

Trans on Screen

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BEGINNINGS: MOVING TARGETS

Autumn, 2001. While leafing through the catalogue of the Netherlands Transgender Film Festival, one of a handful of film festivals in the world with an explicit aim to “encourage visibility and positive representations of transgender issues,”¹ I was surprised to find that *Swordsmen 2*, an old Hong Kong martial arts blockbuster starring Jet Li and Brigitte Lin, had made it into the program.² The 1992 film was well known to me. The casting of actress Brigitte Lin as the indomitable Dongfang Bubai, a swordsman who practices a form of martial arts that requires self-castration, was considered to be a homophobic erasure of gay content in much of the burgeoning queer film criticism emerging in Hong Kong during the 1990s. The film’s inclusion in a *transgender* film festival almost 10 years after its release was certainly provocative. It prompted me to see that what seems problematic from gay/lesbian perspectives can have a significantly different meaning when viewed through a transgender lens.

Spring, 2002. I was invited to give a lecture on Asian cinema at *Inside Out*, Toronto’s Gay and Lesbian Film Festival. Inspired by *Swordsmen 2*’s resurrection as a “transgender film,” I suggested a similar rereading of *Portland Street Blues*, a 1998 triad film starring Sandra Ng in an acclaimed role as Sister Thirteen, a butch woman and a gang leader. In the film, Sister Thirteen has sex with other women but reserves her fiercest loyalty and affection for men.

This characterization has prompted many critics to question whether she is an authentic lesbian character. In my lecture I argued that both films, when viewed from a transgender perspective, become much more interesting. For instance, the casting of Brigitte Lin in *Swordsman 2* challenges audience' presumption that they can tell the difference between transsexual and nontranssexual femininity. Likewise, the affection between a butch woman and a man in *Portland Street Blues* does not necessarily signify heterosexual desire but rather a *homoerotic* attraction between two masculine figures that are commonplace in triad gangster films.³ Not surprisingly, my audience in Toronto was not entirely convinced. Some lesbian members of the audience feared that my "transgender reading" serve as an apologia for heteronormativity, whereas transgender members of the audience thought neither of the films represent "real" transgender people. Not only do the audience's misgivings show me, once again, that transgender and gay/lesbian interpretations can often be at odds, they also remind me that strong audience investment in "realistic representation" and "positive image" often places an undue burden on both queer and transgender characters to be positively representative of whole communities.

Almost a decade has passed since those early conversations. During this time, several important developments have widened the possibilities of how transgender can be considered in relation to cinema. First, there has been an exponential growth of scholarly, artistic, and activist works on transgender issues that are produced by and for the interests and well-being of transgender people. The cinema, in particular, has seen an explosion of independent works—most prominently in the documentary genre—that are explicitly made by and for transgender communities.⁴ At the same time, there is a critical tendency in theoretical discourse to go *beyond* the nominal understanding of transgender as an identity and as the naming of a specific group of people. In a recent special issue on "Trans-" in the *Women's Studies Quarterly* edited by Susan Stryker, Paisley Currah, and Lisa Jean Moore, the editors argue that "the time is ripe for bursting transgender wide open," and in so doing articulate the questions raised by transgender subjectivities and embodiments in relation to the crossings of other categorical differences:

A fundamental aspect of our editorial vision is that neither "-gender" nor any of the other suffixes of "trans-" can be understood in isolation—that the lines implied by the very concept of "trans-" are moving targets, simultaneously composed of multiple determinants.

Furthermore, the editors argue for the deployment of “trans” as a verb and a critical practice that is comparable to, but distinct from, that of “queering”:

“Transing” in short, is a practice that takes place within, as well as across or between gendered spaces. It is a practice that assembles gender into contingent structures of association with other attributes of bodily being, and that allows for their reassembly.

