

Transgender Traditions in China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan

Look around us today in society. How many categories of sex does society recognize? Most of us would say two: male and female. Just like the author of *Transgender Warriors*, Leslie Feinberg, who was once confused about her sexuality, also thought that historically up to now, there was only just being male or being female. It was not until she visited the Museum of the American Indian in New York City where she saw clay figures of flat chested people holding tools and hunters with breasts (Feinberg). Traditionally, men were the hunters, while women stayed back to do domestic chores and care for the children. However, upon glancing at these clay figures, Feinberg discovers that there is gender ambiguity; such as a third gender, a transgender, or to Native Americans, the berdache. The berdaches were also referred to as ♦Two-Spirit♦ and were regarded with high respect in historical Native nations. Why is it that in our society now, ♦our berdaches♦, transgender individuals, are discriminated against in such drastic means?

Today, the term transgender can be defined in at least two ways. ♦It has been used as an umbrella term to include everyone who challenges the boundaries of sex and gender. It is also used to draw a distinction between those who reassign the sex they were labeled at birth, and those of us whose gender expression is considered appropriate for our sex♦ (Feinberg). A clear and simple example of the meaning of transgender can be seen in assumption of gender expressions of babies at birth. For example, pink is for girls, and blue is for boys. Girls play with barbies and boys play with trucks. These two sexes can be seen as opposite ends of a spectrum and transgender people ♦transverse, bridge, or blur the boundary of the gender expression they were assigned at birth♦ (Feinberg).

Hermaphroditism is common among animals. It is a natural way of life for some animals to have both male and female reproductive organs. About a quarter of the fish in the ocean are hermaphroditic. This natural behavior is also widespread in plants. Plants have both pollen, a male part, and ovule, a female part. So, why is it that humans in general hold such intolerant attitudes towards individuals with deviant behavior? Whether they are lesbians, gays, transgender individuals, or cross-dressers, these individuals lead difficult lives by straying from the path that society calls ♦normal♦. Homosexuality and transgender seem like relatively new waves of ideas and behaviors, but they have actually been present in society for long periods of time now; such as the berdache mentioned earlier. It is surprising to realize that transgender behavior was highly common in many parts of the world. ♦In some of these cultures, cross-gendered persons were considered shamans gifted with extraordinary psychic powers, and they assumed special ceremonial roles♦ (Rudacille). Our ancestors did not limit categories of sex to just male and female; instead, there were many societies in the world that allowed for more than two sexes and respected the rights of individuals to choose which sex they fit in and which sexual partners they preferred. In Ancient Greece and Sambia, a tribe in New Guinea, it was common for boys and men to have sexual relationships. The Romans also accepted homosexual behavior and actions in men. Similarly, in ancient China, the shih-niang were transgender individuals who dressed in both female and male clothing. So far in this research paper, I have provided a definition of what transgender means and have included some historical examples of

transgenderism in many cultures in the world. Now, I will focus on three specific areas in the world: China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan.

These three specific geographic areas are all similar in one area: religion. Buddhism is the dominant religion in China, Hong Kong, and in Taiwan. There are many aspects of Buddhism that supports transgenderism (*Fig 1*). Firstly, of the Three Trainings: Sila, Samadhi, and Prajna, Sila focuses on the principle of equality. Sila states that all living entities are equal, which we can infer that men, women, and transgender individuals should all be treated equally, because they are (Buddhism). In addition to the Three Trainings, the Five Precepts also shed light on Buddhism's support for transgender individuals. The Five Precepts are: Do not kill, do not steal, do not lie, do not misuse sex, and do not consume alcohol or other drugs (Buddhism). The most controversial in this list to transgender individuals is to prevent the misuse of sex. What Buddha means about condemning individuals who use sex, is not whether we engage in sexual practices with people of the same or opposite sex. Buddha does not judge base on our sexual preferences. Instead, Buddha means that forced sex, such as rape, is the definition of misusing sex and is forbidden. Consequently, we can see that Buddhism does not judge whether a person is heterosexual, homosexual or is a transgender individual. Buddha, also known as Guan Shi Yin Pu Sa, in Chinese, does not judge because Buddha him/herself can assume any gender he or she desires. Guan Shi Yin Pu Sa is also known as the goddess of mercy and compassion and strongly believed that as long as people could be liberated from ignorance, it does not matter what gender he or she is. In some forms of Buddhist texts, Buddha can have up to 32 different forms. Therefore, it can be seen that Buddha can transcend gender categories and that being transgender is not considered negatively in Buddhism.

