Queer Youthscapes in Asia: Embodied Modernities and Trans-Embodiments

Audrey Yue

Abstract The lives of young people in Asia have been transformed in recent decades as a result of rapid development, industrialisation and globalisation. From new life-making subjects to civic netizens, the embodiment practices of young people are central to these narratives of Asian modernities. Exemplary here is the role that sexuality has played in constituting new desires and identities. From the correctness of suzhi (human quality) in China to gay consumers of creative economies in Thailand and Singapore, the practices of sexual embodiment have become new agents of complicity and change. In this chapter, I critically introduce and canvass the field of queer Asian studies to showcase a range of key case studies that demonstrate these practices of embodiments. Further considering how these practices foreground the convergence of the two formations of 'queerscape' and 'youthscape', I show how youth sexuality, as a site of embodied modernity, can be a productive arena to consider the challenges of transitions and futures as populations and places are constantly being made and remade, and called into becoming. I conclude by further demonstrating these practices using trans-embodiment through the figures of the tomboi (in Indonesia), the boy-head (in Hong Kong) and the butch (in Singapore).

Introduction

Rapid development, industrialisation and globalisation have transformed the lives of young people in Asia. As new life-making subjects, they are also central to these narratives of Asian modernities. Exemplary here is the role sexuality plays in the formation of new desires and identities. From learning the correctness of *suzhi* (human quality) in China to becoming gay consumers of creative economies in Thailand and Singapore, young people are the agents of complicity and change. This chapter addresses these transformations by focusing on LGBT (gay, lesbian,

A. Yue (✉)
University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia
e-mail: aisy@unimelb.edu.au

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bisexual and transgender) youth cultures. Using cultural studies approaches to media and everyday life, this chapter examines how lesbian cinema and transgender self-fashioning have created new practices that challenge the normative patterns of transition experienced at the levels of the economic and social, as well as through the life cycle.

The first section begins by contextualising the development of Asia and the effects of its structural transition on space, time and the body. It highlights these effects as part of the process of embodied modernity, a process where spatial-temporal progress is most acutely experienced at the level of the body. Further evaluating these impacts on young people, it reveals how the teleology of (structural and youth) transitions, and their neoliberal subject-formations, has reproduced young people as economic objects rather than social agents.

The second and third sections map the queer Asian youthscape and critically discuss its challenge to the teleology of transitions. As a new space of sexual desire and identity created through the synergy of global and local cultures, the queer Asian youthscape is a regional imaginary consisting of people, capital and resources. Using the popular film genre of the transnational Chinese schoolgirl lesbian romance as an example of a media commodity and resource that circulate in such a space, this chapter shows how normative time is challenged by girlhood as an alternative temporality that interrupts adult time with its new expressions of intimacy. Further focusing on the everyday performances of gender and sexuality by young masculine women—the tomboi in Indonesia, the boy-head in Hong Kong and the nightclub butch in Singapore, it evaluates how their practices of self-fashioning—practices of trans-embodiment—use body transformations not only to challenge the binary sex/gender system but also for neoliberal accumulation. These sections critically survey scholarship in queer Asian studies—an emergent field that arose in the last ten years on the margins of Asian studies and sexuality studies—by engaging work that has provincialized Western-centric queer theory and widened the frames of queer knowledge-production. It mobilises this field to introduce new practices of the young queer communities in Asia who have come of age by making claims to their sexual identities through alternative trajectories of transitions. The queer Asian youthscape, this chapter argues, provides a fertile arena to expose the normative politics of transitions.

A conceptual framing to the discourse of transition is necessary to highlight this chapter's methodological approach. Common to youth studies, Asian modernisation studies and transgender studies is the discourse of transition. Transition is the process of moving from one stage to another. In youth studies, it refers to the period of physical and social change that falls between the life course of childhood and adulthood (Heinz 2009). Traditionally conceived of as a unidirectional and linear process, the concept examines school-to-work transitions. The field of youth transitions studies now focuses on additional transitions such as extended transitions faced by longer education and uncertain employment opportunities (Skelton 2002), as well as the importance of biographical (Henderson 2007) and cultural approaches (Woodman and Wyn 2015). In studies of Asian modernity, transition is a discourse to denote the fast pace of economic, social and cultural transformation

