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Sketching out the *Tomboy*:
Contemporary Conceptualisations of the
Tomboy Identity in Lesbian Communities
in China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan

Carman Ka Man Fung
0000-0002-3872-2565

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Screen and Cultural Studies,
School of Culture and Communication,
Faculty of Arts

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Abstract

This thesis examines the conceptualisations, uses, and politics of the lesbian secondary gender¹ “*tomboy*” within lesbian communities in China (PRC), Hong Kong, and Taiwan during the late 2010s. The term *tomboy* has been widely used by queer women in these communities to describe masculine lesbian expressions, fashion, and/or gender role for over four decades.² Screen representations of *tomboy* originating from within the Chinese-speaking world and from neighbouring Asian regions were particularly popular among these women during the late 2000s and early 2010s. And yet, since the 1990s³ and increasingly today, a growing section of these communities has been calling for a collective rejection of *tomboy*, claiming that it reinforces conservative patriarchal and heteronormative values and is therefore anti-feminist.

This thesis draws on life stories from those caught between the once-popular use of *tomboy* and their newfound anti-*tomboy* feminist sensibilities. It explores the stories of the many women who decided to abandon their *tomboy* identity in search of their real gender, women who turn to American queer media in hopes of finding true feminist lesbian representations, those who struggle with whether to identify as *tomboy* or not, and those who in the process of self-searching no longer see themselves as lesbians or women at all. It analyses how contemporary debates about the *tomboy* in turn shape the ways in which these individuals think about gender, sexual identity, the self, geographies, and cultures.

This thesis also examines the contributions that transnational queer screen representations make to popular conceptualisations of the *tomboy* and these related ideas. It combines textual analysis of relevant screen texts circulating within the communities in question with in-depth empirical interview data revealing participants’ interpretations of these screen texts. This thesis thus offers a critical engagement with

the media materials that contribute to the cultural production of the *tomboy* identity, and more urgently, it is also a critical engagement with the intimate, conceptual, and affective worlds of those who live out this identity.

¹ The term “secondary gender” was first used by Jennifer Robertson (1992) to describe the masculine and feminine gender attributes performed by female theatre actors in late nineteenth-century to mid twentieth-century Japan. It has since been used by scholars (Li, 2011; Martin, 2006) to describe lesbian sub-labels in Chinese-speaking contexts.

² See Chao, 1996, 2000, 2001; Gian, 1997; Hu, 2017a; Kam, 2008; Lai, 2007; Leung, 2008; Li, 2017; Martin, 2006, 2010; D. T.-S. Tang, 2011; Tong, 2008; Zheng, 1997.

³ See Martin, 2006; P. Wang, 2001.

Declaration

I declare that

- (i) the thesis comprises only my original work towards the Doctor of Philosophy degree except where indicated in the preface;
- (ii) due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used;
and
- (iii) the thesis is fewer than the maximum word limit in length, exclusive of tables, maps, bibliographies and appendices as approved by the Research Higher Degrees Committee.

Signed: Carman Ka Man Fung (28 Apr 2021)

Preface

This thesis is supported by the Melbourne Research Scholarship from the University of Melbourne, and by the Graduate Research in Arts Travel Scheme and Arts Graduate Research International Grant from the Faculty of Arts at the University of Melbourne. I must give my deepest thanks to the Faculty and the University for their support.

The publication status of thesis content appearing in other publications are as follows: Chapter Four is submitted to an edited book currently being considered by the Hong Kong University Press and is in revision following peer review; portions of Chapters Two and Three appear in a journal article published by the *Journal of Lesbian Studies* on 29 Nov 2019. All are single-authored.

Acknowledgement

This thesis was written on the lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation. I pay my respect to their Elders past, present and emerging. In my thesis I address perceptions of Western sexual modernity in the Sinophone world, this perception is often imaginary in nature but the violence of settler coloniality in Australia today is not only materially enforced and felt, but also ongoing. I therefore wish to draw my reader's attention to the activism fighting against this violence and especially to those fighting for justice for Aboriginal deaths in custody.

Writing at a time of abundant violence and horror in Australia, throughout the world amidst the covid-19 pandemic, and in my home city Hong Kong, I am quite often overcome with despair, but in the darkest hours I was uplifted by—and in many ways, saved by—the opportunity to still do meaningful work with this project, and I am so very grateful to every person who has made this journey possible.

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“Look up and there’s still the sky, unbreakable as it is.

Look down and immerse in your work, there’s still wisdom there.

Ideas are theftproof.

Feelings of despair and powerlessness are all evidences of our perseverance.”

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Filmography and Copyright Statement

- *Girls Love* [web series] (*cuole xingbie bucuo ai*, 2016, dir. Jackie Lee, PRC: LESDO)
- *Last Friends* [television series] (*Rasuto Furenzu*, 2008, dir. Watanabe Tsuneya, Japan: Fuji TV)
- *The L Word* [television series] (2004-2009, dir. Ilene Chaiken, USA: Showtime)
- *Yes or No* [film] (*Yes or No: Yak Rak Ko Rak Loei*, 2010, dir. Sarasawadee Wongsompetch, Thailand: Come On Sweet)
- *Yes or No 2* [film] (*Yes or No 2: Rak Mai Rak Ya Kak Loei*, 2012, dir. Sarasawadee Wongsompetch, Thailand: Come On Sweet)
- *Yes or No 2.5* [film] (*Yes or No: 2.5: Klap Ma Pheua Rak Thoe*, 2015, dir. Kirati Nak-intanon, Thailand: Come On Sweet)

Use of screencaps from and references made to these texts fall under fair use.

Notes on Translations

This thesis draws on interviews with Chinese-speaking participants from China (PRC), Hong Kong, and Taiwan. Mainland Chinese participants were interviewed in either Mandarin Chinese or Cantonese Chinese; Hong Kong participants were interviewed in Cantonese; and Taiwanese participants were interviewed in Mandarin. English was used supplementarily by participants of Chinese-English bilingual proficiency.

Transliterations from Chinese to English will use the Hanyu Pinyin system. All Chinese-to-English translations are my own unless stated otherwise. In the case of code-mixing with and code-switching to English, direct quotes will appear *italicised* to indicate that words were said in English rather than Chinese. To distinguish these instances from the emphasis I will be placing on some of these quotes, I will use **bold** for emphasis with all interview data.

Glossary

This thesis discusses a number of terms used to indicate sexual and/or gender identifications in non-heterosexual communities in China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. This glossary provides a general guide on the meanings of these terms and explain how they will be used in this thesis.

Lesbian See *Nü Tongzhi* (below)

Nü Tongzhi In contemporary China (PRC), Hong Kong, and Taiwan, *tongzhi* (literally (女同志) “same-will”) is an umbrella term encompassing all non-normative gender and sexual identifications. With the added prefix *nü* (“female”), *nü tongzhi* is generally used to denote all assigned-female-at-birth individuals who are attracted to women.

In this thesis, I translate *nü tongzhi* into English as “lesbian.” This is mainly because the participants themselves do use *nü tongzhi* and the English word *lesbian* interchangeably. The reader might want to keep in mind that *lesbian* in this context (i.e. as the English translation of *nü tongzhi*) include all non-heterosexual female-assigned people, including those who are not exclusively attracted to women and may identify as bisexual or pansexual.

Tomboy The English word *tomboy* in contemporary Chinese contexts refers to masculine gender role in lesbian relationships and/or masculine lesbian expressions. It is a sub-type of *nü tongzhi*. The term is usually abbreviated to *TB* in Hong Kong and to *T* in China and Taiwan. In this thesis, I use the word *tomboy* in full throughout for consistency purpose except in instances where direct quotes using the abbreviations *T* and *TB* are cited.

Generally speaking, those who identify as *tomboys* are romantically paired

with normatively gendered women (see *TBG* and *Po*).

TBG The term is an abbreviation of the English phrase “tomboy’s girl.” *TBG* is used by Hong Kong’s lesbian community to refer to the normatively feminine romantic partner of the *tomboy*.

Whether *TBG* is a sub-type of *nü tongzhi* is controversial as some see *TBG* women as essentially heterosexual.

TBG is generally understood as equivalent to the mainland Chinese/Taiwanese term *po*. Therefore, I will use the phrase *TBG/po* to refer to this category throughout.

Po The term is an abbreviation of the Chinese word for wife, *lao po* (老婆), and is often shortened to *P*. The term refers to the normatively feminine romantic partner of the *tomboy*. It was first used by the lesbian community in Taiwan and subsequently adopted by the lesbian community in China.

Whether *po* is a sub-type of *nü tongzhi* is controversial as some see *po* women as essentially heterosexual.

Po is generally understood as equivalent to the Hong Kong term *TBG*. Therefore, I will use the phrase *TBG/po* to refer to this category throughout.

Chapter One: Introduction

It was January 2019, and the hot topic of the month among my Hong Kong and Taiwanese lesbian friends was an online article published by the Taiwanese feminist web magazine *Womany* calling on lesbians to stop self-identifying as *tomboy* and *TBG/po*.¹ For over four decades, lesbians in Hong Kong and Taiwan have used *tomboy* to describe a masculine lesbian gender role and/or masculine lesbian expressions (Chao, 1996, 2000, 2001; Gian, 1997; Hu, 2017a; Kam, 2008; Lai, 2007; Leung, 2008; Li, 2017; Martin, 2006, 2010; D. T.-S. Tang, 2011; Tong, 2008; Zheng, 1997). A *tomboy* is usually partnered with a normatively feminine woman, known as *TBG* in Hong Kong and *Po* in Taiwan (Fung, 2019; Gian, 1997; Lai, 2007; Zheng, 1997).

These secondary genders were called into question by the article circulating among my friends. The article argued that lesbians who use secondary genders are in fact imposing heteronormative binary gender on themselves, and that lesbians should abandon their *tomboy* identity and embrace femininity again. This is, without a doubt, a complicated feminist argument that raises an important question about what lesbian genders should be. But in addition to this argument itself, there were three other aspects of this article worth unpacking.

First, this piece of writing was a product of Hong Kong-Taiwan connections. The author was a Hong Kong lesbian writing under the name Kayla and she addressed both Hong Kong and Taiwanese lesbian readers alike. Second, to make her point Kayla turned to Japanese popular media. Her article contained a still of the fictional character Ruka (played by actress Juri Ueno) from the 2008 Japanese television drama *Last Friends* (*Rasuto Furenzu*, dir. Watanabe Tsuneya) (Figure 1). But rather than discussing the drama in the main text, Kayla simply used this image of Ruka to illustrate what a

real-life *tomboy* in Hong Kong and Taiwan looked like. Third, Kayla wrote at length about lesbian studies and lesbian culture in America.² She implied (incorrectly) that U.S. lesbians have long replaced secondary genders (i.e. butch and femme) *completely* with gender fluidity and androgyny, and she encouraged her fellow Hong Kong and Taiwanese lesbian readers to do the same. What these examples show is that the feminist critique of secondary genders is cross-regional and transnational in the sense that it (a) takes place at the intersection of Hong Kong and Taiwan; (b) involves the use of Japanese media to visually represent the real-life *tomboys* it criticises; and (c) draws from American lesbian culture, and in turn creates its own imagination of what American lesbian culture is.

This image/material has been removed by the author of this thesis for copyright reasons.

Figure 1, screenshot of the *Womany* article, which contains a still from *Last Friends*

Strange as it may seem, I soon came across another, remarkably similar article.³ This second article came from the People's Republic of China (hereinafter referred to as

the PRC), where lesbians had adopted *tomboy* and *po* from Taiwan and Hong Kong in the 2000s (Engebretsen, 2014; Kam, 2014; Sang, 2003). The article was published by Beijing Tongzhi Centre on WeChat in February 2019, and the author similarly called for mainland Chinese lesbians to stop forcing restrictive and heteronormative secondary genders on themselves. Curiously enough, this author also used a still of a non-Chinese Asian screen text to visually represent real-life *tomboy* and *TBG/po*: the film used was *Yes or No* (dir. Sarasawadee Wongsompetch) (Figure 2), a 2010 Thai lesbian romantic comedy. But the similarities between the two articles do not stop here. The unnamed Beijing author, like Kayla, concluded her article by suggesting that lesbians in the West did not use secondary genders, and similarly proposed that those in the PRC should catch up.

This image/material has been removed by the author of this thesis for copyright reasons.

Figure 2, screenshot of the WeChat article containing a screen shot of the *tomboy* character (left) from *Yes or No*

These examples epitomise the complexities of thinking about secondary genders in the PRC, Hong Kong, and Taiwanese lesbian communities today. There is, first and foremost, a thriving feminist critique that questions the validity of *tomboy* and *TBG/po*. It takes issues with their supposed proximity to heterosexuality and appears to make recommendations on proper lesbian genders and self-identity. But the conditions and operations of this critique are also significant. First, this critique is clearly emerging intra-regionally across the PRC, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. Second, it draws on an East and Southeast Asian mediascape to illustrate its points. Third, it also draws from Western (mostly U.S.) queer cultures, in a manner that appears to produce specific ways of seeing the West and America.

Research Objectives and Questions

This thesis is an attempt to unpack these complexities. The central aim is to map out and critically analyse the ways in which Han Chinese lesbian communities in the PRC, Hong Kong, and Taiwan conceptualised the *tomboy* in the late 2010s.

This thesis is important not only to those personally involved in these communities, but also to scholars interested in examining: (a) the ways in which self-identity is discursively constructed; and (b) the ways in which intra-regional and transnational screen cultures contribute to local experiences, sexual knowledges, and imagined geographies. To rephrase these differently, the key research questions are:

1. What and who is the *tomboy*, according to members of lesbian communities in the PRC, Hong Kong, and Taiwan?
2. How do intra-regional and transnational screen representations contribute to these communities' conceptualisations of the *tomboy*?

3. How do these communities' uses of intra-regional and transnational media in turn shape their imaginations of geographic entities (e.g. "the West," "U.S.," and "Asia")?
4. What are the underlying cultural logics in these conceptualisations of the *tomboy*? What do they reveal about the ways in which these lesbians understand "self-identity" and "gender"?

By addressing these questions, this project makes original contributions to the fields of cultural studies, queer theory, media studies, lesbian studies, trans studies, intra-regional queer Asian studies, queer Sinophone studies, as follows.

Overview of Original Contributions

This brief overview is intended to efficiently summarise the thesis's conceptual and empirical contribution. A literature review on scholarship on the *tomboy* will appear later in Chapter Two, and my critical engagement with the relevant theoretical frameworks will appear in the next section.

In terms of this thesis's original contributions, first, this study reinforces cultural studies' position (Hall, 1990) that identities are products of self-reflexivity, and provides actual empirical data to illustrate this. Relatedly, my empirical data also support queer theory's position (Butler, 1999; Halperin, 1995) that sexual identities are discursive constructs rather than pre-discursive given.

Second, this study contributes to media studies by illustrating the process through which individuals use screen representations to conceptualise gender and self-identity. My approach is in line with audience studies (Ang, 1985) and fan studies (Jenkins, 1992, 2003; Li, 2011, 2015, 2017; Zhao, 2013, 2017) in its emphasis on

personal usage of screen texts, and similarly provides empirical evidence to support the view that consumption of media texts is less a decoding process but a meaning-making practice (Jenkins, 1992, 2003).

Third, to the field of lesbian studies, this thesis demonstrates the cultural uniqueness of its case study and underlines the epistemological need to contextualise debates about lesbian identities. Although my case study might appear to closely resemble U.S. feminist debates on butch-femme (Case, 1988; Nestle, 1992), my study shows that the PRC-Hong Kong-Taiwan feminist critique of the *tomboy* operates on its own unique internal logics. Likewise, this thesis also underscores the importance of cultural specificity for trans studies by presenting a discussion on the PRC-Hong Kong-Taiwan lesbian/FtM border war, and by showing that this border war is connected to but also distinctive from comparable Anglophone discourses (Halberstam, 1998).

Fourth, my project contributes to intra-regional queer Asian studies (Martin et al., 2008) and queer Sinophone studies (Chiang & Heinrich, 2014) by formulating a “lesbian Sinophone.” My formulation of a lesbian Sinophone differs from previous scholarship in that my focus is not on minor transnational networks enabling Chinese-language (co-)productions of queer screen representations (A. K. H. Wong, 2012a; Yue, 2012). Instead, I define the lesbian Sinophone as a network made up of materially connected lesbians across the PRC, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, and a network through which *both* Chinese-language queer media and *also* other Asian and American queer media circulate. I will explain this in detail in the following section.

Conceptual Framework

This thesis draws on Michel Foucault's (1978) proposition that sexuality is not an ahistorical, biological given but something produced by discourses.⁴ Adopting Foucault's approach to sexuality allows me to examine the discursive construction of the *tomboy*; that is, to examine the ways in which people describe, articulate, use and thereby produce this category.⁵

I propose that an indispensable element in this discursive construction is the use of intra-regional and transnational media across lesbian communities in the PRC, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, which I will call the lesbian Sinophone. Below, I outline how my formulation of a lesbian Sinophone draws from existing scholarship in Queer Sinophone studies, intra-Asian media studies and intra-regional queer Asian studies, and Queer Globalisation/Americanisation studies.

1. Queer Sinophone

Queer Sinophone studies is an emerging field focusing on the shared experiences across Chinese-speaking queer communities enabled by transnational circulations of media and people (Martin, 2015). The concept of the "Sinophone" was originally developed by Shu-mei Shih (2012) to encompass peripheral articulations of Chineseness outside of the PRC, and in Shih's later clarification also includes colonised non-Han voices within the PRC state. Extending Shih's inclusion of minoritised voices within the PRC, Audrey Yue (2012) formulates the concept of "queer Sinophone cinema" to refer to a transnational network connecting queer Chinese film practices inside and outside of the PRC (as well as to Western film markets). Similar use of the Queer Sinophone rubric can be seen in Alvin Ka Hin Wong's (2012a) work on lesbian

Sinophone cinema. Both Wong and later Howard Chiang (2014a) emphasise the potential of queer Sinophone as an opportunity to complicate the category of China(s), with the latter specifically proposing that the queer Sinophone “is not so much a fixed geopolitical materiality” but a process of “(re/con)figuring China’ as viewed from the ‘outside-in’” (p. 68).

By contrast, my framing of the lesbian Sinophone *does* describe a material network. I define the lesbian Sinophone as *an interconnecting network linking lesbian communities in the PRC, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, and a network in which both Chinese-language queer media and non-Chinese-language Asian and Western queer media and cultures circulate*. In this formulation, cities in the PRC, Hong Kong, and Taiwan all function “as nodes in a decentred network” (Martin, 2015, p. 43).⁶

To analyse the lesbian communities in the PRC, Hong Kong, and Taiwan as one analytical entity rather than three separate ones is not to presuppose or essentialise an innate “Chineseness”—as many scholars (Chiang & Heinrich, 2014; Leung, 2011) caution against—or to ignore the extent to which the vastly different political realities of the three regions can and have shaped regionally-distinctive queer cultures.⁷ However—to *my own* surprise—in analysing the interview data I collected from these three societies, I simply could not find any observable differences that could be easily mapped onto geopolitical differences. On the contrary, many participants were exemplary of a border-crossing lesbian Sinophone sphere. For instance, participants from the PRC and Hong Kong spoke of following Taiwanese *tomboy* internet celebrities (Chapter Three); a popular Shanghainese lesbian blogger recalled importing chest-binders from a Taiwanese *tomboy* to sell to her mainland Chinese readers (Chapter Seven); a mainland Chinese participant from Guangzhou arranged to meet me in Hong Kong while she was in town to see her Hong Kong girlfriend; a Hong Kong participant

introduced me to her internet friend from Tainan (Taiwan), and the three of us met in Taipei (Taiwan) just days after the Taiwanese woman returned from visiting her mainland Chinese girlfriend in Beijing; one participant was a dual citizen of Hong Kong and Taiwan; and finally, a Hong Kong LGBT activist I talked to told me she consciously tried to stay connected with PRC lesbians through visiting lesbian WeChat groups. The lesbian Sinophone rubric captures precisely the materiality of such connections. It troubles the presumption that nation states are necessarily the most appropriate analytical categories and takes into consideration the mobility, both online and offline, exercised by lesbians in the Sinophone sphere.

2. Intra-Asian Media Studies and Intra-Regional Queer Asian Studies

The lesbian Sinophone is a space for sharing both Chinese-language queer screen texts emerging from the PRC, Hong Kong, and Taiwan—and those from other parts of Asia. These circulations can be conceptualised as having a “double layered” structure. At the base level, queer screen materials emerging from the lesbian Sinophone circulate within itself. At the second level, non-Sinophone queer representations (including East Asian, Southeast Asian, and Western Anglophone materials) also circulate within the lesbian Sinophone in particular ways.

This project considers both layers. At the base level, I examine the PRC-made *tomboy*-led web series *Girls Love* (2016) made by PRC lesbian app LESDO prior to censorship of gay and lesbian content in the country in 2016. The web series circulated to Hong Kong and Taiwan through official YouTube distribution. At the second level, I include the Japanese television drama *Last Friends* (2008, dir. Taeko Asano) and Thai lesbian film *Yes or No* (2010, dir. Sarasawadee Wongsompetch), both of which were

used in the two online articles I cited in the introductory anecdote. *Last Friends* circulated into the lesbian Sinophone during its initial 2008 run through being translated and uploaded via torrents by mainland Chinese fans for fellow mainland Chinese as well as Hong Kong and Taiwanese lesbians.⁸ The Thai film *Yes or No* similarly circulated into the lesbian Sinophone through fan-subtitled uploads on digital video platform Bilibili (in the PRC) and YouTube (Hong Kong and Taiwan), as did its similarly *tomboy*-themed sequel *Yes or No 2* (2012, dir. Sarasawadee Wongsompetch) and spin-off *Yes or No 2.5* (2015, dir. Kirati Nak-intanon).⁹ The films were eventually officially released through film festivals, DVDs, and/or streaming services in the three regions.¹⁰

These East and Southeast Asian *tomboy* media do not simply enter the PRC, Hong Kong, and Taiwan separately, but entered all three at once and are in fact *re-routed* through the lesbian Sinophone. This is best exemplified by the 2011 *Yes or No* press tour, during which lead actresses Tina Suppanad Jittaleela and Aom Sucharat Manaying toured the PRC (Guangzhou and Shanghai), Hong Kong, and Taiwan (Taipei)¹¹ in the same trip. Another example is the PRC company LESDO. In addition to releasing its own production, *Girls Love*, in Hong Kong and Taiwan, LESDO was also the official distributor of *Yes or No 2.5* in the PRC. Clearly, it is a node in both layers of media circulation.

This lesbian Sinophone model puts my research in conversation with intra-Asian media scholarship on the one hand, and intra-regional Queer Asian studies on the other hand. For the former, my formulation closely resembles (though does not exactly replicate) Chua Beng Huat's (2012) "East Asian Pop Culture" model. Chua's model identifies Hong Kong and Taiwan as key producers of pop culture products for

Sinophone consumption (here referring to the PRC, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore) between the 1980s and early 2000s.¹² He also recognises Japan and South Korea as key television drama exporters for the same Sinophone markets. My model similarly points to the persistent presence of Japanese television in the lesbian Sinophone (and in mainstream heterosexual societies in the Sinophone sphere), but also highlights the growing prominence of media from Southeast Asia (especially Thailand)¹³ in lesbian Sinophone communities.

My model also connects to intra-regional queer Asian scholarship. Intra-regional queer Asia is a field that focuses on the material and inter-cultural connections across Asia through which sexualities are conceptualised and experienced (Johnson et al., 2000). It conceptualises intra-regional mobilities within Asia as a primary context through which gender and sexualities are formed and felt (S. Tang, 2017; Wilson, 2006). This approach resists the globalist assumption that Asian gender and sexualities either simply copy or reject their Western counterparts, and also opposes a nativist¹⁴ interpretation of Asian gender and sexualities (Martin et al., 2008).

But my model does diverge from this scholarship in a significant manner, in that my model also includes circulations of Western queer cultures via the lesbian Sinophone. A key feature of intra-regional queer Asian studies is that it “decenter[s] Anglo-American knowledge production and thereby reconfigure[s] the global hierarchy of queer knowledge” (Yue, 2017, pp. 20–21). My model in contrast suggests that, in the lesbian Sinophone, intra-regional circulations of queer Asian screen cultures are moving in parallel with those of Western queer screen cultures. I will explain my reasoning in the next section.

3. Westernisation / Americanisation of Sexual Identities

In the early stages of conceiving this project, I wanted to focus exclusively on Sinophone receptions of East and Southeast Asian *tomboy* representations,¹⁵ in a manner that would be completely independent of Western sexual knowledges. But this vision proved to be impossible when my participants began to repeatedly bring up Western lesbian representations (most commonly the U.S. television series *The L Word* [2004-2009, dir. Ilene Chaiken]) *alongside* Asian *tomboy* texts in interviews. It became clear that *both* Asian and Western queer representations circulate through the lesbian Sinophone, and that *both* are read and understood in relation to one another.

While I am mindful of Dennis Altman's warning (1996a, 1996b, 1997) about the homogenising effects of American gay and lesbian cultures, the cases explored in this thesis cannot be reduced to cultural homogenisation because my participants' interpretations of American queer texts are not simply a "Sinophone variation" of the texts' receptions among American lesbians. Instead, participants' readings are connected to cultural logics and assumptions that are specific to the lesbian Sinophone. Therefore, these demonstrate not one-way cultural expansion but a process of cultural translation (Boellstorff, 2003, 2005; Grewal and Kaplan qtd. in Corboz, 2009; Martin, 2008).

At the same time, this process of cultural translation also enables discursive *production* of geographic imaginations. For example, both of the two online articles I cited at the beginning of this introduction present Western/American lesbianism as "post-secondary gender" and implore their readers to adopt a similar post-secondary gender stance. This clearly hints at an imaginative interpretation of (and a longing for) the West/America. In this thesis, I explore my participants' characterisation of the West/America as exemplary of a post-*tomboy* modernity.¹⁶ Drawing on research on

imaginings of Western/American modernity in both queer Asian studies (Benedicto, 2014; Chao, 2000) and Chinese studies (Chen, 1995; Rofel, 1999), I show how Sinophone lesbian communities come to see the *tomboy* as a backward “Asian/Chinese” culture that must be done away with in their pursuit of memberships in global gay cultures.

4. Summary of Conceptual Framework

To summarise, this project takes a discursive approach to the *tomboy* and situates the discursive construction of this category in the lesbian Sinophone. The lesbian Sinophone consists of interconnecting lesbian communities across the PRC, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, and within these networks circulate not only Chinese-language PRC/Hong Kong/Taiwan-made queer representations, but also incoming queer screen materials from East and Southeast Asian mediascapes (e.g. Japan and Thailand) and from the West (including the U.S.). Rather than conceptualising the presence of Western queer representations as necessarily culturally homogenising, I focus on the ways in which these intra-regional and transnational media consumptions in the lesbian Sinophone contribute to participants’ *imaginings* of the West/the U.S. (and relatedly, of Asia/Chinese societies).

Methodology

1. Methodological Framework: Cultural Texts as Generative

The methodology for this thesis has shifted considerably since its original conception. The original idea was to first conduct close readings of East and Southeast

Asian *tomboy* screen texts in an intertextual manner to determine the textual and ideological contours of the *tomboy* personage (c.f. Castle, 1993; Martin, 2010), and then examine (via interviews) audience/fan receptions of these screen representations in the lesbian Sinophone. While my textual analysis remains a part of this thesis, my empirical data differed significantly from my expected research outcome. Rather than discussing the texts extensively and maintaining close personal relationships to the texts (as is usually the case in extant reception and fan studies scholarship),¹⁷ my participants only made fleeting, offhand, and often partial references to the screen texts. Though they did sometimes address specific textual elements,¹⁸ more often they were articulating ideas that arose from their engagements with the texts but *were not directly represented* in the texts themselves.¹⁹

A re-conceptualisation of the function of cultural representations was therefore in order. Because I did prepare my interview questions based on the screen texts and the participants *did* make (however fleeting) references to the texts, in the context of this project, I consider these screen texts to be supplementary “imaginative resources” (Martin, 2008) and necessary background information. This is not to say that the texts are dispensable. On the contrary, these screen texts are meaningful not just in terms of the ideas they directly represent and evoke, but also in terms of the far broader, more diffuse groups of ideas they generate. I am therefore looking at these broader ideas that are *articulated through, made possible by, and/or made in reference* (however attenuated) to screen texts.

I must also address the issue of subtitles. To what extent are viewers’ interpretations of the Japanese and Thai screen texts shaped by subtitles? It is important to underscore that multiple subtitled versions²⁰ are in circulation, each pre-defining the paradigm within which viewers may interpret the stories on Sinophone terms. For the

Japanese series *Last Friends*, both the official Taiwanese DVD release and the fan-generated subtitles I reviewed use the original Japanese gender and sexual categories²¹ rather than the Sinophone term *tomboy*. In these instances, viewers' interpretation of the show's character Ruka as a *tomboy* is likely their own. On the other hand, subtitles for the Thai franchise *Yes or No* are more diversified in their translations. Both the official Taiwanese DVD and some fan-generated subtitles translate the Thai categories *tom* and *dee* directly into *T* and *po*, while other fan-subtitled versions use the original Thai terms instead. The practice of fan subtitling also highlights the fact that there is no clear distinction between translators and viewers in the lesbian Sinophone. This further illustrates how the lesbian Sinophone is active in generating the uses and meanings of the screen texts, rather than passively decoding their (supposedly) embedded meanings.

2. Research Method

The main analytical chapters in this thesis draw on interviews with 40 Han Chinese participants who identified themselves as current or ex-members of their respective local lesbian communities. Interviews were semi-structured, face-to-face, and audio-recorded. All interviews were individual except in cases where a prospective participant invited their friend and/or partner to join. Further demographic information on participants is included in the next section.

Fieldwork was conducted between July and November 2018 in Southeast PRC (Shanghai, Shenzhen, Guangzhou), Hong Kong, Taipei, and Melbourne (where one participant was visiting and where I myself resided). Prior to this, the project received ethics approval from the Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of Melbourne. Participants were given a plain language statement explaining the research

aims and procedures ahead of the interviews. Pseudonyms are used in this thesis to ensure anonymity.

The interview questions were based on six East and Southeast Asian screen representations of *tomboy*. These include the aforementioned Thai film trilogy *Yes or No* consisting of director Sarasawadee Wongsompetch's *Yes or No* (2010) and *Yes or No 2* (2012) as well as the Kirati Nak-intanon directed spin-off story *Yes or No 2.5* (2015); the Japanese television series *Last Friends* (2008, dir. Watanabe Tsuneya); and the mainland Chinese web series *Girls Love* (2016, dir. Jackie Lee). In addition to these screen texts, my original corpus also included the Taiwanese lesbian film *Candy Rain* (2008, dir. Hung-i Chen). However, interview questions about this film failed to prompt substantial discussions from my participants, and I subsequently removed my analysis of this film from this thesis. Since the shaping of this thesis is guided by ideas arising from the data, I ultimately decided to also include analysis of the many unprompted references made to *The L Word*.

Recruitment for this project began in early 2018. My recruitment ads appeared in invite-only lesbian WeChat groups (including both Shanghai-based and PRC nationwide groups), the Hong Kong lesbian app Butterfly, and the lesbian section of the popular Taiwanese bulletin board site PPT. I also received help from the Taiwan Tongzhi Hotline Association and from the Taipei bookshop Fembooks with disseminating the recruitment message.

Snowball sampling was then applied after confirming initial prospective participants. As I pointed out earlier, the snowball sampling exercise itself involved cross-border disseminations such as when a Hong Kong participant introduced me to their Taiwanese friend. Additionally and in the interest of full disclosure, several of the Hong Kong participants and one Taiwanese participant were my own personal contacts

prior to this project, and I have since maintained causal contact with several other participants.

3. Demography

Pseudonym	City / Province of Origin	Interview Location	Interview format	Age	Education level	Self-ascribed label at time of interview
Denise	Guangzhou (PRC)	Guangzhou	Group	20	University	N/A (participant refused to ascribe a label)
Luna	Hangzhou (PRC)	Guangzhou		20	University	H or N/A
Lao Wang	Guangzhou (PRC)	Guangzhou	Individual	29	Postgrad	N/A
Fang-fang	Shanghai (PRC)	Shanghai	Individual	38	University	N/A
Jerry	Shanghai (PRC)	Shanghai	Individual	34	University	N/A
Nana	Shanghai (PRC)	Shanghai	Individual	31	Postgrad	Bisexual
Shay	Shandong (PRC)	Shanghai	Individual	30	University	T
Sophia	Shanghai (PRC)	Shanghai	Individual	36	University	N/A
Tori	Shanghai (PRC)	Shanghai	Individual	18	Secondary	N/A
Juan	Sichuan (PRC)	Shenzhen	Individual	24	University	N/A
Sydney	Changsha (PRC)	Shenzhen	Individual	27	Postgrad	T
Miu	Guangzhou (PRC)	Hong Kong	Individual	25	University	N/A
Charlie	Hong Kong	Hong Kong	Individual	28	Postgrad	TB
Emma	Hong Kong	Hong Kong	Individual	25	Postgrad	N/A
Felicity	Hong Kong	Hong Kong	Individual	24	University	Pure
Hannah	Hong Kong	Hong Kong	Individual	28	University	TB
Jackie	Hong Kong	Hong Kong	Individual	32	Tertiary	TB
Kit	Hong Kong	Hong Kong	Individual	34	Postgrad	Pure
Leslie	Hong Kong	Hong Kong	Individual	32	Tertiary	No Label or TBG
Penelope	Hong Kong	Hong Kong	Individual	39	Postgrad	No Label or TBG
Rene	Hong Kong	Hong Kong	Individual	29	Postgrad	N/A
Sarah	Hong Kong	Hong Kong	Individual	35	Tertiary	No Label
Yan	Hong Kong	Hong Kong	Individual	26	University	Pure
Alex	Hong Kong and Taipei	Hong Kong	Individual	25	Postgrad	Gay
Piper	Hong Kong	Hong Kong and Taipei	Individual and group	27	University	No Label
Billie	Tainan (Taiwan)	Taipei		25	Postgrad	Bufen
Chia-ling	Taipei (Taiwan)	Taipei	Individual	30	University	Bufen

Chia-yu	Taipei (Taiwan)	Taipei	Group	26	University	<i>Bufen</i>
Hui-ju	Taipei (Taiwan)	Taipei		28	University	<i>Bufen</i>
Ellie	Chiayi (Taiwan)	Taipei	Individual	26	Postgrad	<i>Bufen</i>
Huang	Taipei (Taiwan)	Taipei	Individual	22	University	<i>Bufen</i>
Lilian	Taipei (Taiwan)	Taipei	Individual	52	University	<i>Bufen</i>
PP	Taipei (Taiwan)	Taipei	Individual	28	University	<i>Bufen or T</i>
Shih-ting	Taipei (Taiwan)	Taipei	Group	22	University	<i>Bufen</i>
Shu-chen	Taipei (Taiwan)	Taipei		47		<i>Bufen</i>
Tiana	Taipei (Taiwan)	Taipei	Group	28	Postgrad	<i>Bufen</i>
Ting-ting	Kaohsiung (Taiwan)	Taipei		27	University	<i>Bufen</i>
Yu-wen	Tainan (Taiwan)	Taipei		27	Postgrad	<i>Bufen</i>
Wan-ting	Taipei (Taiwan)	Taipei	Individual	27	University	Pansexual & agender
Ya-chi	Taipei (Taiwan)	Taipei	Individual	26	University	N/A

Table 1. Participant Demographics

The sample is made up of 12 mainland Chinese nationals, 12 Hong Kong citizens, 15 Taiwanese participants, and one participant with dual Hong Kong and Taiwanese citizenship. All participants are of Han Chinese ethnicity.

The age range is between 18 and 52, with the majority of participants in their twenties to mid-thirties. In terms of the recruitment process, I did not specify the age of prospective participants as I intended to observe and analyse possible generational gap, but most participants were similar to myself in age (I was twenty-seven at the time of the interviews), possibly because they were the most likely to use online platforms that I was personally familiar with, and also most likely to have viewed the same Asian *tomboy* screen texts that I watched and developed my project from.

The data appearing in this study are often characterised by a form of historical amnesia. Participants in the primary age group (twenties to mid-thirties) are generally unaware of *tomboy's* earlier history in the pre-2000 period. They appear not to have any

strong personal relationships with the older generations, among whom *tomboy* might remain popular.

Given that this project draws centrally from the twenties to mid-thirties age group, it is possible that my central finding (that views on the *tomboy* are almost uniformly negative) may represent only this group. However, I am not suggesting that the *tomboy* is no longer in use among this age group. As the thesis will show, despite this age group's critique of the *tomboy* category, the category in fact persists as an object of critique that still centrally structures their gender performances and everyday lives. This thesis therefore deals with the *critique*, rather than the *disappearance*, of *tomboy* among this age group.

Participants were primarily though not exclusively middle-class. I did not ask participants for their class identification and instead opted to observe contextual clues to their economic status. This decision was partly motivated by a need to quickly build interview rapport (most of the interviews took place immediately after the participants and myself met in person for the first time, and therefore I avoided asking potentially embarrassing questions about their class backgrounds and income levels). My decision not to pose those questions directly was also based on the knowledge that generally class identifications in East Asian societies tend to be ambiguous, as a result of rapid economic development and upward mobility in the late twentieth century (and since the 2000 for the PRC) (Hsiao, 1993, 1999; Lui & Liu, 2019). This is well demonstrated in Ting-Fai Yu's research (2018, 2020a, 2020b) on articulations of class among Hong Kong gay men. Yu shows that, because the emergence of the middle class is relatively new in Hong Kong (as is the case with other East Asian cities), both middle-class gay men and working-class gay men share childhood working-class memories and find it difficult to state their class identities when asked to do so.

Despite this, it is still useful to categorise participants as class subjects for analytical purposes, specifically to identify any potential link between specific class background and conceptualisations of the *tomboy*. As a working definition, I draw on Hsiao's schema (1993, 1999; also employed by Yu [2020a]) and define the middle classes as those who hold professional or managerial positions and/or enjoy opportunities for geographic mobility, and the working class as those who perform manual labour and lack opportunity for upward mobility, and/or have little to no geographic mobility. However, since my sample was primarily middle class and the opinions expressed about the *tomboy* identity were often unanimous, it is not possible to confirm or refute any definite linkage between views on the *tomboy* and class differences.

