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SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE

Trans-gender things: Objects and the materiality of trans-femininity in Ming-Qing China

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Abstract

This article demonstrates that objects, more specifically the trans usage of objects that disrupted and rearticulated the normative alignment of objects, sexed bodies and gender embodiments, served a formative role in helping male-assigned individuals to cross gender boundaries and achieve trans-femininity in Ming-Qing China. The examined objects include the foot-binding cloth for the feminine bodily image of bound feet, the embroidery needle for 'womanly work' and concealing underwear for feminine, penetrated sexual acts. This object-oriented heuristic offers a new culturally specific approach to trans history beyond identarian frameworks and foregrounds the material multiplicity of trans formations and embodiments in Ming-Qing China.

INTRODUCTION: CROSSING GENDER THROUGH TRANS USAGE OF OBJECTS

Objects were not merely physical matters in Ming-Qing China.[1] Since the material turn in the field of Ming-Qing history pioneered by works like Craig Clunas' *Superfluous Things*, numerous scholars have explored the social, cultural and ethnic meanings assigned to and carried by objects, and how the usage of objects, especially the appropriate order between objects and users, was key to constructing and maintaining social orders.[2] Similarly, a gendered object, an object that carried specific gender meanings or was normally intended for users with a certain gender, could also in turn function as a gendering force to demarcate gender boundaries, as well as to assign gender roles to individuals or even to interpellate a gendered subject. As Francesca Bray points out, Ming-Qing male intellectuals considered the correct use of material objects and appropriate bodily practice, especially with respect to objects required for 'womanly work', as an essential way of reinforcing gender and related moral norms. For women, the mastery of these gendered objects could craft 'a path to virtue'.[3] Given this underlying intimate interplay between objects and gender, what then does it mean to extend this material turn and shift it to the field of Ming-Qing transgender history? How was gender-crossing achieved through specific gendered objects? To what extent was trans-femininity materialised and

conceptualised through usage or associations with these objects? Hoping to explore these questions, this article proposes an object-oriented heuristic that foregrounds and examines the recurring and essential role of objects in helping individuals assigned male at birth to cross gender boundaries and achieve trans-femininity, both materially and conceptually, in Ming-Qing China.

To define 'trans-femininity' for this article, I follow the emerging post-identitarian thinking in transgender studies but approach it on a material level, by seeing 'trans-' as the motion and orientation of crossing gender boundaries that was enabled and actualised through certain objects, rather than as stable or universal gender identity category.[4] 'Femininity', meanwhile, refers to how the users of these objects were oriented towards, and thus performed the roles of, or embodied the characteristics conventionally ascribed to women in the context of the Ming-Qing gender, social and family systems. More specifically, I argue that such crossings of gender boundaries and resulting trans-femininity were achieved through the trans usage of objects that led to *disruption* and *rearticulation* of the normative material and conceptual alignment of objects, sexed bodies and gender embodiments. The trans-ing potential of objects through *disruption* of the object-sex-gender alignment mentioned here is inspired by Sara Ahmed. In *Queer Phenomenology*, Ahmed discusses how objects produce gender and sexual norms such as heterosexuality due to the way they are arranged, which reflects the interest of those in power. Thus, to make things queer is to disturb their normative order, or more specifically, the social and conceptual alignment of objects, bodies and gender roles.[5] However, such disruption did not always mean a total disavowal of this alignment or normative understandings of ideal womanhood and femininity. Instead, the trans usage of objects also functioned as *rearticulation*, in a Butlerian sense, of the existing female expressions and embodiments associated with objects. This means the material manifestations of normative womanhood and femininity served as the main referent. By adopting objects that either directly or indirectly denoted, or were associated with womanhood, a male-assigned individual also performed varying levels of (trans) 'citation' and 'repetition' of these existing, referential feminine embodiments, thus helping to form or actualise trans-femininity.[6]

Just like masculinity and femininity, trans-femininity was multi-dimensional. It did not function independently but existed and gained meanings across different aspects of life, including one's bodily presentation, social activities and sexual activities. Furthermore, different practices and objects were involved in shaping and producing femininity and trans-femininity accordingly. Following these three different aspects, this article is divided into three sections to explore three types of objects based on what constituted ideal womanhood and femininity in Ming-Qing China, and how related trans-femininity, based on disruption and rearticulation of these models and norms, was achieved respectively by male-assigned individuals through objects. Focusing on the bodily presentation and transformation of trans-femininity, the first section looks at the foot-binding cloth used by individuals assigned male at birth to achieve the feminine image of bound feet, which, as Dorothy Ko considers, symbolised an essential part of womanhood.[7] The second section explores trans-femininity in relation to social activities by examining the object of the embroidery needle. Embroidery constituted a key part of *nügong* (womanly work) in opposition to men's work or skills, and embodied women's domesticity and related womanly virtue.[8] Thus, mastery of, or an innate familiarity with, the embroidery needle was frequently highlighted in sources to signify an individual's trans-femininity in the social realm. The final section focuses on trans-femininity that took form in sexual activities, and more precisely one's feminine, penetrated sexual expressions via the use of concealing underwear. In Ming-Qing medical, literary and legal discourse, phallic penetration was considered as a gendering force, as being penetrated tended to be socially, sexually and conceptually linked to femininity or, at the very least, a disavowal of masculinity.[9] Hence, objects like concealing underwear which concealed the wearer's genitals and their penetrating sexuality, ensured that the wearer could perform the penetrated role during intercourse with men, thus helping them to maintain trans-feminine appeal, or to 'pass' as a woman, in the sexual aspect.[10] The objects examined in this article include both real-life material objects documented in Ming-Qing *biji* (miscellanies) and news collections; as well as literary objects frequently appearing in fictional works like novels and drama.[11] The juxtaposition of both types of objects can together reveal the social, material and rhetorical formation and conceptualisation of trans-femininity.

Focusing on the material specificity and manifestation of gender-crossing, an object-oriented heuristic means that this article is not intended to trace or excavate certain 'classic' trans figures in Ming-Qing history, which might risk reproducing the trans-cisgender divide or other identitarian and transnormative narratives.[12] The individuals embodying trans-femininity analysed in this article did not necessarily share one unified or stable (trans)gender identity in Ming-Qing China. Rather, they exhibited what Howard Chiang terms 'different scales of gender transgression' beyond a 'normativizing scheme' or unrecognisable 'through the Western notion of transgender'.[13] As the sources reveal, some of them went through permanent or recognised male-to-female gender transformation, some 'passed' as women temporarily before returning to, or being made to return to, their gender assigned at birth. Others only performed trans-femininity occasionally, and/or without completely concealing their male gender assigned at birth, such as male-assigned feminine-presenting entertainers, *xiang-gong* (male-assigned courtesans).[14] For all of them, it was their recurring usage of, or association with, the examined trans-gender objects that linked them together. Meanwhile, the varying usage and sometimes contrasting meanings engendered by these recurring objects also revealed these individuals' different positionalities and what Sandy Stone terms as the 'motivational complexity' behind gender-crossing.[15] In this light, the object-oriented heuristic functions as not just a post-identitarian, but also an intersectional analytic, as it sheds light on the different power relations behind the material rearrangements of gender, and opens up questions like: How might individuals with varying social and class backgrounds have accessed and used the object differently? How did trans-femininity run parallel with, or differ from, normative femininity when comparing these trans-gender objects with objects consumed by individuals assigned female at birth? Who supplied the objects or initiated the process and who was intended to be the user developing trans-femininity? And what were the class or other dynamics between trans-femininity and normative masculinity possessed by men, as objects were frequently used by those in an intimate same-sex relationship between individuals assigned male at birth?

An object-oriented heuristic is also a response to the emerging call to 'provincialize' and 'decolonize' the field transgender studies and to centre the historical and cultural specificity of gender variances in the Global South.[16] By following the specific material processes and social conditions of gender crossing in Ming-Qing China, this object-oriented heuristic avoids the anachronism of applying pre-existing, dominant gender or sexual categories that emerged from other geographical and temporal locations as the starting point of historicising gender variances. Additionally, through foregrounding gender-crossing practices and embodiments before and beyond the scope of modern Western trans medical and surgical technologies and judicial regulations, this object-oriented heuristic follows other trans historians in challenging the existing historiographical approaches that tend to conceptualise transness as 'ultra-modern', 'techno-deterministic' or mainly a mid-twentieth-century phenomenon.[17] In this way, the centring of objects as a new approach to trans history not only pushes us to rethink the contemporary ontology of 'transgender', but also opens up new epistemological grounds for exploring and theorising alternative, non-medicalised and more contingent ways of trans-being and trans-becoming.

