To cite:

Li EC-Y (2018) Making Sense of Ambiguity: Theory and Method. In: Morris C, Boyce P, Cornwall A, et al. (eds) *Researching Sex and Sexualities*. London: Zed Books, pp. 43–61.

https://www.bloomsbury.com/uk/researching-sex-and-sexualities-9781786993199/

MAKING SENSE OF AMBIGUITY: THEORY AND METHOD

Eva Cheuk-Yin Li

ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3076-3386

Abstract

This chapter aims to suggest ways to approach ambiguity that arises in the social research of genders and sexualities by reflecting on doctoral research on the discourse and practice of the *zhongxing* phenomenon in East Asian Chinese-speaking societies. The *zhongxing* phenomenon is a substantial mediated and gendered phenomenon referring to heterosexual and queer women doing non-normative gender by using the ambiguous term *zhongxing*, which literally means 'neutral gender/sex' in the Chinese language. I specifically focus on how to engage with inter-disciplinary knowledge and how to collect data empirically. Theoretically, I suggest a critical integration of queer theory and sociology to resist the poetic/textual reading of ambiguity and to avoid reducing complexity and contradiction for the sake of 'systematic' analyses. Methodologically, I propose the indirect 'method of ambiguity' which emphasises openness and reflexivity, in order to delineate and clarify ambiguity to capture a wider range of data and minimise the risk of imposing preconceived definitions. It is hoped that by making sense of ambiguity which is a realistic and complex realm of social experience, we can begin to consider its effects on issues of agency, subjectivity, identity politics, as well as the implications for resistance and incorporation.

> But the lived, empirical world is never that simple. "Reality" has to be more messy than this [binary]. (Plummer, 2003, p. 524)

Ambiguity is a realistic and complex realm of social experience which presents challenges to gender and sexualities researchers across cultural contexts. It includes: the discursive use of ambiguity in social interactions, uncertainty in decision-making that shapes one's behaviour and perceptions of social life, and indeterminacy that influences an agent's relations with social structure.

This chapter reflects on my journey of researching the discourse and practice of the *zhongxing* (中性) phenomenon in the postmillennial East Asian Chinese-speaking societies of Hong Kong and urban China. *Zhongxing* literally means 'neutral gender/ sex' in the Chinese language.[1] The z*hongxing* phenomenon, which I will introduce in detail later, is a substantial mediated and gendered phenomenon referring to women doing non-normative gender by using the ambiguous term *zhongxing*. This reflection is also invoked by my intellectual journey. Having been trained in sociology, I moved to a humanities department for my doctoral studies. This has provided me with opportunities to rethink various issues around research practice and knowledge production.

The aim of this chapter is to open up a conversation on how to approach ambiguity in order to achieve nuanced social analysis. I specifically reflect on two questions. The first one is theoretical: How do we make sense of ambiguity? This concerns the critical integration of queer theory and sociology in particular. The second is methodological: How do we study ambiguity in the empirical world? In the following, I will first illustrate how a personal encounter with *zhongxing* unleashed my interest in researching ambiguity in relation to gender and sexualities, then I will provide a brief introduction to the *zhongxing* phenomenon.

Encountering ambiguity

My first encounter with the term *zhongxing* occurred in the mid-2000s when I was a form-four student (Year 10 in the UK) in Hong Kong. It was an ordinary day and my mother and I were returning from grocery shopping. Inside the lift of the 30storey apartment block in which my family and I lived, there was another neighbour, a middle-aged woman, whom I had barely met before. The silence inside the lift was first broken by her asking my mother: 'Your daughter is no longer a kid, but why does she *still* dress like a boy?'

During my teenage years, I usually went out in 'boyish' outfits – short and spiky hairstyles, loose-fitting unisex fashion and boy's trainers. Although it was reported that more than two-thirds of homosexuals in Hong Kong had experienced discrimination at that time (MVA Hong Kong Limited, 2006, p. iv), such explicit scrutiny of my gender expression (and sexual orientation) was rare. To my surprise, my mother replied calmly, 'She's just a bit *zhongxing*'. Then, the lift arrived at the floor on which we lived, and put an end to the awkward conversation.