The fact that most participants did employ scholarly feminist jargon in the interviews might, on the surface, indicate a link between feminist critique of the *tomboy* with middle-class status and intellectual capital through education. However, most participants are not formally trained in feminist criticism at a university level or postgraduate level, and only three participants are trained in gender studies at a postgraduate level. Only further research with a much larger sample can confirm or disprove any strong linkage between feminist criticisms of the *tomboy* and class/educational background. More importantly, feminist criticism of *tomboy* may have wide, cross-class appeal. Below I discuss the ways in which feminist discourses appear in the interview data, as well as my analytical approach to these discourses.

4. Analysing circulations of Feminist Theories

Throughout interviews, participants often drew on feminist ideas. They described the *tomboy* as “patriarchal” and “heteronormative,” and talked extensively

about “rejecting gender stereotypes.” It is evident that they were engaged with various forms of critical gender and queer theories. Yet, when asked to name the writers or critical theories that inspired their comments, participants answered that they were not directly citing specific theories but were simply speaking from the point of view of a feminist common sense widely shared by their lesbian peers.

This feminist common sense is a crucial context to this study. Feminist ideas are routinely reproduced within the lesbian Sinophone in the forms of blogs, forum discussions, casual conversations—and in the case of Taiwan, in public education (Yang, 2020). The online articles appearing at the start of this chapter already exemplify the extent to which feminist ideas are readily available on non-specialist channels. In terms of research methodology, it is very difficult to provide a clear genealogy of these key feminist ideas because they circulate in such diffused forms. Nonetheless, it is useful to point out that feminist ideas will themselves be a part of the interview data (rather than just analytical frameworks with which to interpret the data) in the context of this thesis.

5. Decoding and encoding strategies

Data used in this thesis include observational field notes and selective transcriptions. Data were first analysed through provisional coding drawing on anticipated categories generated from the historical and textual analysis (Chapter Two). A second cycle of pattern-coding was then applied to identify emergent themes or configurations. The analytical chapters (Chapters Three to Seven) each address one central idea or a group of ideas identified in this cycle.

My approach to the interview data is greatly in debt to Queer Asian studies ethnographers and social scientists (Engebretsen, 2014; Jackson, 2016; Kam, 2013; Li,

2011; Sinnott, 2004, 2008; Zhao, 2017), whose work demonstrates the effectiveness of in-depth qualitative analysis in revealing the complicated and often indirect ways in which participants speak of and conceptualise sexuality and gender.

6. Positionality and Ethics

The voices of my participants and my critical analysis of these voices are often at odds. To cite an obvious example, many participants told me about their deliberate choice to self-present in normatively feminine ways (e.g. wearing dresses and makeup), which they claimed was a way for them to express their natural and innate femaleness. As a researcher, I have to point out that this is an obvious example of gender essentialism. Balancing participants' voices and my own has been especially challenging because I do not wish to portray these women as misguided or delusional, and especially not as people in need of my critical intervention to show them how to "correctly" perform gender. At the same time, I resisted the urge to simply relay their views without any critical engagement, for critical engagement is the most important task of the researcher.

Moments like this compelled me to consider and in fact continually re-examine what my role as a researcher is and what my ethical responsibilities to my participants are, and I came to the conclusion that my task is precisely to subject my participants' ideas to rigorous critical interrogation *because* these ideas mean so much to them. To use the gender essentialism example again: the point is exactly that gender essentialism *is real* to these women. They *do* believe in an innate femaleness that they can express through normatively gendered presentations. To describe and examine this logic is not to devalue their convictions, but rather to give this logic the critical attention it deserves.

Therefore, although I remain critical of my participants' arguments and often disagree with them, I do not see myself as reprimanding my participants, but rather as trying to understand their perspectives and to critically untangle the logics beneath.

I must also stress that I am writing as someone who is part of the lesbian Sinophone, who has first-hand experience with many of the practices and debates described in this thesis. My participants' introspections about *tomboy* and proper gender expressions are also something that I grappled with personally and internally. A key goal of this project, then, is to capture the spirit of these debates and introspections, to spell out their underlying logics, and to carefully think them through. It is therefore not a mere critique of, and most definitely not a malicious attack on these communities, but a dedication to them.

Thesis Outline

Following this introduction, the second chapter of this thesis provides the necessary contexts and background information to prepare the reader for my analysis of the interview data in later chapters. The first half of Chapter Two is a historical literature review examining the ways in which female masculinity and the *tomboy* category have been conceptualised in early twentieth century to early 2000s Sinophone contexts. These historical conceptualisations are important because they preceded and linger in current conceptualisations of the *tomboy*. The second half of Chapter Two presents my close readings of key aspects of the Asian *tomboy* texts, which are important background materials that precede, condition, and are referenced in my interviews.

The third chapter marks the beginning of my analysis of interview data. I begin with stories from the many participants who were teenage *tomboys* in the 2000s, and who now regret their *tomboy* past. This is a crucial starting point because it reveals the ways in which participants frame *tomboy* as a “false” identity in their life-long pursuit of discovering their true gender identity and subjectivity. This is a key theme that threads throughout the thesis.

To unpack this theme further, I turn to the false *tomboy*'s conceptual opposite, that is, the “real” lesbian. Chapter Four traces the inception of the idea of real lesbianism to the 2000s Sinophone circulation of the American lesbian drama, *The L Word*. Because of the drama's focus on feminine queer women to the near-total exclusion of overtly butch or masculine characters, it became for its Sinophone lesbian viewers a vehicle through which to imagine Western lesbian culture as devoid of secondary genders and female masculinity. Crucially, this fantasy of the West also prompted Sinophone lesbian viewers to question their *tomboy* past. In what I will term the “*tomboy* repressive hypothesis” (following Foucault's [1978] critique of the idea of sexual repression), I theorise that Sinophone lesbians came to consider their previous *tomboy* identity as a period of psychological repression under which their “true” gender and subjectivity were repressed. In this hypothesis, the West/America comes to signify a utopia free of such gender repression.

Chapters Five and Six continue my inquiry into the *tomboy* repressive hypothesis. Chapter Five demonstrates that the hypothesis not only frames the West/America as a place of liberation, but also constructs Chinese and Asian societies as the cultural contexts that produce and reinforce *tomboy*-identifying gender repression. Supporters of this hypothesis believe Chinese/Asian culture to be inherently oppressive and patriarchal, and that these cultures are directly accountable for (what

they see as) a repressive *tomboy* identification. In other words, this hypothesis imagines there to be a singular Chinese/Asian conservatism with the *tomboy* as its immediate victim.

The other side of repression is, of course, liberation. Chapter Six follows *tomboy* participants as they narrate the process of coming to terms with what they experience as their natural gender and authentic subjectivity. By referencing the Marxist notion of false consciousness, I illustrate how my participants similarly construct the *tomboy* as a victim of false consciousness. More importantly, they also construct the idea of a post-*tomboy* true natural gender, and relatedly, the idea of a post-*tomboy* true self. My analysis exposes some of the conceptual conflicts and tensions within these imagined notions (i.e. questions concerning whether femininity is natural or socialised, whether female masculinity can be a natural expression of the self rather than a product of repression, and whether one should reject identity categories altogether), and, in my most direct criticism of the *tomboy* repressive hypothesis (and by extension, of the views of many of my participants), I argue that this hypothesis fails to see that *all* enactments of gender are social rather than natural, and that therefore, a pre-socialised “natural” gender is simply impossible.

Chapter Seven presents a quick detour as it follows an alternative spin of the *tomboy* repressive hypothesis vis-à-vis the category of transgender. I chart the ways in which the *tomboy* comes to be re-organised under the category of trans and outside the rubric of lesbianism. This imagined trans/lesbian border draws heavily on the *tomboy* repressive hypothesis: the *tomboy* is presumed to be one who does not know their true gender identity and falsely believes themselves to be a lesbian, when, according to this conceptualisation, *the lesbian must be a woman-loving woman with a stable and secure female identity, and any female-assigned person without such stable and secure female*

identity must be trans. Against this, I extend on Halberstam's (1998) caution against a clear-cut distinction between a wholly cis-gendered lesbian subjectivity and a wholly male-identifying trans identity. Most importantly, the chapter ends with a section centring the voices of those participants who experience different forms of gender variance and/or different identifications with the *tomboy* category. Far from repressed or unconscious, their stories are the ones that are made invisible in this border war in the discursive field dominated and organised by the *tomboy* repressive hypothesis.

Continuing on the many threads on identity category, subjectivity, sexuality, and gender, the last chapter concludes by, first, reflecting broadly on the imagined geographies of the *tomboy* repressive hypothesis. I discuss the contributions *The L Word*, *Last Friends*, and *Yes or No* make to Sinophone lesbians' imaginations about the West and the East. I also speculate on the ways in which the idea of a non-repressive West might contribute to material geopolitics; on how the idea of a repressive Chinese culture seems to persist across my data in the PRC, Hong Kong, and Taiwan despite growing political differences and conflicts; and on the late modern globalising trend of narrowing "correct" lesbianism to "women-loving women." Last but most certainly not least, I consider how, in spite of the many criticisms of the *tomboy* appearing throughout this thesis, the figure of the *tomboy* persists in the lesbian Sinophone sphere. The *tomboy* persists not only as a linguistic tool in the age of digital dating (i.e. to signify one's preferred role on dating apps), but more importantly she persists as a *conceptual necessity*. After all, it is only through the figure of the immature, self-rejecting, repressed, and unconscious, that one can create the *idea* of one's self as mature, self-actualising, free, and—most crucially—enlightened.

Notes to Chapter One

¹ Kayla, “Who is to say that lesbians must categorise themselves into ‘*tomboy*’ and ‘*po*’?” *Womany*, 23 January 2019. <https://womany.net/read/article/17841>.

² The author referenced a summary of Sue-Ellen Case’s (1988) essay on butch and femme, translated by and included in Paris Shih’ (2018) Chinese-language book summarising late twentieth century Euro-American feminist debates. However, I would argue that the author might have misinterpreted Case’s argument. Case’s position is that butch-femme is a parody of heterosexuality and is therefore a powerful tool in resisting dominant heterosexual gender norms. Kayla, the author, instead interprets Case to mean that it is the refusal of subscribing to *tomboy*/butch and *TBG/po*/femme that shall liberate lesbian women from gender norms. Kayla goes on to suggest that completely rejecting secondary genders and employing an intentionally androgynous fashion style is the only emancipatory practice, which she claims is a practice that American lesbians have already begun performing since the 1970s.

³ Unknown author, “*T/P?* Do lesbians really need to categorise?”, Wechat, 12 February 2019. https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/hUSosq58_6ySqXXl3Et_cw

⁴ Also see Halperin (1997).

⁵ Similar discursive approaches to sexuality can be observed in Sang (2003), Wu and Stevenson (2006), Martin (2010), Castle (1993), and Jagose (1994).

⁶ My framework does not exclude a priori the Chinese diaspora. I leave out the diaspora here simply because, as an insider of this lesbian Sinophone, I have only seen debates about the *tomboy* from friends in the PRC, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. This may very well be my own limited personal experience and further research might indicate otherwise.

⁷ There is, to cite a quick example, the story of a Beijing woman finding out about Hong Kong’s and Taiwan’s *tomboy* subcultures at a conference in 1999, as told by Wang Ping (2001). For that Beijing woman, it was a shock to see female masculinity functioning as a lesbian gender when, back in the PRC, where women were encouraged by Maoist state feminism to avoid dressing in an overtly feminine manner, female masculinity would in the not-too-distant past simply have signified normative womanhood (Leung, 2002; Q. Wang, 1999). This has since changed, according to Engebretsen’s (2014) observations. Another example would be the practice of contract marriage (or cooperative marriage) in post-Mao China (Engebretsen, 2014; Kam, 2013). Contract marriage is an arrangement in which lesbians

and gay men marry each other to mitigate family pressure to marry them off, and is only prolific in cities in the PRC but not Hong Kong and Taiwan, a difference that Elisabeth L. Engebretsen (2014) suspects can be at least be partially explained by the much longer history of public *tongzhi* activism in the other two societies.

⁸ This is based on my first-hand experience as a Hong Kong viewer and that of my Taiwanese participants. For an example of the ways in which the show was made available via the PRC lesbian cybersphere, see Monkey D. Luffy, “2008 *Last Friends* Special Episode High-res 720P Japanese Language with Chinese Subtitles Baidu-Cloud Link.” Doki8. 3 July 2018. <http://www.doki8.com/222256.html>

Additionally and in line with Chua’s (2012) theorisation of East Asian Pop Culture, *Last Friends* was also distributed officially and legally in the Sinophone, premiering in 2009 on Television Broadcasts Limited (TVB)’s J2 channel in Hong Kong and on Videoland Television Network’s Videoland Japan Channel in Taiwan.

⁹ This is based on interview data with mainland Chinese and Taiwanese participants and my own personal experience as a Hongkonger.

¹⁰ In the PRC, the first two films were never officially released but *Yes or No 2.5* was released by LESDO in 2015. In Hong Kong, the films opened for Hong Kong Lesbian and Gay Film Festival (HKLGF) in 2011, 2012, and 2015, and debuted on Netflix in 2018. In Taiwan, *Yes or No* was released in selected theatres and on DVD in 2011, and all three films were released on Taiwan’s LGBTQ-themed streaming platform Gagoolala in 2019.

¹¹ For examples, see the following fan-filmed and -uploaded videos: Newwychinesefans. “Fans Farewell Tina at Her Hotel in Guangzhou.” YouTube. 14 October 2011 <https://youtu.be/X2zBSBxTbbM>; Lin, Yu Ling. “Tina and Aom Attend Lesbian Wedding, Reveal Stories about Same-sex Suitors.” Pixnet. 22 August 2011. <https://yonmovie.pixnet.net/blog/post/77150573>; Lu, Qiqi. “Tina and Aom (Meet HK fans).” YouTube. 4 August 2011. <https://youtu.be/VJtSLXqnIYA>; Luo, Xiaoliang. ‘Fans Greeting Aom and Tina in Shanghai on 13 June.’ YouTube. 4 July 2011. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m27UzOhK24>

¹² Though as Chua predicts in his book, the PRC has since become a main producer and exporter of media products.

¹³ A related example might be the popular Boys Love Thai drama *2gether: The Series* (2020, dir. Weerachit Thongjila), which was widely watched among BL fans in Hong Kong (based on my personal knowledge) and in the PRC prior to its political censorship by nationalist PRC fans (Dedman & Lai, 2021).

¹³ For an example of this nativist view, see Chou Wah-shan's (2001) formulation of a distinctively Chinese and non-Western model of non-heterosexual kinship; for criticism of his view, see Kam (2013); Liu & Ding, (2005), D. K. Wong, (2007), and Szeto qtd. in Leung (2007).

¹⁵ It is especially tempting to formulate this project as strictly pan-Asian when we take into account the crucial fact that the *tomboy* category appears not just in the Sinophone but also across Southeast Asia (for examples, as *tom* in Thailand (Sinnott, 2004); *T* in Southern Philippines (Johnson et al., 2000); and *tomboi* in Indonesia (Boellstorff, 2005) . A pan-Asian project would take these commonalities as an opportunity to challenge the often-unquestioned centrality of the West. This is the case that both Johnson et al. (2000) and Megan Sinnott (2010) make in their discussions on the shared Asian category of the *tomboy*, and this project was, in fact, originally conceived as a pan-Asian intervention independent of Western sexual knowledges.

¹⁶ Critics of Altman similarly address these concerns about modernity. They generally take issues with his assumption about the erasure of local and/or traditional sexualities (S. Tang, 2017; Wieringa et al., 2007); his implicit originality/postcolonial mimicry narrative (Bacchetta, 2002; Manalansan, 1997), his tendency to speak of the "modern" and the "Western" as self-evident tropes (Stokes, 2009) , and his implicit characterisation of non-Western sexual traditions as backward moments from which modern sexual subjects must move away (Blackwood, 2005; Boellstorff, 2005; Gunkel, 2010; Jackson, 2004).

¹⁷ The original reception studies approach would have drawn from, first, Janice Radway's study (1991) on women's consumption on romance novel, as well as Len Ang's (1985) research on Dutch *Dallas* viewers' reception of the show's ideologies. I was drawn to these two scholars as their work show that a text's political potential (conformist, transgressive or otherwise) arises not from the text itself but from its reception. Second, I would have also drawn from Henry Jenkin's (1992, 2003) pioneering work in fan studies and specifically his conceptualisation of fans as textual-poachers who actively manipulate the meanings of the text to serve their own interest, for example constructing and reflecting on their own gender and sexual identities. Transposing Jenkin's work to this project would mean conceptualising the *tomboy* texts as materials for which lesbian Sinophone viewers construct their own sexual identities. Third, I was also interested in recent scholarship on queer Asian audiences, specifically Thomas Baudinette's (2017) paper on Japanese gay men's consumption of gay manga, Eva Cheuk Yin Li's (2011, 2017) research on singer Denise Ho Wan-see's queer fandom in Hong Kong, and Jing Jamie Zhao's (2013, 2017) case study on mainland Chinese slash fan sites. All three authors' works demonstrate the complicated interpretations and personal reflections arising from texts and images of celebrities, and I was expecting from my participants similar reflections and complex readings.

¹⁸ See for example my analysis of *Yes or No*'s central theme of non-identification in Chapter Two, and my participants' responses to this theme in Chapter Six.

¹⁹ For example, Chapters Four and Five explore participants' belief that Asian lesbian representations conform more to gender stereotypes than their Anglo-American counterparts; and Chapter Seven highlights the ways in which participants relate the series *Last Friends* to the Sinophone lesbian/FtM border war, despite that the lesbian/FtM border war is not directly mentioned within the show itself.

²⁰ I reviewed the official Taiwanese DVD and multiple fan subtitles here. There are other official versions that I am unable to access, including, for *Last Friends*, the 2009 broadcasted versions on Television Broadcasts Limited (TVB)'s J2 channel in Hong Kong and on Videoland Television Network's Videoland Japan Channel in Taiwan; for the *Yes or No* series, the Netflix versions (as the films have since been taken down on Netflix Hong Kong and Netflix Taiwan at the time of writing in 2021), the Gagoolala version in Taiwan, the LESDO version in the PRC, and the versions screened at the Hong Kong Lesbian and Gay Film Festival (HKLGF) in 2011, 2012, and 2015.

²¹ The original Japanese term is Gender Identity Disorder (GID), see Chapters Two and Seven for further elaborations on the ways in which this term is used in the Japanese context.

Chapter Two: Historical Contexts and Screen Materials

Contemporary conceptualisations of the *tomboy* as at my fieldwork in 2018 drew, on the one hand, from intra-regional and transnational screen representations, and on the other hand, from pre-existing discourses in Sinophone histories throughout the twentieth century. This chapter gives an overview of both the Asian screen materials that contribute to my interview data (by way of textual analysis), and the earlier discursive constructions of lesbianism, female masculinity, and *tomboy* in the Sinophone sphere (by way of a literature review).

This chapter is divided into two parts. In Part One (literature review), I review available literature on conceptualisations of female homosexuality and female masculinity in early twentieth century China, as well as literature on conceptualisations of the *tomboy* in post Chinese Civil War Sinophone societies. Based on my review and synthesis of these literatures, I argue that generally, usage of the term *tomboy* in Taiwan and Hong Kong shifted from an indication of a (trans)gender¹ identity in the 1960s-70s, to a lesbian secondary gender in the 1980s, to an object of feminist critique in the 1990s, and to a casually deployed label in the 2000s. My analysis of the 2018 interview data in later chapters returns to similar themes.

Part Two (textual analysis) provides an overview of the recurring themes and visual elements in the five Asian *tomboy* screen texts (in order of appearance: *Last Friends*, *Girls Love*, *Yes or No*, *Yes or No 2*, *Yes or No 2.5*). It highlights key textual elements that my participants refer to in their discussions of *tomboy*. As I argued in the methodology section, representations are part of the process through which we imagine the world (Hall, 1997), and these screen texts are indispensable materials with which participants talk and think about gender and sexual identities. The texts are therefore

vital clues and important gateways to contemporary discursive constructions of the *tomboy*.

Part One: Historical Genealogies (Literature Review)

1. Early Twentieth Century, Republic of China

Historians (Chou, 2000; Hinsch, 1990; Xiaomingxiong, 1984) generally identify the early twentieth century Republican era as the period in which Chinese societies came to conceptualise same-sex sexual acts in distinctively modern terms. During that time, European sexology was translated into Chinese. Some critics (Hinsch, 1990; Xiaomingxiong, 1984) argue that these translations enabled a paradigm shift through which European pathologisation of homosexuality replaced a Chinese indigenous tolerance for male-male eroticism.² This view has since been heavily criticised by other scholars for its over-simplification³ and its romanticisation of a Chinese past.⁴

Despite the limitations of this indigenous-to-modern paradigm shift narrative, the Republican era is *still* the most appropriate starting point to historicise the *tomboy*'s emergence because that era saw the inception of the idea of female homosexuality (Sang, 2003).⁵ Research (Sang, 2003) shows that Chinese translators⁶ of European sexologists (Carpenter, 1899; Ellis, 1920; Krafft-Ebing, 1906) generally believed there to be two types of female homosexuality.⁷ The first type was a situational and temporary homosexuality that normatively feminine girls might fall prey to but would naturally grow out of. The second type was a real, congenital, and permanent abnormality embodied by women of masculine appearance and/or male identification. In other words, normative femininity was associated with temporary homosexuality whereas female masculinity was linked to permanent and inverted⁸ sexual desire.

During the 1930s and 1940s, public discussions of female homosexuality shrank considerably as a result of the Chinese Civil War (1927-1949), the Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945), the general conservatism of the ruling Kuomintang (KMT) party, and the decline of sexological research in Nazi-controlled Europe (Sang, 2003). Despite this, these two types of lesbianism appear to be heavily linked to subsequent representations of the *tomboy* in post-Civil War Taiwan (Martin, 2010), which I will now turn to.

2. Late Twentieth Century to 2000s, Taiwan

Following the 1949 Communist victory in the Chinese Civil War, the KMT government of the Republic of China retreated to the island of Taiwan. In the following years, the KMT party turned Taipei City into a Rest and Recreation (R&R) destination for its political and military ally, the United States. In the 1960s and amidst the Vietnam War, American style bars popped up across Taipei to cater to an influx of visiting American soldiers. Among these newly opened venues were gay bars, and it was there that Taiwanese locals came to learn the English word *tomboy* from American GIs and coined the label *T* (abbreviated from *tomboy*) (Chao, 1996; Gian, 1997; Zheng, 1997).⁹

At this point, *T* was primarily a gender identity signifying male (i.e. transgender) identification (Chao, 1996). Those identifying as *T* socialised as men both inside and outside the gay bar scene, and many considered undergoing gender reassignment surgery (Chao, 1996). Around the same time, the word *po* was coined to signify *T*'s normatively feminine partner. The fact that the masculine *T* was presumed to be attracted to normatively gendered women clearly bears resonances with the earlier Republican belief in European sexology (Martin, 2006).

Usage of the word *T* shifted in the next two decades. In 1985, the first *T* bar opened in Taipei. Contrary to male identification expressed by the *T* of the 1960s, the new generation of *T* in the 1980s *T* bar scene gravitated towards a stylistic appropriation of normative masculinity, in other words, a borrowing of masculine fashion, haircuts, mannerisms, alongside modification of feminine bodily features (e.g. breast-binding)—*in the absence* of a strong male identification (Chao, 1996; Zheng, 1997).

Indeed, in the 1980s *T* bar lesbian scene, *T* became part of a secondary gender system (Chao, 1996). Corresponding to *Ts*' appropriation of normative masculinity, *po* took up normatively feminine codes such as dresses, makeup, and flirtatious behaviours (Chao, 1996; Martin, 2006; Zheng, 1997). Under this system of secondary gender, *T* and *po* addressed one another as prospective partners, while *Ts* addressed each other as platonic friends (Gian, 1997; Zheng, 1997). (Note, however, that *po* continued to be seen as essentially heterosexual and were expected to eventually return to heterosexuality [Zheng, 1997]; this pervasive idea¹⁰ that normative femininity is indicative of short-term lesbianism is clearly linked to earlier Republican-era adoption of inversion [Martin, 2010].)

In the 1990s, the system of *T-po* secondary gender became the subject of intense criticism among feminist-identifying lesbians (Chao, 2000; Ding & Liu, 1999; Lü, 2003).¹¹ Following the lifting of KMT's Martial Law in 1987, a generation of Taiwanese academics trained in gender studies in the U.S. returned to the island in the early 1990s bearing translated feminist theories from the Anglosphere (Chao, 2000). The growing prominence of feminist discourses in turn gave rise to feminist critique of *T-po* secondary gender. For example, lesbian writer Gian Jia-shin (1997) wrote that *T-po* system was "indeed rooted in heterosexist gender stereotypes" and that *tomboys* in

particular “construct[ed] their identity by reinforcing the masculine role of heterosexual patriarchy” (p. 154-7, translation mine). This critique is no doubt reminiscent of Euro-American lesbian feminism’s rejection¹² of butch-femme identities (Martin, 2006). Both the Taiwanese and the Euro-American critiques argue that secondary genders (i.e. *tomboy/po* and butch/femme) reinforce power relations between heterosexual men and women, and thus should be replaced by egalitarian gender roles (Chao, 2000).

But the Taiwanese critique is distinctive from its Euro-American counterpart in its geographic imagination (Chao, 2000), and this provides a crucial context for this thesis. One example of this geographic imagination can be seen in an editorial column from a mid-1994 issue of *Nüpengyou* (Girlfriend),¹³ the publication of then-leading lesbian feminist organisation Between Us:

The *T-po* classification was only popular in 1950s America! It is already common knowledge that the classification has been long outmoded! [...] [American lesbians have] evolved to the stage of renouncing *T-po* in love pursuits. So, look happily for your own love with a *bufen* (“unclassified”) mentality! (qtd. in Chao, 2000, pp. 384–385)

The Taiwanese critique did not simply reject the *tomboy*, but also framed the *tomboy* as “cultural baggage” preventing Taiwan from reaching U.S.-style sexual modernity (Chao, 2000). The same geopolitical imagination and longing for U.S. style lesbianism appear in this thesis throughout.

Following the 1990s feminist critique, *T* again took on new meanings in the

2000s. Lesbians in the 2000s began to mix *T* and *po* with the word *bufen* (“unclassified between *T* and *po*”), which was originally proposed by feminist lesbians as a feminist substitute for secondary genders (Hu, 2017a). The new mixing approach resulted in hybrid identities such as *bufen pian T* (“unclassified but leaning towards *tomboy*”) and *bufen pian po* (“unclassified but leaning towards *po*”) (ibid). These hybrid identities transformed *T* and *po* from secondary genders “to descriptive languages that express[ed] contingent gender behaviours” (Hu, 2017a, p. 96). In particular, *T* became an adjective loosely used to describe one’s preference as the more active partner in sex and as the partner who takes on the financial responsibilities of a husband (Hu, 2017a). In other words, *T* and *po* still signified gender roles but were used as playful descriptive adjectives rather than more deeply rooted identities.¹⁴

To summarise, between the 1960s and the 1980s, *tomboy* transformed from a (trans)gender identity, to a lesbian secondary gender that appropriated normative masculinity without necessarily expressing (trans)gender aspiration. *Tomboy* was later criticised and framed as culturally backward by lesbian feminists in the 1990s, and in the 2000s became a more playful adjective describing normatively masculine gender behaviours. In the next section, I will turn to comparable conceptualisations of *tomboy* in Hong Kong.

3. Late Twentieth Century to 2000s, Hong Kong

Hong Kong was a British colony from 1841 to 1997, during which time it received waves of Han Chinese mainland immigrants both prior to and throughout the Chinese Civil War and the Sino-Japanese War. *Tomboy* first appeared in Hong Kong in

the 1960s-1970s¹⁵ among the middle class and in privileged girls' schools¹⁶ (Chou, 2000; Lai, 2003, 2007). Not much is known about this era, but research (Chou, 2000) shows that the word *TB* (abbreviation of *tomboy*) only became popular among same-sex attracted women around 1992, when the women-focused branch of Hong Kong's first gay organisation, the Ten Percent Club, was established.¹⁷ The 1990s saw a relatively more relaxed attitude towards homosexuality in mainstream society (partly made possible by Britain's decision to decriminalise male homosexuality as part of its pre-Handover political reform [Chou, 2000]), and it also saw the opening of many lesbian social venues such as bars and upstairs cafes in downtown areas (Lai, 2003; D. T.-S. Tang, 2010, 2011). It is unclear where and when the term *TBG* first emerged.

Research on *TB* and on queer cultures in Hong Kong is unfortunately scarce (Leung, 2007) especially in comparison with Taiwan. Based on my review of the available literature, I cannot determine if *TB* connoted transgender identification to the same extent that the Taiwanese *T* of the 1960s did.¹⁸ The only scholars who directly addressed this question do not appear to agree with one another: Chou (2000) remarks that *TB* in the early 1970s was primarily a gender identity conceptualised in opposition to femininity and not heterosexuality, Lai (2003, 2007) however suggests that Hong Kong's *TB* is more similar to the secondary genders of 1980s Taiwan.

One key feature that Hong Kong certainly shares with Taiwan is the 1990s lesbian feminist characterisation of *tomboy*. We know from activist Wang Ping's (2001) writings that by 1999, Hong Kong's lesbian scene had begun to see secondary genders as guilty of reinforcing heterosexual roles. Similarly, other ethnographic work conducted in the early 2000s (Lai, 2003, 2007) also includes comments from lesbians describing *TB* as "restrictive" and "heterosexist." By then, masculine presentation was

“regarded [by the local lesbian community] as a denial of the female gender or politically immature behaviour (characterised by a confusion of sexual or gender identification)” (Kam, 2008, p. 112).

This feminist rejection of *TB* similarly reshaped the meaning of the term. By the 2000s, *TB* was increasingly referenced as a trendy fashion style (one that included the practice of chest-binding and the wearing of men’s fashion) (Leung, 2008). It did not describe a deep sense of sexual or gender identity per se but was primarily employed as a lesbian fashion style.¹⁹ And like the Taiwanese *T*, *TB* also gave rise to new lexicons. The English word *pure* emerged as a feminist alternative (Lai, 2003). At the time of its conception in the early 2000s, *pure* referred to non-categorisation between *TB* and *TBG* (similar to *bufen* functioning as non-categorisation between *T* and *po* in Taiwan) (Leung, 2008). By the late 2010s, however, *pure* came to denote specifically feminine-feminine pairing while the phrase *no label* replaced it as the signifier of non-categorisation.

In sum, the history of *TB* in Hong Kong appears to follow a similar trajectory to that seen in Taiwan: from (trans)gender identity and secondary gender to a non-identity-based lesbian fashion. But before concluding this section, I have to point out one last conceptualisation that emerged from my literature review of Hong Kong but is missing in Taiwan. Scholarship (Kam, 2008; Tong, 2008) shows that Hong Kong society has been in general highly tolerant of masculine behaviours in adolescent schoolgirls. As at the 2000s, adolescent *TBs* were generally tolerated (though not explicitly accepted) by their parents (Tong, 2008), yet this tolerance was only given on the condition that the adolescent *TB* returns to normative femininity and heterosexuality in adulthood (Kam, 2008).²⁰ This is a key divergence from the earlier Republican perception, but I hesitate

to characterise this idea as distinctively Hong Kong. My own 2018 data show that participants from across the lesbian Sinophone saw identifying as a *tomboy* during adolescence as inherently situational and short-term (Chapter Three). This, I suspect, is linked to the intensifying interconnectedness among lesbians across not just Taiwan and Hong Kong but also the PRC throughout the 2000s. I explain below.

4. Late Twentieth Century to 2000s, PRC

Following the end of the Chinese Civil War and the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, the Chinese mainland underwent massive political and economic transformations under Mao, making its social landscape markedly different from both Hong Kong and Taiwan. Between the 1950s and 1970s, literary or artistic representations of homosexuality became extinct under the Communist Party's rule (Sang, 2003). Gender itself was significantly transformed throughout the Maoist Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), during which the State encouraged women to discard all signs of femininity (L. Liu, 1991; Rofel, 1999).

Because of this political history, female masculinity was understood differently in the PRC than in Hong Kong and Taiwan as at the 1990s. In 1999, masculine appearances that were considered typical of a Hong Kong *TB* or a Taiwanese *T* could, for older lesbians in the PRC, read as those of a normatively gendered woman (Leung, 2002). This is evident in Wang's (2001) recollection of the 1999 *Chinese Tongzhi Conference*:

[The lesbian from Beijing] said that in Beijing there is no distinction between *T* and *Po*. [...] If we thought she was a *T*, she would say that every woman in

mainland China is a *T*, since they are all quite boyish. During the Cultural Revolution, [...] everyone had to act like a man. (P. Wang, 2001, pp. 127–128)

In the 1990s PRC, “[d]ue to the influence of the Cultural Revolution, women [were] already under pressure to look androgynous,” and “one rarely hear[d] of [secondary gender] role-playing” (Q. Wang, 1999, p. 256).

But this regional political difference was soon erased. In the mid-1990s, the PRC state allowed then unrestricted internet access to the outside world, and lesbian women within the PRC’s borders (mostly those based in wealthy urban cities in the Eastern seaboard region) soon began to access Hong Kong’s and Taiwan’s lesbian online spaces.²¹ By the early 2000s they had adopted *tomboy* and *po* (generally abbreviated to *T* and *P*) (Engebretsen, 2014; Kam, 2013, 2014; Sang, 2003). At the same time as Taiwan’s lesbian scene began to use *T* as a playful adjective denoting masculine gender behaviours (Hu, 2017a), the same usage was also employed in the PRC (Engebretsen, 2014). The word *T* signified in the PRC lesbian community:

...a strong sense of *zhaogu ren* (caring for and protecting others), being *hen titie* (very sympathetic) [note: also translates to attentiveness towards a loved one], and having a *shuaiqi* (handsome manner, morale, or spirit). (Engebretsen, 2014, p. 51, additional translation mine)

In addition to what appears to be similar usage of *T* as a gender role signifier in Taiwan and the PRC, my mainland Chinese participants also recall following androgynous²² fashion trends of Taiwanese *T* internet celebrities and importing fashionable chest-

binders from Taiwan. In addition, as at the 2010s, feminist critique of *Ts*' supposed error of perpetuating heteronormativity is clearly in place in PRC lesbian cyberspace (this is evident in the WeChat article cited in the thesis introduction).

In sum, formations of the *tomboy* in the PRC have evidently drawn from and paralleled those in Hong Kong and Taiwan, particularly in their employment of *T* as descriptor of personality/ gender role and as fashion trend. Another trend that clearly parallels developments in the other two Chinese-speaking societies is the emergence of *H* in the PRC lesbian dating scene.²³ An abbreviation of the English word "half," *H* is a mid-point between *T-P* and a label signifying one's refusal to categorise oneself (similar to *bufen* in Taiwan and *pure/no label* in Hong Kong).

5. Summary of Historical Genealogy

To summarise, Sinophone conceptualisations of female homosexuality and of the *tomboy* were obviously significantly conditioned by broader socio-political events and contexts (e.g. the Chinese Civil War, the lifting of the KMT's Martial law, the Handover, the Cultural Revolution, and so on). But similar trends can be observed in late twentieth century Taiwan and Hong Kong, and the use of the *tomboy* category in these two regions clearly became intertwined with that in the PRC by the 2000s. Looking at the lesbian Sinophone as a whole, then, the *tomboy* evidently tended to shift from a (trans)gender identity, to a secondary gender, to the object of feminist criticism and finally to a causal signifier of fashion trends and gender behaviours/gender roles. This shift was accompanied by the emergence of other lesbian sub-labels (*bufen*; *pure/no label*; *H*). By outlining these broad Sinophone trends, I am not denying the existence of regional particularities, but rather, heuristically foregrounding the broader

shared conceptual frames that appear and reappear throughout this thesis.

Part Two: Screen Materials (Textual Analysis)

The second but no less important contextual materials for contemporary constructions of the *tomboy* are screen representations. The thesis introduction outlined the broad contexts of lesbian Sinophone circulations of the five *tomboy* texts (*Last Friends*, *Girls Love*, *Yes or No*, *Yes or No 2*, *Yes or No 2.5*). Here I will provide an overview of the relevant plot points, characterisations, and recurring themes in these texts that proved particularly significant in the interview data.

First, *Last Friends* provides materials for thinking through the perceived boundaries between gender and sexuality (more specifically, between lesbianism and transgender identification). Second, both *Last Friends* and *Girls Love* present a protective *tomboy* character that contributes to discussions about the *tomboy*'s gender role. Third, *Girls Love*, *Yes or No* and *Yes or No 2* all visually represent the 2000s *tomboy* fashion and subculture that my participants took part in. Fourth, all five texts were cited by my participants to illustrate what they saw as a heterosexist unconscious.

My approach to these texts is informed by the conceptual logics identified from my literature review on Sinophone histories earlier. This might seem inappropriate given that all but one text (i.e. *Girls Love*) originated from non-Sinophone Asian contexts (i.e. Japan and Thailand). However, from the point of view of my participants, these non-Sinophone texts effectively *became* Sinophone texts by virtue of being viewed, interpreted, and intensively engaged by Sinophone lesbians. My analysis is therefore likewise informed by Sinophone discourses and histories.

My textual analysis here includes only Asian tomboy representations but not the American television show, *The L Word*, which many participants referenced in the interviews. This is because my participants near uniformly described *The L Word* as a text in which the *tomboy does not* appear. Therefore, from an analytical standpoint, it is difficult to discuss *The L Word* alongside the other *tomboy* texts and without citing the interview data. The series, its plots, characters, and cultural contexts will therefore be addressed alongside empirical data in the upcoming analytical chapters.

1. *Last Friends* (2008)

Last Friends is a Japanese television drama. It follows an ensemble of young adults who share a house in Tokyo. The show's eleven-episode run sees each of the housemates navigating and overcoming a past trauma or an ongoing personal difficulty. For example, hairdresser Michiru faces and eventually escapes emotional and physical abuse from her boyfriend Sousuke; makeup artist Takeru confronts his childhood sexual abuse; flight attendant Eri deals with her love for a married man who is afraid to divorce his cheating wife. All of them are friends and housemates of Ruka (Figure 3), the character most relevant to this thesis, who is a short-haired and boyish competitive motorcycle racer played by actress Juri Ueno. Even though Ruka is not labelled as a *tomboy* by the series—since the *tomboy* label is not in used in the Japanese context—she is interpreted by many in the lesbian Sinophone sphere as a *tomboy* character. I elaborate on this process of cultural re-interpretation in this section.

