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Wuxia Cross-dressing and Transgender Identity: The Roles of Brigitte Lin Ching-hsia from Swordsman II to Ashes of Time

The act of cross-dressing in the theatrical and cinematic traditions has been consistently employed as a method of transgressing and thus exploring the limits of the boundaries in gender but also in identity and selfhood. In some cases, these transgressions were a response to prevailing institutional, cultural and social restrictions of the day. This essay attempts to address the cross-dressing performances of Brigitte Lin (more widely known as Lin Ching-hsia to East Asian audiences) in the context of the wuxia performance tradition, its sense of spectacle and the Hong Kong film culture of which the actress is an integral part. It aims not at a deductive outcome, of whether gender manipulation and ambiguity in the films possess any implications for a culture's social practices, but instead attempts to investigate the act of cross-dressing as a performative act, locating its enactment as the site on which arguments of (trans)gender identity, social expectation, and so on, may converge. As Annette Kuhn puts it,

The casting of Brigitte Lin in the role of Asia the Invincible in the Swordsman series has been said to have revived a flagging genre in Hong Kong cinema, that of the martial arts historical fantasy; by that same token, her "retirement" in 1994, with her final role as the twins, Murong Yang and Murong Yin, in Wong Kar-wai's Ashes of Time (1994), is said to have brought the genre to a temporary close.[2] One of the areas I would like to explore in this essay is the relationship of the actress to the role. How is the choice of one actress so pivotal that it can be said to start and end a genre or a cycle of films? What contribution does she make to the role and to the writing of film and cultural history? I will address Lin's roles in the four major films of her latter career, namely, Swordsman (Ching Siu-tung, Hong Kong, 1991), The East is Red (Ching Siu-tung and Raymond Lee, Hong Kong, 1992), New Dragon [Gate] Inn (Raymond Lee, Hong Kong, 1992) and Ashes of Time (Wong Kar-wai, Hong Kong, 1994).

Alisa Solomon makes a significant distinction between male-to-female cross-dressing and female-to-male cross-dressing, arguing that "men dressed as women often parody gender, women dressed as men, on the other hand, tend to perform gender."[3] This is borne out by the parodic performances of Tony Curtis in Some Like It Hot (Billy Wilder, USA, 1959), Robin Williams in Mrs. Doubtfire (Chris Columbus, USA, 1993) and Dustin Hoffman in Tootsie (Sydney Pollack, USA, 1982), although there are some exceptions such as Jaye

of femininity tend to be read as "dressing up," and the semiotics of masculinity (for female crossdressers) tend to be read as "dressing down," there are more opportunities for male drag to be taken, as Solomon describes it, as "a joke, a misogynist mockery made of tawdry tinsel and bedecked bitchiness,"[5] as the camp antics of The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert (Stephan Elliot, Australia, 1994) can testify. As Jean-Louis Ginibre puts it in the introduction to his extensive photographic collection of male cross-dressing performances, "nothing in the theatrical experience seems to guarantee a laugh like a man in drag,"[6] an afro tradition, he argues, with its roots in vaudeville where "many vaudevillians did not consider their act complete unless they brought the house down with a drag routine complete with frilly skirts and flouncy ringlets." Female cross-dressers tend to have to rely less on costume, since a woman in trousers is not ordinarily considered to be cross-dressing, but on body language and performance. In films like Victor, Victoria, and indeed the Hong Kong film, He's a Woman, She's a Man (Peter Chan, 1994), where the task is for the woman to perform masculinity, emphasis is placed more on the subtleties of physical mannerisms, such as the gait, the stance and hand gestures. Her role is to convince her audience, both within and without the film, that she can indeed inhabit the role of the man, albeit for a limited period of time. In contrast, male actors in camp drag tend to perform gender difference; they remain, in other words, men dressing up as women. In addition, much like Renaissance boy-actors who sometimes had to be boys playing girls playing boys playing girls (such as Rosalind in As You Like It), the nuances of gender performance are taken beyond the bi-polar dialectic when the actress has to be a woman playing a man playing a woman. In Transamerica (Duncan Tucker, USA, 2005), Felicity Huffman plays a transvestite male in the process of undergoing a sex change. Even after the character's gender reassignment, the actress does not return to her "original" self as a woman, but must continue to simulate the perceived awkwardness expected of a man trying to adopt the subtleties of female behaviour.

