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Editorial introduction: androgynous bodies and cultures in Asia

Michelle H. S. HO
Department of Communications and New Media, National University of Singapore, Singapore

Eva Cheuk-Yin LI
Department of Sociology, Lancaster University, Lancaster, UK

Lucetta Y. L. KAM
Department of Humanities and Creative Writing, Hong Kong Baptist University, Hong Kong

This special issue seeks to expand discussion on gender, sexuality, and everyday life in twentyfirst century Asia by exploring "androgyny" as "neither and both," a site that has been and continues to be contested and constructed.[1] We locate "androgyny" within the ambiguous, intermediate, and contradictory gender embodiments of male/masculine and female/feminine characteristics in the biological, psychological, and physiological senses.[2] Although the articles in this collection mostly focus on the latter two senses, as we will argue in this introduction, tracing androgynous bodies and cultures can be productive for configuring alternative ways of seeing, knowing, and thinking grounded in the fluidity and diversity of Asian genders and sexualities. In the last few decades, a heterogeneous body of work on genders, sexualities, and queer and transgender lives and issues in Asia has emerged and flourished (e.g., Welker and Kam 2006; Chu and Martin 2007; Martin et al. 2008; Blackwood and Johnson 2012; McLelland and Mackie 2015; Chiang and Wong 2016, 2017; Chiang, Henry, and Leung 2018).[3] Of special concern remain the marginalization of sexual minorities within Asian studies and that of Asian people and theorizations within trans and queer studies. Granted, such foregrounding of Euro-American frameworks is increasingly complicated by transnational sexualities, queer of color critique, and queer diaspora studies.[4] It bears asking then why this special issue is interested in androgyny at all. How has androgyny been defined, debated, and made sense of and in what ways does it figure in Asian queer and trans scholarship? How might androgyny be useful as an analytic for thinking about gender- and sexually variant bodies and cultures while also adding (or not) to the aforementioned conversation?

In what follows, we first survey different understandings and manifestations of androgyny deriving from various fields and areas of study, ranging from theater, religion, sexology, psychology to fashion situated in a transnational context. After setting the stage, we focus on Asia's relationship with androgyny, building on past scholarship on Asian genders and sexualities to show where the potential of androgyny as an analytic lies. More importantly, we demonstrate how thinking androgyny in Asia-based and inter-Asia projects can intervene in the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of queer studies, trans studies, and cultural studies. Finally, we turn to the contributions of this collection, which showcase diverse cultural practices, representations, and embodied experiences of androgyny in contemporary Asia. Furthermore, they illuminate the forms of solidarity this special issue came out of, from a double panel that we editors convened at the 2018 Association for Cultural Studies (ACS) Crossroads in Cultural Studies Conference held in August in Shanghai, China. After engaging with panel participants during their presentations and afterwards in productive discussions (over a sit-down Chinese dinner no less), we invited them to collaborate with us on this special issue. To help us gain more perspectives on the ground, we later approached Grace Baey, a Singapore-based documentary

photographer and filmmaker, to curate a visual essay with her interlocutors.

Thinking androgyny

"Androgyny" is derived from the Greek root words "andro" (man) and "gyn" (woman) and can be used to refer to someone who "appears to combine masculine and feminine or male and female traits or a person whose gender or sex is difficult to determine" (Califia 2004, 58). Individuals who embody these characteristics have always been around, emerging prominently in art and religion, including in Asia. For example, the prohibition of women on stage at various points in history meant that boys and young men played women's parts, starring as "female impersonators" in the English Renaissance theater (Rackin 1987), the dan (female roles) in traditional Peking opera established during the Qing dynasty (1644-1911) (Mackerras 1994), and the onnagata (female roles) in kabuki theater in seventeenth-century Japan (Isaka 2016). While outnumbered by boys and men, girls and young women have also cross-dressed, notably as "female players" in Chinese theater during the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368) (Li 2003), "male impersonators" in nineteenth-century American variety and vaudeville (Rodger 2018), and oto-koyaku (male roles) in the Takarazuka Revue founded in early twentieth-century Japan (Robertson 1998). In the north Indian folk theater svang, actors undergo double gender transformations, or "transitioning between two states" as a part of the plot such as an M (male)-F (female)-M or F-F-M axis, which potentially transcend both caste and gender (Singh 2019, 430). In Greek philosophy, Plato's Symposium, particularly Aristophanes's story, has influenced adaptations, representations, and (mis)interpretations of androgyny across twentieth-century Western Europe and the United States (Singer 1976; Hargreaves 2005). Writing about their travels to Siam in the nineteenth century, Western European and American visitors became concerned about the "lack of visible gender differentiation" in how the Siamese appeared, who were wearing the same "unisex jong kraben garment" and short-cut "masculine" hairstyles (Jackson 2003).