This incident reveals several issues, which can be seen as a snapshot of the ambiguity of *zhongxing*. Firstly, the neighbour's 'question' was actually a scrutiny of my mother's parenting practice, because a daughter's masculine display in public is considered to bring shame to the parents, who will lose face (Tang, 2011, p. 32). More importantly, the conversation was silenced by an ambiguous response. Invoking *zhongxing* was my mother's act of 'saving face' to avoid public scrutiny. It also manifested her ambivalent approach of 'don't ask, don't tell' towards my gender and sexuality.

When I was characterised by my mother as *zhongxing*, I felt simultaneously relieved and nervous. I was relieved because my neighbour's scrutiny was silenced, but I was uncertain about what my mother meant, and we never discussed that conversation afterwards. This prodded me into studying how Chinese women use the ambiguity of *zhongxing* to negotiate gender, sexuality and selfhood. I am also interested in investigating the differences between Chinese-speaking societies because, although the outcome of the phenomenon looks similar, the process of struggle and negotiation may differ, given their distinctive historical and socio-political trajectories.

The *zhongxing* phenomenon

The *zhongxing* phenomenon in contemporary Chinese societies refers to the widespread representation and self-representation of women doing non-normative gender.[2] The ambiguity of *zhongxing* lies in its equivocal state of not being either a gender identity or a sexual practice (Li, 2015). It is a way of re-doing gender without taking up a specific gender or sexual identity position within the binaries of masculine/feminine and heterosexual/homosexual (Li, forthcoming, 2015; West and Zimmerman, 2009). Hence,

heterosexual-identified and queer-identified women can all do *zhongxing*, albeit with different consequences.

The phenomenon has been largely popularised by a generation of androgynous female idols in transnational Chinese-language popular culture in the post-millennial era, such as Li Yuchun (aka Chris Lee) in China, Denise Ho (aka HOCC) in Hong Kong and Jing Chang in Taiwan (Li, forthcoming, 2015). Their popularity is strongly associated with the transforming entertainment industry in their respective locales, the increased transnational flow of popular culture, the rise of youth culture due to the availability of new mobile technologies, and the quest for female independence. These idols are categorised as *zhongxing* by the media and audiences because of their aesthetic presentation of self and their ambivalent sexual orientation (Li, 2015, pp. 85–86). They have attracted huge numbers of female followers by emphasising individuality and authenticity, which is used as the justification for their non-normative gender expression and enigmatic sexuality. *Zhongxing* therefore became an ambiguous and generic euphemism for women doing non-normative gender.

Elsewhere, I have argued that the *zhongxing* phenomenon is socio-culturally peculiar due to its ambiguity, mundanity and depoliticised overtones; and that there are no existing academic concepts in the English language able to sufficiently encapsulate it (Li, 2015, pp. 76–78, forthcoming). In brief, *zhongxing* is unlike androgyny because it is defined by negation, captured by the Chinese expression *bunan bunü* (neither men nor women), which expresses disapproval of 'unclassified' gender expression and sexuality. Instead of a theoretical performance of male impersonation, *zhongxing* is an everyday embodied practice.[3] Unlike queer (*ku'er* in Chinese translation), an originally derogatory term that was taken up by non-heterosexuals to destabilise categories and resist normalisation politics, *zhongxing* carries depoliticised overtones due to its surface meaning of 'neutral'.[4]

My key research question is: What does *zhongxing* mean to different women and how does it shape the process of doing gender? I am less interested in the positivist question of determining 'who is *zhongxing*?' My concern is how Chinese women, both heterosexual-identified and queer-identified, use the ambiguity of *zhongxing* to negotiate gender and sexuality in their specific sociocultural milieu. Sociological studies of gender have suggested

that ambiguity is the mechanism of hegemony and structurally created contradictions (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 838; Connidis and McMullin, 2002). Thus, the ambiguity of *zhongxing* can be seen as a contested and contradictory site of meanings, repertoires of gender expression, embodiment, sexualities and selfhood in contemporary Chinese societies.

