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SONS, HUSBANDS, AND LOVERS:  
MARRIAGE, FILIAL PIETY, AND TRANSGENDER MEN IN CHINESE MEDIA

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THESIS

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## ABSTRACT

China's 2009 new regulations on sex-change operations were passed with the stated intention of protecting patients. These regulations offer the only path to legal gender change on ID documents, becoming a necessary condition to be fulfilled before participating in legal, public, and heteronormative institutions such as marriage, family, and adoption. Looking at the relationship between Chinese media discourse on transgender before and after the formation and promulgation of the 2009 sex-change regulations suggests the construction of a legal, heteronormative transgender man, often at the cost of constituting other expressions of transgender as sexually deviant and morally corrupting forces that threaten Chinese society. From transgender celebrities in the media to online public "accusations" of lesbianism, I examine both state and social media discourse on transgender, revealing a complex and dynamic relationship between law, filial piety, and gender in contemporary China.

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## Chapter 1

### Private Lives, Public Exposures

In mid-December, 2014, an article was posted on the Chinese internet by a user under the pseudonym Liu Chang'an (刘长安) filled with vitriol, indignation, and accusations<sup>1</sup>:

Media Report: Sexologist Li Yinhe (李银河), in her capacity as a public intellectual whose declaration “even though I am not gay, I will strive for homosexual rights” gained the respect and praise of many homosexuals, recently had her private life exposed, revealing that she herself is a homosexual and has been living with a “tomboy” for many years.

News Brief: At the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, it is an open secret that Li Yinhe is a homosexual. Over the past few years, she has been living with a middle-aged woman who dresses up like a man – after a few years, it was as if she practically *was* a man! As everyone can guess, in Li Yinhe’s “family” nowadays, Li Yinhe continues to play the role of the “female”.

Even more shocking is that again and again in the media we see Comrade<sup>2</sup> Li Yinhe’s . . . private life these past few years is full of unbearable suffering: Her adopted son “Zhuangzhuang” is already an adult, and I don’t know whether or not it is because he grew up in an abnormal family environment – or

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all translations from the original Chinese to English are my own.

<sup>2</sup> The author clearly is using “comrade” here as an attack, doubling as a mockery of Party rhetoric (most likely a jab at her fame and popularity as a publicly-respected intellectual), as well as carrying the slang meaning for the word “comrade” (同志 *tongzhi*) – “homosexual”.

for some other reason I dare not speculate – but Zhuangzhuang’s psychological development was far from normal. He is unable to socialize with his peers and later could not even attend school. Last year, Li Yinhe had no other choice but to help him by contacting a technical school for chefs. (Liu, “Li Yinhe’s Lesbian Identity Exposed”).<sup>3</sup>

Liu Chang’an went on for a few more paragraphs, furthering reiterating the attack on Li and her partner with claims of cohabitation, creating an “abnormal family environment” – and thereby corrupting and harming their adopted son – and deceiving the nation by hiding her sexual orientation. Underpinning Liu’s attack were both implicit and explicit assumptions that non-heteronormative sexualities and lifestyles lead to moral decay or immorality, as “licentiousness is the domain of homosexuals” (Liu, “Li Yinhe’s Lesbian Identity Exposed”).

A few days later, on December 18<sup>th</sup>, Li Yinhe, a retired professor of sociology and arguably China’s most renowned sexologist, posted a very public and very personal reply on Sina Weibo, a Chinese social media tool similar to Twitter, but with blogging capabilities as well, to this “accusation” that she was a lesbian, titled “Response to the So-Called ‘Lesbian Identity’ Exposure.” Li attached her response, written in blog format, to this “tweet” on Weibo:

I’m publishing a blog article, “Response to the So-Called ‘Lesbian Identity’ Exposure.” Online, I saw a very malicious article about exposing my so-called “lesbian identity.” Of course, how a person lives and with whom they make

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<sup>3</sup> At the time of writing this thesis, Liu Chang’an’s Weibo account appears to have been deactivated. I have managed to retrieve a shared copy of the original post and compared it against other copies posted to various BBSs to ensure accuracy. There also seems to be conflicting reports in both the Chinese and American media as to whether the original post was sent via Weibo or posted online as an “essay”.

friends are an individual's private matter. However, since someone so rudely "exposed" [mine as a news story], I [am posting] a reply. (Li, "Posting a Reply")

Li's uncharacteristically open response revealed that, in fact, her partner was born female, but identifies as male. She goes on to explain they have lived together for seventeen years, and Li identifies as straight – not lesbian. Li writes:

I am indeed straight, and not a homosexual. This was one of the reasons I initially married Wang Xiaobo. Unlike the 70% of Chinese homosexuals who reluctantly marry someone of the opposite sex due to all the surrounding pressure, my marriage to Wang Xiaobo had nothing to do with pressure; rather, on both sides it was voluntary.

After Xiaobo passed away, I met a heterosexual – an extremely typical transsexual (the "T" in LGBT). Biologically, he is a woman. Psychologically, he is a man. The difference between people like this and homosexuals lies in the fact that even though he has the body of a woman, his own gender identity is that of a man. He is only able to fall in love with heterosexual women, not homosexual women. (Li, "Posting a Reply")

Li Yinhe writes at length about how she met her partner of seventeen years, their relationship, and his characteristics and personality, even including a poem he wrote in her blog post. She touches on the adoption of her son, Zhuangzhuang, without a shred of defensiveness, choosing not to address the insinuation that her son has a mental disability because of being raised in an "abnormal family environment" – instead, she writes "although his intelligence is

not on par with that of normal kids, he is a beautiful, good, and kind child; a very cute kid” (Li, “Posting a Reply”).

Li’s “coming out” on social media was immediately noticed and quickly passed 400,000 views within a few days, stimulating many exchanges on social media about sexuality, transgender<sup>4</sup> identity, marriage, family, and morality. The fervor and attention garnered by Li Yinhe’s response quickly led to a flurry of articles in prominent newspapers and websites around the world, including *The New York Times* and the *British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC)*, covering Li’s response, sexuality, and transgender in China. Articles on Li Yinhe and her response were widely published and circulated throughout Chinese media, and less than a month later Li Yinhe and her partner, Zhang Hongxia, were featured together on the cover of *People Weekly* (南方人物周刊 *nanfang renwu zhoukan*), one of China’s most widely read magazine.

In an unexpected turn of events, the day after Li Yinhe posted her response, the *People’s Daily*, the official newspaper of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), posted on their Weibo account a message of solidarity and respect for the “Li Yinhe’s” out there, promoting tolerance and acceptance of homosexuality, transgender persons, and AIDS awareness. Seemingly skirting the boundaries of the so-called “Three No’s” policy (no approval, no disapproval, no promotion)<sup>5</sup> towards homosexuality, this declaration from the mouthpiece of

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<sup>4</sup> I am using transgender here as an umbrella term that includes trans, transsexual, and trans\*. Chinese terms used to self-identify or label a body as trans\* are equally as contested and politicized as their American counterparts. 变性者, 变性人, 男变女, 女变男, and 跨行者 are a few of the most common terms used most recently.