Androgynous deities who can transform their bodies and ritual practitioners who embody different genders appear in various religious systems, including Hinduism, Buddhism, ancient Greek religion, ancient Egyptian religion, and Native American religious traditions (Sautman 2007). For instance, the Sārnārth Gupta-period Buddha image is considered "not female, but feminized, perhaps to reduce the reading of the figure as exclusively male in order to accommodate an inclusive gendering" (Brown 2002, 177). Another example is the Two-Spirit people who embody "both a feminine and a masculine spirit in one person" and play a role in ceremonial and spiritual rites (LaFortune 1997, 221).[5] Hijras, who are "neither male nor female, containing elements of both," occupy a special place in traditional Hindu culture and are believed to have special powers where fertility is concerned (Nanda 1986, 35). Also playing a ritualistic role were the bissu in the pre-Islamic Bugis culture of South Sulawesi, Indonesia, who wore "female or dual-gendered attire and accoutrements, safeguarded royal regalia and the sacred 'white blood' of ruling families, engaged in sexual and marriage with same-sex (though differently gendered, i.e. male) partners, and were apparently accorded the status of nobility" (Peletz 2009, 37). Evelyn Blackwood (2005a, 857) argues that religious beliefs and practices allowed people to differently understand gender as cosmologically defined—namely "as masculine and feminine and therefore in need of recombination"—what she calls "sacred gender." We gloss these few examples not only to show that androgyny manifests differently in specific cultural, historical, and geographical contexts, but also that androgyny is in and of itself not new.

In late nineteenth century Europe, describing a person and their way of being as "androgy-nous"

coincided with the development of sexology—a "scientific field of inquiry […] dedicated to studying, theorizing, and sometimes 'treating' sexual desires and bodies" (Bauer 2015, 2). By categorizing their research subjects as "androgynous"—as of "homosexual"—early sexologists in Europe and the United States believed that sex and gender were located in science. This would inform subsequent research in various fields in the (social) sciences and in other parts of the world, such as India and Japan, to think about sexual and gender variance in terms of expert knowledge that is systematically produced and used to enlighten society (Frühstück 2003; Waters 2006). In the 1970s, the rise of a U.S.-led second-wave feminism and the gay liberation movement radically changed how sex, gender, and sexuality were regarded and studied, beginning with the removal of homosexuality from the American Psychiatric Association's list of psychiatric disorders ("The A.P.A. Ruling" 1973). Moreover, supporters of the women's liberation movement called for people to be "androgynous": to be "both instrumental and expressive, both assertive and yielding, both masculine and feminine" (Bem 1975, 634). Taking this up in research, American psychologist Sandra Bem challenged long-held assumptions that masculinity and femininity occupy opposite ends—otherwise known as "gender polarization"—by arguing for a concept of androgyny, in which an individual might "engage freely in both masculine and feminine beha-viors" (Bem 1974; 1975, 635). Bem's concept has since been disputed by feminist scholars, including Bem (1993) herself, for privileging male/masculine views and experiences—also known as "androcentrism"—and for maintaining fixed definitions of "feminine" and "masculine" (e.g., Deaux 1994; Gergen 1994). They contend instead that there are multiple femininities and masculinities, which differ across time and place and are constantly changing as gender is socially constructed (Alcoff 1988).