Thus, the liberation of gender, or "moments of jouissance" as Kuhn puts it, in cross-dressing performances takes place on the level of the performance, rather than on the body of the performer, and the audience is often left in no doubt of the performer's "true" identity. This perception, which Judith Butler argues "is naturalized knowledge, even though it is based on a series of cultural inferences, some of which are highly erroneous,"[9] remains true of Lin's transgender roles, in spite of their attempts to blur the boundaries.

In the role that Brigitte Lin plays in Swordsman II, Asia the Invincible, the character undergoes a metaphysical, magical transformation, through the act of castration, from a man into a woman, without surgery or disguise. The motivation for Asia's sex change is not womanhood as such, but martial arts supremacy. The gender alteration is merely a by-product of the supernatural process (which, significantly, we never get to see) outlined in a sacred scroll. Thus, Asia sets out not to become a woman first, but a powerful man/being, and Rolanda Chu argues that this view of femininity is a monstrous one:

> The supernatural change demands that he endeavour exactly a corporeal altercation of

casts the scroll into the fire), becomes a tyrant of equally abominable proportions. At the end of the film, a character mutters, “Another Asia the Invincible.” In other words, “Asia the Invincible” is not so much a person but a role, and as a result, the presentation of Asia’s gender subjectivity must be addressed in relation to the roles of the other women in the Swordsman films.

In Swordsman II, the main contrast to Asia’s gender transformation is Kiddo, Ling’s sidekick. In Swordsman (Ching Siu-tung, et al., Hong Kong, 1990),[12] Kiddo’s competition for Ling’s affections are the two Miao tribeswomen, Ying and Blue Phoenix. There, she is a woman who dresses as a boy in order to pass through the martial arts community (naughty) undisturbed. Although she lacks the overt sensuality of Ying and Blue Phoenix, she nonetheless discards her male disguise towards the end of the film and reverts to female dress, requiring rescue from the hero who gallantly lifts her onto his horse. It is unclear who the main romantic interest is for the hero in this film, though it is clear that all three candidates are biological women. In Swordsman II, however, Kiddo’s attempt at femininity is met with derision and laughter, both from her companions and the audience. Unlike the first film, in Swordsman II, it is as if Kiddo’s male disguise signifies her forgotten femininity. Not knowing how to dress as a woman, but clearly wanting to, she resorts to consulting a painting, and not knowing how to achieve the desired hairstyle, ends up using two pastry buns as hair ornaments. Her lip rouge is replaced with chilli powder by her male companions, so that when she puts it on, the shock of the heat of the chilli causes her to leap into a puddle of mud, making her a figure of fun, rather than sexual desire. The protagonist, Ling (played by Jet Li), shows no interest in her as a lover, although she clearly harbours some attraction for him, and treats her like a child, a little “boy.”

In Swordsman II, the Miao tribeswomen no longer vie with each other for Ling’s attention. Instead Blue Phoenix actively encourages her mistress’s interest in Ling. Before

through the theme of disguise which runs all the way through the film. When we first meet Asia, it is in disguise (played by the actor who played the old eunuch in Swordsman). When she hears that others have been impersonating her in her absence, she decides to return to the martial arts world and reclaim her identity, which in effect means to kill all those who oppose her. One of these impersonators is her former lover, Snow (played by Joey Wong), who crossdresses as Asia the man. Asia herself takes on various disguises in the film, one as a prostitute, and another as a Japanese general, Kirigakure. Kirigakure himself is later revealed to be yet another impostor as is one of Snow-as-Asia's concubines, who turns out to be a ninja spy for the enemy in disguise, and also of indeterminate gender. In addition, the theme of disguise is carried over into the sub-plot of the corrupt imperial officer who has taken to role-playing to relieve the boredom of his post, boosting his ego by surrounding himself with fake Asias who bend to his whim. Asia, for him, is only an empty signifier, subject to manipulation at his fancy. As with the boy who cries "Wolf," the officer's complacency and refusal to acknowledge the power of disguise prove to be his undoing. The film, it could be said, is riddled with signifiers in search of a signified. At the same time, disguise serves no protection, not even in homage, as in the case of Snow. Disguise implies usurpation, and usurpation is feared by those in power.