<sup>5</sup> I found plenty of Western journalistic reports that referenced this “policy”, all of them with no actual citation or source. I am still digging for an actual source from either Western or Chinese sources.

the CCP on social media exemplifies the disparity between legal recognition of one's identity and public tolerance or acceptance of one's sexuality, and provides a starting point for an examination of legal recognition and the rights that legal recognition accords, versus non-legal recognition of transgender or non-heteronormative lifestyles and sexualities in contemporary China. While support for Li Yinhe and her partner was overwhelming, it was by no means universal, and many comments online reinforced and spread the views Liu espoused. It is also worth noting that the *People's Daily* throws their support behind Li, without mentioning her partner.

This exchange, entangled as it is in the realms of the public and private, playing out competing constructions, definitions and norms of sexuality, gender, family, filial piety, and morality in both state and social media, offers a unique opportunity to examine the role constructions and representations of transgender men in the Chinese media plays in contemporary discourse of marriage, family, and filial piety. As I will show, Li Yinhe presents a definition of transgender identity that does not sync with media constructions of transgender men and identity over the past few years: that of a legally recognized transgender man who has undergone gender reassignment surgery with parental support/permission, changed their gender on their ID card, and is either married in a heterosexual union or expresses heteronormative desires to marry. On the other hand, Liu Chang'an's interpretation and presentation of Li's partner and family appears to conform to the above-mentioned normative construction, allowing Liu to feel righteous openly attacking expressions of transgender that fall outside the established heteronormative transgender man.

At the heart of Liu and Li's public exchange are questions of legal transgender identity, acceptance of non-heteronormative lifestyles and sexuality, stigmatization of certain sexualities, and gendered roles within family units. Why is Li's partner, a self-identified transgender man, not fully accepted as transgender? What role does the media play in shaping transgender men's identity, and how is it related to legally recognized gender change? What can this discourse teach us about the relationship between transgender identity, marriage, and family in China?

As Li Yinhe reflects in a BBC article published earlier this year, "I think [Chinese people] find transsexualism more acceptable than homosexuality . . . Why? Because a trans is defined as heterosexual... heterosexuals wrapped in the wrong body . . . The real signal of social tolerance is the society's attitude towards homosexuality" (Buckley). However, the support was not publicly expressed without the catalyst of Liu's attack on Li – an attack that relied not on the invisibility or assimilation of transgender bodies to heteronormative lifestyles, but instead upon the very visibility of Li's partner and family, as well as their unconformity. To better understand how certain expressions of transgender men have come to be accepted, it is important to look at the intersection of media, law, and representations of transgender identity.

## Chapter 2

### Transgender Identity and Culture

In many ways, strong public support for Li Yinhe signals a noted increase in tolerant attitudes towards non-traditional families and marriage as much as it was an expression of compassion for and awareness of transgender people for many contemporary Chinese. Deborah Davis and Sara Friedman, in their introduction to *Wives, Husbands and Lovers: Marriage and Sexuality in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Urban China*, trace what they term the “deinstitutionalization of marriage and sexuality” in China within the context of “rapid legal, political, and economic restructuring” (3). Examining the deinstitutionalization of marriage through media, legislature, courtrooms and the negotiations of the public and private orderings of families “teach us about why previously shared expectations about acceptable marital and sexual behaviors have atrophied or even disappeared, while norms of childbearing and intergenerational obligation and reciprocity remain more intact” (4-5). Li Yinhe’s response and the subsequent show of support seems to confirm expectations that definitions of acceptable marriage and sexuality are changing, especially with respect to transgender lifestyles. Though *Wives, Husbands and Lovers* covers critical research in the areas of marriage age, divorce, sexual intimacy, same-sex marriage, parenthood and transborder relationships, transgender people in the People’s Republic of China (PRC) are only mentioned in passing, and are usually confined and subsumed under a discussion on homosexuality or deviant sexualities.

This glossing of Chinese transgender studies in academia is not unique to *Wives, Husbands, and Lovers* – in fact, as Howard Chiang, a leading scholar in the field of queer

Sinophone (Chinese-speaking) studies, points out in his introduction to his anthology *Transgender China*, “[w]ith a few notable exceptions, gay and lesbian topics . . . continue to dominate critical studies of gender and sexuality in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and mainland China” (6). Chiang’s anthology highlights critical cultural and historical research on transgender expression, identity, and practice in the PRC, Hong Kong, and Taiwan through analysis of art, literature, opera, and theatre as well as ethnographies. While both *Wives, Husbands, and Lovers* and *Transgender China* contribute critical research on homosexuality and transgender in modern Hong Kong and Taiwan, again, contemporary studies on transgender in the PRC are negligible.

Chiang delineates three different methodologies used by scholars in his anthology to approach the study of transgender in China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. The first methodology Chiang refers to as “identitarian”:

focused definition of transgender to refer to practices of embodiment that cross or transcend normative boundaries of gender . . . identifying specific trans figures based on their self-representation, bringing to light concrete historical and cultural examples in which such identification occur, and stressing the importance of agency both in cultural production and with respect to the historical actors themselves who self-identify as trans. (7)

Offering a second methodology, Chiang suggests “building on case studies of gender ambiguity or androgyny, rather than concrete examples of gender transgression,” allowing consideration of transgender practices “in terms of their relationship to broader circuits of knowledge and

power” (10). A third approach “leave[s] behind Western-derived meanings of gender altogether – or at least problematizing them . . . identifying and understanding Chinese ‘variance’ on its own unexpected terms” (11).

My own research follows the “identitarian” method, as I examine Chinese media articles on self-identified transgender peoples, often featuring their own thoughts and feelings on identity and practices. In this respect, the identitarian method allows a look at presentations of “authentic” transgender expression at specific historical and cultural sites. However, this methodology is further complicated by a complex relationship between the media, regulations on gender reassignment surgery, legally-recognized gender identity, and norms of family and marriage – implying a need to also adopt Chiang’s third method on understanding Chinese variances of transgender. Articles on transgender people in the media are not unfiltered, and generally need to conform to media regulations through censorship and self-censorship (on the part of the journalist)<sup>6</sup>, in addition to the initial barrier of trust and receiving permission to expose someone’s private life to the public. Outside of regulations emphasizing that media aligns with or conveys CCP policy and thought, China’s particular media ecology is similar to most, composed of complex relationships between “messages, sender, receivers, channels, and political, cultural and economic and regulatory factors that shape communication practices” on

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<sup>6</sup> The Chinese government’s censorship of the media (both print and online as well as state, private, and social) is well-documented. At times, it can appear to be mercurial, monolithic, and wide-reaching, often wielding “moral decay” or “harmful to society” as justification for scrubbing articles or keyword searches. However, self-censorship is an issue on which there is less coverage and literature. For a nuanced look at self-censorship and censorship in general in China, see Peter Hessler, “Travels with My Censor: A Chinese Book Tour,” *The New Yorker*, The New Yorker. 9 March 2015. Web. 23 Feb. 2016.