The notion of “transing” also enables intersectional work in which diverse forms of trans processes that transform or realign boundaries between self and other can be considered together. An example is the research collaboration between transgender studies scholar Susan Stryker and researchers such as Nikki Sullivan (who studies cosmetic surgery, tattooing and branding, as well as other modificatory practices) and Samantha Murray (who studies the discourse around bariatric surgery and other medical surgical interventions into obesity).⁵

Second, the rapid growth in queer Asian scholarship has resulted in the development of critical frameworks that eschew simply “applying” LGBT frameworks to non-Western phenomena of sexual and gender variance. For instance, Peter Jackson’s formulation of “pre-gay, post-queer” in the Thai context draws attention to historical formations of sexual and gender variance that predate the advent of LGBT identities, thus crisscrossing and/or overlapping contemporary gay and transgender identities and embodiments.⁶ More recently, in a special issue of the *Journal of Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* on “Trans/Asia,” Josephine Ho and Fran Martin demonstrate the importance of the “specificity of place” in shaping local articulations of transgender identities, cultures, and communities.⁷ In cinema studies, Song Hwee Lim’s analysis of cross-ethnic casting in transnational Chinese cinema through insights culled from transgender practices explores the relation between various forms of “transing” on screen.⁸

In light of these critical developments, the study of transgender issues in Chinese-language cinema can be more fruitfully considered as an exercise in locating moving targets. In other words, it needs not be fixated on a singular notion of what constitutes transgender on screen. It must not limit itself—nor, however, should it remain indifferent—to representational politics. Instead, issues concerning representation are best explored in relation to or alongside wider questions about how embodied difference (of gender and beyond) is constituted, guarded, permeated, and reconstituted on screen. In this chapter, I will explore three interpretive models of reading trans on

screen. I am by no means suggesting that these three are the only, or even the best, kind of approaches. I simply want to show the varied and creative critical possibilities that the notion of trans has enabled.

The first model, the most conventional but nonetheless important, focuses on gender variant characters and their cultural meanings. In mainstream cinema, in particular, characters who disrupt the normative alignments presumed between sex assignment, gender presentation, and gender identification seldom emerge as fully articulated subjects. More often, they are displaced symbols of cultural anxiety over, or fascination with, various forms of boundary crossings. Jay Prosser's critique of *Silence of the Lambs* for representing the "somatic trouble" of the transsexual as trouble for the social corpus;⁹ Judith Halberstam's analysis of the ways transgender characters are punished for their "inflexible" gender identity in *Boys Don't Cry* and *The Crying Game*;¹⁰ as well as John Philips's study of the ambivalence underlying depictions of transgender in Hollywood films¹¹ are examples of a critical model that exposes the ideological workings of such displacement. Like Hollywood cinema, Chinese-language cinema is replete with examples that would benefit from such critique. An implicit—at times explicit—imperative behind such critical works is the advocacy for a *different* kind of representation, one that is less harmful for the communities represented.

The second interpretive model approaches transgender not as an identity but rather as a term of relationality. For example, Judith Halberstam's reading of the masculine bonding between butches in *By Hook Or By Crook* or my reading of homoeroticism between a butch woman and male gangsters in *Portland Street Blues* illustrate the gendered dimensions of desire, love, and friendship that are rendered unintelligible by hetero as well as homonormative narratives.¹² Furthermore, Halberstam has pointed out that the use of "transgender" as a broad umbrella term denoting all cross-gender identifying subjects has at times blurred the difference between diverse forms of embodiments and presentations. For Halberstam, approaching "transgender" as relationality also allows us to *specify* how people place themselves in "particular forms of recognition" to signify how they relate to others within an intimate bond or a community.¹³ The films of queer auteurs Cui Zi'en and Zero Chou especially warrant such an approach as they explore how relational bonds, particularly between queer subjects, can be transformed by unexpected modes of gender presentation and recognition.

The third critical model is perhaps the most adventurous. It turns its attention to what Nikki Sullivan calls "trans practice"—a broad

notion that denotes various modification practices that transform bodily being.¹⁴ Sullivan is writing about practices such as piercing, branding, tattooing, and cosmetic surgery in addition to sex reassignment surgeries. In the context of Chinese-language cinema, the example of martial arts and myriad forms of theatrical, acrobatic, athletic, and spiritual training come to mind. Paying attention to the modification practices—rather than primarily to issues of identity and relationality—uncovers trans articulations in unlikely and provocative places. It is from this angle that I would like to revisit *Farewell My Concubine* (1992). The film has raised all kinds of problems for critics concerned with issues of gender and sexuality because it depicts a brutal process of enforced feminization while associating it with homosexual desire. It has also been critiqued as a national allegory that views modern China as a feminized victim. Following Sullivan's ethical imperative, I propose a reading that foregoes judgment on whether the film's depiction of transgender constitutes positive or negative representation. Rather, I am interested in what its depiction of Beijing opera training as a "trans practice" shows us about the negotiation between self and otherness.

