

Jiyu Zhang

Pink Pride in Bangkok

Asian Transgender and Transnational Mobility in *Out of Place*¹

Centering on the politics of mobility, I aim to examine various aspects that are implicated in transgender narratives from the documentary *Out of Place*, such as spatial displacement, physical malleability, and social activism. With differential interpretations of mobility, I bring attention to a wide breadth of transgender identification which unravels both the limits and potentials of transgender movements across Asia. Only with a nuanced understanding of transgender movement in a non-Western context, I propose, can we overcome a parochial conception of transgender identity that is caused by epistemic asymmetry and geographical distance between China and the West. I argue that the transgender stories allow us to see how individuals rely on distinctive strategies for transgender identification, all of which entail a situational consciousness of their reified circumstances.

On October 14, 2016, a documentary titled *Out of Place: Transgender Stories from Asia* was premiered at the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art (UCCA) in Beijing, China. The two directors of the documentary, Han Xia and Joshua Frank, along with Mr. C, one of those interviewees whose real-life experiences are captured in the film, all showed up to participate in discussion after screening. Regarding the conceivably sensitive subject of this documentary, that is, transgender communities who have been long relegated to the margins of society, this film's premiere in Beijing should be viewed as an attempt to address sexual diversity and gender equality

in public. On the UCCA's official website, the introduction reads that this is a documentary which not only "presents the realities of transgender individuals in Asia," but also "provides assistance to those living with unanswered questions about their own identities, giving an inside look on the process of sex reassignment surgery, as well as the social support available to LGBTQ communities."²

As the statement above implies, the documentary *Out of Place* seeks to bring forth a pan-Asian transgender community by broadly applying the category of transgender identity to the geographic landscape of Asia. Encompassing a wide range of trans people on screen, however, the extensive approach to a unity of sexual and gender minorities across Asia, which this film supposedly achieves, is employed at the stake of controversial tendencies. Two questions arise from the documentary's narrative movement towards a trans-Asian alliance of transgender communities: what does "transgender" mean for/in Asia, and how does a trans-Asian network account for transgender experiences stem from a disparate array of cultures and locations? In other words, my immediate concerns with this documentary have to do with hierarchal structures of knowledge and practice not simply between the West and Asia, but also within the overarching region of Asia as a whole.

To be precise, first, to what extent is the concept of "transgender", (picture 1) a notion originated from the West, adequate enough to designate and subsume gender expressions in non-Western contexts? Does it still carry any analytical efficacy? Second, if transgender communities already exist in Asian territories, as it were, then are these communities identical to one other? Are they invariably identical to those in the West? On both levels, I would like to take transgender embodiments in this documentary as a point of departure, so as to articulate external and internal conflicts that are instigated by discrepancies between "transgender" as a globalizing trend and gender embodiments in Asian locations. On the premises of transgender identities, I call attention to the intersectionality of identity politics, by which I mean one's identification may not be solely defined in a single social category. Rather, intersectionality implies that a person's identification consists in varied constellations of social categories, such as sex, gender, race, ethnicity, class, and so on. Considering the thematic axis of (trans)gender and (trans-) Asia which lays the foundation of this film, it is equally important to recognize identifications that overlap multiple

in public. On the UCCA's official website, the introduction reads that this is a documentary which not only "presents the realities of transgender individuals in Asia," but also "provides assistance to those living with unanswered questions about their own identities, giving an inside look on the process of sex reassignment surgery, as well as the social support available to LGBTQ communities."²

As the statement above implies, the documentary *Out of Place* seeks to bring forth a pan-Asian transgender community by broadly applying the category of transgender identity to the geographic landscape of Asia. Encompassing a wide range of trans people on screen, however, the extensive approach to a unity of sexual and gender minorities across Asia, which this film supposedly achieves, is employed at the stake of controversial tendencies. Two questions arise from the documentary's narrative movement towards a trans-Asian alliance of transgender communities: what does "transgender" mean for/in Asia, and how does a trans-Asian network account for transgender experiences stem from a disparate array of cultures and locations? In other words, my immediate concerns with this documentary have to do with hierarchal structures of knowledge and practice not simply between the West and Asia, but also within the overarching region of Asia as a whole.