state, local, and private levels (Zhang and Zhou 13). It is within this particular environment that social norms and law blend together as media:

virtually whatever the state-controlled media transmits carries authoritative weight, from written or oral pronouncements of the top leaders, which are printed in the *People's Daily* but not formally enacted into law, to statements on television by an official of the Supreme People's Procuracy, to a speech of the Vice-President of the Supreme People's Court published by the Court, to anecdotes in a legal newspaper about children failing to care for their elderly parents. (Lee 461)

The centrality of law to the question of transgender identity necessitates an understanding of the complex relationship between law and media in China. Tahirih Lee's study of the role of media in transmitting law in China offers a framework that helps understand the unique role of the media in China as "educator of the public about the law" (440). Lee writes that "law achieves its power by the way that it is communicated in society to individuals" and that "the phenomenon of law [i]s something that is broadcast to shape behavior" (443). In two separate case studies of family law and marriage law in the media, Lee found that

Media transmissions about family in the PRC project images of family relationships and relations between the state and families that illustrate good behavior and bad behavior in situations that are regulated by central law and policy. These images are as important a part of the government's message to the

subjects of the law as are the texts of the laws themselves, many of which are not published. (Lee 464-465)

It is due to these many layers and considerations of the broadcast of law through media as Lee understands it that may potentially sift certain media pieces on transgender to the foreground that to a certain extent Chiang's third method also applies to my work. This is not to say that discourse on transgender in Chinese media is isolated from international discourse, or can offer an essentially "Chinese" conceptualization of transgender. Instead, while there may be strands of both international and distinctly Chinese discourse, sometimes in concert and sometimes at odds on issues of transgender in the media, it exists within the media ecology of China and will thus, as Chiang hopes, at least problematize questions of gender. Rosalind Gill, in *Gender and Media*, writes about the relationship between gender and the media, arguing that "rather than there being a pre-existing reality to the meaning of the categories masculine and feminine, the media were involved in actively producing gender," thus drawing attention to the role media plays in constructing realities (12). These actively produced genders extend to transgender identity, as media reports on transgender people often seek to authenticate a transitioned body through alignment along the gender binary with normative gendered behaviors, standards of beauty, and familial roles/filial piety. Regarding filial piety, Zhang Qingfei<sup>7</sup> argues, "Chinese transgender people have been burdened with, as well as judged by, Confucian thoughts, in that the transgenders, without marriage and posterity, challenge 'filial piety', and, consequently, they become the target for social condemnation and ostracism"

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<sup>7</sup> Zhang Qingfei is a scholar who has published a broad survey of transgender representations in the *People's Daily*.

(181). As I will argue, filial piety, embedded as it is in both regulations on gender reassignment surgery and media narratives of transgender men, plays such a key role in the rise of regulatory control of transgender identity that at times biological sex appears secondary.

An analysis of state and social media coverage of transgender men, especially as the coverage touches on and is enmeshed in issues of legal recognition of the new gender, reveals few of the elements of the deinstitutionalization of marriage in the PRC that Davis and Friedman witness in other arenas. Instead, there are greater implications of a *re-*institutionalization of marriage and an increased stigmatization of non-heteronormative lifestyles and expressions of transgender, contributing to the atmosphere in which Liu Chang'an attacked Li Yinhe.

I will analyze two news pieces reporting on Gengzi (耿子, 1974-), purported to be China's first publicly open transgender man. The first, published in 2005 before Gengzi underwent gender reassignment surgery, is an interview with Gengzi about his concerns and hopes facing the upcoming surgery. The second, published in 2007, is a feature piece on his life post-operation. These first two media reports are published before any regulations on gender-assignment surgery were in place with no legal agenda on the part of the CCP, as evidenced by a focus on expressions of gender and sexuality outside of marriage and filial piety.

The following year, a third article was published chronicling the journey of a woman who wants to undergo gender reassignment surgery to become a man. Proposals to regulate gender reassignment surgery were underway at this time, and applying Lee's understanding of Chinese media as sources and enforcers of law draws our attention to two important shifts in

the representation and construction of transgender men in the media. First, beginning in 2008, there is a marked emphasis on framing the subject's desire to transition as necessary to fulfill natural desires to marry and be legally recognized. The second shift sees parental consent and filial piety play a pivotal role in the transitioning process, both in terms of satisfying the legal requirements to undergo gender reassignment surgery as well as in terms of promoting continuity, support, and adherence to gendered family roles. Similar to the coverage on Gengzi, the 2008 article relies on "authenticating" the new gender through heteronormative gender expressions, while also wielding cultural norms and narrative tropes of mother/son relationships to identify and validate the transition.

My analysis will demonstrate that recent shifts in media reports, interviews and features on transgender men are embedded in regulatory control of transgender identity, contributing to the construction of a legal transgender man that is synonymous with a desire to marry, moored by state-promoted norms of filial piety and heteronormativity. This construction, moving as it does from an initial de-institutionalization of marriage and sexuality towards a re-institutionalization, contributes to multiple and competing discourses on what constitutes an authentic transgender male identity, culminating in exchanges similar to the one between Liu Chang'an and Li Yinhe.

## Chapter 3

### The “Good Transsexual” in Chinese Media

American and British media commonly frame their coverage of Li Yinhe’s public response as important specifically because of the invisibility of transgender people in China. Andrew Jacobs of *The New York Times* writes “[h]er announcement both stunned and intrigued China, where there is little familiarity with transgender men” and that this announcement “reluctantly moved the nation to the threshold of a new frontier: transgender love” (“Sex Expert’s Secret”). While there is no doubt that transgender people may often be rendered invisible in China, as gay-rights activist Wei Xiaogang points out in Jacobs’ *New York Times* article, “People have this stereotyped idea of a man trapped in a woman’s body, but a biological woman who identifies as a man is something new here” (“Sex Expert’s Secret”). In fact, transgender men and transgender love have been featured in Chinese media, but not nearly to the same breadth and depth of coverage, positive or negative, that one can find on transgender women. Regardless, transgender coverage in the Chinese media is hardly uncharted terrain – though the form, tone, and frequency of articles has varied with political, economic, and societal changes over time.

The *People’s Daily* has covered issues surrounding transgender men and women in China since as early as 1950.<sup>8</sup> State media, such as the *People’s Daily*, still runs coverage of transgender people and issues, but less frequently than privately-owned newspapers and

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<sup>8</sup> The earliest article I was able to locate on (non-fiction) transgender expression was published in the *People’s Daily* in 1950: Wang’s “Top-class Female Battle Hero,” which I address later. However, Zhang Qingfei places the first article around 1957.

online news portals. Most recently, discussions and awareness of transgender men and women has seen a sharp increase on social media, where Chinese netizens engage with each other over issues of gender, sexuality, and politics, sharing and distributing domestic, international, state and private media on transgender. Coverage tends to focus on Chinese transgender women who were assigned male at birth and typically focuses on pre- and/or post- gender reassignment surgery pictures, perhaps partially due to the international fame of dancer Jin Xing (金星, 1967-), widely regarded as one of the first Chinese openly transgender women to permanently transition through gender reassignment surgery.

