	36	investor	master (overseas)	upper class
16	Audio Interview	Rayray	MtF	30s	civil servant	drop out from college	middle class
17	Video Interview	Kagura	MtF/drug women	24	streamer	professional education	lower class
18	Audio Interview	Hasen	trans gay	33	College teacher	PhD	upper class
19	Video Interview	Aoi	trans woman	19	baker	professional education	lower class
20	Guangzhou	Kilo	CD/agender	28	customer service staff	undergraduate	lower middle class
21	Guangzhou	Grace	MtF with women heart	30	self-employ	undergraduate	lower middle class
22	Guangzhou	Chris	not 100% FtM	20	unemployed	drop out from high school	middle class
23	Guangzhou	Coco	trans lesbian	28	game designer	undergraduate	lower middle class
24	Guangzhou	Phel	trans lesbian	34	part-time	professional education	lower class

25	Guangzhou	Gabriel	bisexual transgender	21	College student	undergraduate	middle class
26	Guangzhou	Stone	pansexual trans man	28	clerk	undergraduate	lower class
27	Guangzhou	Eve	pansexual trans woman	20	College student	professional education	lower class
28	Guangzhou	Edward	trans man	24	freelancer	undergraduate (overseas)	upper middle class
29	Guangzhou	Laurel	trans woman	24	truck driver	drop out from middle school	lower class
30	Video Interview	Tyler	nonbinary	27	civil servant	undergraduate	lower middle class
31	Guangzhou	Ling	nonbinary	19	College student	undergraduate	middle class
32	Guangzhou	Jasmine	MtF	31	customer relation	undergraduate	middle class
33	Guangzhou	Penny	MtF	24	photographer	professional education	middle class
34	Guangzhou	Cheese	FtM	19	College student	undergraduate	middle class
35	Audio Interview	Chack	FtM	26	florist	undergraduate	middle class
36	Guangzhou	Shila	MtF	28	self-employ	professional education	lower middle class
37	Guangzhou	Nathan	Demiboy, transgay	28	illustrator	master (overseas)	middle class

38	Guangzhou	Petrus	FtM	33	salesman	undergraduate	middle class
39	Guangzhou	Doge	FtM	18	High school student	high school	middle class
40	Guangzhou	Atiz	MtF	33	programmer	master	middle class
41	Video Interview	Olivia	trans woman	22	master student	undergraduate (overseas)	upper class
42	Beijing	Chao Xiaomi	gender queer	37	self-employ	undergraduate	lower middle class
43	Beijing	Kosa	trans man	33	salesman	undergraduate	middle class
44	Audio Interview	Ply	want-to-be girl	18	College student	undergraduate	middle class
45	Video Interview	Judy	trans woman	23	College student	undergraduate	middle class
46	Beijing	Katherine	trans woman	30	Physical Therapist	drop out from high school	lower class
47	Beijing	Willow	trans woman	19	College student	undergraduate	lower middle class
48	Beijing	Lee	trans man	26	public relations	undergraduate	middle class
49	Beijing	Miao	trans man	19	College student from Hong Kong	undergraduate	middle class
50	Beijing	Summer	trans man	25	master student	master	middle class

51	Audio Interview	Manna	CD	50+	unemployed	primary school	lower class
52	Beijing	Trevor	trans man	27	waitor	drop out from middle school	lower class
53	Beijing	Matvei	trans man	23	master student	master	middle class
54	Beijing	Alex	trans man	30s	trainer	professional education	lower class
55	Beijing	Louis	trans man	24	Accountant	master (overseas)	upper class
56	Beijing	Jonathan	trans man	31	Finance	undergraduate	middle class
57	Beijing	Cabbage	trans man	20s	College student	undergraduate	middle class
58	Beijing	Remo	nonbinary/CD	20s	make-up artist	professional education	lower class
59	Beijing	Althur	trans man	20s	College student	undergraduate	upper middle class
60	Beijing	Natine	trans woman	30s	NGO staff	drop out from college	middle class
61	Beijing	Miss F	trans lesbian	20s	College student	undergraduate	middle class
62	Beijing	Miss R	trans lesbian	20s	College student	undergraduate	middle class
63	Video Interview	Naseri	trans men	20s	unemployed	undergraduate (overseas)	upper middle class

64	Beijing	River	nonbinary	40	press staff	undergraduate	lower middle class
65	Beijing	Kathey	trans woman	30s	self-employ	undergraduate	middle class
67	Shenyang	Lily	trans woman	20s	College student	undergraduate	lower middle class
68	Shenyang	Anny	CD	60	worker	primary school	lower class
69	Shenyang	Yami	yao'er	20s	clerk	professional education	lower middle class
70	Shenyang	Rose	yao'er	20s	self-employ	master	lower middle class
71	Shenyang	Mika	yao'er	20s	self-employ	undergraduate	lower middle class
72	Shenyang	Moth	yao'er	20s	dance teacher	professional education	lower middle class
73	Shenyang	Yuki	yao'er	30s	clerk	undergraduate	lower middle class
74	Shenyang	Phoenix	yao'er	40	tourist guide	undergraduate	lower middle class

75	Shenyang	Tamara	trans woman	20s	College student	undergraduate	middle class

Appendix III Interview guide

Part 1: Starting questions

● Tell me something about you: your name, occupation, age, original family?

● What was your life like in the past and present?

