

## Embodying gender: transgender body/subject formations in Taiwan<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT** *'A soul trapped in the wrong body' is a common description employed by trans subjects to explain their unusual condition. While useful in illustrating the often contradictory feelings, perceptions, self-images, and social expectations that trans subjects have to negotiate as they move through social space; the body-soul imagery also obscures the manifold differences in endowment and resources among trans subjects that may limit their embodiment. Important aspects of contemporary socio-cultural culture also add to the complexities of trans existence or even seriously hamper the logistics of their body/identity-construction. The present paper demonstrates such specificities of Taiwanese transgender existence in relation to body- and subject-formations, in the hope to not only shed light on the actualities of trans efforts toward self-fashioning, but also to illuminate the increasing entanglement between trans self-construction and the evolving gender culture that saturates it.*

**KEYWORDS:** Transgender, embodiment, body, gender, trans, transsexual, subject formation

'A soul trapped in the wrong body' is a common description employed by trans subjects to explain their unusual condition.<sup>2</sup> This self-characterization includes two important premises: that the body and the soul (or identity, self-image, etc) are two separate and independent entities whose correct alignment makes up the effect of gender; and that the soul occupies a higher position than the body, to the extent that any mismatch between the two is to be resolved by modifying the body (through cross-dressing, hormonal therapy, SRS, or other procedures) to match the soul (differently known as identity, self-image, etc). Such a body-soul imagery has helped illustrate the awkward situation of trans subjects by graphically presenting the often contradictory feelings, perceptions, self-images, and social expectations that trans subjects have to negotiate as they move through social space. Yet the binary also tends to simplify trans subjectivity by slighting persistent/insistent trans investment in the transformation of the physical body and its image as well as obscuring the manifold differences (in sex, gender, age, socio-economic status, facial features, body shape, etc) among trans subjects, differences that may very well undermine the credibility of a claim to 'a soul trapped in the wrong body' in addition to creating different kinds of difficulties for differently positioned trans subjects in their efforts toward self-realization. Within any given social context, important aspects of contemporary socio-cultural life also add to the complexities of trans existence or even seriously hamper the logistics of their body/identity-construction. The present paper will attempt to demonstrate such specificities of Taiwanese transgender existence in relation to body- and subject-formations for some trans subjects,<sup>3</sup> in the hope of not only shedding light on the actualities of trans efforts toward self-fashioning, but also illuminating the increasing entanglement between trans self-construction and the evolving gender culture that saturates it.

Limitations of the body-soul imagery have become increasingly apparent in Taiwan after two high-profile trans tragedies. The best-known MTF TS in Taiwan,<sup>4</sup> Lin Guo-Hua,

committed suicide in a hotel room on May 7, 2003, five years after her transition. Her former psychiatrist said afterwards in a press interview that Lin was a victim of unrealistic dreams about becoming a female: she had been told by many that her quite plain looks and chubby body figure 'would not make a successful woman.' Still, the psychiatrist remarked, Lin insisted on going through SRS surgery and, as things turned out, had a hard time getting and holding jobs and ended up killing herself in desperation. The question of professional ethics aside, the psychiatrist's comments highlighted the grid of the body-soul imagery: trans subjects whose physical endowment (in facial features, body figure, height, etc) makes it difficult for them to exhibit normative gender image and gender performance in their adopted gender role will consistently encounter immense obstacles in the most mundane details of daily life, whether before or after transition. Another MTF TG, Tsai Yia-Ting, who was quite active in local Taiwanese trans causes, killed herself by throwing herself on the tracks of an oncoming train in December 2003 after a long period of unemployment and a futile romantic pursuit of a straight woman who considered it abhorrent that a trans woman could be a lesbian at the same time.<sup>5</sup> As it stands, frustration in employment and intimate relationships continues to produce devastating effects on the formation of Taiwanese trans subjects, especially those whose gender presentations do not fit, not to mention defy, the assumptions of normative sex-gender-sexuality alignment.

The difficulties facing trans existence span further beyond the pragmatics of daily life and deep into the basic fabric of personal character. Due to widespread ignorance about, and animosity toward, transgenderism, most transgender subjects – whether out of self-protection or resistance to misreadings by mainstream culture – try to maintain a certain degree of inscrutability, which makes it difficult for them to produce empowering knowledges about themselves as well as to produce resisting discourses against the totalization of medical sciences. As trans subjects move through social space, their body and performance often encounter gender policing in the form of curiosity, if not interrogation. In order to smooth over the impression of any possible gender incongruence, trans subjects have to learn to provide coherent stories to narrativize their trans identity and body presentation.<sup>6</sup> Writing about the way American transsexual Agnes constructed her body and narratives to manipulate the diagnosis of the medical community, Harold Garfinkel captures the continued self-reflection and calculation that make trans identity into what Anthony Giddens would term 'a reflexive project of the modern self' (Giddens, 1991: 75):<sup>7</sup>

Each of a great variety of structurally different instances required vigilance, resourcefulness, stamina, sustained motivation, preplanning that was accompanied continually by improvisation, and continually, sharpness, wit, knowledge, and very importantly her willingness to deal in 'good reasons'—i.e., to either furnish or be ready to furnish reasonable justifications (explanations) or to avoid situations where explanations would be required. (Garfinkel, 1967: 137)

Unfortunately, for trans subjects in Taiwan, the most basic information in self-narrativization that makes up the fabric of social interaction or friendship-building is also the most tell-tale information that may evoke further inquiries about the subject's life, inquiries that may expose the subject's trans identity. The kind of school you went to, the military unit you served in during compulsory military service, your major in college, your shopping favorites – all give out distinct gender-coded information and may very well jeopardize the narratives that trans subjects construct for their gender identity. To avoid social occasions where such information functions as a necessary lubricant, many trans subjects choose to adopt low profiles in their social existence, refraining from attending school class reunions or office mates' social gatherings, projecting images of coldness and aloofness rather than warm openness so as to pre-emptively frustrate the other party's urge for conversation, carefully keeping circles of acquaintances separate so that knowledges about their personal

lives do not have any chance of being verified. This kind of defensive sensitivity that developed along with the subjects' self-fashioning necessarily impacts upon their character and personality, not to mention exacting a heavy toll on their social life by depriving them of the friendship and support that could have been enjoyed.