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Figure 3. the characters Ruka (right) and her housemate Michiru (left) in *Last Friends*

Unlike the other main characters, Ruka's central personal difficulty cannot be easily summarised in one short sentence. The first episode already illustrates this. One of Ruka's first scenes finds her waiting outside the women's changing room at the motorcycle training ground. Once her female colleagues have left the bathroom, Ruka enters and looks at the mirrored reflection of her naked body in disgust. This scene appears to suggest and underline the character's gender dysphoria, but the episode introduces another personal struggle later. Towards the end of the episode, Michiru (still living with her abusive boyfriend at this time) seeks shelter with Ruka and temporarily moves into the shared house. The episode's concluding scene reveals Ruka's secret and repressed love for Michiru by showing Ruka looking longingly over a sleeping Michiru, before leaning in slowly and placing a soft kiss on this (presumably heterosexual) woman (Figure 4). As Ruka leans in, the quietness of this scene is broken by a strong and emotionally charged music cue, that is, the opening lines of the show's theme song *Prisoner of Love*. The lyrics, which are in English, state: "I'm a prisoner of love, prisoner of love, just a prisoner of love," and the song clearly paints Ruka as the prisoner of forbidden queer love in question.

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Figure 4. Ruka kissing Michiru in *Last Friends*

While it is perfectly plausible for a character (or indeed a real person) to be dealing with both gender dysphoria and forbidden queer love at the same time, the key point here is that *Last Friends* presents these two struggles as two sides of the same coin. The rest of the series follows Ruka both in her preliminary diagnosis as a person with Gender Identity Disorder (GID) and in her unrequited longing for Michiru—while hinting strongly that these two narratives are somehow linked to one another. For example, in the scene in which she writes a letter confessing her secret(s) to her friend Takeru, the camera hides the exact content of the letter from the viewer but shows that Takeru becomes aware of both her GID diagnosis and her affections for Michiru. Later on, the series includes a plotline in which Michiru's abusive and jealous boyfriend maliciously outs Ruka to her own family in a letter. The letter describes Ruka as someone who is not a woman, and who desires women (i.e. Michiru) like a man would. Despite the malicious intent behind this message, the series does present this to be a true representation of Ruka. This is most evident in the fact that, after receiving the message and overcoming the initial shock, Ruka's father tells Ruka that he accepts her as she is described in the letter, to which Ruka tearfully expresses her gratitude.

A proper overview of the different modes of conceptualising sexuality and gender in modern Japan is in order before we can delve further into *Last Friends'*

characterisation of Ruka. One can easily recognise Ruka's characterisation as a variant of European sexology (Krafft-Ebing, 1906), which was also translated into early-twentieth century Japan (Furukawa 1994, 1995; Hiruma 2003 qtd. in Curran & Welker, 2005). (In fact, many of the influential Chinese-language sexology texts circulating in the Republican era in China were first translated from European languages to Japanese, and then from Japanese to Chinese (Martin, 2010; Sang, 2003).) Japanese scholars similarly came to believe in the two types of female homosexuality, i.e., that of situational short-term lesbianism and that of inborn sexual inversion (Curran & Welker, 2005).

Though public discussions on homosexuality were brought to a halt in the 1930s and 1940s when Japan invaded the rest of Asia, the emergence of sexual magazines in the 1950s soon shaped popular imagination of the masculine, female homosexual (McLelland, 2004). At the time, the Japanese public came to imagine the homosexual man as naturally effeminate and drawn to normatively masculine men, and by extension, the homosexual woman as naturally masculine and drawn to normatively feminine women (Lunsing, 2005; McLelland, 2004). The two figures were termed *okama*²⁴ and *onabe*, respectively.

Over the 1990s, however, *onabe* was relegated from lesbianism (which was itself re-conceptualised as sexual relationships between feminine women) (Sugiura, 2007)²⁵ and submerged under the newly-popularised category of Gender Identity Disorder (GID) (Ishida & Murakami, 2006; McLelland, 2004, 2009; Sugiura, 2007; Yuen, 2015). The term GID first emerged in Japanese society in a legislative campaign pushing for the recognition of trans people's right to gender reassignment surgery (Yuen, 2015). The growing acceptance of people with GID in mainstream Japanese society throughout the late 1990s and early 2000s prompted many individuals who

previously identified as *onabe* to enter the GID community, which in turn sparked debates within the GID community about what the conceptual distinctions—if any—between GID, *onabe*, and lesbian should be (Yuen, 2015).

Viewed in this cultural context, the character Ruka can be interpreted as one who embodies *all* of these conflicting modes of gender variance and queer desire. The ambiguity the series writes her with makes it possible to read her as a person with *GID*, an *onabe*, a lesbian, as all of these figures and as neither, depending on viewers' preconceptions on how sexuality and gender should be categorised. This was precisely the case when, prior to the show's broadcast, *Last Friends* scriptwriter Taeko Asano gave the script to a group of GID-identifying consultants, who refused to interpret Ruka as a *GID* person on the ground that she did not ultimately seek surgical intervention.²⁶ In her analysis of this incident and on the show in general, Yuen Shu Min (2011) highlights the subversive potential in what she calls the "not male, not butch, not GID" body (p. 395). She writes, "instead of crossing from a 'wrong body' back to the 'right' one, the emphasis in *Last Friends* is that of staying on the border and finding a place for that body that is perpetually out of place" (ibid). In this thesis, I transpose this out-of-place body to the lesbian Sinophone, where an emerging border war between the categories *tomboy*, lesbian, and trans is breaking out. I argue that Ruka appears in that discussion as a key reference point, with which many participants insist on deploying body dysphoria as the metric to measure whether one truly "belongs" in the lesbian community.

In addition to Ruka's ambiguous sexual/gender identity, another aspect of this character that enters lesbian Sinophone discussion on the *tomboy* is the protectiveness she shows toward her friend and crush, Michiru. In Part One, I pointed out that by the 2000s, *tomboy* became primarily used as a playful descriptor of masculine gender role

(Engebretsen, 2014; Hu, 2017a, 2018). My participants draw on *Last Friends* and specifically Ruka's relationship with Michiru to illustrate their ideas and criticisms of this masculine gender role, in later chapters.

To preview those arguments and give examples of Ruka and Michiru's relationship, in episode two, Michiru attends Ruka's motorcycle competition. While competing, Ruka ends up in an accident and is soon hospitalised, and Michiru defies Sousuke's order to return home immediately after the race, going instead to visit Ruka at the hospital. Sousuke shows up at the hospital and introduces himself to Ruka in the guise of a well-meaning boyfriend, but that mask immediately slips when they leave Ruka's ward. As Sousuke pushes Michiru to the ground and is about to hit her in the empty hospital corridor, Ruka unknowingly walks into the scene. In a matter of seconds, Ruka—whose limbs are still covered in plaster casts—abandons her walking aids and shields Michiru with her already wounded body (Figure 5). For some of my participants, Ruka's willingness to protect Michiru at her own expense typifies the kind of protectiveness often associated with the *tomboy* role. *Last Friends*, however, is not the only text to appear in this discussion on *tomboys* and protectiveness, and in the following I will look at another story that heavily features similar plot points.

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Figure 5. Ruka shielding Michiru from abuse in *Last Friends*

2. *Girls Love* (2016)

Girls Love is a two-part mainland Chinese web series. It follows university student Xiao Rou in her journey of accepting her sexual and romantic attraction to her roommate, the handsome *tomboy* Mi Le. The first episode depicts the initial progression of the relationship between Xiao Rou (female protagonist) and Mi Le (the *tomboy*), in spite of the efforts of Xiao Rou's jealous male classmate He Yu to win over Xiao Rou's affections. The second episode follows Xiao Rou and Mi Le's newly blossoming romance, which is soon brought to an end as a combined result of He Yu (the male classmate) outing Xiao Rou to her parents, and of He Yu tricking Xiao Rou into thinking that Mi Le was cheating on her. In both episodes, He Yu is depicted as a key antagonist standing in the way of the couple's happiness, rather than a viable prospective partner for Xiao Rou. (Interestingly, although *Last Friends* also clearly presents Sousuke as the antagonist, it often does so in a quasi-sympathetic light by framing Sousuke's abusive tendency as something he cannot control. In contrast, He Yu is presented as a jealous and malicious man who deserves no sympathy whatsoever from the viewers.) In a key scene, He Yu forces Xiao Rou into his arms as he confesses his clearly one-sided feelings to her (Figure 6). Stumbling upon this scene, Mi Le pulls him away from Xiao Rou (Figure 7). This scene clearly shares many tropes with the scene from *Last Friends*: the jealous and dangerous boyfriend (Sousuke and He Yu), the damsel in distress (Michiru and Xiao Rou), and the *tomboy* saviour (Ruka and Mi Le). As Chapter Five will show, both scenes as well as the perceived similarities and differences between them are materials on which my participants draw to discuss the protective gender role a *tomboy* undertakes.

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Figure 6. He Yu attacks Xiao Rou in *Girls Love*

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Figure 7. Mi Le pushes He Yu away from Xiao Rou in *Girls Love*

Additionally, but no less crucially, *Girls Love* also became an important reference point in discussions on the *tomboy* look. I pointed out in Part One that scholarship (Leung, 2008) shows that by the 2000s, the *tomboy* label came to be associated with a particular lesbian fashion style. Mi Le's fashionable appearance in *Girls Love* is seen by many as typifying exactly that 2000s *tomboy* aesthetics. Elsewhere, I (Fung, 2019) wrote on the ways in which *Girls Love* extensively underscores the erotic appeal of Mi Le. The examples I gave include the numerous close-ups of Mi Le's naked body in the series' opening sequence, during which the spectator follows Xiao Rou's point of view as she stalks and catches glimpses of Mi Le's body in the shower (Figures 8 and 9). Mi Le's sex appeal is also verbally reinforced by the series' other characters such as Xiao Rou's classmates, who, in spite

of their generally homophobic attitude towards the couple, also speak positively of Mi Le's looks.

In the next chapter, I will explain how this visual and verbal emphasis on Mi Le's erotic appeal in fact symbolises the past 2000s *tomboy* fashion that my participants retrospectively took issues with. By the time I undertook fieldwork in 2018, the preceding decade's lesbian culture—characterised by attractive *tomboy* looks—was already a thing of the past and quite often a subject of ridicule. *Girls Love* therefore became a part of that conversation as a visual example of that 2000s past.

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Figure 8. Close up of Mi Le in the shower in *Girls Love*

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Figure 9. Xiao Rou observes a showering Mi Le in *Girls Love*

3. *Yes or No* (2010) and *Yes or No 2* (2012)

The Thai films *Yes or No* and its sequel *Yes or No 2* are two other examples from which the attractive *tomboy* look, among other aspects, comes into play in current Sinophone constructions of the *tomboy*. Both films are romantic comedies about college students Pie and Kim. At the start of the story, Pie is in the process of requesting a change of dorm room at her university in an attempt to avoid her current roommate Jane, who exclusively pursues romantic relationships with *toms* (Thai abbreviation of the word *tomboy*, as I will explain below). Though Pie is friendly with Jane, she knows a change is in order because Pie's own mother strongly disapproves of relationships between *toms* and women. As luck would have it, Pie is assigned a new roommate, the boyish and soft-spoken Kim. Their first meeting in the dorm room is marked by, on the one hand, their immediate and obvious mutual attraction, and on the other hand, Pie's explicit rejection of Kim seconds later. Accusing Kim of being a *tom* (a label that Kim rejects), Pie declares her request for a room change a failure. The film subsequently follows their developing romance from both sides. For Pie, we see her struggles with her attraction to Kim, before eventually pursuing a relationship with Kim and confronting her own mother's disapproval; for Kim, we follow her in her continuous rejection of the *tom* label, as well as her growing attraction to and eventual relationship with Pie.

Pie's attraction to Kim in the first film is presented in ways that are markedly similar to the desire Xiao Rou has for Mi Le, as I pointed out elsewhere (2019). *Yes or No* similarly employs visual devices to encourage viewers to identify with Pie in her attraction to Kim, for example, by using a slow-motion shot-reverse-shot sequence lingering on Kim's gentle smile shown from Pie's point of view (Figures 10 and 11), evoking the feeling of love-at-first-sight Pie feels for Kim during their initial meeting.

The two stories also share a similar general premise: both follow a normatively gendered young woman whose presumed heterosexual identity is challenged by a *tomboy* roommate whose charm she cannot resist. Kim therefore takes on a similar function in discussions of the *tomboy* fashion trend as Mi Le does for my participants. That is, she comes to visually represent the figure of a fashionable and desirable *tomboy* who is now becoming the subject of intense critical scrutiny.²⁷

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Figure 10. Pie stops in her tracks as she meets Kim for the first time in *Yes or No*

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Figure 11. A smiling Kim turns towards Pie in *Yes or No*

The second and equally important aspect is Kim's rejection of the *tom* identity, and in fact, of all identity labels. At the beginning of the first film, Kim strongly disagrees with Pie in her characterisation of Kim as a *tom* and insists instead that she is in fact a girl. Despite this, as Kim begins to develop feelings for Pie, she actually

momentarily doubts her earlier stance. This doubt stems from the worry that her same-sex attraction, coupled with her masculine outfit, does in fact make her a *tom* after all. A key scene, however, rejects this interpretation of Kim's feelings and spells out the film's central message. In this salient scene, Kim seeks advice from her aunt, who says: "There are women who look masculine but are not gay, [and] women who are gay but are not masculine at all. [...] What matters comes from the inside."²⁸ Kim soon repeats this message to Pie: "If I fall in love with a girl [implied to be Pie], does that make me a *tom*? [...] I will like the same things. [...] It doesn't change the person I am." It is clear here that the film's central message is that there exists a subjectivity—an individuality—that operates independently of sexual and identity categories, and that neither one's gender performance nor one's erotic desire can define this subjectivity in any significant way. This message is featured much less overtly in the sequel but does appear in subtle ways. For example, an earlier scene sees a stranger hitting on Yam (Kim's internship colleague and new love interest) rudely asks if Kim is a *tom*, to which Kim smugly answers that she is not.

To contextualise *Yes or No*'s rejection of *tom* and identity labels, a brief consideration of sex-gender categories in Thailand is in order. Thai conceptualisations of gender and sexualities are generally structured under the framework of *phet* (*eroticised gender*), under which there is no clear distinction between biological sex, social gender, and sexuality (Jackson, 1997, 2000, 2004). Before the twentieth century, pre-modern Thai society assumed that all human beings embodied a blend of maleness and femaleness to varying degrees, and it was only during the modernisation period between 1960 and 1985 that maleness and femaleness come to be understood as completely polarised (*ibid*).

One pre-modern *phet* category that survived this modernisation period (albeit with some modifications) is *kathoey*, which, in pre-modern terms was a category that encompassed all individuals with hermaphroditic features, non-normative gender behaviours, and/or non-heterosexual desires (Jackson, 1997, 2000, 2004). The modernisation period gave birth to new, modern variants of *kathoey*, one of which was *tom* (abbreviation of *tomboy*), a term that described masculine women who desired normatively gendered women.²⁹

In contrast to *tom*, which delineated both masculinity and attraction to feminine women, a new conceptualisation of lesbianism took root in the 1990s (Sinnott, 2004). At that time, Thailand's newly established lesbian organisation *Anjaree* ("followers of a different path"), began to advocate for a re-conceptualisation of lesbianism as *ying-rak-ying*³⁰ ("women-loving women"), that is, relationships between two strictly female-identifying women (ibid). They argued that *tom* was a sub-type of *ying-rak-ying* and by extension a female-lesbian (rather than gender-sexual) category (ibid).

I read Kim's characterisation in *Yes or No* as a careful response to these conflicting modes of conceptualising gender and sexual identities. In an interview,³¹ the director Sarasawadee Wongsompetch confirms that she spent years looking for the right actress for the role of Kim because she needed someone who was masculine enough to be called a *tom* but also too feminine to be labelled as a *tom*. She eventually found actress Tina Suppanad Jittaleela, whose first impression on the director was as follows: "I thought oh here is a cute *tom*, and then she greeted me in this really girly voice. And I thought, is she a *tom* or a girly girl? And that's when I knew she would be perfect."

Indeed, what made the first film so successful in the lesbian Sinophone sphere appears to be, at least in part, its ability to both *evoke* the image of a *tomboy-TBG/po*

iconography through the outward appearances of Pie and Kim while, and at the same time, *rejecting* these same sexual categories. To give an example and preview some of the differing interpretations of this film, I conducted a group interview in which two participants argued about whether *Yes or No* was a *tomboy* film. One argued that it was because Kim and Pie looked just like the *tomboy* and *TBG/po* in the lesbian Sinophone, and the other disagreed on the ground that Kim clearly rejected such a label. These conflicting interpretations appear throughout this thesis as I chart both the rejection of the *tomboy* specifically and my participants' rejection of identity labels in general.

Yes or No 2 is featured much less prominently in my data but whose plot I will nonetheless summarise here for contextualising purposes. In the second film, set a year after the first, Kim and Pie are assigned to different provinces in Thailand for their respective internship programmes in their last year of university. The two are separated for most of the story and eventually break up due to miscommunications while maintaining a long-distance relationship, as well as the introduction of a love rival, Yam, who catches Kim's romantic attention. The film jumps another year ahead in the final scene. Now college graduates, Kim and Pie meet again and decide to reunite as a couple.

4. *Yes or No 2.5* (2015)

Yes or No 2.5 is a spin-off of the *Yes or No* franchise. It tells a brand new story with completely new characters, one of which is played by actress Tina Suppanad Jittaleela, who was cast as Kim in the original films. Here, Suppanad plays a young adult *tom* named Wine, who is involved in a complicated network of love triangles. The plot is as follows: Wine shares a flat with another *tom*, Pii, and the film initially presents

their friendship to be overtly romantic and homoerotic (i.e. by showing the two cuddling in bed in the opening scene). This potentially romantic relationship is soon overshadowed by the arrival of their new neighbour, Fah, and her flatmate Pim (both normatively feminine women). Pim is in fact an ex-girlfriend of Wine. She left Wine years ago when they were still in college and is now engaged to be married to a man despite the fact that she and Wine still long for one another. To help Wine get over Pim, Pii (Wine's flatmate) encourages Wine to pursue a relationship with Fah, unaware that Fah is in fact in love with Pii herself. Feeling rejected by the people they actually love, Wine and Fah begin to date each other and everyone is stuck in a miserable position. Eventually, however, Pim musters up the courage to come out to her family and leaves her fiancé for Wine, Wine and Fah agree to break up and Fah in turn confesses to Pii, who returns her feelings. The film ends with the union of two happy couples.

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Figure 12. The two main couples in *Yes or No 2.5* (from left to right, Pii and Fah, Pim and Wine)

In her article, Fan-Ting Cheng (2019) points out that *Yes or No 2.5* disappointed many lesbian fans in Taiwan and in the PRC because they thought they were promised a *tomboy-tomboy* love story between Wine and Pii, rather than two couples involving one *tomboy* partner and one feminine partner (Figure 12). Cheng theorises that there is in

fact substantial demand for a *Tomboys Love* (TL) story (taking a cue from the *Boys Love* [BL] genre). Much like the female viewers of BL stories, Cheng speculates that feminine viewers of TL do not actually want to see a feminine character resembling themselves in the romance but would much rather see two *tomboys* that they find attractive fall in love with one another.

My research takes on a related but also distinctively different angle. Rather than identifying themselves as *TBG/po* viewers in need of TL representations, my participants simply suggested that they did not want to see any further *tomboy/TBG-po* pairing for feminist reasons. For some, the pairing of Wine (the lead *tomboy* character) with Pim (a normative feminine woman) and Pii (another *tomboy*) with Fah (another normatively feminine woman) is disappointing not just because these two pairings came to replace the teased *tomboy-tomboy* romance, but more importantly they see these *tomboy-feminine* pairings as indicative of a heteronormative unconscious that forces queer women into secondary gender organisation. This theme of heteronormative unconsciousness and *Yes or No 2.5*'s contributions to this theme will be elaborated in Chapter Five and then throughout.

Chapter Conclusion

This chapter has critically examined the historical conceptualisations and transnational screen representations of the *tomboy*, both of which precede and contribute to discursive construction of the category and will inform my analysis throughout this thesis.

In Part One, I looked at twentieth century conceptualisations of female homosexuality and of the *tomboy* category in Sinophone societies by way of a critical

literature review. I underscored the general historical shifts, in which the *tomboy* was first conceived of as a (trans)gender identity, later as secondary gender, and then as the target of feminist rejection and eventually as causal signifier of lesbian masculine gender role and fashion (the last transformation taking place against a broader backdrop of emergent new lesbian identities and continued feminist characterisation of the *tomboy* across the lesbian Sinophone). In Part Two, I briefly discussed the screen texts that my participants make reference to throughout this thesis, and highlighted the ways in which these texts contribute to conceptualising lesbian/FtM border wars, *tomboy* fashion, *tomboy* gender role, and the feminist critique.

Moving forward, the next chapter—the first in a series of chapters analysing my interview data—will look at the ways in which the *tomboy* category became re-conceptualised yet again by 2018. Following the 2000s, during which many of my participants were teenagers who adopted *tomboy* masculine fashion and stylised themselves after popular *tomboy* internet celebrities, they now came to regret that period and see it as a time of ignorant and improper lesbianism. Chapter Three charts this new retrospective rejection of the 2000s adolescent *tomboy*. I will explore the ways in which this new retrospective rejection intertwines with the lesbian feminist position and examine the implications this rejection has in terms of how my participants conceptualise themselves, their genders, and the world.

Notes to Chapter Two

¹ I am using the word “(trans)gender” here because the usage of *tomboy* at the time is very similar to what we now understand in the Anglosphere as transgender. Note however the category “transgender” itself emerged much later in the lesbian Sinophone (Chapter Seven).

² For two alternative articulations of this paradigm shift narrative, see Frank Dikötter's *Sex, Culture, and Modernity in China* (1995) and Chou Wah-shan's *Tongzhi* (2000). Dikötter claims that rather than being conceptualised as a sexual abnormality, male-male sex was condemned as a sexual dissipation that contradicted with the wartime nation-building project. This claim is faulty because, as Tze-lan D. Sang (2003) points out, Dikötter has based this claim on a few health pamphlets and committed the error of overgeneralisation. As for Chou, his book has—as Fran Martin (2010) points out—paradoxically attempts to reaffirm a range of viewpoints from earlier writers which are at odds with one other, including (following Hinsch) that there had been no conceptualisation of homosexuality in Chinese traditions, *and* (following Dikötter) that Chinese elites adopted the West's pathologisation of homosexuality as a by-product of the nation-building project promoting modern heterosexual love, *and* that the modern conceptualisation of homosexuality in Chinese societies cannot be reduced to a coloniser-colonised account.

³ Writing on Foucault's "birth of modern homosexuality" and the scholarship that follows, Eve Sedgwick (1990) warns that "the historical search for a Great Paradigm Shift [between the pre-modern and the modern] may obscure the present conditions of sexual identity" (p. 44). That is, the assumption that there are profound differences between a homosexuality "as we know today" and pre-modern arrangements of same-sex relations might not hold true even within a European context precisely because it denies long-coexisting understandings that cannot be fully grasped in a unidirectional narrative (p.44-48). In her critique of Hinsch and Chou, Martin (2010) builds upon Sedgwick's argument to propose that, in the context of cross-cultural sexuality studies, the search for a fundamental divergence between the West and the "non-West" may obscure the conditions of sexual culture in both places. However, Howard Chiang has pointed out that scholarship following Sedgwick's call for non-linear particularism over historical periodisation might risk turning a blind eye to traceable global historical trends, of which, Chiang says, the instillation of homosexuality in Republican China was clearly an example.

⁴ Writing against Xiaomingxiong's and Hinsch's idealisation of a pure Chinese tolerant past, Ming-yeung Lu (1992) argues that it is hardly productive for modern Chinese societies that are already affected by present and past encounters with the West.

⁵ Another work that looked closely at Republican Chinese views on sexualities is Cuncun Wu and Mark Stevenson's (2006) paper on moral attitudes against male same-sex prostitution in Beijing. By conducting discourse analysis on a range of historical evidences, Wu and Stevenson are able to point out that it was the belief among Chinese elites that homosexual acts would be perceived by Westerners as undesirable and pre-modern that brought about what Xiaomingxiong and Hinsch later call the rise of Chinese homophobia. In other words it was not direct military or ideological colonialism but an

internalised foreign gaze that caused this shift.

⁶ Sang argues that the editors' and translators' choice in translating Carpenter and Ellis demonstrates that there was a conscious desire among the elites to understand, theorise, and regulate female same-sex relationships in modern school contexts, and to draw comparisons between homosexual schoolgirl romance in China and in the West. Additionally, Some of these translations were in fact "double transculturations" of Japanese texts (i.e. Chinese translations of Japanese writings that were themselves translations of Western theories), showing that in Japan there was also a keen interest in adolescent schoolgirl romance (Martin, 2010, pp. 32–35). This ideological linkage between Republic of China and Japan will be relevant to discussions on *Last Friends* later.

⁷ This is first delineated by Havelock Ellis in *The Psychology of Sex* (1920), which according to Sang (2003) seems to have gained widespread popularity following Pan Guangdan's translation of Ellis' study in 1946 (even though the English edition had already begun circulating since 1920s, as Martin (2010) adds).

⁸ This description of a masculine-identifying lesbian deviant in Ellis' work is clearly a newer incarnation of the sexual deviant figure in Richard von Krafft-Ebing's (1906) work. In Krafft-Ebing's theory, same-sex desire and cross-gender identification are conflated and collapsed into the idea of inversion, which holds that same-sex attraction is caused by identification with the other gender (i.e. that lesbian desire for other women is in fact rooted in the inverted subject's identification as male).

⁹ A summary of the history of the Taiwanese *tomboy* synthesising the works of Antonia Yengning Chao, Zheng Meili, and Gian Jia-shin is included in Fran Martin's "Stigmatic Bodies: The Corporeal Qiu Miaojin" (2006)(Martin, 2006, pp. 180–181). However, note that the actual inceptions of *tomboy* and *po* are not entirely clear: on the one hand, Chao's thesis traced the origin of *T* to a gay bar owner who learnt of the word *tomboy* from American GIs but made no mention of the source for *po*; on the other hand, Zheng's participants have attributed the root of both *T* and *po* to women hanging out with Americans at gay bars. In either case, contacts with American GIs in the gay bar scene is considered the primary factor.

¹⁰ In her book *Backward Glances* (2010), Fran Martin further argues that these two types of female homosexuality persist even in late twentieth century representations (including not only Taiwan but also Hong Kong and broader Sinophone productions). Whereas same-sex attracted feminine characters are generally destined for heterosexual marriage within fictional narratives, *tomboy* characters either fade out of focus or are made to disappear (usually via an early death). In Martin's schema, the adult *tomboy* in the general public's mind occupies an unrepresentable narrative blank space, bereft of lasting love or any future at all, and the *T*'s singing over lost love clearly harbours similarly pessimistic feelings about their supposedly doomed future with *po*.

For an ethnographic example, a common sight at *T* bars was that of a *T* singing melancholic love songs

about a *po* partner leaving the *T* for men (Chao, 2001).

A related conceptualisation associated with this temporal logic is marriage pressure. Zheng's (1997) book on Taiwanese lesbian lives for example devotes a sizable portion to the motif of being pressured by elder family members into marrying men. Zheng however does not make clear whether there is a linkage between family pressure and secondary gender (i.e. whether feminine lesbians faced more pressure than their masculine counterparts). Relatedly, one tactic used by Zheng's participants was to avoid explicitly coming out and to instead introduce their lesbian partner as a friend to their own family. Perhaps coincidentally, this tactic also appears in Chou Wah-Shan's (2001) controversial claim that same-sex-attracted ethnically Chinese people are by nature non-confrontational and therefore prefer to incorporate their partners into their homes through non-verbal means (as opposed to Westerners' preference of coming out). His claim however is strongly rejected by scholars such as Liu Jen-peng and Ding Naifei (2005), who sees Chou's proposition of a silent Chinese tolerance of homosexuality at home as itself an act of violent silencing.

Elsewhere I have demonstrated that the conceptual figure of feminine woman experiencing short-term lesbian desire and marriage pressure remain prevalent in the late 2010s, drawing from the same pool of data I gathered in 2018. See Fung (2019).

¹¹ These works are collectively summarised by Fran Martin in "Stigmatic Bodies" (2006).

¹² For more examples of the lesbian feminist position in Euro-American contexts, see Wittig (1992). For criticisms of this position in the U.S., see Butler (1999), Halberstam (1998), Newton and Walton (2000).

¹³ It should be noted that Gian's participant later became an editor of *Nüpengyou*.

¹⁴ Hu (2017a) points out that participants often expressed a very strong sense of detachment from the labels (*T/po/bufen/bufen pian T/bufen pian po*) they used to describe themselves. Many of Hu's participants pointed towards the limitations of these labels in communicating the difficult feelings they had towards gender roles, and added that they would rather not identify with any label at all. In other words, this new articulation of *T* and *po* as semantic descriptors (rather than as coherent identities) in fact coincided with a gravitation towards non-identification more generally.

In fact, according to my data, this gravitation is also reflected in the changing usage of the word *bufen*, which by 2018 does not only refer to the rejection of *T* and *po*, but also a refusal to identify oneself as straight, lesbian, or any other kind of sexual identity. At the same time, my data also show that in 2000s, a group of *tomboy* internet celebrities amassed a huge following on the photo-sharing site Wretch. As my analysis in Chapter Three will show, *tomboy* in that context symbolises a style of outward appearance consisting of trendy masculine fashion, chest-binding, and short hair.

¹⁵ Chou's fieldwork in 1995-1997 places its origin in the 1970s middle class, but Franco Lai Yuen-ethnographic data from 2002 traces it further back to late 1960s.

¹⁶ The fact that *TB*'s origin can be traced back to middle-class girls'-school settings seems to indicate a connection between Hong Kong's *TB* and earlier conceptualisation of female homosexuality in the Republican era. Indeed, in *Undercurrents*, Helen Hok-Sze Leung points towards fictional stories about same-sex love between schoolgirls in China in the 1910s and 1920s as the ancestor of a "long and distinguished literary lineage" that extends to both Taiwan and Hong Kong (Leung, 2008, p. 41).

In addition, it should be noted that Lai did not explicitly describe the schools as middle or upper class. However, single-sex schools in Hong Kong in the 1960s and 1970s would most likely have been prestigious. Lai's subsequent argument that the term *tomboy* was replaced by the abbreviation *TB* to make it more accessible to working class women would imply that earlier users of the term *tomboy* have come from a privileged class background.

¹⁷ The establishment of the Ten Percent Club itself reflected the public's increasingly open discussion of homosexuality throughout the 1980s. To be specific, it was the high-profile death of John MacLennan, a Scottish policeman facing arrest for homosexual conduct, in 1980 that sparked intense public debates and scrutiny over homosexuality in mainstream society (Chou, 2001; D. T.-S. Tang, 2011a). The strong public reaction to MacLennan's death soon compelled the colonial government to review its laws, and homosexuality was eventually decriminalised in 1991 as part of the British administration's efforts to push for democratic reform ahead of the 1997 Transfer of Sovereignty to China (Chou, 2000).

¹⁸ However, on the representational level, Helen Hok-Sze Leung's reading of a filmic *tomboy* figure, *Sister Thirteen from Portland Street Blues* (1998, dir. Raymond Yip) does suggest some resemblance to Halberstam's formulation of the "transgender butch," who occupies the blurred, overlapping area between butch and trans (Leung, 2008, pp. 78–83).

¹⁹ Additionally, one of the inspirations for 2000s *TB* fashion in Hong Kong was the Taiwanese *T* internet celebrities on *Nameless Little Site*, according to remarks by my participants in Chapter Three. Hong Kong *TBs* in the 2000s also purchased chest binders from Taiwan, as I will note in Chapter Seven.

²⁰ At the representational level, Helen Hok-Sze Leung's research on Hong Kong cinema in *Undercurrent* (2008) echoes with Kam's observation: representations of schoolgirl romances in Hong Kong films are characterised by a failure for the characters to register any sort of self-affirmation of their lesbian desires; paradoxically, however, these films also show an ambivalence towards the idea that adult

heterosexuality is the inevitable destination. Leung's research nonetheless does not seem to draw a clear linkage between temporality and secondary gender as Martin did in *Backward Glances* (2010).

²¹ See Martin (2008) for a discussion of the geographic distribution of queer women internet users in the PRC in the early 2000s.

Another thread of cross-strait connection is the temporal logic underlying both Taiwanese and PRC conceptions of *T* and *po*. In PRC lesbian spaces, *P* are widely regarded as women who are "not really homosexual," and who possess a "more-normative bio-psychological core," making them likely to eventually marry men (Engebretsen, 2014, pp. 53–54). Whether this logic was directly inherited from Republican era thinking or circulated to the PRC from Taiwan in the 1990s and 2000s remains unclear.

²² This trend also appears to coincide with the rise of androgynous (*zhongxing*) fashion popularised by female pop singers across China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, though as many commenters have noted the *zhongxing* style is sometimes interpreted not as a lesbian aesthetics but as a (presumably heterosexual) modern femininity (Hu, 2017b; Kam, 2014; Li, 2017; Xiao, 2012; Zhao, 2013).

²³ This is from my own 2018 data.

²⁴ Same-sex attracted men were called *okama* (literally "pot") in reference to the men's supposed feminine passivity as the penetrating partners during anal sex (Lunsing, 2005; McLelland, 2004). The word *onabe* was associated with *okama* because both were essential cookware in a Japanese kitchen.

²⁵ Indeed, *onabe's* linkage to female homosexuality shifted several times over the years. By 1960s, a new term, *rezubian* (transliteration of the English word "lesbian") replaced *onabe* as the umbrella term for female homosexuality, and *onabe* was relegated to being a sub-type of *rezubian*, specifically the more masculine and sexually active kind (Sugiura, 2007). Fast forwarding to the early 1990s, the two terms began to operate entirely separately: *rezubian* at this time referred to women-loving women whereas *onabe* described those understood to have inverted sexual desires (i.e. desiring women as men would) (ibid).

²⁶ This appeared in an interview with Asano Taeko. See Keiser, Y. "Interview with scriptwriter of *Last Friends*, Asano Taeko," Tokyo Wrestling, June 2008. http://www.tokyowrestling.com/articles_eg/2008/08/last_friends_3.html

²⁷ Note that unlike *Girls Love*, which is a mainland Chinese production, the Thai production team of *Yes or No* is less likely to be directly drawing from 2000s Sinophone *tomboy* fashion culture; however, one may take into consideration that masculine fashion styles in East and Southeast Asia generally are

conditioned by the same transnational trends.

²⁸ Quote lifted from the Thai to English translation on Netflix.

²⁹ Specifically, Jackson's research (1997, 2000, 2004) shows that, by the early 1970s, masculine same-sex attracted women were no longer called *kathoey* and were re-labelled *lesbian*, *dai*, *sao lesbian* and *sao dai* (the word *sao* stands for "young woman" in Thai while the rest are English loan words borrowing from *lesbian* and *dyke*). By the late 1970s those terms were replaced by, *tomboy*, which was shortened to *tom* in the 1980s.

³⁰ It should be noted that the term *ying rak ying* was chosen in place of the English loan word *lesbian* because the word *lesbian* in the Thai contexts connotes strongly to female-female pornography made for heterosexual men (Jackson, 2000; Sinnott, 2008).

³¹ This is included as bonus content in the officially released Taiwanese DVD copy of the first film.

Chapter Three: Narrating The 2000s Adolescent *Tomboy* in Retrospect

Some people say that it is easy for *TBG* to go back to dating men, but impossible for *TB* to do the same. But that's really not the case. The crucial factor is the person's age. When you're finishing high school and about to start university, that's when you are most susceptible to turning straight. Whether you actually turn or not has nothing to do with whether you are a *TB* or *TBG*. Many people thought only the *TBG* turned, but actually so did the *TB*. The more people you meet and the more you observe, the more you realise this: Back in our day, being a *TB* was just a trend.

— Leslie, thirty-year-old administrator in Hong Kong, used to socialise as *TBG* but now describes herself as *no label*

The year was 2006, and the first and only lesbian online forum in Hong Kong was called *Blur-F*. As you browsed from one thread to another, you saw selfies after selfies from other *Blur-F* users. Mobile phone cameras were a novelty at that time, and the experience of prying into ordinary strangers' private lives was not at all familiar to you, but the unfamiliarity actually made it all the more exciting. Soon enough, you noticed recurring patterns across all these pictures. The users were all *TB* (the Hong Kong abbreviation of *tomboy*), and they were all quite young. They looked to be somewhere between fifteen and eighteen years of age. Big eyes, handsome faces. Their haircuts were somewhere between short and medium length, their hair was trimmed right to the spot where the neck met the shoulders and back. They reminded you a bit of male pop stars, but they had a somewhat softer edge. You realised some of these selfies

were not uploaded by the people pictured but were ripped from elsewhere and reposted here. You realised the people in those pictures were from Taiwan. They were *T* (the Taiwanese term for *TB*, as the *Blur-F* Q&A section helpfully clarified for you), and they posted pictures of themselves on a Taiwanese website called Wretch. They had huge followings both here and over there, you learned. You kept scrolling.

This is what I remember from my own youth. Twelve years later at the age of twenty-seven I was travelling from Hong Kong to Southeast PRC, and from there to Taipei talking to people in the lesbian communities about *tomboys*. Whenever I would meet a participant in their twenties to mid-thirties (i.e. the age group making up the majority of my sample), this “2000s *tomboy* culture” would come up in conversations. In fact, references to this past were made by almost everyone who was old enough to remember it. Overtime, I realised that everything *else* they said in the interviews was said in connection with their recollections of this past, and that my analytical chapters must by extension start from these recollections.

Finding a term to use as a shorthand descriptor for those past experiences is, however, quite difficult. A few of my participants called it a trend, one called it a past influence, most just vaguely gestured to it with words like “those years,” “over a decade ago,” or “when we were young.” These references do not crystallise perfectly into one clearly defined rubric, but I believe they can be bound together because they are references to the same experiences. My proposition is that it was a culture, in the sense that it is something we collectively participated in and now remember.¹ This culture not only encompassed, at the time, the experience of scrolling through *tomboy* selfies and following *tomboy* internet celebrities, but for many it also included dressing up like these *tomboy* celebrities (Figure 13) and participating in same-sex courtship with *TBG/po* as a *tomboy*. This culture was in one sense a fashion trend, but it was also a

very specific form of *tomboy* self-labelling and practice in the 2000s lesbian Sinophone sphere.²

This image/material has been removed by the author of this thesis for copyright reasons.