Before moving on to the main discussion, it is also worth clarifying my translation of gender pronouns in this article. The translation of gender pronouns for gender-crossing or non-conforming individuals remains an equivocal, yet under-discussed, issue in the Anglophone scholarship of Ming-Qing history. Some scholars have used combinations of both masculine and feminine pronouns, such as 'she/he' or only 'he' or 'she' based on the gender assigned at birth, or switch between the masculine and feminine pronouns.[18] This is partly due to the lack of the gender pronominal split in classical Chinese and partly due to what I consider the lack of a unified and stable (trans)gender identity shared by the individuals that embodied transness at various temporal stages and different degrees, as examined in this article.[19] In this article, I have opted to use gender neutral pronouns 'they/them/themself' for three main reasons. First, I try to avoid imposing gendered pronouns that might not reflect one's own agency and subjectivity and reproducing the historical violation of their chosen gender embodiments that many of them had already experienced in the first place when documented in historical sources

by an author or authority. As Scott Larson points out, gender-variant people often become visible to the public when they are less able to control or care for their bodies, including when they are injured, arrested or exposed by external forces.[20] This is applicable to some of the examined individuals in this article, including Xing Da, documented in Qing official records and A'xiu, reported in the late Qing newspaper *Shenbao*, whose birth gender were forcefully or accidentally exposed by external forces. Through being documented in historical sources or entering the archives under these vulnerable conditions, their chosen gender was ridiculed or erased. Therefore, purely using masculine gender pronouns based on their assigned gender at birth might further restage such violations. However, neither do I want to use feminine gender pronouns for all examined figures, which might risk over-emphasising some of their trans subjectivities or agency in gender crossing, in a way similar to how some of the examined theatre-related sources and literati writings tended to depict male-assigned entertainers' feminine appeals in romanticising and connoisseurial manners. As this article will demonstrate, certain individuals might have crossed gender boundaries and developed trans-femininity for more practical or financial reasons, rather than for individual gender expressions or pleasures. By using gender neutral pronouns, I hope to highlight the complex and heterogeneous makeup of gender-crossing and gender variant people in Chinese history that one unified gendered pronoun fails to capture, and more importantly, to leave space for these gender-crossing and gender variant figures, as well as space for readers to hear them speak back.[21]

Second, on an individual level, I aim to avoid creating what Jen Manion mentions as 'a false sense of stability' when writing about historical figures marked by varied gender expressions over a long period of time, and hope to highlight the moving nature of one's gendered positions, since many of the examined individuals cross gender boundaries at different levels and in various directions throughout their lives.[22] Instead of relying on temporary or contingent gender position or identification from one specific temporal location to represent their whole life, I use 'they/them/themselves' to allow room for what Jacob C. Hale notes as 'multiple complexities, ambiguities, inconsistencies, ambivalences, border zone status'.[23]

Last, I employ 'they/them/themselves' as a placeholder to deliberately disrupt the reading experience, to encourage readers to pause and reflect on the normative gendered nature of the English language, as well as to consider how we can further engage with monolingualism, (un)translatability and other related issues that are also embedded within the emerging field of trans studies, in which the majority of theorising and knowledge production have been conducted within the Anglophone sphere.[24] Provincialising and decolonising trans studies would benefit from centring a broader range of language, including sets of pronouns and terminologies emerging from non-Anglophone contexts, and/or from simply just using the original language without translating them to fit into the pre-existing English pronominal categories of 'he', 'she' or 'they'. Hopefully, more alternatives and interventions on trans pronouns and language will emerge in future translational, translingual and transdisciplinary works 'across sex/gender divides and communities'.[25]

THE FOOT-BINDING CLOTH FOR FEMININE BODILY PRESENTATION

The binding cloth was normally gendered as a 'female object' through direct classification as an item of women's routine toilette, as well as through social and cultural associations as a token that represented women on economic, ritualistic, emotional and erotic levels.[26] With such strong associations with femininity, the binding cloth was frequently documented in the process of male-to-female gender-crossing, helping individuals to present the female body imagery of bound feet and adapt to their new feminine roles. This trans usage of objects directly disrupted and rearticulated the alignment of object (the foot-binding cloth), sexed bodies (females' bound feet) and gender embodiments (femininity), as the very same object used by women was directly adopted to achieve trans-femininity.

One of the most documented male-to-female transformation cases was that of Li Liangyu from the late Ming. Li Liangyu's case was not only recorded in official records, but also appeared in

contemporary literati *biji* collections, medical encyclopaedias and fictional writings.[27] In depicting Li Liangyu's gender transformation process, these texts frequently mentioned foot-binding as a key stage. For example, Li Liangyu's case was recorded in detail in late Ming author Li Xu (1505–1593)'s *biji* collection, *Jie'anlaoren manbi* (Jottings by the Old Man Jieyan). This collection largely drew upon local gazetteers and was completed around 1597.[28] The case of Li Liangyu was documented as follows:

> In the first month of the first year of the Longqing reign (1567), Yu (Li Liangyu) suddenly had a stomach ache … In the fourth month, Yu's testicles shrunk inside the belly and later turned yin (into female genitals) … On the first day of the fifth month, [Li Liangyu]'s menstrual cycle started to flow and stopped on the third day. It repeated each month afterwards. Yu then changed to wearing women's hairpieces and dresses, also started to bind the feet and change the shoes … On the second day of the eleventh month, [having been examined in the magistrate's hearings], the transformation was confirmed, [Li Liangyu] was no different from a woman.[29]

As the source indicates, Li's gender transformation first started with unexplained changes in the genitals, including the development of female reproductive organs. The adoption of female attire and bodily presentation that followed, especially binding of the feet, helped Li, now with an ambiguous gender identity and unmatched sexed body, to embark on the gender transformation in the social sphere. This realignment of Li's bodily presentation with that of a woman also ensured that Li was later recognised by the official as a woman after examination. A more detailed description of Li's foot-binding process, with the use of the foot-binding cloth, was documented in contemporary author Lu Renlong (*ca*. 1580–1660)'s fictional version of Li Liangyu's case, '*Xi'anfu fu bie qi, Heyangxian nan hua nü*' (Husband left the Wife in Xi'an Prefecture, A Man Turned into a Woman in Heyang County).[30] Similarly, Li first went through a sudden transformation of the reproductive organs, but this time as retribution sanctioned by the supernatural figure of Yanwang (the God of the Underworld).[31] Having been tried by Yanwang in their dream, Li then decided to follow Yanwang's order to live as a woman and became the wife of fellow businessman Lü Da. Li's husband Lü then helped to initiate Li's gender transformation into a woman on the social front:

> Lü Da said: 'A man should dress like a man, a woman should dress like a woman' … [Lü Da helped Li to start to style the hair in a female way,] and helped them to apply makeup. [Lü] also purchased the foot-binding cloth, and asked them to bind the feet … [Li] then made all efforts to bind the feet. Within a couple of months, [Li] managed to bind them as *banlanjiao* (half-blocked feet). [When Li] sat in the reception (of the restaurant they now ran), [Li] looked just like a woman with the beauty that could score eight or nine [out of ten].[32]

In Lu's version, Li's bound feet, achieved through the use of the binding cloth purchased by their husband, were constructed as the final stage and the hallmark of Li's gender transformation. The use of the binding cloth helped to integrate Li's ambiguous gender and body into one of the existing binary gender categories of 'men' and 'women', through strictly following the existing social and bodily conventions, as Lü reasoned that 'a woman should dress like a woman'.[33] It was only after Li's feet were bound to the size of *banlanjiao* (half-blocked feet) that Li could start to pass and live as a woman socially, working as a restaurant reception hostess and looking 'just like a woman'. Furthermore, the term *banlanjiao* (half-blocked feet) highlights the distinctive result of the foot-binding cloth on Li's feet, which were close to, but still different from the ideal image of women's bound feet. According to Ko, *banlanjiao* was a colloquial term usually used to refer to women's feet that have been bound but are not necessarily small judged by the ideal standard.[34] Unlike most women who would begin the practice of foot-binding from a young age, sometimes as early as six, Li's relatively late adoption of the

foot-binding cloth might have yielded to feet that could only be 'half-blocked'.[35] Therefore, despite portraying Li's new womanly social presence and 'passibility' as achieved through foot-binding, the author's choice of the term *banlanjiao* still reminds the reader of Li Liangyu's trans-femininity, and its distance from normative femininity marked by the different foot size.

Later in the story, Li's ability to pass as a woman, marked by their bound-feet and other womanly traits, was also highlighted as the source of tensions with their male past and previous family. Although they tried to convince their brother that they were indeed Li, their brother found it hard to believe as: 'the beard [of Li] has fallen, the voice is quiet, and the feet are smaller …'.[36] This also showcased how gendered bodily presentations, with bound feet being one of the key signifiers, were essential for deciding how one's gender was identified. Therefore, the foot-binding cloth played an essential role in Li's gender transformation.