in the past four or so decades as a result of postcolonial and postsocialist development (see e.g. Chiang et al. 2004; Herrschel 2007; Safarian and Dobson 2002). Aided by capitalism, this discourse—similar to the linear model of normative youth transitions studies—also invokes a linear pathway through the teleology of modern progress. In transgender studies, the term transition has at least two meanings. The first stems from biomedicine and refers to the process of switching from one's biological sex to one's desired sex. One's desired sex is opposite to one's biological sex. This process has required and been legitimated by sex reassignment surgery. The second meaning comes from queer theory and is mobilised as a critical site to question the stability of the material sex as a referent and its unstable relationship to socially constructed norms of gender (Stryker 2013). The following sections mobilise these discourses of transition.

Transitions in Asia: On the Youthscapes of Space, Time, Body

Section one provides a critical context to consider how society's structural transitions have affected the transitions of young people in Asia and impacted their processes of identity-formation. It exposes the normative politics of transition across three domains: time, space and body. As Asia modernises, time is teleological and space becomes developmental, while the body and its subject are incorporated as human capital.

The pace and scale of change in Asia in the past fifty years has been unprecedented. This is evident across the domains of space, time and body, and has impacted the lives of young people. Many countries broke away from colonial rule and became independent postcolonial nation-states, and some such as China and Vietnam turned their command systems into prosperous post-socialist models. Asian economies flourished and many transitioned from under-developed to newly industrialising nation-states. While the world's average annual growth rate for this period was 2 % (Kose and Ozturk 2014), Asian economies grew exponentially: in 1980, the rate of growth, for example, in China, Indonesia, India and Singapore was 15.2, 7.2, 3.8 and 8.8 % respectively; in 2013, and in the aftermath the sluggish global post-GFC recovery, economic growth was steadfastly maintained, registering 7.7, 5.8, 5.0 and 3.9 % respectively (World Bank 2014). New clusters such as Asian Tigers and BRIC were coined to capture such fiscal clout.[1] About 717 million young people aged 15–24 live in this region, making up 60 % of the world's youth population (UN ESCAP 2013). High birth rates, especially during the earlier two

[1]Between 1980s and 1990s, the term 'Asian Tiger' was used to refer Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan, countries that achieved an annual growth rate of more than 7 %. In early 2000s, the acronym BRIC was coined to refer to Brazil, Russia, India and China, the big 4 countries whose combined economies were predicted to eclipse the most developed and richest nations of the world.

decades, have resulted in a young workforce that has contributed to the region's productive capacity and rising income. It is estimated that in the next century, young people will make up more than half of the working population in the region (Australian Government 2012, p. 32).

These transformations in national economies and societies have reconfigured relations in the region, and are also complexly related to other processes occurring globally. Important to note here is that Asia is a vast, diverse, disparate and unequal region; it is home to some of the world's most technologically advanced (e.g. South Korea), richest (e.g. Singapore) and poorest (e.g. Bangladesh, Cambodia and Laos) countries. These patterns of economic and social transformation—patterns that do not conform to a singular economic and social model of similarity and universality—are also reflected in the transformation of Asian youth cultures.

Paul Clark (2012), for example, provides a succinct historical overview of the changes experienced by young people in China in the past forty years. Marking out three distinct periods–from 1968 during the Cultural Revolution; from 1988 in the wake of the Tiananmen Square student democracy movement; and from 2008 in the aftermath of the Beijing Olympics—he examines the country's transition from communism to neoliberal post-socialism. Clark (2012) argues that Chinese youths have always carved out cultural practices of belonging and fashioned identities using indigenous and foreign sources. From the theatre and music performances of the Red Guards in the 1960s, to the dissent of Western-influenced Chinese rock music such as that of Cui Jian's in the 1990s, and the influence of the K-pop wave amongst the current Internet-savvy generation, Clark shows how youth cultures are distinct sites of identity-formation. He argues they "cannot be understood…in grid patterns of simple binaries: Chinese and Western, local and global, or traditional and modern. The developments are more complex and also spontaneous, ungoverned, uneven, and unpredictable. An assumed teleology from local to global is misleading, as Chinese elements coexisted and intermingled with the international and were transformed and reinvented" (Clark 2012, p. 192). These transformations in Chinese youth cultures are exemplary of the dynamic formation of the youthscape.