Despite this and even when not explicitly named, "androgyny" continues to be undertaken and shaped in divergent ways within various disciplines and areas of study. This often results in a rich body of work, even if scholars are not always in agreement about the uses and meanings of androgyny. For instance, fashion studies scholars have shown how androgyny may refer to disparate forms of gender expression in different eras, such as a postmodern gender ambiguous aesthetic created from balancing feminine and masculine elements and a post-postmodern gender presentation that asymmetrically juxtaposes stereotypically feminine and masculine markers (Morgado 2014; Bowstead 2018; Reilly and Barry 2020). The post-postmodern version of androgynous looks is interesting for moving away from the "perfect blend of the masculine and feminine and the creation of gender harmony" (Halberstam 1998, 215). This suggests that we can no longer assume that androgyny embodies femininity and masculinity in equal parts but can generate uneven combi-nations. Theater studies scholars have also discussed how performing androgyny, such as in cross-gender Shakespeare and flamenco's "gypsy aesthetic," can be categorized as "sexless"—that is, devoid of gender—or "sexy"—an embodied eroticism that is attractive to all genders (Klett 2006; Diamond 2018). Others have observed the deconstructive potential of such performances, namely to disrupt gender categories and fracture subjectivity (Curtin 2011), but also their limits such as when cisgender actors play androgynous characters, leaving out the actual bodies and experiences of trans and gender nonconforming people (Kemp 2019). This raises the question of what androgyny's relationship to queer and trans studies is, particularly in the context of Asia, which we turn to next.

Asia and androgyny

Thinking androgyny may be particularly productive in Asia-based and inter-Asia projects as a means of negotiating the theories, methods, categories, and frameworks dominant in EuroAmer-ican-centric

queer studies and trans studies. For instance, Peter Jackson (2003) demonstrates the cultural limits of a Foucauldian history of sexuality in Thailand by examining gender or "radical shifts in the performative norms of masculinity and femininity," from which new Thai subjectivities emerge. For Jackson (2000), the dangers of imposing a Foucauldian analysis and gender/sexuality split on Thai phet (eroticized genders) lie not just in erasing indigenous discourses and local experiences, but also failing to develop analytical categories and frameworks for studying them. Moreover, as Chiang and Wong (2017, 123) succinctly put it, "non-Western queerness oftentimes remains as merely the empirical 'object' of study within area studies formation severed from 'theory' proper." Responding to this persistent lack in queer epistemologies from within Asia, more recent collaborative works have proposed thinking about "Queer Asia" as method or critique—following Kuan-Hsing Chen's (2010, 211–212) "Asia as method," or reconfiguring knowledge production by recentering frameworks and approaches from within Asia and rebuilding Asian societies, meeting points, and people's subjectivities. They urge us to reconceptualize "Asia" not as static and provincial but rather always changing and inter-relational, displace queer theory's Euro-American-centric biases, and reconstruct "queer" as key to doing research on a changing Asia (Chiang and Wong 2017; Yue 2017).

Queer Asia as method or critique builds on earlier endeavors to theorize Asian queer studies as "Inter-Asian," or by drawing on the generative energies of "placing side-by-side the largely separate histories of queer studies in each Asian country" (Martin et al. 2008, 9). Alongside this are attempts to advance transgender studies in Asia, such as the Inter-Asia Cultural Studies (IACS) special issue "Trans/Asia, Trans/gender," which illustrated the inter-referencing of trans communities across India, Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Australia (Martin and Ho 2006, 185). More recently, guest editors of the Transgender Studies Quarterly special issue "Trans-in-Asia, Asia in Trans" have contended that just as trans perspectives are important for those of us invested in studying Asia, Asian perspectives are equally significant for intervening in studies of trans and gender nonconforming embodiments (Chiang, Henry, and Leung 2018). Together, the impetus of Queer Asia as method and what might be called "Trans Asia as method" propel us to advance scholarship in exciting new ways and it is this that we bring to the table with our focus on androgyny as a site of analysis.

Despite a rich body of work coming out of Asian queer studies, trans studies in Asia, and interAsia cultural studies, few scholars have so far discussed the potential of androgyny as an analytic. One exception is Howard Chiang (2012; 2017, 397-398), who suggests for scholars to adopt alternative lines of inquiry to Chinese transgender studies by unearthing manifestations of gender ambiguity or androgyny in art and situating them within specific relations of power and knowledge. This method allows us to underscore the fluidity and diversity of Asian genders and sexualities both in historical and contemporary contexts while not privileging identitarian politics and approaches that tend to characterize much LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer) activism today—whether in Asia, the U.S., or elsewhere. Granted, the term "androgyny" might be criticized for maintaining the gender binary. Partly to counter this in his study of Southeast Asia, Michael Peletz (2009, 10) introduces the concept "gender pluralism" to describe "pluralistic sensibilities and dispositions regarding bodily practices (adornment, attire, mannerisms) and embodied desires, as well as social roles, sexual relationships, and overall ways of being that bear on or are otherwise linked with local conceptions of femininity, masculinity, androgyny, hermaphroditism, and so on." While this aligns in some ways with what scholars (e.g., Monro 2005) have called "post-postmoder-nist" gender pluralist gender theory in a bid to move beyond the gender binary, Peletz's concept encompasses the overlaps between gender and sexual variance—something prevalent in many Asian contexts—as well as androgyny as an indigenous notion. Gender pluralism partly emerges from Peletz's (2009, 11) desire to be inclusive of Southeast