Asia initially attempts to reclaim her title as "Asia the Invincible" by vanquishing each impostor one by one. However, not satisfied in having done so, she then usurps Kirigakure's position in a bid to extend her domination over the Japanese and Spanish armies and the Christian God. Asia's demand that the Spaniards replace the God in their bibles with "Asia the Invincible" is the ultimate usurpation, not just of divine authority, but also the authority of the foreign (Western) power on Chinese soil. In Chinese, Asia's name, Dongfang Bubai in Mandarin or Dongfong Batbai in Cantonese, transliterates as "the East cannot be defeated," or "the undefeated East." More than a name, it is much closer to a title, much l

"William the Conqueror" or "Attila the Hun." Once the Spaniards begin to invoke her name in place of God, she changes her title to Dongxifang Bubai, or, literally, "the undefeated East West." In encompassing East and West—i.e. the world—the role of the undefeated East is rendered irrelevant, since East and West are now one and the same. So rather than ending on a triumph, this is the point of Asia's downfall. Having gained and simultaneously lost her identity, she seeks to have it validated by Snow, who at this point in the film is near death. Chu argues that "it is Snow's human love, affection, and worship that is the key to proving Fong's [Asia's] humanity."[15] Perhaps so, but even at the very end, Asia's last demand of Snow is "I have to take you back." Snow, like Ying, is the self-sacrificial female in this sequel, but unlike Ying, her sacrifice is one of complete supplication. Rendered frail and helpless, she is the prize to be fought for between "men." And the victory for each is inconclusive. Although Koo, the de facto male "hero" of the film, the government official set on defeating Asia, manages to "win" Snow from Asia for a time, she dies shortly after. Asia then snatches Snow's corpse up in a sail and they fly off to "start over." Once more, the victory is pyrrhic, and the last image is not of the steel10(s) ima>he6and6( ]TJ 0.vTj 0.002 Tc -03e,

with female kissing scenes (fairly risqué by mainstream Hong Kong standards), is intercut with a flashback to a sex scene between Asia and Snow. The suspension of disbelief required to accept Snow and Asia as male characters and thus engaged in heterosexual relations is difficult to sustain given the visibility of both Brigitte Lin and Joey Wong in the Hong Kong popular culture industry. What the audience is asked to negotiate is the reputation of the actresses as beautiful women and their gender transformations on screen. The transgression of common perceptions of gender thus takes place not only in the narrative but also on the meta-cinematic level; the audience is asked to relate to an apparently heterosexual sexual encounter which is effectively presented as a lesbian one. This is not unlike Elizabethan audiences being asked to accept that the actor playing Romeo is in fact romancing a boy playing Juliet, or, in a more layered example, the actor playing Orlando in As You Like It wooing the boy playing Rosalind pretending to be Ganymede pretending to be a woman. However, Jean E. Howard argues that Rosalind "could be a threatening figure if she did not constantly, contrapuntally, reveal herself to the audience as a man."[16] Howard further notes that "in certain circumstances, cross-dressing intensifies, rather than blurs, sexual difference, sometimes by calling to attention the woman's failure to play the masculine role signified by her dress."[17] In that sense, Asia's success at transcending gender boundaries is also her failure. The abdication of her masculinity, and capitulation to feminine weakness (love) leads to her defeat in Swordsman II, and her abdication of that feminine weakness (the love of Snow), and capitulation to traditional masculine goals of absolute power, results in annihilation and nihilism ("I've come to bury everything"). Rolanda Chu concludes that "the boundaries of identity have been blurred.… Fong [Asia] essentially has to make the passage back to convince us she is a human being in order to transgress boundaries."[18] This relationship between Asia and Snow reveals the tensions between conceptions of gender and conceptions of sex. Butler argues for the need to distinguish the two, since although one (gender) appears

to be dependent on the other (sex), discourse on the latter (sex) is itself already defined by discourse on the former (gender):

their first encounter, Jin attempts to flirt with Qiu but soon realises that she is a woman. Far from losing interest, she spies on Qiu who is attending to her bath. For the viewer at this

This less than scientific conclusion is subverted when Zhou, the male hero, arrives on the scene and also fails to look at Jin, who then concludes that he is looking not with his eyes but with his “heart.” Looking, in this film, is thus always accompanied by the double take—can you recognise what you first see? The border official cannot identify Zhou even with the help of a drawing, the second glance revealing a mole on the forehead (that Jin managed to sneak) causing him to accuse the wrong man. The Eunuch Cao, usurper of the Emperor’s power, must look twice before he sees that his bones have been carved of their flesh. At the beginning of the film, Qiu herself is initially mistaken for the martial arts hero, Zhou Huai An, who, we later realise, is her lover. At the end of the film, Zhou in his grief cannot see past Jin’s old appearance as a pleasure-seeking harlot. It is the audience that is given the double take, the second glance—Jin regains her honour by returning the flute (with all its phallic symbolism) to Qiu, fights alongside Zhou and Qiu against Cao (she is the only one of the three to declare that they stand together), and vows to save her rival from sinking into the sand. In other words, Jin redeems herself at the end of the film with loyalty, heroism and selflessness, all the values traditionally propounded by the jianghu community; Zhou and Qiu, the poetry-spouting lovers, are heroes only in the most academic sense. Significantly, although Zhou delivers the final blow, it is the forgotten “Dazi” (a member of an ethnic minority group), the meat carver with the lightning reflexes, the one who is loyal to Jin to the end, who brings down the villain.