Zhang Qingfei divides media representations of transgender in China into three distinct stages beginning from 1949. The first stage, suppression of transgenderism, lasted from the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, until 1976. During this suppression stage, transgender was usually represented by cross-dressing and tied to anti-revolutionary behavior and betrayal of one's country. Very few articles were published that even touched on cross-dressing, with the exception of fiction (Zhang). However, there are instances – even in the early 1950s – of articles featuring cross-dressing that did not tie this transgender expression to anti-revolutionary behavior or betrayal. Published in 1950, a *People's Daily* article about Guo Junqing, a woman disguised as a man (女扮男装 *nü ban nanzhuang*), affected the opposite tone, writing at length of Guo Junqing's valor, bravery, and revolutionary spirit. Guo Junqing dressed as a man in order to join the Eighth Route Army when she was fourteen, to revenge her father's death. Her role as a combat soldier was unique at a time when most women were regulated to support functions in the military (Wang). Guo's cross-dressing here is applauded as ingenuity and bravery, as her performance as a man aligns itself with goals of revolution, party

agenda, and nationalism. While this article serves as an exception to Zhang's analysis of the first stage of transgender representation in media, it should be noted that Zhang's stages still offer a valid, if rather generalized and rough, method for tracing historicized representations of transgender in the modern PRC.

The second stage, the pathologization of transgenderism, lasted from 1978 to 2000. This stage of transgender representation was centered on medical and moral questions of transgender (Zhang), though often gender reassignment surgery was held up as proof of a technically- and scientifically-advanced China. In 1992, the *People's Daily* published a clinically descriptive and short article about the first female-to-male sex change operation to take place in China. The unnamed 26-year-old female patient suffered from depression and anxiety due to gender identity disorder (易性癖 *yixing pi*). Medical professionals deemed it necessary to intervene with gender reassignment surgery before she lost her ability to work and live. Gender reassignment surgery was posited as a last resort, while simultaneously cast as an achievement in medicine and science ("First Successful").

In 1993, the exciting headline "China's Sex Change Operations Attain Globally Advanced Levels" again saw successful sex change operations emerge as evidence that not only can China compete globally in the arena of medicine and science, but that beyond the successful biological changes, patients who had undergone sex change operations in 1992 were also "adapting to their role in society [as the new gender]" (Zhu).

Legalization of transgenderism, the third stage, started with the declassification of homosexuality and other "deviant" sexualities including transgender as a psychiatric disorder in

2001. In 2003, a new *Regulation on Marriage Administration* passed, legally recognizing transgender marriages that reflected gender changes on identification cards after gender reassignment surgery (Zhang). However, it appears that before 2009, there were no regulations governing the process of changing one's gender on their identification card, leaving the decision and authority to honor a request for an official ID card gender change in the hands of the local police station.

## Chapter 4

### “I Believe I Would Make a Good Father”

In 2005, Gengzi, China’s first openly transgender man in the Chinese media, gave an interview to an unnamed journalist one hour before heading into the third and final stage of his gender reassignment surgery. As this interview marks the first exposure for many Chinese citizens to a transgender man through the Chinese media, the discourse used to frame Gengzi’s sexuality, desire for gender change, and thoughts on family and marriage will serve in part as a model for future discourse of transgender men, especially as Gengzi’s thoughts and feelings are lent a certain authority and validity as a self-identified transgender man. The interview begins with Gengzi contemplating his surgery in a rather calm fashion, then turns to Gengzi’s anticipation and preparedness for the surgery:

Interviewer: Do you feel like you are already completely ready [to become a man]?

Gengzi: Yeah, I’ve been ready for a while. Ever since 1992<sup>9</sup>, when I was in high school, I have been quietly resolved to become a man. I’ve wanted this for so many years.

Interviewer: Your father knows what today’s operation means?

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<sup>9</sup> Because Gengzi is pretty specific about the year 1992, I wonder if his decision was influenced by the aforementioned 1992 article in the *People’s Daily* covering the first successful female-to-male sex change operation.

Gengzi: Of course, he knows. Before, my parents were deeply concerned about me, and would ask after me. After the surgery is complete, they will take me to change my gender on my ID card.

Interviewer: After the surgery, you will have nearly the same body parts as normal men, do you think you'll be able to get used to it? How will your mentality adjust?

Gengzi: I think there won't be any need to adjust anything, my mentality is already completely male. For example, I've always liked using the men's restroom. Maybe I should have been a man from the moment I was born, but God played a huge joke on me. I've always only liked women, never men. It's very natural for me to go down this path.

Interviewer: But in fact, you've never been a man. What do you understand about your future role [as a man]?

Gengzi: There's responsibility, and others will depend upon me.

Interviewer: What was your original intention behind getting a sex change? Was it because you really wanted to be a man, or is it because you love women?

Gengzi: To be a man. As a man, I can better love women. I've always wanted to be a man, I ought to be the same as them, so that I can love women normally.

Interviewer: What kind of changes do you think this surgery will bring to your life?

Gengzi: I don't really expect any big changes. But, I really want a family, I want to find a girlfriend, and I want to get married. ("An Interview with Gengzi")

Gengzi goes on to explain that he would not hide his identity from any future girlfriends, pointing out that part of the reason he is allowing the media to follow him is to help prepare people. The interview turns to sex, and Gengzi explains that his penis' hardness and length will not really change and won't have sensitivity, making him pretty different from normal men. His doctor told him the main thing his penis will be able to do is service women – his own pleasure will be barely noticeable, if at all. Gengzi points out that this does not matter to him – after all, it is not why he wanted the gender reassignment surgery. Segueing from sex to having children, the interviewer asks Gengzi if he wants to have a kid, and if he does, would he hide his transition from them?

G: I definitely won't [hide my transition from them]. When my child is at an age where he could accept it, I definitely would tell him – as a father. I believe I would make a good father. Also, when that time arrives, people's way of thinking about a "transgender father" undoubtedly won't have as intense a [negative] reaction. ("An Interview with Gengzi")

The interview concludes with Gengzi musing about other changes in the future – namely, his wish to someday burst onto the entertainment scene as a songwriter and singer ("An Interview with Gengzi").

Throughout the interview the interviewer appears more curious than hostile, though Gengzi definitely faces very classic assumptions on the part of the interviewer that the biology

“makes the man.” There is the belief that once Gengzi has the appropriate male body parts, only then can he truly become a man, which in turn will then affect his mentality. At the same time, Gengzi very firmly expresses a link between his gender and his sexuality – it is “only natural” that he change his sex from a woman to a man, because he has always liked women. Gengzi sees his sex as changeable, but his sexuality as immutable and only able to be actualized once his body matches his gender. While his desire to change his sex may be perceived as unnatural, his sexuality conforms to heteronormative desires, including getting married and having a family, allowing him to explain his desire to change his sex as natural.

