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## Zhongxing Phenomenon

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*A popular movement of gender ambiguity among women in postmillennial East Asian Chinese-speaking societies in China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan.*

Zhongxing literally means “middle gender/sex” or “neutral gender/sex” in the Chinese language. Zhong means “being middle or in between,” and *xing* implies both sex and gender. The latter is the result of a historical quirk in the twentieth century that saw sex translated from Western medical literature as *xing* in Japanese texts, and gender later translated as *xingbie*—literally, “sex difference”—in Chinese feminist texts (Min 2008; Rocha 2010). The zhongxing phenomenon is a substantial mediated and gendered phenomenon referring to the discourse and embodiment of gender ambiguity, in particular among women, in postmillennial East Asian Chinese-speaking societies in China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. Although the same written characters are used, transliteration differs across locales: *zung sing* in Cantonese spoken in Hong Kong and *chunghsing* in Mandarin in Taiwan.

The zhongxing phenomenon cannot be subsumed under the concepts of queer or LGBT both because of its sociocultural peculiarity and because it has been mainstreamed and practiced beyond the LGBTQ communities. Hence, it offers a unique lens for understanding the transformational contours of gender and sexuality in relation to media culture in East Asian

Chinese-speaking societies. Zhongxing is neither an identity category nor a sexual practice. Instead, it is a liminal state of performing nonnormative gender without claiming a gender or sexual identity position within the binary system of masculine/ feminine, male/female, and heterosexual/homosexual (E. Li 2015). Since the late 1980s, zhongxing has become a generic term for the expression of gender ambiguity associated with both individualism and homosexuality. It has proliferated by means of popular culture and, in particular, has been heightened by a generation of androgynous female idols in transnational Chinese-language popular culture. The linguistic ambiguity of zhongxing has provided a space for individuals to negotiate normativities and manoeuvre marginality. Nonetheless, such ambiguity is highly contested and gendered. In general, female zhongxing is more mainstreamed and tolerated in comparison with male zhongxing.

### **Peculiarity of Zhongxing**

Zhongxing is socioculturally peculiar because of its linguistic ambiguity, mundanity, nonidentitarian inclination, and depoliticized overtones. There are no existing academic concepts in the English language able to sufficiently encapsulate it (E. Li 2015). Unlike androgyny, which celebrates the union of femininity and masculinity in one body, zhongxing is defined by negation—the lack of masculinity in the male sexed body and the lack of femininity in the female sexed body—captured by the Chinese expression *bunan bunü* (neither man/masculine nor woman/feminine), which expresses disapproval of a gender expression that is unclassifiable. Zhongxing also does not equate with queer, which is a derogatory term taken up by nonheterosexuals to destabilize categories and resist normalization politics. Zhongxing implies depoliticized overtones because of its surface meaning of “middle/ neutral.” Furthermore, the Chinese translation of queer, *ku’er*, which literally means “cool (kid),” is seldom used outside of activist circles and academia.

Because zhongxing does not intrinsically refer to a particular sexual orientation, the term T-style does not capture its ambiguity and inclusiveness (Kam 2014). T, short for “tomboy,” refers

to butch lesbians in China and Taiwan. In a similar vein, the concept of female masculinity only partially captures the peculiarity of zhongxing. In addition, the concept has been critiqued for lacking clarity and overlooking constraints of embodiment (Francis and Paechter 2015). Terms modeled on it, such as tomboy femininity, have similar issues (Yue and Yu 2008). “Gender neutrality” appears to be the closest and most direct translation (Hu 2017a); yet this may cause confusion with the Anglo-American postgenderism movement, which originates from distinct sociopolitical backgrounds.

The position of neither directly translating zhongxing nor subsuming it under “queer” because of its sociocultural specificity is not intended to essentialize a homogeneous Chinese culture. Instead, it acts as a point of departure to reveal the mutual transformation of transnational and local practices and norms in the process of modernities, hybridization, and globalization (Martin et al. 2008). The ambiguity of zhongxing opens a contested and contradictory space for exploring gender repertoires and negotiating alternative modes of subjectivity. This can be seen as an ongoing critical engagement with Western theories and local practices mediated by a transnational mediascape.

### **Historical Relevance**

As Michel Foucault (1972) points out, the emergence of a new discursive formation does not imply the disappearance of an old one but rather signifies a transformation of relations between the concepts, objects, and enunciations within those formations. That said, although zhongxing is socioculturally and spatiotemporally specific, there are ample historical examples of ambiguous gender performance that provide a glimpse into the changing meaning attached to nonnormative gender performance in contemporary Chinese-speaking societies.