In addition to religion, stories and art forms in China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan also show acceptance of transgender issues; such as the folk stories and Beijing operas. Two famous stories in China deal with cross-dressing: Hua Mulan (Mulan) and Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai (The Butterfly Lovers) (Siu). Both stories revolve around women who transform their sexual genders, to escape their past, and end up falling in love with the men they meet during their journey of cross-dressing. Although from both women's perspective, their love for the men they meet is entirely heterosexual; from the men's perspective though, they fell in love with men. For example, in the Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai story, the man, Liang, slowly began to develop more intimate feelings towards his male friend, Zhu, who was actually a woman, throughout the story (*Fig 2*). If cross-dressing and transgenderism was so negatively looked upon, then these issues would not have come up in such popular Chinese folk stories, which have survived the test of time. Beijing opera also shows signs and acceptance of transgender individuals. The most common Chinese terms for transgender are *kuaxing* and *bianxingzhe*. *Kuaxing* literally means to cross over sex. Historically though, the terms for cross-dressed performs is *fanchuan*. *Fanchuan* is often seen in Beijing operas as well as in Taiwanese operas. Beijing opera is an art form that involves singing, dancing, acrobatics, and many other styles. The four main characters in the opera are Sheng, Dan, Jing, and Chou (Beijing). The most interesting role for the study of transgenders is the role of Dan. The Dan is the female role in the opera, and historically, this role has always been played by men. It was not until 1912 where females were allowed to perform on stage as well. It was acceptable for men to cross-dress for the performance, and the audience focused more on the acting of the characters than on the different gender representations. Thus, it can be seen that gender ambiguity and cross-dressing was not an issue historically. However, times have changed and people have changed, and the

western thoughts of homophobia and transphobia have leaked into Asian society. Consequently, I will focus my essay now on China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan respectively and discuss their current attitudes toward transgender issues.

China, the largest country in Asia, and its vast culture and history serve as a perfect example to explore early signs of transgender behavior. Eunuchs were Chinese boys or men that were castrated to be allowed to serve in the palace. They were considered as exceptionally pure and were treated as women. These were prized by palace ladies and given as much freedom and familiarity as if they were girls, and allowed to perform bedroom and bathroom duties of the most intimate nature (Anderson). Although Eunuchs generally did not engage in any sexual behavior, but this concept depicts an abnormal addition to the traditional genders of just female and male. China has long since changed from this era and is globalizing at rapid speeds. Yet, it still carries with it, its original interest in deviant sexual behavior, because as China modernizes, its attitude towards transgender behavior also becomes more accepting.

Lisa Rofel, a China scholar and an anthropologist has witnessed the economic growth that China has gone through after the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). Following after the Cultural Revolution was a period of socialism led by Chairman Mao, which was filled with inequality and inability to meet the needs of the Chinese people. Consequently, this triggered China to put an end to socialism and to start opening up to the rest of the world. As China westernizes and strives to become more international, its culture has begun to be influenced by countries all over. Rofel stresses that China has become a country that desires. Within this process of desiring, China has begun its loosening of attitudes on sexual activity in general and homosexuality in particular (Rofel).

At the beginning when transgender behavior emerged in the 80s, the emergence caused great corruption, where police would harass LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) individuals. Society and individuals families also gave pressure for LGBTs to conform. Jobs were at stake for coming out, along with individuals social networks. Although China still does not support gay rights and transgender behavior openly, the country does not have laws against homosexuality. The government still has a strong control over the internet, banning websites that they deem inappropriate, but LGBT individuals constantly move their websites around. The government also does not allow public demonstrations; such as protests, walks, or broadsheets; however, individuals still congregate in more private areas to organize events. For example, gay people in China successfully organized to get the psychological association to state that they no longer think that homosexuality is abnormal (Rofel).

For some traditional Chinese, accepting homoerotic desires is without doubt socially unacceptable; however, Rofel discovered that more and more people have begun to hold indifferent attitudes towards LGBT issues and people. Despite China's attempt to repress LGBT movements, they are still very much present. The young generation now is increasingly supportive towards LGBT individuals. Along with China's globalization and urge to desire, young people have come to the conclusion that if China pushes individuals to pursue their wants and needs, then no one should be judged for being a LGBT individual. This wave of thought transformed the gay scene in China to a more international atmosphere. In the states there are a lot more ethnic separatism and a history of racism that separates different groups. And that is not true in China (Rofel). Rofel was informed that gays and lesbians are crucial

subjects to the formation of this new human era, as gay men and lesbians in this context are considered cosmopolitan, he implies, is crucial if China is to gain its proper place in a cosmopolitan globalized world (Rofel). In addition, many opportunities have opened up for LGBT individuals. In Beijing operas, males play women parts; moreover, some bathhouses specifically target LGBT individuals, which create chances for men to meet other men (Fig 3). Major cities also have restaurants and bars which allow gay men to congregate. Consequently, it can be seen that although the Chinese government is not openly supportive of LGBT issues, it is relatively open-minded about this new wave of cosmopolitan desires.