Apart from women or sex-changing individuals that tried to pass and live as women, the foot-binding cloth was also used by male-assigned entertainers to achieve trans-feminine appeal, including *xianggong* (male-assigned courtesans) whose emergence could be traced back to the early Qing time (the Shunzhi Reign 1644–62).[37] *Xianggong*'s trans-feminine appeal took form on both artistic and sexual levels, as they were usually *dan* (the general name for the female role in the dramatic tradition) actors from the Peking Opera who cross-dressed to perform female characters on the stage, and also provided sexual services to male patrons off-stage.[38] As numerous Qing sources indicate, foot-binding was a documented practice among male-assigned entertainers like *dan* actors, *xiaochang* (singers) and private entertainers based in the patron's household, some starting from a young age.[39] The usage of the binding cloth among *xianggong* was explicitly recorded in *Qiekou dacidian* (Dictionary of Secret Language), which included a dedicated section entitled *Xianggong tangzi qiekou* (Secret Language from the *Xianggong*'s House).[40] It provides insider perspectives into the Qing social space *xianggong tangzi* (the *xianggong's* house), where *xianggong* resided and entertained their male clients. *Xianggong tangzi* were so popular in the capital that it 'could be found on every corner in Beijing in the mid-19th century'.[41] They remained 'an openly recognized feature of the city' until it was abolished by the Republican government in 1912.[42] Before introducing the various objects and techniques used for their training, the section on *xianggong tangzi* first introduced the phrase *gai jiangshan* (Changing the Mountain and the Sea), with the following explanation: 'Humans are created by Heaven and Earth. Men and women are different. However, a senior *xianggong* can change the male, and train them into the female'.[43] This entry stresses that gender-crossing sensibility and trans-femininity formed an essential part of a *xianggong*'s professional identity and attraction in the eyes of their clients, even when they were in *xianggong tangzi*, not performing in the theatre. The author then went on to introduce the binding cloth, in the entry *guo lianban* (binding lotus petals):

> *guo lianban*: using a cloth to bind feet. As soon as there is pressure on one's toes, it can prevent [one's feet from] looking unattractively chunky and fat, but still ensures they are different from women's pointy feet that look like *yuban* snakes, so that the length and the measurement [of the feet], will be appropriate.[44]

Lianban (lotus petals) was the same term used to describe women's bound feet in Ming-Qing Chinese lexicon.[45] Women's bound feet, frequently referred to as *lianban* or *jinlian* (golden lotuses), also carried sexual and erotic meanings, as they became parts of female bodies that men could fondle to heighten sexual pleasures, or serve as a euphemism for sexual intercourse in Ming-Qing erotic literature.[46] The emphasis on *xianggong*'s use of the binding cloth to achieve the 'lotus petals' thus showcased that femininity, in this case derived from associations with women's bound feet and related feminine erotic connotations, constituted the conceptual foundation of their sexual appeal. Such material and conceptual associations, achieved through the usage of the foot-binding cloth, thus rendered *xianggong*'s sexual appeal and gender expressions as trans-feminine.

However, this entry also highlighted that *xianggong's* distinctive usage of the binding cloth would differentiate their bound feet from that of women, as their feet would not be as 'pointy' as some

women's feet that resemble '*yuban* snakes'. By describing women's feet like threatening snakes, the author might have been suggesting that *xianggong*'s distinct trans-femininity, as characterised by their feet, was perceived as less menacing and even more superior to normative femininity possessed by women in the eyes of male patrons and connoisseurs. Rather than being articulated through a 'passing' narrative, male-assigned entertainers seemed to actively compete with women, and even succeeded in 'leading' a new, if not better, model of femininity. In this way, the adoption of the same female-gendered object seemed to have created different feminine connotations and meanings for *xianggong* and women.

This distinctive usage of the foot-binding cloth by *xionggong* also contrasted with that of Li. Unlike *xianggong* who did not worry about erasing all traces of their transness through binding their feet in the same way as women did, Li Liangyu did try to pass and live fully as a woman. The different emphasis of feminine embodiments were manifest in the different way Li Liangyu bound their feet compared with *xianggong*, as Li Liangyu 'made all efforts to bind the feet … as *banlanjiao*' to pass as a woman.[47] The varying usage of the same object in the process of gender-crossing thus showcases the multiplicity of trans-femininity, which operated at different levels for individuals with varying positionalities and motivations.

The connoisseurial tones in depicting male-assigned entertainers as superior or more elegant than female-assigned entertainers was prevalent in contemporary theatre-related sources and Ming-Qing homoerotic novels.[48] Materially revealed through the varying usage of the same object by male-assigned entertainers and women, this preference for trans-femininity over normative femininity possessed by women also reflected the greater aesthetic and cultural sensibilities that became dominant in the elite circle of Beijing, especially after the rise of Peking Opera from the mid-Qing. This is documented in He Gangde (1855–1936)'s miscellaneous collection *Chunming Menglu* (Records of dreams at the [Gate of] Spring Brightness), which is considered to include some of the most detailed descriptions of *xianggong* and the theatre world in Qing Beijing.[49] The popularity of *xianggong* is documented as follows:

> Officials in Beijing were not allowed to consort with actors and female entertainers by the law. However, consorting with actors was still tolerable, but consorting with female entertainers would be despised by people … [Female] Brothels were located in the Bada Hutong outside of Qianmen … Those who had self-respect would definitely not go there. [Actors] who played the role of *qingyi* and *huadan* (both were female roles in Peking Opera) had beautiful looks like elegant maidens. Thus people called them *xianggu* (women look-alikes), or *xianggong* due to the similar pronunciation … When they were called (by clients' requests), they would wear their everyday clothes and *xiaoxue* (tiny boots), to sing or serve wine … .[50]

Again, a comparison between male-assigned entertainers and women was drawn at the beginning of the passage: *xianggong* looked like women, but consorting with them was considered as more 'tolerable' and elegant than consorting with women. Nevertheless, *xianggong*'s attraction was still strongly associated with women's bodily image, as *xianggong* would wear *xiaoxue* (tiny boots) when they were on call entertaining their male clients off-stage. As this source indicates, the foot-binding cloth might not have been sufficient and was not the only object used for achieving the image of bound feet. Other objects included special footwear, such as *xiaoxue* (tiny boots) mentioned in the source. In addition to *xiaoxue*, a more widely documented type of footwear was *qiao*, which was mostly worn by male-assigned entertainers during the Qing.[51] Such special footwear again helped to maintain and emphasise *xianggong*'s trans-feminine appeal. Functioning similarly to the foot-blinding cloth, the act of *xianggong* wearing *xiaoxue* in this source indirectly rearticulated the gender meanings and image associated with women's bound feet. Especially for their male patrons, these objects allowed *xianggong* to perform for, and to feed the gendered obsession with the practice of foot-binding.

This recurring emphasis on male-assigned entertainers having bound feet to attract and serve male patrons also foregrounded the power dynamic behind the foot-binding practice and class connotations of male-assigned entertainers' usage of the foot-binding cloth. In Ming-Qing legal frameworks, male-assigned entertainers, including *xianggong*, singers and sex workers, had been classified as *jianmin* (mean people), the lowest social class until the Yongzheng Emperor's emancipation of the debased *jian* status in 1732. However, after this reform, male-assigned entertainers continued to be discriminated against by the legal system.[52] They were 'doubly debased' due to their lower, stigmatised social backgrounds and feminine gender expressions, thus not treated as normative males by Qing legal standards.[53] Mostly sold by impoverished families under strict contracts at young ages, these actors became the property of their master-trainers in the *xianggong tangzi*, with little choice but to go through feminising training and to entertain male clients, until they managed to achieve independence after becoming older and richer in some cases.[54] These class and commercial dynamics were also indicated in the previous sources, as the techniques for using the foot-binding cloth were institutionalised in the designated social space of *xianggong tangzi* as part of the training reserved for *xianggong*. Thus, for them, developing trans-femininity through using the foot-binding cloth might have been a survival strategy driven by financial and other practical reasons, rather than purely for individual gender expressions or pleasures. As existing trans of colour scholarship has pointed out, the processes of gender-crossing and trans-femininity should not always be read in idealised or liberatory tones. For instance, Jules Gill-Peterson reminds us the importance of considering the larger material and social contexts of trans-femininity, including class struggles and colonial campaigns. This allows us to investigate how certain individuals were '*trans feminized* by the state' or other external factors, and to better understand 'what such people and communities thought about their situation and how they lived in response to it'.[55] By situating the foot-binding practice and the trans-femininity of male-assigned entertainers within the commercialised economy and the imperial class system of Ming-Qing China, it becomes evident that the foot-binding cloth functioned as more than a trans-gender object for male-assigned entertainers. Carrying more than gender meanings, the foot-binding cloth might have been one of the key objects that materially paved their ways toward survival and upward social mobility, by reconfiguring and (re/trans)gendering their male-assigned, and equally important, lower class bodies.

THE EMBROIDERY NEEDLE FOR 'WOMANLY' WORK AND SOCIAL ACTIVITIES

Apart from the bodily presentation, normative boundaries between men and women in Ming-Qing China were also defined by appropriately gendered social activities assigned to each group, especially through the mastery of the correct objects required for these activities. Needlework, alongside sewing and weaving, constituted *nügong* (womanly work) that represented women's domestic status and economic value in household production.[56] Thus, the embroidery needle was one of the key female objects that signified womanhood, especially that of commoner women of gentle nurture and refinement.[57] Such gendered differentiation through association with objects and skills was deliberately cultivated among children from a young age, as Bray mentions, 'when boys were sent off to the school-room to start grappling with the writing brush, little girls were given their first training in plying the needle'.[58] The mastery of, or an innate familiarity with, objects for womanly work, especially the embroidery needle, also played a key role in forming individuals' trans-femininity or signifying their gender transformation into women, through referring to and rearticulating this alignment between the gendered object and embodiments of womanhood on the social front.