The concept of the youthscape highlights how a new world of youth cultures is created as a result of the globalization and indigenization of youth practices and identities. The concept follows Arjun Appadurai's (1996) seminal spatial model of cultural globalisation where new worlds—what he calls scapes—are formed by the deterritorialising and reterritorialising flows of ideologies, finances, technologies, people and media. The key to Appadurai's model is the disjunctive characteristic of globalisation. Rather than following the globalisation-as-one-world thesis where global flows are unidirectional (usually from the West to the East, or the Global North to the Global South) and have the propensity to colonise, homogenise and universalise the local, this model draws attention to irregular globalisation and its multi-directional flows. Maira and Soep (2005) coin the term youthscape to refer precisely to these disjunctures where local youth cultures are constituted in the intersections and contradictions of global cultural flows, and through the specificities of political and social currents.

Postindustrial transitions identified above have clearly reconfigured youthscapes in Asia. If these structural transformations, as Belinda Smaill argues, can be understood through the historical frame as "a site of becoming" (space/locality), the notion of youth, too, has been posed frequently and ontologically, as a "state of becoming" (time/temporality) (Smaill 2008, p. 3). Both are associated with the change and advent of the new. While Asia's new regimes of capital accumulation rely on the energy, optimism and resilience of young people, its teleological narrative of development has also led to the uneven distribution of life chances. This is especially evident in the opportunities for schooling and employment. Take literacy rates across the region for example: although South Korea and Japan are in the world's top ten countries with the highest literacy rates, the rest of the region's emerging economies is at least 3.5 years behind the level of advanced countries (Lee and Francisco 2012). Against this context, youth has become a site of both the promise and uncertainty of capital accumulation and postindustrial transition. Young people's futures in Asia, like everywhere else in the world, are becoming increasingly uncertain. Their transition is also complex, especially for young women (Nahar et al. 2013). With fast-changing markets that have reordered national economies and reduced domestic opportunities, the forms of life inhabited by their parents in terms of secure employment and benefits are no longer available to them. They are now expected to take up more and more life-making practices to improve their future chances. Transitions are not only experienced across regional space and developmental time; but the material body is also a site of becoming.

Young people embark on life-improvement practices to embrace the burden of self-development that are characteristic of the enterprising neoliberal subject. Examining their future in East Asia, Ann Anagnost defines these practices as "embodied human capital," as "investments in the self to ensure one's forward career progression" (Anagnost 2013, p. 2). These investments are most evident through education. Not only are governments putting more emphasis on education, young people themselves are staying at school longer to improve their knowledge capital and becoming more educated than their predecessors (Mason and Lee 2012). They are now required to enter the global economy through their new status as human capital. Embodiment, as a process of how the body has acquired meaning through signification, has abstracted young people as material social agents into objects of economic labour. Although their changing economic roles show how they are always in the process of being made in relation to national projects of human engineering, such as through top-down state projects that attempt to create new kinds of subjects for political and economic transformation, it is significant to note they are also active agents of change. The term embodied modernities (Martin and Heinrich 2006), captures these processes of becoming that are tied to the changes of the new and most acutely experienced at the level of the body.

Against this backdrop, it remains important to ask: how are young people actively fashioning their life trajectories within this logic of neoliberal capital accumulation, and how do these practices conform to and/or challenge normative conventions of space, time and the body? The following presents a new critical frame to problematise these processes by focusing on the practices of queer

youthscapes in Asia, in particular, through the schoolgirl romance film genre from China, Hong Kong and Taiwan, and everyday transgender youth embodiment in East and South-East Asia.

Space and Time: Queer Asia and the Chinese Schoolgirl Romance Film

Section two examines the queer Asian youthscape as a site to challenge normative transition's conception of time and space. To question the norms of straight space, this section shows the queer Asian youthscape as a new site for sexual minority groups to come together, as well as an alternative arena for cultural production and consumption. To question the norms of straight time, this section shows how reproductive time is challenged by the new lesbian film genre of the school romance.

