The Transgender Studies Reader

Edited by

Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle

48

Unsung Heroes

Reading Transgender Subjectivities in Hong Kong Action Cinema

Helen Hok-Sze Leung

Vancouver-based media studies scholar Helen Hok-Sze Leung, in her article on transgender subjectivity in Hong Kong action cinema, interrogates two recent Chinese films. She asks a set of theoretical questions that have emerged within European and North American transgender theorizing, and simultaneously advocates increased research into gender-variant phenomena outside of Euro-American contexts. In doing so, she calls attention to the anxiety she perceives in the field of transgender studies, that the notion of "transgender" itself may become an exclusionary narrative rooted in the experiences of Europeans and North Americans, one that is detrimental to understanding other forms of gender difference in cultures of non-Western origin.

Leung notes the tendency in recent criticism of Hong Kong cinema to treat the theme of gender atypicality as either a symbolically subversive queer destabilization of gendered spectatorship, or else as a metaphor for other types of dissidence. She proposes instead to treat the magical sex-change Dongfang Bubai in Ching Sui Tung's 1992 *Swordsman II*, and the butch gangster Thirteen in Raymond Yip's 1998 *Portland Street Blues*, not merely as symbols, but rather as agents enacting culturally specific transgender narratives of desire, identity, and embodiment. By asking what these previously invisible but now intelligible subject-positions might signify, she poses the question of what conditions permit these transgender subjects to appear on-screen in the first place.

Leung's nuanced "transgender" readings of *Portland Street Blues* and *Swordsman II* allow her not only to address ethnocentric misreadings of sexuality and gender in these films and their respective gangster and martial arts genres, but also to critique the implicit Eurocentrism of much transgender theorizing. Her article makes a valuable contribution to an emergent trans-Pacific, cross-cultural dialog about the utility of the "transgender" rubric for understanding Asian gender practices and cultural formations.

INTRODUCTION: TRANSGENDER THEORY AND HONG KONG CINEMA

In her introduction to the "transgender issue" of the journal *GLQ*, Susan Stryker offers a definition of *transgender* that captures the nuance and complexity of the term:

> … I use *transgender* not to refer to one particular identity or way of being embodied but rather as an umbrella term for a wide variety of bodily effects that disrupt or denaturalize heteronormatively constructed linkages between an individual's anatomy at birth, a nonconsensually assigned gender category, psychical

> identifications with the sexed body images and/or gendered subject positions, and the performance of specifically gendered social, sexual, or kinship functions.[1]

In Stryker's formulation, *transgender* is not a single identification or embodiment. It is an umbrella concept that refers to all "bodily effects" that trouble the assumed coincidence between our anatomy at birth, the gender assignment that is imposed on us (i.e. the "M" or "F" on the birth certificate), and our own subjective identifications. *Transgender* includes transsexuality in its rubric but is not reducible to it. The emergence of transgender theory—a growing body of knowledge that deploys *transgender* as at once a descriptive, analytical, and deconstructive category—has significantly reconfigured the debates on gender and sexuality.[2] It has challenged feminist theory to examine its history of transphobia, while igniting a resurgence of interest in the sexed body and its vexed relation to gender.[3] For gay and lesbian studies, transgender theory has complicated the discourse of sexual orientation and the notion of same-sex desire, both of which rely on a categorical distinction between male and female bodies. At the same time, transgender theory has inspired new critical intersections with gay and lesbian work on alternative gender practices and with theories of bisexuality.[4] Most importantly, the academic presence of transgender theory, which would not have been possible without the ongoing activism of transgender advocates in legal, social, and medical battles, is also starting to challenge the hitherto exclusive authority of medical expertise on transgender lives.[5] At the very least, no consideration of transgender issues can now go unchallenged without a recognition of both the diversity of transgender experiences and the agency of transgender subjects.

More recently, there is increasing recognition that more research on transgender phenomena outside of the Euro-American context is needed. This is the result of an anxiety in the field that the notion of "transgender" itself may be in danger of reifying into an exclusionary narrative that is rooted only in the experiences of Europeans and North Americans. The response to this call for diversity has been especially keen in Asian Studies, resulting in the recent establishment of the Transgender Asia Research Centre and a growing number of works by emergent scholars from a variety of disciplines.[6] The recent release of films with transgender themes from locales as diverse as Singapore (*Bugis Street*, dir. Yongfan, 1997), Thailand (*Iron Ladies,* dir. Yongyoot Thongkongtoon, 2001), Sri Lanka (*Flying With One Wing*, dir. Asoka Handagama, 2002) and China (*Enter The Clowns*, dir. Cui Zi'en, 2001) also attests to the vitality of transgender cultural expressions in Asia. Hong Kong cinema similarly provides a rich source of material for the consideration of transgender issues. From Stanley Kwan's 1996 documentary *Yin ± Yang: Gender in Chinese Cinema* to the recent works of critics such as Yau Ching and Natalia Chan, there has not been a lack of insight and critical interest in issues of gender variance and gender transgression in Hong Kong cinema. Yet, as I will argue in more details in the rest of the article, there is a tendency in the critical works to date to view cross-gender expressions largely as symbolic subversion: as a disruption of the binary gender system, as queer destabilization of gendered spectatorship, or as a vehicle for dissident sexuality. Not enough attention has been paid to the formation of transgender *subjectivity*—i.e. the conditions in which transgender subjects may emerge on screen, not as symbols but as agents of his or her specific narrative of transgender embodiment. In this article, I would like to trace the contours of two possible transgender subject-positions through a re-reading of two films in the action genre. What does the hitherto invisibility and now intelligibility of these subject-positions signify for the gendered structure of the genre? In particular, what would the recognition of transgender subjects mean for the coding of masculinity in these genres, so commonly assumed to be the exclusive expression of genetically male bodies? By the same token, what implications does such recognition have for the coding of the male-born body that wilfully gives up its access to masculinity or even its embodiment of maleness?