The interviewer, by questioning Gengzi’s intention behind the sex change, casts homosexuality as something so unnatural that women who have feelings of love towards another woman must view sex change as a way to correct themselves. A good portion of the interview actually rationalizes Gengzi’s choice to undergo gender reassignment surgery through constructing non-heterosexual sexualities as deviant and unnatural. The insistence that Gengzi has the same desires, the same sexuality, the same mentality, and soon, the same body as other “normal” heterosexual men assures readers that other transgender men who have followed the same path as Gengzi are not a threat to heteronormative cultural values of family and marriage.

Gengzi’s parents are only mentioned once, and there is no discourse on filial piety or a request for permission from his parents to undergo surgery. They clearly are concerned for him, and will accompany him to get his gender changed on his ID, but outside of this, his parents appear to be of little to no importance. More importantly, the interviewer and Gengzi both never bring up Gengzi’s new role as a son in the family. This reflects the lack of regulations and

requirements for those wishing to change their gender through surgery, as articles on transgender men published in 2008 and after demonstrate.

Perhaps the most poignant piece of the interview is when Gengzi supposes that in the future, attitudes towards transgender fathers will have changed for the better. Unfortunately, almost ten years later, the opposite is apparent from Liu Chang'an's ugly insinuation that Zhuangzhuang's disabilities were due to growing up in an "abnormal" family environment. As Chiang points out, the politics of representation play a crucial role in questions of voice, authority, and representation of the embodiment of transgender (9), and Gengzi's interview certainly is expected to offer readers the representation of an "authentic" transgender man in a time before law and regulations further shaped/restricted this identity.

## Chapter 5

### “Please Don’t Call Me a Transsexual”

The open discussion of Gengzi’s penis, pleasure, and sexuality is focused on again in a 2007 profile piece written about Gengzi’s life post-operation, titled “Gengzi: Please Don’t Call me Transsexual.” In fact, this article delves into sex even further, prompting a discussion of pleasuring women with sex toys:

Gengzi knows he can’t provide his future lovers a “happy sex life” in the usual sense of the word<sup>10</sup>, but he resolutely denies that this gives him a guilty conscience. “She’ll know the situation before we get married. We might even get married without having sex, but not without having a fortunate life.”

“Then will you choose some other way to let her have a ‘happy sex life’?”

“No, even though I’ve never used sex toys, I feel like they aren’t clean. As for the issue of adopting a kid, that’s a decision that two people need to make together. There are many factors that need to be considered when adopting a child, and you need to be responsible for him and provide him a good environment.”

(“Please Don’t Call Me a Transsexual”)

Open discussion of sexuality is not necessarily unique in the Chinese media, but it is worth noting Gengzi’s sudden transition from discussion of sex toys to adopting a child. For the journalist, Gengzi’s male identity is not complete, as he is unable to pleasure a woman in the

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<sup>10</sup> Here, the journalist uses “性福” as a play on “幸福”, which means something along the lines of “happiness” or “well-being”. The pronunciation is the same, but “性福” implies happiness or fortune in sex.

“usual” fashion, though it is extremely unclear why not, what is usual, and how to define a “happy sex life.” Gengzi’s abruptness in bringing up adoption may indicate his own understanding of the purpose of sex, or might reflect cultural norms dictating that while there are shifting attitudes towards enjoying sex for pleasure, it is separate from family and marriage. This helps legitimize his gender change by once again framing his sexuality in safe, state-sanctioned heteronormative terms of marriage and family. In this way, Gengzi shows resistance to participating in a discourse that represents transgender men’s sexuality as deviant, even while accepting the premise that his sexuality is somehow “incomplete.”

Gengzi asserts his male identity in a very different way than before his surgery. When discussing relationships, Gengzi declares, “I’m pretty masculinist. I feel men should be aggressive and dominant, the head of the household” (“Please Don’t Call Me a Transsexual”). While this expression of masculinity doesn’t conflict with his pre-surgery sentiment on the responsibility he expects as a man, the tone is quite different, and less likely to be interpreted as anything but manly. The profile piece ends with a plea from Gengzi: “I kinda oppose the word ‘transsexual.’ I have a name, you can call me by my name, but please don’t add ‘transsexual’ before my name” (“Please Don’t Call Me a Transsexual”).

Zhang observes that “as transgenders hold a stronger conforming desire to gender binaries and heterosexuality, their issues are comparatively easier to handle on both moral and legal sides. In line with their expectation, the government of China has helped transgenders to be accommodated into gender binaries” (193). Conforming to heterosexual norms of marriage and gender binaries will secure not only social, but legal recognition as well, thus resulting in what Zhang terms a “normalization of transgenderism.” This normalization often frames the

discourse on transgender citizens in articles published in the Chinese media, as the above analysis of Gengzi demonstrates.

The significance of this normalization cannot be understated. In her article “Constructing the ‘Good Transsexual’: Christine Jorgensen, Whiteness, and Heteronormativity in the Mid-Twentieth Century Press,” Emily Skidmore examines the construction of popular discourses of “transsexual” through American mainstream media, and finds that “white transwomen were able to articulate transsexuality as an acceptable subject position through an embodiment of the norms of white womanhood, most notably domesticity, respectability, and heterosexuality” (271).

Chinese media, and in particular the *People’s Daily*, plays an active role in the presentation of China’s own “good transsexual.” Chinese transgender women who have undergone gender reassignment surgery, are married, and model themselves after Chinese standards of feminine beauty and ideals demarcate “acceptable” transsexuality, often at the expense of subjugating other bodies.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> This phenomenon has not gone unnoticed by Chinese netizens. Searches for “女变男” (a popular way to express the idea of FtM in Chinese) on Baidu, China’s equivalent of Google, yields results from posters wondering why the media has so many features and pictures of trans women, with so little attention on trans men.

## Chapter 6

### Legal Identity

Over the last few years, responses and coverage from both state and social media on issues of transgender citizens moved away from warnings of moral decay and fear of deviants towards support and tolerance. In part, this is due to the Ministry of Public Safety's announcement in 2000 that Chinese citizens had the right to choose their own gender. Shortly afterwards, in 2001, *The Chinese Classification of Mental Disorders* "removed the reference of homosexuality – an umbrella term for sexual "deviants", including transgenders – as a psychotic [sic] disorder" (Zhang 191).<sup>12</sup>

However, further restrictions on who could legally change their gender on their ID cards were implemented. In 2009, the new (essentially, the first) medical regulations and requirements for patients wishing to undergo gender reassignment surgery were promulgated. As with most recent Chinese laws and regulations (Lee), the Draft for Soliciting Opinions of Regulations on Gender reassignment Surgery Technique and Management (《变性手术技术规范(征求意见稿)》 *Bianxing shoushu jishu guanli guifan (zhengqiu yijian gao)*) was first published in June of 2009 in the *People's Daily* and was open for comments from the public for a period of 30 days<sup>13</sup>. A few months later, on November 20, 2009, the general office of the Ministry of Health printed and distributed the Trial Regulations on Gender Reassignment

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<sup>12</sup> Chapters 6, 7, 8, and 9 contain some material, reprinted with permission, from my forthcoming publication: Potter, Christian. "Queering Confucius: Mothers and Transgender Sons in Contemporary China." *Mothers and Sons: Centering Mother Knowledge*. Eds. Besi Brilliant Muhonja and Wanda Thomas Bernard. Ontario, Demeter Press: 2016.