To be precise, first, to what extent is the concept of "transgender", (picture 1) a notion originated from the West, adequate enough to designate and subsume gender expressions in non-Western contexts? Does it still carry any analytical efficacy? Second, if transgender communities already exist in Asian territories, as it were, then are these communities identical to one other? Are they invariably identical to those in the West? On both levels, I would like to take transgender embodiments in this documentary as a point of departure, so as to articulate external and internal conflicts that are instigated by discrepancies between "transgender" as a globalizing trend and gender embodiments in Asian locations. On the premises of transgender identities, I call attention to the intersectionality of identity politics, by which I mean one's identification may not be solely defined in a single social category. Rather, intersectionality implies that a person's identification consists in varied constellations of social categories, such as sex, gender, race, ethnicity, class, and so on. Considering the thematic axis of (trans)gender and (trans-) Asia which lays the foundation of this film, it is equally important to recognize identifications that overlap multiple

categories. Consequently, this paper sets out to distinguish the multitude of transgender identities in *Out of Place*, and locate different strategies by which trans people in this documentary express their identity.



Picture 1: The Transgender flag, designed by Monica Helmes. “The stripes at the top and bottom are light blue, the traditional color for baby boys.”³ Source: Pixabay <https://pixabay.com/en/trans-transgender-flag-pride-1792756/>

Trans across Nations

The documentary begins with Bobbie Huthart, a half-Chinese and half-English transsexual woman (MTF, male to female), who has been living in Hong Kong for most of her life, and finally decides to undergo sexual reassignment surgery in Bangkok, Thailand. Revolving around Bobbie’s transnational-cum-transgender transition, this documentary also introduces stories of some other local trans people in Hong Kong, Bangkok, Beijing, and Guiyang — four cities are shown with varying attitudes towards transgenderism that reflect local cultural and social conditions on the one hand, and epistemic shifts of sexual and gender identities in Asian societies in response to globalizing Western knowledge, on the other. So much so that the interstices between local traditions and global trends serve for some people to facilitate their gender modification in a desired manner, these rifts might also turn into abysses of fantasy, fetish, and obsession. In the context of this documentary, I would argue that the tension of transgender identity is demonstrated by a politics of *mobility* — be it physical movement from

one place to another, or bodily transition from one gender to another — which plays out in the characters' negotiations with transgender identity. Focusing on both space and gender, I will elaborate how mobility and its lack have played out in an array of transgender individuals' everyday life.

Established as the main thread that runs throughout the whole film, Bobbie's personal story charts a parallel of transformations in terms of body and space. Although in the documentary Bobbie does not reveal much about her family history, in an interview with *South China Morning Post* (SCMP) after the film's premiere and online release, her family background turns up clearer according to what she disclosed in the interview.⁴ Born in the late 1940s in Hong Kong, Bobbie was formerly called Robert Huthart, born as the second son of Robert Huthart Senior who was the managing director of the retail company Lane Crawford. Raised in a successful merchant family, Bobbie was supposed to shoulder the responsibility to flourish the family business, in which she was engrossed for the most of her life. Still, apart from the paramount duty ordained by the Huthart corporate empire, Bobbie was also expected to carry on the family line — another pressing issue that become more complicated when her brother Gordon Huthart came out as gay.⁵ Circumscribed by entrepreneurial and familial commitments, Bobbie had no choice but to fulfill her obligations, with nothing but anguish and regret. In 2015, now a father of two daughters and a son, Robert Huthart decided to make her wish come true. Like her brother, so did Robert come out to his family and friends, as a transgender woman who has called herself Bobbie ever since.

Bobbie's presence in the documentary coincides with her outed life in Hong Kong. Showing around her hangout places in the city, Bobbie, who has already been going through hormone therapy, expresses that she will undertake a sex reassignment surgery in Bangkok for her long overdue aspiration of a female body. In the SCMP coverage, Bobbie adds that the reason for the genital reassignment surgery in a different country has to do with her romance between her (with a male biology back then) and a transgender woman once in Thailand. There Bobbie speaks:

"About 20 years ago, I had a relationship with a transgender girl in Phuket, who had changed completely to become female. She was a wonderful person and being with her was a wonderful experience which changed how I saw my situation forever. I had always assumed that transgender people were perverts — that they were hookers and dancers or in the sex industry — and I was not aware there was a normal life for many transgender people. It was

a time that preceded the internet so access to information of this nature was difficult.