In a world that fails to see that all of us are involved in 'making and doing the work of bodies – of *becoming* a body in social space' (Turner, 1996/1997/1999: xiii, emphasis added), trans efforts in self-fashioning is often viewed with suspicion and, at best, described as 'passing' (Goffman, 1963: 73). As such, trans lives invoke serious ethical debates over the issue of deception, as the famous examples of trans persons Billy Tipton and Brandon Teena both demonstrate. In a similar case that hit the news in June 2002, Taiwanese aboriginal singer Xioulan-Maya was reported as having lived with her boyfriend for two months and even had wedding pictures taken with him without ever knowing that the boyfriend is actually a biological female. As the performer scrambled to eschew rumors and the stigma of being a lesbian, the transgender 'boyfriend' ended up being a target for serious allegations of fraud and deceit. The sensationalism of the media report only made it all the more horrifying that the deception could remain undetected for so long and through such intimacy. Set within a Taiwanese social context plagued with rampant phone scams and internet scams in recent years, the erosion of social trust cannot but worsen social perception and reception of trans-passing.

It is now clear that as useful as it may be in capturing the maneuvers of trans existence, the concept of 'passing' – along with its connotation of deception – entails profound knowledge/power maneuvers for trans subjects. For passing presupposes the unchallengeable 'naturalness' and 'truthfulness,' or the 'evidentiality' of the physical body, and affirms the meaning and status assigned to such a body by the social culture. The operation of such a truth regime thus serves to reduce/stigmatize the trans subjects' bodily self-realization as nothing but scams and deceit, not to mention creating a profound sense of shame and insecurity in the subjects in regard to the clear discrepancy between one's body (and assigned social gender) and one's chosen identity, a hard-to-explain discrepancy that haunts most trans subjects in their daily existence.

Struggling against social mistrust, discrimination, and humiliation, trans subjects' continued insistence on their self-identity and self-fashioning is in need of a concept that would help explain the close relationship between acts of doing gender, of embodiment, and trans subject formation, without necessarily invoking the gender binary. Here it may be helpful to look into FTM researcher Jay Prosser's adaptation of French psychoanalyst Didier Anzieu's concept of 'skin ego' into that of 'embodiment.' Prosser believes that 'Transsexuality reveals that extent to which embodiment forms an essential base to subjectivity; but it also reveals that embodiment is as much about feeling one inhabits material flesh as the flesh itself' (Prosser, 1998: 7).<sup>8</sup> In other words, neither self nor identity is merely a construction of mental cognition; on the contrary, cognition is quite materially rooted in the actual feelings of the body (especially those of the skin), all the more for trans subjects. At the same time, the skin of a body is no mere essential, physical, fixed *a priori* existence, but always mixed in with associated feelings and images that continue to form the self and identity. Within such a conception, both the self and the body can be understood as open, dynamic existences, constantly changing, adjusting, seeking/constructing different, inhabited, 'at home' feelings, feelings that are not necessarily in alignment with social expectations or prescriptions. Individual self-images, trans or not, far from being abstract imaginings or false consciousnesses, are deeply-rooted in and constitutive of this material body (especially its 'skin'). Similarly, our physical bodies are not given, fixed materials, nor are they the boundary of self-images; instead, bodies are the physical embodiment of self, and most importantly, both are constantly negotiated by all the desires, expectations, norms, and fantasies of daily life.<sup>9</sup> In that sense, trans subjects differ from other subjects only in that

they have formed a very different feeling of 'at-homeness,' as their endowed body completely fails to provide that feeling.

Prosser's attention to the skin of the body as constitutive of the self and identity is not without precedent. Sigmund Freud had a similar materialist conception of the ego in relation to the body in which it is embedded. As Freud puts it, 'The ego is first and foremost a bodily ego; it is not merely a surface entity, but is itself the projection of a surface' (Freud, 1986/1991: 451). The ego is thus 'anaclitic' on the sensations and feelings of the body, and, above all, its surface. In that sense, Freud's conception situates the ego, its development, function and interpretation, squarely in the middle of the body and its materiality. Although Freud was probably referring to the material/physical sensations and feelings of the body surface, we can at this present moment extend the concept to include those sensations and feelings of inadequacy or satisfaction that accompany one's body surface/image as the body negotiates its course within a social context that imposes certain gender/sex values on all bodies. And as self-affirmation and self-contentedness are both rooted in the surface of the body, forged with feelings and emotions formulated within given social contexts and social interaction, it is little wonder that the body constitutes a vital site where trans subjectivity is constantly struggling to create itself.

Both Prosser and Freud are helpful in illuminating the importance of body and its valuation as constitutive of the self; their theories are also helpful in explaining trans insistence on non-normative body presentation. But in addition to the inexorable connection that has developed between body and self for the individual – in particular for trans subjects – there is a host of socially- and culturally-specific forces that are both constitutive and transformative for such connection. As modernity marches on to produce a Taiwanese society increasingly filled with strangers, unfamiliar occasions, unforeseeable social interactions, and transient human encounters, traditional social markers are becoming increasingly irrelevant as the basis for mutual recognition. It is within such a social context that images of the body came to be loaded with increasing importance in the process of signification, thus becoming key markers for self-representation and other-recognition. Trans subjects, like other subjects, also feel an increasing urge to actively fashion their self-presentation. Unfortunately, in Taiwan, the cultural development that valorizes bodies and their 'readings' – readings that are always already saturated with, and arbitrated by, the sexual dimorphism that accompanies reproduction-oriented understanding of sexuality<sup>10</sup> – also flared up anxious concerns over gender presentations, which only exacerbates the delicate position of trans subjects and their self embodiment. It is also ironic that in an age that seems to have loosened gender barriers in body presentation,<sup>11</sup> there is a simultaneous, commercially-encouraged hyper-attention to exaggerated gender features in Taiwan, thus the popularity of big breasts for women and big muscles for men. The complexities of a seemingly diversifying gender culture eventually leave trans maneuvers vulnerable to unpredictable and often contradictory social interpretations. In addition, as sexual dimorphism continues to persist in Taiwan's public discourses, a relentless but over-simplified feminist critique of the pervasiveness of differential gender power and male malice only serves to imperil already difficult trans existence in Taiwan: within this highly sensitized gender atmosphere, FTM trans subjects tend to be understood as unfortunate souls who have succumbed to the lure of patriarchal values, and MTF trans subjects are read as conniving criminals who are crossing gender boundaries only to facilitate their criminal acts against women. In short, visible and obvious gender crossing is dismissed as either politically incorrect or psychotically criminal in intention, which greatly intensifies trans subjects' difficulties in practicing their embodiment.