The embroidery needle was a recurring literary object used by Ming-Qing authors to construct a gender-transforming character. The early Qing playwright Li Yu (1611–1680)'s work *Nan mengmu jiaohe sanqian* (A Male Mencius's Mother Educates a Son and Moves House Three Times) features a *longyang* (a man's younger male-assigned lover) You Ruiniang who tried to live as a woman under

the guidance of their male lover Xu Jifang.[59] After You managed to complete the transformation on the bodily front, by castration and hiding their feet with special boots, they started to pick up the embroidery needle and performed the new womanly role in the social, or more precisely the domestic, realm:

> From now on, [You] never left home, spending all day in the sewing room. [You] was also very smart by nature. [You] managed to master womanly work including needlework by themself without being taught by others. Everyday when [You] got up, [You] either started sewing, or doing embroidery As Jifang now has no family business, [You] decided to be a *neizhu* (inner assistance) to support his studies.[60]

In Ming-Qing China, embroidery was more than a gendered marker that signified 'womanly work', but also carried strong spatial associations with the domestic sphere and more specifically the inner women's quarters. According to Susan Mann, for young upper class girls, embroidery was not simply a practical skill, but coincided with 'a kind of preparation for marriage' and 'transition into the women's quarters' in which they engaged in tasks like elaborating trimmings for dowry trousseaus or fashioning shoes.[61] Thus, You's mastery of needles and other tools for womanly work, not only helped to locate Ruiniang into the gendered and designated space for women, 'the sewing room' in the domestic sphere, but also integrate them into performance of the new female family role as *neizhu*, a highly gendered term used to refer to married women while highlighting their domesticity and the female virtue of supporting husbands and families. You's innate familiarity with the embroidery needle, with the author emphasising that they mastered the needlework 'without being taught by others', also denoted that their gender transformation and trans-femininity were considered as natural or perhaps even pre-destined. This echoed the author's earlier depiction of You's recovery after castration: 'They seemed to have assistance from God. Within a month, the wound [from the castration] was healed. The scar developed in a strange way, looking just like a woman's vagina'.[62]

This emphasis of a male-to-female gender-crossing figure's innate familiarity with the embroidery needle was also evident in the late Qing story *Chou Ba Gu'niang* (The Eighth Daughter of the Chou Household). The story was documented in the late Qing literary collection *Chuncaotang congshu* (Collectanea from the Springtime Cottage), compiled by Xie Kun (*fl.*−1844).[63] The protagonist Chou Ba Gu'niang was assigned male at birth but was brought up as a girl, as 'Chou's brothers all passed away young and all the girls survived, and the ageing parents worried that this young boy would also pass away like the other boys'.[64] Although this decision was made by their parents, Chou started to exhibit innate feminine traits from a young age:

> From the age of five or six, [Chou] followed the elder sisters in binding their feet. [Chou] would not stop crying if people did not allow [them] to do so … [Their parents] taught them to read, but [Ba Gu'niang] could not remember any character. When they taught [Ba Gu'niang] embroidery, [Chou] became very good at it even though [they] were shown only once.[65]

Here the author deployed the popular dichotomy between 'reading' and 'embroidery' to symbolise the different gendered skills for men and women. Even at a young age, without being taught, Chou showed instinctive preference for embroidery needles over books, the womanly things over manly things.

Apart from innate familiarity, mastery of the embroidery needle was often used to showcase how successfully a gender-crossing individual performed womanly traits and tasks. The mid-Qing literatus Yuan Mei (1716–1798) documented a contemporary individual Dian Miangu. Similar to the fictional character Chou, Dian was assigned male at birth but brought up as a girl by their parents who believed that this could save Miangu from dying of illness.[66] Again, the author highlighted Dian's mastery of the embroidery needle to signify their achieved trans-femininity: '[Dian] Miangu had a beautiful look

and no beard. [Dian] referred to themself as a woman. [Dian] had written a book entitled *Xiuzhen ci* (Poetry on Embroidery Needles), which was quite well-known. My friend Yang Chaoguan was close to them, and described this (Dian's story) from start to finish'.[67]

On the contrary, a lack of familiarity or skills with embroidery needles might lead to a gender-crossing character's new female identity being questioned and their previous male past being exposed. In the late Ming drama *Nan wanghou* (A Male Queen) by Wang Jide (1540–1623), the protagonist Chen Zigao dressed and lived as a woman in order to become King Linchuan's queen. However, the princess, King Linchuan's sister, grows suspicious of the new queen:

> [Princess]: My dear sister-in-law, since you entered the Palace, have you embroidered any flowers?
>
> [Chen]: No. I have only managed to read a few lines of books.
>
> [Princess]: Reading books is what men do. My dear sister-in-law, how can you learn from them?
>
> [Chen said to themself]: How strange! Why does this girl keep picking on me? I have given her the wrong answer again, which almost gave away the secret.[68]

Wang deployed the recurring dichotomy between reading and embroidery, or books vs. embroidered flowers. This showcased how orthodox gender and social boundaries between men and women were constantly highlighted through associations with corresponding objects and social activities. Similarly, Ji Yun, a contemporary of Yuan Mei, also illustrated how one's new female identity might risk being undermined because of their distance from embroidery and other womanly work. In *Yuewei caotang biji* (Jottings from the Yuewei Grass Hut), Ji included a story of two former late Ming eunuchs who tried to live as women, as their male patron's female concubines, in order to avoid prosecution. Their male patron even purchased bone-softening tonic to help bind their feet, so that they 'looked like two beautiful women'.[69] Having completed their gender-transformation on the bodily presentation front, they went back to their husband's hometown to start their new lives as women. 'These two have been in the Palace for a long time, and had light skin and gentle demeanour, with no masculine trace … No one realised the truth. However, some wondered why they never did any *nühong* (needlework), but only guessed that they might have been too spoiled to do it'.[70] Like Chen, although these two concubines had already looked like women, they still had to negotiate or perform the dominant social expectations of women in terms of gendered skills and material activities that involved the embroidery needle.

In addition to gender-transforming individuals who tried to live fully as women for various reasons, the embroidery needle was also frequently associated with trans-femininity possessed by male-assigned entertainers. This was evident in the late Ming story collection *Longyang yishi* (The Forgotten History of Longyang) by Zuizhu Jushi, published in 1632.[71] According to Giovanni Vitiello, the term *longyang* was not only used to refer to a man's younger male-assigned lover, but also to male-assigned entertainers who might have provided sexual services to male clients.[72] One such male-assigned entertainer featured in this collection was Pei Youniang, whose second name translates as young maiden. Pei was known for mastery of the embroidery needle, and this is also how their trans-femininity was materially manifested:

> Although Pei Youniang was a male, [Pei] excelled in all womanly skills … such as embroidering [the prints of] phoenixes or *luan* (another mythological bird in Chinese mythology) … every type of womanly work that involved needles and fingers, [Pei] was good at them all. Everyone in Luoyang City who knew about this was jealous of them. That's why this name was picked.[73]

Embroidery was also Pei's main pastime when not working or waiting for clients: 'Being idle at home, [Pei] fetched some embroidery needles and threads, hoping to embroider some flowers to kill the boredom. Suddenly someone knocked on the door. [Pei] rushed to the door … '.[74] This suggested that the trans-feminine trait of playing with the embroidery needle had been internalised by male-assigned entertainers like Pei, rather than being just a temporary performance for attracting clients, as Pei even did so in the spare time.

The association with the embroidery needle could also been deployed in a moralising tone to explain or criticise male-assigned entertainers' trans-feminine traits. In the late Qing novel *Honglou fumeng* (Dreaming Again in the Red Chamber) completed in the Jiaqing Reign (1796–1820), the author Chen Shaohai used the supernatural narratives of reincarnation and retribution to explain *longyang*'s innate familiarity with the embroidery needle and their resulting feminine, ambiguous identities. Chen depicted a scene from the Underworld Court in which many men dressed as women were trapped. The Underworld Judge explained:

> Those men who did women's work in the human world would be jailed here, including embroidery artists … Therefore these people will still be born as men in the next life, but they will be destined to become *longyang*, to take up women's roles. This would make them neither *yin* nor *yang*, but just wantonness in the human world.[75]

Following this supernatural logic, *longyang*'s innate familiarity with embroidery objects had already taken form in the previous life. This transgressive mastery of womanly objects by men had disrupted normative gender boundaries and alignments, thus triggering retribution. And being reborn as *longyang*, who were 'neither *yin* nor *yang'*, served as their retribution, and it also seemed to fit their trans-feminine traits. A similar conceptual link between *longyang* and womanly work under the retribution narrative could also be found in constructing the previously examined character Chou, who 'was the descendant of a *longyang*'.[76] By pointing this out at the beginning of the story, the author seemed to suggest that the *longyang* bloodline contributed to Chou's gender transformation and their innate preference for womanly matters such as embroidery. It also showcased that people's perceptions towards *longyang* and gender-transforming individuals like Chou were somehow interrelated, and it was the recurring association with the embroidery needle that 'knit' these different trans-feminine figures together.