Hong Kong, one of Asia's top global and modern countries, also has a history of its own. Though it does not date back to the ancient times like China, Hong Kong has instigated movements and actions to help support LGBT individuals. Hong Kong did this by organizing the group, TEAM (Transgender Equality and Acceptance Movement), in November 2002, which strives to bring about justice for transgender individuals in Hong Kong. Prior to the establishment of TEAM, transgender and other LGBT individuals lead extremely difficult lives in Hong Kong. TEAM stresses that being transsexual is not a lifestyle choice; most experts in the field now acknowledge that gender dysphoria, the gender identity disorder associated with transsexualism, is established during gestation, i.e. while the baby is still in the womb (TEAM). This medical disease has an extremely high fatality rate. Around 30% of patients with gender dysphoria, end up committing suicide before the age of 30. In Hong Kong, there are only around 300 individuals that suffer from this medical disorder, which makes each and every one of them more prone to be identified and attacked.

Although TEAM has been organized for around 7 years already, many issues regarding transgender individuals are still considered illegal. For example, it is still illegal in Hong Kong for post-operative transsexual to remarry in their assigned gender. This is not the case in many provinces in China, or in most countries in Europe (TEAM). By not allowing a legal change of sex, many transgender individuals find it difficult to apply for jobs and live life in society freely. However, the most awful treatments that transsexuals have to endure are the constant glares and rude remarks they receive daily. While other countries have taken steps to resolve issues like these, Hong Kong has not taken any supportive action yet. It is extremely crucial for the country to show support for its transgender individuals, so that the suicide rate in transsexuals will decrease. Female to male transsexuals are more likely to commit suicide as opposed to male to female transsexuals. This is due to the fact that male to female transsexuals often get more positive feedback from society.

Though Hong Kong is still far from achieving a utopian society where transsexuals can leave care freely, TEAM has established objectives and aims that they strive to achieve. TEAM has six main objectives that it wishes to accomplish. Firstly, the organization wishes to encourage the government to pass a legislation that will allow transsexuals to change their birth certificates so that they may remarry. Secondly, they strive to protect transsexuals from being victims of discriminations in work areas or in school. Thirdly, they wish to educate the public about what it truly means to be a transsexual and how challenging it can be to live as one. Fourthly, they desire to encourage the media to report transsexuals in positive light. Fifthly, they wish to establish a support network for transsexuals in Hong Kong to congregate and to support one another. Lastly, they wish to continue to organize events to bring about support among the population.

Finally, the little island of Taiwan, where I was raised, happens to be one of Asia's most accepting countries when it comes to LGBT rights. In 2003, the government introduced same-sex marriages. Although the law has not been passed yet, but if it does, Taiwan will be the first country in Asia to permit same-sex marriage. In addition, the government also passed laws to ban discrimination based on sexual orientation in work places. Moreover, in 2003, the first gay pride parade in Taiwan was held, called Taiwan Pride (*Fig 4*). In October of this year, 2009, around 25,000 supporters showed up for the parade, which made Taiwan Pride the largest gay pride event in Asia. In novels and films, authors and directors have also incorporated the topic of homosexuality in their works. For example, the author Pai Hsien-Yung included gay characters in his famous novel, *Crystal Boys*. Similarly, the world famous director, Ang Lee, directed *Brokeback Mountain*, gay western film, which received recognition along with many awards. Finally, like TEAM, in Hong Kong, Taiwan also has organizations to protect the rights of LGBT individuals. Gender/Sexuality Rights Association Taiwan (G/STRAT) was established in May 1999 and helps promote the rights of sexual minorities (Wiki). As we can see, as conservative as Asian cultures are, they have started to open up to LGBT individuals. A public poll conducted in April 2006 shows that 75% of the Taiwanese population believes that homosexual relations are acceptable (Wiki). These kinds of statistics shows a ray of hope for LGBT individuals and a promising future towards complete acceptance.

All in all, although western culture and many parts of the world still hold the dominant view that the only categories of gender are men and women and there is only one way to be either, I believe that gender expression is not just limited to that. Gender is not entirely biological or cultural, instead it is a mixture. If gender expression was entirely biological then why are rural women more masculine than urban women? Similarly, if gender expression was entirely cultural, then why have such large populations of people still not learned to accept transgender individuals? Consequently, we need to understand that attitudes toward gender expression derive both from biological and cultural factors, and by understanding this, it is then possible to address problems of transphobia and to overcome it. One solution is to engage in one-on-one dialogue with transphobic people. This interaction humanizes transgender people, who could have initially been seen as foreign and terrifying to others. Another effective solution is to provide knowledge of transgender individuals through the use of mass media. By reducing heterosexist and homophobic attitudes and languages, the media can truly create a nonhomophobic culture. Nonetheless, the greatest problem we face today is that most people are not educated about LGBT topics. Consequently, we must get the word out so that knowledge can spread and society can begin to accept LGBT individuals.

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