Within this social context where gender non-conformity is looked upon with suspicion and body transformation procedures are both hard to come by and expensive to acquire, quite a number of trans subjects are forced to resort to various forms of entertainment work

or sex-related work as their only viable source of income and the only site where their chosen embodiments and identities are at least applauded or appreciated as spectacles. As the sex workers' rights movement is still in its nascent stage of development in Taiwan, there is little support or understanding for so-called 'third-sex' sex workers. Worse, trans subjects who have found their only livelihood in the booming sex-related entertainment and recreation industry in Taiwan face increasing alienation from other trans subjects, as the latter, in their urgent quest for legitimacy, strive to resist any possible association with stigma or criminal elements.<sup>12</sup> This complex social atmosphere is further aggravated by the collusion between the police and the media, which guarantees that any news that involves gender-nonconforming trans subjects is sure to meet with sensationalized coverage and humiliating exposure,<sup>13</sup> which not only impinges on the basic human rights of the trans subject in question but also contributes to a reductive and inimical understanding of transgenderism as a whole.

Many Taiwanese trans subjects have found some empowerment through the internet where they can locate otherwise inaccessible information and otherwise inaccessible friendship, as well as professional-sounding identity terms that could help with their self-representation. Unfamiliar with the historical and localized contextualization that had informed the meaning and connotation of western trans terms of identity,<sup>14</sup> Taiwanese trans subjects generally adopt western abbreviations (TV, TS, CD, and TG) to provide some identity intelligibility for themselves.<sup>15</sup> Unfortunately, divisions often convey a hierarchy of different degrees of authenticity (which each trans subject could lay claim to accordingly), or viewed from another angle, a hierarchy of different degrees of perverseness (which could be levied against trans subjects perceived as belonging to categories different from one's own). Each identity term also invokes a prescriptive life path to be followed by individual trans subjects who claim the identity category. Quite a few trans subjects thus hedge to settle into such categories, not only because existing trans categories do not adequately represent the diversity among trans subjects, but also because the terms never quite capture the tentative and transient state they find themselves in. After all, as Judith Halberstam aptly puts it: 'identity might best be described as process with multiple sites for becoming and being' (1998: 21). As a matter of fact, during the process of my research, several trans subjects whom I had interviewed completed their SRS procedure and moved into their new gender identity; others have entered different stages of the complicated transition process, thus making the gender of their bodies all the more indeterminate.<sup>16</sup> Still, public discourses surrounding trans subjects in Taiwan continue to be constructed on the simple dimorphic model.

Recent developments in Taiwan's gender culture and gender politics are also bringing forth new challenges for local trans subjects. Within the Taiwanese context, the rapid ascendancy and legitimation of the concept of 'gender' both as a social category and as a policy category have been helped and promoted most importantly by a nationalist project that aims to turn women into, more often than not, mere passive consumers of electoral politics. And increasingly, mainstream women's groups, inspired and led by the self-proclaimed 'state-feminists,' are acting as brokers in mediating women's votes so as to bring women into the public sphere en masse in an effort to feminize the state into its prescribed role of 'care-takers of its people.' The rise of the concept 'gender' is further propelled by a nationalist aspiration that aims to affirm Taiwan's nation-statehood by demonstrating its willingness to live up to international standards of performance in terms of paternalistic measures that claim to protect women and children against specifically sex-related travesties such as trafficking or pornography. The intersection between gender constructions of the nation as well as nationalist constructions of gender has thus led to a serious simplification or rarification of the concept of 'gender' that leans all the more toward the normative. Within this social context in which gender norms and gender rights have acquired policy status, other



related developments further complicate trans existence. For example, an increasingly liberal view toward women's social role has created a social space somewhat hospitable toward women who choose to present themselves in gender-neutral embodiments. In the meantime, a burgeoning lesbian movement and accompanying lesbian consumption culture have also helped legitimate butch-looking gender presentations. Yet this liberal attitude toward gender crossing has only made more unintelligible, and thus unacceptable, trans subjects' insistence on body modification procedures. In other words, trans embodiment and trans quest for a sense of bodily at-homeness remain incomprehensible even to the liberalizing gender culture. Furthermore, several high-profile sex murders in 1996–97 and Taiwanese mainstream feminists' follow-up advocacy since have not only highlighted the hostility and danger against women in public spaces, but also widely propagated the idea and fear of 'sexual perversions.' This general and indiscriminate apprehension of sexual perversions is unlikely to stop at the door of trans subjects. More often than not, dubious gender performativity is conveniently read as expression of a dubious – i.e. perverse – sexuality. Consequently, gender non-conformity is easily collapsed into sexual perversion in the public eye, helped in no small way by mainstream feminists' reductive characterization of gender power differential as little more than sexual violence and sexual harassment against women. All in all, such recent developments in Taiwanese gender/sex culture are creating an increasingly complicated social space in which trans subjects and their embodiments are hard-pressed to navigate the treacherous waters.

It has already been established that the body–soul imagery beckons forth a simple and static juxtaposition of the body and its gender identity that further conceals 'the daily effort of "doing" gender in everyday interactions that all of us engage in' (Kessler and McKenna, 1978/1985: 126). After all, the imagery of a soul trapped in the wrong body addresses only the wrongness of the given body, while the subject's desired embodiment remains both unarticulated and unelaborated. This kind of silence has made it very difficult for under-privileged trans subjects to locate and acquire appropriate information and resources to build toward their desired embodiment. For if the subject inquires about such issues, it is considered discrediting to the subject's claim to gender authenticity; after all, gender embodiment and performance is still considered to be a natural endowment, even if 'wrongly' endowed. Many a trans subject thus has to make special efforts to access the embodiment techniques that would help with their gender presentation, such as fashion choices, dressing styles, shopping tips, voice adjustment techniques, vocabulary choices, body part concealment accessories, etc, or else be forced to live with unsatisfactory embodiments that are sure to jeopardize their social existence.