The rise of queer Asia has arguably been as equally prominent as the rise of Asia. In a region marked by conservative heterosexual values that reify the marriage and the family (e.g. family values as Confucian, Hindu or Islamic Asian values), LGBTs have become increasingly visible in public cultures. This has been made possible by: the legalisation of homosexuality in some countries such as Thailand (1956), Hong Kong (1991) and China (1997); Internet access that has opened up new platforms for community support and sexual identity role modeling (Berry et al. 2003); government interventions in commerce and the creative economies that have led to the rise of gay and lesbian businesses, and pink tourism (Jackson 2011; Yue 2012); the public health management of HIV/AIDS (Altman 2001); and; a thriving regional subculture of media production and consumption including social media portals, films, books and circuit parties. It is estimated that there are at least 200 million people—or 20 % of the population—who identify as LGBTs in Asia (Marsh 2013). Of these, approximately 143 million are between the ages of 15–24. Not coincidentally, this zeitgeist of sexual coming out has also mirrored the coming of age of the aforementioned mainstream postcolonial generation. 'Queer Asia' is a collective term to describe this regional imaginary. As a space of sub/cultural production and everyday consumption, it has also created distinct practices that have challenged heteronormativity. Below is a meta-analysis of the transnational Chinese schoolgirl romance film that critically eludicates the genre's challenge to 'straight' or normative conventions of time and space.

The transnational Chinese schoolgirl romance film was a popular genre in the 1990s and early 2000s. Usually in Mandarin and Cantonese, these films were made in China, Hong Kong and Taiwan, by mainstream and same-sex identified film-makers. These films have received global critical acclaim in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Germany and Slovakia, and are circulated widely across domestic mainstream film markets, and international mainstream and queer film festivals. They were also very popular among Chinese-speaking lesbian audiences in East Asia, and the global Chinese diasporas. The highest profile film, for example, *Spider Lilies* (dir. Zero

Chou 2007), won the Teddy Award at the Berlin International Film Festival, and was selected by Chinese lesbians in Singapore as the most popularly watched film of that period (Yue 2011). Films in this group include *Fish and Elephant* (dir. Yu Li 2001); *The Intimates* (dir. Jacob Cheung 1997); *Butterfly* (dir. Yan Yan Mak 2004); *Hu-Du-Men* (dir. Shu Kei 2007); *20–30–40* (dir. Sylvia Chang 2004); *Spacked Out* (dir. Lawrence Ah Mon 2000) and *Drifting Flowers* (dir. Zero Chou 2008).

This genre shares a common melodramatic storyline: either through the main plot or as a subtext, they narrate the unfolding of erotically charged relations among adolescent girls and young women. Usually told in flashback (from the point-of-view of an adult woman remembering her adolescent love-crush), these stories are set in high schools and revolve around the same-sex love between two schoolgirls.

Fran Martin (2010) calls this genre a type of memorial film characterised by a mode of adult recollection about the foreclosure of female homoeroticism. She focuses on the film's framing just before the flashback sequence. This iconic framing, a 'backward glance' shot of an adult woman turning her head back to look behind, usually begins the film. It functions as a structural transition to the flashback mode and sets up the film's diegesis of remembering. The flashback not only interrupts the present time of the narrative with a past time; it also interrupts adult time with girlhood time.

The focus on girlhood time is reinforced by Helen Hok Sze Leung (2008) who has also examined this film genre, as well as through the genre of campus fiction. She suggests these films and books reveal an ambivalence about adult heterosexuality as an inevitable and desirable outcome of girlhood, and proposes examining girlhood through disidentification. Where girlhood is normatively marked by its temporal transition into adult womanhood, disidentification allows girls to refuse to identify with the category of woman and create instead a new self-identity by remaining as girls. For her, girlhood is an identity located in a different temporality that resists the gendered expectations of normative womanhood. Normative womanhood is marked by the reproductive time of biological clocks, marriage, child rearing and family routine (Halberstam 2005). Girlhood is not about a refusal to grow up; it simply means a rejection of the linear time that equates responsibility and adulthood with the heterosexual norms of marriage and childrearing. As anti-heteronormative and non-reproductive queer time, girlhood also defies the national time of reproduction. This temporality disrupts straight time, and also reflects a non-teleological time that has the potential to resist the official narratives of modernity, progress and maturity associated with and expected of economic, social and youth transitions.