CONCEALING UNDERWEAR FOR FEMININE SEXUAL ACTIVITIES

In addition to one's bodily presentation and social activities, sexual acts – especially phallic penetration – were also highly gendered in Ming-Qing China, with masculinity assigned to the penetrating individual and femininity assigned to the penetrated one through intercourse. The central role of phallic penetration in conceptualising normative boundaries between men and women was evident in Qing legal discourse, as penetrated males were perceived as feminine or considered to assume the social roles of women, as their masculinity had been compromised.[77] Penetrated sexual acts were also key in constructing trans-femininity in literary works, as many of the previously discussed characters, from the 'Male Mencius's Mother' You Ruiniang to the 'Male Queen' Chen Zigao, all somehow had their penetrability highlighted.[78] Following this phallocentric alignment of sexual and gender performance, concealing underwear, which would conceal their genitals, was worn by gender-crossing individuals to ensure their feminine, penetrated sexual expressions during intercourse with men. Compared with the two previously examined objects, the concealing underwear disrupted the object-sex-gender alignment in a different, indirect way. The trans usage of the foot-binding cloth and the embroidery needle directly disrupted the existing object-sex-gender alignment, as male-assigned individuals adopt the very same gendered object used by women in the process of gender-crossing. The concealing underwear disrupted and rearticulated this alignment indirectly, as a new object that was not used by women,

but specifically used by gender-crossing individuals, was introduced. Nevertheless, this trans usage of objects – or to be more specific, the usage of a trans object – still referred to the same gendered association between (penetrated) sexualised bodies and gender embodiments of womanhood in relation to sexual activities, thus allowing male-assigned individuals to achieve trans-femininity on the sexual front. As seen in different sources, such concealing underwear came in diverse forms and was made of various materials, ranging from the female bodice *guodu* (the belly wrap) to something as simple as a silk handkerchief. These different forms of concealing underwear yielded different concealing effects, including visually masking the genitals, flattening the shape of the genitals and completely concealing the genitals. The various emphases of concealing effects also revealed individuals' different positionalities and motivations for developing trans-femininity.

Concealing underwear frequently appeared in Ming-Qing erotic novels to help construct and ensure the trans-feminine sexual appeal of the penetrated partner. With their genitals covered by concealing underwear, sexual intercourse between two male-assigned individuals was equated with, or reimagined as, sex between man and woman, thus sexually and conceptually rendering the penetrated partner as trans-feminine. This conceptual equation between the penetrated partner and the female was clearly articulated in the late Ming story *Hailing Yishi* (The Forgotten Story of the Prince of Hailing) (printed *ca*. 1606–1627).[79] The author described male-assigned entertainers as follows:

> Some boys are young and beautiful, and named *qingtong* (toilet-boys: male-assigned sex workers). When [*qingtong*] is having sex with men, they become intimate just like husband and wife. [Men] would enter them through their anuses, and would treat them as the same as women by penetrating them … [*qingtong*] would lie on their backs like women to be penetrated.[80]

The author then highlights the necessity for concealing underwear to be worn to ensure that they are 'like women', or to trans-feminised them sexually:

> However, when these *qingtong* grow older, their *yang* (genitals) grow too. During sex, if their *yang* are erect in the front, it would look extremely inelegant. Therefore, the procurers of these *qingtong* would prepare cloth-like silk handkerchiefs beforehand, to bind these boys' *yang* with the cloth and tie it around their waists, so that it would not erect and disrupt things.[81]

Apart from engendering trans-femininity on the sexual front, the usage of concealing underwear also re-defined and heteronormalised sexual interactions between two male-assigned individuals as *different-gendered* sexual interactions, similar to that between 'husband and wife', as the source indicates. The concealing underwear ensured that the penetrated partner's male-related sexual embodiments – the 'inelegant' sight of *yang* (genitals) erecting in the front as the author phrased – were visually concealed. Through this visual concealment, the potentially transgressive and 'inelegant' same-sex/*yang-yang* union was made conceptually legible and reincorporated into the dominant heteronormative framework and Confucian morality. This heteronormalising narrative of portraying same-sex intimacy is also observed by H. Laura Wu. Through examining Ming-Qing literature on female same-sex relationships, Wu highlights the recurring emphasis on 'the institutions of heterosexual sex and marriage', as 'the bond between husband and wife' provides the dominant analogy and context for literary representation of female same-sex relationships.[82] Therefore, in the context of same-sex relationships, trans-femininity could function as a form of governance in Ming-Qing China in the service of dominant heteronormative gender orders and related social hierarchies, with the help of trans-gender objects such as the concealing underwear.[83]

In this story, the concealing underwear was simply made of a handkerchief-like cloth. A more frequently documented form of concealing underwear was *guodu* or *doudu* (the belly wrap), a traditional Chinese form of female bodice. In another late Ming erotic novel, *Bieyouxiang* (An Exotic Fragrance),

the belly wrap was worn by the younger, penetrated partner during sex: 'The young boy wore a *guodu* (belly wrap) made of red silk, to cover the genitals, as if that thing did not exist'.[84] Again, the younger, penetrated partner was equated to a woman during intercourse, as they performed women's sex positions: '[They] also mimicked what women would do, lying down on the back with two feet high up in the air'.[85]

In addition to male-assigned entertainers, concealing underwear was also associated with, or used by, individuals who tried to live as women and completely conceal their transness. One such figures was Xing Da who had been living as a woman until being arrested by the Qing authority in 1807 for 'practising heterodox crafts to deceive people', as Xing claimed to be the incarnation of a fox spirit capable of curing people's illness.[86] According to the official record, Xing's birth gender was forcefully exposed, after being examined by a midwife in the court.[87] Prior to this, based on the official record, Xing had managed to live a woman and had married a man named Liu Liu. Neither Liu nor his family had been aware of Xing's birth gender upon the wedding. The official record portrayed Xing Da's feminine embodiments in a narrative of deceit as follows: 'because Xing Da had pretended to be a woman for a while, [Xing's] voice, looks and mannerism were just like those of women. Liu Liu's father Old Liu and Liu's mother Zhang and others were all deceived'.[88] On their wedding night, when they were about to have sex: 'Xing Da managed to hide and cover [the genitals] and trick Liu into having anal sex. Liu did not spot anything wrong … '.[89] The official record did not specify the objects and methods used by Xing to pass as a woman sexually. However, a more detailed depiction, including the use of concealing underwear *doudu* (belly wrap), was provided by the late Qing reformer and author Wu Zhichang (1828–1897) in his miscellaneous collection *Kechuang Xianhua* (Miscellaneous Stories Told by Guests), completed around 1850. In line with the official record, the author noted that on the night of their wedding: 'Xing had already made a small bag at the bottom of a *doudu* (belly wrap), to cover the front of the genitals. [Xing] lifted up their highs to use their anus to receive penetration, so that [Liu] was unaware [of Xing's genitals]'.[90] Later, the removal of the belly wrap also led to the exposure of Xing's birth gender: 'As the days went by, and the weather became hot, Liu was determined to take off both Xing's top and bottom clothing, forcing [Xing] to expose their naked body. [Xing] could not hide it anymore, the bumpy thing was exposed'.[91] Since the covering of genitals by concealing underwear ensured one's feminine, penetrated sexuality, its removal, on the other hand, would risk the erosion of the visual and bodily boundaries separating the feminine, penetrated individual and the masculine, penetrating one. The heternormative conceptual framework of sexual intercourse between a husband and a wife was also disrupted, as the author, following the legal document, skilfully implied that the couple Xing and Liu later started to penetrate each other: 'From now on, [the husband] not only served as the husband but also the wife, [the wife] not only served as the wife but also the husband'.[92] Here the author used the phrase 'served as the husband' to refer to the act of penetration, and 'served as the wife' implies being penetrated. Once again, this highlighted the gendered and gendering meanings of sexual penetration, which normally aligned one's sexual acts and their gender role. And the concealing underwear, or the lack of it, could create meanings and implications of gender-crossing and transgression based on this phallocentric and heteronormative alignment.

A similar case of using concealing underwear by individuals who tried to live as a woman was reported in the late Qing newspaper *Shenbao* in 1873. As the news report documents, the reported individual had previously worked in a barbershop on the outskirts of Beijing, before living as a woman with the adopted name A'xiu (*xiu*: elegant/beautiful). Because of their beautiful looks, the place was extremely popular, and one rogue man suggested to them: 'Why don't you pretend to be a woman and open a brothel. It would definitely be a successful business'.[93] Seeing that they were unsure, the rogue man went on to persuade them: 'You have thick hair, so the hair can be grown … Your feet can be bound in the Nanjing style, like willow leaves'.[94] Still feeling uncertain, especially due to concerns about the genitals, A'xiu then asked: 'How about the lower parts?' The rogue thought for a while then answered: 'There it is! You can use white silk to bind and flatten [the genitals]. If you are about to share a bed with someone, you just need to do this …'.[95] Following the man's advice, A'xiu started

to dress and live as a woman, and then opened their own business for sex work in Beijing, which attracted many clients. No one realised A'xiu's birth gender until it was later discovered by a doctor when A'xiu fell ill.[96]