The younger generation of trans subjects in Taiwan, mostly weak in economic resources, often live at home where privacy and mobility are both limited. While they have been encouraged by the democratizing/liberalizing Taiwanese society to start early and 'be themselves,' home is, ironically, where they feel least at home. Limited home space often results in siblings sharing the same room, thus making it all the more difficult to store trans materials for embodiment. Even if some secret corner – such as the top shelf of a closet or the far end behind drawers – could be found to store the clothes, shoes, or wigs; once found out, the result of exposure and humiliation is both direct and brutal. For familiarity among family members deprives trans subjects of any credibility to their fabricated excuses. In one family, one 19-year-old MTF TG has repeatedly lost precious clothing items on such occasions, leaving him distressed both in resources and family relations.<sup>17</sup> Some of the more mature trans subjects are forced to use their cars as key storage space as well as the site for other maintenance (make-up) purposes, which often leaves their outfit in much worse conditions than desired and thus quite damaging to their self-presentation. Still others resort to renting gender-crossing outfits only when needed, which greatly reduces the subject's cumulative experiences in embodiment in addition to significantly raising its cost.

Storage of materials for gender embodiment is but the first of the problems; for trans, life and self-presentation are much more dynamic processes. To begin with, with the semi-tropical weather pattern of Taiwan, there is the necessity of frequent washing and drying of the clothing items when they become soiled through actual embodiment. It may not be too difficult to find private moments to schedule hand-washes, but as hanging to dry is still the general practice in Taiwan and may take up to a few hours to reach total dryness, trans subjects are faced with the problem of finding such airy places to renew the looks of their embodiment materials. Some are forced to risk hanging the clothing on the clothes lines of neighbors in the fragile hope of not being found out by their own family members or by their neighbors. All the time, trans subjects would have to be alert and watching, and have some kind of excuse or flat denial ready on hand in case things do not turn out the way they had been planned.<sup>18</sup> The horror of being found out, the humiliation of interrogation, the embarrassment of confrontation, the trouble of maintenance – all of these likely scenarios and difficulties leave young and dependent trans subjects constantly enmeshed in a keen sense of vulnerability that is bound to affect their self-identity as well as self-representation.

Even if trans subjects can overcome the difficulties of setting up a wardrobe, they may not have the luxury to utilize it fully, which can prove to be quite frustrating. As outward appearances of gender variance may provoke public interrogation and subsequent humiliation, many Taiwanese trans subjects are forced to create other kinds of ‘personal privacy’ to maintain their individual self-embodiment. Some of these are quite humble attempts: the many MTFs whose outward presentations may not survive the scrutiny of gender norms, or whose jobs may not tolerate any degree of gender deviation, are forced to reduce their gender embodiment to a mere set of female underwear underneath their male or neutral outfits, because, as one MTF puts it, ‘I am a woman and I feel comfortable this way.’ When the thin summer shirts or T-shirts make it too obvious to wear bras underneath, female panties became the last line of defense for the self-embodiment of many MTFs. Yet, even with such subdued and limited self-embodiment, trans subjects still run the risk of being found out and humiliated, as Taiwanese police often set up road blocks in the name of preventing crimes or drunk driving and may conduct body searches if they deem it necessary. Once found out, the humble trans efforts can be easily read as another exemplary of fetishism if not an insidious performance of some unspeakable sexual perversion on the verge of committing sexual crimes. Even though there is no law prohibiting the donning of opposite-sex clothing, the collusion between the police and the tabloid media often work together to picture trans subjects as possible crime suspects.<sup>19</sup> Consequently, just as women had been deprived of access to public spaces after dark before they took back the night through activism, many trans subjects have also learned that their self-embodiment cannot share public space. A woman may demand a room of one’s own to pursue her self-actualization; trans subjects, in contrast, could hardly hold on to the bare minimum of their self-embodiment.

With trans subjects whose outer appearances may no longer arouse suspicion upon initial encounter, another important aspect of embodiment becomes a necessity. The voice uttered by such a body is still quite telling. MTF TS university professor Ah-Qi has some quite profound observations in this area:

This is a learning process. You are in the process; you still have not managed the technique. You don’t know how high you can go with the pitch of your voice. Many things take a lot of experimenting and you need to accumulate experiences. There are many cultural things, the adjectives that different genders use, the different vocabulary items, the voice, the pitch. Everything is different between the genders and needs learning.

As experienced as Ah-Qi is, trans embodiment is still a continuous process of becoming, the process of a highly reflexive self-fashioning that is constantly testing the limits of the body. FTM TS Xiau-Wei, on the other hand, has learned a quick way to change his pitch of voice

through drinking and smoking. Interestingly, this comes as the side effect of a traditional socializing process for males. As Xiau-Wei puts it: 'Most of the guys I hang out with are smoking and drinking when we are together. If I don't, I won't feel that I belong anyway.' As he smoked and drank, his voice is also gradually tuned to the male pitch. The gendered body is truly a socially-induced body in this case.

Although the 21st century is already equipped with the chromosome, the hormone, the sexual glands, and DNA to determine a person's gender, the scientific paradigm stubbornly hangs on to the genitals in gender assignment. The decades-old observation that 'Gender attribution is, for the most part, genital attribution' (Kessler and McKenna, 1978/1985: 153) seems to be alive and well. Such valorization of the genitals in gender determination – helped along in no little sense by recent Taiwanese mainstream feminist dramatization of the genitals as either the root of sexual evil (on the male body) or the site of most vulnerability (on the female body) – has created a social context in which the genitals have also become the focal points of concern for trans subjects. And it is here in the refashioning of the genitals that trans sense of embodiment demonstrates its most unusual operation. For as the body is recognized as a highly contested site in which trans subjects' self re-scripting is effected, the body and the self form an at once close yet alienated relationship: close because the body is demanded to mirror the self accurately and thoroughly so as to embody the transgendered self; alienated because the body is treated in this process as an objective, distant existence, to be subjected to manipulation and modification, but also equipped with feelings and concerns hard to explain by the norm. The body is thus a highly contested site: trans subjects' aggressive fashioning of their bodies is no less than a re-scripting of their bodies that announces their independence from a rigidified gender/sexuality regime.