Asian people's subjectivities and ways of being as although he does not entirely avoid using "transgender," he is nevertheless cautious about applying it to "non-Western" settings.

Across twenty-first-century Asian media and popular culture, androgyny has accrued renewed popularity and commercial value and several scholars have turned their attention to looks, expressions, and representations that combine neither and both feminine and masculine traits. Some of these examples include young Hong Kong women "cross-playing" as their favorite anime characters (Peirson-Smith 2013), Vietnamese fandom of kkonminam (pretty/flower boy) K-Pop (South Korean popular music) star G-Dragon (Hoang 2020), and the rise of Chris Lee and other zhongxing (neutral sex/gender) celebrities in Chinese-speaking reality television singing contests (Li 2015; Zhao, Yang, and Lavin 2017).[6] Despite these celebrities' and characters' androgynous presentation, scholars have posited that they may not necessarily reflect their gender identity and sexual orientation (e.g., Oh 2015; Zhao 2018). For instance, the protagonists of Japanese boys' love (BL) media—a genre of anime, manga, and other narratives featuring sexual and romantic relations between young men—are described as "genderless ideal types, combining favored masculine qualities with favored feminine qualities" (Kinsella 2000, 117; Martin 2012). Yet, they are also said to enable reader identification precisely because of their androgyny (Nagaike 2015). This simi-larly manifests in representations of homoerotic relations between male characters in Chinese and Korean fan-created media, namely danmei (BL) and Korean "FANtasy" texts (Yang and Xu 2017; Kwon 2018). For example, Jungmin Kwon (2018, 10) describes the romanticized gay male character as "pretty (not handsome), slim, and androgynous […] interested in fashion, beauty, caring, and nurturing, which are traditionally considered women's pursuits in Korea." These examples complicate any straightforward way of approaching and understanding androgyny.

Contributions

In their IACS special issue "Global Queer, Local Theories," which they called an "inter-Asia queer 'coming-together,'" Wei-cheng Chu and Fran Martin (2007) regretfully note that most of their essays examine queer discourses in the more affluent East Asian area, namely Japan, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. Although more than ten years has passed since then, the reader will soon observe that this issue has a similarly strong East Asian representation—one might even say a preoccupation with the "Sinophone."[7] This reflects not only Asia's uneven intellectual flows, but also the longstanding influence of Chinese language, culture, and tradition on East Asia (McLelland and Mackie 2015). Furthermore, Asia's asymmetrical relations of power determine whose trans/queer experiences can be heard, how they are studied, and who researches them. While it was not a conscious decision for us to focus on the East Asian region, we have nonetheless contributed to this disparity. Can Asian queer studies, trans studies in Asia, and inter-Asia cultural studies give voice to (more) individuals from South Asia, Central Asia, and Southeast Asia? Yes, we certainly think so. This is part of the reason why we have named the collection "Androgynous bodies and cultures in Asia," if only as a small gesture to signify a larger agenda for other scholars to take up (hopefully).

All the contributions interrogate the interconnections between androgyny, culture, and embodiment in different ways. Yet, they also speak to one another by tracing cultural flows, social structures and subjectivities, media representations, and stage performances across and beyond Asia, where "Asia" is problematized as a contested region of heterogeneous cultures, languages, and peoples. Located at

the intersections of multiple disciplines and areas of study traversing the huma-nities and social sciences, these essays also employ a variety of research methodologies, such as discourse analyses, visual approaches, and (self-)ethnography, in keeping with the spirit of inter-Asia exchanges within cultural studies. Most importantly, all the contributors share an investment in (re)thinking critical ways of being, seeing, feeling, knowing, and thinking locally grounded in people's lived experience.