As the report indicates, unlike the belly wrap, which only visually covered the genitals, the concealing underwear used by A'xiu was made of white silk and was specifically applied to vertically bind and flatten the private parts, thus erasing any visible trace or suspicious shape that might give away A'xiu's birth gender or their transness. The different techniques and goals of these two forms of concealing underwear not only showcased the different levels that trans-femininity operated on for women-like male-assigned entertainers and sex workers who tried to pass as women, but might have also corresponded with the shifting social landscapes and the changing urban entertainment sector in the late Qing. Compared with preceding periods when male-assigned entertainers gradually dominated the urban entertainment scene, as characterised by *xianggong* analysed in the first section, the late Qing witnessed the decline in their popularity. This was evident in the Tongzhi and Guangxu reigns starting from the 1860s, as documented in *Yandu Mingling Zhuan* (Biography of Famous Beijing Actors): 'Actors and their students, apart from performing, would be based in their private residences called *xiachu* (lower place), organising events to entertain their clients … From the Tong-Guang reigns (1861-1908) onwards, this trend started to decline, and actors started to focus on performing as their main occupation'.[97] Female entertainers gradually replaced male-assigned entertainers towards the end of the century, after the Boxer Rebellion (1899–1901): '*xianggong* have completely lost their power, and Bada Hutong (Qing Beijing's largest red light district) was back to the control of female entertainers'.[98] Before A'xiu tried to live and work as a female sex worker, the *Shenbao* article implied that they might have already been engaged in sex work at the barbershop, as this beautiful individual with a feminine hairstyle and elegant clothes 'was not an actor, but as in fact even better than those actors'.[99] Apart from *xianggong*/actors, barbershop workers like A'xiu constituted another main group of male-assigned entertainers providing sexual services, although they tended to occupy the lower ladder of the industry.[100] Thus, different forms of concealing underwear, with more elaborate binding effects and better concealing techniques, may also have reflected these lower-class entertainers' agency to adapt to the changing market environment. As in 1873, when the news was reported, being a feminine-presenting, male-assigned entertainer – especially for those working in low-end venues such as the barbershop – might have become less profitable or increasingly inadequate in competition with female sex workers, whose popularity was now on the rise. To live and work as a woman could have been more financially beneficial to them – this was also how A'xiu was persuaded by the rogue, as the *Shenbao* report indicates. This also highlights the interconnected history of trans-femininity and of sex work, particularly in terms of the prevailing perceptions and regulations with regards to them, as documented in historical sources.[101] Accordingly on the material level, this changing market conditions for sex workers required more secure forms of concealing underwear. For A'xiu, being a female look-alike was not enough. They now needed to pass as a woman completely, including on the sexual front. Hence, the belly wrap loosely tied around the waist became inadequate. Instead, the binding and flattening method, as documented in the news, provided more support and pressure, thus ensuring that any trans trace that might reveal their birth gender was tightly bound and safely concealed.

Similar agency through using more secure concealing underwear to pass as women was documented in the late Qing *biji* collection, *Zhuangxie xuanlu* (Selective Records of Both Serious and Humorous Matters), compiled by the famous newspaper publisher Wang Kangnian (1860–1911), under the pseudonym Xingzuisheng, which was prefaced in 1903.[102] In this source, the cross-dressing sex worker went one step further, by changing the texture and look of the concealing underwear to create the illusion of real skin:

> [They] usually concealed the private part with a piece of cloth, so people would not notice. One day a client was so insistent, [They] could not get away. [They] were also tempted by the client's wealth. Therefore, [they] tied multiple layers of silk on top of each other to cover and bind [the genitals], and then moistened it [the concealing underwear]

> to achieve the glow and texture of the skin. This client was so drunk and slept with them, and was successfully deceived by them. The total amount of money given [to them] was countless.[103]

Considered together with the previous sources, concealing underwear had evolved from just visually masking the genitals, to vertically flattening the shape, and now textually modifying the private area. The silk would 'blend in' the skin, as if it had become part of the new trans-feminine genitals, rather than just a layer of clothes exterior to the body. These varying forms and objectives of concealing underwear, again, corresponded with the different positionalities and motivations from which these individuals arrived at their trans-femininity.

CONCLUDING REMARKS: CENTRING OBJECTS IN TRANSGENDER HISTORY

Through an object-oriented heuristic, this article argues that objects, more specifically the trans usage of objects that disrupted and rearticulated the normative alignment of objects, sexed bodies and gender embodiments, served a formative role in helping individuals assigned male at birth to cross gender boundaries and achieve trans-femininity in Ming-Qing China. Based on how normative understandings of femininity materially and conceptually took shape across three different aspects of life, including bodily presentation, social activities and sexual activities, this article has explored how gender boundaries were crossed accordingly and how the resulting trans-femininity was achieved through using three sets of objects. These included the foot-binding cloth for the feminine image of bound feet, the embroidery needle for womanly work, and concealing underwear for feminine, penetrated sexual acts.

Focusing on the specific material rearrangements and manifestations of gender-crossing in Ming-Qing contexts, the object-oriented heuristic follows the trajectory of post-identitarian thinking, and further extends it on a material level. This article has examined a wide range of individuals, both fictional and real, who embodied trans-femininity operating at different levels. Some managed to live as, or were recognised as, women, such as Li Liangyu. Some tried to live and pass as women but were then exposed or made to return their birth gender, such as Xing Da and A'xiu. Some performed trans-femininity temporarily and occasionally, without completely concealing their male identities, such as feminine-presenting male-assigned entertainers, *xianggong* and *longyang*. Although these individuals did not share one stable, unified (trans)gender identity, it was their recurring association with certain objects, the trans-gender things examined in this article, which linked them together. The recurring associations with the same objects also revealed that people's perceptions towards these individuals with 'different scales of gender transgression' were sometimes interrelated.[104] Meanwhile, the varying usage and sometimes contrasting meanings engendered by these recurring objects showcased these individuals' different agency and positionalities. Reading such diverse positionalities and multi-layered agency revealed through objects requires more than an umbrella, essentialist 'transgender' identity derived from a Eurocentric context or other related progressivist or transnormative frameworks for subject formation. Centring objects in transgender history is a new way of thinking beyond these categories and frameworks, and hopefully, a small step towards building a more dynamic Global South trans-epistemology and ontology.

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ENDNOTES

[1] The Ming (1368–1644) and the Qing (1644–1911) were the last two imperial dynasties in Chinese history, before the establishment of the Republic of China. Scholars in Anglophone academia also refer to this period as 'late imperial China'. These two dynasties tend to be examined together in works on gender and sexuality, see Wu Cuncun, *Homoerotic Sensibilities in*

Late Imperial China (London: Routledge Curzon, 2004), pp. 3–5. Susan Mann discusses the 'late imperial transformations' of gender relations in Chinese history, see Mann, *Gender and Sexuality in Modern Chinese History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 15–19. For a broader discussion 'on the importance of studying the Ming and Qing as one historical unit', see Evelyn Rawski, 'Economic and Social Foundations of Late Imperial Culture', in David Johnson, Andrew Nathan and Evelyn S. Rawski (eds), *Popular Culture in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), p. 3; cited from Wu, *Homoerotic Sensibilities*, p. 182.

[2] Craig Clunas, *Superfluous Things: Material Culture and Social Status in Early Modern China* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991). For other works on objects in Ming-Qing China, see examples: Wai-yee Li, 'The Collector, the Connoisseur, and Late-Ming Sensibility', *T'oung Pao* LXXXI (1995), pp. 269–302; Dorothy Ko, *The Social Life of Inkstones: Artisans and Scholars in Early Qing China* (University of Washington Press, 2007); Sophie Volpp, *The Substance of Fiction: Literary Objects in China, 1550–1775* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022); Judith Zeitlin, 'The Cultural Biography of a Musical Instrument: Little Hulei as Sounding Object, Antique, Prop and Relic', *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studie*s 69 (2009), pp. 395–441.

[3] Francesca Bray, *Technology and Gender: Fabrics of Power in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), pp. 43–47. Also on gender and objects, see Dorothy Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers: Women and Culture in Seventeenth-Century China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994); Jean Wetzel, 'Hidden Connections: Courtesans in the Art World of the Ming Dynasty', *Women's Studies* 31 (2002), pp. 646–65; Sophie Volpp, 'The Gift of a Python Robe: The Circulation of Objects in Jin Ping Mei', *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 65 (2005), pp. 133–58; Francesca Bray, *Technology, Gender and History in Imperial China: Great Transformations Reconsidered* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), pp. 117–18.

[4] For more discussion on the term 'trans-', see Hongwei Bao, *Queer China: Lesbian and Gay Literature and Visual Culture under Postsocialism* (Routledge: London, 2020), pp. 153–54; Helen Hok-Sze Leung, 'Trans on Screen', in Howard Chiang (ed.), *Transgender China* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 185; Susan Stryker, Paisley Currah and Lisa Jean Moore, 'Introduction: Trans-, Trans, or Transgender?', *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly* 36 (2008), pp. 11–22.

[5] Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), vol. 87, p. 161.

[6] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Taylor & Francis Group, 2006), pp. 185–90; Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York: Taylor & Francis Group, 2011), vol. xxi–xxiv, pp. 181–5.

[7] Dorothy Ko, *Cinderella's Sisters: A Revisionist History of Footbinding* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), p. 140.

[8] Bray, *Technology, Gender and History in Imperial China*, p. 184; pp. 255–60.

[9] Charlotte Furth, 'Androgynous Males and Deficient Females: Biology and Gender Boundaries in Sixteenth and Seventeenth-Century China', *Late Imperial China* 9 (1988), pp. 4–6; Matthew H. Sommer, *Sex, Law and Society in Late Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), pp. 116–18; Giovanni Vitiello, *The Libertine's Friend: Homosexuality and Masculinity in Late Imperial China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), pp. 32–5.