The given body's resilience and failure to embody the transgender self often leads the subject to see the body itself as wrong, unsatisfactory, alienated, and desperately needing modification through SRS.<sup>20</sup> And when SRS procedures are still beyond the reach of trans subjects either because of a lack of funds to cover the huge surgery costs or difficulties in getting parental approval,<sup>21</sup> trans subjects often have to invent their own measures to reduce (or create) the visibility of protruding genitals. With increasingly accessible breast-binding techniques and commodities provided by a growing lesbian culture, FTMs can now concentrate on experimenting with techniques that help create the tubed look in the crotches. MTFs, on the other hand, are not so fortunate and have to resort to more dramatic measures to perform the disappearing act. While such dramatic measures are usually pathologized by the medical and counseling communities or the media as irrational behavior urged on by misguided desires or inverted identification; a whole generation of trans subjects, helped along with body modification technologies, endocrinological research, internet information, and gender/sexual liberation movements, are already forging aggressive ways to embody their selves. More importantly, these efforts of embodiment often challenge the fragile and shifting boundaries between self-management/self-mutilation, body-realignment/body-destruction, rational choice/blind impulse.

If actual physical transformation is still beyond the subject's means, it is at least feasible in fantasy. MTF TG graduate student Mei-Suei makes it a routine to dream herself into womanhood as she falls asleep every night:

I am not sure when I began imagining its [penis] non-existence. I think it might have begun in the second or third grade. Everyday before falling asleep, I would make up a story ... I would imagine an incident that would miraculously turn me into a girl. For example, maybe I got into a car accident or some other accident, and hurt my penis, then it became natural to get rid of it in the hospital.

Such fantasies may seem ridiculous and pathetic, yet when trans subjects recount such stories, they always sound quite nonchalant if not elated ('Wouldn't it be wonderful!' says



Mei-Suei). The calm happiness is uttered in stark contrast to the many real obstacles in the lives of trans people as well as the seeming impossibility of ever reaching their goal.

Beyond the realm of fantasy, gradual changes in the Taiwanese social milieu have made it possible for many trans people to take actual steps to create their own gendered bodies. Contraceptive pills for women have long been recognized as effective for MTFs to change their contours as well as their skin tone. Thirty-year-old MTF TS Huei-Tze learned about the application of female hormones at the age of 12 while flipping through a dictionary of medicine in a doctor's waiting room. He also learned from the book that 'a complete woman would have to have female hormones and breasts besides a flat pubic area down there.' With Taiwan's rather loose regulation over the dispensing of medicine, Huei-Tze was able to purchase female hormones for himself from a neighborhood pharmacy, under the excuse of running his mother's errands. The early application of female hormones helped him through puberty without developing many of the expected secondary masculine sexual markers and happily with the welcomed growth of breasts. The easy accessibility of female hormones within a Taiwanese pharmaceutical system that is quite lenient in its dispensing practices has helped many MTFs as they seek to recreate their bodies. Recent public education on menopause issues, promoted by both medical professionals and feminists, has also made hormonal information even more easily accessible – especially for craving trans subjects. As more and more trans subjects begin their body modification process earlier and earlier, Taiwan's military draft system is now faced with an increasing number of gender-transposed draftees who have already developed obvious breasts and feminine traits through the use of female hormones, but still retain their penises. The increasing presence of such mixed-gender bodies in the all-male context of compulsory military services, along with demands from gender/sexuality rights groups, is forcing the Taiwanese military to review its drafting policies and to re-train its medical personnel to handle gender-related discharge evaluations.

Short of hormonal or surgical measures, many trans subjects can still make do with limited available resources to modify their bodies as they struggle to forge their own embodiment. While FTMs bind and flatten their breasts and stuff their groins to create a tubed look, it is now commonplace that MTFs try out pads, water balls, and other stuffing materials to create the look of breasts. The lower part of the MTF body calls for more ingenuity. As it turns out, the most gender-exclusive item may come to a surprising and creative application in the hands of the transgendered: 50-year-old MTF TG Ah-Mei had experimented with many different materials before settling down with none other than feminine napkins to create a flat and smooth look in the groin that would be held in place by the provided adhesives. Economically disadvantaged MTFs would fold toilet tissues or wear double under-panties to create the same smooth look. One MTF sex worker who always wears super mini-skirts at work was asked how she did it during her pre-op days. She proudly announced that she could tuck 'the whole thing' in the rear and still wear G-strings. The transformation was so successful that she would even lift her skirt to flirt with clients. I asked innocently whether it would feel uncomfortable to tuck away so much in so little space. The sex worker said nonchalantly: 'What does it matter? I don't want it anyway.' The light-hearted response demonstrates that, *as a woman*, she has already effected a certain degree of alienation from her male body and male organs to the extent that the value and feelings of such body parts are simply insignificant. In June 2001, she had her surgery done in Thailand and called me from overseas to tell me the good news. I again asked ignorantly whether she felt anything missing from her body now. She answered: 'Missing? It has always been this way; it was never existent for me. The only difference is that I used to wear girdles to hold everything in, but now I don't have to do that anymore.' When I pursued this with a question about the possible feeling of 'empty-handedness' when she relieves herself now, she said as-matter-of-factly that she never felt any

difference, for she had always relieved herself in the feminine sit-down posture and thus never developed any dependency on hands to hold or direct the penis. In fact, almost all of the MTF trans subjects I interviewed urinate in the feminine posture behind closed doors. Given bodies and organs obviously could not dictate the use to which the bodies and organs are put.

Still, no matter how trans subjects hide, conceal, fake, fabricate to create their gender embodiment, when interrogations and identity-checks became inevitable, the evidential presence of the gendered body poses such an undeniable reality that trans subjects feel hard-pressed to strive toward full embodiment.<sup>22</sup> After all, stuffing, pressing, binding, only succeeds in temporarily getting those 'undesirable body parts' out of sight. When the undeniable and resilient presence of such body parts continues to haunt trans subjects, other futile measures emerge to deal with them. MTF TS Ah-qian has heard too many bloody trans stories to do anything drastic or stupidly harmful; still, she could not help but punch on the testicles when frustration rises. The MTF TS sex worker mentioned earlier had also tried the knife on the penis when she was in junior high school. The immense pain forced her to stop and let that 'piece of dead meat' hang there. Now that she has returned from Thailand with her ideal body, she no longer has to worry about it. Other trans subjects have resorted to more resolute steps to get rid of 'this thing that does not belong to me.' MTF TS Ru-Yuen hated the presence of 'such an ugly thing' so much that she tried many different ways to get it out of sight. She had tried to pull her panties all the way backward tightly so as to make the groins look flat. Once she soaked her genitals in piping hot water until she could not bear it anymore, which did not seem to do much to it. Then she tried something else.

I used rubber bands to tie them all up, cutting the blood flow so that they turned blue. That really hurt. I couldn't stand it but for half an hour. Then when you tried to remove the rubber bands, they were so tightly bound that you could not do it. Eventually I had to use scissors to cut them loose. The pain was so sharp that I lost all sensations for a while.