1. LOOKING AT: TRANS OTHERS

Gender variant characters have been repeatedly projected on screen as figures of alterity, much like the way sexual, ethnic, and racial "others" have been represented on screen. Their gender variance—whether in the form of intersexuality, transsexuality, cross-dressing, or any form of transgender embodiment and presentation—is visibly exoticized but the "back story" of their gender history is seldom made clear. Furthermore, these characters are most often found in films with supernatural elements such as ghosts, demons, and magical martial arts. It is thus seldom possible for audience to recognize these characters within the terms of realism. In other words, none of these characters fits into the narratives of contemporary identity categories. Whether demonized as a symbol of monstrosity or idealized as a paragon of perfection, they appear not as fully articulated subjects, but as objects of fantasy. A range of displaced investments—from anxiety and fear to fascination—underlie these representations.

A good example can be found in *A Chinese Ghost Story* (1987), a popular retelling of a well-known story from the eighteenth-century collection of supernatural tales, *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*. The film tells the story of a beautiful ghost, Xiao Qian, who is imprisoned by a malevolent tree spirit with a monstrously long tongue.

Known simply as Madam, the spirit pimps out beautiful ghosts to lure unsuspecting men to her lair so she could feed on their yang energy. While the script does not include any mention of Madam's gender history, the casting of male actor Lau Siu-ming in the role uses the audience's nondiegetic recognition of a male body to suggest a discrepancy between male body and feminine presentation.¹⁵ This implicit suggestion of gender variance in the character is further amplified by the way she talks in an alternately male and female voice. Neither Madam's gender history nor her self-identification is available to the audience who only sees the titillating sight of her gender ambiguity as a physical manifestation of—indeed even a short hand for—her monstrosity.

A more complex example appears in *Swordsman 2* (1992) and its sequel *The East Is Red* (1993). In this loose adaptation of Jin Yong's martial arts novel, the arch villain Dongfang Bubai castrates himself to practice a lethal form of martial arts to dominate the world and, in the process, turns into a formidable villain and beautiful woman. I have argued elsewhere that the casting of Brigitte Lin—in contrast to the cross-gender casting of Madam—actually honors certain aspects of transsexual subjectivity because the audience's nondiegetic recognition of Lin as a beautiful woman actually matches the diegetic ambition of the character to appear precisely as just that.¹⁶ Even so, Dongfang Bubai's transsexuality is explicitly figured in the film as evidence of the character's ruthless ambition, destructive power, and monstrosity. By intimately linking Dongfang Bubai's will to dominate the world with the transformation of her body from male to female, the film has displaced anxiety about totalitarian rule onto the sex-changed body, which it portrays to be both dangerously seductive and violently destructive.

When not depicted as monstrous villains, gender variant characters are idealized as tragic figures of obsessive or sacrificial love. For example, in Wong Kar-Wai's meditative martial arts film *Ashes of Time* (1994), brother and sister Murong Yin and Murong Yang—played, once again, by Brigitte Lin—turn out to be the same person: a “wounded soul behind two identities,” as described by the narrator Ouyang Feng's voice-over. Murong's split personality is symptomatic of the character's traumatic experience of unrequited love. When she cross-dresses as the masculine Yang, an alternative persona has taken over her consciousness. This “alter” plots the murder of the lover who jilted her thereby resolving the trauma of the victimized woman. In Yim Ho's *Kitchen* (1997), a film based on Banana Yoshimoto's novella, the protagonist Louie explains that his gentle,