Chinese opera has been a significant site of gender crossing. The gender of roles on stage was recognized by costumes and bodily movements (*shenduan*) instead of the player’s biological sex. Male players impersonating female roles (*dan*) can be dated back to the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE); this practice had been predominant in theatrical performance until the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368) when Mongolian military rule undermined the Confucian

ideology of gender and sexual division (Tian 2000). During that period, the phenomenon of female players cross-dressing to play leading male roles (*sheng*) was significant. Sometimes, the female *sheng* acted in fight scenes that were regarded as exclusively masculine (Chou 2004). During the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) and Qing dynasty (1644–1911), Confucian ideologies were restored and vigorously enforced, which led to the prohibition of female players performing in public. Nonetheless, theatrical male impersonation was maintained by private all female *Kunqu* troupes owned by male literati (S. Li 2003). The general ban on female players on stage during the Ming and Qing dynasties had resulted in the fetishization of the male *dan*'s cross-gendered body in Beijing opera, and its cultural obsession culminated in the 1920s and 1930s; in the postwar years, however, the cultural significance of male *dan* declined as a result of the mainland Chinese state's suspension of male *dan* training (S. Li 2003). On the contrary, theatrical performances of the female *sheng* have been sustained by the popular all women Yue opera troupes in Shanghai from the late 1930s through the 1980s. The popularity of all-women Yue opera troupes among female audiences is considered unique evidence of women rising to public culture in modern China (Jiang 2009).

Theatrical performances aside, female cross-dressing was also considered an expression of class distinction and/or individuality in particular. It was documented that during the Tang dynasty (618–907), women cross-dressing as men were popular among nobles and the gentry class (Huang 1994; S. Li 2003). During the republican era in the early twentieth century, female gender-crossing reemerged when fashion became a symbol of modernity and the contested site of gender performance (Chou 2004). Actresses who cross-dressed in everyday life were considered fashionable, and women intellectuals such as Jin Qiu (1875–1907) and Zhang Zhujun (1876–1964) who passed as men in public were later seen as pioneers of the Chinese women's liberation movement (Chou 2004; Luo 2008).

During the postwar era, different forms of female gender ambiguity have been observed. In Maoist China, female Red Guards, known as the "Iron Ladies," were allowed to act as violently and brutally as men in public (Honig 2002). Nonetheless, this form of "socialist androgyny" served the particular political purpose of maintaining gender difference; women were required

to be genderless workers in public and sacrificing wives at home to support the revolutionary work of their husbands (Young 1989). Outside Maoist China, women's ambiguous gender performance emerged in popular culture in Hong Kong, a British colony between 1842 and 1997. Among numerous examples, during the 1940s and 1960s the Cantonese opera and film stars Leung Mo-sheung (Liang Wuxiang; 1930–?) and Yam Kim-fai (Ren Jianhui; 1913–1989) were widely acclaimed for their interpretation of cosmopolitanism, gentleness, and masculinity. This earned them the reputation of “ideal men,” which is a good demonstration of Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity (Chan 2016; Butler 1993).

### **Proliferation in Popular Culture**

During the 1980s and 1990s, zhongxing was largely regarded as a positive in popular culture despite occasional concerns about its implications for female sexuality. At that time, the discourse of female zhongxing was mostly centered on fashion aesthetics, which were attached to the desirable qualities of individuality, authenticity, and cosmopolitanism. In Taiwan, toward the end of the martial law period (1949–1987), the female singers Julie Su (Su Rui), Jessie Lin (Lin Liangle), and Eagle Pan (Pan Meichen), who were known for their masculine outfits and vocal quality, were distinctively featured by the local press and entertainment industry as “zhongxing” for their individualistic style and unique personalities (Kuo 2010; Lu 2015). In parallel, gender ambiguity blossomed in Hong Kong cinema and popular music during the 1980s and 1990s. This was showcased in a spring 2017 exhibition titled *Ambiguously Yours: Gender in Hong Kong Popular Culture* at the M+ museum in Hong Kong. Female and male stars such as Anita Mui (Yanfang Mei), Roman Tam (Luo Wen), and Leslie Cheung (Zhang Guorong) were transnationally renowned for their glamorous and ambiguous performances. The utopian discourse of zhongxing as cosmopolitan individuality was succinctly stated in Hong Kong's *City Magazine* (January 1991 issue), which defined and translated zhongxing as the symbol of progressiveness, open-mindedness, cleanliness, and decency (Lai 2007).