Other than rubber bands, trans subjects could be quite ingenious in using whatever is most conveniently at hand to create the look that matches their gender image. In the hope of creating a flat look in the groin, MTF TS Huei-Tze boldly used the sealing tapes sold in her family's grocery store and taped the unwanted organs down:

It was very uncomfortable in summer time because the skin under the sealing tape would canker. But I felt very happy because at least temporarily I was a girl. I did that from third grade in the elementary school to second year in junior high. When I had to go to the bathroom, I would peel the tape off and press it back on afterwards. And my skin would canker all the time ... I had done other crazy things. I would soak my organs in very hot water and I got burnt right away. I really hate this organ; it should not belong to me. I must do something to get rid of it.

Psychiatrists would probably view this kind of 'self-mutilating' behavior as an expression of 'self-hatred.' But the language and attitude of the trans subjects demonstrate clearly that it is not self-hatred, for the object of the hatred is by no means 'part of the self.' What the body should have, should not have; what is one's own, what is not – trans subjects have very definite ideas about these things. Their self-determination in the body is actually testing the bottom line of feminist position on 'our bodies, ourselves.'

The media or medical professionals tend to view such attitudes or acts as impulsive if not compulsive, saying that the trans subjects are doing those things because they are psychologically unbalanced. But many trans subjects are far from impulsive in the construction of their gender embodiment. SRS procedure is an important life choice, and trans subjects are not without their own calculations. Even when surgery is available and parental consent is in hand, some trans subjects still have their own considerations. The lack of

relevant information and the imperfection of the medical procedure are most acutely felt by FTMs. FTM TS Tim had been waiting to go this way for 17 years. Now that everything seemed to be in place and he had gotten parental approval, he calmly deliberated and asked his psychiatrist not to rush him into the procedure even though he was fast approaching the surgery cut-off age of 40. Tim explains: 'I have not found out all there is to know about the surgery, and what I see today is still evolving and the techniques are improving.' He eventually received surgery in 2002, having 'learned everything about the procedure and evaluated all available doctors and hospitals.'<sup>23</sup>

As to the expensive cost of the transition, nobody knows it better than trans subjects themselves. Thirty-something FTM TS Wei-Wei has been living as a man since he was 15, has gone to all job interviews as a man, and has worked as a man with only a few people in the company personnel departments knowing anything about it. Such a long-term construction process derives its force from the deeply-rooted 'skin-ego' that insistently demands an embodiment different from the given one. When challenged about the importance of sex-change surgery to a life already acclimated to living in the opposite gender role, Wei-Wei says: 'You might think it is not important, but the important thing is how I feel in that body. My bodily senses about the need to change into the *right* body are too profound to be ignored.' Fragile-looking MTF TS Ru-Yuen says with a faint smile on the eve of her SRS:

From the point of view of 'ordinary people,' such sacrifices are really terrible. Your lifespan will shorten, your body strength will worsen, you might not accomplish the dreams you have for your life. I don't know if my head is screwed on wrong or not, I just have to make myself into a true woman, a woman who does not have any worries. I think the price is well worth it. I don't mind not living too long. For somebody like me, I could never have children. I am not qualified to enjoy living-happily-ever-after. And if that is the case, I don't need to live too long.

The taking of hormones may damage the liver. Life span may be shortened because of that. SRS procedures do not offer reproductive capacities, nor do they guarantee finding a partner who would accept the newly constructed body and life.<sup>24</sup> Still, trans subjects are determined to charge forward. The road of gender embodiment is no smooth thoroughfare, yet their own life experiences have already proven that if they do not take this road, they will never feel at home in their bodies. The interrogations and humiliations of daily life are much more unbearable than whatever hazards accompany the embodiment measures.

In the thick woods of gender walked the many trans subjects, covered with various scars and bruises. Some are still bleeding with pain; others have dried up into sophisticated scars. While existing gender stereotypes do exert strong pressures on trans subjects – either when they try to lead a regular and unobtrusive life in their chosen gender presentation, or when they are in the process of struggling to acquire the psychiatric evaluations needed to become eligible for SRS – trans subjects' chosen gender identities are not necessarily circumscribed by existing gender stereotypes. When I asked college freshman pre-op MTF TS Ah-Qian what kind of woman he pictures himself becoming, his answer came as a stark contrast to his soft and demure feminine appearance: 'A lewd, licentious woman. Very aggressive and enticing. I think many people look at me now and think I am a good girl, but I know that I have many different faces.' In fact, not every TS would like to remain low-profiled after transition. The MTF sex worker who eventually went to Thailand for her surgery said before her departure, 'If I had my SRS, I would be able to wear very sexy clothes, very tight clothes, and to become a very sexy enticing slut.' While many criticize trans subjects for giving in to gender stereotypes, the latter's conception of 'gender' may move beyond what is commonly assumed. After all, many members of the new generation

of trans subjects were brought up in the post-1994 gender/sexuality liberation atmosphere of Taiwan, and in many ways they are exactly the ones whose lives carry and embody the ideals of that movement to its logical conclusion. MTF TG physics doctoral student Mei-Suei provides a self-description that may be considered confounded for the gender orthodox: 'I wish gender stereotypes did not exist. If I become a woman, I don't see anything improper if I act the way I do now as a man. I don't think I will ever be modest or demure; I will be confident, lively, and intellectual. I think I will become a feminist.' Pre-op FTM Hsu-Kuan may be anticipating her SRS very soon but also has very complicated thoughts about his future gender: 'If I lead a stereotypical man's life after the transition, I would hate that. Maybe after the surgery, I would not want to be referred to as a man, I don't know. I'm still thinking.' Such complicated gender formations are bound to bring unpredictable impact on existing gender culture.

Due to limitations in language and conceptualization, 'trans'-gender subjects are commonly perceived as merely trying to 'trans'-plant themselves so as to find their 'home' in the other sex/gender, to create a new at-home feeling in a self-fashioned body. Yet it is increasingly obvious that, as the contradictory and disharmonious body/identity of the transgender subjects struggles to assert itself despite existing gender stereotypes and prejudices, their self-reflexive project of doing gender is also constantly 'trans'-gressing/'trans'-forming existing gender/sexuality categories. As such, trans subjects are not only making/fashioning their bodies and selves but embodying new contents and possible meanings for gender imagination.