Like Asia the Invincible, the cross-dresser who is “not a man,” Qiu, in spite of her superior martial arts abilities is defeated because of her feminine sensibilities. Her faith in Zhou is tested by the sham wedding between Zhou and Jin and it serves to break her resolve, jeopardising the entire plan to escape from Dragon Gate Inn and ultimately capture. Costume, in this sense, is only successful at concealing physical signs of gender. Look twice, and you will see “just another woman” beneath, in the same way looking twice allows the heroes to notice

the rogue official's boots beneath the tradesman's disguise. The woman without the disguise, Jin, though, loses both the man and her business, since he fails to see past her old persona. Female cross-dressing, usually applied in martial arts films as a means of allowing the woman to travel freely beyond the traditional confines of her gender, in this film serves also to reinforce the visual equivalent of the double entendre. The woman is not freed, but continues to remain trapped by old conceptions of femininity as promiscuous – or self sacrificial, and sentimental rather than rational. Indeed, one could argue that the patriarchal order remains well in place, its limits bound, invariably, by the limits of conventional imagination. In an interview, Tsui Hark, producer of Swordsman II,[21] revealed this anecdote about the script-writing process:

> I had three scriptwriters agree to write it, and all of them were very, very, very depressed because they couldn't imagine themselves as a man who falls in love with a man/woman/man. I told them this was really fun. Imagine you were the character and you never knew this 'Tung Fong Bu Pai' [Dongfang Bubai] was a man. You fell in love with 'Tung Fong Bu Pai,' and then you found out this person was a man but you made love with this woman. Then what happens? That would be a really strange feeling. Could you imagine that? I could not imagine that. This was something.[22]

Of course, David Henry Hwang had already imagined, and effected, just such an encounter in his play, M. Butterfly, which made its debut in 1988. Tsui Hark's conservatism is acknowledged by Chu, who refers to the use of Cici as a "patriarchal safety net from consummating relationships with monsters,"[23] and Hunt, who cites Stanley Kwan's remark that Tsui Hark's films "always end by reaffirming heterosexual norms."[24]

I would like to offer yet another mode of reading through the lens of Hong Kong film culture and its preoccupation with spectacle. It is, however, not quite the pleasure-making verisimilitude –

entrepreneurial, free-market conditions that propelled the Hong Kong film industry to its productive peak in the 1980s.[25] To a certain extent, these conditions supported and maintained, even thrived on snappy, fingered time frames from conception to execution, often with production schedules of forty days or less. Hong Kong film culture is less concerned with the visual believability that Hollywood goes to expensive lengths to preserve, but more with precisely stretching the boundaries of plausibility. "What if…?" concepts are taken to the extreme: what if there were such a thing as a "man/woman/man," as Tsui Hark put it, how would s/he have sex? Would one know if one had sex with such a being? David Hwang asks those questions in M. Butterfly to explore the extent of Guillemard's self-delusion, he

not, the idea is dropped. This is not wholly differentiated from Hollywood's commercial logic, but the difference, I believe, in Hong Kong cinema, is the different attitude towards the product – there is less of a concern with disguising its artifice; it is there with all its wobbly sets and continuity flaws. The recent international success of Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon (Ang Lee, Taiwan/Hong Kong/USA/China, 2000) and Hero (Zhang Yimou, China/Hong Kong, 2002) and the changing conditions in Hong Kong's film industry following its return to the People's Republic of China in 1997, the Asian currency crisis and the SARS epidemic, have caused it to reconsider some of its practices, but in view of some recent releases, such as Infernal Affairs and Shaolin Soccer as I have mentioned, the old slapdash, maverick spirit seems to remain, though repackaged for a new global audience.