loving mother actually used to be his father, who raised him after his mother's death while "keeping his dead wife's spirit alive in her new, female body." In Yonfan's over-the-top erotic thriller *Colour Blossoms* (2004), a real estate agent Mei-Lin becomes haunted by a ghost—played alternately by transsexual Korean actress Harisu and Japanese diva Keiko Matsuzaka—who tells the story of how in her youth she changed her sex "to protect the love" she felt for a lover. In these films, all cases of gender variance result from obsessive love. In *Ashes of Time*, Murong's cross-dressing is a symptom of her mental trauma. In both *Kitchen* and *Colour Blossoms*, the characters' transsexuality is not a result of their gender self-identification, but evidence of the lengths they would go to in order to sacrifice for the person they love, be it an orphaned son or a lover. From the point of view of representational politics, all of these films fall short of providing any viable mode of recognition for transgender audience. In *A Chinese Ghost Story* and the *Swordsmen* films, the visual recognition of gender variance leads directly to monstrosity while in *Ashes of Time*, *Kitchen*, and *Colour Blossom*, the narrative of gender variance—whether in the form of cross-dressing or transsexuality—leads only to pathological obsession.

More realistically realized transgender characters do exist, although quite rarely and only in a marginal capacity. Interestingly, the two examples that come to mind both focus on issues of *work*. This singular interest may be due to the perception that transgender visibility is associated with the presence of what legal scholar Robyn Emerton calls "transgender specific professions," which are far more prolific in the entertainment industries of Thailand and the Philippines or in the bar culture of Japan than in Hong Kong, Taiwan, or mainland China.¹⁷ The critically acclaimed *Whispers and Moans* (2007)—a docu-drama that fictionalizes ten days in the lives of a group of sex workers—includes a layered portrayal of a transsexual woman, her working life, and her relationship with her boyfriend. Zero Chou's melancholic *Splendid Float* (2004) spotlights a lesser-known profession through the character of a gay Daoist priest who conducts funeral rituals by day and performs in drag for a dance troupe at night. These, however, are rare exceptions amongst a much larger body of films in which gender variant characters are neither fully fleshed out subjects nor agents of their own actions. Their gender expressions do not result primarily from their self-identification. Rather, they are stand-ins for some notion of "difference," whether construed as villainous monstrosity or sacrificial obsession. They sustain a fantasy through which audiences can channel their own anxiety or fascination.

When we look at these characters, we are looking at everything *but* transgender subjects, who are nowhere to be found amongst the monsters, victims, and ghosts.

2. LOOKING ASKANCE: TRANS RELATIONS

A different critical strategy does not try to look at transgender characters *per se*, but rather look *askance* at issues of relationality. It focuses on the transing of relational bonds: the ways in which the crossings of gender realign desire, affection, and affinity between people, in a manner that is unpredictable within hetero or homonormative narratives. Here I will focus on films by queer auteurs, by which I mean out queer filmmakers whose stylistic signature involves markedly queer aesthetics and/or themes.¹⁸ I count amongst others Stanley Kwan, Tsai Ming-Liang, Yonfan, as well as Cui Zi'en and Zero Chou—the two younger filmmakers whose works I will discuss—as queer auteurs. Cui's and Chou's films provide what Halberstam calls a “mode of recognition” that is consciously meant for queer audiences: each film “universalizes queerness” within its specific cinematic space without ever returning the audience to a heteronormative gaze.¹⁹ In the two films that I will discuss, there is conscious attention paid to the complex gendered dynamics of intimacy between queer bodies and how transing practices can be constitutive of unique relationship bonds.

Cui Zi'en is one of very few out gay directors working in mainland China. In his films, he has consistently explored the dynamics of gay life while showing a deliberate indifference to representational realism or conventional aesthetics. Until his most recent documentary *Queer China, Comrade China*, which is uncharacteristically intended for a more mainstream audience, all of Cui's films have adhered to his principal concern with “deconstructing all the traditions in filmmaking”²⁰ or, as Cui puts it more starkly in Chinese, “raping cinema.”²¹ *Enter The Clowns* (2004), the film from Cui's oeuvre that deals most prominently and explicitly with transgender themes, is also especially representative of this aesthetic choice. The film's self-styled “rigid, rough, sharp, tedious cinematic language”²²—evident in its long shots with little depth of field, its abrupt and rapid panning shots in place of cuts, and its muted, claustrophobic lighting—disorients and destabilizes audience expectations.