[10] To 'pass' in the trans/gender context usually means the 'effacement of the prior gender role', 'to live successfully in the gender of choice' or to be 'accepted as a natural member of that gender'. See Sandy Stone, 'The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto', *Camera Obscura* 10 (1992), pp. 165–6.

[11] For discussion on how objects in literary sources can function as historical evidence about Ming-Qing material culture and historical contexts, see Volpp, *The Substance of Fiction*; Wai-yee Li, *The Promise and Peril of Things Literature and Material Culture in Late Imperial China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022).

[12] Howard Chiang, 'Imagining Transgender China', in Howard Chiang (ed.), *Transgender China* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 6; Susan Stryker, 'De/Colonizing Transgender Studies of China', in *Transgender China*, pp. 287–81; C. Riley Snorton and Jin Haritaworn, 'Trans Necropolitics: A Transnational Reflection on Violence, Death, and the Trans of Color Afterlife', in Susan Stryker and Aren Z. Aizura (eds), *Transgender Studies Reader 2* (New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 67.

[13] Howard Chiang, *Transtopia in the Sinophone Pacific* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021), pp. 4–6.

[14] *Xianggong* does not have a modern Western equivalent. They were mostly feminine-presenting male-assigned individuals who cross-dressed to perform for female roles on stage, and provided sexual and entertaining services to male patrons off stage in the Qing dynasty. Some scholars even considered *xianggong* as synonymous with sex workers in the late Qing context. See Guo Chao, *Chinese Traditional Theatre and Male Dan: Social Power, Cultural Change and Gender Relations* (Abindon; New York: Routledge, 2022), pp. 42–44; Wu, *Homoerotic Sensibilities*, pp. 113–17.

[15] Stone, 'The Empire Strikes Back', p. 166.

[16] Tom Boellstorff, Mauro Cabral, Micha Cárdenas, Trystan Cotten, Eric A. Stanley, KalaniopuaYoung and Aren Z. Aizura, 'Decolonizing Transgender: A Roundtable Discussion', *TSQ* 1 (2014), pp. 419–39; Chiang, 'Imagining Transgender China'; Alyosxa Tudor, 'Decolonizing Trans/Gender Studies?: Teaching Gender, Race, and Sexuality in Times of the Rise of the Global Right', *TSQ* 8 (2021), pp. 238–56; Aniruddha Dutta and Raina Roy, 'Decolonizing Transgender in India: Some Reflections', *TSQ* 1 (2014), pp. 320–21.

[17] For critiques on such medicalised, techno-determinist and modern emphasises on trans history, see Zavier Nunn, 'Trans Liminality and the Nazi State', *Past & Present* 260 (2023), p. 124; Jules Gill-Peterson, 'Trans of Color Critique before Transsexuality', *TSQ* 5 (2018), pp. 606–20.

[18] For example, Charlotte Furth uses she/he to refer to the sex-changing Li Liangyu in 'Androgynous Males and Deficient Females', pp. 10, 22; for other choices of translation, see Sophie Volpp, 'The Discourse on Male Marriage: Li Yu's "A Male Mencius's Mother"', *positions* 2 (1994), pp. 113–31; Olivia Milburn, 'Bodily Transformations: Responses to Intersex Individuals in Early and Imperial China', *NAN NÜ* 16 (2014), pp. 1–28.

[19] There was no third person feminine pronoun in Chinese as a translational equivalent for 'she' until 1917; see Coraline Jortay, 'War of Words and Gender: Pronominal Feuds of the Republican Period and the Early PRC', in Séagh Kehoe and Gerda Wielander (eds), *Cultural China 2020: The Contemporary China Centre Review* (London: University of Westminster Press, 2021), pp. 123–4.

[20] Scott Larson, 'Laid Open: Examining Genders in Early America', in Greta LaFleur, Masha Raskolnikov and Anna Kłosowska (eds), *Trans Historical: Gender Plurality before the Modern* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2021), pp. 350–65.

[21] For discussions on the erasure of gender-variant and trans individuals' subjectivities by dominant cisgender readings of histories and how to invite these figures to speak back, see M. W. Bychowski, 'The Transgender Turn: Eleanor Rykener Speaks Back', in Greta LaFleur, Masha Raskolnikov and Anna Kłosowska (eds), *Trans Historical: Gender Plurality before the Modern* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2021), pp. 95–113.

[22] Jen Manion, *Female Husbands: A Trans History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 13–14.

[23] Jacob Hale, 'Consuming the Living, Dis(Re)membering the Dead in the Butch/ FTM Borderlands', *GLQ* 4 (1998), pp. 311–48.

[24] Linda D. Wayne, 'Neutral Pronouns: A Modest Proposal Whose Time Has Come', *Canadian Woman Studies* 24 (2005); Chiang, 'Imagining Transgender China', p. 6.

[25] Yahia Zhengtang Ma, 'Queering Transgender and Translation', *TSQ* 9 (2022), pp. 304–307; A. Finn Enke, 'Translation', *TSQ* 1 (2014), pp. 241–44; David Gramling and Aniruddha Dutta, 'Introduction', *TSQ* 3 (2016), pp. 333–56.

[26] Ko, *Cinderella's Sisters*, pp. 138l–138m, pp. 176–86. For discussion on the changing ethnic meanings behind the practice of foot-binding, see Mann, *Gender and Sexuality in Modern Chinese History*, pp. 17–19; Dorothy Ko, 'The Body as Attire: The Shifting Meanings of Footbinding in Seventeenth-Century China', *Journal of Women's History* 8 (1997), pp. 8–27. For connections between foot-binding and women's social status, see Ko, *Cinderella's Sisters*, pp. 182–86; pp. 193–95; Dorothy Ko, 'The Written Word and the Bound Foot: A History of the Courtesan's Aura', in Ellen Widmer and Kang-i Sun Chang (eds), *Writing Women in Late Imperial China* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 1997), pp. 74–100.

[27] For more discussion on Li Liangyu's case, see Furth, 'Androgynous Males and Deficient Females', pp. 8–16; Milburn, pp. 18–27; Li Mengyun, '*Xingbie bianluan yu wenxue shuxie: Longqing ernian Shanxi nanzi hua nü shijian de xushi yanjiu*' 性别变乱与文学书写—隆庆二年山西男子化女事件的叙事研究 (Sexual Displacement and Literary Creation: A Study of the Narration of a Man's Transformation into a Woman in Shanxi in the Second Year of the Longqing Period of the Ming Dynasty), *Yunnan daxue xuebao (shehui kexue ban) 云南大学学报 (社会科学版)* (*The Journal of Yunnan University, The Volume of Social Sciences*) 10 (2011), pp. 60–66.

[28] Li, '*Xingbie bianluan yu wenxue shuxie*', p. 61; Furth, 'Androgynous Males and Deficient Females', p. 9.

[29] Li Xu, Nanzi bian nü 男子變女, *Jieyan laoren manbi* 戒庵老人漫筆 (Jottings by the Old Man Jieyan) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1982), vol. 8, pp. 181–2.

[30] Lu Renlong, *Xi'anfu fu bie qi, Heyangxian nan hua nü* 西安府夫別妻 郃陽縣男化女(Husband left the Wife in Xi'an, A Man Turned into a Woman in Heyang County) in *Xingshiyan* 型世言 (Words to Shape the World) (Ji'nan: Qilu shushe, 1995), pp. 321–28.

[31] Ao Huang, 'Retribution, Reward, and Reincarnation: Gender Nonnormativity as the Supernatural in Late Imperial China's Gender System', *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 31 (2022), pp. 307–09.

[32] Lu, *Xi'anfu fu bie qi, Heyangxian nan hua nü*, p. 326.

[33] Lu, *Xi'anfu fu bie qi, Heyangxian nan hua nü*, p. 326.

[34] Ko, *Cinderella's Sisters*, p. 183.

[35] Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers*, p. 149.

[36] Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers*, p. 149.

[37] Wu, *Homoerotic Sensibilities*, pp. 115–16.

[38] Guo, *Chinese Traditional Theatre and Male Dan*, pp. 1–2; Wu Cuncun and Mark Stevenson, 'Male Love Lost: The Fate of Male Same-Sex Prostitution in Beijing in the Late 19th and Early 20th Centuries', in Fran Martin et al. (eds), *Embodied Modernities: Corporeality, Representation, and Chinese Cultures* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2006), pp. 45–6.

[39] See Wu Changyuan, *Yanlan xiaopu* 燕蘭小譜 (A Small Book on the Orchids of Yan), in Zhang Cixi (ed.), *Qingdai yandu liyuan shiliao: zhengxu bian* 清代燕都梨園史料 : 正續編 (Historical Materials on Opera Circles of the Capital in the Qing Dynasty) (Beijing: Zhongguo xiju chubanshe, 1988), p. 46; Qian Yong, *Wu Yun* 五雲(Five Clouds), in *Lüyuan Conghua* 履園叢話 (Collected Tales of the Lü Garden) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1979), p. 623; Zhou Lianggong, *Jia nan jia nü* 假男假女 (Fake Men and Fake Women), in *Min zaji* 閩雜記 (Miscellany of the Min) (Fuzhou: Fujian renmin chubanshe, 1985), p. 107.