Queer theory and sociology

When conducting the literature review for my research, I went through the work of several disciplines: textual analysis of ambiguous gender performances in humanities writings, ethnographic accounts of the everyday lives of women and lesbians in sociological research and audience reception studies from the interdisciplinary field of media research. These have provided insights from diverse perspectives; yet, I still need new conceptual tools to approach the ambiguity of *zhongxing*. Thinking about ambiguity and the instability of identities, it was inevitable that I would turn to queer theory. As Valocchi (2005, p. 768) reminds us, sociologically informed queer concepts 'can result in gender and sexuality research that represents individuals' lived experience in ways that honour the complexity of human agency, the instability of identity, and the importance of institutional and discursive power'.

My question is: How can we engage with theories and concepts of both queer theory and sociology for empirical analysis? This question has been thoroughly discussed by others (Green, 2007; Plummer, 2003; Plummer and Stein, 1994; Seidman, 1996b). With my specific focus on researching ambiguity, I would like to raise three issues that require particular attention.

The first concerns queer theory's impulse to deconstruct. The primary strategy of queer theory is to denaturalise and destabilise categories such as man/woman, heterosexual/homosexual and masculine/feminine. What concerns me is the tendency to romanticise and force potentiality upon the fluidity and ambiguity found in some of the writings in 'queer textualism' (Seidman, 1997, p. 153). Sociologist Steven Seidman provides two relevant suggestions to tackle this concern. Firstly, he calls for rethinking the ethical and political standpoint of deconstructive critiques of queer theory (Seidman, 1995, p. 132). He

also draws attention to the different understanding of 'empirical' in queer textualism and sociology – the former locates it in literary texts while the latter finds it in agents' interactions with social structures (Seidman, 1997, p. 75). And it is researchers' responsibility to consider which theorisation of the 'empirical' and 'social' better suits the objectives of a specific research project.[5]

Secondly, queer theory and sociology seldom acknowledge each other's work (Seidman, 1996a, p. 13; 1997, p. 94). Queer theory often claims innovation for concepts that have already been developed within sociology (Brickell, 2006; Green, 2007). Indeed, as Seidman (1996a) argued more than two decades ago, it is necessary to create dialogues between the two in order to advance an analysis that remains attuned to the contingency, contradictions and complexity of social life. An obvious example of the 'mutual indifference' that I came across is the 'performance' of gender – Judith Butler's widely cited theory of performativity and the notion of 'undoing gender' (Butler, 1990, 1993, 2004) and 'doing, re-doing, un-doing gender' in sociological writings (Deutsch, 2007; Risman, 2009; West and Zimmerman, 1987, 2009). Good research practice needs to critically evaluate its epistemological difference and theorisation of the 'social', since gender is not only citational repetition but also a more deeprooted social structure (Risman, 2004). Examples include the works of Jackson and Scott (2001) and Brickell (2003, 2005).

Thirdly, when bringing both into dialogue, we need to work on conceptual clarity. When I was asked whether the *zhongxing* phenomenon is female masculinity (Halberstam, 1998) or 'tomboy femininity' (Yue and Yu, 2008, p. 130), I hesitated because they only capture part of the phenomenon, since my findings show that heterosexual and/or normatively feminine women also do *zhongxing*. More importantly, sociologists have critiqued the concept of female masculinity for lacking clarity and overlooking the constraints of embodiment when applied to empirical analysis (Francis, 2010; Paechter, 2006). The heavy reliance on highly dualistic definitions of gender risks reifying a dichotomy that we aim to challenge (Francis and Paechter, 2015). To address this dilemma, researcher reflexivity and sensitivity to local discursive and material conditions are the most important attributes (Francis, 2012; Francis and Paechter, 2015, pp. 785–786).