Through this demanding aesthetic, the film attempts to explore the queerness of kinship by “transgendering” all major relations in the family. Short vignettes are staged around the character Xiao Bo: a death bed scene in which his dying mother, who turns out

to be either a transvestite or a preoperative transsexual woman, asks to suckle him with sperms in place of breast milk; a fight scene between Xiao Bo and his transsexual girlfriend who frets about losing Xiao Bo's attention after her transition; and a domestic scene in Xiao Bo's violence-tinged household where his birth mother, now a trans man, still lives with his hot-tempered ex-husband. The film's highly symbolic register clearly is not meant to portray realistic transgender lives. Rather, as its tag line "We are all transgender" suggests, it attempts to denaturalize the gendered dynamics of kinship relations—in the same way that its cinematic language denaturalizes aesthetic conventions—while rendering all family relations queer and unpredictable. Cui's interest lies not so much in representing the fact of transgender lives but in unsettling the audience into different ways of looking. By deploying its harsh cinematic language that destroys the seemingly "natural" ways of cinematic viewing, the film also compels us to give up the heteronormative ease of viewing and forging relational bonds. It suggest that only by looking queerly could we begin to see bodies and relations that kinship norms have kept obscured from view.

The melancholic and lyrical style of Taiwanese filmmaker Zero Chou cannot be aesthetically further apart from Cui Zi'en's austerity, but the two share a similar commitment to exploring queer themes in complex and original ways. Chou's *Drifting Flowers* (2008) is a film that provides one of the most original treatments of "trans relations" in queer cinema. Moreover, the film breaks the mold of queer cinema's predominantly urban and middle-class focus by portraying queer lives in Taiwan's small towns and poorer communities. Divided into three distinct but subtly interlinked time periods, the film tackles a theme rarely explored in-depth in queer cinema: friendship. The film is replete with beautifully executed examples of queer friendship in its finest nuance. In each instance, an intriguing form of transgender practice is shown to be fundamentally constitutive of the specific dynamic of the friendship. The best example takes place in the film's second section, set in the characters' twilight years. The story portrays a convoluted "trans relation" between Yan and Lily, a gay man and a lesbian woman who in their youth had gotten married for appearance, but have not seen each other again until old age. By then, Lily is suffering from Alzheimer's disease and often forgets that her long-time lesbian lover Ocean is already dead. Yan, depressed by his HIV status and string of failed lover affairs, goes to visit his old friend. Lily, in her illness, misrecognizes Yan and treats him as though he is Ocean. When Yan dresses up in a shirt and tie, Lily tells him not to go out in such masculine clothes and with such flattened chests because she



Figure 7.1 Yan and Lily sitting together contentedly. Zero Chou, *Drifting Flowers*, 2008. DVD Still.

worries it is not safe for a butch to be so blatant. She then dresses Yan in women's clothes and the two spend their days together like two contented grannies. Even though Yan is a feminine gay man, he is not transgender in identification. In these scenes, he dresses as a woman not out of identification but rather out of kindness for his friend. Likewise, Lily's request for Yan (whom she takes to be Ocean) to dress in women's clothes comes from a concern for her butch lover's safety. Yet, what results from her misunderstanding and Yan's compliance is a touching and mutually dependent feminine friendship that is very much built on the accidental transing of their relation (figure 7.1). Thus, while there are no transgender-identified characters per se in the film, locating trans relationality amongst its characters illuminates the film's nuanced and highly original treatment of queer friendship.

3. LOOKING AMIDST: TRANS PRACTICES

Finally, I want to offer a preliminary exploration of an interpretive framework that focuses on "trans practices."²³ Putting aside issues of identification or relationality, it is also instructive to examine actual somatic processes that modify bodily boundaries. In what may look like a counterintuitive choice, I turn to *Farewell My Concubine*, which stars the late Leslie Cheung as fictional Beijing Opera actor Cheng Dieyi. Despite Cheung's own clever public discussions of the film

and his subsequent (especially posthumous) iconicity as a queer figure,²⁴ the film has often been criticized for what is perceived to be a homophobic portrayal. Two thematic elements, in particular, are deemed objectionable. First, the film spends a great deal of screen time depicting the coercive and physically demanding training actors have to go through to become accomplished stage performers. In particular, Dieyi's training to become a dan—the female role-type—appears to involve an abusive and involuntary inculcation of femininity in the young boy. Second, the adult Dieyi's obsessive devotion to both the art and to the actor who plays the male lead is perceived to be a wrong-headed portrayal of gay desire. Critics feel that the film is implying that gay desire results from the abusive and forced feminization of Dieyi during boyhood.²⁵