As symbolic texts and institutional commodities, these films embrace new girlhood intimacies that celebrate an alternative temporality. They also inform the space of an emergent queer Asian youthscape. Emanating from queer Asia, and drawing on the queerscape as a new world created by the globalization and localization of queer media cultures (McLelland 2003), as well as the oblique spaces of non-heteronormativity reclaimed and reinvented on the margins of straight (mainstream; official; colonial) spaces such as that of the high school in the lesbian schoolgirl romance genre (Leung 2001), the queer Asian youthscape consists of people, resources and capital. Further on, it entails how these elements

combine to become the repository for young sexual minorities to further imagine new desires and identities. It is especially significant for adolescent and young LGBTs in Asia who often choose to hide their sexual identities from their families, communities and peers (Chang 2005). The following maps these desires and identities through the everyday practice of trans-embodiment to show how, in addition to the queer Asian youthscape's challenge to conventional space and time, the cisgendered body is also a site of intervention.

Body: FTM Trans-Embodiment—the Tomboi, Boy-Head and Butch in Southeast and East Asia

Section three challenges the site of the body as embodied human capital by showing how the self-fashioning practices of transgender embodiment appropriate the strategy of neoliberal accumulation to carve out alternative forms of life-making and sexual identities.

In recent years there has been a rise in trans-identification among young people. Whether through medical transition or sexual and gendered identification, more and more young people, from as young as the age of eight are coming out as trans-gender. Trans-identification has become an accepted social, sexual and medical practice in the West and across some parts of Asia. Where Singapore was the center of sex reassignment surgery in the 1970s, Thailand is now the heart of such medical tourism. Across East and South East Asia, from China to Hong Kong, Manilla and Bangkok, female to male trans-boys are also becoming visible in the mainstream, winning television singing idol competitions and forming regional touring tomboy boybands. Since the twenty-one-year-old self-proclaimed tomboy Li Yuchun's (Chris Lee) win as the 2005 China Idol, Suppanad Jittaleela (Tina), a Thai model, singer and actress, has also rose to fame with her debut portrayal as a high school tom in the popular mainstream Thai movie *Yes or No* (*Yaak Rak Gaw Rak Loey*) (dir. Saratswadee Wongsomphet 2010), and become a heartthrob with lesbian fan clubs across China, Malaysia and the Philippines. Similarly, after winning the 2013 *Thailand Got Talent* contest, the K-pop inspired boyband group, Tom Actz, has also achieved celebrity status in Asia. These practices draw out two significances when considering the queer Asian youthscape and its critical capacity to challenge normative meanings about young people and their bodies. First, these are increasingly a key part of the youthscape, creating alternative images, identities and desires that are circulated across the inter-Asian media and sexual cultural circuits, and forming a resource for young queer and straight people to debate, question and model their own gender presentations and sexual identities; second, the concept of trans, with its metaphor for crossing from one threshold to another, provides a useful and relevant theoretical tool to problematise the teleology of transitions (youth and otherwise). This section will first examine the latter to establish its conceptual framing in order to further evaluate the former.

In the binary sex system, the material body must align with its prescribed gender. The transgender is a term that reveals how gendered bodies can take up diverse subject positions that move back and forth across the ideologies that surround the boundaries of binary sex and gender. It is used to describe practices that transgress these norms of sex and gender. For example, in Western narratives of female to male (FTM) transgender, the use of testosterone or T has become a tool to acquire the muscles, facial hair and deep voice associated with the cultural intelligibility of masculinity. Similarly, in non-Western narratives of male to female (MTF) transgender, terms from India and the Philippines such as hidjra and bakla address the complexity of local sexual identities. While both have legal rights as the third sex, the bakla identifies as a woman and is attracted to a cisgendered man (Manalansan 2003), and the hijra is defined by the removal of the male genitalia and performs femininity through dress, make up and deportment (Reddy 2005). Writing about transgender studies, Susan Stryker notes of the field:

> [it] is concerned with anything that disrupts, denaturalizes, rearticulates and makes visible the normative linkages we generally assume to exist between the biological specificity of the sexually differentiated human body, the social roles and statuses that a particular form of body is expected to occupy, the subjectively experienced relationship between a gendered sense of self and social expectations of gender-role performance, and the cultural mechanisms that work to sustain or thwart specific configurations of gendered personhood (Stryker 2013, p. 487).