TRANSSEXUAL EMERGENCE: *SWORDSMAN II* AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF DONGFANG BUBAI

Swordsman II [*Xiao'ai jianghu II zhi Dongfang Bubai*] (dir. Ching Siu-Tung, 1992) is the second installment of a series of films loosely adapted from Jin Yong's 1963 novel, *The Smiling, Proud Wanderer* [*Xiao'ao jianghu*]. The film features one of the most memorable villains in Jin Yong's *oeuvres*: Dongfang Bubai, an ambitious swordsman who has castrated himself in order to acquire an awesome form of martial art. There is a dramatic difference between the novel's and the film's treatment of this remarkable character. In the space of this difference, it is possible to locate the emergence of a transsexual subjectivity, one which has critical implications for the status of masculinity in the martial arts genre.

In the afterword to the 1980 edition *The Smiling, Proud Wanderer*, Jin Yong recalls the anxious political climate under which he wrote the serialized novel. The intense power struggle between warring factions in China, which at that time was teetering on the brink of the Cultural Revolution, inspired some of the major themes in the novel.[7] The character Dongfang Bubai, whose name literally means "undefeated in the east,"[8] is a cunning parody of Mao Zedong's self-appellation as the "red sun in the east" and a pointed allusion to his megalomaniacal appetite for power. The critical force of Jin Yong's allusion, however, derives from a transphobic understanding of the gendered body. In the novel, the extremity of Dongfang Bubai's thirst for power is marked by his willingness to castrate himself. This trope of castration-as-desire-for-power recalls a historiographic cliché: the contention that many of the political disasters in imperial China can be attributed to the usurpation of power by eunuchs.[9] Jin Yong stretches this symbolic equation even further. The monstrosity of power corruption is symbolized not only in the fact of castration but in the very process of bodily transition from male to female. When Dongfang Bubai appears in the novel for the first time, her enemies are confounded. They remember *him* as "an awe-inspiring and fearsome fighter" who has "usurped the leadership of the Sun-Moon Holy Sect and reigned supreme in the martial world for twenty years" (1282). *She* now appears in front of them, "beardless, rouged, and wearing lurid clothes that appear to be neither masculine nor feminine" (1282). She sits embroidering in a perfumed chamber, "having lost all previous appetite for women" and become completely devoted to a man and obsessed with becoming a woman (1291). Dongfang Bubai has become, in the words of the novel's heroine Yingying, "not a human, but a monster" (1293). The novel disposes of Dongfang Bubai within one chapter but its anxiety over the "monstrosity" of sex change continues. One of the most important narrative development hinges on the secret of an elder swordsman and his son-in-law, both of whom have self-righteously persecuted the novel's hero, Linghu Chong, who is being wrongfully blamed for a series of crime. The novel subsequently reveals the two men to be the real criminals. Hungry for power, they have been practising the same dark art that has transformed Dongfang Bubai. The physical changes in the elder swordsman are described through his wife's observations. She chillingly starts to notice the change in the pitch of her husband's voice, the shedding of his beard, and the loss of his (hetero)sexual appetite (1468). These are not, of course, medically accurate symptoms of castration nor literal descriptions of transsexual transitions. Rather, the horror of power corruption is projected, through the wife's terrified observations, onto a sex-changed body. The novel allegorizes transsexuality, likening the somatic transition from male to female to a process of moral degeneration. Such transphobic understanding of ultimate villainy as a form of literal emasculation reveals the novel's own anxiety about the free-spirited and hermetic masculinity it celebrates in its hero Linghu Chong.[10] In the afterword, Jin Yong suggests that Linghu Chong never achieves the true freedom that he desires, *not* because of worldly political struggles that have entangled him throughout the novel, but because of his committed love first for Yue Lingshan and later for Yingying. According to Jin Yong, Linghu Chong is "imprisoned" when he returns a woman's

love, and most free in "Yilin's unrequited love for him" (1690). Apparently, a man is only free in a relationship with a woman if he does not return her love and thus escapes the "prison" of her influences! Jin Yong's remarks betray an acute anxiety about feminine sexuality and its constricting effects on the masculine freedom he envisions for Linghu Chong. Jin Yong's anxiety becomes *literalized* on the villainous male bodies: Dongfang Bubai and the other corrupted swordsmen are portrayed to be literally and monstrously bounded by their feminizing bodies. Ironically, it is exactly at the moment that these swordsmen are becoming feminized that they lose their sexual desire for women, thus escaping from the very influences that Jin Yong identifies as constraining for masculine freedom.[11] In this light, the novel's transphobia actually reveals an underlying crisis in the genre's conception of masculinity and freedom. On the one hand, an idealized masculinity is perceived to be vulnerable to the constraints of heterosexual desire. On the other hand, the ultimate freedom from heterosexual desire is inevitably coded in metaphors of castration (which, in this novel, is further imagined as a form of sex change) and, by implication, the *loss* of masculinity. This contradiction may explain why Jin Yong, even as he laments Yingying's constraining influences, does not end the novel differently, with Linghu Chong wandering free and unfettered by heterosexual desire. To do so would, I suspect, bring Linghu Chong too monstrously close to Dongfang Bubai, who in fact represents what is both most abhorred and most desired in the novel's conception of masculinity and freedom.