In Hong Kong society, I was shielded from any exposure and of course, there was my family duty. Thus, this relationship made me realise that not only was a normal life as a transgender person possible, but that I was not a freak of nature. I realised I was a derivative of gender and a human being with value."⁶

Indeed, the romantic encounters of Bobbie with the transgender woman in Thailand, have become a source of inspiration and liberation for her transition. Speaking with a sense of certainty, Bobbie justifies her pursuits of transgender identity as a way to achieve her personhood that rests on an ideal body image. As the documentary shows, after her surgery, Bobbie intends to spend the rest of her life in Bangkok. Hence, Bobbie's transgender identification is not only actualized by physical plasticity via medical technologies, but also aided by spatial mobility via geographical relocation. For both, Bobbie's transition is a mobile process through body and space, a process that, as trans scholar Lucas Crawford suggests, allows the subject to "move from place to place and gender to gender."⁷ However, this double transition is virtually a one-way journey for Bobbie, one that conflates her subjective feelings with bodily actions towards a finite destination of embodied selfhood. Paradoxically, Bobbie's mobility to go through this process rather reinforces dominant norms of sexual and gender expression, which builds on a binarism of masculinity and femininity. The mobility is not so much subversive precisely because its ultimate embodiment complies with prescribed sexual and gender norms. Bobbie's gender narrative slips into a closed circuit of gender identity, in which she might choose one over another, but cannot break the loop altogether. In this sense, this personal transgender story turns into a cautionary tale about *how solutions to gender problems could be part of the same power structure*. That is to say, even though it is true that Bobbie has fully become a woman — whether biologically or psychologically, the fullness of her transition, which is achieved by bodily modification and transnational dislocation, is just another way to illustrate current definitions of gender. The whole journey of Bobbie's transgender transition has become a mirror image of gender norms, in the sense it merely displaces gender categories (woman and man) within the same archetypical forms of gender in reverse order, instead of disrupting them. Such a trajectory that is highlighted by a discernible performance of mobility of space and body, compels us to recognize an ignorant optimism

of transgender movements which derives from the fulfillment of one's longstanding wish, but conceals the possibility to subvert the operation of social and cultural stereotypes altogether.

Trans in the City

Whereas the documentary follows through Bobbie's transgender migration across national borders, it also features alternative routes of transgender people in Asia. For example, Mr. C, a transgender man who lives in the city of Guiyang (the provincial capital of Guizhou in China), reveals another approach to transgender identity. As a native of the city, Mr. C belongs to the emerging generation of Chinese youth who bear witness to drastic transformations of the country. China's integration into global economy since its economic reform in the late 1970s has not only led to marketization and urbanization on a vast scale, but also ushered in ideas and concepts from the outside world. Along with material changes of living conditions, wealth accumulation, and technological advancement, there have been intellectual movements that call for more civic engagement to address public issues, such as gender politics.

The narrative of Mr. C unfolds in sharp contrast to Bobbie's transnational itinerary. Guiyang, which has been often cited as one of the most underdeveloped provincial capitals in China, saw a burgeoning group of LGBTQ individuals like Mr. C. Due to his nonconforming gender expression, Mr. C constantly encounters social discrimination. Besides social inequality of gender identity, Mr. C faces predicaments from his personal relationship. Though his girlfriend accepts him as a heterosexual trans man, his girlfriend's parents think otherwise. Nonetheless, Mr. C is an active member of the trans community in the city. Rather than organize public assemblies to call on the authorities to protect trans people's rightful benefits — which is highly unlikely given restrictive policies in mainland China — Mr. C regularly holds casual group meetings with friends, most of which are trans people themselves, to discuss promotional campaigns on social media platforms such as Weibo and WeChat, in order to raise awareness on transgender people. It might be added that, by the time when the documentary was released in Beijing in 2016, Mr. C had already filed a case in the local court earlier that year, by suing his former employer who dismissed him, and claiming his dismissal a discriminative act against gender equality. After the film's public screening near the end of the year, the district court ruled in favor of Mr.