This criticism is not inaccurate if our purpose is to locate a contemporary gay (or, for that matter, transgender) subject in the film. In that sense, Cheng Dieyi certainly falls short. It is entirely reasonable to list Dieyi alongside all the examples I presented earlier of characters whose transgender embodiments serve more to displace some forms of social anxiety than to express a transgender identity. Certainly, much has been written about the film's sweeping construction of modern national history and its figuration of the nation as a transgender, feminized, and victimized body.²⁶ More recently, however, there are critical efforts to redirect the focus on the film's epic and spectacular dimension to its more personalized and intimate aspects. Yomi Braester's study of the film's staging of the lost urban spaces of old Beijing is an example.²⁷ In a similar spirit, I want to take a more intimate look at the somatic process by which Dieyi becomes the literal embodiment of the highest ideal presented in the film: the perfection of an art form.

Furthermore, the tension in the film—between its unsavory depictions of the brutally abusive aspects of Beijing opera training and its unflinching celebration of the art form itself—is also instructive in illuminating a central conundrum in critical works on trans practices. As Nikki Sullivan shows in her survey of theoretical writings on body modification practices from sexual reassignment surgery to cosmetic surgery, there is a tendency amongst critics to make a dichotomizing and moralistic distinction between “good” and “bad” practices. Whereas early feminists such as Janice Raymond and Sheila Jeffreys infamously condemn transsexuality as monstrous, some contemporary theorists privilege “non-mainstream” modification practices such as tattooing and branding while castigating cosmetic surgery as normative and conforming. Sullivan further points out that the “intent” or

active agency of the practitioner is not necessarily a good yardstick in defining good from bad practices because every subject, whether or not conscious of it, acts within institutional and ideological limits. It is presumptuous, if not downright impossible, to categorically draw a line between where agency stops and where ideology begins. Instead, Sullivan proposes that we forgo the dichotomizing impulse and regard *all* body modification processes as distinct forms of “transmogrification,” which she defines as “a process of (un)becoming strange and/or grotesque, of (un)becoming other.” Sullivan suggests that we regard all bodies, whether visibly going through some form of transformation or not, to be in states of becoming and unbecoming, and that we approach *any* modification practice to be potentially illuminating of those states.²⁸ In other words, any modification practice—however we evaluate its benefit or harm—that transforms and reassembles the body’s seemingly “natural” boundaries can show us the constructedness of all bodies and, in so doing, denaturalize the line between what appears “normal” and what appears “strange.”

In *Farewell My Concubine*, Beijing opera training is depicted as a historically specific form of “transmogrification”: a life-long physical training that molds pliant bodies into stylized theatrical role-types. The film’s focus is on Dieyi’s gradual transformation from an untrained boy to the perfect embodiment of all the classic dan roles. During the first half of the film, physically transformative aspects of the training are repeatedly emphasized: from the scene when the mother of young Dieyi brutally chops off the boy’s extra finger so he can train properly; the long sequences of boys arduously enduring merciless beating to achieve perfection of form and movement; and in the dramatic scene in which Dieyi, after having an opium pipe shoved in his throat, finally delivers the line “I am by nature born a girl” without a mistake. The fruition of those scenes culminate in the second half of the film, which is punctuated with long sequences of the adult Dieyi performing some of the most renowned dan roles in the Beijing opera oeuvre. The entire narrative may at first sight appear to be one of “transgendering,” of a boy’s transformation into a female role-type. Yet, on closer look, it should more accurately be seen as a paradigmatic narrative of *gendering*, period. In other words, how Dieyi learns to become a type of stylized womanhood is not dissimilar to how other characters learn to embody other roles, both on and offstage. Dieyi’s fellow trainees in the theatrical troupe, whether they are learning to be *sheng* (the lead male role), *chou* (the clown’s role) or other role types, have to undergo the exact same physical process, so brutal that one boy ends up choosing suicide over his training. Dieyi’s “stage-brother” Xiaolou,