If such a critique of the novel simply reveals the ideological limits of its times, then the dramatic transformation of Dongfang Bubai on the screen in 1992 owes something to the first stirrings of queer politics in Hong Kong. The debates over the decriminalization of homosexuality throughout the 1980s had resulted not only in the emergence of gay and lesbian identities and organized activism around those identities, but also a new discursive space where issues of sexual and gender transgressions can be openly voiced.[12] *Swordsman II* was made at this time, feeding the public's newfound fascination with queer subject matters while reinvigorating a gender-bending tradition that has arguably always existed in Chinese cinema.[13] One of the film's most glaring departures from the novel's treatment of Dongfang Bubai is the centrality it accords to the novel's villain. While Dongfang Bubai dies within one chapter in the four-volume novel, she occupies the most prominent role in the film, usurping even the limelight of Linghu Chong (Jet Li), not unlike the way she has usurped the leadership of the Sun-Moon sect in the novel. The film also invents an erotic relationship between Linghu Chong and Dongfang Bubai, further blurring the line between hero and villain. Most unexpectedly, Brigitte Lin was cast in the role of Dongfang Bubai. The box office success of the film would later revitalize Lin's sagging career and instigate a trend of gender-bending roles that distinguish the careers of actors like Leslie Cheung, Anita Yuen, Anita Mui and, most prominently, Lin herself. The casting of Lin, an actress famous for her immense beauty, is significant. No longer represented as a castrated half-man, Dongfang Bubai remerges on screen as a (transsexual) woman. The film's inclusion in the Netherlands Transgender Film Festival in 2001, almost ten years after its initial release, completes Dongfang Bubai's remarkable transformation. Conceived as a symbol of masculinity-under-threat by a transphobic imagination during the 1960s, Dongfang Bubai is emerging in the new millennium as a transsexual icon.[14] However, the film has not always enjoyed such enthusiastic critical reception. In fact, it was routinely criticized in the first wave of queer critical writing to emerge from Hong Kong in the 1990s. This critical gap in the film's reception reveals an interesting contradiction between queer theorizing and transsexual subjectivity.

In the introduction to *Seconds Skins: the Body Narratives of Transsexuality*, Jay Prosser calls our attention to queer theory's foundational reliance on the figure of transgender. As a body of knowledge that takes as its point of departure the "queering"—i.e. the destabilization and displacement—of established categories of gender and sexuality, it is no surprise that queer theory finds the trope of crossing

and traversing genders immensely valuable to its theoretical enterprise. Prosser suggests, however, that the queer appropriation of transgender privileges only a particular segment of the conceptual umbrella represented by the term transgender: "Crucial to the idealization of transgender as a queer transgressive force in this work is the consistent decoding of 'trans' as incessant destabilizing movement between sexual and gender identities."[15] Prosser argues that the formulation "transgender = gender performativity = queer = subversive" results in a conceptual split between queer and *transsexual*. The transsexual subject position, as Prosser shows, does not necessarily value fluidity, movement, and performativity but rather "seek[s] quite pointedly to be nonperformative, to be constative, quite simply to *be*" (32). Prosser's subsequent articulation of a theory of transsexual embodiment delineates a specifically transsexual experience of the body that is not easily reconciled with the queer imperative. While queer theory celebrates disruptions and instability as transgressive forces, the transsexual subject in Prosser's formulation is invested in gender transitivity not in and of itself, but as a process that eventually *arrives* at a more stable form of gendered embodiment. It is not surprising, then, that critics who turn to *Swordsman II* for a queer reading are often disappointed. In one of the earliest pieces of queer criticism on Hong Kong cinema, Chou Wah-Shan offers a scathing critique of the film. He takes issue in particular with the casting of Brigitte Lin: "Dongfang Bubai and Linghu Chong are clearly homosexual lovers. Casting the beautiful actress Brigitte Lin in the role completely takes away the shock and anxiety a male actor would inspire in playing that role."[16] Chou is especially irked by one scene: Dongfang Bubai asks her concubine Sisi to substitute for herself while making love to Linghu Chong in the dark. Chou interprets this scene as the film's final reinscription of heterosexuality: the only sexual scene in the film occurs unambiguously between a man and a woman. In a much more complex and nuanced reading, Yau Ching shifts the interpretive focus and locates queer pleasure in the spectatorial gaze. Yau argues that the film in fact offers its spectators "layered and diverse paths to project their desire" and the character Dongfang Bubai "allows us to refuse identification through sexual difference."[17] For Yau, the spectator's simultaneous recognition of the actress' female body and the character's male body means that identification with the character demands a (temporary) suspension of seamlessly gendered identification. Thus, as the gender discrepancy between actress and character becomes less intelligible—i.e. as Dongfang Bubai's transition progresses—the queer pleasure of the film also diminishes: "When Dongfang Bubai becomes more and more like a woman, the spectatorial pleasure of the female audience also becomes less radical and more conservative, until they finally only see the reflection of their own gender identification."[18] Both critics, in their very different readings, view Dongfang Bubai as a subversive character only in so far as s/he remains a symbol of gender instability. Chou prefers to see Dongfang Bubai played by a male actor, thus displaying a feminized male body and serving as an object of homosexual desire for Linghu Chong. Yau relishes the casting of Brigitte Lin, as long as a queer discrepancy is maintained between Lin's (meta-textual) female body and Dongfang Bubai's (textual) male body. Both critics become disappointed when they are confronted with what is arguably Dongfang Bubai's subjective emergence: i.e. as a transsexual woman who challenges Linghu Chong's (and our) demand to *tell the difference* of transsexuality. In this light, the scene that has appeared so *un*queer to critics, can be re-read as an inscription *not* primarily of heterosexuality, but of transsexual agency.

Prior to the seduction scene, Dongfang Bubai has just told her concubine Sisi about her somatic changes, citing them as the reasons for their recent lack of physical intimacy. At that moment, Linghu Chong enters the compound and asks Dongfang Bubai, known to him only as a beautiful stranger, to run away together from the turmoil of worldly affairs. Dongfang Bubai extinguishes the lights and asks Sisi to substitute for her. She then pushes Sisi into Linghu Chong's arms and the two make love in the dark. Later on in the film, Linghu Chong discovers the true identity of Dongfang Bubai and fights