## Notes

1. An earlier version of this paper was read at Sexualities, Gender, and Rights in Asia: 1st International Conference of Asian Queer Studies, Bangkok, Thailand, July 7–9, 2005; and subsequently at Inter-Asia Cultural Studies Conference on 'Emerging Subjectivities, Cultures and Movements,' Seoul, Korea, July 22–24, 2005. I want to thank the members of Taiwan TG Butterfly Garden for allowing me to share our group discussions and to conduct in-depth interviews with individual members when available. The group has been in existence since 2000 when my TG friend Winnie and I decided to create a regular meeting space for the transgendered so as to promote support and education, and activism if possible. Since then, the group has seen more than 60 members come and go, and it is the only standing TG group in Taiwan that is meeting regularly and working in close alliance with other marginal gender/sexuality groups.
2. The term 'trans' is commonly used in the US context to refer only to transsexuals who have gone through SRS procedures. But in the Taiwanese context, gender-sexuality rights groups have created the term 'trans-gender' (*kuaxingbie*) in the year 2000 as an umbrella term that would cover all subjects of gender variance in an effort to rally unity and solidarity for a yet-to-develop transgender movement. The present paper will honor this spirit of solidarity in its non-essentialist use of terms.
3. Here I must emphasize the word 'some,' for the trans subjects reported in this paper do tend to be more articulate and resourceful in cultural-educational capital, though not necessarily so in financial capital. The 'other' trans subjects – who are large in number but mostly invisible, suffering from severe stigmatization and ostracization due to their marginal survival in various forms of sex-work-related occupation – can only be glimpsed in refraction.
4. As transition entails a long process during which the subject may continue to exist in various gender variant conditions, commonly used terms such as FTM (female to male) or MTF (male to female) are used in this paper not to denote the subject's eventual gender position but only to signal the subject's own description of their shift from a biological category (the former term) to an identity category (the latter term). Likewise, terms such as TS and TG are used not in any essentialist sense in this paper, but only to denote in the former case an active involvement in surgery-related transformation process (including psychiatric evaluation in preparation for SRS procedure, hormonal treatment, and all forms of surgical procedure), and in the latter a nonchalance toward the surgery track of life (but not without occasional experimentation with hormonal or other body transformation technologies). The binary structure of FTM/MTF or TS/TG thus entails problems of identity intelligibility mixed in with the demands of gender authenticity.

5. Tsai became famous because she launched a personal campaign to demand that trans subjects, or for that matter all subjects, be allowed to use photos that reflect their chosen gender on their identity cards, instead of being required to pose for gender pictures that accord with their birth sex.
6. In that sense, gender embodiment is as much a narrative construction as it is a physical construction.
7. Although Anthony Giddens recognizes that tranvestism has become a lifestyle issue rather than a biological inevitability in late modernity (1992: 199), he never did include trans subjects' construction of their selves in his list of self-reflexive projects of the modern self. Garfinkel's description here, however, would situate trans existences squarely in the middle of the reflexive projects of the modern self.
8. Prosser may be limiting the discussion here only to transsexualism, but my experience with members of the Taiwan TG Butterfly Garden has been much more complicated. Whether those in their 50s for whom surgery is no longer viable, or those who are in their 20s for whom surgery is only one option in life, it is not always clear where to draw the line between a transsexual and a transgender. Entry into the SRS surgery process is likewise a problematic index, as many subjects would delay later stages of the transformation process indefinitely, which leaves them in a limbo stage of transition and gender designation, but accompanied by a more or less settled and pragmatic attitude toward life.
9. It needs to be stressed here that such adjusting/seeking/constructing is always done through continuous interaction with surrounding social forces (such as prevailing aesthetic values, suggestive fantasies conveyed in the ads, social discipline, etc). In that sense, embodiment, trans or not, is never an individual's willful act, nor purely dictated by fashion or fad, but a complicated process of negotiation between the self and the social. The discussion here also has profound implications for the Taiwanese orthodox feminist critique of body sculpturing and cosmetic surgery. Feminists who are against cosmetic surgery aim to expose the gender power behind such practices, yet the critical discourse they generate often reverts back to a biological point of view of the body, believing that women's imagination of their body images should not deviate from their given endowment and that women should be content with their 'real' (biologically endowed) conditions. Within this point of view, women who are devoted to body sculpturing or body shaping are seen as victims of false consciousness, as being duped into such dreams, or as victims of patriarchal pressure, as being forced into living up to men's fantasies and expectations. Yet the concept of skin ego expresses that there are complicated relationships between desires of self-consciousness (self-identity) and existing body conditions that cannot be reduced to simplistic essentialism or political correctness.
10. Gilbert Herdt believes that 'dimorphism was an invention of modernism' and traces its theoretical origin to the Darwinian theory of natural selection, whereby the reproduction of species was taken to be the purpose of all existences (Herdt, 1993: 26). As sexual selection and reproduction became the foremost quality of species, the basic structure of sexual dimorphism also became the norm, consolidated by various religious doctrines and legal codes as well as by sexological discourses that began to develop in the 19th century. Of course, as the dimorphic model affirms itself and the function of reproduction dictates gender/sexual categories, a multiplicity of perverse/pathological subjects are also 'produced' (Foucault, 1978: 37-39).
11. Among multiplying body features, it is most unfortunate that trans presentations still attract the most alarmed gazes. I might offer here a personal observation made in June 2005. Even in London's Camden Town area, well-known for its subcultural bodies with their multiple and outrageous tattoos, piercing, Mohawk hairstyle, Gothic outfits, etc, it is still the transgender who stands out like a sore thumb, trailed by disapproving gazes.
12. Sex work is now completely outlawed in Taiwan, although in reality it prospers in many forms and sites. This contradictory existence often leaves sex workers, not to mention 'third-sex' sex workers, most vulnerable to various forms of exploitation. Here it may be also enlightening to examine another kind of alienation that has become quite visible in the Taiwanese gay community, where transgender gays (drag queens or sissy gays) are often treated with contempt even though they are the ones most directly facing the blunt force of homophobia and the ones most active in resisting the latter. Still, mainstreaming gays often go to great lengths to stand clear from those gays who may be considered promiscuous or sexually adventurous.
13. On the small island of Taiwan there are a total of eight around-the-clock cable news stations. The pressure of competition is so keen that a lot of effort is devoted to 'producing/creating' newsworthy reports, reports that tend to center upon sensational (aberrance-related) topics. The collaboration between the media and the police in Taiwan has been consistently criticized by marginal subject groups.
14. For one thing, in the context of the US in the 1970s, the term transgender had denoted 'living' in the opposite gender; in other words, trans status is a matter of the life activities of trans subjects rather than their identity. I met 89-year-old trans legend Virginia Prince in April 2002 at the annual convention held



by the International Foundation for Gender Education, in Nashville, Tennessee. Prince reiterated time and again: "The term "transgender" tells about what we "do," not what we "are." The uneasiness she felt toward essentialistic identity politics was quite obvious, and her insistence on a praxis-oriented understanding of transgender was also quite firm.