Method of ambiguity

Besides theoretical issues, ambiguity has also posed a major methodological challenge: What types of selection criteria should I use to recruit interview participants? The ambiguous and generic use of *zhongxing* as a euphemism for doing non-normative gender is too broad, but searching for 'self-identified' *zhongxing* individuals inevitably imposes my preconceived understanding and risks forcing interview data.

When studying the less well-defined empirical phenomenon of heterosexual casual sex, Farvid (2010) put forward the idea of 'benefits of ambiguity'. She suggests that starting from a more general idea of sex would give her access to the complex and multi-faceted aspects of the phenomenon. Similarly, I adopt an indirect approach when interviewing the fans of *zhongxing* stars by considering the constructivist approach of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006, 2008).[6] I call this approach 'the method of ambiguity'. Instead of starting from the ambiguity of *zhongxing*, I use 'doing gender' as the sensitising concept to structure my interview questions, which can simultaneously avoid reifying existing binaries and imposing a predefined understanding of *zhongxing*.[7]

Concern about the selection criteria for research participants can be addressed by the strategy of theoretical sampling – a strategy rather than an explicit procedure, which can be useful in specific studies (Charmaz, 2006, p. 107). It aims to gather pertinent data instead of achieving representativeness and allows the development of conceptual categories with a specific analytical focus and research puzzles (Charmaz, 2006, pp. 96, 108).

There are three advantages. Firstly, it sidesteps the paradox of recruiting self-identified *zhongxing* informants. Secondly, because doing gender is a deeply internalised everyday accomplishment, it may not be easy to verbally articulate their experience without a nodal point. The *zhongxing* stars can serve as the point of departure. By staying attuned to the mediated nature of *zhongxing*, it is easier to elicit a discussion of gender and sexuality by starting from one's consumption and affective engagement with popular culture. Through this, I can understand how fans, as gendered and sexual subjects, appropriate these meanings and practices into their everyday lives and what additional resources and knowledge they drew from.

Thirdly, without assuming that fans of *zhongxing* stars necessarily take up the position of *zhongxing* themselves, this method reaches out to research participants of diverse gender, sexual orientation, age and educational level, as suggested by fandom studies of *zhongxing* stars, which challenged the stereotypical assumption that associates *zhongxing* stars with lesbians only (Li, 2012; Yang, 2012). Since *zhongxing* is an integral part of their stardom, fans, whatever their own stance on *zhongxing*, unavoidably have to negotiate and re-appropriate the discourse and practice of *zhongxing*.

The interview schedule

When recruiting fans for my semi-structured interviews, I made it clear that I was also interested in their lives beyond fandom – as a 'gendered and/or sexual subject'. The interview guide was structured according to the sensitising concept and divided into several parts that progressed according to several themes: the experience of being a fan, interpretation of their idol's stardom, discussion about *zhongxing* as media discourse and personal experience, and fans' gender-related experiences in everyday life.

The interview schedule is also divided into softer and harder questions. Softer questions ask about fans' practice and experience with the purpose of understanding their background and establishing rapport before discussing more personal experiences related to gender and sexuality. The harder questions began with asking fans to comment on the various discourses of *zhongxing* in relation to their idol. Since *zhongxing* is ambivalently related to homosexuality, which is considered a social taboo, questions regarding the sexuality of *zhongxing* stars were asked indirectly, in order not to offend the fans. Instead, I asked them to comment on relevant news reports. Based on their responses, I proceeded to ask about their understanding of *zhongxing* beyond fandom, such as their relation with their family, peers and significant others, and whether they are attracted to *zhongxing* individuals or identify with being *zhongxing*.