alongside his allies against her. Yet, when she is about to die, he tries to save her life, repeatedly asking if it was really *her* with whom he has spent that memorable night. In fact, he begs her to confirm that it was indeed her. Dongfang Bubai neither confirms nor denies, telling him that he "will never know, and will always regret this moment" (presumably the moment of her death). She then lets herself fall into the bottom of the cliffs, leaving Linghu Chong none the wiser. Why does Dongfang Bubai offer Sisi to Linghu Chong? And what is her motive for "deceiving" Linghu Chong until the very end? Chou, who insists on reading Dongfang Bubai as "rightfully" a gay man, argues that it is the film's way of "avoiding an explicit male-male sex scene."[19] Yet, Chou has already critiqued the casting of Brigitte Lin as a heterosexualization of the relationship between Dongfang Bubai and Linghu Chong. Why would her recognizably female body be in danger of suggesting a homosexual scene? The substitution in fact only makes sense as part of a transsexual narrative. In his discussion of transsexual embodiment, Jay Prosser theorizes the transsexual subject's relation to his or her transitioning body through Didier Anzieu's notion of the "skin ego." Anzieu's reworking of psychoanalytic theories departs from the emphasis Lacan and his followers place on language as the defining structure of ego formations. Instead, Anzieu returns to Freud and the importance he attributes to the body, especially its surface, in the formation of the ego.[20] It is from this *tactile* origin of the psyche that Prosser derives his theory of transsexuality:

> Writing against the grain of most poststructuralist theories of the body informed by psychoanalysis, Didier Anzieu suggests the body's surface as that which matters most about the self. His concept of the "skin ego" takes the body's physical skin as the primary organ underlying the formation of the ego, its handling, its touching, its holding—our experience of its feel—individualizing our psychic functioning, quite crucially making us who we are.[21]

Prosser goes on to explain the untouchability, or "stoneness," of the pre-transition body—a recurrent motif in transsexual narratives—as a feeling of a non-coincidence between "the contours of body image" and the material body, a "description simply of the refusal of body ego to own referential body."[22] Dongfang Bubai's refusal of sexual intimacy, both with Sisi and with Linghu Chong, can be explained in Prosser's scheme as precisely this wilful non-recognition of the (transitioning) body that is not (yet fully) her own. Furthermore, as Prosser suggests, it is this "dis-ownership of sex ... [that] maintains the integrity of the alternatively gendered imaginary."[23] In other words, Dongfang Bubai's refusal to be sexualized during physical intimacy as either "not quite man" (by Sisi) or "not quite woman" (by Linghu Chong) is her means to maintain her subjectively gendered imaginary of being a woman. However, she does not simply stop there. She literalizes this alternative gendered imaginary, through Linghu Chong's desire for her, *on* Sisi's body. Prosser deploys Oliver Sacks's work on neurology to draw a parallel between the way amputees feel and animate their prosthetic limbs through a phatasmatic memory of their real limbs and the way transsexuals experience their post-surgical bodies. In place of actual memory, Prosser suggests that transsexuals experience their surgically transformed bodies through *nostalgia*, for an idealized body that *should* have existed:

> The body of transsexual becoming is born out of a yearning for a perfect past—that is, not memory but nostalgia: the desire for the purified version of what was, not for the return to home per se (*nostos*) but to the romanticized ideal of home.[24]

Sisi's body represents for Dongfang Bubai the idealized gendered body that she longs to become/ return to. In substituting for Dongfang Bubai, unbeknown to Linghu Chong, Sisi is serving as a phatasmatic extension of Dongfang Bubai's body. By denying Linghu Chong the power to tell the difference,

Dongfang Bubai has in effect closed the gap between her subjectively embodied gender and Linghu Chong's actual experience of her body. The price of Dongfang Bubai's subjective emergence in this erotic encounter is, of course, the erasure of Sisi. In this scene, she is disowned from her own body, which has become a phantom limb possessed by both Dongfang Bubai (through identification) and Linghu Chong (through desire). It is thus fitting that the figure of the concubine returns with a vengeance in the film's sequel, *The East is Red* [*Dongfang Bubai zhi fengyun caiqi*] (Dir. Ching Siu-Tung, 1993). In the latter film, one of Dongfang Bubai's former concubines Xue Qianxun (Joey Wong) refuses to be abandoned like Sisi. In a scheme to lure Dongfang Bubai (not dead after all) out of hiding, she impersonates her former lover and embarks on a killing spree, thus sending the entire martial world on a search for the real Dongfang Bubai. Xue's scheme is similar to Dongfang Bubai's deception of Linghu Chong in one important way: successfully disguised as a transsexual woman, Xue challenges the world to "tell the difference" of transsexuality, with the confidence that they, like Linghu Chong (and the audience) would be unable to do so.

My reading of Dongfang Bubai as a transsexual subject does not mean to suggest that she presents a "positive image" of transsexual femininity. After all, she is a brutal, cunning and power-driven villain. What I appreciate in the film, in contrast to the character's treatment in the novel, is the intelligibility of Donfang Bubai as a transsexual woman, who is moreover an agent of her own actions. Her power, though awesome and terrifying, is worthy of her enemies' respect. Most of all, she is no longer a symbol of damaged masculinity, to be conquered by Linghu Chong's free-spirited heroism. Instead, she has fully emerged into her self-chosen subject position as a woman. Unlike the novel, the film is not primarily about masculinity under siege. Rather, it offers a spectacular display of transsexual femininity that has successfully eclipsed the centrality of masculine heroism in the genre.

TRANSGENDER BUTCH BLUES: HEROIC MASCULINITY AND HOMOEROTICISM IN *PORTLAND STREET BLUES*

The transsexual narrative that I trace, through Jay Prosser's theory of transsexual embodiment, in Swordsman II is by no means the only possible articulation of transgender identity. While the transsexual trajectory tends to be marginalized within queer theory, it is by contrast the dominant expression of transgender identity within the medical discourse of gender dysphoria, which views transgender people pathologically as patients in need of treatment. The "treatment" offered is a rigid process of sex reassignment that follows strict medical protocols, prescribed and monitored by medical and mental health professionals. A "cure" is understood to be the patient's successful reassignment from one sex to another.[25] Until very recently, narratives of transgender embodiment that do not conform to, or consciously reject, this grammar of binary gender transitions are viewed with suspicion and hostility by the medical community. Since the 1990s, thanks to the continual efforts of transgender activists, the medical establishment has been relinquishing some of its exclusive claim to expertise on transgender lives. With increasing input and participation of activists, academics and cultural producers who are themselves the consumers of transgender care, a much more complex and diverse picture of the experiences and needs of transgender people is starting to emerge, both in the medical community and in mainstream culture.[26] Leslie Feinberg's 1992 novel Stone Butch Blues, for instance, has brought a new visibility to transgender narratives that explicitly departs from the transsexual trajectory. The protagonist Jess has first lived as a butch lesbian, then taken hormones and undergone surgery and lived as a man, while finally realizing that neither of those identities fully encompasses who s/he is. Towards the end of the novel, Jess asks this poignant question:

> I felt my whole life coming full circle. Growing up so different, coming out as a butch, passing as a man, and then back to the same questions that had shaped my life: woman or man?[27]

The novel deliberately refrains from answering the question. In the end, Jess stops passing and resolves to live as s/he is: neither man nor woman but transgendered in hir own way. All of Feinberg's subsequent writing, as well as the works of authors like Kate Bornstein and Riki Wilchins, are committed to a sustained critique of the binary conception of gender at the same time that they demonstrate the diversity of transgender lives.[28] In my reading of *Portland Street Blues* [*Hongxing shisan mei*] (dir. Raymond Yip, 1998), I would like to trace, in the protagonist Sister Thirteen [*Shisan mei*], a form of transgender subjectivity that does not conform to the transsexual trajectory. Previously overlooked by critics, the possibility of reading Thirteen as a transgender character also has critical implications for the debates on homoeroticism in the gangster genre.

Portland Street Blues is the fourth installment of the *Young and Dangerous* series, which are blockbuster films adapted from a comic book series about young Triad gangsters. The film documents how Sister Thirteen (Sandra Ng), leader of the Portland Street branch of the Hung Hing Triad, rises to power. From her first appearance in the opening scene where she is dressed in a classy black suit, with her hair slicked back and a cigarette between her lips, Thirteen perfectly embodies the heroic masculinity made famous by Chow Yun-Fat's characters in John Woo's films from the 1980s. In the *Young and Dangerous* series, this tradition of heroic masculinity is modulated and reinvented through the youthful characters played by Ekin Cheng and Jordan Chan.[29] What is Thirteen's subjective relation to this/ her masculinity? The first flashback sequence in the film is initiated by a scene of mourning. While Thirteen burns incense in front of a portrait of her late father (Ng Man-Tat), she explains to her Triad brother: "I've always thought of myself as a man. Do you know why?" A dissolving shot cuts from the late father's portrait to the past where the father is playing mah-jong with Triad bosses who use him as a pawn in the game. The narrative of Thirteen's transgender identification is thus visually linked to her father, a man who has never been able to live up to the heroic masculinity glorified in the genre. As a result, he is harassed and bullied and eventually dies in brutal humiliation. Thirteen's masculine identification thus also signals her identification with Triad power. However, the desire for Triad power alone does not explain Thirteen's transgender identification, only the *type* of masculinity she embraces. Her masculinity is not simply "functional": it is not just a means to gain Triad power. Subsequent flashback sequences show that long before her Triad ambitions, Thirteen was already a tomboy in her youth. Scenes of Thirteen and her girlhood companion A Yun (Kristy Yeung) playing, smoking, joking, and cuddling in bed together consciously echoes what would be recognized in the Hong Kong lesbian lexicon as a TB/TBG (literally "tomboy/ tomboy girl" and signifying butch/femme) relationship, even in the absence of any explicit sexual relations between the two. Thirteen is what Judith Halberstam would call a "transgender butch." Halberstam first formulates this category in order to challenge the overlapping, often blurry but frequently contested "borders" between butch and FTM (female-to-male transsexual) identities:

> There are real and physical differences between genetic females who specifically identify as transsexual and genetic females who feel comfortable with female masculinity. There are real and physical differences between female-born men who take hormones, have surgery, and live as men and female-born butches who live some version of gender ambiguity. But there are also many situations in which those differences are less clear than one might expect, and there are many butches who pass as men and many transsexuals who present as gender ambiguous and many bodies that cannot be classified by the options transsexual and butch.[30]

The category of "transgender butch," which emphasizes a cross-gender identification (transgender) while retaining a reference to a masculine form of femaleness (butch) that is distinct from either "man" or "woman," provides a more flexible category for those who inhabit the borderland between butch and FTM. I describe Thirteen as a transgender butch to signify her masculine identification and masculine presentation as well as to underscore the fact that she does not seek to pass as a man or transition physically. This specificity is important to my reinterpretation of the film's sexual dynamics.

The romantic plot of *Portland Street Blues* is full of twists and turns and offers an especially interesting example of the way transgender theory complicates the discourse of sexual orientation. Throughout the film, Thirteen suspects that A Yun is in love with Coke (Alex Fong), a hit man from the rival Dong Sing Triad. To Thirteen's surprise, A Yun admits towards the end of the film that the true object of her love has always been Thirteen. Her apparent desire for Coke is, like her many scheming acts of seduction earlier on in the film, simply a weapon of manipulation. In retrospect, it becomes clear that she seduces Coke in order to keep him away from Thirteen who, in a further twist of the romantic plot, greatly admires Coke and later betrays an intense affection for the man. Thirteen also runs a prostitute ring, cruises young women, and is widely known to be a lesbian. Yet, the only emotionally charged and intimate encounter she has in the film is with Coke. As a result, many reviewers are puzzled by the film's sexual dynamics. The veteran film critic Sek Kei, for instance, ends his review of the film with this question: "... moreover, is the Sandra Ng character [Sister Thirteen] actually homosexual or heterosexual? This was never made very clear."[31] Sek Kei wants to know, once and for all, whether Thirteen is "actually" lesbian or straight. What Sek Kei, or any other critic for that matter, fails to take into account is Thirteen's transgender identification and its implication for our understanding of her sexuality. If we read Thirteen not simply as a woman but more specifically as a transgender butch—i.e. as a *masculine* figure—then her desire for Coke is neither lesbian nor straight, but *gay*. Admittedly, my use of the term "gay" here is tongue-in-cheek, as the word inevitably invokes a discourse of sexual orientation that categorizes desire according to the sex of the desiring bodies, regardless of their gender presentation. Yet, if we take transgender identifications seriously, then sexual orientation may be much more complex than what the binary scheme of heterosexuality and homosexuality can describe. Is Thirteen's desire for Coke still heterosexual if she does not identify as feminine? In fact, since she is attracted to Coke as a self-identified *masculine* woman, would it not be more accurate to describe this attraction as *homoerotic*? This latter suggestion makes particular sense in the scene where Thirteen and Coke show immense tenderness for each other. The two are reunited for the first time after many years. They reminisce and make sexual jokes, in ways that are typical of male-male camaraderie. Then, all of a sudden, the mood shifts and Thirteen awkwardly asks Coke for a hug and he obliges, tentatively but tenderly. The film critic Shelly Kraucer has observed that during the exchange, the editing consistently violates the 180 degree rules, which means that from our perspective, the two characters keep switching position from left to right, continually replacing one another in placements.[32] The editing of the sequence recalls John Woo's famous manoeuvre in *The Killer*. In a formal analysis of the film, David Bordwell describes the ways in which Woo "cuts across the axis of action" to make the two heroes John and Li (Chow Yun-Fat and Danny Lee) "pictorially parallel":