In the first article, Priscilla Tse delves into the onstage and offstage androgynous embodiments of wenwusheng, Cantonese opera (yueju) performers who play the lead male role. Drawing on field research in contemporary Hong Kong, Tse contends that wenwusheng elicit homosocial and homoerotic bonds between themselves and their predominantly cis-female fans. While Tse's wenwusheng cross gender and onstage-offstage boundaries, Michelle Ho's dansō (female-to-male crossdressing) and "genderless" (jendāresu) individuals in the next article show that fashion is not just fashion but significant for expressing one's gender and sexual subjectivities. Dansō and genderless are two distinct but related forms of androgynous bodies and styles in contemporary Japanese media. Merging media analysis and ethnographic research, Ho posits that through their practices, dansōindividuals and genderless joshi (girls) construct alternative ways of being before becoming labeled and read as "doing" dansō and genderless. In the third article, Yi-Ting Lu and Yu-Ying Hu investigate how young Taiwanese women who self-identify as "zhongxing" (again, neutral sex/gender) "do" and articulate non-binary gender in their everyday lives vis-à-vis the zhongxing phenomenon embedded in media and popular culture. Based on in-depth interviews with them, Lu and Hu argue that zhongxing women challenge a linear conceptualization of gender in terms of a spectrum as their identities are very much in flux, which is generative for defying "fixed" ideas of zhongxing as necess-arily associated with female masculinity and lesbian subjectivity. Where Lu and Hu locate zhongx-ing women's identities primarily in how they feel, Siufung Law considers how we might disentangle dualisms of sex/gender and body/mind through his/her own self-ethnographic experience as female and a genderqueer bodybuilder. Drawing on Buddhist philosophy, Law unsettles perceptions of gender (identity) as stable and offers "genderqueerness" as a "process to break through binaries and understand trans as a continual process of becoming."

In our epilogue, Helen Leung considers the politics of pronouns through keoi, a singular thirdperson pronoun in Cantonese that is non-gendered and does not gender other people, performing a form of "linguistic androgyny." Leung suggests quite optimistically that perhaps the time has come for leaving behind "they"—the non-binary pronoun in English—for keoi, the linguistic messiness of translingual contexts, and other not-yet-knowable possibilities. In our final contribution, Grace Baey et al. animate a palimpsest of narratives—poems, letters, voices, scrapbooks, and photographs—belonging to various individuals living in Singapore who identify as trans. Written over and over again, these texts converge and interweave personal struggles of transitioning with familial (dis)connections, contestations of gender norms, and costs of all kinds, be they social, physical, financial, or emotional. Carefully threading together the stories her interlocutors want to tell, Baey's methods of photo-elicitation and photo-documentation—the use of images to capture and draw out participants' responses—for the project "(Un)bound" make them come alive.

Notes

1. "Neither and both" can be traced back to a didactic emblem depicting a bearded woman from Spanish iconographer Sebastian de Covarrubias's 1610 collection (Velasco 2007). This was

before the term "androgyny" emerged.

2. We perceive androgyny in the biological sense as not limited to intersexuality. Moreover, some categories in the Asian context such as hijras in Hindu culture and the Indonesian bissu are said to comprise intersex and transgender people.
3. Many more works have been published on this subject but we cite these collaboratively written introductions to themed special issues as examples.
4. See for example the following works on transnational sexualities (Grewal and Kaplan 2001; Puar 2001; Blackwood 2005b), queer of color critique (Eng and Hom 1998; Muñoz 1999; Ferguson 2003), and queer diaspora studies (Manalansan 1995; Gopinath 2005, 2018).
5. Originating from Northern Algonquin dialect, "Two-Spirit" is an "umbrella term for Native GLBTQ people as well as a term for people who use words and concepts from their specific traditions to describe themselves" (Driskill 2010, 72).
6. "Cross-playing" refers to gender-crossing cosplay (costume play), or dressing as a fictional character.
7. While many scholars have disagreed on what "Sinophone" indexes and this is a bigger debate than we can get into here, we regard it broadly as Chinese-speaking cultures and communities around the world, including Greater China. For discussions on queer's relationship with Sinophone, see Chiang and Heinrich (2014); Pecic (2016).

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