[40] Wu Hanchi, *Qiekou dacidian* 切口大詞典 (Dictionary of Secret Language) (Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1989), section 283, p. 23.

[41] Chou Hui-ling, 'Striking Their Own Poses: The History of Cross-Dressing on the Chinese Stage', *TDR* 41 (1997), p. 137.

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[43] Wu Hanchi, *Qiekou dacidian*, section p. 283.
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[45] Li Yu, *Xiewa* 鞋襪 (Shoes and Socks), in *Xianqing Ouji* 閑情偶寄 (Sketches of Idle Pleasure) (Hangzhou: Zhejiang guji chubanshe, 1985), pp. 127–8.
[46] Robert van Gulik, *Sexual Life in Ancient China: A Preliminary Survey of Chinese Sex and Society from ca. 1500 B.C. till 1644 A.D.* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2003), p. 218; Keith MacMahon, *Misers, Shrews, and Polygamists: Sexuality and Male-Female Relations in Eighteenth-Century Chinese Fiction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), pp. 127–8, 133.
[47] Li, Nanzi bian nü, p. 182.
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[49] Wu, *Homoerotic Sensibilities*, pp. 130–40.
[50] He Gangde, *Chunming menglu* 春明夢錄 (Records of dreams at the [Gate of] Spring Brightness) (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1983), vol. 2, pp. 53–4.
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[52] Sommer, 'Dangerous Males', p. 74; Cuncun, *Homoerotic Sensibilities*, pp. 117–18.
[53] Sommer, 'Dangerous Males', pp. 74–78; Sommer, *Sex*, pp. 129–30.
[54] Wu, *Homoerotic Sensibilities*, pp. 118–19.
[55] Jules Gill-Peterson, 'The Trans Woman of Color's History of Sexuality', *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 32 (2023), pp. 97–98. Also see C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (University of Minnesota Press, 2017).
[56] Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chamber*, pp. 149–76.
[57] Home embroidery marked a class line between elite women and lower-class women, as the latter group might have been busy with weaving. See Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chamber*, p. 176; Susan Mann, 'Women's Work in the Ningbo Area, pp. 1900–1936', in Thomas G. Rawski and Lillian M. Li (eds), *Chinese History in Economic Perspective* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), p. 262.
[58] Bray, *Technology and Gender*, p. 116.
[59] Like *xianggong*, *longyang* does not have a direct Western equivalent. It was used to indicate a man's younger male-assigned lover. It was also sometimes used to refer to male-assigned entertainers. The expression originally came from the legend of the Lord Longyang, who was a lover of the King of Wei (reigning from 276 to 243 bc) during the Zhou Dynasty. Previous scholarship has translated *longyang* as 'catamites'. See Vitiello, *The Libertine's Friend*, pp. 3–4; pp. 25–7.
[60] Li Yu, *Nan mengmu jiaohe sanqian* 男孟母教合三遷 (A Male Mencius's Mother Raises Her Son Properly by Moving House Three Times), in *Wu shengxi* 無聲戲 (Silent Operas) (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1989), pp. 103–104. For more detailed discussion on this work, see Volpp, 'The Discourse on Male Marriage, pp. 113–32.
[61] Mann, *Gender and Sexuality in Modern Chinese History*, p. 10.
[62] Li, *Nan mengmu jiaohe sanqian*, p. 104.
[63] Xie Kun, *Chou Ba Gu'niang* 仇八姑娘 (The Eighth Daughter of the Chou Household) in Chuncaotang congshu 春草堂叢書 (Collectanea from the Springtime Cottage) (Quyi: Kuiwenzhai, 1845), vol. 31, p. 52. [https://ctext.org/library.pl?if=gb&file=193952&page=113]
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[67] Yuan, *Dian miangu xiucai banshi nüzhuan*, p. 25.
[68] Wang Jide, *Nan wanghou* 男王后 (A Male Queen), in Chen Wannai (ed.), *Quan Ming zaju* 全明雜劇 (Collections of Ming zaju) (Taipei: Dingwen shuju, 1979), p. 3197.
[69] Ji Yun, *Yuewei caotang biji* 閱微草堂筆記 (Jottings from the Yuewei Grass Hut), (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe: 1980), p. 32.
[70] Ji *Yuewei caotang biji*, p. 32.
[71] Wu, *Homoerotic Sensibilities*, p. 44.
[72] Vitiello, *The Libertine's Friend*, pp. 3–4, pp. 25–7.

[73] Zuizhu jushi, Longyang yishi 龍陽逸史 (The Forgotten History of Longyang), chapter 1, in Chen Qinghao and Wang Qiugui (eds), *Siwuxie huibao* 思無邪滙寶 (Taipei: Taiwan daying baike, 1995), vol. 5, p. 80.
[74] Zuizhu jushi, Longyang yishi, p. 81.
[75] Chen Shaohai, *Honglou fumeng* 紅樓復夢 (Dreaming Again in the Red Chamber) (Shenyang: Chunfeng wenyi chubanshe, 1988), p. 911.
[76] Xie, *Chou Ba Gu'niang*, p. 52.
[77] Sommer, *Sex*, p. 118.
[78] Li Yu, *Wu shengxi*, p. 104; Jide, *Nan wangho*, pp. 3174–6.
[79] Xiaoqiao Ling, '夷虜淫毒之慘」—借《西廂記》閱讀《海陵佚史》(Debauchery and Barbarity: Reading Retrieved History of Hailing against The Western Wing)', *清華中文學報 Tsing Hua Journal of Chinese Literature* 12 (2014), pp. 153–200.
[80] Wuzhe Daoren, *Hailing yishi* 海陵佚史 (The Forgotten Story of the Prince of Hailing), in *Siwuxie huibao*, vol. 1, 55; also see Vitiello, *The Libertine's Friend*, vol. 34, p. 219.
[81] Vitiello, *The Libertine's Friend*, p. 219.
[82] H. Laura Wu, 'Through the Prism of Male Writing: Representation of Lesbian Love in Ming-Qing Literature', *Nan nü* 4 (2002), pp. 19–34.
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[84] Taoyuan Zuihua Zhuren, *Bieyouxiang* 別有香 (An Exotic Fragrance), in *Siwuxie huibao*, vol. 8, p. 127.
[85] Taoyuan Zuihua Zhuren, *Bieyouxiang*, p. 127.
[86] Yang Benren, *Daqing lüli xing'an xinzuan jicheng* 大清律例刑案新纂集成 (A New Compendium of the Great Qing Legal Cases) (Edition in SOAS Library, 1823), vol. 15, p. 14.
[87] Yang, *Daqing lüli xing'an xinzuan jicheng*, p. 14.
[88] Yang, *Daqing lüli xing'an xinzuan jicheng*, p. 14.
[89] Yang, *Daqing lüli xing'an xinzuan jicheng*, p. 14.
[90] Wu Zhichang, *Yaoren Xingda* 妖人邢大 (The A Sorcerer Xingda), in *Kechuang Xianhua* 客窗閑話 (Miscellaneous Stories Told by Guests), (Changchun: shidai wenyi chubanshe, 1987), p. 229.
[91] Wu, *Yaoren Xingda*, p. 229.
[92] Wu, *Yaoren Xingda*, p. 229. This is also documented in the official record of Xing Da's case: 'Xing Da and Liu Liu sodomised each other'. – see Yang Benren, p. 14.
[93] '*Nanban nü zhuang* 男扮女裝 (A Man Dressing as a Woman)', Shenbao 申報, 16 May 1873, 321, p. 2.
[94] '*Nanban nü zhuang*', p. 2.
[95] '*Nanban nü zhuang*', p. 2.
[96] '*Nanban nü zhuang*', p. 2.
[97] Zhang Cixi, *Yandu Mingling Zhuan* 燕都名伶传 (Biography of Famous Beijing Actors), in *Qingdai yandu liyuan shiliao*, p. 1186.
[98] Jiang Zhichai, *Dumenshi xiaolu* 都門識小錄 (Brief Records on Things in the Capital), cited in Yao Shuyi, *Wan'Qing xiqu de biange* 晚清戲曲的變革 (The Transformation of Late-Qing Theatre) (Taipei: Xiuwei zixun, 2013), p. 204.
[99] *Nanban nü zhuang*, Shenbao, p. 2.
[100] Goldman, 'Actors and Aficionados', p. 52; M. J. Meijer, 'Homosexual Offences in Ch'ing Law', *T'oung Pao* 71 (1985), p. 114; Sommer, *Sex*, p. 157.
[101] For more discussions on the history of trans-femininity and sex work, see Jessica Hinchy, *Governing Gender and Sexuality in Colonial India: The Hijra, c. pp. 1850–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Jamey Jesperson, 'Trans Misogyny in the Colonial Archive: Re-Membering Trans Feminine Life and Death in New Spain', pp. 1604–1821, *Gender & History* 36 (2023); Gill-Peterson, 'The Trans Woman of Color's History of Sexuality', pp. 96–7.
[102] Xingzuisheng (Wang Kangnian), *Yaoren* 妖人 (A Sorcerer), in *Zhuangxie xuanlu* 莊諧選錄 (Selective Records of Both Serious and Humorous Matters) (Shanghai: Zhenhuan shuju, 1915), vol. 1, p. 208.
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