<sup>13</sup> As interesting as the process of soliciting opinions from the public is, as well doing a comparison of changes made from draft to official document, it has little bearing on this particular paper.

Surgery Technique and Management – these are still the current regulations in effect today.

Covering hospital procedure, skill of surgeons, medical responsibilities, and more, the regulations also include a series of requirements and conditions for patients to pass in order to be approved for gender reassignment surgery. The relevant section begins with item three under section three, “Technique and Management Basic Requirements”, as follows:

(III.) Required materials to be provided by patient and conditions that ought to be satisfied before the surgery:

1. Materials patients must submit before the surgery:

(1) Proof issued from the local Ministry of Public Security that the patient has no criminal record.

(2) Proof from a qualified psychiatrist certifying a diagnosis of gender identity disorder, while at the same time proof that there is no other abnormal psychological condition; pass a specialized psychological exam, proving psychologically that their sexual orientation is heterosexual, and without any other psychological abnormalities.

(3) A notarized, formal written report of request for the surgery by the patient.

(4) Patient must provide relevant proof that they have already informed the directly-related members of their family [parents, children].

The above mentioned materials must be entered into the patient’s medical record.

2. Conditions that patient must satisfy before surgery:

(1) Must live as the requested new gender for a continuous period of no less than 5 years, without going back and forth in the process.

(2) Before the surgery, must receive psychological and psychiatric treatment for 1 year or more, to no effect.

(3) Must not be in a marriage or divorce.

(4) Must be at least 20 years of age, and must be completely capable of civil conduct.

(5) Must have no surgical contraindication. (PRC Trial Regulations)

In order to change your gender on your ID card – a card that records and transmits information about the identity of the owner, as well as being required for everything from buying train tickets, opening bank accounts and applying for jobs, to registering for a marriage license – you need to show proof of having completed gender reassignment surgery. In turn, in order to undergo gender reassignment surgery you must fulfill and satisfy the above-mentioned requirements. Failing to completely satisfy all aspects of the regulations can lead a request for gender change on ID to be refused, as was the case with Xiao Lin (小林), a transgender woman who went to Thailand for gender reassignment surgery. After a successful operation, she returned to her home, a small village in Sichuan province, only to be told that “in order to have her gender changed on her ID, she needed to provide proof of her gender issued by a domestic hospital, along with a notarized certificate, which would then have to be authorized by the prefecture” (Koetse). Xiao Lin provided the needed documents, but as the hospital that

performed the surgery was in Thailand, and not domestic, her request to change the gender on her ID was refused.

Not only are these required materials and conditions strict and time-consuming, they are potentially difficult or impossible to fulfill. It is important to point out that obtaining proof that one has notified one's immediate family members is not as simple or as easy as it sounds. If a parent objects or refuses to sign documents stating they have been informed, a patient would be unable to meet the requirements for surgery. This could provide a serious obstacle for many who want to undergo gender reassignment surgery, especially when the cultural norm is to respect one's parents. Changing one's role in a family from daughter to son or from son to daughter could have much greater implications for other family members, in addition to possible future legal complications. The 2010 report on China from the International Gay & Lesbian Human Rights Commission criticized these new regulations stating "in certain aspects these rules fail to meet international standards on individual autonomy and privacy" (Levine).

The importance of transnational movements advocating transgender awareness, tolerance and rights is indisputable even while an "international standard" on individual autonomy and privacy is debatable. Susan Stryker warns of the "ways in which transgender activism and advocacy themselves can become complicit with the globalizing logic of neoliberalism" (290). It is thus important to not isolate gender and transgender identities from local cultural pressures and expectations of gendered roles. Within Chinese culture, these gendered pressures and expectations are often tied to familial roles, relationships, and filial piety. Whether one chooses to meet these expectations or not, there are real consequences for the individuals and families involved. Questions of filial piety and the hetero/normative roles of

sons and daughters have always been complex and dynamic throughout Chinese history. Transgender sons and daughters can further complicate traditional norms and family values. Examining Chinese media coverage can provide insight into how transgender discourse is framed and negotiated, especially around the private and highly-contested realms of the family.

Popular narratives of transgender in the Chinese media tend to revolve around this recognized, legal, heteronormative construct of a transgender body. If one desires to conform to this construction of transgender, one of the obstacles to overcome is not only the gender reassignment surgery, but more importantly the above-mentioned new regulations overseeing gender reassignment surgery, which includes parental notification/consent. In many ways, China's "good transsexual" appears similar to that constructed historically by American mainstream media, but with an added dimension of filial piety under the auspices of parental consent.

Previous scholarship on mother/son relationships in China has been limited at best, often regulated to a few pages at most in works on Chinese kinship.<sup>14</sup> Likewise, while scholarship of transgender studies in America is well established, if not flourishing, the field of Chinese transgender studies is nascent. To the best of my knowledge, the intersection where mother/son relationships meets transgender men is virtually unmapped. As such, this portion of my research is necessarily exploratory. First, I will look at both past and present norms of mother/son relationships before turning to media coverage of transgender men in China. I then

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<sup>14</sup> A notable exception here is Alan Cole's *Mothers and Sons in Chinese Buddhism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998). Cole addresses the intersection of Confucian filial piety, Buddhism, and family relationships and their evolution from the 4<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> century. While intriguing and complimentary to my research, assessing the impact and relevance/relation to contemporary Chinese mother/son relationships proved difficult at this point in my project.

offer an analysis of a widely-circulated article published in 2008 that details the life of a Chinese transgender man as he seeks his mother's consent for gender reassignment surgery. I seek to respond to a number of questions. How is the mother/son relationship exemplified or challenged by transgender men? To what extent and in what role, if any, does the mother/son relationship play in media coverage of transgender men? How is this parental consent constructed by the media?

## Chapter 7

### Sons, Save Your Mothers!

In early 2015, China's Ministry of Justice administered their national judicial examination for prospective lawyers and judges. When the official answers were published on September 24<sup>th</sup>, one question in particular garnered the attention of Chinese netizens as well as responses from both domestic and international media: "Your girlfriend and your mom are both in a burning building. If you could only save one, which one do you choose?" The official answer? You are obligated to save your mother. Saving your girlfriend first, resulting in your mother's death, is to commit a crime of non-action (Dong).

While the legal and social implications surrounding this question and its sanctioned answer – issues concerning crimes of non-action, filial duty and duty as a citizen – are important, I am more interested in the question itself. The exam question is essentially a variation on a classic conundrum posed to men in China: Your wife and your mother both fall into a river; who do you save first? The question is designed to pit filial piety against romantic love, challenging men to put one before the other and reflects the tension between classical teachings of Confucian philosophy that stressed filial piety and more recent developments over the last seventy years valuing spousal choice, romantic love, and the rise of the conjugal unit.