Figure 13. Collage of the adolescent *tomboy* internet celebrities on the Taiwanese web site Wretch, retrieved from a Taiwanese lesbian Facebook group in 2021

But this culture is now frowned upon by most of my participants—*in spite of* their *own* past participation in it. In light of this discovery, the central research question of this thesis (i.e. “how is the *tomboy* conceptualised by members of the lesbian Sinophone?”) must therefore be modified to take into account this process of remembering. Hence, the key questions of this chapter are: How is this 2000s past (re)conceptualised *in retrospect*? How does this *retelling* of the past contribute to conceptualisations of the *tomboy* in the present? I chose to open this chapter with a quote from my participant Leslie to underscore this central retrospective construction of

the past. Leslie's quote is a dialogue with the past from the present, through which she retrospectively diagnoses teenage *tomboys* in the 2000s to be immature actors following a trendy culture before returning to the life path of heterosexual adulthood. This quote is representative of a series of similar statements and life stories that I will discuss later in this chapter. I argue that the speakers construct the 2000s *tomboy* as an unserious and immature teenager who pursued *TBG/po* girls in what the speakers see an illegitimate form of same-sex dating bordering on heterosexuality. Rather than either refuting or supporting this retrospective assessment of the past, I ask what it produces. I argue that this line of thinking *constructs* the idea of a mature, serious, and enlightened lesbian self in the present. This is a recurring theme appearing across this thesis. In this chapter, I focus specifically on participants' contemporary construction of the adolescent past (in distinction to their narration of the present as a period of enlightenment, which will come into focus in the next chapter and culminate in Chapter Six).

Alongside Leslie's statement I have included a personal anecdote to help flesh out the scene. It was difficult for me to find a direct quote describing the scene in detail, for my participants all correctly identified me as an insider who was personally familiar with it. When Leslie said, "back in our day, being a *TB* was just a trend," I—the interviewer—was also embedded in the word "our." Certainly, I am writing from the position of an insider and the process of writing this chapter is likewise for me also a process of remembering and re-interpreting the past, but it is my participants' voices that I want to centre here.

Importantly, these voices are autobiographical. The first section of this chapter looks at retrospective comments my participants made about the 2000s adolescent *tomboy* culture generally. The second section considers their thoughts on *tomboy-TBG/po* dating specifically by drawing from their readings of the screen texts *Yes or No*

and *Girls Love*. On the surface, participants' statements are made about people they knew or saw on screen, but they are also implicit statements about themselves. This subtle construction of the self becomes clearer in the third and final section of this chapter, in which I look at my participants' reflections on *their own participation* in 2000s adolescent *tomboy* culture. Whereas the first two sections are about the retrospective constructions of the immature *tomboy*, the third section charts the beginning of the making of a new mature self.

To theorise these reflections, my central argument is that retrospective framing of one's adolescent *tomboy* past is an *inventive* process. Autobiography is a form of self-intervention into past experiences, through which the present self enters into dialogues with the past to re-construct former events into a coherent trajectory (Giddens, 1991). The *ex-tomboy* autobiographies appearing in this chapter are therefore "dialogues" with the past that re-organise the speakers' past experiences into meaningful chronologic life histories. Near the end of this chapter, I compare these *ex-tomboy* autobiographies with the coming-out narrative analysed by Ken Plummer in *Telling Sexual Stories* (1995). I argue that, like the coming-out narrative Plummer sketched out, the *ex-tomboy* autobiographies are *modernist* tales that produce in the narrator the sense of a singular, coherent, stable sense of self.

Section One: “Those *Tomboys* Who Went Back to Being Straight”

I think the butch identity in Western societies is really different from Taiwan's *T*. Butch identity is something that is very concrete, *T* on the other hand is not. Perhaps it's because there is a lot of all-girl schools in Taiwan. Back when we were teenagers at all-girls schools, a lot of people looked at the *T* style and thought, “Oh, I can dress like that,” and they started dressing as *T*. Maybe some of them were actually lesbians, but maybe some of them weren't. And over time they started dressing femininely and dating men again. For most people, being a *T* is just a transitional phase. It's not a permanent identity the way butch is. Butch has a history. But I don't know where *T* came from. It seems like it's only been around since one or two decades ago. [...] Perhaps a lot of them just picked the *T* label when they were teenagers and didn't give it much thought back then, but over time they started to realise that wasn't quite right. [...] A lot of the *T* I knew in high school began to turn when they entered university. *T-P* couples usually break up when they finish high school. *You know, it's just a phase*. I've met many people like that [...] And sure, a lot of *P* started to date men again, but on the outside their appearances remained the same, so it's not a very obvious change on the surface. But from what I've seen, it was the people who were *T* whose change was very noticeable [because their appearance changed from masculine to feminine]. That's not to say there's anything fundamentally wrong with that. It's definitely not a crime to turn. I'm just *curious* as to why. I suppose it was because they were still discovering themselves. They just thought dressing like a *T* was cool, so they gave that a go. After all those were just kids who were still growing up.

This passage is taken from my interview with PP, a twenty-eight-year-old education magazine editor in Taipei. We had been internet friends for a few years prior to this interview and were meeting in person for the first time for this interview. PP knew that I had been researching *tomboys* for a few years by then and expressed, at the outset of the interview, that she did not think the category *tomboy* had a history. She tried to look into the history of *T*, she said, but there was none. It was in that moment that she made the comparison with butch. Butch in her understanding was a clearly defined sexual identity that not only had a long history in the West but more importantly remained an *unchanging* part of the person who bore it. Unmistakably, this construction of the unchanging butch was made to illustrate the image of the *changing and changeable tomboy*. Similar to Leslie's statement at the beginning of this chapter, PP argues that both the *tomboy* and *TBG/po* are susceptible to heterosexual adulthood. According to this view, being a *tomboy* is only a transitional phase in the grand scheme of self-development. In a language that might remind the reader of conservative pamphlets warning teenagers against premarital sex, this view describes the *tomboy* as a child with impaired judgement incapable of making a mature decision for herself. Her eventual choice of normative feminine heterosexuality in early adulthood now serves as the (supposed) evidence of her past sexual confusion. The significance of this view lies in its suggestion that adult sexuality is real, whereas adolescent sexuality is not.

This view marks a significant departure from the earlier, twentieth century to early 2000s perceptions of the *tomboy* and the *TBG/po* as respectively destined to permanent homosexuality and normative heterosexuality³ (Martin, 2010). It is also distinctively different from earlier, twentieth century to early 2000s representations of the "adolescent lesbian entering heterosexual marriage" trope. In Fran Martin's (2010) and Helen Leung's (2008) research on this trope, they suggest that even though

representational texts in that era overwhelmingly position heterosexual adulthood as the inevitable destiny for normatively gendered⁴ and same-sex attracted women, the stories remain ambivalent about the validity of this destination. In fact, these representations privilege past adolescent female-female romance as the true love in the (*po*/ feminine) protagonists' lives, while their later entrance into heterosexual adulthood (which is forced upon them by their families) is presented as the unfulfilling conclusion to their stories (Martin, 2010). Contrast this with PP's and Leslie's view. According to their view, adulthood heterosexuality is the teenage *tomboy*'s true sexuality. This reading denies two possible alternative interpretations of events. The first and obvious possibility is that the *tomboy* was bisexual all along, and the so-called turn from same-sex to heterosexual dating was not actually a change but was consistent with a true inherent bisexuality. The second possible reading is that—like the *po* protagonist described in Martin's research who regretfully enters heterosexual adulthood—the *tomboy* was forced into giving up her adolescent masculinity and same-sex love. But neither of these readings is evoked in this new view, which, again, relies on the central idea that adolescent adoption of the *tomboy* label was not, and had never been, real.

This dismissal of the authenticity of teenage *tomboys* appears not only in my interviews with Leslie and PP (who were from Hong Kong and Taiwan, respectively) but also in my interviews in the PRC. One such instance is my interview with Jerry, a thirty-four-year-old editor from Shanghai. She told me:

I remember I was learning about *T* and *P* from online forums in the 2000s.

People on those forums said that these labels came from Taiwan. And for a long time then, there was this wave of *T* internet celebrities from Taiwan who were

really popular here in mainland China. Nick⁵ or something. *I don't know. I think they're a bunch of kids. They knew nothing.* But they had such a bad influence on younger people in China. [...] Younger people back then were just imitating these *T* celebrities.

Again, the same framing of adolescent sexuality as lacking maturity and sound judgement can be observed. While PP is perhaps less harsh than Jerry in her characterisation of the unknowing *tomboy* teen (“That’s not to say there’s anything fundamentally wrong with that. It’s definitely not a crime to turn”), PP’s and Jerry’s descriptions ultimately follow the same logic. According to both, the young girls in the 2000s fell victim to a fashionable *tomboy* culture, under the influence of which they mistakenly thought they should imitate attractive tomboys in their own appearances, and it was only when they entered early adulthood that they overcame this bad influence. 2000s *tomboy* culture was, to summarise these comments in a word, a mistake.

Section Two: “2000s *Tomboy* Courtship was Deceptive on Both Sides!”

The protagonists in *Yes or No* [Kim and Pie] are just kids falling in love [...] Actually, they look just like the *T* and *P* teens I knew from school. Funny enough, I was just trying to think of a Taiwanese film that resembled that high school *T* and *P* culture, but I could not think of any. But that Thai film is exactly that. The popular *T* look back then? Kim looks just like that! Her haircut is exactly what teenage *T* back then wore. And Pie also looks just like the teenage

P I knew. [...] So maybe Kim and Pie from *Yes or No* will also break up and turn straight when they get older. Who knows? [...] At the end of the day, that film is just a heterosexual love story.

— PP, the aforementioned twenty-eight-year-old education magazine editor based in Taipei

Previously, I argued that *Yes or No* and *Girls Love* each place a significant visual focus on the *tomboy* character's erotic appeal. I argued that these texts both appear to extend and reinforce the configuration of the *tomboy* as an eroticised fashion style in the 2000s culture. By extension, the retrospective dismissal of that scene is also reflected in contemporary readings of the two screen texts. PP's reading of *Yes or No* above is perhaps less concerned with the film itself than it is a commentary on the 2000s *tomboy* and *TBG/po* culture of which she assumes the film to be representative. Her suggestion that the two characters will not stay together (despite the second film's ending—which contains a flash-forward into their mid-twenties—clearly indicating that they will continue to be a couple well into adulthood) again reinforces the idea that teenagers who adopted the *tomboy* (and *TBG/po*) look from the 2000s culture were unserious about themselves and their sexualities. PP's suggestion that the film is “just a heterosexual love story” about “kids falling in love” could therefore be interpreted as a general comment about her understanding of 2000s *tomboy* and *TBG/po* culture more broadly.

Other participants made similar comments. The following quote is from my interview with Kit, a thirty-year-old retailer based in Hong Kong. Kit came across my recruitment advertisement for this project on a Hong Kong dating app and we had been

messaging each other for several weeks to talk about the project prior to our interview. During that time, I came to know that Kit was very against the category of the *tomboy*. I was therefore not at all surprised when she told me she hated *Yes or No* and *Girls Love*, though I was unsure of her reasons. When I asked if she could elaborate on them, she said:

Kit: Those absolute trash...*Yes or No*, *Girls Love*, whatever. I only had them playing on my TV screen while I was doing housework and wanted some background noise. I would never sit down and actually pay attention to that kind of rubbish. [...] Try to make a movie like that with an unattractive, fat *TB*. A flannel-wearing *TB* with an undercut who's so fat her belly is bigger than her tits. See if anyone would watch that! The whole thing is just about what a handsome guy⁶ the *TB* is. It's just about a straight woman falling for a cute guy. [...] The *Yes or No* sequel is worse. It's just a story about two straight women fighting over a cute guy! That's it! [...] Those are heterosexual stories essentially, and they are all trash. [...]

Me: Did watching *Yes or No* and *Girls Love* change the ways you understand *TB* and *TBG* at all?

Kit: Not at all. It's just forcing heterosexuality into same-sex dating.

Me: Is that how you see *TB* and *TBG* in real life? That they are no different from straight couples?

Kit: Yes. They are just reinforcing the same gender binary.

Kit's (fatphobic) comments entertaining the idea of a sexually unattractive *tomboy* screen character highlight implicitly the sex appeal of Kim and Mi Le. Yet it is precisely this sex appeal that for Kit invalidates the filmic love story. As she explains, it is the *tomboy* character's adopting of a sexually appealing masculine appearance that ignites in the *TBG/po* character (what Kit perceives to be) a heterosexual desire. The logic underpinning her statement is as follows: a heterosexual teenage girl meets a handsome *tomboy*. She falls for the *tomboy* the same way she would fall for an attractive cis-gender man. The attraction is rooted in gender polarity and is, according to this logic, inherently heterosexual.

Another participant, from Taiwan, made a similar argument about the supposed heterosexuality of these stories:

I remember in *Yes or No*, when Pie first walked into the dorm room and met Kim, and immediately Pie started to see Kim as a man. I think this is the quintessential *P* perspective. They see *T* as men. Gradually they fall for *T* while still seeing them as men. [...] Then you are just in a heterosexual relationship! [...] There's also this mainland Chinese series, *Girls Love*, and that one was just like this too.

—Ting-ting, a twentieth-seven-year-old Taiwanese engineer from Kaohsiung who identified as *bufen*

Like Kit, Ting-ting reads the attraction Pie and Xiao Rou have for Kim and Mi Le as psychologically heterosexual. The handsome *tomboy* characters are, according this line

of thinking, *not* a legitimate object of lesbian desire, as any attraction one may have towards them is (deemed) heterosexual.⁷

Drawing on this characterisation of *tomboy/TBG-po* dating as psychologically heterosexual, I now link this back to the framing of the *tomboy* as an immature teenager. Below, I will juxtapose three quotes in order to spell out the core logic that underpins the comments and stories in this chapter:

I feel like Mi Le was just putting on a show. She is flaunting her looks to make straight girls fall for her. That's why I don't go out with stereotypical *TB* like Mi Le. I take one look at her and I just know that she's like that. It's her whole look! [...] She dresses in such a phony way—the hair, the clothing, and her attitude. She is like a peacock showing off her feathers, trying to seduce you with her best and most attractive side. And it makes it easy for you to accept it, if you were a straight girl who rejected homosexuality in the past. She makes it easier for you to accept it. Because her whole appearance is just like a guy's. [...] I think Xiao Rou just fell for an attractive, masculine person, and she forgets that this person is actually a girl.

— Leslie, who appeared at the start of this chapter and is also from Hong Kong

Back when we were teenagers at all-girls schools, what we knew about lesbianism was limited to *TB* and *TBG*. At all-girls schools, the *TBG* idolised and fell in love with attractive *TB*. The *TB* usually played sports, they looked exactly like Mi Le [who is a basketball player] in *Girls Love!* [...] To be honest I couldn't finish that series. I've only seen the first part [out of two]. Mi Le is so

pretentious, and I just cannot stand her. And Xiao Rou is just like those *TBG* I knew all those years ago who fell for handsome *TB* [...] And the series tries very hard to make you experience this too, with the way the camera always close up on Mi Le. I just think this whole situation feels so dated. In this day and age, this really shouldn't be how lesbians are represented on screen anymore. [...] It's so heterosexual.

— Piper, a twentieth seven-year-old financial planner from Hong Kong who identified as *no label*

A lot of young people imitated those *T* internet celebrities back then. They all dressed like Nick. But *she's practically a dude*. I'm quite puzzled by this. If you are actually a lesbian, why would you fall for a girl that looks just like a guy⁸?

— Jerry, the aforementioned mainland Chinese editor

Read in successive order, these three quotes reveal one consistent central argument.

First, Leslie suggests that the *tomboy* look is deceptive and seduces heterosexual women into same-sex relationships that remain heterosexual at heart. Second, Piper suggests that this deceptive courtship between *TB* and *TBG/po* teens in the real world is mirrored by the fictional couple in *Girls Love*, in which the camera's focus on Mi Le's sex appeal and invitation to the spectator to desire her body is an *outdated* mode of same-sex attraction. Third, Jerry again references the idea that teenage *tomboys* were simply immature actors imitating a fashionable *tomboy* aesthetics, but adds that the teenage girls who desire *tomboy* teens were equally immature. The central argument all three participants make is this: The fashionable *tomboy* look was deceptive for *both* the

wearer *and* the girl desiring the wearer. The wearer fooled herself into taking the costume on and in the process seduced and deceived the young girl drawn to her. This is how the past is remembered: as a culture of deception on both sides.

Section Three: “I Was Misled”

On the surface, my participants appear to be directing these retrospective criticisms completely externally. It may seem that, in suggesting that 2000s teenage *tomboy* and *TBG/po* culture was a collective hoax, they are rejecting only former *tomboys* and the young women they dated. However, this (perceived) hoax was one that my participants themselves also participated in in their youth, and it is fundamental to their own personal experiences and the way in which they view their own life histories. In the same way that they construct the now-heterosexual ex-*tomboys* to be children with impaired judgement and little personal agency, they also view their *younger selves* as fellow victims of this hoax.

To illustrate this, I will now turn to self-reflections from three participants who appeared earlier in this chapter. The first is PP, the Taiwanese participant who described former *tomboys* as children still in the process of discovering themselves. In the 2000s, PP did not identify strongly with the *T* label but did socialise as a *T*. This is how she described her past:

Back then, around the time we were in high school, we thought there were only two types of lesbians. In online lesbian space, I felt like I had to choose to be either one. I had no choice but to say I was a *T* or a *P*. That was the scene back

then. It was only much later, when I started my study at university, then I began to realise...

A similar comment was made by Jerry, the Shanghainese participant who described 2000s *tomboy* culture as a negative influence on Chinese youth. As a young person herself during that period, Jerry not only socialised as a *tomboy* but in fact identified as one. Below is her recollection of that experience:

I knew at a young age that I was attracted to girls. Given how society at large believed so strongly in the gender binary, my first thought was that I was born in the wrong gender. I thought I was a freak, and I was in quite a lot of pain. But as I grew older, I realised there was this thing called homosexuality. I was looking it up on the internet, and I found out about this *T* and *P* categorisation. I thought, Oh I must be a *T* then. And I just left it at that and didn't really think about it too much. [...] And now I know we shouldn't categorise ourselves like this.

I will discuss these two quotes in conjunction with a third self-reflection from Kit, the Hongkonger who saw the sexual attraction between *tomboys* and *TBG/po* as heterosexual in nature. Similar to Jerry, as a high schooler Kit also assigned the *tomboy* label to herself. This is a past that she clearly regrets:

At that time, we only had this binary opposition. The options were limited to A or B. If you didn't pick this, then you're forced to choose the other. [...] This

was the situation for me in high school. I thought there were only options A and B. But now I know there are options A, B, C, D, and E! I only realised this maybe ten or eight years ago.

These three reflections share a common characterisation of the past. They present it as a period of restriction. There were only two types, the speakers say; there was a restrictive gendered binary opposition that limited their choices to *T* and *P*. It is in this sense that the hoax deceived not only the former *tomboys* and their girlfriends, but also the speakers themselves.

Section Four: Scenes of the Crime—the Internet and the All-girls School

The reader might notice that I have chosen to end the quotes at the point at which the speakers begin to discuss their rejection of the *tomboy* label. This is a deliberate choice, for their descriptions of that process are so complex and so crucial to their self-identity that they demand three more chapters for a proper analysis. For now, I will analyse the above reflections together and draw out aspects that are already at play.

The first aspect is the material conditions of the 2000s *tomboy* culture. My participants make numerous references to two material contexts that shaped their past understandings of the *tomboy*. The first and most obvious context is that of the internet. Both PP and Jerry make reference to online lesbian space in the quotes above (“In online lesbian spaces...”; “I was looking it up on the internet”) and also to the *T* internet celebrities in that era. That online space is also the subject of my personal anecdote, included precisely to illustrate its contours, interiors, and textures. Much like the Taiwanese 1980s *T* bar scene (Chao, 1996), that world required that members align with

either *tomboy* or *TBG/po* in order to make themselves legible to one another. That online world was not simply a technological channel through which offline ideas were disseminated unmodified to an online audience, but it was in itself very much a scene—a discursive space—that organised its members in regulatory ways. In this sense, the medium *was* the message (c.f. McLuhan, 2013). The problem now is that *that message was wrong*, or so the argument goes. As two other participants said:

I think the reason why we categorised ourselves into *T* and *P* was because of PTT [note: PTT was and remains a popular bulletin board system in Taiwan]. I remember browsing PPT with my schoolmate all the time, and we were reading other people's posts. [...] And then in high school, people started to say they were *T* or *P*. The *T* were the ones who wore androgynous hair and dressed in cool, trendy clothing. Their gentle partners were the *P*. [...] But later we started to realise, actually this categorisation might not be necessary at all.

— Shih-ting, a twentieth-two-year-old university student from Taipei who identified as *bufen*

I was still in high school then, and my friends were reading about these terms [*T* and *P*] from the internet. When they told me about these terms, I was like, what? I did not understand at all. My friends had to explain them to me. They said a *T* was someone who dressed like this, and I said okay. They asked me if I knew what a *P* was, I said no and they had to explain that to me as well. At the time I thought if we were drawing the line between people that way, then I must be a *T*. But later on, I stopped putting that label on myself.

— Yu-wen, a twentieth-seven-year-old Taiwanese psychologist from Tainan who identified as *bufen*

From these two stories, it becomes clear that the online world structured not just online interactions but offline school life as well. *T* and *P* labels learned from the internet became principles from which the social worlds at school developed. The online world was the source of the offline world. And unmistakably in these retrospective accounts the internet is construed as the origin of misinformation. It spreads—almost like a disease—from one schoolmate to another, until all succumb to its infection.

It is important to point out, however, that this online-to-school narrative is constructed by individual participants and may not reflect the actual sequences of events. Considering the history of the *tomboy* throughout the late twentieth century Sinophone world, it is entirely possible and in fact quite likely that the online world of the 2000s also relates to the *tomboy*'s preceding offline history. The exact chronology perhaps followed not a straightforward cause-and-effect flow but might have been a network of multidirectional offline-online crossings-over.

Relatedly, the other context my participants credit as the source of 2000s *tomboy* culture is the single-sex school setting in the education systems of Taiwan and Hong Kong. For instance, PP observes that the *T* style was particularly popular in Taiwanese all-girls schools (“Back when we were teenagers at an all-girls school, a lot of people looked at the *T* style and thought...”). Piper similarly describes a *tomboy* culture flourishing in single-sex schools in Hong Kong (“At all-girls school, the *TBG* idolised and fell in love with attractive *TB*...”). Another participant I met in Hong Kong also gives a similar description, when she said:

A lesbian couple back then consisted of a *TB* and a feminine girl. Rarely did I see couples who were *pure* [note: *pure* refers to a lesbian relationship in which both partners are feminine]. At the beginning, none of us knew enough. And we thought that was okay. That nothing was wrong with it. And then, as we grew up, we learned more, and now we know more.

— Felicity, a twenty-four-year-old Hong Kong financial planner who now identifies as *pure*

In my attempt to make sense of these quotes and their suggestion that 2000s *tomboy* culture was *specifically* linked to all-girls schools, I thought of, on the one hand, the similar presumed linkage between lesbianism and all-girls schools made by early-twentieth century Chinese readers of European sexological texts (Sang, 2003), and, from then on and throughout late twentieth century Taiwan and Hong Kong, filmic representations of lesbian love at all-girls schools circulating in the popular imagination, such as the Sinophone film *Butterfly* (2004, dir. Yan Yan Mak) and the Hong Kong film *All About Love* (2010, dir. Ann Hui). There is a danger, however, in suggesting that same-sex schools and lesbian love are somehow fundamentally linked, as doing so will amount to a situationist sexological theory (similar to Carpenter's [1899], in fact) that offers little help in understanding the materials at hand. One can otherwise speculate that the assumed linkage between lesbianism and all-girls schools already in the public imagination led to greater tolerance for *tomboy* and *TBG/po* dating in girls school, but that also appears unlikely given the literature on homophobic discipline from the all-girls school administrations in Hong Kong (Tong, 2008) and Taiwan (J. Liu & Ding,

2007). Regardless of what actually transpired, the point is that both the online sphere and the girls' school campus are presented in these self-reflections as the *scenes* of a collective delusion. Like the scene of a small town in a fairy tale in which a witch casts her sleeping spell over the townsfolk, or the scene of a metropolis at the start of a zombie apocalypse movie when a mysterious virus begins to take control of the citizens' minds, the online world and the all-girls school are presented as the scenes where the speaker (and everyone else) was put under a spell, their thoughts and actions becoming not entirely their own.

Section Five: Autobiographies and Modernist Self-Making

In this section, I draw on this idea of a collective delusion to show how these memories in turn create a coherent autobiography. Let me start by first laying out the shared narrative structure underpinning the quotes above, thus:

1. As a child, I knew I was attracted to girls.
2. As a teen, I began to interpret these feelings as indicative of homosexuality.
3. As a teen, I found out about *tomboy* and *TBG/po* and labelled myself a *tomboy*.
4. As an adult, I realised labelling myself as a *tomboy* was wrong.

One can easily recognise a progressive narrative of personal development here. The speaker organises events in order beginning from childhood, progressing to adolescence, then finally reaching adulthood. The framing of the immature teenage *tomboy* and her *TBG/po* lover fit neatly into the speaker's narration of her own self development. Whereas the *ex-tomboy* (supposedly) re-discovers her heterosexuality in adulthood, the speaker similarly moves away from her *tomboy* identity while retaining her lesbian sexuality in adulthood. To repeat an earlier point, adulthood in these

retrospections is associated with truthfulness, and the speaker's own adulthood is associated additionally with wisdom. Constructing adolescence as an era of unknowing produces present adulthood as the time of knowledge. "And then I began to realise," says PP. "**And now** I know we shouldn't categorise ourselves like this [emphasis mine]," echoes Jerry. Or, as Felicity neatly summarises, "as we grew up, we learned more, and now we know more."

This linear progression from past ignorance to present wisdom is unmistakably modernist. My definition of modernism draws on Ken Plummer's (1995) work on modernist sexual stories. Plummer writes that while depictions of sexuality took many varying forms in history, by the 1970s, the stories that gay men and lesbians in America told about themselves began to take one unified, modernist form. Plummer points out that these coming-out tales were modernist in the sense that they organise events into a "sequenced, causal, rational and linear pattern that is a feature of much modern biography" (p. 83). This sequencing does not allow chance and contingency, he adds; instead, it unites events in a cause-and-effect linearity. The sequence is as follows:

1. The subject first experiences same-sex attractions during childhood.
2. In adolescence, the subject begins to interpret these previously unnamed feelings as indicative of an inner gayness.
3. The subject comes to understand themselves as a gay person.

(Plummer, 1995, p. 84, paraphrased to reduce length)

Other scholars who have written on coming-out narratives make similar observations. For example, in an anthology of American lesbian coming out stories titled *The Original Coming Out Stories*, editors Penelope and Wolfe (1989) described the coming out process as an organisation of past events and feelings. Similarly, William H. DuBay (1987) writes that in coming out stories, queer people tend to say that as children they

knew they were different, and so “the process [then] goes from feeling gay and doing gay to being gay” (p. 7). Cohler and Hammack (2007), too, highlight that gay autobiographers “writ[e] their life stories backward” to “remake their own identities” (p. 154–5). In sum, what these scholars suggest is that coming out stories are inventions of a logical narrative. To say so is not to suggest that the childhood self was actually not gay and only retrospectively deemed as such. Rather, the point is that childhood memories are materials re-ordered and re-interpreted by the subject in the present to create one singular coherent life history that gives meanings to their current sense of self. As Adrienne Rich (1989) puts it, coming out is a process of “making the connections between past and present and future” (p. 8-9).

Like these coming out stories, the *ex-tomboy* stories are also modernist inventions. The *ex-tomboy* stories are in fact variations and extensions of the coming-out narratives. The speakers in *ex-tomboy* stories and coming out stories both begin by narrating a childhood marked by unnameable same-sex attractions; both remember adolescence as the time in which they begin to interpret these feelings as indicative of an inner sexuality; and while the subject in coming out stories simply continues on until a gay or lesbian identity is firmly established, the other subject first adopts the *tomboy* label before taking the final step of realising (as she claims) that her *tomboy* label is unnecessary. To be perfectly clear, I am not disputing my participants’ characterisations of their pasts. I am not counter-arguing that their past *tomboy* identity was in fact “truthful” and that they are somehow misrepresenting their own memories. My point, to reiterate, is that past events have no *a priori* meaning and only come to be meaningful through retrospective narration.

This is to say that backwardly introspective narrative *creates* an essence of the self that is presumed to have always existed. The Anglosphere gay subject in the

coming-out story says: I have always been gay. My life has been a journey of discovering my gayness. My gayness is a part of me that has always been there. The Sinophone lesbian says: I was never a *tomboy*. It was never necessary to label myself a *tomboy*. As an adult I eventually stopped labelling myself and re-discovered myself, who had never been a *tomboy*.

These are modernist tales through which the speaker invents a *stable* sense of self. As Plummer suggests, the organisation of past events into a coherent chronology is:

...artificial and imposed and always implies an underlying disorder: ambiguities will emerge, phenomena will not fit, new stuff will emerge which threatens the purity of the existing order. Stories function to gloss over disorder. Indeed, the greater the sensed disorder, the stronger may be the need for stories to create tighter classification, stronger boundaries, rules for living. Modernist tales largely provide this sense of order (Plummer, 1995, p. 177).

The *ex-tomboy* autobiography is also one that forecloses ambiguities and alternative interpretations. It rejects, for example, the view that past identification and current dis-identification with the *tomboy* are equally valid. It also resists the post-modernist suggestion that the self is not a coherent entity. Instead, the speaker gathers dispersed moments and stitches them into the semblance of a coherent identity. When she says, I was never a *tomboy*, she creates, regulates, and disciplines her own life history. And it is at the centre of this self-creation that the category of the *tomboy* sits, like a lighthouse that the subject is sailing away from. For the speaker this is a pivotal moment: realising

that she was never a *tomboy* (as she claims) is the beginning of a new chapter in life. This is a new chapter for her to search for a post-*tomboy* world, and most crucially, for an enlightened, self-knowing, true self.

Chapter Conclusion

This chapter has considered my participants' retrospective reflections on 2000s Sinophone *tomboy* culture. Viewing this chapter in connection with the earlier conceptual history of the *tomboy* in the lesbian Sinophone sphere (Chapter Two), it appears that the late 1990s to 2000s period was a turning point at which it became increasingly common to view the *tomboy* not as a stable sexual identity but rather as a fashionable, eroticised culture. That culture is now remembered as a regrettable and unserious past. This chapter has examined this process of remembering, re-interpreting, and regretting and its implications for identity formation.

The first section looked at comments my participants made about former teenage *tomboys* who re-entered normatively gendered heterosexual relationships in adulthood. Drawing on scholarship that examines Sinophone perceptions of the (presumed) linkage between adolescent same-sex sexuality and adulthood, including Martin's (2010) important suggestion that *tomboy* has generally been conceptually linked to (the impossibility of) lesbian adulthood, this chapter has sketched out a new and different conceptual logic. The post-2000s retrospective logic no longer associates female masculinity with impossible lesbian adulthood, but instead sees *tomboy*-identifying adolescence as *either* a temporarily homosexual phase for those who are perceived to be truly heterosexual, *or* a temporary phase of ignorance and immaturity for those who conceptualise themselves to be truly lesbian. Furthermore, whereas earlier

representations remained ambivalent about whether heterosexual adulthood was in fact fulfilling for women previously in same-sex adolescent relationships, this new narrative assumes that former *tomboys* who are now involved in adult heterosexual romances are returning to their “real,” “innate” heterosexuality.

Put differently, this new logic paints these former *tomboys* as self-deceiving in the past. In the same vein, it also presents past *TBG/po* as self-deceiving, and the mutual attraction between these past *tomboy* and *TBG/po* as essentially heterosexual. While similar accusations are also directed at lesbian gender polarity outside of the Sinophone world, I argue that the heterosexist accusation here contributes to a broader conceptualisation of 2000s *tomboy* culture as a collective failure (specifically, an intellectual failure enforced by the internet and the single-sex school). The key point is therefore not whether these accusations are *true* or not (whether the attraction was truly heterosexual or truly homosexual), but that they are made *retrospectively*. By painting that past culture as immature, naïve, and symbolically heterosexual, the retrospective mechanism frames the present as its polar opposite: mature, wise, and as the next chapter will make clear, “genuinely lesbian.”

The chapter’s final section argued that these *ex-tomboy* autobiographies are self-making inventions, and my analysis of this self-making process will span several chapters (Chapters Four to Six). This chapter has discussed several important aspects of this narration. First, it is one that follows the logic of psychological self-development. It constructs the former *tomboy*-identifying phase as immature and deceptive, and presents adulthood as mature and enlightened. Second, and most crucially, I compared the *ex-tomboy* autobiography to conventional Anglophone coming out stories. I argued that the *ex-tomboy* autobiography is a variation of the coming out narrative, and that both produce an orderly and coherent sense of self in an unmistakably modernist manner. In

saying this, I proposed that the participants are crafters of their own personal identities, and that it is through framing their *tomboy* past as regrettable that they assemble their present selves.

My proposition that the *tomboy* figure functions as a negative reference point in the process of self-creating raises several new and important questions that the following chapters will address. The first is: if the 2000s *tomboy* culture is a past that the self has come to view as a mistake, then what exactly is the turning moment at which the self begins to re-frame her past? Chapter Four examines autobiographies in which participants said they came to realise their error while watching the American television show *The L Word*. This opens up further questions about the imagined geographies of sexual modernity and pre-modernity, which are first raised in Chapter Four before continuing on to become a focus for Chapter Five. A further and crucial question is: How are the narrators of these life stories addressing themselves in the present? If the “I” was never a *tomboy*, then who am “I”? Chapter Six addresses this by looking at autobiographies in which the speakers explicitly attempt to find their true, authentic, lesbian self.

As my participants claim to be moving on from 2000s *tomboy* culture and starting a new chapter, here in this thesis, so do we.

Notes to Chapter Three

¹ I want to distinguish this from collective memory (Wertsch & Roediger III, 2008) (both in the sense of State-sanctioned official public memory and vernacular common-folk shared memory) because my participants in fact remember this collective past privately. When I previewed my thesis analysis to some participants recently, in 2021, they were all surprised to learn that others in the communities also remembered that past in a way so closely resembling their own.

² The previous chapter also touched upon some aspects of this then-emerging culture, for example in my recap of Leung's (2008) points that in the 2000s, the *tomboy* category was increasingly used as a popular form of self-stylisation.

³ Although this earlier perception certainly remains powerful, as many participants—like Leslie—evoked this idea of the *TBG/po* turning only to immediately subvert it by saying that the *tomboys* also turned.

⁴ Martin specifically connected normative heterosexual life path to normatively gendered women; Leung's research spoke of lesbian characters broadly without specifying their gender performance.

⁵ A picture of Nick is included in the collage in Figure 11. Nick is the one pictured in the middle.

⁶ I translate the Cantonese term *liangzai* (靚仔) as “cute/handsome guy.” The term *zai* is a slang describing boys and young men, whereas *liang* can be translated into “beautiful,” “handsome,” or “cute.” This translation applies to all the other Cantonese interviews appearing in this thesis.

⁷ I have discussed this notion of *TBG/po* inauthenticity in greater details in a paper focusing on *TBG/po* sexuality elsewhere (Fung, 2019).

⁸ Here I translate the Mandarin term *Nansheng* (男生), which is usually used as a vernacular to refer to boys and young men, to the English word “guy.” This translation applies to all the other Mandarin interviews appearing in this thesis.

Chapter Four: Imagining *The L Word* as a *Tomboy*-free Utopia

When I first watched *The L Word*, I thought “Oh in foreign countries there are many different types of lesbians and these lesbians all wear their hair long! Even the most masculine character, Shane, wears her hair long”! [...] I thought lesbians over there are really different from those in Asia. Here in Asia, everyone divides themselves into *TB* and *TBG* roles. At that point in time, I was questioning myself about whether I was forcing myself into these roles. I was thinking about whether these *TB* and *TBG* roles were no different from gender roles assigned to men and women. Does that mean relationships between *TB* and *TBG* are just the same as heterosexuality? If you compare that with foreign countries, you see that lesbians there are all really feminine. This image of a feminine woman dating another feminine woman was just very alluring to me. I thought it was perfection.

This excerpt is from an interview I conducted with Yan, a twenty-six-year-old nurse in Hong Kong who socialised as a *TB* during adolescence but identified as *pure* as an adult. Yan was one of the first participants I interviewed for this project and, at the time of our meeting, I did not expect us to discuss receptions of Euro-American screen texts extensively at all. But this meeting soon took a new direction on its own, as did the many interviews that followed. According to Yan and these other participants, the U.S.-produced lesbian television drama *The L Word* (2004-2009) (Figure 14) was key to their rejection of *tomboy* and *TBG/po* roles. Hearing this, I began to ask—and this is the core question this chapter aims to address—what function does *The L Word* serve in their rejections of the *tomboy*? That is, what *use* does this screen text have for these women?

This image/material has been removed by the author of this thesis for copyright reasons.

Figure 14. Promotional material for *The L Word*

To do that, I must first describe how *The L Word* ended up in the lesbian Sinophone sphere. Produced by Ilene Chaiken, *The L Word* debuted on the cable network Showtime in 2004. As the first television series in the U.S. to centre lesbian and bisexual women and their stories, the show was widely considered to be a monumental moment for queer media representation (Akass & McCabe, 2006; Heller, 2013; McFadden, 2014). But beyond offering mainstream lesbian visibility that was previously rare for its domestic and Anglophone audiences, *The L Word* also offered a glimpse into (a fictionalised version of) American queer lives for lesbian viewers in the Sinophone world. Though never officially broadcast or released in the PRC, the show amassed a huge fan following in mainland Chinese lesbian cyberspace via peer-to-peer file sharing and fan-translated subtitles (Zhao, 2017). In Hong Kong and Taiwan, *The L Word* was accessible through both legal (official subtitled DVD) and non-legal channels (torrenting). To give a clear example of the show's popularity in the lesbian Sinophone cyberspaces, a key lesbian discussion board on Taiwan's largest bulletin board platform PTT is named after the show—precisely because *The L Word* has already become so emblematic of lesbianism locally.