While the transgender presents different genders that create new types of subjectivities and identities, the trans metaphor—as a process of not only crossing from one state to another but in doing so, exposing how hierarchies and boundaries of embodied difference are constructed in power-systems that act on the body—is apt to understanding the politics of transition. The key here is the emphasis on embodiment.

Feminist scholarship on embodiment helps extend this chapter's early definition of embodiment as a process of how the body has come to acquire meaning through social constructions and lived experiences: it is "a way of inhabiting the world as well as the source of personhood, self, and subjectivity, and the precondition of intersubjectivity" (Mascia-Lees 2011, p. 2). Embodiment reveals how meanings are encoded onto the body; it exposes how social constructions and lived experiences are created through power structures that act on and shape the social practices of subjects, and; it is also a critical framework committed to the agency of individuals and communities. Embodiment's focus on the lived experiences of the body has been discussed through phenomenology (Meynell 2009). The term 'lived body' highlights bodies as "assemblages of practices, discourses, images, institutional arrangements, and specific places and projects" (Farquhar and Lock 2007, p. 1). Emphasising contingency and fluidity rather than fixity and containment, embodiment practices are varied, ranging from personhood, gender, race to aesthetics, transnationalism and neoliberalism. The following three short case studies offer a critical review of trans-embodiment to further demonstrate these practices.

Indonesia: The Body Knowledge of Tombois

Homosexuality is legal in the predominantly Muslim Indonesia. Increased Islamization in recent years have impacted the public and private lives of LGBTs, such as the public caning of homosexuals in Aceh in 2014, the Internet censorship of gay content in 2012 and the government ban of the ongoing gay and lesbian film festival since 2010. Despite this, the capital city of Jakarta and the creative province of Surabaya have a thriving gay and lesbian subculture consisting of bars, nightclubs and support groups, and the Seminyak beachside resort in Bali is a renowned destination for gay tourism.

The Indonesian term for same-sex attracted women is called lesbi, a derivative of the English word lesbian. The embodied masculine woman who is attracted to a feminine woman is commonly known through its subcultural lingo as the tomboi. In the general parlance, the spelling ('boi' instead of 'boy') is used to refer to embodied masculine women who are not medically transitioning. In Evelyn Blackwood's anthropology of tombois in the town of Padang in West Sumatra, she defines tomboi as "female bodied" individuals who "express a sense of self that plays with gender, responds to gender expectations and normative masculine codes" (2011a, p. 219; see also Blackwood 2011b). Physically dressing, eating and behaving like men, and performing their gender through clothing, talking, walking and attitude, their claim to masculinity accords with how dominant manhood is viewed and accepted in Indonesia. For the tombois, self-identity is formed through their own dress and deportment, as well as through their experiences in the social world. Blackwood calls this practice "body knowledge" (2011a, p. 210). Body knowledge combines identity and embodiment to show the interpellation of one's identity constituted in and through social recognition and experiences. She offers "a theory of contingent masculinities" (2011a, p. 210) to refer to the multiple and conflicting subject positions tombois assume as they navigate across the different spaces of the family home, the community, and their lesbi world. Bound by filial piety and family loyalty, they dress down and exhibit normative femininity when they are among family and community; when out with other lesbis, they heighten their masculine competency. The theory of contingent masculinities contests the essentialism of binary categories and shows how flexible gendered subject-positions can be transgressive by moving back and forth across normative sex and gender systems.

Hong Kong: The Self-Fashioning Boy-Heads

Homosexuality was decriminalized in Hong Kong in 1997 when the British colony returned to communist Chinese sovereignty under the one-country, two-systems rule. That year, the Cantonese gay film, *Happy Together* (dir. Wong Kar-wai) won the highest prize at the prestigious 1997 Cannes Film Festival, and the city's most popular singer-actor, the late Leslie Cheung, publicly declared his homosexuality.

The period that followed saw the beginning of a thriving activist, media and urban queer culture. Tongzhi—translated to English as 'comrade'—emerged to become the Chinese term for queer, and was quickly adopted by peers in the Mainland and across the queer Sinophone LGBT communities. To keep the capitalist spirit alive, the gay ghetto of Lan Kwai Fong, a street in the Central district now famous for elite dining and entertainment, continues to flourish with its high-end gay bars and clubs. LGBT activism has since joined the pro-democracy Umbrella Revolution and spawned new models of social movements.