This attitude is not altogether dissociated from older performance traditions in East and South East Asia, which unlike Western theatre, has not altogether divorced dance from drama, and realism from stylisation. Peggy Phelan writes of a congress in theatrical performance that she attended (note that her feminist sensibilities find these observations "disturbingly interesting"):

> The eastern dance forms represented at the [International School for Theatre Anthropology] Congress – Balinese dance drama, Indian Kathakali and Odissi, Japanese Kabuki, and Chinese opera – proved to be most disturbingly interesting. [Because they are rooted in myth, such classical female roles played by men or women do not, by definition and design, penetrate the 'identity' of any female; they are surface representations whose appeal exists precisely at the surface. 'Reading' them depends not on plausibility or coherence but rather upon an immediate recognition of the comic artifice and reverent idealization which organizes the image the dancer projects.][26]

Thus, it is worth thinking about Asia the Invincible as a surface representation, a spectacular (and entertaining) answer to a "what if" question rather than as a philosophical character study on the nature of the masculine or the feminine per se. One of these representations is undoubtedly the trope of the Chinese "woman warrior" that Siu Leung Li addresses in the Chinese performative tradition, a role which is still embodied by the daring Fa Mulan

(Hua Mulan), whose tale was most recently adapted by Disney as an animated feature in 1998. Although a prerequisite for the Chinese woman warrior on stage was the sheer physicality of her body, utilised in dance and acrobatics, Li notes that the characters' dangerous potential to displace men… is a potentially disruptive force in the patriarchal order."[27] And, if gender itself can be seen, in Butler's words, as "performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence,"[28] these regulatory practices, as they pertain to Lin's transgender roles, are drawn in part from the context of her career as a media star in East Asian celebrity circles.

At this juncture, it is thus458 -2EMC4( )4(3(ol)-2(e)4(7-6(y)20n t)-2(6(a)dd4(r)-7(e)C4( )4(3(c

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This is *Waiting for Godot* without the jokes, where the audience is invited not to laugh at the characters but to join them in the endless wait for fulfilment. At the same time, the realms of the fictional and the real are conflated into the figure of Lin's character/s. The climax is not only caused by the twin brother and sister unwittingly trying to kill each other but by the audience knowing that there is only one of Brigitte Lin Ching-hsia. It is a perfect moment in gender theatricality identified by Siu Leung Li's account of the history of cross-dressing in the Chinese performative tradition: "classical writings on acting imply that the perfect performer in-role is one who transcends the boundary of the real and the fictional; or in other words, blends real life and playacting."[35] At the same time, the sexual ambiguity is overwritten by a more conventional essentialism, borne out by Li's discussion of how classical theories of crossdressing on the stage were also "vested in the binary oppositions of form/appearance [*xing*] on the one hand, and essence/psyche [*shen*] on the other."[36] Li argues that the cross-dressing actors and actresses "were essentialists in that they believed in the essence of a biological sex as given,"[37] their performances were in fact geared towards inhabiting the essence or psyche of the other sex. This drive towards essentialism contains what Li identifies as a "hidden contradiction"

[1] Annette Kuhn, The power of the image: Essays on representation and sexuality (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), 49.
[2] See Leon Hunt, Kung Fu Cult Masters: From Bruce Lee to Crouching Tiger (London: Wallflower, 2003), 136.
[3] Alisa Solomon, "It's never too late to switch: Crossing towards power" in Lesley Ferris, ed., Crossing the Stage: Controversies on Cross-dressing (London: Routlege, 1993), 145.
[4] Solomon, 145.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Jean-Louis Ginibre, Ladies or Gentlemen: A Pictorial History of Male Cross-dressing in the Movies (New York: Filipacchi, 2005), 8.
[7] Kuhn, 56.
[8] Ibid., 60.
[9] Judith Butler, Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (1990; New York: Routledge, 1999), xxii.
[10] Rolanda Chu, "Swordsman II and The East is Red: The 'Hong Kong film,' Entertainment and Gender" (Bright Lights Film Journal 13, 1994, http://www.brightlightsfilm.com/31/hk_swordsman1.html [accessed 30 March 2006]
[11]

[32] Jin Yong is sometimes known as Louis Cha and the title of his work is alternatively known as The Condor Shooting Heroes or The Vulture Shooting Heroes. The Swordsman films are also adapted from novels by him, but the stories have been substantially altered.
[33] Ackbar Abbas, Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1997), 60.
[34] Abbas, 61.
[35] Li, 158.
[36] Li, 165.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Ibid., 166.
[39] Tetsuya, 167.
[40] Abbas, 58–59.
[41] See Felicia Chan, "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon: Cultural Migrancy and Translatability" in Chris Berry, ed., Chinese Films in Focus: 25 New Takes (London: BFI, 2003), 54–56
[42] Hunt, 136.
[43] See Judith Roof, "Is there sex after gender? Ungendering/'The Unnameable'" The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association 35.1, Spring 2002), 56–67.
[44] Kuhn, 50.
[45] Marjorie Garber, Vested Interests: Crossdressing and Cultural Anxiety (New Har