In the twenty-first century, in addition to the utopian values celebrated in the 1990s, zhongxing has increasingly been seen as a euphemism for nonnormative gender and sexuality—female lesbianism and problematic singlehood. The proliferation of zhongxing in media

representations, as well as self-representation among Chinese women, was heightened by a new generation of female idols in transnational Chinese popular culture during the century's first decade (E. Li 2015). The usage of zhongxing to refer to ambiguous gender and sexuality in everyday life proliferated. According to an analysis of newspapers in WiseNews, the internet's Chinese-language news archive, the number of news reports in China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan that used zhongxing in relation to gender and sexuality saw a sixfold increase, from 200 in 2000 to more than 1,200 after the middle of the first decade of the twenty-first century.

This new generation of female idols has been popularly categorized by the entertainment industry, media, and audience as zhongxing. Most of them rose to fame from reality talent shows (Au 2012). Their onscreen debut was typically characterized by a short and trendy hairstyle, unisex fashion such as jeans and rock 'n' roll accessories, and sharp bodily gestures (E. Li 2015). Well-known examples include Li Yuchun (also known as Chris Lee) of China, who won Super Girl in 2005 by receiving more than 3.5 million votes out of 8 million from audience mobile phone text messages and attracted the largest personal cult following in post-Maoist China (Xiao 2012). She appeared on the cover of Time Asia in October 2005 as one of Asia's heroes of the year and remained popular a decade later. Other examples in China include Bichang Zhou (also known as Bibi Zhou), Gao Yayuan (also known as Seven Gao), and Liu Liyang. In 2017 the popularity of zhongxing female singers seemed to be continuing through Acrush, billed as "all-girl boy band," which drew widespread attention with the release of several photos and a music video. In Hong Kong, Denise Ho (He Yunshi; also known as HOCC), a mentee of the Cantopop diva Anita Mui, is among the best-known zhongxing stars in the territory. She was one of the best-selling singers of the first decade of the twenty-first century and was selected as a trailblazer in Cantopop by Time Out Hong Kong in July 2011 (E. Li 2015). In Taiwan, well-known zhongxing singers include Jing Chang (Zhang Yunjing), champion of Super Idol in 2007; Ella Chen of the girl band S.H.E; and the girl band Misster, which consisted of five handsome young tomboys who emphasized that they were zhongxing rather than lesbians.

These zhongxing idols attracted considerable numbers of followers both domestically and transnationally, facilitated by new technologies such as mobile phones, internet discussion

forums, and satellite television. This simultaneous popularity of zhongxing singers in China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan in the first decade of the twenty first century can be seen as largely unconnected because of their respective market structures, the local gender and sexual norms, and the media policy of the state (if any). Nonetheless, there are parallels in terms of the situation faced by the local entertainment industry. During the twenty-first century's first decade, the Chinese entertainment industry as a whole was still recovering from decreased revenue resulting from piracy and digitization, and those within the industry were motivated to experiment with new marketing strategies. After learning of the fervent audience response to female idols who did not embrace normative femininity, the industry quickly realized that marketing them as zhongxing appealed to a wide audience of both heterosexual and queer women and that, by emphasizing the values of individuality and authenticity, the social taboo of homosexuality could be sidestepped.

The popularity of zhongxing idols has unleashed heated speculation about their enigmatic sexual orientation. The utopian values of zhongxing, such as individuality, were frequently used as the justification for nonnormative gender performances. For example, on the television show *Lady Guagua* broadcast by Star TV in China on 21 February 2011, the zhongxing idol (Moraynia Liu [Liu Xin]) stressed that being zhongxing means to feel comfortable in her own skin and to ignore others' criticisms. Over the years, some of the zhongxing idols, such as Ella Chen of S.H.E, have been openly heterosexual. There is also a dramatic example from Jing Chang, who publicly announced her change of sexual orientation from queer to heterosexual in 2014 and subsequently stirred up heated debate in Taiwan. A few others, such as Denise Ho and Jin Tai (Dai Anna) of *Misster*, subsequently came out as lesbians in public, whereas some others, such as Li Yuchun, remain enigmatic regarding their sexuality.