who later becomes successful playing lead male roles alongside Dieyi, must also inculcate his masculinity through the same kind of transformative training. Later on in the film, when opera connoisseur Master Yuan criticizes Xiaolou for taking “too few steps” in a performance, thus falling short of the regal air of a hegemon king, it is evident that a male actor’s embodiment of masculinity can fall short and is itself as much a trans process as the training for female roles. More successful than Xiaolou in his training, Dieyi—as Master Yuan observes—has perfected the art to such an extent that the actor has become “the living reincarnation” of all the roles he performs (figure 7.2).

Furthermore, the brutality and coercion involved in Beijing opera training is not only paradigmatic of the process of (trans)gendering, but also of *all* processes of becoming in the film. Even though not all characters go through visible processes of transformation, the film portrays a tumultuous century of political upheavals that in effect compels everyone into constant states of becoming and unbecoming. One of the ways in which the film depicts the constant shifts in power—from the Japanese, to the regional warlords, to the Nationalist government, to Communist rule and the vicissitude during the Cultural Revolution, is by showing the characters donning clothes that would appear “correct” (from Qing dynasty era robes to Western-style suits during the Republican era to Mao jackets under the Communist regime) in the eyes of those in power. They undergo sartorial makeover much in the same way that actors change costumes



Figure 7.2 Dieyi and Xiaolou transforming into their roles. Chen Kaige, *Farewell My Concubine*, 1993. DVD Still.

from production to production. In one scene set at the height of the Cultural Revolution, those accused of having “questionable background” are paraded in “costumes” signifying their bad status while being publicly humiliated. Throughout all this, Dieyi is constantly the only character who remains out of steps and out of place. In a scene after he burns all his theatrical costumes to lament the degradation of the art form under the Communist regime, the camera follows Dieyi from the back as he walks away awkwardly, clearly a misfit, in his Mao jacket and sandals. That scene economically sums up Dieyi’s unwillingness or inability to morph from what he has perfected to be his “self,” not in the sense of an authentic essence, but pointedly an artistic creation forged on physical hardship, talent, and devotion. At the same time, this inability or unwillingness also becomes Dieyi’s uniquely admirable trait, by which he dares to remain, in his words, “true from beginning to end” [*congyi erzhang*]. The trans practice of Beijing opera training, brutal as it is, is shown in the film to have produced both a beautiful form of artistry and an admirable character with the courage to embrace becoming strange and becoming other. In one of the most impassioned and evocative writings on transgender embodiment, Susan Stryker theorizes and performs Frankenstein’s monster by embracing the rage and suffering forged from the experience of being an outcast. Stryker does not flinch from claiming the trans body as “unnatural,” “a flesh torn apart and sewn together,” and a body that “literalizes the violence” of a normative order that produces but shuns this body. Most importantly, Stryker shows that the trans body can be a “monstrously powerful place” from which to act, as it exposes the constructedness of the “natural” order and the foundational violence of gendering that constitutes all subjects, whether they are marked as such or not.²⁹ It is from this place that I would like to resuscitate Cheng Dieyi from being so often understood as merely a victim, both within the film and as a product of the director’s homophobic imagination. It is possible to view him in a rather different light. The tragedy seems rather to belong to the characters around Dieyi who, unwitting of how they are being continually produced and reproduced by the normalizing regime, simply reform themselves over and over, sartorially and ideologically to fit into a norm that, in the end, always threatens to elude them. By contrast, Dieyi’s unflinching embrace of his otherness—forged out of an abusive process but transformed through his artistic integrity—allows him to constitute a self on his own terms, against a “natural” order that is always trying to disrupt those terms. In this regard, Dieyi is a trans subject, not in the conventional identity sense but more

provocatively in the sense that he reassembles gender and constitutes his self within the contingent structure of power that produces him.

PARTING WORDS: TRANS LOOKS

Whether we are looking at transgender characters, looking askance at trans relations, or looking amidst trans practices, what constitutes “trans cinema” is very much in the eye of the beholder. In other words, a trans cinema is ultimately the result of different kinds of trans looks—different ways of seeing trans. Trying to locate the “moving target” of trans on screen is thus an exercise in continuing the discussion of how we see, what compels us to look, and what eludes our sight. What the thriving works on transgender theory, politics, and culture have enabled us to do is to look more closely, creatively, and adventurously while keeping our eyes intransigently out of bounds.