As a BBC correspondent writes, "no-one on the Chinese internet appears to address the sexist nature of the question. Should a woman save her father or her boyfriend first?" (Hatton). While perhaps symptomatic of China's struggles for women's equality under the shadow of Confucian patrilineal norms, the fact that the question is gendered may be less important than

the cultural value and importance attached to a son's relationship with his mother. This is not to say that there is no value placed on father/daughter relationships in China, but instead simply to highlight the assumed normativity of a powerful bond between mother and son. Whether it is used to tease a young man about his new girlfriend or to illustrate an example of a crime of non-action, the special relationship between a son and his mother is significant in contemporary Chinese culture.

For most anthropologists, the mother/son relationship in Chinese culture is best understood in terms of security and traditional patrilineal family and marriage customs. Sons are traditionally expected to take care of their parents as they age, but for mothers the security that a filial son can bring matters far more than it does to fathers. As Margery Wolf explains, a male grows up in a community learning everything about the people and physical environment around him. People outside of his family are considered outsiders, not to mention those who live outside the community (42). For a new wife and mother, who has left her natal family and "married in" to her new family (that of her husband), there is no security or familiarity. She has a new mother-in-law and sisters-in-law to compete with for authority and attention, and giving birth to a son secures her a position of importance in the family. The son becomes insulation against the sometimes dangerous terrain of marrying into and moving in with an entirely new family. In turn, the mother nurtures and protects the son, sometimes even to the extent of sacrificing her own safety and position. These sacrifices, however, are not in vain and also not without the expectation of a return on the emotional investment. Often, the greater the sacrifice, the closer the bond between mother and son. The mother/son relationship is one of affection, security, and nourishment, especially when contrasted with the father/son

relationship – one of distance, authority, and respect. For the father, a son may represent the continuation of the family, but for the mother her son represents emotional security and reprieve from her in-laws as he grows up, and financial security as she ages. Wolf contrasts a Chinese father's desire for respect and obedience at the cost of admiration and affection with a Chinese mother's dependence on "ties of affection and gratitude that she weaves in the years of her son's childhood," finding that "Chinese culture extracts from a son the obligation of supporting his mother" (43).

William Jankowiak argues that even though economic, social, and legal reforms over the last forty years have challenged traditional parent/child relationships, mothers still "exercise tremendous psychological control over their offspring," and the mother/child bond "is sustained in large part through a Chinese tradition that legitimizes and promotes an intense lifelong emotional bond between mother and child" (374-5). While Jankowiak writes about mother/child relationships, it should be noted that when he discusses his data, the sex of his informants is overwhelming male, which indicates that most are speaking about mother/son relationships.

Examples of the deep connection between mother and son can be found in Chinese literature, and Paul Chao points to stories from both *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (*Sanguo Yanyi* 三国演义) and *Water Margin* (*Shui Hu Zhuan* 水浒传) that illustrate the depth of a mother's sacrifices and affection and the obligation of the son (85-86). Most of these stories serve to exemplify Confucian filial piety, but when it comes to mother/son relationships, portrayal of a son's struggle to reunite with his mother or to provide for her is crucial. The impact of constructing the narrative of mother/son relationships through depictions of

overcoming disasters or obstacles has lasted to this day, with news headlines featuring stories of a mother's great sacrifice for her son, or a son's struggle to find his mother. A search through news headlines over the last several years reveals hundreds of such reports, such as "Chinese Mother Forgoes Surgery to Save Money for Sick Son's Treatment," about a mother who refuses to undergo a necessary surgery in order to pay her son's hospital bills (Jun). "Trek of a Thousand Villages" tells of a son's journey of seventeen years to find his long-lost mother (Chen). Perhaps most famously in recent news, the story of the mother who saved her son even as she was swallowed alive by a faulty escalator (Zeng). Certainly there are other factors at play that draw the public's attention to these stories – heroic acts, self-sacrifice, and long-lost reunions over time and space – but more often than not, it is the mother/son relationship that lend these reports even more pathos, buoyed by cultural expectations and norms of intergenerational obligation and filial piety.

## Chapter 8

### Mothers and Transgender Sons in Chinese Media

“Thirty-Eight-Year-Old Woman, For Love, Wants to Become a Man: Seventy-Year-Old Mother Gladly Consents,” (hereafter “Woman, For Love”) reads an eye-grabbing headline first published in the *Qilu Evening News*. Quickly picked up by other media outlets, the story circulated in both print and online editions in early 2008, just as the new regulations concerning gender reassignment surgery were being discussed. The unnamed journalist tells the story of Miss Jia, a thirty-eight-year-old woman who was assigned female at birth, but has always identified as a male, and her struggle to marry the woman she loves.<sup>15</sup>

The headline appeals to norms of mother/son relationships by incorporating two of the classic themes discussed earlier: the struggles a son endures, and the acceptance and affection of a mother. The fact that it is a woman who wants to become a man makes the headline all the more compelling. The obstacles and hardships the woman undergoes on her journey to become a man reinforce the sense that her role as daughter is diminished and overshadowed by the narrative of the son who will do anything to keep the bond with his mother. However, romantic love is being posited as the reason for desiring a gender change. Romantic love and filial piety are not mutually exclusive, but at times romantic love can be in direct conflict with filial piety. If we understand a mother’s acceptance of and affection for her son as serving partially as a bulwark against the authority and distance prescribed by the form of filial piety between father and son, then even desiring to change genders for the sake of romantic love folds neatly into

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<sup>15</sup> My searches for articles in Chinese media that touched on both transgender men and their relationship with their mothers yielded very few results. Fortunately, this particular article offers much in terms of both.

the narratives of mother/son relationships. For the son, it is a struggle with rigid authority and expectations that send him seeking the understanding and nurturing mother. For the mother, consent and approval can go a long way towards ensuring more security in her old age. Miss Jia may not yet be recognized as a man legally, but her actions in concert with her mother's approval tell us otherwise and suggest a mother/son narrative that is only betrayed by the use of female pronouns.

Throughout the article, Miss Jia is referred to using the pronoun for female, 她 (*ta*), despite the fact that it is clear Miss Jia has been living as a man for many years. Whether intentional on the part of the journalist or not, the use of the female pronoun throughout the article reinforces a construction of gender identity as valid only when legally recognized. On the other hand, it could be an active refusal to respect transgender self-identification or the journalist might simply be unaware. No matter the reason, the use of both "Miss Jia" and the female pronoun is noteworthy considering the story describes in detail Miss Jia's desire to have her gender *legally* changed to male. As the story unfolds, we learn of the struggle and challenges Miss Jia is willing to overcome to become legally identified as male by the state, and in turn legally marry her long-time girlfriend:

Thirty-eight years ago, Miss Jia came into this world with a daughter's body, but ever since she was old enough to understand, she has never worn women's clothing. When she was a child, she wore her hair short and flat, and was always playing with boys, climbing hills and trees.