There are both advantages and drawbacks to this approach. In most of the interviews, the softer questions got fans engaged; yet, sometimes they were extremely talkative, which made it difficult for me to proceed to the harder questions about their own experience of doing gender and negotiating *zhongxing*. For example, a lesbian-identified fan eloquently

recounted how she overcame hardship and how the fandom experience transformed her life. I was grateful for her sharing for more than an hour before I could politely interrupt and lead the way to the harder questions. And the interview resulted in a more solid rapport. Later, I was given the chance to re-interview her about more personal issues regarding her negotiation of gender and sexuality and the ways in which the discourse and practice of *zhongxing* had enabled and/or limited such a process.

Moreover, the ambiguity of gendered pronouns in *Putonghua* spoken in China and Cantonese in Hong Kong helped me to ask about informants' sexual orientation in a less intrusive manner. I did not explicitly ask for their sexual orientation at the beginning of the interview for fear of intimidating informants, because some of them might not see the relevance of their own sexual orientation to the interview. Therefore, only when the interview had progressed to a point that touched upon their everyday lives and personal aspirations, did I ask whether they were 'dating someone' or what their ideal partners would be like. In spoken *Putonghua*, the gender-specific pronouns 'he' and 'she' share the same sound, *ta*, while, in colloquial Cantonese, the third-person pronoun *keoi* is not gender specific. The ambiguity of these pronouns can reduce the embarrassment of posing a potentially intrusive question but, at the same time, informants could use the same tactics of ambiguity to avoid providing any hints about their sexual orientation.

Since qualitative interviewing is a process of co-constructing knowledge, at the end of each interview I encouraged informants to reflect on the experience and asked if they had any questions for me. Some informants were curious about my research motivation because they usually found talking about popular culture and gender trivial. In these situations, I reaffirmed them by acknowledging their contribution to my research. I also asked them to describe the aura of their idol with a colour and explain why they had chosen that colour. The question was originally formulated as a reflection of my interest in the affective dimension of doing gender. Most of the informants found this question interesting. Although their answers might not be directly relevant to my theorisation of the discourse and practice of *zhongxing*, it helped to end the interviews with a lighter mood and imaginative answers.

'Failed' interviews and veiled silence

Researching *zhongxing* ambiguously touched upon both gender and sexuality, and the interview process has not been as straightforward as I had anticipated. Due to the method of ambiguity, I also encountered several interviews which I initially considered 'failures' because informants seemed not to be engaged and gave short responses. A few fans whom I interviewed kept playing with their mobile phones during the interview. On some occasions, I successfully asked what was keeping them distracted, and they showed me photos of other *zhongxing* celebrities and fashion models in the West, such as Freja Beha and Andreja Pejić, which enhanced my understanding of my research question.
However, with some of the others, I seemed to fail.

Nairn and colleagues (2005) argue that an apparently 'failed' interview should be revisited for a reflexive analysis since it teaches us about our research practice. When I listened to the recordings after the interviews, I found that some informants considered gender to be a 'non-topic', which they had taken for granted because it was deeply embedded in everyday life. Hence, they had little to say and did not find much vocabulary or narrative to articulate their thoughts. This motivated me to improve my probing skills and develop more diverse ways to ask for their views – for example, by citing more examples from popular culture.

As well as actual silence, I also encountered 'veiled silence' during interviews. 'Veiled silence' is silence in a metaphorical sense. It is a situation in which informants spoke, but what they said responded to a different question than the one I had posed (Morison and Macleod, 2014, p. 695). During interviews, there were signs of avoidance of some issues on *zhongxing* that informants 'spoke without speaking' (Mazzei, 2007, p. 633). An example is the group discussion with four Chris Lee fans in Shanghai, China. It was initially scheduled with Tung, a migrant worker in her mid-twenties from central China. On the day of our interview, she brought three other fans, despite my preference for conducting individual interviews. I did not seek a group discussion since it was likely to quickly become a fan talk session, which hindered the progression to harder questions. At last, I met Tung and the three other fans, Hong, Han and Chi, who were also migrant workers in Shanghai. Two of them, Han and Chi, looked very alike with a similar short hairstyle and unisex outfits. They were

exceptionally quiet during the interview. Tung also occasionally interrupted my conversation with Han and Chi on their experience of being classified *zhongxing* and misrecognised in public:

Li: You've mentioned that some people stare at you in public because of your appearance. Has your appearance got you into … unexpected situations?