At first glance, underlining *The L Word*'s popularity in these Sinophone lesbian cyberspaces and centring it as a key to understanding critiques of *tomboy* and *TBG/po* might seem to speak to the cultural dominance of the West—particularly of the U.S.—in non-Western societies. Chapter One briefly discussed Dennis Altman's (1996a, 1996b, 1997) framework of American gay cultural imperialism. But such a framework is insufficient to explain my participants' fascination with *The L Word*. The fact that they interpret *The L Word* as a critique of *tomboy* and *TBG/po* roles—*despite* the fact that the series itself never presented any such discussion on Sinophone lesbian genders—underscores the extent to which the series has been “mis-translated,” localised, and re-appropriated into local lesbian feminist politics. In this light, Fran Martin's (2008) critique of Altman's claim is a much more appropriate framework to my data. Martin, extending on Raymond Wei-cheng Chu's (2004) proposition that non-Western queer communities often favour Euro-American queer materials because local versions of such materials are difficult to access, argues that consumption of Western queer materials by Sinophone lesbians “functions not as a material extension of actual Euro-American sexual cultures, but *as an imaginative resource* used to address [...] specific local problems [such as]: isolation, family and other social pressures, and in some areas, stigmatization” (emphasis mine, 2008, p. 298–299).

Similarly, *The L Word* functions as an imaginative resource to think through local lesbian feminist concerns.¹ This chapter illustrates the ways in which the series provides a canvas for my participants to imagine: (a) an alternative culture in which egalitarian feminine-feminine pairing replaces *tomboy* and *TBG/po* as the most visible form of lesbianism, (b) a lesbian identity free from patriarchal repression, and (c) a culturally superior Western lesbian Other toward which one should aspire. Extending on the last point, I shall return to Altman's assertion about America's cultural dominance

in the chapter conclusion. This chapter also presents an extension of the life stories documented in the previous chapter. Whereas Chapter Three focuses on the backward critique on one's own teenage *tomboy* experiences, this chapter centres the retrospective re-telling of one's "discovery" of the repressiveness of the *tomboy* category vis-à-vis the construction of a Western lesbian Other imagined through *The L Word*.

Section One: Imagining Feminine-Feminine, Egalitarian Lesbians

To contextualise my discussion, let me briefly describe the ways in which queer women are portrayed on *The L Word*. As the first mainstream television programme in the U.S. to primarily feature queer women, *The L Word* is subjected to considerable scrutiny among American lesbian critics. Many hope that the series may accurately represent queer women to a broad heterosexual audience but ultimately find the show to be failing in this task (Wolfe & Roripaugh, 2006). Writer Malinda Lo for example expresses her disappointment in a blogpost over the fact that the main cast is exclusively made up of "slender, beautiful, femmy women," adding that the show effectively fails to sufficiently represent the diverse gender performances—particularly butch and masculine gender performances—found in real-world American lesbian communities (qtd. in Wolfe & Roripaugh, 2006, p. 44). Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2006) is similarly displeased with the show's focus on feminine women, and speculates that this is motivated by the producers' intentional decision to appeal to heterosexual male viewers. This speculation is widely shared by other commentators. For instance, Samuel A. Chambers (2006) writes that by focusing on feminine women, the show implicitly tells heterosexual male viewers that "lesbians are attractive, desirable, feminine beauties" available for their consumption (p. 91). Other critics (Farr & Degroult, 2008; Moore & Kristen Schilt, 2006) suggest that even characters who might possibly appear

as butch (e.g. the somewhat androgynous Shane and breadwinner Bette) are feminised in their appearances to the extent that they will not alienate the male gaze, which might otherwise find explicitly coded female masculinity to be threatening.

Regardless of whether this speculation is correct, the fact remains that for most of the series' run, the cast consisted predominantly of normatively gendered women, and that female masculinity was largely absent. This did not go unnoticed by lesbian viewers in the Sinophone world. Take for instance the story quoted at the start of this chapter, in which Yan said that when she first viewed *The L Word*, she "noticed" that lesbians in Western societies (as seen on the show) all wore long hair and presented femininely. For Yan, the only available lesbian sub-types available domestically at the time were *tomboy* and *TBG/po*, and it was *The L Word* that first made available this alternative "image of a feminine woman dating another feminine woman." With this in mind, it becomes clear that *The L Word*'s predominantly feminine cast in fact provided Yan with *a canvas to imagine a world* in which normative femininity in both partners replaces gender polarity as the most visible form of lesbianism.

Yan was not alone in this imagination of an alternative world. In Hong Kong I also met with twenty-seven-year-old financial planner Piper, who identified as *no label*. As Piper told me:

In romantic relationships, *TB* behave exactly like heterosexual men. They are the breadwinners who take care of everything. *TB* follow [the Chinese idiom] "men are breadwinners and women are homemakers." [...] But if you look at how things are in foreign countries, say in *The L Word*, they tend not to be in *butch* and *femme* pairings [note: Piper is equating butch with *tomboy* and femme with

TBG/po here]. That really makes you realise things. When I first watched that show in Secondary Three [aged fifteen], I was like, whoa! I was shocked.

Piper's and Yan's stories share two important themes. First, both participants assume that *The L Word* is a realistic portrayal of queer lives in America. They read it as a documentary rather than a highly fictionalised drama. Both appear to be unaware of the domestic criticism concerning the absence of masculine visibility on the series, and as such both Piper and Yan imagine *The L Word* to be an unfiltered look into an alternative lesbian culture in which the *tomboy* figure (and with it, female masculinity and gender polarity) is entirely absent. The fact that both use the ambiguous phrase "foreign countries" rather than specifically designating the U.S. speaks to the illusory quality of this alternative culture. Secondly, for both Piper and Yan, this alternative culture is crucial to exposing the (perceived) heteronormativity of *tomboy* and *TBG/po* roles. Both participants describe the experience of watching *The L Word* as the decisive moment at which they began to problematise the practice of *tomboy* and *TBG/po* roles. In their words, it is the iconography of feminine-feminine lesbianism that compels them to reconsider the (perceived) heteronormativity that is presumably embedded in the lesbian genders at home.

Indeed, the critiques that *The L Word* enable in the lesbian Sinophone concern not only gender presentations but also dynamics between romantic partners. If, as Piper suggests, the core problem with *tomboy* and *TBG/po* lies in its semblances to normative gender roles (i.e. breadwinner and homemaker roles), then *The L Word* may present an opportunity to conjure up a different model of conducting intimate relationships. This is exactly Yan's interpretation of the show's central couple, Bette and Tina. As Yan said:

That scene where Bette and Tina were dancing together left a lasting impression on me. The way they were looking into each other's eyes was so beautiful.

Neither of them was more masculine, more *butch*, or more assertive than the other. They can both be *strong* and protect each other, at the same time they can both be so feminine, so gentle, and so considerate of each other. They protect one another *physically, mentally* [and] *emotionally*. I think they are two *strong* women who can both be *weak*. This whole picture was perfect!

Some additional contexts on the characters are in order here. Bette and Tina are introduced in the first season as a long-term cohabiting couple and both appear as series regulars throughout. In the first season, Tina gives up her career as a film producer in order to conceive a child with Bette, effectively making the latter, who is an art gallery director, the sole breadwinner. The couple breaks up several times over the course of five seasons, and during periods of separations Tina returns to her profession while Bette changes jobs several times but remains in managerial positions in the art sector. The scene Yan cited appears at the end of the fifth season. In this scene, Bette and Tina proudly announce their recent reunion to their friends and colleagues by dancing at the wrap party for the film Tina produces. Just before this scene, an ex-lover of Bette publicly humiliated Bette at an art show and a tearful Bette seeks emotional comfort from Tina. This is a new development in their relationship as Bette is usually portrayed as the emotionally stronger partner whom Tina turns to for emotional support. From this context it becomes clear what Yan read from this scene. For Yan, this scene is a celebration of egalitarian relationships. Both women are incredibly successful in their respective career, both are financially independent, and both are in the position to offer each other monetary as well as emotional support. Comparing this with the breadwinner

and homemaker model that Piper characterises *tomboy* and *TBG/po* roles with reveal exactly why *The L Word* becomes such a powerful imagery for both. Rather than having one partner dependent on the other (a mode of intimate relations that Piper associates with *tomboy* and *TBG/po*), Bette and Tina appear to offer an alternative marked by egalitarianism.

This reading of Bette and Tina also appears in a different interview. Consider the following story from Sydney, a twenty-seven-year-old mainland *T* from Changsha who now works in I.T. in Shenzhen:

The lesbian media that left the most lasting impression on me was *The L Word*. And among the characters on that show, I like Bette and Tina the most. [...] Even though at the beginning, Bette was the breadwinner and Tina was the homemaker. [...] But by the final season I thought they became more equal. Tina grew stronger and Bette grew a lot softer. I think this is the ideal state. There's no need to differentiate [between breadwinner and homemaker roles].

Note the similarity in the language (i.e. breadwinner and homemaker) used by Sydney and by Piper earlier. Even though Sydney did not explicitly use the *tomboy* and *TBG/po* labels in the above passage, she did compare *tomboy* and *TBG/po* to normative heterosexual gender roles at other times during our interview. Implicit in the passage above is the idea that an egalitarian relationship is preferable to a breadwinner-homemaker one. According to Sydney's reading, the series starts with Tina being financially dependent on Bette but the two eventually reach a state of balance. This transition is framed as one of progression, of evolution from what is unsatisfactory ("even though at the beginning") to what is ideal. Clearly, Sydney shares with Yan the

same aspiration towards egalitarianism. This aspiration becomes even more obvious when Sydney compares her relationship (in which Sydney is the *tomboy* and her partner the *po*) to Bette and Tina's:

My partner and I were quite traditionally heterosexual during the first few years of our relationship. [...] Just a few years ago, my partner would expect me to take care of her like a *T* would. And she uprooted herself to move to this city with me, because that's what's expected of a wife [...] I think even now we have yet to achieve the kind of, we haven't gotten to the state of Bette and Tina yet. But we are okay. We have gotten more equal.

Despite identifying herself as *T*, Sydney is indeed as critical of these lesbian gender roles as the two participants before. For her, watching Bette and Tina's relationship progresses from a heteronormative dynamic to an egalitarian one means that her own relationship can follow a similar path.

It is important to underline here the fact that these readings of Bette and Tina extend well beyond simply causal appreciation of screen texts; they are in fact part of a broader process in which the subject draws from a representation (or more accurately, her interpretation of it) in her actual everyday practices. In the passage above there is no suggestion that fictional characters are somehow lesser than real-world individuals by virtue of their fictional nature. To the contrary, Bette and Tina represent for the speaker an ideal state to reach. They occupy in the participants' mind an almost mythical status towards which real life only plays catch up. Consider for instance the following quote from Yan, in which Yan described Bette and Tina's egalitarian relationship as the blueprint through which she modelled her own relationship:

The relationship between Bette and Tina is what I want in life. They really speak to my identity [...] The important thing is that my partner and I can both be *strong* and also *weak* at times, and that we both protect one another.

In sum, *The L Word* provides these women with resources to imagine a radically different culture. This culture is imagined as one in which lesbianism is characterised by feminine gender performance on the one hand, and egalitarianism on the other hand. This imagined reference point in turn enables and contributes to feminist critiques of *tomboy* and *TBG/po* roles (which are in turn constructed as the unequal and heteronormative counterpart to the characters Bette and Tina). Furthermore, the characters Bette and Tina also provide imaginative materials upon which real life intimacies draw on. These characters are interpreted as exemplary of an alternative egalitarian relationship and participants are modelling their own relationships after it. Therefore, their reading of the show in fact materialises and corporealises in their real relationships, on real bodies, and in the real world.

Section Two: Imagining a Model of Repression-Emancipation

In addition to providing materials for this fantasy of a feminine-feminine egalitarian lesbian culture, *The L Word* also functioned as a reference point for my participants to imagine the *repressiveness* of *tomboy* and *TBG/po* roles. Note, for example, the way in which both Yan and Piper described watching *The L Word* as a moment of liberation (echoing the moment of realisation in the life stories discussed in the previous chapter). As with the narratives in the previous chapter, the stories here follow an evolutionary progression: the subject began in a state of ignorance during

which she was blind to the heteronormativity of these roles, and in being exposed to *The L Word*, she finally saw the truth.

The resemblance to the logics analysed in the previous chapter is far from coincidental, as the narratives included in this chapter and the last are in fact two parts of the same story. To illustrate this, let us return to Jerry, the thirty-four-year-old Shanghainese journalist. In the previous chapter she said:

I knew at a young age that I was attracted to girls. [...] [A]s I grew older, I realised there was this thing called homosexuality. I was looking it up on the internet, and I found out about this *T* and *P* categorisation. I thought, Oh I must be a *T* then. And I just left it at that and didn't really think about it too much.

Directly continuing from the above, Jerry said:

But then I started to be exposed to American television shows and films such as *The L Word*, and in those stories, people did not categorise themselves into *T* and *po*. And now I know we shouldn't categorise ourselves like this.

Building upon my discussion from the previous chapter, here I add that, identification with *tomboy* (and *TBG/po*) is constructed not only as an act of ignorance, but also as an act of self-repression.

The L Word as such is described in emancipatory terms. The excerpt below, drawn from my interview with twenty-nine-year-old Hongkongese business analyst Rene, strongly implies this logic of repression. Rene said:

Rene: It is totally a product of patriarchy.

Me: Do you mean *tomboy* and *TBG* pairing?

Rene: Yes, it is a product of patriarchy.

Me: Why?

Rene: Well we would have to go back to representations of homosexuality in the 1960s and the 1970s. Back then, I can't recall the titles, but if you look at the articles and films coming out then, you can see that they were categorising [same-sex attracted] people into masculine partners and feminine partners. To me, conceptually, the only reason why people did that was because they hadn't moved beyond the framework that in society there must be a man and a woman in a relationship. [...] The divide between masculine and feminine partners was very clear. They couldn't move beyond that framework, and they would think there was no way two women could be together, **so one of them has to change, has to become masculine, to cater to dominant social ideas** [emphasis mine]. They'd think, if they don't do that, people would reject them. So during that time, the whole *tomboy* look was more overt.

Me: How long ago would that be?

Rene: I think roughly from the 1970s to 1990s. But in the 2000s, you start to see signs of femininity in articles and in films. When I first watched that show, *The L Word*, on that show you could see it's not necessary [to have *tomboy* and *TBG/po* pairings]. It can be between two feminine-presenting women. There are **different pairings between different gender roles** [emphasis mine].

Me: Was it shocking when you first saw that? To see people not dividing themselves into *tomboy* and *TBG* roles?

Rene: It was quite a shock. I mean, I realised then that there could be many

different *combinations*. It's not just pairing up tomboys with *TBGs*, there are many more *combinations*. It really affected the way I saw myself too.

Before I analyse Rene's quote above, I want to draw the reader's attention to two related and comparable quotes from two other participants:

I thought *Yes or No* was too stereotypical [...] The way the *tomboy* character interacts with her partner was even more similar to heterosexual couples than the *tomboy* and *TBG/po* friends I know in real life. [...] I did not enjoy that film because by the time I saw it, I have already seen **more diverse representations, like *The L Word*** [emphasis mine].

— Sydney, the mainland Chinese tomboy from Changsha quoted earlier

The L Word left a lasting impression on me because you can see **many different types of people on that show** [emphasis mine]. It represents the lesbian community that I really long for.

— Hui-ju, a twenty-eight-year-old Taiwanese tutorial schoolteacher from Taipei

All three participants describe *The L Word* as a source for “diverse” representations where one can see many different types of queer women. How can we make sense of this reading when domestically, the series is criticised for its narrow focus on feminine lesbian visibility? Clearly, *The L Word* is diverse to my participants to the extent that feminine lesbian visibility is otherwise scarce locally or in other Asian screen texts, as I already noted. But here I want to propose that this notion of diversity actually suggest a deeper logic of repression at play. Consider this hypothesis: *tomboy* and *TBG/po* roles

are repressive. They are rooted in binarism, rigidity, and limitation. By contrast, the absence of such roles would indicate natural diversity (akin to, say, the idea of unconstrained biodiversity in a natural habitat). It is precisely this hypothesis that enables these participants to read *The L Word* as a diverse text. Through *The L Word*, these viewers imagine two opposite worlds. In the first (Western) world, queer women can be feminine. They can take up different gender roles because they are free of patriarchy and heteronormativity. By implication, in the other (Chinese) world, queer women are forced to take up a normative masculine role to appease society (e.g. Rene's assertion that "one of them has to change, has to become masculine, to cater to dominant social ideas"). Their femininity is repressed, and the natural diversity in their gender expressions altogether erased.

Section Three: *Tomboy* Repressive Hypothesis

Here I want to draw out and theorise this logic of repression by borrowing from Michel Foucault's (1978) polemical critique of the "repressive hypothesis." The repressive hypothesis refers to the conviction that Western societies have suppressed and silenced human sexuality since the seventeenth century, and as such, at present we must end the repression of sexuality and liberate it. Although Foucault does not name the originators of this popular hypothesis in his polemic, it is rather obvious that his targets are Freudian leftist thinkers Wilhelm Reich and Herbert Marcuse (Rocha, 2011; Soble, 2009; Whitebook, 2002). Both Reich (1972, 1974) and Marcuse (1955) are known for synthesizing Freud's theory of internal repression and Marx's writings on social repression. To be specific, both Reich and Marcuse take from Freud's proposition in *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1963) that individuals' sexual desires must be repressed for the sake of society, and argue that this sexual repression is in fact specific

to capitalism.² A capitalist society, according to Reich and Marcuse, is one that suppresses working class people's instinctual sexuality in its attempt to control and regulate workers' productivity. The solution, say Reich and Marcuse, will be a sexual revolution that restores sexuality to its natural, genuine, and undiluted form. Reich's and Marcuse's ideas later became a cornerstone of the Sexual Revolution movement and the early gay liberation movement in 1960s America, during which activists advocated for free, liberating expressions of sex (e.g. legalisation of teenage sex, gay sex, and abortion) (Bramwell, 2018; Floyd, 2001).

But Foucault argues that this repressive hypothesis is misguided. According to Foucault, the problem with this hypothesis is that the hypothesis takes sexuality to be a natural biological fact. The hypothesis presents sexuality as an object hidden in the dark waiting to be brought into light, but what believers of this hypothesis fail to see is that both medical and sexological discourses (in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries), and the repressive hypothesis itself (post-Freud) are *creating* and authorising forms of sexuality that have no pre-discursive existences themselves (i.e. sexology's sexual categories, and the sexual practices that the sexual revolution movement wished to legitimise). This is to say that it is the conviction that sexuality ought to be freed from repression that creates particular forms of sexual expression in the present. In other words, the error of the hypothesis is that it essentialises the repressed, when it is in fact bringing into existence that which it describes as having been repressed.

I will now outline what I term the "*tomboy* repressive hypothesis," which will be crucial to my core arguments throughout this thesis. According to the *tomboy* repressive hypothesis, patriarchy commands that all intimate relationships must be structured by gender polarity. Under this social regulation of intimacy, same-sex attracted women falsely believe that one half of a female-female couple must force upon herself a

normatively masculine *tomboy* role. The subject's (supposed) natural femininity is suppressed.

Stepping back to look at this hypothesis critically, we can see that this hypothesis gives the impression that the subject can liberate herself and restore her natural femininity by choosing to give up her *tomboy* role. The *tomboy* repressive hypothesis is productive. It invents versions of lesbianism (feminine, egalitarian, diverse) that it deems emancipatory, natural, and therefore correct. I must reiterate here that like Foucault, I am not affirming or disputing the hypothesis itself—it misses the point to counter-argue that the subject was in fact truly a *tomboy* in the past, for the point is precisely that the self has no pre-discursive existence, and so any attempt to argue that the self was genuinely repressed or not repressed is itself already a discursive creation of that self.

A second, more geo-culturally proximate example of Foucault's repressive hypothesis and its productive effects can be observed in Lisa Rofel's (1999) *Other Modernities: Gendered Yearnings in China After Socialism*. Rofel's book draws on her ethnographic study of women who came of age in the post-Mao PRC in the 1970s and 1980s. In the immediately preceding Maoist socialist era, state feminism had encouraged women to participate in conventionally masculine forms of labour and to dress in clothing free of signs of conventional femininity. In talking to women who came of age after Mao, Rofel notices a recurring motif: according to these women, socialist state feminism repressed women's natural femininity, which in turn forestalled China's entrance into modernity. For these women, natural femininity is to be recovered in the post-Mao era—but Rofel writes that “natural femininity” is actually not so much re-discovered as *invented* through the deployment of this narrative. She writes: “The rhetorical strength of such an allegory rests on the ahistorical essence that it posits at the

root of female identity” (1999, p. 225). The *tomboy* repressive hypothesis is guilty of this same mistake. It positions femininity as an ahistorical constant suppressed by the subject’s adoption of the *tomboy* role, and in making this claim, incites a “retrieval” of femininity that is in truth a *making* of femininity.

But is femininity the only object to be lost and found (i.e. in truth, invented)? Does this emancipatory project also include the “retrieving” of egalitarianism and gender diversity? If we pay closer attention, these logics are not always compatible. As a matter of fact, if egalitarianism is held up as the only form of correct lesbian intimacy, then prioritising one such model would surely imply a reduction—rather than a proliferation—of diverse lesbian practices and expressions. By this I mean that if the egalitarian model is seen as *the only* natural and truthful form of lesbian relationships, this would surely discourage if not delegitimise other forms of intimacy (e.g. when one partner does wish to provide financial/emotional support and receive none in return, or when one partner fails to provide such support due to external circumstances, etc). Likewise, if *The L Word*’s main cast is a visual representation of the gender diversity said to be restored, it would seem that these so-called diverse gender expressions are actually all quite feminine and homogenised. Yet, these subtle contradictions are perhaps beside the point. At their core, what unites these arguments about femininity, egalitarianism, and diversity is their presumption of a patriarchal *tomboy/TBG/po* repressive power. All these readings suggesting that *The L Word* is “exemplary” of feminine, egalitarianist, and/or diverse lesbianism ultimately share one emancipatory aim against the perceived repressiveness of the *tomboy*. And in each of these readings, the West emerges as the site of emancipation: a lesbian utopia.

Crucially, I must clarify that *The L Word* is not the only source of influences contributing to the *tomboy* repressive hypothesis. The fact that participants routinely use

feminist language to describe the *tomboy* as well as *The L Word* clearly suggests that they are already familiar with feminist theories outside of their consumptions of the series. Chapter One already discussed the non-specialist circulations of feminist theories, but my focus in this chapter is on *The L Word* in part because my participants themselves position the series as a *key* inspiration for the *tomboy* repressive hypothesis, and in part because their readings of the show generate a new and crucial geographic imagination, which I will now discuss.

Section Four: The Making of Western Sexual Modernity and Lesbian Utopia

The *tomboy* repressive hypothesis has a temporal dimension and a spatial dimension, and from here I will outline how they relate to one another. With regards to the former, the *tomboy* repressive hypothesis follows a repression-to-emancipation chronology. For example, in my interview with Rene, quoted earlier, she sketches a timeline that starts with a 1960s-1970s *tomboy* culture that (supposedly) falsely reproduced heteronormativity and ends with the restoration of lesbian femininity through the release of *The L Word* in the 2000s. For a different example, Sydney's interview excerpt similarly positions *Yes or No* as the "backward" counterpart to the presumably more progressive *The L Word*. Together, these two statements clearly illustrate the ways in which the *tomboy* repressive hypothesis associates the *tomboy* with a primitive and premodern past, and *The L Word* with modernity, liberation, and the future. This is indeed where a second parallel can be drawn between the *tomboy* repressive hypothesis and Rofel's post-socialist allegory. In Rofel's work, the post-socialist Chinese women imagine a modern China to be a China that will allow femininity to be rediscovered and restored. For my participants, a modern future means

moving away from the primitivism of the *tomboy* and towards a liberated femininity/gender diversity.

This temporal organisation of primitivism/modernity is in fact spatial. To illustrate how, let us return to Piper, the twenty-seven-year-old financial planner from Hong Kong who appeared earlier in this chapter. The passage below continues from a quotation appeared earlier:

Piper: But if you look at how things are in foreign countries, say in *The L Word*, they tend not to be in *butch* and *femme* pairings. That really makes you realise things. When I first watched that show in Secondary Three, I was like, whoa! I was shocked. [...] Now in Asia, if you look at the newer films and television shows here, you can see that the variety of lesbians they show has increased. I mean, it's not always just a *TB* dating a *TBG* now, but I think that kind of pairing is still dominant in society.

Me: When you said society, did you mean mainstream heterosexual society or within the lesbian community?

Piper: Both. In the West, of course the variety is a lot richer, Asia is more limited to *TB* and *TBG*.

This is what the *tomboy* repressive hypothesis says about space and time: The past is primitive, and it represses the subject's natural gender. Asia lives in this past (even though it is slowly moving forward). On the other side, the future is modern and non-repressive, and this future lies in the West. This association of Asia with a premodern past and the West with a modern future becomes even clearer as Piper's quote continues:

In non-Chinese-language lesbian films and shows, people are always less rigid, be it the way they dress or the way they interact with their partners. In those stories, you don't see one dominant partner and another woman depending on her. Those stories are more about the two sides relying on one another in different aspects. But in Asia, or in Chinese-language ones, most of the time there's one partner who's relying on the other for emotional or day-to-day support [...] I think Chinese-language stories and [non-Chinese-language] Asian films are the same in this regard.

Just as the notion of the "West" is used interchangeably with "America" and "foreign countries" in several excerpts quoted earlier (despite the obvious fact that there are many regional differences and specificities within the geographies collectively delineated by these rubrics), "Asia" and "Chinese societies" are similarly flattened into one locale where same-sex attracted women supposedly live under repression. Piper's statement also works in agreement with Rene's and Sydney's to portray a world order of sexual modernity made up of a modern non-repressive West on one side and a backward repressive East on the other.

Earlier, I proposed that *The L Word* represents for these viewers an alternative, feminine-centric lesbian culture, but it should be made clear that for them this alternative culture is not just a fantasy land that exists in the abstract but is projected onto the very real geography that is America (and other Western countries), a projection that in turn produces the sorry state of a primitive culture at home in Chinese societies (and the rest of Asia). Watching *The L Word* in this sense is therefore an exercise of world-making, or more precisely, *world-imagining*. It is an exercise through which

these women develop “spatial knowledge [...] that allows [them] to imagine place” (Marcus, 2009, p. 481). Even more so, they imagine not only places but also the (supposed) cultural differences between these places, and in these cultural comparisons, “what is imagined as ‘unfamiliar’ is [...] done so within a frame of reference of what is already familiar” (Robins, 2019, p. 730). What is imagined as the unfamiliar but modern West is done within the framework of what is familiar, at home.

Indeed, the modern West/America and backward Chinese societies/Asia are two images that produce and sustain one another. This dialectic logic is present in the earlier quotes and also in the passage below, in which Jerry (the thirty-four-year-old ex-*tomboy* Shanghainese journalist) compares the *T-po* subculture in the PRC to lesbian culture in America:

When I socialise with other Chinese nationals, most of them are divided into *tomboy* and *po*, and all the *tomboys* would be very masculine. But when I hang out with foreigners, they would say “of course we don’t all look as gorgeous as the women on *The L Word*, in reality some of us are quite masculine, unlike the feminine women on that show, but it’s never quite as bad as you Chinese people. Many years ago, when this thing was still new in our country, we were just like how you are today. But over time things became the way they are now. What you are going through now is equivalent to what happened in our country two or three decades ago.” This is what an American told me ten years ago, here in Shanghai. [...] Looking at how things have developed so far, I think we might need much time to catch up with America. It will take much longer than two or three decades to see that change. Because in the U.S., gay people are already so visible over there, and we are still in this twilight zone. Even in terms of gender

studies education, we have been avoiding those [topics]. So, a lot of these so-called *tomboys*, they were not given the right guidance about gender, and therefore they accepted this gender binary, and that's why they think, oh I am quite androgynous, and I am attracted to women, so I must be a *tomboy*! They haven't considered the possibility that they are just normal, regular women.

Both the temporal and spatial dimensions of the *tomboy* repressive hypothesis are at play here. American lesbian cultures are, as I have repeatedly suggested, not monolithic and most certainly include butch-femme expressions. But the crucial point is that this idea of the West serves only the purpose of an unfamiliar Other with which to criticise the familiar target that is the *repressed* tomboys at home (and in this specific instance, to make recommendations for these *tomboys*' liberation via "broadening" their understandings of gender). In a different interview with twenty-five-year-old Billie, a graduate research student in anthropology from Tainan, we see a different spin of this familiar/unfamiliar, primitive/modern, East/West dichotomy:

Recently Taiwan has grown to be like *The L Word* [...] I think we are now more similar to America, in the sense that we no longer categorise people into *tomboy* and *po*. Maybe it's because Taiwan has embraced feminism more readily than other Asian regions, and so Taiwan became more *LGBT* friendly, and people are more inclined to just be themselves. [...] If you look at other places like Japan, South Korea, and China, they are not as open and accepting as we are. We are comparatively more open and accepting, and our feminism has progressed considerably further.

Although one might argue that America is evoked here as an equal, the core idea still lies in its supposed foreignness. Note for instance that according to this statement, Taiwan has only recently caught up with the foreign Other while the other Asian societies still lag behind in the race. In both Jerry's description of the PRC and Billie's description of Taiwan, America remains the benchmark towards which the non-West ought to catch up with.

To be sure, the "America/West" at stake is not a real geopolitical superpower but an image of an unfamiliar "elsewhere" (Cannell, 1999; Johnson, 1997).³ It represents the *idea* rather than the reality of a modern global lesbian culture to which my participants wish to access.⁴ But, in addition to constructing this imagined hierarchical global order, the *tomboy* repressive hypothesis also has—and this is my focus here—a utopian allure. Traces of utopian visions are ever-present across many repressive hypotheses. Reich and Marcuse, for example, call for a sexual utopia where natural sexuality flourishes. Rofel's post-Mao women dream of a utopic China that liberates true femininity. Even Foucault—despite his passionate polemic against the repressive hypothesis—speaks of a sexual pleasure of the flesh that yearns to be free from the discursive power that governs sexuality.⁵

This mistake on Foucault's part has been pointed out and examined by many, and I will borrow some of those criticisms here because they are, like the *tomboy* repressive hypothesis, also concerned with East vs. West world-making. In Volume One of *The History of Sexuality* (1978) and immediately following his critique of the repressive hypothesis, Foucault makes the bold and obviously incorrect assertion that the systems of discourses creating particular forms of sexuality exist only in the West. He then adds that ancient and Eastern societies are *ars erotica* civilisations that simply let the body enjoy its natural sexual pleasures. After the publication of this volume,

Foucault would later on revise this position and say that only China has an *ars erotica* (qtd. in Rocha, 2011). Since then, many of his critics (Charles R., 2003; Johnson, 2005; Pflugfelder, 1999) accused him of painting Chinese sexual cultures with broad, essentialist, and Orientalist (c.f. Said, 2003) strokes. These criticisms are most definitely correct, and they are relevant to my analysis here because they show the ways in which Foucault (as a writer guilty of his own version of repressive hypothesis) borrows the idea of China to imagine a utopian locus where power and repression no longer exist, or perhaps never existed.

The lesbian America/West in the *tomboy* repressive hypothesis is equivalent to Foucault's Chinese *ars erotica*. It is the land onto which one projects the absence of the patriarchal mechanisms that supposedly strip lesbians of their femininity/selves/gender diversity. Whereas Foucault's *ars erotica* concept is Orientalist, the U.S./West imagined through Sinophone reception of *The L Word* is Occidentalist (c.f. Chen, 1995). In both cases, the cultural Other is constructed as a repression-free utopia.⁶ The problem with this is not only that it misinterprets and over-simplifies the cultural Other; more urgently, it is that a repression-free utopia simply does not and cannot exist.

Such is the argument that Annamarie Jagose (1993; 1994) makes in her analysis of radical feminism, particularly in her critique on the writings of Monique Wittig (1992). As a radical feminist, Wittig makes the assertion that since lesbians are not involved in heterosexual relationships, they embody a utopic space outside of patriarchy and heteronormativity. Disputing this, Jagose correctly points out that there simply *cannot* be a position outside of the dominant mechanisms of power in the material world. Because we are always already embedded in real networks of power in the real world—regardless of our sexual and intimate relations, this lesbian utopia will simply never materialise, argues Jagose. To transpose Jagose's critique to the *tomboy*

repressive hypothesis, one may say that *any* enactment of gender (be it masculine, *tomboy*, butch, feminine, egalitarian or else) is *already in dialogue with* normative constructions of gender and therefore cannot possibly exist “outside” of power. Queer women in the U.S. and in other Western societies must, like any of us in any part of the world, navigate gender norms and construct their gender identities in relation to gender norms. As Jagose writes: “the illusory exteriority promised [by radical feminism] is quite literally a utopic space, *ou-topos*, no place” (1993, p. 287). Likewise, the free, diverse and unrestricted America/West promised by the *tomboy* repressive hypothesis *is* a utopia, a no space. It is impossible.

Chapter Conclusion

In sum, those in the lesbian Sinophone critical of *tomboy* and *TBG/po* roles use *The L Word* as an imaginative resource in several interconnected ways. First, they read the series’ focus on feminine lesbians and lack of butch/masculine visibility as representative of an alternative culture in which feminine-feminine lesbianism prevails. Second, they also associate this feminine-feminine visibility with an ideal egalitarian model for conducting intimate relationships, a model that is supposedly exemplified by the characters Bette and Tina. Third, through this perceived alternative culture they come to view *tomboy* and *TBG/po* roles as an instrument of patriarchal-heteronormative repression. Fourth, this logic of repression (what I term the *tomboy* repressive hypothesis) subsequently compels them to retrieve (which in practice is to invent) their own natural femininity and gender diversity—two notions that are not actually compatible but are both positioned as the emancipatory ends to the perceived repression reinforced through *tomboy* and *TBG/po* roles.

A final and key imagination made possible through their consumption of *The L Word* is the construction of a hierarchal world order of sexual modernity, within which the West is conceptualised as a lesbian utopia free of patriarchal power. The West in this sense remains primarily a fantastical site—for what it actually signifies (i.e. real lesbian lives in Western societies) does not in fact matter, as the Western lesbian Other is only a tool through which one thinks through the perceived flaws of one's own society (in this case, the equally vaguely defined notion of the East/Asia/the Chinese-speaking worlds). As we approach the end of this chapter, however, I want to revisit, if only briefly, Altman's notion of American cultural dominance in global gay cultures. Although I maintain that this fantastical West is not an actual expansion of American culture, this fantasy is likely to have real material effects. For instance, in the excerpt from my interview with Jerry, she said that an American expatriate once told her that mainland Chinese queer women would catch up with the U.S. in their rejection of female masculinity in a few decades. From this exchange there is already a real hierarchal organisation of social relationships, in which an American expatriate "educates" a Shanghainese local about the outdatedness of gender polarity while the recipient comes to believe in her own backwardness and inferiority. Likewise, many of the participants quoted in this chapter expressed to me a strong yearning to be in contact with the West (specifically North America and Western Europe), most commonly through consumption of Euro-American lesbian screen representations. Whether this yearning inspires further exchange of capitals, transnational mobility (e.g. tourism, education, immigration), or other practices that may materially benefit the West, is a question that remains to be addressed. In other words, the Occidental *L Word* utopic West *is* fantastical, but it may very well reinforce the hegemony of the West in real, material ways.

In terms of how this chapter connects with the others, I suggested earlier that the *tomboy* repressive hypothesis is one way of reconsidering the retrospective autobiographies discussed in Chapter Three. In that chapter, I argued that autobiographical accounts are self-development narratives that position adolescence as a period of ignorance and adulthood as the era of enlightenment. The *tomboy* repressive hypothesis is a different angle on the same evolutionary progression from repression to emancipation. Additionally, the *tomboy* repressive hypothesis reveals not only a temporal juxtaposition between past and present but also a spatial imagination of the East and West. Chapter Five extends on this geographical imagination by examining in detail the ways in which the East/Chinese/Asia is conceptualised as a fundamentally patriarchal and conservative culture that produces the repressed *tomboy* as its symptom. Just as viewings of *The L Word* are exercises in utopia-making, examining (in truth, imagining) one's cultural root is an exercise of inventive self-Orientalism. Following this discussion, Chapter Six returns to the autobiographical narratives and also pick up on my critique on the logical fallacies in the *tomboy* repressive hypothesis. To recap, I pointed out that it is not always clear whether "the repressed" refers to the subject's selfhood, her femininity, natural gender diversity (defined as the absence of the *tomboy*), or some combinations of these. Chapter Six interrogates the correlations and contradictions between these notions as they are taken up as guiding principles by those participants who now decide to undergo a process of self-transformation to liberate themselves from being repressed *tomboys*. In other words, collectively these four chapters (Chapters Three to Six) chart the making of the self through the figure of the repressed, that is, the *tomboy*.

Notes to Chapter Four

¹ For another example, Jing Jamie Zhao's (2017) paper on mainland Chinese fans' online gossips about *The L Word* actress Katherine Moennig already exemplifies this. The paper illustrates how Moennig's *L Word* character and off-screen appearances are used by mainland Chinese fans in their discussions on ideal post-Reform female androgyny.

² Marcuse's characterisation of suppressed sex is in fact somewhat more complicated than Reich's. For Marcuse (1955), there are two distinctly different forms of repression: basic/necessary repression is a natural component of the human psyche that mitigates sexual desire for survival, but surplus repression—which Marcuse sees as prevalent in modern capitalist societies—is unnecessary repression whose sole purpose is to control the working class. In either case, both Marcuse and Reich saw capitalism as the social structure in which natural sexuality is oppressed by political and economic powers. See Whitebook (2002) for an in depth discussion.

³ For another parallel example, Mark Johnson's (1997) and Fenella Cannell's (1999) work on the appropriation of American pop culture in Filipino gay beauty pageants both indicate that references to America address not the real United States but an imagery of an "elsewhere."

⁴ This obviously parallels with the Taiwanese lesbian feminists who want to reject tomboys in favour of American egalitarian lesbianism in Antonia Chao's (2000) research, and the Filipino gay men who reject the local *bakla* in favour of the global gay scene in Bobby Benedicto's (2014) work, both of which are cited at length in Chapter One.

⁵ For an in-depth discussion on how Foucault himself constructs a version of the repressive hypothesis in his writings, see Cook (2014), Keat (1986), and Whitebook (2002).

⁶ Ironically, for Foucault it is the absence of modernity (specifically modern science) that allows the *ars erotica* societies to keep experiencing bodily sexual pleasure in its natural form. But for *The L Word* viewers, it is modernity and not primitivism that frees individual from repression.