Hong Kong has a long tradition of trans-embodiment, from the Peking opera genre of the 1960s and 1970s where female performers impersonate male roles, to the martial arts films of the 1980s and 1990s where transsexual swordsmen routinely display gender-bending supernatural fighting skills. Against this context, it is not surprising that in everyday life, FTM trans-embodiment is also a common practice visible in schools, workplaces and public spaces, and practiced by individuals across all age groups. The colloquial term for the embodied masculine woman is the boy-head. This phrase is derived its literal Cantonese term 'nam chai tou' ('nam chai' translates as 'boy'; 'tou' translates as 'head'). Like the Indonesian tomboi, it also begets a similarly to the alternative temporality of girlhood discussed earlier. As a compound word, the phrase signifies the action of putting the boy on and in the head. Through the act of putting on as an act of acessorising, and through the phrase's connotation to external gender presentation, the boy-head is a signifier for trans-embodiment as a practice of self-fashioning the qualities and aesthetics of masculinity.

In her fieldwork of boy-heads in a few all-girl high schools, sociologist Carmen Tong (2008) shows how they, like the tomboi, actively embrace and adopt the cultural markers of masculinity. They refuse the compulsory school uniforms, participate in action sports such as basketball, wear sports bras, shirts, sweaters and baggy trousers, have short haircuts, talk loudly, smoke and use foul language. For the boy-heads, masculine attributes are associated with a "dressing style" and "appearance" (Tong 2008, pp. 104–118). Tong compares these characteristics by contrasting them with the proper femininity of 'good' girls who are hardworking, diligent, obedient, quiet, caring and gentle. Rather than juxtaposing boy-heads with the improper femininity of bad girls, Kam (2008) suggests boy-heads are recognised through a mis-recognition brought about by their embodiment of a hybrid female masculinity (Halberstam 1998) that challenges conventional adult femininity. Rather than seeing these attributes as cultural stereotypes accorded men and improper girls, these qualities and aesthetics perform the transgender as 'the wrong body type', and attempt to correct it through deportment, style and attire. When there is a mismatch between the inner self and the outer body, accessories such as dress, style, attitudes and aesthetics help craft out one's self character by altering the body. As investments on the self, they are not dissimilar to the DIY-improvement project of the self-enterprising neoliberal subject as one who is always in the process of being made in national projects of human engineering. Rather than conform to the top-down model of neoliberal self-fashioning, the same tactics of

self-biography and individualisation are also used by boy-heads to fashion an alternative practice of life-making and a new identity.

Singapore: The Neoliberal Accumulation of Nightclub Butches

Unlike Indonesia and Hong Kong where homosexuality is legal, Singapore continues to enforce the Victorian Penal Code 377A that punishes homosexuality as an offence with an imprisonment of two years. Unlike Indonesia and Hong Kong where legal homosexuality has not been officially resourced with new infrastructure and support, Singapore's illegal homosexuality has been appropriated by the government to engineer a new creative economy (Yue 2012). In the past fifteen years, the loosening of state control through cultural liberalism has seen queer media and cultural production thrive in state-funded theatre, film, arts and nightlife. To replicate the 24/7 cycle of a successful creative nighttime economy, the state also subsidised shop rents in prime riverside tourist zones. Pink tourism and queer commerce flourished with its dance clubs, public parties, karaoke bars and saunas. Amongst this is the emergence of the nightclub butch culture that has instituted and made quotidian the figure of the butch.

Herstory and Two Queens are two events management companies that have become successful in the queer creative economy. Lesbian-owned and women-focused, they organise lesbian parties by hosting them in prominent mainstream nightclubs such as Zouk in Chinatown and Pangaea at the Marina Bay Sands. While Two Queens caters to all lifestyle groups with their diverse mix of low-key film screenings as well as high profile themed parties, Herstory organizes an annual 'Butch Hunt' competition that occupies most of the calendar year. In operation now for more than ten years, this event initiated, developed and established the country's distinct butch culture.