Han: Sometimes I was expelled from the female toilet. Those old ladies [toilet attendants] thought I was a boy.

Chi: When we hang out [with Han], some people think we're a gay couple.

Tung: People always classify others according to their hairstyle.

But wearing a short hairstyle is great.

Li: Why?

Tung: It saves on the water bill [*chuckle*].

Li: So, do you all consider a short hairstyle an element of *zhongxing*?

Hong: Can a person wear a long hairstyle and be *zhongxing* at the same time?

Tung: Many people think that *zhongxing* girls lack *nürenwei* [lit. scent of femininity]. It's hard to understand. For example, Chris Lee is just full of *nürenwei*, isn't she?

She's so adorable and everyone falls for her … Sexiness is delivered through the tiny details of a person. At the end of the day, girls are girls. At least 80 per cent of us want men to take care of us.

To interpret veiled silence, research reflexivity is needed in order to re-examine the power relations and language used during interviews (Morison and Macleod, 2014). Pillow (2003, p. 193) argues that 'messy' examples in qualitative research in fact demonstrate complex and uncomfortable realities. Reviewing the above interview, it is clear that there was an unspoken avoidance of certain topics, such as the gender expression of Chi and Han, and also the sexuality of Chris Lee. To them, *zhongxing* star Chris Lee was by default (normatively) feminine and therefore 'normal'. In hindsight, this interview illustrates an important concept regarding the *zhongxing* phenomenon – avoidance and denial, which also occurred in other interviews. It also highlights the situatedness of the discourse of *zhongxing*,

since such responses were less observed among interviews conducted in Hong Kong. While literal silence in the discussion of nonnormative gender and sexuality is considered a 'violent form of symbolic erasure' (Kam, 2012, p. 92), *zhongxing*, on the other hand, is an example of veiled silence, which is more ambiguous and contested; it is usually spoken without actually speaking. It is acknowledged ambivalently through avoidance, which manifests its entanglement with the complex web of domination through gender, sexuality and class.

Reflexivity of discomfort

Moreover, uncomfortable moments during interviews helped to refine my understanding of *zhongxing* and informed subsequent interviews and data analysis. To better engage with the complexity of the empirical world, the 'reflexivity of discomfort' repositions reflexivity 'not as clarity, honesty, or humility, but as practices of confounding disruptions – at times even a failure of our language and practices' (Pillow, 2003, p. 192). Uncomfortable reflexivity continuously challenges 'the representations we come to while at the same time acknowledging the political need to represent and find meaning' (Pillow, 2003, p. 192).

During the interviews, I never made judgmental comments on informants' gender expression. When asking whether they desire *zhongxing* – being attracted to *zhongxing* individuals or identify with being *zhongxing*, I asked indirectly and progressed carefully, in order to avoid any potential discomfort or embarrassment. However, when informants made comments about my appearance, I felt uncomfortable. There was one occasion when an informant said to me during the interview: 'You look quite *zhongxing* too. You've a light skin tone, cute face, and short hairstyle'. I was slightly nervous and stammered a bit before returning to the questions that I was asking. In hindsight, it was the ambiguity of *zhongxing* that caused my discomfort. Recalling my experience of being described by my mother as *zhongxing* when I was younger, I felt anxious because being described as *zhongxing* is different from being described as fat or 'gay', for instance. 'Being fat' is a definite statement referring to my physical shape, while 'being gay' implies that I do not look feminine *enough*; and I could easily know what to 'improve' in order to 'fit in' if necessary. Being characterised by an informant whom I had only known for 30 minutes as *zhongxing*, I felt as though I was 'being caught' for doing something wrong without a concrete reason. I could not read exactly

what she meant. Was she saying that I was not feminine enough? Was she implying that I was *bunan bunü*? Was she hinting that she 'smelled' that I might be a lesbian?