Maybe because she had two older sisters, her family members never stopped her from wearing men's fashion. Her father's early demise when she was thirteen made her drop out of school and leave the village to open a restaurant with some other people. 'Just like a man, she experienced all of life's hardships.'

The experiences in her life made strong Miss Jia more and more like a man. She likes to drink liquor, ride a motorbike, and play cards.

### **Because of Love, I Want to Be a Real Man**

The real reason Miss Jia wanted to change her gender was because of going through a short relationship. In 1989, a neighboring village girl named Xiao Zheng came to work at Miss Jia's restaurant. The two worked together a long time and grew close, but along with their growing affection came villagers' gossip.

In early 1990, unable to stand being the talk of the town any longer, the two of them went to a Beijing hospital for a consultation about the cost of undergoing a gender reassignment surgery. The doctor's answer left them feeling that their situation was hopeless, so Miss Jia returned home to her family, alone. With no way to free herself from her pain and suffering, Miss Jia drank a bottle of medicine intending to commit suicide. Fortunately, she was rescued by a villager. Discouraged and downtrodden, Miss Jia did as her family

ordered, and married a man from a neighboring village. Two years later, the marriage was over.

When we started talking about her current girlfriend, Xiao Di, Miss Jia's mood improved greatly. 'On March 16<sup>th</sup>, 1994, at 3:30 p.m. we met when she came to the village and performed the flower-drum opera. After just a little while, I spent forever just riding on my motorbike cheering for her.' Since then, the two of them went everywhere as a couple, and everyone around them accepted it. Now, however, Miss Jia's heart is miserable: 'We don't have a marriage certificate, so it seems like we don't belong. If I had a man's body, it'd be fine.' ("Woman, For Love")

As Miss Jia admits, she went everywhere with her girlfriend, Xiao Di, and everyone around them accepted their relationship. Still, she felt that they did not belong. Miss Jia's narrative places herself as a deviant, unable to feel comfortable until recognized by the state in the same fashion as heteronormative married couples. Undergoing gender reassignment surgery for the sake of body matching her self-identified gender is not the goal. The goal is a marriage certificate and a conformity to heteronormative lifestyle. After all the struggle with gender, conformity, finances, love, and bureaucracy, in the end, Miss Jia found acceptance and support exactly where a son could expect it the most: from his mother. This acceptance in turn helps to solidify a traditional and important relationship in Chinese culture, that of the filial son and the supportive mother, perhaps playing a role in "normalization of transgender" in the Chinese media similar with conformity to heteronormative marriages and gender binaries.

What follows are a few paragraphs detailing how Miss Jia, accompanied by the journalist, contacted a plastic surgeon who offered to perform the gender reassignment surgery for free after hearing Miss Jia's story. Returning to her hometown to get the necessary documents and evidence, Miss Jia and the journalist came to understand the regulations surrounding gender reassignment surgery. Though not addressed in the article, the differences between the obstacles Miss Jia faced in 1990 and 2008 were vast. In 1990, the financial cost of the operation forced Miss Jia, in despair, to break up with her first girlfriend and give up her dream of becoming a man. The 2008 requirements, though complex and bureaucratic, left her determined to pursue the surgery. Framed this way, the story presents the illusion that, financial burdens aside, regulations and requirements prior to undergoing gender reassignment surgery are acceptable and negligible compared to the money involved. Miss Jia, upon hearing that she could not begin the process until she had consent from her family, said, "I have lived in darkness pointlessly for over 30 years; now when I finally have a little light, I cannot let it slip away" ("Woman, For Love"). As Lee points out, regarding her study of marriage law and media in China, newspaper profiles often feature stories related to upcoming changes in law or new regulations, and "despite this simplicity of language and character portrayal [in these types of media reports] . . . attempted to legitimize the government and to enforce the law in the complex, psychological ways" (463). There is a marked shift away from the questions of sexuality and relationships that may constitute or imply a deinstitutionalization of marriage and sexuality that played a more prominent role in media about Gengzi. For Miss Jia, her sexuality is deviant unless validated by the state.

The journalist, still a party to Miss Jia's determined final push towards a new life as a man, writes about Miss Jia's meeting with her mother:

Soon after, I followed Miss Jia to her mother's home. When the already seventy-year-old mother heard that a hospital in the province's capital could perform the operation for free for her daughter, she couldn't help letting a little smile show. 'Ever since she was little, she was just like a boy, and now her younger brother has uremia, if she can become a man then she'll be able to make a little money, and also her desires will be fulfilled.' And with that, she placed her thumbprint on the family consent papers. ("Woman, For Love")

Miss Jia's mother's reaction to her daughter's plea for consent to become a man can be understood as the mother recognizing that a new relationship will be formed when her daughter transitions to a man. Her acceptance is contingent on the understanding that her son will take care of her, as is his obligation. Drawing a connection between Miss Jia's future transition and her other son's uremia, a disease that could lead to kidney failure, the mother all but explicitly states that her security is what is at risk. Her affection, understanding, and nurturing of Miss Jia when she was little and "just like a boy" is proven when she consents to Miss Jia's surgery. In turn, Miss Jia's role in the family is not threatened by her gender change – if anything, it is strengthened.

## Chapter 9

### Conclusion

The mother/son relationship, though never explicitly stated, appears to play a role in both prescribing gender identities and the formation of the “good transsexual” discourse, in the words of Skidmore. For better or worse, this essay raises more questions than it set out to answer. To what extent mother/son relationships are central or whether filial piety plays a larger role is an important question. Also necessary is an examination of what the link between legal marriage and parental consent for transgender men and women in China can reveal about the relationship between law, filial piety, and gender/sexuality. Further research in this area is needed to enrich our understanding of gender in contemporary China. I am working under the assumption that media bias towards transgender women inhibits deeper research into this area. If there exists no media bias, what contributes to the fact that there are few articles on transgender men that mention their mothers? It is important to explore whether other transgender men’s stories and relationships with mothers mirror those in the narratives found of sons transitioning (or transitioned) to daughters. The fact that parental consent is part of the process of obtaining legal gender identity change must affect dynamics in parent/child relationships. There are many important aspects of both Gengzi and Miss Jia’s stories that require more research and would help present a more complex and rich picture of the relationship between transgender, filial piety, and mother/son relationships in China. Without a thorough look at mother/daughter relationships as well as local, historical, and urban/rural variances in parent/child relationships it is difficult to come to any clear conclusions.

With over a year having passed since Li Yinhe's public rebuttal to her attacker, an important question remains to be answered – has the show of support from both Chinese netizens and the state-run *People's Daily* impacted media discourse of transgender? As long as the dominant paradigm of acceptance of heteronormative transgender men continues, so too will it contribute to relegating non-heteronormative sexualities and expressions of gender to the realm of deviance, unprotected by law and invalidated by the state.

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malicious article about exposing my so-called 'lesbian identity'. Of course, how a person lives and with whom they make friends are an individual's private matter. However, since someone so rudely "exposed" [mine as a news story], I [am posting] a reply]. 18 Dec. 2014, 7:55 p.m. Tweet/Blog (Weibo).

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