C, ordering the defendant to compensate Mr. C's financial loss.⁸ Although this win counts hardly as a historical moment of transgender community in China, let alone the legitimatization of transgender citizenship, still, this victory guarantees a fair possibility that transgender individuals in China can preserve their lawful rights.⁹ Therefore, not only has Mr. C's personal struggle given rise to a larger visibility of the Chinese transgender group with media exposure, but more it also proved that even without a transnational or translocal displacement to obviate from repressive circumstances, it is still possible to procure and promote transgender identity within a limited social space. Sharing the same motivation notwithstanding, there lies a distinction between Bobbie's and Mr. C's accesses to transgender identity derived from their unequal accesses to mobility.

Apparently, unlike Bobbie, who was born into a wealthy family with racial privileges from her mixed ancestry and colonial legacy from her family history, Mr. C merely has a scarce access to social resources — thus sustainable livelihood and body modification.¹⁰ Because of his lack of financial means or a social network, Mr. C's transgender identification and activism are based on his local experience in Guizhou. Whereas Bobbie's transgender transition moves beyond physical and national borders, Mr. C's transgender identity solely depends on his everyday experience in the city. The social space for him to maneuver through repressive conditions is rather constrained. Deprived of the opportunity to bypass the regulatory atmosphere, what Mr. C's personal struggle has incited is a situational approach that navigates between personal tactics and local realities. By contrast, whereas Bobbie can wield her social capital to purchase a mobility that could ease the tension of her transgender transition, Mr. C has shown an *immobile* transgender transition as he faces far more difficulties both from society and the family, such as unemployment, detachment from his girlfriend, and above of all, a legitimate gender citizenship.

These features of immobility reflect how much the concept of transgenderism as a Western category, seems to become a crucial aspect of human rights in a democratic society, but at the same time, can also become symptomatic of the category's introduction to and reception in non-Western societies. Specifically, transgender and other non-heteronormative sexual and gender expressions are hindered at large by the authorities in China. Mr. C's transgender activism echoes what Stryker notes on the specific conditions of transgender identification, as to "how various forms of personhood in locations around the world imagines their own relationship to those things

that transgender can be made to evoke, such as modernity, metropolitanism, Eurocentrism, whiteness, or globalization.”¹¹ By directing his agency at equal rights within the legal framework rather than materializing a subjective feeling (a body image or a gender certainty), Mr. C has paved another way for transgender individuals to improve their lives against the grain of social prejudice and cultural discrimination — a way that does not necessarily resort to mobility of space and body.

As a result, my formulation of local transgender communities, as registered in *Out of Place*, questions the ways in which transgender as a Western category is incorporated into non-Western locations. It implicates a plethora of scenarios whereby local traditions and exercises of gender contradict global concepts and practices. Just as Mr. C’s transgender story epitomizes how Chinese youth in contemporary China respond to transgender movement as a part of global transmission of Western knowledge. The local space of Guiyang that conditions Mr. C’s experience, also serves as a frontier of globality vis-à-vis locality in the Chinese context. The category of transgender identity in Mr. C’s case can be understood in conjunction with what Stryker postulates as “a means of resistance to local pressures”, “an alternative to tradition”, or “a mode of survival and translation for traditional cultural forms that are unintelligible within binary concepts of man/woman and homo/hetero associated with the modern West.”¹² Mr. C’s local transgender experience, therefore, constitutes a form of subject construction emerged from the dialectic relationship of the global and the local. Furthermore, it operates as a site of contention between the individual and the state against the backdrop of an expanding civil society in China, where marginal individuals and communities strive for rights with different foci. Instead of slipping into a universalist pitfall of transgender identification, Mr. C’s immobile trajectory is not complicit with either profit-driven beauty industries or radical social movements. Aiming at legal rights provided by the state institution, his personal efforts might have a larger progressive and tactical impact on social acceptance and legal recognition of the transgender community in China.