**Chapter Five: Constructing Chinese and Asian Societies
as Sites of the *Tomboy's* Gender Repression**

Yes or No really emphasised how masculine Kim is. It shows you repeatedly that she's like this cool, attractive guy. I think this is because there are a lot of masculine *lesbians* in Asia, and Asian people believe in this *stereotype* that lesbian relationships all consist of a masculine and a feminine partner. Things are not this restrictive in the West. Westerners don't think with *stereotypes*, but Asian people don't understand gender in a *flexible* way. Asians think that relationships must consist of a man and a woman, so *even if* it's two women, one of them *tend[s] to* take up a masculine role. [...] Here in Hong Kong, people believe in [the Confucian axiom] "**men rule the outside and women rule the inside** [emphasis mine]." That is how *relationships* are structured under *Chinese tradition*. If you're a man and you become a stay-at-home husband, *as in* [a male version of] a *housewife*, people see you as weak. People think a man should be the *stronger* one, and a woman the *weaker* one. They think that men must be the breadwinners and women the homemakers. That women can't earn more money than men. But in foreign countries people don't believe these. Because those are just *gender stereotypes*! But here these stereotypes are deep-rooted beliefs, because they are part of the Chinese tradition. [...] Even some of the *lesbians* here in Hong Kong believe that a relationship must consist of a masculine role and a feminine role. Maybe they just don't have enough *exposure*. They think that we, the people of China, must have this kind of gendered division of labour, between a man and a woman, and between a *TB* and a *TBG*.

— Emma, a twenty-five-year-old law student from Hong Kong

The previous chapter introduced the concept of the *tomboy* repressive hypothesis. To recap, the hypothesis refers to my participants' argument that identifying as a *tomboy* is a process of self-repression through which one's natural gender is suppressed. The previous chapter focused on the way in which this hypothesis imagines the West; namely, as a utopia in which lesbians can embrace their true gender without feeling pressured to impose the *tomboy* role upon themselves.

This chapter turns to the other geographical imagination implied by this hypothesis. As the opening quote already hints, the hypothesis claims that in Chinese and Asian societies there exists a patriarchal tradition that organises and dictates hegemonic gender relations between heterosexual men and women, and that the same relations are reproduced by *tomboys* and their *TBG/po* partners. In other words, just as the West is imagined to be a repression-free utopia, the East, according to the hypothesis, is the site at which repression operates and reinforces itself. As this chapter will make clear, the claim of the hypothesis is as follows: whereas Westerners think about gender in unrestrictive ways and can therefore embrace their true genders, Asian people believe in traditional patriarchal gender roles and reinforce such false roles in both heterosexual and lesbian relationships. The *tomboy* according to this hypothesis is one who uncritically adopts the hegemonic gender role that society expects of normative cis-gendered heterosexual Asian men.

My objective in this chapter is to critically interrogate the ways in which the hypothesis describes, imagines, and constructs "Chinese societies" and "Asia." I argue that the hypothesis makes two claims: first, that a patriarchal Eastern tradition is the culprit of *tomboys'* false identification with hegemonic masculine role; second, that this patriarchal Eastern tradition remains powerful in present-day Chinese-speaking regions and the rest of Asia, thereby keeping these places culturally inferior to the (imagined)

Western Other. The first section of my analysis looks at my participants' descriptions of this Eastern tradition. By underscoring two recurring motifs in the interview data, which I call the gendered division of labour and the protector-provider husband archetype, my aim is to paint a picture of what this tradition looks like according to the hypothesis. Additionally, I will draw on references made to the screen texts to illustrate how, to some participants, these fictional *tomboy* characters are in fact accurate examples of real-life *tomboys* who uncritically adopt traditional masculine gender role.

The next section of this chapter examines the ways in which my participants use the idea of a Han Chinese tradition to interpret contemporary Chinese and Asian regions. I show that they often speak of different Chinese and Asian regions interchangeably (despite the many political, regional, and ethnic complexities in the areas designated under the rubrics of "Chinese societies" and "Asian societies"). I show that, through the idea of a shared conservative Eastern tradition, my participants see all these regions as inherently restrictive in the ways in which normative genders are organised, and therefore, for them, the presence of the *tomboy* throughout the three Chinese-speaking societies and in the Asian mediascape come to be seen as "evidence" of this shared Asian/Chinese gender conservatism. In other words, the hypothesis sees the *tomboy* as symptomatic of a patriarchal Asian/Chinese society. It is a society seen to be restrictive, repressive, and culturally sick.

Having teased out this logic from the interview data, in the last section, I discuss the key challenge I faced in writing this analysis; namely, whether I should put the interview data in dialogue with academic scholarship on traditional gender roles in early and imperial China. It seems obvious that doing so poses the risk of essentialising Chinese (and Asian) culture(s). Epistemologically, the act of finding historical records that match up with the interview data so as to bring them into dialogue with one another

also seems to be a self-confirming exercise that serves no analytical purpose other than to “confirm” that a traditional conservative Chinese (and Asian) patriarchy does indeed persist from early China to the present. In light of this, in an earlier draft I avoided making references to early Chinese gender roles altogether. However, that approach also did not feel appropriate given that my participants did make repeated references to Chinese history, and especially to key pieces of the classical Confucian canon (for example, in the opening quote Emma cites the well-known Confucianist axiom “men rule the outside and women rule the inside”). To navigate this dilemma, I will discuss briefly historical records that support the idea of a patriarchal Chinese tradition. Crucially, I then bring into discussion alternative interpretations of these historical records. By drawing on debates among historians on how historical records should (or could) be interpreted in the present, I am borrowing from this debate the vital idea that contemporary interpretation of history is always at least to some extent *inventive*. My claim, then, is that in presuming that there is a historical pre-given (that is, an inherently conservative Chinese patriarchy), my participants are in fact (re)creating such an idea. “Chinese tradition” is therefore a discursive sign, and by extension references to Chinese societies and Asia are exercises in creating imagined geographies. Much like the previous chapter, the key point here is that the *tomboy* repressive hypothesis constructs geographies—both East and West—in imaginative ways.

Section One: Constructing a Chinese Heterosexist Tradition

1. Gendered Division of Labour

Let me begin by returning to the participant quoted at the beginning of this chapter, Emma. Emma and I had met through a mutual friend several years prior to this project, and we met again for this interview at a sub-basement kebab shop in downtown Hong Kong one September night in 2018. At the beginning, I was half-expecting Emma to make overtly negative comments about *tomboys* because by then that has been a common occurrence in my fieldwork. But when I finally broached the question of what her thoughts on *tomboys* were, Emma insisted that she had no problems with them. It was, in her words, gender stereotypes that bothered her. I asked her to elaborate, and it was her answer that was quoted at the start of this chapter.

“Gender stereotypes” is a phrase that recurs again and again in my interviews with not only Emma but many other participants. But when I heard Emma use it in that sub-basement kebab shop, I actually had no idea what she was trying to convey. In Anglophone gender studies, in which I was trained, the phrase gender stereotypes usually refer to normative traits and behaviours that are respectively associated with men and women, but Emma’s usage of this phrase was instead primarily concerned with a gendered division of labour. Gender stereotypes in this sense refer to the Confucian axiom that men belong in the outside (the public and political sphere) and women in the inside (the domestic sphere). For Emma, gender stereotypes are part of this broader traditional framework that mandates gendered division of labour and spatial segregation in mainstream heterosexual society, and through this framework, heterosexual men become tough breadwinners and heterosexual women become dependent homemakers. Crucially, for Emma, this traditional framework is mistakenly adopted by the lesbian

community, in the form of *tomboy* and *TBG* pairing, and it is this error that she finds most unsettling (“They think that we Chinese must have this kind of gendered division of labour, between a man and a woman, and between a *TB* and a *TBG*.”).

It is important to underscore that this example of the *tomboy* repressive hypothesis explicitly names Chinese tradition as the source of repression. When Emma makes the argument that lesbians in Hong Kong are mistakenly following heterosexual gender roles, she repeatedly underlines their cultural background (of being Chinese and Asian) as the reason for their misjudgements. It is tradition that is at fault, according to her proposition, because it misdirects same-sex relationships and forcefully moulds them in the image of normative heterosexual relationships (“Asians think that relationships must consist of a man and a woman, so *even if* it’s two women together, one of them *tend to* take up a masculine role.”). An Eastern tradition in this sense is presented as hegemony and ideological baggage, and noticeably the West is again constructed as the culturally superior Other that does not impose gendered division of labour but instead understands gender roles in presumably fluid and flexible ways.

Emma is far from the only participant to suggest that a restrictive Chinese tradition lies at the centre of what is perceived to be the *tomboy's* self-imposed and confining gender role. Another participant who makes this argument is Sydney, who also appears in the last chapter. Sydney was a twenty-seven-year-old mainland Chinese *tomboy* who moved from her hometown Changsha to pursue a career in Shenzhen, and her *po* partner followed suit in this journey. Sydney described this relationship as follows:

My girlfriend and I have been together for seven, eight years now. A lot of times I have to be the more assertive one. For instance, I am the one who made the decision on which city we were moving to [...] and my girlfriend follows me to a new city the same way a wife follows her husband to a new city. [...] I do think we were quite traditionally heterosexual during the first few years of our relationship, and even now it is still a little like that. But over time our personalities have rubbed off on each other. Even though I still dress in a masculine way and she still dress in a feminine way. But in terms of personalities, our inner expressions are becoming more equal.

Similar to Emma's suggestion that present-day *tomboy-TBG/po* pairings are in fact governed by a traditional conceptualisation of heterosexual gender roles, Sydney similarly describes the early stage of her relationship with her *po* partner as one that was traditionally heterosexual. Though there are obviously parallels between this characterisation of *tomboy-TBG/po* pairing and similar feminist criticism of lesbian genders in Euro-American contexts (as discussed in Chapter Two), the key difference is that Emma and Sydney speak of "heterosexuality" not as a trans-cultural ideology but as a distinctively Chinese-traditional way of thinking. Put differently, heterosexuality in this light is implicitly coded as traditional and Chinese. The argument, then, is not only that gender polarity is a replica of a heterosexual source, but that it is a replica of a conservative Chinese culture.

In another interview, a different participant similarly spoke of a Chinese gendered division of labour that organises and restricts lesbian relationships. This

participant, named Fang-fang, was a thirty-eight-year-old popular lesbian blogger and entertainment news reporter from Shanghai. She told me:

My ex-housemate, who was a *T*, used to tell me that she's always dreamt of having a girlfriend to provide for. She's always wanted to become the breadwinner, and she wanted a partner who would do all the housework for her. True to her words, she never learnt to cook and the only meal she could make was instant noodles. Later on she had a girlfriend who was a very good friend of mine, but my friend left her in the end. I suppose my friend might have left my housemate for more than just one reason, but the thing that my housemate never understood was that my friend did not want to follow that formula. My housemate was too formulaic. She would always insist on paying when the two of them went on a date. But my friend didn't like that. It was too formulaic, too much like the heterosexual formula. But later on my housemate did find another girlfriend. As I keep saying, there will always be women like that for people who are *T*. There will always be women who are 100% *P*, who follow the authority of a *T* the same way a wife follows a husband.

It is obvious that what Fang-fang calls a "heterosexual formula" is extremely similar to what Emma termed "gender stereotypes" earlier. Indeed they seem to be making the same argument, which is that, the organisation of female-female intimate relationships into secondary gender roles is in fact an act of subjugation in which queer women falsely follow a restrictive and traditional ideology.¹ Though I have already discussed the general operation of the *tomboy* repressive hypothesis earlier in the previous

chapter, what this current discussion adds is the crucial idea that the *tomboy* is seen (within this hypothesis) as a variation of a traditional, Chinese hegemonic masculinity.

This traditional Chinese masculinity that the *tomboy* supposedly imitates is conceptualised primarily in a marital context. Both Fang-fang and Sydney compare the *tomboy* and *TBG/po* to the role of husband and wife respectively. The former describes *po* as a woman who follows the order of a *T* the same way a wife follows that of a husband, while the latter describes her *po* partner's decision to follow her to a different city as similar to a wife fulfilling obligation to follow the lead of her husband. The point then again is that these arguments do not conceptualise heterosexuality in its broadest sense (which is not necessarily conjugal), rather, they are comparing these secondary gender roles specifically to a form of gendered division of labour generally associated with the traditional Chinese family. To unpack this association further, in the following I will look closely at the ways in which my participants compare the *tomboy* role to that of a good Chinese husband.

2. The Protector-Provider Husband Archetype

What does it mean when a participant suggests that the *tomboy* role is akin to that of a traditional Chinese husband? When Sydney told me over dinner that her relationship used to be fairly "traditional," I had to pause and ask her to elaborate:

Me: Could you tell me a bit more about what you meant by "traditional"?

Sydney: It's like, I have to... I am expected to spoil my girlfriend. And she's expected to move to a different city for me. And, you know, financially.

Me: Do you mean that *T* have to bear more responsibilities financially?

Sydney: Yes.

Sydney defines a traditional husband role (which the *tomboy* supposedly appropriates) as the partner who makes major decisions, pamper her partner, and bears financial responsibilities. This characterisation is echoed by many of my other participants.

Below I will list the many similar descriptions I identified from the interview data to better sketch out this idea of the traditional *tomboy* as imagined collectively. Starting with a quote from Kit, the thirty-year-old *pure* tradeswoman from Hong Kong who appeared in Chapter Three:

The thirty-something *TB* who are looking for love will always tell you that they will take care of you like a good husband. It's this very heterosexual, very traditional thing. They'd say *I'm gonna pamper my girlfriend*, and give you tens of thousands of dollars (in Hong Kong dollars) to spend.

Another Hong Kong participant, Rene, a twenty-nine-year-old financial analyst from Hong Kong, said:

The *TB* is expected to be the one who pays for a date, who carries her girlfriend's heavier belongings, and protects her girlfriend all the time. But that's ridiculous because both the *TB* and her girlfriend are women!

Elsewhere in Taiwan, participants gave similar descriptions of what the *tomboy* role entailed. PP, the twenty-eight-year-old *bufen* editor in Taipei said:

The *T* I know are people who want to help their girlfriend carry heavy things and walk her home after a night out.

Another Taipei participant, twenty-sevens-year-old research assistant Wan-ting, similarly noted:

For many people, to be a *T* is to help carry your girlfriend's heavy things and takes care of her.

And in the PRC, twenty-year-old university student Luna told me:

The people who still insist on categorising between *T* and *P* think that the *T* must take on more responsibilities. When I was still with my ex, her *T* friend thought that she was the *T* in the relationship and that I was her *P*. When the three of us went out during winter, this *T* friend would pressure my ex into taking off her jacket and putting it on me. It was quite embarrassing.

The recurring themes in these descriptions clearly add up to a particular persona. Collectively, my participants claim that a *tomboy* is someone who is expected to provide her partner with financial security, comfort, and protection (e.g. pampering her with money, lifting heavy things for her, keeping her warm with her own jacket). Importantly, according to this claim, the *tomboy* is defined not only in contrast with the *TBG/po* partner (who presumably lacks these attributes), but also primarily by *what she does* for her *TBG/po* partner. To better analyse this specific gender role, from here onwards I will name it the “protector-provider husband archetype.”

As the name implies, this protector-provider husband archetype is primarily defined by physical protection and financial provision. References to the latter can be observed in the following quote, in which Luna, the mainland Chinese university student, described her own *T* and *P* friends as people who expect the *T* to be high-earning partner in the relationship:

When I was still with my ex-girlfriend, she was friends with this *T-P* couple. Between the two of them, the *P* partner made more money than the *T*. This couple's own *T* and *P* friends used to badmouth them behind their backs all the time! They called the *T* a gold-digger, living off of her own girlfriend!

This observation is of note on several levels. There is, on one level, the idea among that *T* and *P* friends that a *T* should be the breadwinner of the relationship, an expectation that the *T* in question failed to live up to. On a second level, Luna was telling me this story to express her own amusement at this circle of *T* and *P* friends. She would later tell me that she did not have *T* and *P* friends herself, as she disagreed strongly with

these kinds of financial responsibilities expected of *T* in *T-P* social circle. Indeed, many participants describe the protector-provider husband archetype to me as something they find to be unfair and unethical. For a second example, let me draw on my interview with Rene, the twenty-nine-year-old Hongkongese financial analyst from Hong Kong:

Why does a *tomboy* feel ashamed when her girlfriend makes more money than her? When *tomboys* try to find a partner they always say things like, if the other person has a master's degree, or makes thirty or forty thousand [Hong Kong dollars] a month, then they can't date this woman [who earns a higher salary and has a higher education level]. It's so strange!

Rene and Luna both describe feelings of shame a *tomboy* is socially expected (among the *tomboy-TBG/po* dating circle) for failing to assume the higher-earning breadwinner role. More importantly, both participants counter-argue that this sense of shame is unwarranted, and in fact both reject this archetype in general. In Luna's earlier quote for instance, she expressed embarrassment at having her relationship mistaken to be a *tomboy-TBG/po* one, and especially at being assumed to be in need of a *tomboy* partner's protection. Likewise, in both of Rene's quotes she refers to the archetype as something that is unreasonable, calling the expectations for the *tomboy* to provide financially for her partner "ridiculous" and "strange."

As my discussion on this archetype continues below, it is best to reinforce the fact that I am examining *critiques* on the archetype, which sees this archetype as a part of *Chinese tradition*. My analysis therefore is primarily concerned with the ways in

which Chinese tradition is imagined through critiques on this archetype more broadly. And while the quotes that appeared so far have been about financial responsibilities primarily, the quotes that will appear below are about physical protection, and they draw mainly from the screen texts *Girls Love*.

3. Seeing the Archetype through *Girls Love*

In Chapter Two I briefly discussed the plot of *Girls Love*, which involves the *tomboy* character Mi Le shielding protagonist Xiao Rou repeatedly from her relentless and sometimes aggressive male suitor, He Yu. It is abundantly clear to even the most casual viewer that Mi Le is the saviour of the story. For many of my participants, who are critical of the protector-provider husband archetype, Mi Le is the perfect example of this archetype and everything that is (supposedly) wrong with it.

The short passage below illustrates this. The participants in this interview were Luna, the mainland Chinese university student who was quoted just earlier, and Luna's friend Denise, who was also a twenty-year-old university student in the PRC. Sitting across from Luna and Denise at a bar table inside a Starbucks coffee shop in downtown Guangzhou city, I was originally asking them about another *tomboy* text, *Yes or No*, when they changed the topic to *Girls Love* unprompted:

Luna: I thought *Yes or No* was pretty good because it didn't give a very strong heterosexual impression. Kim (i.e. the *tomboy* character) was not too masculine. She was quite endearing actually. But the other one, *Girls Love*...

Denise: [Explaining to me] *Girls Love* was made here [in the PRC].

Luna: Yes, it was.

Denise: That one was completely heterosexual.

Luna: It was very stereotypical.

Denise: Did you finish watching all of it?

Luna: No I didn't. I've only watched a bit.

Denise: That's what I did, too. It made me feel rather uncomfortable, and I couldn't bring myself to finish it.

Luna: I didn't like that Xiao Rou was so passive and weak. I hated that the most.

Denise: What do you mean?

Luna: I don't like to be that passive!

Denise: I thought the *T* was quite attractive but she gave off a very strong heterosexual impression, so I stopped watching before I could finish it. Wasn't there a scene where the *T* got into a fight with a guy for the *P*? What's up with that?

Denise's and Luna's characterisation of *Girls Love* as heterosexual and stereotypical makes sense if we recognise that the protector-provider husband archetype is exactly the stereotype in question. To spell this out more clearly, their claim is that, cis-gendered men are expected to fulfil this archetype (i.e. what they call a gender stereotype), *tomboys* are women who mis-identify with this archetype, and Mi Le is a fictional

version of these *tomboys* who fulfils this archetype by getting into physical conflict to defend her feminine partner.

Several weeks after meeting with Luna and Denise, I met another young mainland Chinese woman, Juan. Juan is a twenty-four-year-old Sichuan native who worked in I.T. in Shenzhen. As we greeted each other and sat down at a bookshop inside a mall, she told me that she hated *Girls Love*:

Mi Le was a bit, I don't know, machismo? When I watched the show, I felt that she was too similar to...a heterosexual man. As in, she's here to protect you, that you can rely on her to solve everything for you.

Like Luna and Denise, Juan sees Mi Le as a character who follows the archetype too strictly. Again, the characterisation of Mi Le (and of the *tomboy* figure) as heterosexual relies on the presumption that both *tomboys* and heterosexual men perform the exact same normative gender role to protect and to provide. The archetype is at the heart of these critiques.

4. Conceptualising the Archetype as Self-Repression

Drawing on my description of the archetype just now, I now connect it back to the *tomboy* repressive hypothesis. According to the hypothesis, the protector-provider husband archetype is a stereotype that the *tomboy* falsely imposes on herself. Take for example the following quote from Juan, the mainland Chinese I.T. professional based in Shenzhen:

I hated *Girls Love* so much. It was probably my least favourite piece of media. The way Mi Le interacted with Xiao Rou made me felt like, like even straight guys don't go after girls like this anymore! As a...as a...how do I put this? Most lesbians I met in real life don't categorise between *tomboy* and *po*. I have met some *po*, but by contrast, it's very rare to meet someone who forces herself into taking up such an overly masculine role the way Mi Le does.

The idea that Mi Le (and by extension people who still identify with the *tomboy* role in real life) is imposing the archetype on herself also appears in my interview with financial planner Piper, a twenty-seven-year-old from Hong Kong. In the following Piper compares Mi Le to two other characters, *Yes or No's* Kim and *Last Friends's* Ruka. This is what she said:

In *Yes or No*, Kim only looked like a *tomboy* but she didn't really want to *take care* of Pie. When she does things for Pie, it's just part of her personality. It's not deliberate. She's not deliberately assuming an assertive role, to become in charge of everything—financially and otherwise—like *tomboys* do [...] Whereas in *Girls Love*, Mi Le was like that. She is trying very hard to prove that she can fight better than He Yu. [...] Even though in *Last Friends*, Ruka also protected Michiru [like Mi Le protected Xiao Rou], Ruka is different from Mi Le because she had a real reason to protect. Ruka protected her because she was genuinely in love with Michiru, whereas Mi Le just wanted to do what a man does.

Both Mi Le and Ruka provide physical protection for their respective love interest. For Piper, however, the two characters demonstrate two different types of offering physical protection: one is a genuine expression of love and one's true personality (exemplified by Ruka and relatedly Kim), the other is a false imitation of the protector-provider husband archetype (exemplified by Mi Le).

This juxtaposition of true and false expressions again reinforces the idea that the archetype is a gender stereotype that is only ever imposed on rather than truthfully embraced. In my interview with Luna and Denise, Denise similarly identifies the archetype as a stereotype and as a false personality:

When it comes to dating, the only line I draw is that my girlfriend has to have an awareness about gender stereotypes. I will reject someone if she thinks in a stereotypical way. I will refuse her if she insists on being very heterosexual in an intimate relationship. For example, if we are dining out on a date, who's paying for it? Some would insist that the *T* pay for it. That's a very straightforward example. Actually, there was someone I was crushing on. Her ex-girlfriend was a *T* who took a masculine role in the relationship and was the one to take up responsibility. But they were just two women! There are no men there, right? But she wanted to take that masculine role. To protect her, care for her, take responsibility etc. [...] In my own social circle there's not a lot of people who categories between *T* and *P* like this. Because we believe that fundamentally *T* and *P* are just stereotypes. They are unnecessary. You're both women.

To reiterate, heterosexuality as a discursive sign here refers not to just any type of heterosexual relationships but specifically to the archetype. Denise's comment suggests that, in a lesbian relationship, no one should have to assume the archetype because women were never expected to perform the archetype to begin with. In fact, Rene also made the same argument implicitly in an earlier quote, in which she said that it is "ridiculous" that *tomboys* have to perform that archetype "because both the *TB* and her girlfriend are women!"

This presumption that lesbian relationships should somehow be different from the archetype by default fits especially well with the proposition that lesbian relationships ought to be egalitarian.² And just as egalitarian lesbian sexual modernity is conceptually linked to the West, the archetype is conceptually linked to the East.

Section Two: Conceptualising the Archetype as Culturally Specific to Chinese and Asian Societies

Here I turn to the imagined geographies enabled by criticisms of the protector-provider husband archetype. Below is an excerpt from my interview with twenty-seven-year-old Wan-ting, a research assistant in Taipei who used to identify as a *T*:

I realised then that within the lesbian circle, there are a lot of stereotypes when it comes to *T* and *P*. It's like, all the *T* should behave the same way. In Taiwanese society often many people would think a *T* should be like a man, who take care of the partner, help carry heavy things and so on. So women who date *T* treat their partners like men too. They would be like "Oh why are you not doing what society expects of men? You ought to be taking care of me." [...] All these

stereotypes are imposed on the *T*. When I finally realised this, I didn't feel quite comfortable. And I was treated like a *T* by my ex-girlfriends too. And I didn't think it did me any good, to differentiate between *T* and *P* like that.

Note Wan-ting's remark that the archetype is a specific feature of Taiwanese society. The argument is not only that the archetype is a false role imposed on the *tomboy*, but also that it is an ideology common to (if not exclusively found in per se) the mainstream society in Taiwan. Another participant, a mainland Chinese high schooler, made a similar comment about China in her defence of the show *Girls Love*:

I didn't have a problem with the scenes of Mi Le getting into fights with He Yu, even though a lot of people didn't like those scenes, but I thought they were fine because what Mi Le did was morally correct. Regardless of whether you're a man or a woman, anyone who aspires to be a moral person would have protected Xiao Rou like Mi Le did. [...] In China, men are taught to take responsibilities but women are not told to do the same. But actually everyone should embrace this value.

This comment was made by eighteen-year-old student Tori from Shanghai. Even though Tori's assessment appears on the surface to contradict with other participants' comments on the character, Tori's comment is in fact still a critique of the archetype and still links the archetype to contemporary China specifically. Her argument that people misjudged the show relies on the assertion that her local society has the wrong idea about gender (that, both men and women should take on the role of the protector

when the circumstance calls for it). Like the other participants, Tori sees contemporary China to be specifically at fault for associating men with the archetype.

While Tori's and Wan-ting's comments are about their local societies (the PRC and Taiwan) respectively, other participants made comments about a general Chinese traditional culture more broadly. Below I return to my interview with Emma, the law student in Hong Kong, whose assertion that *tomboy* and *TBG/po* roles are expressions of a traditional Chinese culture opened this current chapter. In the passage below I asked Emma to elaborate on this assertion. This soon turned into a discussion comparing (perceived) cultural differences between Hong Kong (where both Emma and I grew up) and the United Kingdom (where both Emma and I attended university). Continuing directly from the earlier quote, Emma said:

Emma: [Lesbians in Hong Kong] think that we, the people of China, must have this kind of gendered division of labour, between a man and a woman, and between a *TB* and a *TBG*. [...] I really do think the fact that *tomboy* and *TBG* roles is so common in Hong Kong has a lot to do with Chinese tradition.

Me: Well, we both spent some time in societies that are not ethnically-Chinese [*Hua ren*].

Emma: Yeah, and I really don't think foreign countries are this rigid.

Me: When you say foreign countries, do you mean the U.K. or foreign countries in general?

Emma: Maybe just the U.K., I don't know.

Me: And can you elaborate on what you said about ethnically Han Chinese?

Wait, actually, I'm not sure if I should say ethnically Han, or, the people of China...

Emma: Hahaha!

Me: Which phrase would you use?

Emma: I said the people of China earlier but actually ethnically Han Chinese would be more suitable. Anyway, I think it's about traditional gender roles in Chinese tradition. There's a very specific role for men.

Me: And when you said Hong Kong lesbians in *Butterfly* had little exposure. You meant that they have this very deep-seated idea for what men and women should do in a relationship right?

Emma: Yes, I think they've inherited this Chinese value. In their world, there's only one kind of relationship dynamic, and that's between a man and a woman.

The wording here is certainly interesting, given the heightened political tension between Hong Kong and China since the 2019 protests, which took place a year after this interview. Perhaps I should point out to the reader that from my own experiences, even by 2018, it was quite rare to hear a Hong Kong person of my generation (late twenties/millennial) to speak of themselves as one of "the people of China," hence my caution in language use in the interview. It is therefore especially intriguing that Emma is not speaking in terms of national belongings but in terms of a shared cultural baggage. The imagined "unification" of Hong Kong and the PRC become logically plausible because Emma's Hong Kong does not share the United Kingdom's (imagined

to be) progressive attitude to gender, but does indeed share China's regressive traditional gender culture. It is a backward Han-Chinese tradition that makes Hong Kong Chinese.

A similar conceptualisation of shared Han-Chinese backwardness also appears in one mainland Chinese participant's cross-strait and East-West imaginations. This quote below is from Tori, the Shanghainese high school student:

Shanghai is more open-minded about gender, *T*, and *po* than the inland rural areas, but it is still behind the U.S. [...] Guangzhou is doing quite well but I think Shanghai is still ahead [...] Taiwan is very, very progressive. But I don't understand that fully because surely there must have been a strong Chinese Confucian tradition in Taiwan too. I think Taiwanese people must be less accepting in the past, but somehow that changed over time. Perhaps that has something to do with politics, but frankly I don't know much about politics. Here in China though, people definitely still believe that men should be breadwinners while women should stay home.

Again, what seems to symbolically unite the two Chinese states according to this story is their shared—*regressive*—cultural heritage. It is a Han Chinese tradition that purportedly hinders people of both societies from an enlightened understanding of gender, and what “divides” the two states is the different extents to which they have seemingly progressed beyond this heritage.

Additionally and crucially, this Han Chinese tradition is also generalised to the entire continent of Asia by some of my participants. Ellie, a twenty-year-old Taiwanese

national that I met in Melbourne during her working holiday in the city, said this about Asia in her comment on the Thai film *Yes or No*:

When I watched *Yes or No*, I just thought Kim was a very typical *T*. Because between her and Pie, she was the one who cared for Pie. And she also looked quite masculine. For me, looking masculine and taking up that gender role are the two characteristics that define a *T*. And, just commenting on gender role for now, what I think is that no one side should be the one to take up the responsibility for caring for the other. [...] Maybe it's because we are ethnically Han Chinese, and we are used to seeing this kind of masculinity. And I think Kim is performing exactly that role. You know, when a *T-P* couple starts dating, the *T* will just automatically assume that role without much thinking, even though they are two self-sufficient individuals. In the Han Chinese world in Taiwan, that's just how it is. It's very patriarchal. [...] In foreign countries people don't categorise into *T* and *P*. Just now from talking to you, I realised that I've always preferred Western lesbian representations because they don't categorise into *T* and *P* gender roles. In Asian films, I pay more attention to the power relations between the couple, and they tend to be less balanced.

Much like the Hong Kong-Chinese and cross-straits imaginations earlier, the argument here is that Asian regions shared a conservative tradition that insists on gender polarity. The implication seems to be that a Han Chinese tradition has spilled over to the rest of Asia, or, alternatively, that other Asian regions are similarly tied down by a tradition that is not Han Chinese but functions similarly to its supposed Han Chinese counterpart.

To give a different example of this pan-Asian imagination, consider my interview with Charlie, a twenty-eight-year-old research assistant from Hong Kong. Though Charlie labels herself a *tomboy*, she only does so to indicate how she wants to look, and she is quite critical of the protector-provider husband archetype. She said:

Nowadays a lot of the lesbians I know are not like that anymore. There's not a ton of people who still insist on being the provider, and being the one to take up the responsibility to care for their girlfriends. No, everyone is more equal. [...] You know, when the promotional materials for *Yes or No 2.5* first came out, they gave me the false impression that the *tomboy* housemates were going to fall in love with each other. I was expecting a *tomboy-tomboy* romance! That would have been so innovative! But no, it turns out I was lied to. And the film turned out to be this heterosexual love story between the *tomboys* and the *TBG*. It was the same old formula. [...] *Tomboys* are really so common in Southeast Asian lesbian representations. But that's not the case in Western representations, or at least you don't see *butch* characters very often. It's just very rare to see stories about two feminine Han Chinese women falling in love.

Again the connection between Han Chinese culture and the rest of Asia is not exactly clear—it seems possible that Charlie might be implying that a Han Chinese tradition is the source of a pan-Asian backwardness, but it is also equally possible that she just meant to say that Han Chinese societies and other Asian societies are similar in their (supposed) belief in gender polarity without necessarily implying a causal relationship between the former and the latter. Regardless, the key recurring theme from my

interviews with Emma, Tori, Ellie, and Charlie is that a Han Chinese tradition (supposedly) persists and ideologically unites Chinese and Asian societies. For these participants, the *tomboy* figure—as the bearer and reinforcer of the archetype—is evident of this tradition.

The construction of a singular “conservative Asia” vis-à-vis a progressive West in fact depends on the systematic erasure of regional differences between the lesbian Sinophone and the other regions designated by the rubric of “Asia.” In the interview data appearing in this chapter, Thailand is repeatedly constructed as an equivalent of (and at times implied to be the extension of) conservative Han Chinese societies. It is less clear whether Japan is equally submerged into this imagination of a singular Asia, given that references to Japan were much scarcer in comparison in my sample. Nonetheless, the argument I will now make is that this *idea* of a conservative Chinese/Asian culture is, ultimately, imaginative.

Section Three: The Making of History

Is the protector-provider husband archetype actually a legacy of a Han Chinese tradition? Let us presume for a moment that it is. This would mean that a classical patriarchal Han Chinese tradition has survived through the millennia-long continuum of Chinese history and is now responsible for the *tomboy's* self-imposed protector-provider role. In my research into the potentially relevant historical materials, I could not find very specific descriptions of the archetype (i.e. descriptions about lifting heavy things and being the sole breadwinner) but there are plenty of references to gendered division of labour more generally. The phrase Emma used, *men rule the outside and women rule the inside*, for instance appeared in several Confucian canonical texts, most

noticeably in *The Book of Rites* from the Zhou and the Warring States period.³ The book says:

In the dwelling house, outside and inside are clearly divided; the man lives in the outer, the women in the inner apartments ... the men do not enter, neither do the women leave them. (qtd. Goodman & Larson, 2005, p. xi)

This gendered segregation appeared in another Confucian canon, *The Book of Odes*.⁴

This book is summarised by the third-century scholar Ge Hong as follows:

The Book of Odes praises the union of husband and wife, but attaches supreme importance to the separation of the sexes [...] Further, that news from outside shall not penetrate into the household, and that news from within the household shall not become known outside [...] Such are the shining regulations on the separation of the sexes instituted by the Sages. (qtd. in Gulik, 1974, p. 103)

What is inscribed by these classical texts include not only women's exclusion from public life but also a specific form of masculinity, which indeed appears to resemble quite closely the archetype I describe. Writing on this normative masculinity that was authorised by classical texts, Santos and Harrell (2017) note that this masculinity was defined by the outside, the heavy, and the skilled, while femininity was defined by the inside, the light, and the unskilled. In other words, classical texts described the ideal man as a skilled man who does the heavy lifting and engages in public life.

Interestingly, scholars of these classical texts *also* describe this masculinity as a "stereotype" (Santos & Harrell, 2017, p. 13)—a word choice used by many of my participants.

In the centuries that followed,⁵ these classical texts were indeed regularly recited and reinstated by succeeding rulers. The most noticeable example was the eleventh-

century Song dynasty, during which social elites wrote about how women should be banned from all areas of public life and made repeated references to the classical texts to support this call for exclusion.⁶ This was later known as the Song neo-Confucianism, which was later reinforced again by the state of the High Qing in the eighteenth century.⁷

When one organises historical records in this way, one may begin to “see” an unyielding patriarchal orthodoxy that somehow survived centuries of regime changes across the long chronology of Han Chinese history. And yet, to believe in a consistent and unchallenged existence of Han Chinese patriarchy is to ignore the many counter interpretations and evidence. For example, whether records of Song neo-Confucianism (i.e. written records of Song social elites’ call for banning women in the public sphere) actually reflected real practices of female seclusion is a key proposition that historians have come to doubt.⁸ According to some historians (Bray, 1997; Mann, 2000), contrary to the interpretation that Song society kept women from the public sphere, these records might have been evidence of the opposite. They speculate that Song women were in fact so economically active in the public sphere that these conservative arguments were written by male elites who hated seeing successful women all around them.

I am borrowing from this important historical debate to highlight its implication that, merely having historical records of patriarchal expressions from the past can never truly tell us whether that past was “actually patriarchal.” As Bray (1997) suggests, the connections between written records and actual practices from bygone eras will remain forever unsettled to those of us in the present. Additionally, there are also potential counter evidence suggesting the existence of non-Confucian gender practices in premodern China, such as “the uterine family structure delineated by Margery Wolf (1972) and [...] critiques [of classical ideas about gender] in such literary works as

Flowers in the Mirror and chapter 16 of *Journey to the West*" (Santos & Harrell, 2017, p. 11).

The key point—and this is my claim—is that the “traditional past” is but a rubric under which a magnitude of experiences and practices are designated, and *to say that it has always been strictly and unchangingly patriarchal is to impose a singularity on an endless field of multiplicities and contradictions*.⁹ To propose this is not to dismiss altogether my participants’ references to a patriarchal tradition. Quite the contrary, the point is to bring attention to their *constructiveness* and indeed *creativity* in constructing a singular Chinese tradition. Framing their quotes in this way, it becomes clear that these quotes are an exercise in creating the idea¹⁰ of a historical pre-given. At the same time, this is not to say that restrictive social expectations imposed on men and women are somehow all fictional—certainly, normative heterosexual men in Chinese societies *are* expected to behave in certain ways, and quite possibly the archetype may closely resemble those expectations. The danger, though, is to characterise patriarchal gender socialisation as specifically and unchangingly Han Chinese (*and* Asian). Such cultural exceptionalism dangerously regards Chinese and Asian cultures as *exceptionally* patriarchal and *exceptionally* repressive in comparison with the West, further maintaining the perceived world order of sexual modernity between the West and the non-West.

Chapter Conclusion

I began this chapter by considering the fact that accusations of the *tomboy's* appropriation of heterosexuality in fact defines this “heterosexuality” in the context of a conjugal Chinese gendered division of labour. I then listed all the attributes that the

good normative cis-gendered husband supposedly embodies, which are also attributes that the *tomboy* supposedly appropriate. Collectively these attributes add up to what I named the protector-provider husband archetype. I illustrated the ways in which the *tomboy's* supposed appropriation of this archetype is imagined to be a self-imposed false personality. I then looked at the imagined geographies that sprung from this archetype. I pointed out that contemporary Chinese-speaking societies (the PRC, Hong Kong, Taiwan) are perceived to be descendants of a shared patriarchal Han Chinese tradition, which the rest of Asia also supposedly shared in some unclear ways.