NOTES

1. <http://www.transgenderfilmfestival.com/about/>
2. http://www.transgenderfilmfestival.com/2001/_GB/article_swordsman.html
3. I develop these arguments in detail in my book *Undercurrents: Queer Culture and Postcolonial Hong Kong* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2008), 65–84.
4. Recent examples of self-reflexive and complex autobiographical documentaries by transgender filmmakers include: *She's a Boy I Knew* (Gwen Haworth, 2007), *Prodigal Sons* (Kimberly Reed, 2008), and *Against A Trans Narrative* (Jules Roskam, 2008).
5. Somatechnics Research Centre, <http://www.somatechnics.mq.edu.au/>
6. Peter A. Jackson, “Pre-Gay, Post-Queer: Thai Perspectives on Proliferating Gender/Sex Diversity in Asia,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 40, nos. 3–4 (2001): 1–25.
7. Fran Martin and Josephine Ho, ed., special issue on “trans/Asia, trans/gender,” *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 7, no. 2 (2006).
8. Song Hwee Lim, “Is the Trans- in Transnational the Trans- in Transgender?” *New Cinemas: Journal of Contemporary Film* 5, no. 1 (2007): 39–52.
9. Jay Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 67–68.
10. Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 76–96.
11. John Phillips, *Transgender on Screen* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

12. Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*, 92–96; Leung, *Undercurrents*, 77–83.
13. Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*, 49.
14. Nikki Sullivan, “Transmogrification: (Un)Becoming Other(s),” *The Transgender Studies Reader*, eds. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (New York: Routledge, 2006), 552–564.
15. It is interesting to note that in the 2011 remake of the film, the role is cast with a female actress instead, thus erasing the transgender implications of the original casting.
16. Leung, *Undercurrents*, 71–77.
17. Robyn Emerton, “Finding a Voice, Fighting for Rights: The Emergence of the Transgender Movement in Hong Kong,” *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 7, no. 2 (2006): 248–249.
18. My conception of queer auteurs is influenced by Song Hwee Lim’s provocative discussion in “Positioning Auteur Theory in Chinese Cinema Studies: Intratextuality, Intertextuality and Paratextuality in the films of Tsai Ming-liang,” *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 1, no. 3 (2007): 223–245.
19. Halberstam, *In a Queer Time*, 94.
20. Qi Wang, “The Ruin Is Already a New Outcome: An Interview with Cui Zi’en,” *positions* 12, no.1 (2004): 181–194, on 193.
21. Cui Zi’en, “Enter The Clowns Rapes Cinema into Uselessness” (《丑角登場》把電影強暴得一無是處), in *Diyi guanzhong* (第一觀眾) [First audience] (Xiandai chubanshe, 2003).
22. Zi’en, “Enter The Clowns.”
23. For a detailed elaboration of this argument, see my *Farewell My Concubine: A Queer Film Classic* (Arsenal Pulp Press, 2010), 94–106.
24. See my detailed discussion in Leung, *Undercurrents*, 91–92.
25. Zhang, Benzi, “Figures of Violence and Tropes of Homophobia: Reading *Farewell My Concubine* between East and West,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 33, no. 2 (1999): 101–109; Sean Metzger, “Farewell My Fantasy,” *The Journal of Homosexuality* 39, nos. 3–4 (2000): 213–32.
26. Jenny Lau, “Farewell My Concubine: History, Melodrama, and Ideology in Contemporary Pan-Chinese Cinema,” *Film Quarterly* 49, no. 1 (1995): 16–27.
27. Yomi Braester, “Farewell My Concubine: National Myth and City Memories,” in *Chinese Films In Focus: 25 New Takes*, ed. Chris Berry (London: BFI, 2003), 89–96.
28. Sullivan, “Transmogrification: (Un)Becoming Other(s),” 561.
29. Susan Stryker, “My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Charmounix,” in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, ed. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (New York: Routledge, 2006), 244–256.