> Thereafter John and Li are compared by every stylistic means Woo can find: crosscutting, echoing lines of dialogue, and visual parallels ... He intercuts tracking shots in John's apartment to make Li literally replace John, and he will have them face off again and again, in a dizzying series of variant framings, while telling the blind Jenny they're childhood friends. Woo violates Hollywood's 180-degree cutting rule in order to underscore graphic similarities between the two men.[33]

In the scene from *Portland Street Blues*, the "quotation" of Woo is significant in two ways: it anchors Thirteen's transgender identification in the mirror of Coke's masculinity at the same time that it represents an intense intimacy between two masculine figures. In a later scene when Thirteen arrives at the place where Coke has been shot dead, she grieves for him in a highly masculinized gesture: she picks up three burning cigarettes, lays them down on the ground together like three burning sticks of incense, and then kneels down to pay respect to Coke. Furthermore, in another implicit romantic subplot between Thirteen and her Triad partner Han Bin, who awkwardly tries to give her a ring to express his affection, the relationship is also coded in generic images of male-male camaraderie rather than heterosexual romance. The bonding scenes between the two show them getting drunk together while heading out to cruise women, expressing mutual respect for each other's abilities, and loyally watching each other's back amidst Triad power intrigue. All of these scenes typically occur between male characters in the genre. Thus, Thirteen never once steps out of her role as masculine hero, even—in fact, especially—in her romantic relations with men. What, then, is the significance of Thirteen's appropriation of this hitherto exclusively male homoeroticism (now understood as eroticism between two masculine-identified figures, regardless of their assigned birth sex)? In order to answer this question, it is necessary to turn, for a moment, to the debates on homoeroticism in Hong Kong action cinema.

In Jillian Sandel's analysis of John Woo's pre-Hollywood films, she suggests that the implicit homoeroticism in Woo's films signifies a repudiation of femininity, heterosexual desire and the burden of family, all of which threaten the hero's ideal of individualism and freedom.[34] However, this homoerotic tension is never allowed explicit expression in the films and is instead resolved in an aestheticized excess of violence inflicted on the male bodies. For Sandel, the homoerotic relationships in Woo's films are impossible to sustain because they articulate a form of freedom that the films associate with capitalism which, for Sandel, is an economic system that only permits competitive relations between individuals. Sandel's analysis is quite compelling but it is premised upon an overly hasty identification of femininity and the family with Chinese tradition. Violently masochistic masculinity is, by contrast, linked to capitalism, with the unresolved homoerotic relations between men as its (impossible) fantasy of freedom. In another reading of the films' masculinity, Mikel J. Koven reverses Sandel's argument in an equally problematic move. Koven contends that the discussion of homoeroticism in gangster films is a Western "misreading" of "traditional Chinese masculinity" which he characterizes as more openly expressive of emotions. For Koven, the intense affective investment in honour, duty, and loyalty commonly experienced by Chinese men are misrecognized as eroticism by Western critics.[35] Both Sandel and Koven, in their rush to set up a Chinese vs. Western dichotomy, are unable to see the interconnections, rather than oppositions, between homoeroticism, masculine freedom, and "traditional Chinese masculinity." While Sandel insightfully links the homoeroticism in Woo's films with the repudiation of femininity and family, she overlooks the possibility that the masculine freedom idealized in these homoerotic relationships is not necessarily an embrace of capitalist individualism and a repudiation of Chinese tradition. Rather, it is a nostalgic reconstruction of traditional masculinity, precisely in response to the competitive individualism of capitalism which eclipses such relations. Kovel, by contrast, recognizes the action genre's investment in traditional masculinity but is unable, or unwilling, to understand it as anything but categorically heterosexual.[36] Contrary to Kovel's assumption, homoeroticism abound in pre-modern in Chinese culture and is far from incompatible with "traditional Chinese masculinity."[37] As I have argued earlier on in the article, there is a crisis in the conceptualization of masculinity in the martial arts genre. While heterosexual desire is perceived, on the one hand, to be a constraint on masculine freedom, the repudiation of heterosexuality, on the other hand, seems to lead dangerously to feminization and homosexuality. While Jin Yong alleviates

this crisis with an expression of transphobia, Woo represses it by offering a homoerotic subtext that is forever deferred by outbursts of violence, thus never in danger of developing into homosexuality.