Again, *zhongxing* would not need to be named if it were normalised in society, if there were space for everyone to do their gender and express their sexuality comfortably without the need to account for it. When *zhongxing* is named, it means that something ambivalent is being acknowledged, but without being addressed directly. While one may happily embrace the ambiguity, most subjects, including my informants, live in a binary gender/sex system. Not everyone desires, or can afford, to embrace the ambiguity or to challenge the binary. In this sense, normativity was one of the key themes running through most of the interviews. By taking this uncomfortable experience into account, I was more reflexive in understanding why some informants embraced or avoided *zhongxing* as a discursive and embodied practice. Moreover, in subsequent interviews, I felt more comfortable when informants used my appearance as the point of reference to discuss *zhongxing* and gender, which, in turn, facilitated the interview process. Therefore, I argue that the method of ambiguity is indeed better to sketch and delineate the ambiguity of *zhongxing* by capturing a broad range of discourses and practices.

Conclusion: making sense of ambiguity

When talking about gender-ambiguous performances in Hong Kong popular culture, Hong Kong sociologist and cultural critic Dr Chun-Hung Ng (2017) observed: 'you could choose to see it, or not see it, because it was "ambiguous"'. In a similar vein, we can choose to address and delineate the complexity of ambiguity, or ignore it by reducing it to classifiable patterns for 'systematic' analysis. What I want to reiterate in this chapter is that, in order to achieve a better understanding of the lived experience of gender and sexuality, ambiguity as a realistic realm of social experience can and should be acknowledged by the critical and theoretical integration of queer theory and sociology and the method of ambiguity that reflects on uncomfortable and ambivalent experiences.

To recap, this chapter reflects on the theoretical and methodological issues that arose when I researched the discourse and practice of the ambiguous *zhongxing* phenomenon in Chinesespeaking societies. Making sense of ambiguity requires the critical integration of

queer theory and sociology by resisting the temptation to merely engage in a poetic/textual reading of ambiguity. Instead, we need to locate ambiguity and fluidity firmly within everyday interactions situated in the web of domination, such as that of gender, heterosexual marriage, class structures, the media industry and so on. Methodologically, it requires an indirect method, the method of ambiguity, to help in *delineating* and *clarifying* ambiguity in order to capture a wider range of data and minimise the risk of forcing interview data and imposing preconceived definitions. By employing the method of ambiguity, it is hoped that we can begin to consider the effects of gender and sexual ambiguity on individual agency and their implications for resistance and incorporation.

Author's note

Many thanks to Dr Charlotte Morris for inviting me to write this chapter. Thank you to Miss Chloe Chow at M+ for providing information on the exhibition 'Ambiguously Yours'. I also thank Professor Ken Plummer and the participants of the *Researching Sex and Sexualities* conference at the University of Sussex in 2015 for their feedback.

Notes

1. Although the same written characters are used in East Asian Chinese-speaking societies, the transliteration differs – *zungsing* in Hong Kong (Cantonese) and *chung hsing* in Taiwan (Mandarin).
2. Men who are not performing the 'correct' gender tend to be labelled with derogatory adjectives instead of *zhongxing* (Li, 2015, p. 76).
3. For historical traces of gender ambiguity in Chinese history, see Huang (2013) and Li (forthcoming, 2015).
4. Moreover, the Chinese translation of queer, *ku'er*, literal meaning 'being cool', is seldom used in everyday life.
5. It should be noted that there is also an impulse to deconstruct in sociology. See Plummer (2003) and Green (2007).
6. I interviewed the fans of Chris Lee in China and Denise Ho in Hong Kong due to their popularity in the respective locales. For details of their stardom, see Au (2012) and Li (2015).
7. Sensitising concepts are the concepts that give a researcher initial ideas and a general sense of orientation in approaching the empirical world (Blumer, 1969, pp. 147–148).

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