Conclusion

Centering on the politics of mobility, I have introduced various aspects that are implicated in transgender narratives from *Out of Place*, such as spatial displacement, physical malleability, and social activism. With differential

interpretations of mobility, I bring attention to a wide breadth of transgender identification with which this documentary has informed us about both the limits and potentials of transgender movements across Asia (although in this paper I merely focused on two trans persons living in mainland China and Hong Kong). Only with a nuanced understanding of transgender movement in a non-Western context, I propose, can we overcome a parochial conception of transgender identity that is caused by epistemic asymmetry and geographical distance between China and the West, in this case. The transgender stories in *Out of Place* reveal how individuals rely on distinctive strategies for transgender identification, all of which entail a situational consciousness of their reified circumstances.

Notes

1. Correspondence: Jiyu Zhang, Department of Film and Literary Studies, Leiden University Centre for the Arts in Society, Faculty of Humanities, Leiden University. E-mail: j.zhang[at]hum.leidenuniv.nl.
2. For details, see the website of UCCA. "Out of placetransgender stories from Asia screening and discussion." <http://ucca.org.cn/en/program/out-of-place-transgender-stories-from-asia-screening-and-discussion-2/> (accessed 15 March, 2018).
3. "The stripes at the top and bottom are light blue, the traditional color for baby boys. The stripes next to them are pink, the traditional color for baby girls. The stripe in the middle is white, for those who are intersex, transitioning or consider themselves having a neutral or undefined gender. The pattern is such that no matter which way you fly it, it is always correct, signifying us finding correctness in our lives." <http://point5cc.com/the-history-of-the-transgender-flag/> (accessed 31 May, 2018).
4. Rachel Blundy, "How a 'ruthless playboy businessman' in Hong Kong became a transgender woman," in *South China Morning Post*, 26 August, 2017, <http://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/education-community/article/2108317/how-ruthless-playboy-businessman-hong-kong-became>, (accessed 9 March, 2018).
5. Robert's late brother Gordon was the founder of Disco Disco, one of the earliest gay clubs in Hong Kong. After Disco Disco was sold by Gordon Huthart in 1986, the building in which it was located later turned into Lan Kwai Fong, Hong Kong's most popular night club nowadays. For details, see: Kenneth Howe, "Pink power" in *South China Morning Post*, 1 September, 2000, <http://www.scmp.com/article/325266/pink-power>, (accessed 9 March, 2018); Isobel Yeung, "Funky town: How disco fever in the late '70s changed Hong Kong's nightlife forever," in *Post Magazine*, 15 June, 2014, <http://www.scmp.com/magazines/post-magazine/article/1529999/funky-town-hong-kongs-disco-heyday> (accessed 9 March, 2018).
6. Rachel Blundy, *South China Morning Post*, 26 August, 2017 (accessed 9 March, 2018).
7. Lucas Cassidy Crawford, "Transgender without Organs?: Mobilizing a Geo-Affective

Theory of Gender Modification,” vol. 36, no. 3&4, *WSQ: Women’s Studies Quarterly* (2008): 129.

8. Lindsay Maizland, “Transgender activists in China just scored a historic victory,” *Vox*, 27 July, 2017. <https://www.vox.com/world/2017/7/27/16049820/china-transgender-discrimination-lawsuit-mr-c> (accessed 15 March, 2018).
9. Emily Rauhala, “Transgender Chinese man wins first-of-its-kind labor discrimination case,” *The Washington Post*, 27 July, 2017. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/07/27/transgender-chinese-man-wins-first-of-its-kind-labor-discrimination-case/?utm_term=.1c753ebc87b1 (accessed 15 March, 2018).
10. In the documentary it remains unclear whether or not the protagonist has undergone a sex reassignment surgery, but Mr. C’s physical and vocal appearance are shown with effects of hormone medication.
11. Susan Stryker, “De/Colonizing Transgender Studies of China,” In: Chiang H. (eds) *Transgender China*. Palgrave Macmillan, New York: 291.
12. Stryker, *Ibid*.