Just as *Swordsman II* provides an intriguing variation on the theme of masculinity in Jin Yong's novel, so *Portland Street Blues* provocatively modulates the homoeroticism in Woo's genre films. The film attempts to imagine a male-female relationship that departs from the generic portrayals of heterosexuality. The "homoerotic" relationship between Thirteen and Coke (or Han Bin) is unfettered by the burden of family and free from feminine influences. It is built upon loyalty and mutual respect. Yet, for such relationships to be intelligible within the gender dynamics of the genre, the film must fully articulate Thirteen's transgender identification as a masculine subject. This portrayal, which in effect concedes that masculinity is not the exclusive property of male bodies, is simply too threatening to be accommodated fully in a genre film. In a discussion of the cross-dressing opera diva Yam Kim-Fai, Natalia Chan argues that Chinese culture seems to have more tolerance for women who cross-dress as men than vice versa, because a cross-dressing female performer like Yam Kim-Fai, who embodies a "tragic" version of feminized (*yinrou*) masculinity, does not pose a real threat to the tradition of tough, strong (*yanggang*) masculinity.[38] Thirteen's decidedly *un*feminine masculinity in *Portland Street Blues* certainly departs from this tradition of feminized masculinity exemplified by Yam. More importantly, unlike Yam, the role of Thirteen is not a cross-dressed performance. Sandra Ng is not playing a male character as Yam was in Cantonese operas. Rather, Thirteen *is* a masculine character who has announced her transgender identification and who embodies a masculinity that rivals that of any other male characters in the film. She even forges a homoerotic relation with another hero. As such, she represents a far greater threat to the gendered structure of power than the examples of cross-dressed masculinity in Chan's analysis. The film's concluding scene exposes the anxiety of the genre towards this threat, which ironically is the fruit of its own production. After Thirteen has avenged the death of Coke, a mass of young gangster led by Ho-Nam, the hero of all the early *Young and Dangerous* films, congregate around her. This show of mass collectivity is a signature scene in all the films in the series. As Thirteen grieves Coke's death, Ho-Nam remarks coolly, "She is a woman after all." Here, Ho-Nam speaks the anxious conservative voice of the genre in this sudden attempt to tame the transgender butch, who has until this moment been its shining star. However, his remark sounds oddly disingenuous as the sight of a masculine hero grieving for another man is a commonplace in gangster films. Ho (Ti Lung) grieving (far more emotionally than Thirteen) for Mark (Chow Yun-Fat)'s death at the end of *A Better Tomorrow*, for instance, would not have shown him to be "a woman after all." Ho-Nam's insistence on Thirteen's "difference" is the film's anxious last-minute disavowal of her transgender identification, but the remark also ends up undermining the film's own innovative reworking of generic masculinity.

UNSUNG HEROES

My analysis of the two films is meant to provoke future work on other unsung heroes who have been overlooked as transgender subjects in Hong Kong cinema. I also hope to have shown that insights from transgender theory can significantly complicate our understanding of sexual desire. Furthermore, exploring different forms of transgender subjectivity and the context of their emergence in these two films has revealed an intriguing crisis in the representation of masculinity in the martial arts and gangster genres. The most idealized forms of masculinity in these genres involve a repudiation of heterosexuality and feminization; yet such repudiation also threatens to expose the repressed homoerotic roots of this masculine ideal. In *Swordsman II* and *Portland Street Blues*, transgender portrayals are a means to resolve this crisis. Yet, they end up reconfiguring the fundamental gender and sexual dynamics underlying the genres. *Swordsman II*'s bold transformation of Dongfang Bubai substitutes the novel's

anxiety of emasculation with an abandonment of masculinity altogether. In the film, it is the heroic *femininity* of a transsexual woman that triumphs over the restrained masculinity of Linghu Chong. In *Portland Street Blues*, a butch woman's successful embodiment of masculinity and appropriation of homoerotic desire has disrupted the seemingly natural association of heroic masculinity with genetic male bodies. Still, despite the box-office success of these films, they remain exceptional examples. There have not yet been another transsexual woman or transgender butch on screen storming the martial or gangster world in heroic glory. I believe a critical recognition of these characters *as* transgender subjects is a necessary first step towards their continual existence on the big screen.

Just as exploring transgender subjectivities in film can lead to reconceptualizations of generic formulations of gender and sexuality, so the social and political recognition of transgender subjects may lead to changes in public attitudes towards gender and sexual variance. At the time of writing, following the recent suicide of Leslie Cheung on April 1, 2003, there has been an unprecedented surge of public appreciation for his brilliant cross-gender performances on screen and on stage. On May 7, just a little over a month after Cheung's death, the much less publicized but equally heartbreaking suicide of Lin Guohua, a transgender woman from Taiwan, has also prompted much public reflection on the urgent need to respect, support, and protect transgender lives.[39] It is my hope that contributing to cultural work that respects the complexity of transgender experience and the agency of transgender subjects will, in its own modest way, contribute to the ongoing social and political struggles for gender and sexual diversity.

NOTES

Earlier drafts of this article were presented during 2002 at Inside Out: The 12th Toronto Gay and Lesbian Film and Video Festival, the "Intersecting Asian Sexualities" conference at the University of British Columbia, and the "Queer Visualities" conference at SUNY-Stony Brook. I have benefited enormously from the thoughtful responses to my work at these events. I am also grateful to Kam Wai Kui, whose rich experience in transgender activism and continual love of Hong Kong cinema have illuminated endless conversations that ultimately shaped many of my best ideas.