● What were the important moments, figures or things in your life?

* probes: Did you come out or ever think about it? Have you ever use any medical transition treatment? Who were the important ones in your life?

Part 2: Semi-structured in-depth interview

1. Gender practice, identification, body status

● What's the best way to describe yourself now? Do you define yourself differently in different circumstances?

● How did you first encounter these terms and what does this best description of yourself mean to you?

● Are you satisfied with your current status?

● How do you dress-up and make-up recently? How do people around react to it?

* probes: What kind of medical treatment are you having or planning to have recently? How do you obtain the information and learn about medical treatment?

2. Daily Internet use and online social interaction

● What apps and webs do you use daily? How frequently do you use them?

● What media content do you consume daily?

● How do you manage your profile and social media accounts? How do you present yourself online?

● Is there difference between your online and offline self-presentation?

● What kinds of people can have access to your trans-relative presentation? How do people comment on your posts? How do you feel about this, and how do you react to them?

● In what ways do you hang out with people online? How would you engage with

others in online trans chatting groups or forums?

Part 3: Elicitation interview of media texts

- Now let's talk a bit about the name you use online and offline. What is the connotation of the names? Tell me more about the details of picking up this name? How will you call this name, a pseudonym, net name or else? Under what circumstances will you use this name? Is there any safety or privacy concern? Will you use your original name anywhere? How do you feel about your original name and your net name?

- Would you mind showing me some of your posts recently? Can you explain your intention, interpretation and of these textual, audio, photographic and video posts to me?

Ending question: What do you plan to do in the future?

Online Experience and Expression of Transgender Identity in China

Name of researcher: Songyin Liu

Department of Media and Communications, London School of Economics and Political Science

Information for participants

Thank you for considering participating in this study. This information sheet outlines the purpose of the study and provides a description of your involvement and rights as a participant, if you agree to take part.

1. What is the research about?

This research aims to understand how Chinese transgender people experience and express gender identity as mediated by the internet, and to fill the gap in transgender studies since very little attention has been paid to this group in academia. Also, this project seeks to give voice to transgender individuals who are neglected in official discourses and public concern. In-depth interviews will be the major method to collect data about transgender people's life stories and everyday use of the internet. The research is funded by the London School of Economics and Political Science.

2. Do I have to take part?

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. You do not have to take part if you do not want to. If you do decide to take part I will ask you to sign the consent form at the end of this information sheet and return it in advance of the interview or sign at the meeting.

3. What will my involvement be?

You will be asked to take part in an interview (and a follow-up interview if needed) about your experience and feelings of gender expression and gender identity. If you are ok with this, you will be asked to share parts of your media profiles and posts. If you decide that you do not want to share these you can still take part in the study. The interview should take no longer than 1 hour.

4. How do I withdraw from the study?

You can withdraw at any point of the study, without having to give a reason. If any questions during the interview make you feel uncomfortable, you do not have to answer them. Withdrawing from the study will have no effect on you in any forms. If you withdraw from the study the information you have given thus far will not be retained unless you are happy for us to do so.

5. What will my information be used for?

I will use the collected information for my PhD thesis and further publications and academic presentation. You will not be identified in any of these.

6. Will my taking part and my data be kept confidential? Will it be anonymised?

The records from this study will be kept as confidential as possible. Only Songyin Liu (the researcher) and his supervisors will have access to the files and any audiotapes. Your data will be anonymised – your name will not be used in any reports or publications resulting from the study. All digital files, transcripts and summaries will be given codes and stored separately from any names or other direct identification of participants. Any copies of research information will be kept in encrypted files at all times.

Limits to confidentiality: confidentiality will be maintained as far as it is possible, unless you tell us something which implies that you or someone you mention might be in significant danger of harm and unable to act for themselves; in this case, the relevant agencies might have to be informed of this, but this would be discussed with you first.

8. What if I have a question or complaint?

If you have any questions regarding this study please contact the researcher, Songyin Liu, on S.Liu58@lse.ac.uk.

If you have any concerns or complaints regarding the conduct of this research, please contact Liu's supervisor Professor Ellen Helsper via e.j.helsper@lse.ac.uk.

If you are happy to take part in this study, please sign the consent sheet attached.

Online Experience and Expression of Transgender Identity in China

Name of researcher: Songyin Liu

PARTICIPATION IN THIS RESEARCH STUDY IS VOLUNTARY

I have read and understood the study information, or it has been read to me. I have been able to ask questions about the study and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction.	YES / NO
I consent voluntarily to be a participant in this study and understand that I can refuse to answer questions and I can withdraw from the study at any time, without having to give a reason.	YES / NO
I agree to the interview being audio recorded.	YES / NO
I understand that the information I provide will be used for the reseacher's PhD thesis and academic publication and presentation and that the information will be pseudonymised.	YES / NO
I agree that my information can be quoted in research outputs.	YES / NO
I am willing to sharemy online profiles and posts with Songyin Liu so that hecan analyse these in his research. [If you do not want to share your profiles or posts you can still participate in the interview. You can change your mind about this at anytime].	YES / NO
I understand that any personal information that can identify me – such as my name and address, will be kept confidential and not shared with anyone other than Songyin Liu.	YES / NO

Please retain a copy of this consent form.

Participant name:

Signature: _____   Date _____

Interviewer name: Songyin Liu

Signature:_____   Date _____