Finally, I turned to the crucial and urgent question of whether there *is* a Han Chinese tradition that can somehow explain the commonplaceness of the *tomboy* in Chinese societies. I drew on historical records that seemingly confirm such a suspicion, and then referenced alternative interpretations of the historical materials to highlight the constructiveness inherent to writing history. The key problem, I believe, is not whether that such an archetype exists or not, and certainly there are historical materials that seem to suggest resonances with the past. My key concern is the danger in constructing this archetype as a trans-historical figure that Chinese (and Asian) societies cannot escape from, or at least have much more trouble escaping from than their Western counterpart(s).

This is indeed my biggest reservation about the portrayal of Western-ness and Chinese-ness portrayed by the *tomboy* repressive hypothesis. While the West comes to be the site of an Occidental fantasy of lesbian utopia, it seems that the East is self-Orientalised into the site where a conservative Han Chinese tradition looms over the heads of heterosexual men and women as well as lesbians. *A priori* notions of Chinese-ness and Western-ness are ultimately *retrospective constructs of macro-histories*. While there were certainly experiences of restrictive gender roles in early and imperial

China—and in fact in contemporary PRC, Hong Kong, and Taiwan—reducing the histories of “the Han Chinese” and “the West” into two trans-historical singularities is bound to be reductive in the face of multiple experiences, materiality, and practices of both the past and the present. A “Han Chinese tradition” is and always will be a discursive sign rather than a real trans-historical orthodoxy.

In researching historians’ discussions of the idea of a patriarchal Han Chinese tradition, I came across Dorothy Ko’s (1994) discussion of the widely held belief among academics that Chinese women were historically oppressed throughout centuries of Han Chinese history. Ko writes:

[...] the invention of an ahistorical “Chinese tradition” that is feudal, patriarchal, and oppressive was the result of a rare confluence of three divergent ideological and political traditions—the May Fourth-New Culture movement, the Communist revolution, and Western feminist scholarship. Although these traditions envision vastly different forms for modernity and the place of women in it, they concur in their indignation over the cloistered, crippled, and subservient existence of women in old China (Ko, 1994, p.3).

To quickly recap Ko’s salient arguments in her excellent debunking of the myth of the traditionally repressed Chinese woman, Ko suggests that, while there were surely instances of oppression of women in history, each of these three discursive traditions overgeneralises these instances into evidence of an inherently patriarchal Chinese tradition to serve their own political purpose: the early-twentieth century May Fourth movement (1915-1927) uses this myth in their call for the modernisation of China,

which would supposedly break away from this patriarchal tradition; the Chinese Communist Party reinforces this myth to portray itself as the key to women's liberation and promises to uplift women—and the country—from the oppressive traditional era; and Western feminists also use this myth to (shakily) construct the idea of a universal patriarchy, and to position itself as the answer for the third-world women (Ko, 1994; Mohanty, 1991).

The *tomboy* repressive hypothesis is a similar, fourth discursive paradigm. According to it, men have been traditionally oppressed under the archetype, and this oppression now extends to the *tomboy*. What the hypothesis shares with the other three paradigms is that they are ultimately not so much concerned with historical accuracy as with using the idea of history to highlight what they see as a core problem of the present. For the May Fourth writers and the Chinese Communist Party the core problem is not having modernised China, for the first-world feminist it is what they see to be the ongoing patriarchal repression in third-world China, and for the *tomboy* repressive hypothesis, the problem is that a true, authentic self is being oppressed and hidden away under the archetype. In the next chapter, we return to the autobiographies about the “retrieving” of—and what is in fact the *making* of—the true post-*tomboy* self.

¹ It is interesting to point out that earlier literature generally suggests that the *tomboy* is conceptualised as exterior to (if not in direct opposition with) the category of the traditional Chinese family. Martin's *Backward Glances* (2010) for example provides an in-depth discussion on the various Chinese-language representational texts that present the *tomboy* and the family in direct antagonistic terms. That kind of antagonistic tension is even present in the screen texts I am drawing from in this thesis, for example in

both *Yes or No* and *Girls Love* the *tomboy* character faces disapproval from the family unit. Here, however, proponents of the *tomboy* repressive hypothesis see the *tomboy* as in line with and in fact an extension of the traditional family structure.

² Note that the egalitarianism is also increasingly popular among heterosexual couples in post-Reform PRC, see for instance the work of Lu et al. (2000), Shu (2004), Zhang and Fussell (2017).

³ From the year 1046 BC to 221 BC.

⁴ Believed to date back to 11th to 7th centuries BC.

⁵ Collectively known as the Imperial era, starting from 221 BC to the end of the last dynastic in 1912.

⁶ See Goodman and Larson (2005).

⁷ See Goodman and Larson (2005).

⁸ See Bray (1997) and Mann (2000), both cited in Goodman and Larson (2005).

⁹ For a detailed discussion problematising over-generalised constructions of a “traditional Chinese patriarchy,” see Ko (1994).

¹⁰ My approach here is also similar to Martin’s (2003) approach to the idea of a traditional Chinese family, with which she argues that it is more productive to treat the idea of a traditional Chinese family as a signifier rather than as a transhistorical pre-given.

Chapter Six: The Quest for the True, Post-Tomboy Self

Yan: In a heterosexual relationship, a man is expected to appease the woman and carry heavy things for her. In my opinion, *TB-TBG* couples just replicate this heterosexuality. My *TB* friends always do the heavy lifting for the *TBG* at their own expense. For me, I believe that relationships should be egalitarian. After all, they are both women! [...] I suppose this is also related to my self-identity as *pure*. I label myself that because I want an egalitarian relationship, in which my partner and I share the same amount of responsibilities, as opposed to dating a *TB* who takes up everything the way a man does.

Me: Have you always identified as *pure*?

Yan: No, actually. Back when I was about fifteen or sixteen, I had yet to find my *identity*, but I was starting my first relationship. My first girlfriend was dating a *TB* before we got together, and she *somehow expected* me to be the *TB* in our relationship, and so I started to force myself to perform the *TB* role. She told me to cut my hair short and to wear t-shirts. She complained about the way I laughed because it was too feminine for her. And I felt very frustrated, because I **am** [emphasis mine] a woman! I can't just lower my voice and laugh like [in a forced deep voice] ho ho ho. Right? It was then that I realised, that I did not want to be forced to be that person, and I started to explore more. Later on, I grew my long hair back. I stopped dressing too masculine. I've gotten back to just being myself.

The last three chapters have charted different aspects of what I term the *tomboy* repressive hypothesis. To recap, Chapter Three examined how my participants framed their own *tomboy*-identifying adolescence as a period of immaturity during which (they argue) they falsely represented themselves. The next two chapters showed that, for them, *tomboy* identification was an act of self-repression with which lesbians suppress their own natural genders and adopt a normatively masculine gender role (which they characterised as culturally Chinese and Asian). In sum, the hypothesis suggests that one's past *tomboy* identity can only be the result of ignorance and self-suppression, and critically it also implies that there *is* a true self out there, waiting to be retrieved. This chapter therefore returns to the autobiographies that were discussed at the end of Chapter Three. Earlier, I focused on the retrospective interpretation of adolescence (i.e. the period now seen as a repressive past); in this chapter I focus on the stories of healing that follow.

I begin above with a short excerpt from my interview with Yan, a twenty-six-year-old nurse in Hong Kong who previously socialised as a *tomboy* and now identifies as *pure*. My intent is not to dispute with Yan that her previous *tomboy* identification was a deeply uncomfortable experience for her. As a researcher, I fully acknowledge and respect Yan's recollection of discomfort, and it is not my place to dispute her lived and affective experiences. What I am interested in—however—is the *discursive production* of the post-*tomboy* self in her story and in the many similar stories from my other participants. The short excerpt above already foreshadows some of the conceptual tensions my participants face in “finding” their true self-identities in the wake of having abandoned their *tomboy* identities. For instance, is the true self naturally feminine (as Yan suggests)? Does one's true self necessarily orient towards egalitarian lesbian

relationships? What kind of gender expressions and gender roles are natural to us? How do we know for sure?

This chapter considers all these conceptual tensions in the stories of finding oneself. I will preface my analysis with a brief discussion on the idea of true/false self-consciousness in different theoretical traditions, specifically those of early Marxism, the Frankfurt school, liberal feminism, and radical feminism. My intention is to draw on similar deliberations on true/false self-consciousness in these theoretical traditions so as to spell out similar logics in my empirical data. Through comparing my data to theories on true/false consciousness, I examine the multiple ways in which participants speak of abandoning their false *tomboy* identity and finding their true selves. Some consider this true self to be naturally feminine and egalitarian, other dispute with that view and consider the true self to be post-gender and post-identity category. Many consider the *tomboy* (and by extension masculine expressions in general) to be the conceptual opposite of the true self. These conceptual differences also show in the conflicting readings of *Yes and No*, which I will discuss towards the end of this chapter. At the crux of these contestations is the question of—what *form* should this “true self” take, and how can one be certain of its truthfulness? In responses to these questions and tensions, I will reinforce at the end of this chapter my central position in this thesis. That is, that the self is not found, but made. These deliberations and autobiographies are themselves the very processes through which the self is re-invented and revised. Rather than existing as a natural pre-given, the “true self” is only conceptually possible in the process of trying to liberate it from false consciousness.

Section One: False Consciousnesses

1. A Critical Summary of the False Consciousness Concept

I shall begin with a brief discussion of the notion of false consciousnesses in Marxist and related theoretical traditions. The purpose of this is to further develop my own analysis of the *tomboy* repressive hypothesis. While previous chapters highlighted the ways my participants framed *tomboy* identification as false identification with masculine gender role (i.e. the protector-provider husband archetype), this chapter focuses on this logic of false self-identity and, by extension, the idea that a true identification can be restored and released. To do so, let us first look at related theoretical discussions, which will inform my analysis later in this chapter.

In the Marxist tradition, the term “false consciousness” has historically been used in conjunction with Marx’s concept of “ideology.” It first appeared in a letter written by Marx’s long-term collaborator Friedrich Engels, who defines false consciousness and ideology as one and the same (Tucker et al., 1978). In Engels’ definition, both refer to the process through which a person accepts socio-political influences into their own consciousness and allows these forces to dictate their thoughts and actions. Whether Engels’ definition is a sound interpretation of Marx’s scholarship is subjected to much debate (Callinicos, 1983; Larraín, 1979; McCarney, 1980; McLellan, 1986; Seliger, 1977),¹ but the notion of false consciousness nonetheless remains crucial to the thinking of Marx’s successors. One such example is Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci (1971), who similarly defines ideology as a case of false consciousness in which the working class accepts capitalist values that are instrumental in their own oppression. According to him, the proletariat “adopted a conception which is not its own but is borrowed from [the bourgeoisie]” (qtd. in Femia,

1981, p. 43). Yet, Gramsci also claims that the working class's false consciousness is only partial (Eyerman, 1981). Like Marx and Engels before him, Gramsci argues that experiences of oppression make the underclass more perceptive to social reality than their rulers,² and therefore the road to revolution is to reject the part of consciousness that is false and embrace that which is true (ibid).

Another Marxist philosopher who adopts Engels' notion of false consciousness is Gramsci's contemporary, Hungarian writer György Lukács, and it is Lukács' model and the theoretical writings he inspires that will be most appropriate for my analysis. Although Lukács shares Gramsci's interest in using false consciousness to explain the proletariat's acceptance of their own oppression, he does not claim that the working class has adopted the values of the bourgeoisie; rather, his claim is that the very condition of living in capitalist society distorts all humans' perception of reality—irrespective of their class positions (Eyerman, 1981; Lukacs, 1971, 2015). He theorises that under capitalism, people increasingly regard one another as objects (rather than as persons),³ and the task of the revolution is to see beyond this *illusion* and seek the *truth* of social reality. This is where the notion of false consciousness becomes the most relevant to my analysis. Lukács' model firmly establishes false consciousness as an epistemological problem. The implication is that there is a correct, objective, and truthful understanding of social reality that stands in stark contrast to a distorted, mystified, and deceptive perception. A more contemporary example of Lukács' model can be found in Steven Lukes' (2011) paper, in which he defends—against critics of the notion of false consciousness—the propositions that: (a) there are objective truths; and (b) it is possible for people to be ignorant of these truths and act in a delusional way. In my discussion of the *tomboy* repressive hypothesis later on, I will return to this idea that

individuals can be acting in a delusional manner as a result of having the wrong perception of the world.

Before returning to the *tomboy* repressive hypothesis, I want to examine the applications of false consciousness in other schools of thoughts so as to use them for my analysis later. The first school of thought in question is the Frankfurt school. Erich Fromm (1978), one of the Frankfurt school's key theorists and a psychoanalyst, sets out to integrate Lukács' model with psychoanalytic theories. According to Fromm, false consciousness consists not only of false knowledge (as Lukács argues), but also of the *unconscious*. Fromm's claim is that it is not only people's cognitive perception that is distorted but also their very own psychological experiences, and these distortions in turn produce irrational thoughts and a false understanding of the self (Eyerman, 1981).⁴ In other words, for Fromm, false consciousness is the psychological internalisation of false knowledge.

The idea that the ordinary person may accept a distorted worldview into their consciousness on a deep psychological level is key to my analysis. The same idea can also be observed in many of the writings of Fromm's fellow Frankfurt school theorist, Theodor W. Adorno. Although Adorno avoids relying on psychoanalysis or using the term false consciousness directly, the continuities between his theories and those of Engels, Lukács, and Fromm are self-evident. For instance, in the seminal paper Adorno co-authors with Max Horkheimer titled "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception" (2002), the writers depict the capitalist mass media industry as an oppressive machine and media consumers as its victims. Many interpret Adorno's (and Horkheimer's) argument as characterising media consumers as passive victims (for example in Van Zoonen, 2017), but in fact his characterisation of them is much worse than just simple passivity. In another essay, "On popular music" (2009), Adorno

outright rejects the proposition that the average consumer is reacting passively to the stimuli of media products, instead, he claims that they actively *delude* themselves into accepting these (in his view) mediocre products. He writes, “this self-delusion is based upon imitation and even histrionics [of what genuine enjoyment of art should be]. The [consumer] is the actor of his own enthusiasm [...] He is only under a spell of his own making” (Adorno, 2009, p. 325).

Let me pause here to sum up these Marxist and Frankfurt school characterisations of false consciousness, which, as my analysis later will show, is also how the *tomboy* repressive hypothesis characterises the *tomboy*-identifying individuals:

1. False consciousness is a product of distorted worldview (Lukács).
2. False consciousness is the psychological internalisation of distorted worldview into one’s sense of self (Fromm).
3. False consciousness is not passive compliance but active self-deception (Adorno).

The other schools of thought that draw on the same characterisations of false consciousness are liberal feminism and radical feminism. Like Adorno, liberal feminist author Betty Friedan similarly portrays the media industry as a powerful enforcer of false knowledge (Friedan et al., 2013; Van Zoonen, 2017). One may even say that Friedan’s theory is a feminist spin on Adorno’s. Whereas Adorno is concerned with the erasure of genuine artistry and creativity by the media industry, Friedan’s claim is that the media industry lies to American women and impels them to become housewives and mothers. Her claim therefore is that women are deluding themselves into accepting subordinated positions in a male-dominated world. Similarly, radical feminist Catharine A. MacKinnon also portrays the average woman as a victim who internalises male values. For her, the enforcer of this false consciousness is pornography, and she claims

that “pornography freely enslaves women’s minds” (MacKinnon, 1987, p. 156). She claims that women do not sincerely crave the sex that they participate in and have simply mistaken a distorted sexuality for their own. Like Fromm, MacKinnon’s writing has a strong psychological connotation. The underlying claim of both writers’ arguments is that: People do not know what they truly want, but there *is* a real society out there they have so far failed to see, and there *is* a true version of themselves that they have yet to recognise.

2. False Consciousness and the Tomboy Repressive Hypothesis

Drawing on the false consciousness framework I just addressed, I turn to the *tomboy* repressive hypothesis to see how this the same logic manifests in this circumstance. Below are two excerpts from an interview I conducted with a thirty-nine-year-old Hong Kong lesbian and social worker named Penelope. Much like many of the other participants, she socialised as a *tomboy* in adolescence but now takes issues with the category. She told me:

All my life I’ve been wanting to *deconstruct* gender. Even as a child I was trying very hard to liberate myself from the role assigned to women. And after that, I realised that the masculine role is also something to be liberated from. It’s not just women who are oppressed. I can now see that the patriarchy is forcing a lot of gender stereotypes on men as well. I now realise that we really do not need to force these stereotypes on men, and obviously it is wrong to force these stereotypes on *TB* as well. It is wrong to force those *TB* and *TBG* roles. After all, you are both women. [...] Now I can really understand the mechanisms of these

gender stereotypes, or I should say, I can see how patriarchy assigns a masculine role to men and a feminine role to women. This is why we have gendered division of labour. I can feel and reflect on how these roles penetrate everyday life. And, gender is such a very personal thing. When you completely believe in stereotypes, you unconsciously reinforce this system.

We can identify several similarities between Penelope's characterisation of the *tomboy* and the earlier theorisation of false consciousness. But first I must clarify again that Penelope's (and my other participants') use of "gender stereotypes" and "patriarchy" are somewhat different from feminists' use of the same vocabularies. Whereas the feminists I referenced above use these vocabularies to refer specifically to women's subordination (e.g. as housewives) in a male-dominated world, my participants use the same phrases to refer to *tomboys*-identifying women's mis-identification with normatively masculine gender role (rather than normatively feminine gender role). The *tomboy* according to this argument is one who internalises a distorted worldview (about normative masculinity). She is a victim of false consciousness.

This characterisation of the *tomboy* is even more apparent in my interview with Ellie, a twenty-six-year-old Taiwanese woman who was in Melbourne, Australia on a working holiday visa at the time of the interview. Ellie was also a *tomboy* in her youth but now identifies as *bufen*. She said:

When I went to college, I started questioning the so-called definitions of *T* and *P*. In university classes, my lecturer was very dedicated to getting us to understand that we shouldn't impose gender stereotypes on ourselves [...] I

started doing more research on my own, and I learnt a lot from films and media, and I began to reflect more [...] Now, I realised that I was never that comfortable with being a *T*.

In Chapter Three, I pointed out that the *tomboy* past is now looked down upon with regrets. Here my intention is to underline the framing of that past as a period of false consciousness. Ellie's autobiography here can for instance be rephrased using the language of the Marxist, Frankfurt, and radical feminist writers as follows: I was never actually a *tomboy* but I accepted that role against my own interest (like Lukács' working class who accept capitalist values at their own expense); and, as a result, I remained for some time in a subordinated position (like the women described by feminist writers).

Below is another example from a different ex-*tomboy* participant. This story belongs to twenty-nine-year-old Lao Wang, a Guangzhou native and a postgraduate student:

Sometime between 2014 and 2017, I got to make more lesbian friends than I did before. Some of them used the labels *T*, *P*, *H* but many didn't. They rejected all kinds of [sub-]labels. They would say that they are lesbians and that's it. They told me *T*, *P*, *H* are too *stereotypical*. They said by using these labels, you mould yourselves into gender stereotypes. I thought, oh! This is great. I didn't know this before and now I'm learning more [...] Eventually I finally realised that, when the *tomboy* label is forced upon you, you are given a rigid framework that dictates your actions. You'd feel like you have to follow stereotypes, and that

you must do stereotypical things like keeping your hair short, wearing pants [...] but really, you don't have to!

Lao Wang's story again shares many similar characterisations with the theorists I discussed. For her, *tomboys* and other sub-labels form a distorted worldview that people internalise against their own interests. And similar to the feminist writers' claim that women cannot take real pleasure in becoming housewives and participating in pornography (whatever pleasure there is must be a misrecognition of what is truly internalised patriarchal value, or so they claim), Lao Wang's claim here is also that the *tomboy* role cannot possibly be something that a person genuinely wishes to perform. The claim here is that the person who identifies as a *tomboy* and performs the *tomboy* role must be delusional, she internalises a distorted worldview into her own psychology and acts as its hypnotised victim.

There is a strong humanist impulse at play in the *tomboy* repressive hypothesis. My participants' stories seem to all imply that: *you don't have to act according to the roles you are given, you can just be yourself!* And I recognise the same impulses in my own readings of the Marxists, Frankfurt, and feminist theories. Lukács and Adorno lament the loss of *genuine* human relationships and creativity under capitalism, Friedan and Mackinnon write in defence of what they see as women's *true* desires, sexuality, and happiness. These different variations of false consciousness all read—to me at least—like a rallying call for true consciousness, a rallying call for true understandings of the world and true expressions of the self. This is also how I read the *tomboy* repressive hypothesis. It is a call for the restoration of the true self.

To reinforce this point with two more examples, let me first turn to an interview I conducted in Shanghai. There, I met Fang-fang, a thirty-eight-year-old lesbian. Fang-fang works in entertainment news reporting in her day job and runs a popular lesbian blog. She said:

I founded this blog in 2001. Did you know when we first had internet access in China back in 2001, there was no internet censorship? We could just visit any website from outside, and I used to go to Hong Kong and Taiwanese lesbian websites, because I wasn't very fluent in English. Those websites taught me about lesbianism and the *T* and *P* categories. I only knew that lesbians had to divide themselves into binary roles from their cultures. [...] And then my girlfriend at the time was also exposed to this thing. And she started to behave like that. She forced our relationship into this *T-P* format. But neither of us was like that! This thing really took hold of her. She tried so desperately to mould our relationship into it.

I want to take a closer look at the *framing* of these emotional experiences. By framing these them as the result of her partner's delusional infatuation with secondary gender roles, and by claiming that "neither of us was like that," Fang-fang gives the impression that her true self and the true self of her partner were in somewhere, suppressed, waiting to be retrieved.

To give one more example, here is a story from Chia-ling, a thirty-year-old editor from Taipei who described herself as *bufen pian T* ("not categorising but leaning towards *tomboy*") in the past but later on switched to the label *bufen*. She said:

I don't really like dressing up in a very overt way, to fulfil some kind of expectation. I don't think that's necessary. I think it would be easier if we just abandon that altogether [...] Some people insist on calling the feminine partner *po* and their partners *T*. And you have people who hear that, and truly believe it. They fool themselves into believing that they are *T* but in reality, they don't actually fit in that category. [...] Some *T* are really just forcing themselves to act a certain way [...] This is also what happens to [cis-gender] men in general. It's sad that people [i.e. cis-gender men and *tomboys*] feel like they have to pretend to be who they are not. For [cis-gender] men, it is society that forces them to act a certain way. But for *T*, society never forced them to adopt traditional values [i.e. the protector-provider husband archetype], so why do they do this to themselves?

Here I will again outline the similarities between the *tomboy* repressive hypothesis and the false consciousness theories cited. According to the *tomboy* repressive hypothesis (as articulated by Chia-ling), both cis-gender men and *tomboys* accept a distorted perception of gender (i.e. what my participants call "traditional gender stereotypes") and in turn impose this misunderstanding upon themselves in their everyday practice of gender (i.e. by fulfilling the protector-provider husband archetype). Importantly, this description of cis-gender men and *tomboys* clearly suggests that their minds are somehow enslaved to a regime of hegemonic gender roles, and this imagery of an enslavement of the mind is similarly key to the language of the radical feminists (e.g. "pornography freely enslaves women's minds" [MacKinnon, 1987, p. 156]) and the Frankfurt scholars (e.g. "the listener remains the slave of radio's immediacy" [Adorno, 2009, p. 379]).

But Chia-ling also distinguishes *tomboys* from cis-gender men because for her, cis-gender men have no choice but to be socialised by hegemonic understanding of masculinity, whereas *tomboys* (in her imagination) deliberately *choose* to accept hegemonic masculinity despite not having it imposed on her. In this sense, the *tomboy* repressive hypothesis is in fact most akin to the Adorno variant of the false consciousness argument. Whereas Adorno describes the consumer as a person who eagerly deludes themselves into enjoying media products (as opposed to simply being the media industry's passive victim), the *tomboy* repressive hypothesis seemingly sees the *tomboy* as one who *actively* fools herself into accepting the masculine role. To rephrase the *tomboy* repressive hypothesis using Adorno's (2009) language, "[the *tomboy*] is only under a spell of [her] own making" (p. 325).

It must be said that in contemporary scholarship, this suggestion that the common people are in fact delusional is perhaps near-universally treated as an object of critique. For example, Adorno is often attacked by media studies scholars who accuse him of ignoring the complicated relationships consumers forge with cultural commodities.⁵ Likewise, Friedan is condemned by researchers for failing to grasp the diverse motives behind women's decisions to become mothers and housewives,⁶ and by self-proclaimed happily-married mothers for portraying them as brainwashed fools.⁷ MacKinnon is similarly criticised for denying women's agency in sex.⁸ In philosophy, critics of Lukács also accuse him of implying the existence of a "superior knowledge" inaccessible to the common people.⁹ In sum, critics take issue with their portrayal of the average people as incapable of knowing what is best for themselves.

This is a key problem of the *tomboy* repressive hypothesis. For one, characterising the *tomboy* as a self-delusional fool *is* condescending. Although the hypothesis often begins as a critique directed at one's past *tomboy* self (as is the case in

Friedan's examination of her life as a housewife), in practice it is—as the example from Chia-ling shows—often directed at fellow members of the lesbian community. It denies the agency of those who *do* find joy in identifying with what these women call traditional gender stereotypes. It denies, also, the possibility that those who do still identify as *tomboys* may similarly exercise a great degree of self-reflexivity regarding their sexual identity. More worryingly, some participants even suggest that those who identify with masculinity in fact do not belong in the lesbian communities at all. Given how these presumptions about false consciousness are intertwined with an emergent lesbian/*tomboy*/trans border war, I will address these at once and in greater details in my discussion of the border war in the next chapter.

Before I wrap up my discussions of false consciousness, I want to reference Chia-ling's and Penelope's statements again to point out a related logic. Both participants suggest that cis-gender men are socialised in accordance with hegemonic masculine role, and that *tomboys* are women who subscribe to the same role. In addition to resembling the language of false consciousness, this hypothesis also appears to resemble what sociologists often call the “socialisation” of gender. To give two brief examples, a study by Jones-Bodie (2016) frames gender socialisation as the process through which normative gender expectations are presented to and imposed on children. Another study by Mousavi et al. (2019) similarly describes gender socialisation as a psychological development in which teenagers come to internalise gender expressions they acquired from society as part of their self-identity. Though sociologists using this socialisation model might not always suggest that such a process is necessarily a misinterpretation of the self (as theorists of false consciousness do), they do often describe gender as *acquired*. Gender, in the language of socialisation, is acquired from society (which is external to the self) and then integrated into part of the self. This

characterisation of gender (as something external and later internalised) is clearly present in both Chia-ling's and Penelope's statements. It can be said that the *tomboy* repressive hypothesis in fact combines the language of socialisation *and* the language of false consciousness. It suggests that gender (specifically the husband archetype) is acquired by cis-gender men and *tomboy*, but then there is a true self—a true consciousness—that is suppressed by this acquired gender. In other words, the true self is framed as pre-social. As I will show throughout this chapter, the *ex-tomboy* self is often described not only as the true counterpart to the false consciousness of being a *tomboy*, it is also framed as the *natural* counterpart to the socialised figure of the *tomboy*. In saying this, I am not suggesting that the *tomboy* repressive hypothesis draws directly from these theories on false consciousness and socialisation. I am merely using these theories to illustrate the logic of the hypothesis. Though it is possible that the hypothesis does in fact draw from everyday non-specialist circulations of feminist ideas, it seems unlikely that the hypothesis itself is a *direct* reproduction of the theorists appearing above.

With this in mind, let us now turn to these *ex-tomboy* autobiographies in the next section. As these women come to view their *tomboy* past as a period of false consciousness and repression, they begin to embark on a quest for their true—and natural—selves. These are stories presented as self-healing, as stories of delusion, and of shedding the false skin of the *tomboy* to re-discover a pre-socialisation self, of finding the self as it was born to be. It is about retracing one's footsteps back to the diverging point where one chose the wrong path. And this time, one is determined to return to her one true path.

Section Two: In Search of the Self

1. Gender Metamorphosis, or, the Construction of the Feminine True Self

Yan: I started to force myself to perform the *TB* role [...] It was then that I realised, that I did not want to be forced to be that person, and I started to explore more. Later on, I grew my long hair back. I stopped dressing too masculine. I've gotten back to just being myself.

Me: Would you say you were making that change on purpose, or was it just so that you're more comfortable being yourself?

Yan: I was just more comfortable that way. I realised dressing that way just made me feel easier. Later on, when I began my second relationship, I said to my second girlfriend: I'm going to be frank. I will not be a *TB* again. When that relationship was over, sometime after that—I'm not quite certain when—but I came across the label *pure* on an internet forum. And I thought, oh that's me! It was like a lightbulb lit up in my mind. I didn't have to struggle anymore to find my identity.

These quotations from Yan, a twenty-six-year-old nursing student from Hong Kong, continues directly from another excerpt from the same interview cited at the beginning of this chapter. Similar to an earlier story with Shanghainese participant Fang-fang, who talked about being forced into taking up the *tomboy* role by an ex-girlfriend, Yan spoke of an unpleasant experience of being forced into becoming a *tomboy* by her first romantic partner. Soon after the end of that relationship, Yan undid her *tomboy* presentation. She told me she resumed speaking in a higher register, which was

something her first girlfriend strongly objected to. Yan also grew her hair long and began wearing dresses often. She grew into a new appearance,¹⁰ and this change is curated with the sense that she is rediscovering herself (though it should be noted that for other participants, the shift in self-identity from *tomboy* to non-*tomboy* does not always correspond with a change in appearance).

Though Yan suggests that she is simply more comfortable dressing this way, I want to propose—alternatively—that this metamorphosis of the self may in fact be carefully curated and managed. Certainly, this metamorphosis is about restoration. In Yan's story, she frames her femininity as the formerly repressed. It was her natural high-pitched voice that was pushed lower, her long hair that was cut short. And now, she can wear long hair again. Her feminine voice was restored both literally and figuratively. By framing the *tomboy* role as a role that she forced herself to perform, Yan frames her new, normatively feminine presentation as the expression of a true self that emerges outside of the shell of the *tomboy*. It is therefore not just that Yan is more comfortable dressing in this manner—and again my analytical interest here is not about disputing with lived experiences of comfort and discomfort. Instead, what is actually at stake here is the construction of normative femininity as the destination of one's journey in retrieving of one's true self.

Consider these additional examples of ex-*tomboy* autobiographies that similarly describe the true self as naturally and normatively feminine:

By the time I started university, I realised that I was never that comfortable with being a *T*. From then on, I was waiting for an opportunity to let myself change. In the past two years, I started to grow my hair long. And...well I didn't have

time to put on makeup today because I was in a rush to get here, but I do wear makeup now [...] In the past, I used to identify as a *T* but now I see myself as *bufen*. I do really think this is the most comfortable I have ever been with myself. I really want this. Now I don't allow people to define me, nor do I care how they define me.

— Ellie, twenty-six-year-old Taiwanese from Taipei who identified as *bufen*

Actually, I used to dress in a way that most people would say was very *tomboyish*. I had very short hair in the past. But over the last few years I started to feel quite tired of all that. I'm tired of being given a label. So, I started growing my hair, and now it's reaching my shoulders. I think this length is still quite androgynous. Because I realised that I don't want to dress in a way that imitates men. I think, women should still dress in a way that's womanly. We should dress in a way that we like. It doesn't matter how you present or what kind of gender expression you present in. Clothing is an important thing. Some people would wear both feminine and masculine clothes, and so do I. Right. I think none of this truly matters.

— Huang, twenty-two-year-old college student in Taipei who did not use any identity label

In both stories, upon coming to the decision that the *tomboy* label does not fit her, the speaker deliberately grows her hair out and learns to dress in a conventionally “womanly” way. Despite framing this as an act of expressing her real self, this act is in fact a very careful curation. The applying of makeup, taking note of the exact length of one's hair, dressing in “a way that's womanly”—all require deliberate, regular, and

consistent self-management. In thinking through this act of gendered self-stylisation, I am reminded of a related argument Judith Butler makes in her seminal work *Gender Trouble* (1999). In what she terms as the theory of gender performativity, Butler explains that we commonly understand gender to be a natural part of ourselves, which we then naturally express. To give an example, a person who is assigned female at birth may think of herself as naturally female, she would then live her everyday life in a conventionally feminine way (e.g. by wearing dresses, keeping her hair long, applying makeup). For Butler, though we usually see these conventionally feminine behaviours as a natural expression of this person's innate femininity, it is actually these behaviours that constitute the *idea* that she has an innate femininity in the first place. It is therefore the performance of gender that gives the impression of a biologically given gender. My participants' *ex-tomboy* stories can be seen as a variation of Butler's example. By performing conventionally feminine expressions, my participants create the impression that they were always and shall always be naturally feminine. In this case, the performance of femininity creates not just the sense that the speaker is innately feminine (or in more precise term "innately female"), it also creates in retrospect the impression that this innate femininity (or more appropriately "femaleness") was there all along, even during the time when the speaker outwardly presented as a *tomboy*.

But there is obvious conceptual conflict in assuming that the natural self is by default feminine. Huang's statement above for instance already belies this anxiety. Her statement "it doesn't matter how you present or what gender expressions you present in" clearly contradicts with her earlier assertion that "women should still dress in a way that's womanly." At the core, the conflict seems to be arising between, on the one hand, the very narrow interpretation of the real self as naturally feminine, and on the other hand, the idea that the self can just present in whatever manner it wishes to. This

conflict arises again in my interview with another participant, who said:

I've always known that I was attracted to girls. In junior high I started reading up about [same-sex attraction], but it wasn't until high school that I really started to understand. And at the time there were many online celebrities who were *tomboys*, and I was really obsessed with photos of those cool-looking *tomboys* [...] *Bufen* was something that came later. *Bufen* became popular when *T* was out of fashion. I think since I got into university, *bufen* became the hottest label within the community [...] I was quite masculine back in high school, and I always wondered if I was a *tomboy*. And then I was like, maybe not. Because I am a girl right. Why would I ever want to bind my breasts? This is something I can't do. It's my feminine quality. If you identify as a woman, why would you bind your chest? Right. [...] The real *bufen* woman would never bind her breast, and she would never wear her hair short [...] And being *bufen* is about being yourself, about not being confined by the *T* and *P* categories.

This is said by Billie, twenty-two-year-old graduate student in Tainan. Her story again draws on a familiar pattern that I examined closely in Chapter Three. It begins with an initial stage of unnamed same-sex attraction, and proceeds to an exposure to *tomboy* and *po* labels (though in this case not an explicit identification with the label), and finally reaches to a state of re-discovering oneself. The last stage is again marked by a deliberate re-stylisation of one's body, which transforms what was once a masculine presentation to a feminine one.

What is most intriguing here is the formulation of the other label, *bufen*. In the 1990s to 2000s Taiwanese context, *bufen* described a mid-point between *tomboy* and *po* (Hu, 2017a), but in the *ex-tomboy* stories at the time of my fieldwork in 2018, it appears to relate specifically to conventional femininity. The real *bufen* woman, according to Billie, wears her hair long and never binds her breasts. The language of restoration is applied to (a) outward appearances that are socially coded to be feminine (e.g. dresses, long hair, makeup) *as well as* (b) the (perceived idea of) the natural and biological female body. Since Billie also describes being *bufen* as “about being yourself,” it is obvious that again the self is assumed to be naturally feminine and female.¹¹

In addition to framing the self as naturally feminine, these *ex-tomboy* stories also frame egalitarianism¹² as a key characteristic of the natural feminine self. Below I refer to the story of Kit, a thirty-four-year-old retailer from Hong Kong who appeared in Chapter Three. As explained in that chapter, Kit has undergone a shift from identifying as a *tomboy* to now identifying as a *pure* lesbian. She said:

I think *pure* has only been around for six, seven years or so. [...] People prefer *pure* relationships now because the *TB/TBG* relationships are confined by the same binary structure that confines heterosexual men and women. *TB* and *TBG* are stuck in the heterosexual framework. They don't understand *equality*. They don't get *gender equality*. But *pure* is about *equality*. You can't be in a *pure* relationship and then go “Oh you have to take care of me because I can't take care of myself,” or that, “you have to give me a couple hundred dollars [to support me financially]” [...] Relationships between *pure* women are more equal because neither party would resist their femininity. For example, you could be like “Oh darling can I borrow your lipstick for a bit,” and your

girlfriend could be like “Don’t use my lipstick with so much force or you would make the edge too sharp! Or I’d just have to get you liquid lipsticks next time.”

Neither you or your partner would resist feminine things.

Here again, an egalitarianist relationship is conceptualised as the ethical alternative to the protector-provider husband archetype that the *tomboy* supposedly wrongly assumes. But this story is also particularly intriguing in the ways in which it associates egalitarianism with feminine traits. The implicit logic is that, if *tomboy* and *TBG/po* relationships are heterosexist, then the image of two feminine women sharing lipsticks in fact symbolises “natural” lesbian relationships, which, supposedly is characterised by both normative femininity and egalitarianism. In other words, the true self in this imagination is one who naturally orients towards feminine presentations and egalitarian intimacy.

2. The Feminine Self: Constructed or Genuine?

My reading of these stories is that, what is presented as natural femininity is rather carefully performed and maintained. The application of lipstick and makeup itself is an act of using artificial materials to alter the natural appearance and texture of the face, and to point this out is to say that the performance of femininity is never as quite as natural as these stories imply. Other participants made similar observations. For example, Rene, the twenty-nine-year-old financial analyst in Hong Kong, commented that

Now there is a very strict interpretation of how a *pure* should look in Hong Kong's lesbian scene, *pure* lesbians must wear makeup and wear dresses.

Penelope, the thirty-nine-year-old social worker who appeared earlier in this chapter, also lamented that

For many lesbians in Hong Kong, *pure* is strictly defined as the mutual attraction between feminine women, both of whom wear long hair and present femininely.

To illustrate the extent to which femininity is required in the *pure* subsection of Hong Kong's lesbian community, let me draw on my experience of meeting Kit, the *pure* lesbian from Hong Kong.

I met Kit in an industrial part of downtown Hong Kong populated by warehouses and manufacturing buildings, where Kit owns a small warehouse flat for her retail business. From the moment we met, Kit began telling me about a *pure*-only social group she was involved with. The group was meant to be a dating pool exclusively reserved for *pure* lesbians, but frustratingly, she said, they kept getting request from *tomboys* to join. She said:

Now if you want to join the [*pure*] group, you have to go through the group moderators, and ask, does the way I dress count as a *pure*? Perhaps the moderators would think that you have to put on heavier make-up, and style your

hair a certain way. You would really have to check with them. [...] [But] you know, nowadays everyone says if you don't want to be single, then you shouldn't be a *TB* anymore. You should grow your hair long if you want to get hitched, because that's the kind of quality that suits what women in the community want these days.