1. Susan Stryker, "The Transgender Issue: An Introduction," *GLQ* 4:2 (1998), 149.
2. In addition to the works cited in the article, the growing scholarship that is defining the emergent field of transgender theory includes, amongst others, the works of Kate Bornstein, Jacob Hale, Kate More, Vivien Namaste, and Riki Wilchins.
3. One of the earliest critiques of transphobia in feminism is Sandy Stone's now classic rebuttal to Janice Raymond in "The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto," revised 1993 version, http://www.sandystone.com/empire-strikes-back. See also Pat Califia, *Sex Changes: The Politics of Transgenderism* (San Francisco: Cleis, 1997), 86–119.
4. For an account of gay studies' relation to transgender theory, see Califia, 120-162. For works that intersect lesbian gender practices and transgender theory, see Minnie Bruce Pratt, *S/he* (New York: Firebrand, 1995) and Joan Nestle, *A Fragile Union* (San Francisco: Cleis, 1998). For the intersection between transgender theory and bisexuality, see Claire Hemmings, *Bisexual Spaces: A Geography of Sexuality and Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 99–144.
5. In 1997, the Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association (HBIGDA), the professional organization of health specialists in transgender care, elected transgender individuals to sit on its board of directors for the first time. See Stryker, 146.
6. For a description of the aims and activities of the Centre, as well as links to recent scholarly works on transgender issues in Asia, visit the Centre's web site at http://web.hku.hk/~sjwinter/TransgenderASIA/.
7. Jin Yong [Louis Cha], *Xiao'ao Jianghu* [The smiling, proud wanderer] Vol. 4 (Hong Kong, Minghe she, 1980), 1690. Subsequent references to this text will be given parenthetically after quotations. All translation of Chinese that appears in the article is my own.
8. Dongfang Bubai has also been variously translated as "Master Asia" or "Asia the Invincible" in the film's English subtitles and other English-language publications on the film.
9. For a discussion of this historiographic "use" of the eunuch, see Samshasha [Xiaomingxiong], *Zhongguo tongxing'ai shilu* [History of homosexuality in China], revised ed. (Hong Kong: Rosa Winkel Press, 1997), 348–9.
10. For a discussion of the role of the hero-hermit in martial arts fiction, see Chen Pingyuan, *Qiangu wenren xiakemeng: wuxia xiaoshuo leixing yanjiu* [The literati's chivalric dreams: narrative models of Chinese knight-errant literature] (Taipei: Rye Field Publishing, 1995), 187–228. See, also, Kam Louis's study of the archetypes of masculinity in Chinese culture, *Theorising Chinese Masculinity: Society and Gender in China* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002).

11. I am indebted to one of the anonymous reviewers of the book for pointing out this intriguing relation between feminization and freedom from female sexuality in the martial arts genre.
12 For an analysis of the relation between the decriminalization debates and the emergence of gay identity in the 1980s-1990s, see Petula Sik-Ying Ho, "Policing Identity: Decriminalisation of Homosexuality and the Emergence of Gay Identity in Hong Kong" (Ph.D. Diss., University of Essex, 1997).
13. See Stanley Kwan's documentary *Yin ± Yang: Gender in Chinese Cinema* [*Nansheng Nuxiang*] (1996) for a provocative look at transgressive gender representations throughout Chinese cinema.
14. The description of the film in the festival catalogue celebrates Dongfang Bubai's "ease with this newly acquired gender identity as a woman." http://www.transgenderfilmfestival.com/2001/_GB/article_swordsman.html
15. Jay Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (New York: Columbia UP, 1998), 23.
16. Chou Wah-Shan [Zhou Huashan], *Tongzhi lun* [On tongzhi] (Hong Kong: Tongzhi yanjiu she, 1995), 300.
17. Yau Ching [You Jing], *Lingqi luzao* [Starting another stove] (Hong Kong: Youth Literary Bookstore, 1996), 165.
18. Ibid., 166.
19. Chou, *Tongzhi* 300.
20. Didier Anzieu, *The Skin Ego: A Psychoanalytic Approach to the Self*. Trans. Chris Turner (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989). For a discussion of Anzieu's notion of the "self" in the context of the development of psychoanalytic theory, see Barbara Socor, *Conceiving the Self: Presence and Absence in Psychoanalytic Theory* (Madison and Connecticut: International Universities Press, 1997), 253–260.
21. Prosser, 65.
22. Ibid., 77.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid., 84.
25. Updated versions of the Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association Standards of Care for Gender Identity Disorders are available from http://www.hbigda.org/soc.html.
26. For an account of transgender activism that challenges thse medical discourse of transsexuality, see Califia, 221–244.
27. Leslie Feinberg, *Stone Butch Blues* (Milford, CT: Firebrand, 1992), 301.
28. See, especially, Leslie Feinberg, *Trans Liberation: Beyond Pink or Blue* (Boston: Beacon, 1998), Kate Bornstein, *My Gender Workbook* (London: Routledge, 1998), and Joan Nestle, Clare Howell, and Riki Wilchins, eds., *Genderqueer: Voices From Beyond The Sexual Binary* (Los Angeles, Alyson, 2002).
29. For a detailed analysis of the *Young and Dangerous* series in relation to the gangster genre in Hong Kong cinema, see Lisa Odham Stokes and Michael Hoover, *City On Fire: Hong Kong Cinema* (London: Verso, 1999), 79–86.
30. Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham: Duke UP, 1998), 142–173.
31. Sek Kei, *Shi Qi yinghua ji* [*Collected Reviews of Sek Kei*] Vol 4 (Hong Kong: Subculture, 1999), 39.
32. Shelly Kraucer, email correspondence, May 28, 2002.
33. David Bordwell, *Planet Hong Kong* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2000), 108–109.
34. Jillian Sandel, "A Better Tomorrow: American Masochism and Hong Kong Action Film," *Bright Lights Film Journal*, No. 13 (1994). Reprinted on http://www.brightlightsfilm.com/31/hk_better1.html.
35. Mikel J. Koven, "My Brother, My Lover, My Self: Traditional Masculinity in the Hong Kong Action Cinema of John Woo," *Canadian Folklore* 19.1 (1997), 55–8.
36. Ibid., 56.
37. For a beautifully written account of the homoerotic tradition [*nanfeng*] in pre-modern Chinese literature and culture, see Kang Zhengguo, [*Aspects of Sexuality and Literature in Ancient China*] (Taipei: Rye Field Publishing, 1996), 109–166.
38. Natalia Chan [Luo Feng], *Shengshi bianyuan* [*City on the Edge of Time*] (Hong Kong: Oxford UP (China), 2002), 41–2.
39. The Gender/Sexuality Rights Association in Taiwan has created a memorial website for Lin. See http://www.gsrat.org/.