The butch hunt competition is similar to any other beauty pageant contests, staged across a few monthly rounds culminating in the grand finale. During the competition, embodied masculine women show off their skills (such as singing, kung fu, breakdancing and stand-up comedy) and walk the stage with various outfit changes. The winner, chosen from more than fifty to a hundred aspiring contestants, is crowned 'Butch of the Year'. Most of the contestants are between 19–22 in age. Not all of them are outwardly 'masculine'. Some refer to themselves as pretty boys, most have trendy hairstyles emulating K-pop stars, and very few flex their pectoral muscles. They wear hip-hop gear, smart suits and ties, leather shoes, cowboy shirts or just plain street wear. They come from all walks of life: university students, sales assistants, chefs, teachers and graphic designers. At each round of the competition, the nightclub (Zouk), with its four thousand plus patron capacity, is usually full. Tickets for the final night always sell out in advance yet hundreds more fans will still turn up and mingle by the riverfront outside the club.

The most distinct feature of this event on stage and off stage is the showing off of the flat-chest. For the performer, success in the competition is also judged by the aesthetics of the flat chest that is accentuated by tight sleeveless tank tops. In early years this physique was achieved with breast-binders. Where the older generation of the breast binder was made out of DIY elastic bands, bandages, duct tape or clear wraps, the new generation professionally manufactured breast binder is made from spandex and shape like Velcro-adjusted sports bras or t-shirts in assorted colours. Herstory organizers sell these binders at the events and on their websites. Recently, the surgical flat chest is the most sought after, usually revealed through an unbuttoned vest. Upon seeing these performers gyrating down the catwalk, spectators always scream in awe at the flat skin of the flesh.

For the general lesbian public, the breast binder has become a popular accessory in the last decade, especially with teenagers and young adults under the age of 30 as older butches tend to wear a normal bra and a t-shirt under their baggy shirt. Young butches wear the breast binder as part of everyday embodiment, under school uniforms and tight fitting t-shirts, developing a distinctive look in mainstream public culture, at the shopping malls, on the subway, in the streets, and regular lesbian venues and events. The competition has popularised the breast binder as the technology par excellence in the practice of 'doing butch' in Singapore (Yue 2012). It has liberated the butch's shame of the breast as a sign of failed masculinity and made visible a new young community who are proud and out.

While these practices of trans-embodiment follow the self-fashioning and body knowledge practices of the Indonesian tomboi and the Hong Kong boy-head, significant to note here is how economic neoliberal restructuring has created new institutional forms of the social and subcultural. From the business culture of the lesbian nightclubs to the active self-fashioning of young butches, self and group investments replicate the same logic of neoliberal flexible accumulation to reveal how economic reordering has also resulted in unexpected new alliances for subcultures to thrive from below (Ong 2006). In Singapore, neoliberal engineering has resulted in sexual democratising that has allowed lesbian entrepreneurs and young butches to work with and twist the illiberal logics of governmental control, and open up new ethics of queer survival in a country that refuses to recognise their claims to rights and identities.

Conclusion

This chapter began by showing how embodied modernity is a distinct formation in Asia as a space of rapid economic and social transitions, as well as a region with a high youth population in life-cycle transitions. It proposed that the queer Asian youthscape, with its new regional imaginary and alternative trajectories of life-making, is a site to contest these norms of structural and youth transitions. It illustrated these contestations using the film genre of the Chinese lesbian schoolgirl melodrama and the everyday trans-embodiments of young masculine women in

Indonesia, Hong Kong and Singapore. The former disrupted teleological reproductive time by celebrating the queer temporality of girlhood as a new site of same-sex intimacy; the latter disrupted the cisgendered body by celebrating the fluidity of female masculinities as diverse sexual identities. All practices worked within the same logic of flexible human capital accumulation that has marked the mainstream status of young people as embodied human capital, some through bending the bounds of body knowledge while others replicated their self-fashionings as economic resource. Rather than stay in the closet or assimilate into the straight mainstream, these practices carved out new ethics of life-making in a conservative region notorious for its hostility to deviant sexualities, making visible self-enterprising and self-empowering young LGBTs as agents of complicity and change. Using queer Asia as a method of analysis, and enriching the transitions paradigm with its trans-methods that focused on transnationality and trangenderism, this chapter has also shown how its new approach to knowledge-production can address the Western-centric teleological model of rights and liberation by presenting the disjunctive queer youth cultures of Asia as different to but equally as vibrant as those in the West.

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