15. Before the arrival of the trans identity terms, many trans subjects in Taiwan had at one time used 'Third Sex' to describe themselves as something that lies beyond the gender binary (Herdt, 1993: 20). Yet a shift in meaning has occurred in recent years: as booming tourism made transvestite song and dance shows in Thailand a regular stock in the expectations of Taiwanese tourists, 'the third sex' has come to denote those who perform in such shows. Consequently, Taiwanese trans subjects chose to shy away from this term and its association with a specific type of entertainment/sex work conducted mostly by trans subjects. The highly queer but trans-affirming Thai movie 'The Iron Ladies,' (webpage at <http://www.pappayon.com/movies/satreelek2/english/main/>) has done a lot to mitigate the original negative connotations associated with the term. Still, most Taiwanese trans subjects would avoid 'The Third Sex' and its connections with stigmatized sex work.
16. Taiwan's only existing TG support group, the Taiwan TG Butterfly Garden, includes quite a few trans men who have had their breasts and female reproductive organs removed but are delaying the reconstructive surgery for penises due to various considerations, the least of which being a concern over the function of the reconstructed organ. Many trans women on the other hand are already into female hormones and growing breasts without going through surgery to remove any male sex organs. As things go, the trans identity labels in the present paper mark only the moment of its writing, and that moment is always fast becoming the past as trans bodies continue their odyssey of embodiment
17. The same youth also has to share a computer with his brother, which leaves him hard-pressed when the brother notices that Google searches have been performed on trans-related key words. At such critical and telling moments, a flat denial, a denial that violates the subject's sense of dignity, is the only and a very vulnerable response.
18. One trans youth jokingly tells me that he has developed a 'conniving/scheming personality' as a result of such constant necessity to come up with a variety of narratives to cover his tracks as a trans. The self-reflexivity demonstrated here speaks of a trans life that is much more dynamic and treacherous than conveyed by the body-soul misplacement imagery.
19. Many a trans subject has suffered the suspicion and threats by the police; the more unfortunate ones even scandals in the media. On May 19, 2002 actor Chen, Juen-Sheng was found to be shopping, dressed like a woman, in a mall in Taipei. Mall security chased him down and had him arrested because the actor 'looked suspicious in women's clothing.' The huge scandal gave local trans group, Taiwan TG Butterfly Garden, its first opportunity to voice its defense of trans rights to alternative gender embodiment in public.
20. In that sense, what has been termed the 'transsexual ideology' that paints a rosy picture for trans subjects (MacKenzie, 1994: 57-102) only sets in relief the painful interrogations and embarrassment that make up their daily life, as well as the torturous process of getting the right medical procedure so that a new body and a new identity could be created.
21. As surgeons who perform body modification procedures could, under Taiwanese law, be sued by the patients' parents for malicious mutilation against their (even fully grown) children, no surgeon would perform SRS procedure without the patients first acquiring written approval from their parents. With age-old Chinese belief in family lineage and the traditional duty of bringing forth off-springs, parental approval has become a formidable obstacle for trans subjects.
22. In cases where such embodiment can no longer be realized, trans subjects can only harbor secret plans for their own final departure. Fifty-year old MTF Ah-Mei says he is too old to do any actual body modification even when he can afford it now, but he hopes that he could be buried in women's clothing when he dies. Realizing that even such humble wishes probably will not be granted, he hopes that family members would at least incinerate all his female outfits for him to use in the other world. In 2004, when trans activist Tsai Yia-Ting threw herself in front of an oncoming train and was killed instantly, members of the Taiwan TG Butterfly Garden negotiated with her family and finally got them to agree to let Tsai be buried, according to her wish, in women's attire underneath a man's suit. The ancestral tablet that bore her name carried her given name as well as her adopted female name. It was a compromise won through persistent persuasion by gender/sexuality activists. For details, see 'The Woman Under the Burial Quilt—Death of a Trans Warrior' (Ho, 2005: 127-128).
23. As history would have it, Taiwan has now developed its fame in genital reconstructive surgery for FTMs. In fact, it is when the reconstructed genitals have proven to be fully functional that Tim finally decided to make the transition. He had said one year before the surgery: 'What good is the surgery if I end up with a limp organ that only highlights my inadequacy as a man?'

24. Again, gender makes a big difference here. It seems that in Taiwan FTMs enjoy more luck than MTFs in finding soul-mates after transition. Even in the small circle that I am familiar with, quite a few weddings have already taken place in the past few years for transitioned FTMs.

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## Special terms

kuaxingbie 跨性別

Iron Ladies 人妖打排球

third sex 第三性

## Author's biography

Josephine Chuen-Juei Ho 何春桂 has been writing both extensively and provocatively to open up new discursive space for gender/sexuality issues. Her books, all written in Chinese as timely interventions into local gender/sexuality politics, include *The Gallant Woman – Feminism and Sexual Emancipation* 豪爽女人 (1994), *Gendered Nations – Sexuality, Capital and Culture* 不同國女人 (1994), *Sexual Moods: A Therapeutic and Liberatory Report on Female Sexuality* 性心譜 (1996), *Radical Sexuality Education: Gender/Sexuality Education for the 'New Generation'* 性/別啟蒙 (1998), and *The Admirable/Amorous Woman* 好色女人 (1998). She then turned to the editing of a number of ground-breaking anthologies of local gender/sexuality research as well as the organization of international conferences on cutting-edge gender/sexuality topics. Describing herself as a feminist sex radical, she now serves as Chair of the English Department and the Coordinator for the Center for the Study of Sexualities at National Central University 中央大學性/別研究室, Taiwan, well-known for both its activism and its intellectual stamina. Website at <http://sex.ncu.edu.tw>.

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