Aside from popular music, zhongxing has also become a recurring theme in television shows, where an ambivalent oscillation of meaning between lesbianism and individuality can be observed. For example, on two episodes of *Wocai wocai wocai* (*Guess guess guess*) on 28 July 2007 and 1 December 2007, broadcast by CTV in Taiwan, several tomboyish girls were given a makeover to "reembody" normative femininity and then presented to a group of

teenage boys, who were presumably heterosexual. The hosts of the show described the tomboyish girls using the words *zhongxing* and *shuai* (handsome) interchangeably. A more explicit association of *zhongxing* with lesbianism is observed in an episode of *Bama jiong hen da* (About sex/Straight talk with parents)

titled “My daughter is very *zhongxing*; how could she get married (to a man)?” which was broadcast by PTS on 22 June 2010. The show featured concerned parents and their *zhongxing* daughters. The relationship between *zhongxing* gender expression and lesbianism is implicitly drawn throughout the show. These examples suggest that the *zhongxing* phenomenon has paradoxically opened new space for discussing sensitive topics of gender and sexuality on the one hand, while perpetuating heteronormativity on the other (E. Li 2015; Hu 2017a).

In contrast with the contested mainstreaming of female *zhongxing*, male *zhongxing* remains relatively marginalized. Although the Japanese style of *bishonen* (beautiful boy), the Korean style of *kkonminam* (flower handsome man), and the burgeoning industry of male cosmetic products and aesthetic surgery in East Asia have contributed to the emergence of a new Pan–East Asian soft masculinity that has reshaped masculinity ideals in Chinese societies (Miller 2003; Holliday and Elfving-Hwang 2012; Jung 2011; Chua 2004; Louie 2012), everyday stigmatization of male gender ambiguity prevails, as evidenced by derogatory adjectives such as *niang* (sissy) and *yao* (monstrous), the latter being a term that has been associated with male same-sex sexuality (Chiang 2014). Therefore, the experiences of and implications between female and male *zhongxing* are not directly comparable. It has also been argued that attributing the mainstreaming of female *zhongxing* to the rise of Pan–East Asian soft masculinity is male-centric and overlooks the diverse subjectivity of female *zhongxing* (Hu 2017b).

### **Implications**

Although female *zhongxing* idols have received much acclaim from their audiences, the *zhongxing* phenomenon has attracted a homophobic backlash from those concerned about the self-representation of *zhongxing* among young women (E. Li 2015). The reception of the *zhongxing* phenomenon also varies across locales. Whereas *zhongxing* is relatively well

tolerated in Hong Kong and Taiwan, where it is more incorporated into the mainstream consumerist culture, the phenomenon remains relatively controversial in China.

On the one hand, the ambiguity of *zhongxing* renders it an at least less derogatory label for nonnormative gender performance by replacing negative terms such as *nanrenpo* (mannish women) in everyday life. Its discursive ambiguity has also opened an ambivalent space to verbally articulate and visually represent the desire to loosen gender norms. By associating *zhongxing* with individuality and cosmopolitanism, the phenomenon has normalized nonnormative gender performance and potentially expanded the socially acceptable repertoires of gender expression and embodiment for Chinese women.

Moreover, *zhongxing* as a space of in-betweenness has allowed individuals to question gender norms without taking up stigmatized identity positions, especially in a context where the concept “queer” is accessible to only a few within academia and social activism.

On the other hand, however, it is questionable whether the *zhongxing* phenomenon has yielded an actual transformation in the everyday lives of heterosexual and queer Chinese women or, to an even lesser extent, Chinese men. There is evidence that the increased social visibility and public awareness of lesbianism as a result of the *zhongxing* phenomenon have ambivalent consequences. The phenomenon has simultaneously improved social tolerance and nonnormative gender expression (Kam 2014; Hu 2017a). Yet, when *zhongxing* is presented as an individual aesthetics and is commodified by the entertainment industry, it raises doubts regarding the potentiality and resistance of everyday cultural politics.

In short, since the late 1980s, the *zhongxing* phenomenon has revealed the entanglement of subjectivity and hybrid normativities in Chinese societies within a transnational mediascape and local gender and sexual norms undergoing transformation. From the representations within popular culture to the self-representation of young women who are questioning gender norms, whether the *zhongxing* phenomenon has improved the actual terrain of the everyday lives of Chinese women is subject to further examination.

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