If, as the *tomboy* repressive hypothesis suggests, the *tomboy* role is a false identity with which one diligently performs gender expressions in an attempt to make herself appealing to others (and this is indeed the claim that many participants made in Chapter Three), it appears that femininity and the *pure* label specifically may in fact function much the same way. To make yourself appealing, Kit suggests, you should keep your hair long, and perform that look to the satisfaction of the moderators of the *pure*-only dating group.

The idea that the performance of femininity is simply another variation of socialisation and false consciousness appear not only in my interviews with Hong Kong participants but also those from the PRC and Taiwan. In the former, for instance, I met twenty-year-old college student Luna. Luna said:

In the lesbian community [in mainland China], *P/P* relationship is the ideal now. But as a feminist I must say that I am against all gender stereotypes [including conventional femininity].

Noticeably, this doubt actually does not depart from the socialisation/false consciousness model used to conceptualise the *tomboy*. The difference is only that, instead of presenting normative femininity as one's liberation from her *tomboy* past, Luna casts the *same* suspicions towards femininity. This version of the model sees both *P-P* relationships and the *tomboy* as reinforcement of normative gender stereotypes. It interprets *both* femininity and masculinity as social influences rather than the natural expression of oneself.

A similar criticism is made by Shih-ting, a twenty-two-year-old college student in Taiwan. Like many other participants, Shih-ting had recently transformed her look from a more androgynous presentation to a more feminine one. Yet, this was also a transformation that she herself doubted. She told me:

I believe that you have to truly know what you want. You have to differentiate your true desire from the value system that patriarchy imposes on you. I think this is very difficult. It's like with myself now, when I'm trying to dress differently [note: more femininely than before], I keep asking myself: am I doing this because everyone thinks that feminine girls are beautiful? Or am I doing this because I myself truly think that dressing like this is beautiful? I think making the distinctions between these two is really quite difficult. And if you can truly pull that off, and move away from other people's gaze, that would be amazing.

In questioning whether femininity is a natural expression of oneself or the result of socialisation, there lies a clear desire to distance oneself from all social expectations and

influences. Though Luna's and Shih-ting's thoughts on femininity clearly diverge from Kit's, all these accounts ultimately rely on the same emancipatory desire. This doubt about femininity among some participants however does give rise to an alternative kind of *ex-tomboy* narrative, one that seemingly promises a rejection of all forms of gender socialisation altogether. We will turn to those stories now.

3. Construction of the Post-Identity Self

[As a *tomboy*], you'd feel like you have to follow stereotypes, and that you must do stereotypical things like keeping your hair short, wearing pants [...] but really, you don't have to! And *P* don't have to express themselves in the conventionally feminine way! They don't have to wear their hair long and walk in heels [...] We don't need all these frameworks that limit us. I don't think there needs to be absolute distinctions between *T*, *P*, and *H*. Everyone should just express themselves in their own way.

This quote follows directly from my interview with Lao Wang, cited earlier in this chapter. Like the participants who cast doubt on whether femininity is a natural expression of oneself, Lao Wang also sees feminine presentations as potentially equally repressive as the masculine presentations of *tomboys*. In contrast to the assumption that the natural self is innately feminine, the argument here suggests that the true self should be altogether free of *any* social constructions of gender. Both arguments are different strains of the *tomboy* repressive hypothesis: while one sees the *tomboy's* liberated counterpart in the conventionally feminine woman, the other finds that counterpart in a "post-gender" subjectivity. This subjectivity appears to be highly individualised, at least according to Lao Wang. It claims that everyone is different and therefore "should just express themselves in their own way." It also appears to suggest a sense of *dis-identification* with identity labels ("I don't think there needs to be absolute distinctions between *T*, *P*, and *H*"), and seems to imply that these labels are too philosophically limiting to adequately describe oneself.

We find another expression of this argument in this quote from Piper, a twenty-seven-year-old financial planner in Hong Kong who also appeared in previous chapters.

She says:

For me, in an ideal world, everyone will no longer be limited by these labels. It's unfortunate that many people feel more secure by using these labels. At the end of the day, in my ideal world, it's all about the person and not her gender. When we move beyond gender, then we are falling in love with the person, and not with their label. If you like the person as they are, then you shouldn't let things be limited by labels.

Two months after my interview with Piper in Hong Kong, we met again in Taipei where she introduced me to her friend Billie (the participant who talked about being *bufen* earlier). During this group interview, the topic of a label-less world came up again. As Piper repeated her earlier point to Billie:

Piper: I think my ideal world is that everyone would be *bufen*.

Billie: Yes, me too. It's the most natural state of things.

Here, again, a contrast is made between repressive labels (including but not limited to the *tomboy*) and the natural state of being. Similarly, in Shanghai another participant named Sophia, who was a thirty-six-year-old Shanghainese educator, also said to me: "I hope that in the future there's no need to categorise at all, labels don't really matter."

According to these participants, all the sub-labels are limiting, repressive, and insufficient to capture or articulate the true self. This vision appears to propose that disidentification with the *tomboy* label *as well as* with sub-identity categories more broadly would allow individuals to restore their most natural states.

My own speculation is that this vision is connected to shifting meanings of the sub-labels themselves. For instance, *bufen* in Taiwan originally referred to the imagined mid-point between *tomboy* and *po* (Hu, 2017a) and was at the time of my 2018 fieldwork sometimes heavily characterised by feminine performance. But it also had another meaning. According to Wan-ting, a twenty-seven research assistant in Taipei, the term may also refer to not categorising oneself into labels altogether (also see Hu's [2017a, 2018] research noting similar trends of non-identification in Taiwan). Another participant Chia-ling explained this shift as follows:

I think right now, more and more people accept the idea that there is no need to categorise. And you really can just not categorise yourself at all, instead of saying that you are stuck between two points of a gender binary.

A parallel example can be seen in Hong Kong. Rene told me that in the 2000s, the label *pure* was not restricted to those who presented femininely, and instead was used by people who did not differentiate between *tomboy* and *TBG*.¹³ This usage is now replaced by the strictly feminine definition, but the term *no label* has since filled this position of non-identification. My speculation is that both this new articulation of *bufen* and the emergent *no label* category implicitly signify one's "true" liberation from all

forms of gender socialisation, in other words, they construct the true self as the post-gender, post-identity self.

4. The Condition of the True Self—Tomboy as its Conceptual Opposite

But it would be a mistake to think that the post-identity self is not also heavily regulated. As Billie explains to me how this trend of *bufen* self-perception actually allows people to just be themselves instead of having to subscribe to a heteronormative *tomboy-po* framework, I asked:

Me: Is there a particular look for people who are *bufen*? Or can anyone say that they are *bufen* regardless of how they dress?

Billie: Anyone can say that they are *bufen*. [...] But, sometimes there are people who...the real kind of *bufen* people are women who don't bind their breasts. And additionally, usually they don't wear short hair.

Me: Do you mean that they can't look too much like *tomboys*?

Billie: Yes, exactly. For example, someone may bind their breasts, and wear very short hair. Then within the community, the people who are really *bufen* would tell this person, why do you have to say that you are *bufen* when you are really a *T*? It's like that, right.

Me: And what do you think about this? Would you agree with them?

Billie: I do agree, yes.

As this brief exchange shows, the natural self is conceptualised in opposition to the *tomboy*. It is conditional. The condition is that the person cannot present herself in a *tomboy*-like manner, or else she cannot claim to be her natural self. Again, this narrative relies on the construction of the *tomboy* as a victim of false consciousness, those who dress like a *tomboy* therefore cannot lay claim on true consciousness of themselves. The figure of the post-identity true self *requires* the conceptual presence of the *delusional tomboy*.

Any sign of masculinity is conceptually incompatible with the figure of the true self. This interpretation forecloses any possibilities of reading masculinity as an expression of the natural, because emancipation relies on the assumption that masculinity is inherently repressive. Consider for instance this exchange between Chia-ling and myself:

Me: If you meet someone who dresses like a *tomboy*, but she tells you that that's just her most comfortable state, then, what would you say? What if she says this is just how she is and that it isn't about how other people think of her?

Chia-ling: Right. I think there are several layers to this. On the one hand, if that makes you happy, then sure, just go for it. But still on some level, it's about being restricted by social influences. [...] I think it's more about how you are on the inside. Because it's about your own state of mind. If dressing that way makes you happy, then so be it. But there are other people who do not actually exercise any autonomy over themselves. They just accept what society tells them. Then I think, this person would have to consider, that at present she's

already grown into this gender expression, but if she has the chance to choose again, would she have accepted that [social influence]?

Chia-ling suggests that there are two ways to read masculinity: on the one hand, if masculine presentation is a natural extension of personhood, then it ought to be accepted and celebrated; on the other hand, Chia-ling insists that some *tomboy*-representing individuals are truly people who “do not actually exercise any autonomy over themselves.” But the key issue is of course that it is simply not possible to know for certain what someone’s natural self really is (as was the case with the suspicions cast towards feminine presentations). And Chia-ling’s insistence that there are at least some *tomboys* who are simply deluding themselves in fact reinforces the presumption that it is unlikely that one would genuinely identify with the *tomboy* role if given the choice.

I asked Hui-ju, a twenty-eight-year-old woman tutor in Taipei,¹⁴ a similar question. Her answer is below:

Now, if I were to befriend someone who identifies as a *T*, and if being a *T* is truly what this person wants, then that would be fine with me. But if this person is actually quietly suffering on the inside, if being a *T* is actually very painful, then...Because you see, some people only act a certain way because they want to fulfil certain expectations. These people are actually hurting on the inside. So, if I meet people like that, then I would try to have a chat with them about it. Because there might be some misguided thoughts in their thinking. They might think “oh to be attracted to someone of the same gender requires that I act a certain way, that I become a certain type of person.” Perhaps they really don’t

know that there are other ways [of being same-sex-attracted]. I will go talk to them so that they fully understand these concepts and can make an informed choice. And they can pick whichever label they truly identify with. But in the past, back in high school and university...well mostly high school, I don't think those people truly understood.

At the end of this quote, Hui-ju suggests that people who used to identify as *tomboy* in high school never truly understood what they were doing. This construction of the *tomboy* as a victim of false consciousness is clearly linked to the retrospective denunciation of 2000s high school *tomboy* roleplaying subculture, which was the subject of my analysis in Chapter Three. This linkage reinforces a central point I made in that chapter, which is, that my participants conceptualise the *tomboy*-identifying teenagers from their past (including both themselves and others) as delusional children who were unknowingly involved in a collective hoax. Here, another crucial logic that we can identify from Hui-ju's answer is the strong conceptual association between being a *tomboy* and being delusional. Even though Hui-ju (and Chia-ling) do acknowledge the possibility that some may genuinely identify as *tomboys*, there is still the strong sense that most who identify as *tomboy* are in fact imposing that role upon themselves to the extent that they are suffering internally. This quote, as do the other excerpts, clearly positions the *tomboy* identity and the true self as conceptual opposites.

Section Three: Reading *Yes or No*—Unconscious *Tomboy* or Conscious Self-Exploration?

This conceptual conflict between masculinity and emancipation becomes most prominent when my participants discuss *Yes or No*. As I described in Chapter Two, *Yes or No*'s Kim is a masculine-presenting character who questions whether she herself is a *tom* (Thai abbreviation of the English word *tomboy*) but ultimately decides that she is her own person outside of the *tom* category. In the following exchange about the film between two Taiwanese participants, they debate whether this character Kim actually resembles the delusional *tomboy* or whether she is embracing her true self. To give some background information of this exchange, the two participants were Ting-ting and Yu-wen. They had been friends since attending middle school together in Tainan. At the time of the interview, both were twenty-seven years old. Ting-ting was an engineer and Yu-wen a clinical psychologist. Both were often labelled a *tomboy* by their peers (who interpreted their appearances as masculine), but both were reluctant to identify themselves as *tomboy*. The exchange is as follows:

Ting-ting: In *Yes or No*, the characterisation of Kim was too masculine.

Yu-wen: You think so? I thought she was very cute.

Ting-ting: She was cute, yes. But the way she behaves feels very masculine. And Pie was a very typical *P* too. It feels like Kim was there to protect Pie. I think Pie sees Kim the way a *P* sees a *T*. She treats Kim like her boyfriend [...] But actually Kim is still a girl.

Me: Do you mean that Pie didn't treat Kim like a girl even though she should have?

Ting-ting: Yes exactly. If you wanted a boyfriend, you should just date a guy.

Me: Because having a lesbian partner is different from having a boyfriend?

Ting-ting: Yes exactly.

Yu-wen: But actually when I first saw *Yes or No*, I could really relate to Kim's experience. You see, I too have always been told that I'm too *T*, too masculine, or that I belong to this side or that side. And so when I watched this film, I thought, this is exactly how I feel! I can relate to Kim because sometimes people say I'm too feminine [for a *tomboy*], that I'm a sissy *T* or something. And I really think Kim's experience really mirrors mine.

In this exchange, Ting-ting reads Kim as a self-repressed *tomboy* figure who fulfils the protector-provider husband archetype. Like the other participants, Yu-wen believes that lesbian relationships should be fundamentally different from heterosexual relationships, and that the *tomboy-po* format she observes from Kim and Pie's relationship is guilty of replicating heteronormative dynamics and does not honour the "naturally" egalitarian state of lesbian partnerships. On the other hand, Yu-wen actually reads Kim's experience as similar to her own experience of struggling with lesbian sub-labels. As she told me elsewhere in the interview, Yu-wen herself long struggled with whether she was as a *tomboy* or not, her masculine outfit often invited comments about her supposed *tomboy* identity but her gentle attitude on the other hand invited criticism about her supposed failure in living up to her *tomboy* image. Given this experience, Kim's

exploration of her sense of self in the film actually reads to Yu-wen as indicative of a conscious non-identification with identity labels.

Two of my other participants also offered similar interpretations:

When I first watched *Yes or No* as a teenager, I can relate to Kim insisting that she's just dressing the way she wants to dress. Because at the time, I was a quite boyish both in terms of my fashion style and my general disposition, but I didn't identify as a *TB*. And I felt like, I was dressing the way I did just because I liked it. It's just because I liked that style. So when I saw the film, I thought, Kim was really cool and I could identify with her.

— Alex, a twenty-five-year-old Hongkongese-Taiwanese graduate student

Kim was very rare [among representations of *tomboys*] in the sense that, she didn't say that she was a *tomboy*. In fact, she refused the label at first. She was very unlike a typical *tomboy*. And back when the film was new, that was something that no one had seen before. [...] In the film Kim says she doesn't know whether she was a *tomboy* or not. That was very ground-breaking at the time [...] When I first watched *Yes or No*, I wasn't quite sure how to label myself either. [...] And in the film, even in the end they don't tell you whether Kim is a *tomboy* or not. The message was that, if you love somebody, then what they identify as—whether they were a *tomboy*—none of that matters. I think this is the kind of utopic vision everyone wants. [...] I thought the film was quite smart. It doesn't negate the question of whether Kim is a *tomboy*. And this is quite true in that, Kim started to question herself right from the beginning. The

first film was about her identifying with some parts of being a *tomboy*, but at the same time not fully identifying as a *tomboy*.

— Charlie, twenty-eight-year-old research assistant from Hong Kong

In both of these interpretations, Kim actually symbolises (in spite of her masculine presentation) the desired post-label state. These interpretations mark a sharp contrast from earlier accounts that conceptualise masculinity and the post-identity self as mutually exclusive.

I do not want to suggest that a “true” “post-label” state seemingly embodied by the character Kim is the answer to all the conceptual conflicts I am drawing out. Quite the opposite, I believe Kim resonates with these participants precisely because the question of true self-identity remains so perpetually unresolved. This is evident in my interview with twenty-four-year-old Juan, a Sichuan I.T. professional now living in Shenzhen who declined to identify with sub-labels. She said:

I’ve known about the film *Yes or No* since high school [...] Back then, at my school there were quite a lot of lesbians, and all of them dressed like a *T*. [...] and I remember feeling very scared that, if I were to admit to myself that I’m gay, then it felt like I would have to become a *T*? Because I didn’t particularly like dressing in a girly way, but I really didn’t want to become a *T* like they did either. *Yes or No* was the first to tackle this well. It was the first film to say, that “I am just me,” that “who I am have got nothing to do with whether I’m gay or not, or whether I’m a *T* or not.” To me, this was truly so amazing. [...] But in the sequel, they introduced this new love interest [a feminine woman interested

in Kim, and with whom Pie and Kim form a love triangle], and it just loses that theme altogether. Because the theme of the first film was self-exploration. It was about finding yourself. But the second one was just about the love triangle.

Charlie also noted that this theme of the authentic self was lost in later instalments of the franchise:

But in the next film they just disregarded the question of whether Kim identifies as a *tomboy* or not altogether. It wasn't the same thing anymore. It was just about a love triangle.

It is not the ambiguity in Kim's self-identity alone that makes *Yes or No* a radically refreshing text for Juan and Charlie. More importantly, it is that this ambiguity is coupled with an internal journey of *self-exploration*. When Juan began talking about *Yes or No*, she immediately drew on her own experience as a teenager, specifically her past anxiety about having to start dressing as a *tomboy* if she were to come out as a lesbian. Kim's struggle with the *tom* label in the film reminds Juan of her own discomfort, and in Kim, Juan sees her own quest for her true self.

This is to say that it is the *self-reflexivity* Juan sees in Kim that distinguishes the character from the figure of the delusional *tomboy*. It is self-reflexivity that identifies Kim as a person on a self-searching quest, a journey that Juan and many of the participants undertook. Put differently, self-reflexivity is (like the feminine self and the post-identity self) yet another conceptual opposite of false consciousness. Because the

argument of false consciousness is that the victim in question is simply internalising distorted worldview into their own psychology, that a person is consciously, carefully, and diligently questioning her own sense of self is therefore the exact opposite of the false consciousness victim.

Chapter Conclusion

This chapter has examined the construction of the *tomboy* as a victim of false consciousness and charted my participants' quests to look for their true selves. I began with a theoretical discussion on false consciousness. Drawing on early Marxist, Frankfurt school, and the feminist traditions, I pointed out that the notion of false consciousness generally characterises the common people as delusional individuals who internalise distorted knowledge of the world into their own psychology; in other words, they become delusional in both their self-understandings and their perception of the social reality around them. I then used this theoretical framework to explain that the *tomboy* repressive hypothesis similarly characterises the *tomboy* as a victim of false consciousness. According to the hypothesis, the *tomboy* is a figure who accepts hegemonic (and incorrect) normative gender role that society teaches her, and in her delusion believes this masculine role to be her true self.

Following this discussion, I examined the different variations of the "true self" that participants now claim that they have found. I first turned to those who saw their true selves as naturally feminine. By consciously adopting a new feminine look through the use of makeup, long hairstyles, and dresses, they construct this new self as a return to their nature. On the other hand, critics of this logic express doubts as to whether this practice ultimately conforms to normative forms of femininity imposed on women. At

the heart of this debate is the question of whether the true self takes the form of conventional femininity, and whether femininity is itself the product of socialisation—akin to the false masculinity the *tomboy* supposedly imposes on herself.

Another variation of the true self is one who supposedly rejects all gender and identity categories. Supporters of this vision propose that disidentification with the *tomboy* label *and* with identity categories more broadly allow individuals to restore their most “natural” states. The thesis that “everyone can be their label-less self” is clearly reminiscent of the principle of gender diversity examined in Chapter Four. To recap, the principle of gender diversity argues that there is a natural variety in gender presentations in the lesbian community that was unfortunately submerged under the hegemony of the *tomboy* identity. It follows that rejecting this hegemony would allow such gender diversity to flourish. But this is not the case, in practice. *Both* the notions of gender diversity (constructed via *The L Word*) and the post-label true self hinge on a rejection of the *tomboy*. The real self is conceptualised as someone who is *not a tomboy* and the space for gender diversity is similarly conceptualised as the space in which the *tomboy* does not exist. This is most evident in participants’ proposals that “everyone” can declare herself to be *bufen* or label-less *except* individuals who still appear too masculine. The delusional *tomboy* figure remains the crucial and necessary conceptual opposite to true consciousness.

Next, I examined the conflicting readings of the character Kim in *Yes or No*, which extended this debate. To one participant, Kim’s masculine presentation renders her a delusional *tomboy* who subscribes to gender stereotypes; to others, the ambiguity of her identification and her self-reflexivity about the *tomboy* label make her an appropriate example of their own post-identity impulses. In other words, for a masculine-presenting individual to be seen and celebrated as a person who embraces her

true sense of self, she must exercise considerable internal self-interrogations about the *tomboy* label and about identity categorisations in general. Again, this self-reflecting person is framed as the anti-*tomboy*. Though the self-reflecting person might still appear masculine, she is defined in opposition to the *tomboy* by virtue of her self-consciousness, self-reflexivity, and self-exploring aspiration. This figure in turn reproduces the idea that the *tomboy* is one who operates under false consciousness. However, it remains unclear how one may in practice be able to distinguish the former from the latter, and this challenge again begs the question of what form the authentic self ought to take.

In fact, to ask what *form* the natural, pre-socialisation, truthful self should take is to also ask: what and who *is* the self outside of the realm of society? Does this self have a gender? How is this self related to gender? And, relatedly, is gender (specifically femininity / femaleness) natural, or social? There is no answer to these questions for the simple fact that such a pre-social self simply does not exist. The quest for the authentic self is therefore an un-ending maze. It is clear that many participants struggle to find a destination in this self-finding pursuit because, no matter what kind of gender presentations they currently perform, there will always be doubts that such a form itself is also tainted by—if not entirely produced by—gender socialisation. To highlight this struggle is to say, and this is my view, that gender is simply inherently social. To imagine the self as either inherently feminine or post-identity is still a process of constructing the self *in dialogue with* normative categories of gender and of identity. Ultimately, it is the *idea* that there has been a false consciousness that creates what is now perceived to be true consciousness.

Notes to Chapter Six

¹ For a recap of the debates on Engels' interpretation of Marx's concept of ideology, see Pines (Pines, 1993).

² In fact, Engels's writing suggests that only the bourgeoisie suffers from false consciousness.

³ Lukács' (1971) claim in fact combines Engel's false consciousness with another Marxist concept, that is, the concept of commodity fetishism, of which Lukács provides a close reading at length before he begins developing his own argument. In Marx's (1981) original discussion on commodity fetishism, Marx explains that social relations between people are wrongly mediated by the exchange of products. In other words, those who live in capitalism can no longer perceive human relations (e.g. the time and human labour invested in the production of goods) and will mistake them for commodity relations (i.e. how one commodity can be traded for another). Lukács' proposition is obviously similar, in that he claims human-to-human relationships are now substituted by objects-to-objects relationships under capitalism.

⁴ Relatedly, critics of Engels rejected his claim that ideology is false consciousness precisely on the grounds that the term false consciousness bears too strong a psychological connotation, which they argue was not present in Marx's writings (McCarney, 1980).

⁵ Most noticeably in Stuart Hall's counter-suggestion that audiences are active decoders who may not always take the hegemonic position but also the negotiated and oppositional positions towards the content they receive (Hall, 1973).

⁶ For an example of this criticism of Friedan, see Caven (2006).

⁷ For example, see the letters addressed to Friedan included in an guided version of her book *The Feminine Mystique* (Friedan et al., 2013).

⁸ For example, see Wells (2017).

⁹ For a summary of this discussion, see Lukes (2011).

¹⁰ The first academic work to identify this shift is in fact Eva Cheuk Yin Li's (2017) paper, in which Li describes a Hong Kong participant who changed her appearance from a *tomboy* look when she and the author first met in 2009, to a normatively feminine one in 2014. The participant described going to a fancy restaurant with her femme partner in what she herself termed "*The L Word* experience," as she

believed that she was dressing in a way akin to lesbians in *The L Word* and was doing so intentionally to, in her words, challenge local society's perception that a lesbian couple must consist of a *TB* and a *TBG*. While Li concludes that this participant tactically appropriated American pop culture to challenge local gender norms, my focus here is on the shift in self-perception.

¹¹ In fact, as I have already hinted earlier, these *ex-tomboy* stories often make interchangeable references to femininity and femaleness (i.e. biological sex). This is also especially the case since in the original Chinese transcriptions, my participants generally used the phrase *nuxing tezhi* (女性特質)—which can be translated as either “womanly quality” or “female-nature-quality,” making it very ambiguous whether they meant to reference social gender or biological sex, or if they are making any distinction between the two at all. In fact, based on Billie's quote above I will argue that she is not making any distinction between the two.

¹² As noted in the previous chapter, heterosexual couples in the PRC are also increasingly moving towards egalitarianism, see Lu et al. (2000), Shu (2004), Zhang and Fussell (2017).

¹³ This definition also appears in Leung (2008).

¹⁴ The reader may notice that I only posed this question to Taiwanese participants but not to those in Hong Kong and the PRC. This is simply because Taipei was my last fieldwork site and by the time I was there, I had done some tentative analysis of the interviews I conducted and was more confident in posing this kind of conceptually difficult questions.

Chapter Seven: *Tomboy*, the Trans Figure, Border Wars

“Hello, I saw your posting about looking for lesbian participants for a research project on *tomboys*,” reads a text message I received one night during fieldwork in Taipei. “Can I ask what your definition of lesbianism is? Because I don’t identify as a woman now,” the sender added. I said the project was open to anyone who identified as current or past members of the lesbian community, and that as a researcher it was not up to me to impose a closed interpretation of lesbianism. “That’s great!” they replied, “Nowadays many people insist that to be a lesbian you must self-identify as female, so I wasn’t sure if I could participate in your research.”

A few days later we met at a café near the university where this participant worked as a research assistant. Their name was Wan-ting. A twenty-seven-year-old Taipei native, Wan-ting soon began telling me about the history of their sexual and gender identities:

I used to see myself as a *T*, I think it is all a bit like a journey. At the beginning, I didn’t know what I was. Later on I started identifying as a *T*, and after that I was *bufen*. And fast forward to now, I guess I’m a bit, you can say trans (*kua* 跨) (literally “crossing,” an abbreviation of transgender (*kua xingbie* 跨性別)). To some extent I would call myself trans. And now I also say that I’m *agender*.

I asked if they could walk me through each transition in detail, and so they did:

In junior high I realised that I was attracted to girls. But back then school education didn't cover these topics, so I didn't know what it was called. Then in senior high I learned the word *T*. And I thought, "I'm quite masculine, so I guess I'm a *T*." [...] During graduate school, I realised that the way the lesbian community thinks about *T* and *P* was very stereotypical. People think *T*s have to do what men do, that a *T* has to provide for their partner, and lift heavy luggage for their partner. In a relationship you have to do what society expects a man to do.

Wan-ting's story shares many markers with the *ex-tomboy* autobiographies discussed in the previous chapter. There is at the beginning attraction towards female friends. These feelings are then organised under the delineation of the *tomboy* category. Ultimately, the subject's self-identity is challenged by a new set of knowledge that sees the *tomboy* category as a repressive socialisation mechanism and identification with the category as delusional. During this process, the subject arrives at a new post- and anti-*tomboy* position (in this case that of *bufen*). Yet what obviously distinguishes Wan-ting's journey from those quoted in the previous chapter is that it did not stop there. There was an additional step that re-oriented their journey from the realm of sexual identity towards that of gender identity.

[After finishing graduate school] I started volunteering at an LGBT organisation, and as volunteers we had to take some training. [...] There was a series of seminars where people talked about their life experiences, and it was from the trans speakers that I learned that there are trans people out there in the world.

And as I was listening to their stories, I thought, oh, this sounds like me actually! Even though in the past I did not think about myself in those terms. I didn't think about my gender identity in those terms. [...] But then I began to think back to junior high, when I was a bit masculine [and identified as a *T*]. I recall feeling that my female body was quite troublesome for me. I remember disliking my own chest. So I was holding on to that memory, and I gave my gender identity some serious thought. Then again it's not that I really, really want to transition into a man. That's actually not what I want either. So I guess I'm somewhere in the gender spectrum. I'm in an androgynous state.

In the *ex-tomboy* stories, the subject looks back to her *tomboy* past and sees it as a period during which her *real* self was silenced. Wan-ting's backward reading of their adolescence relies on a similar logic. It is through adopting a new knowledge framework (i.e. the categories of transgender and agender) that they can now re-interpret their past and arrive at a new subject position. This subject position is, in other words, new in its construction, but mapped backward onto all stages of the subject's life trajectory.

Is transgender identification or some other form of non-normative gender identity the final destination for some? A new homeland upon which one can cease all further searching and truly unlock an inner self that was there all along? I believe these are the wrong questions to ask. This is in no way a dismissal of the very real experiences and feelings Wan-ting expresses here about their gender identity. My role as an analyst is not to validate or invalidate individual experiences but rather to look at the ways in which each of the identity categories Wan-ting drew on (i.e. *tomboy*, *bufen*,

female, lesbian, transgender, agender) contradicts, competes with, and indeed re-defines one another. This is the goal of this chapter. More specifically, in this chapter I draw out two interlocking themes that are present in Wan-ting's story. First, I look at this new "border" of the lesbian community that defines lesbianism as female-female love on the one hand, and in opposition to any non-normative gender experiences and identifications, on the other. I will argue that this new border relegates the *tomboy* to the status of outsider by relying on the tropes of body modification, sex untouchability, and gender dysphoria to reciprocally define the "true" trans person. Such a debate is no doubt reminiscent of the butch-lesbian-FtM border war analysed in Halberstam's paper "Transgender Butch: Butch/FTM Border Wars and the Masculine Continuum" (Halberstam, 1998), and I will make substantial references to Halberstam's argument in this part of my analysis. As in Halberstam's examples, there are participants who insist on separating the *tomboy* (in Halberstam's analysis, the butch) from lesbianism, and others who consider there to be a kind of *tomboy*-trans continuum (the masculine continuum in Halberstam's analysis). This is, however, not to suggest that the debate at hand is simply a Chinese-language re-enactment of the same border war, or that it is simply an effect of globalisation of the Anglosphere's transgender category.

It is indeed tempting to frame the intersection of the *tomboy* figure and the transgender category as a competition between local knowledge and imported knowledge. In the paper "Compelling Categories, Shifting Identities: Social Media, Transnational Cultural Politics, and 'T/Po/Bufen' Lesbian Identity Formation," researcher Yu-Ying Hu (2018) recounts a Taiwanese participant's story comparable to Wan-ting's. Her participant, Xiao-fu, was a *tomboy* who did not wish to be naked or penetrated during sex. They soon found that their untouchability made them an unwelcome figure in the lesbian community, and subsequently they came across the

category transgender and found semblances of refuge in it. However, Xiao-fu also hesitated to identify as transgender because they “don’t hate [their] breasts and vagina to the point that they want to get rid of those parts” (translation mine). Commenting on Xiao-fu’s feelings of being caught between the labels *tomboy* and transgender, Hu observes that “[t]his phenomenon illustrates that *the intersections and collisions between Western progressive gender politics and local T/po sexual culture* have resulted in on one side a re-organisation of the boundaries between identity categories, and on the other side gaps and asymmetry between the subject’s gender identity and erotic practices” (translation and emphasis mine, Hu, 2018, p. 37). While I agree with Hu that the *term* transgender originated in the Anglosphere and is relatively new in Taiwan (and in Hong Kong and the PRC), I hesitate to characterise the transgender *category* as strictly a Western import. Here I will refer again to Martin et al.’s queer hybridisation model (Martin et al., 2008) to argue that the transgender category and the *tomboy* category do not merely compete in their roles as frameworks of knowledge through which the subject interprets themselves, but that these categories are also re-interpreting, re-defining, and transforming one another. Furthermore, while the border war casting out the *tomboy* from lesbianism and the idea of a *tomboy*-trans continuum are both examples of re-interpretations of the *tomboy* figure through the transnationally mobile language of transgender, the second half of this chapter deals with the ways in which the transgender category is interpreted through the more locally embedded logic of the *tomboy* repressive hypothesis. To use Wan-ting’s example, the transgender and agender categories here become part of a quest for the authentic self that has arisen from the *tomboy* false consciousness logic outlined in Chapter Six. My analysis will expand on this and look at how the incorporation of the transgender category into this true/false consciousness framework further produces notions of self-knowledge and gender

identity vis-à-vis so-called mis-identification with the protector-provider husband archetype.

At the end of this chapter, as a response to both the intersections and mutual transformations of the *tomboy* and transgender categories, and more generally to the *tomboy* repressive hypothesis to which I have dedicated the last four chapters, I will turn to autobiographies from participants who expressed varying and at times unstable and inconsistent feelings towards gender, towards their bodies, and towards their identification with maleness/masculinities. In spite of participants' many attempts to locate the *tomboy* either firmly outside lesbianism or within a *tomboy*-trans continuum, I share Halberstam's position that both of these schemas are inadequate. As Halberstam argues, there are many bodies and experiences that cannot be neatly organised in these languages. By drawing on these autobiographies, I aim to show that there are indeed diverse experiences with body dysphoria and masculinities, and most importantly that far from being self-deceiving, these individuals are putting as much reflexive *work* into their self-examinations as their "post-*tomboy*" counterparts. They share the same frustrations with the limitations of identity categories and the same wish to be true to themselves.

Section One: Historical Context of the Trans Category

Cross-gender practices have long been a theme in classical Chinese literature and have been traditionally organised under the category of *renyao* (人妖). The term is translated by some as "human prodigy" (Chiang, 2014b) and by others as "human freak" (Emerton, 2006). The most prominent example of *renyao* was a story titled "Renyao," written by Pu Songling and published in a collection of works as *Strange*

Stories from the Studio of Liaozhai (Liaozhai zhiyi) in 1766 during the early Qing dynasty (A. K. H. Wong, 2012a; Zeitlin, 1993). In “Ren Yao,” Pu tells the story of a heterosexual man cross-dressing to seduce a married woman, whose husband eventually castrated him and forced the cross-dresser to become his own mistress. Wong notes that the figure of *renyao* in Pu’s story and in his/her subsequent mutations across Chinese-language cultural history operates primarily as “a relational term rather than a specifically confined sexual category of transgenderism” (A. K. H. Wong, 2012b, p. 130).

In post-war Taiwan, the concept of *renyao* became associated with male sex workers in mainstream news reporting (Huang, 2011). The first instance in which *renyao* became explicitly linked to transgenderism was a 1953 newspaper article titled “A Teenage Boy Dressed Up as a Modern Woman” in *United Daily News*, in which the writer describes a teenage cross-dresser as a “young *renyao*” (Chiang, 2017a). This instance coincided with then-increasingly common news reports on sex reassignment surgeries. In the early 1950s, the Taiwanese media was covering the story of Christine Jorgensen, an American transgender woman who was the first person in the U.S. to undergo reassignment surgery (Chiang, 2017a). The Taiwanese public soon learnt of a similar sex change operation taking place locally, and the person operated on—Xie Jianshun—was soon dubbed “Chinese Christine” and became the object of public fascination and scrutiny (Chiang, 2017a). In the 1990s, trans people again became the centre of public attention following the high-profile suicides of two MTF women named Lin Guo-Hua and Tsai Yia-Ting (Ho, 2006). The tragedies have subsequently given rise to a Taiwanese transgender activism lobbying for the right to change one’s legal gender (Kuan, 2019).

In Hong Kong, modern usage of the term *renyao* generally applies to *ladyboy* and *kathoey* performers in Thailand, whom Hong Kong people travel overseas to see (Emerton, 2006). Though reassignment surgeries have been available since 1981 (Eleanor Cheung, 2010), visibility of trans people within the public consciousness remained low as at the mid-2000s (Emerton, 2006). This changed in 2013 with the landmark court case of *W v Registrar of Marriages*, where the Court of Final Appeal ruled in favour of allowing post-operation transgender individuals to marry in their preferred gender (Chiang, 2017b). Subsequently, local transgender activism is now pushing for gender recognition without so-called complete surgical reassignment (Winter, 2014; K. Y. Wong, 2015).

In the PRC, celebrity ballerina and transgender woman Jin Xing was coined “China’s first *renyao*” (Davies & Davies, 2010). Though the first reassignment surgery took place in 1983, media coverage of Jin’s 1995 operation and her post-transition stardom remains the most prominent image in public perception of trans people (Davies & Davies, 2010). There is no comparable court cases or activism lobbying for legal recognition in China due to its specific legal system (Guo & Zhu, 2016).

By outlining the historical shift from *renyao* to public perception of high-profile transsexual figures, I am attempting to sketch out what I speculate to be a re-organisation of gender variance into the very strict and well-defined category of post-operative trans identification. Indeed, none of my participants have used the term *renyao*, and the term they used to refer to cross-gender identification was *kuaxingbie*, (literally “crossing gender”), which some of them use interchangeably with the English word “transgender.” I will therefore use “transgender” as the English translation of *kuaxingbie* here, but it must be noted that my participants’ uses of transgender/

kuaxingbie often specifically designate post-operative transsexual individuals or pre-operative individuals who have yet to but are bound to undergo surgery.¹

Based on my own data, the concepts of “transgender” (*kuaxingbie*) and “Gender Identity Disorder” (*xing bie ren tong zhang ai*, abbreviated to GID hereinafter) appear to have gained wider usage in Sinophone lesbian circles during the late 2000s.² For example, the Taiwanese participant Wan-ting recalled not knowing about the category “transgender” until after graduate school (in the mid-2010s). Research on Taiwanese FTMs also suggests that many trans individuals had not known about the category “transgender” during adolescence and as a result identified as *tomboys* in the past but had since identified themselves as FTM (Lin, 2017). Likewise, Hu (2017a) also notes the increasing popularity of the trans category within Taiwan’s lesbian scene, as she writes:

I went through the registration process [at the lesbian website 2girl.net] again at the end of November 2010, almost a year after my first registration, and realized in the column of *lazi xingbie* [note: *lazi xingbie* is the transliteration of “lesbian gender”] that the options of “either *T* or *Po*,” “not sure,” and “not a lesbian” had been removed and replaced with *kuaxingbie* (“transgender”) and *nantongzhi* (“gay men”). I argue that the change reflects a transforming imagination of who are the welcomed participants in the online forum, as well as the process in which certain categories (like “transgender”) are gaining cultural currency whereas other conceptualizations of subjectivity (like “either *T* or *Po*”) are losing theirs in the general lesbian community (p. 107).

Similar to Hu's observation of a greater awareness of the *transgender* category in Taiwan's lesbian scene, Engebretsen (2014) also observes a similar trend on the PRC side:

[After the author's initial data collection in 2004 and 2006], transgender (*kuaxingbie*) and queer (*ku'er*) discourse [became] more known in China, especially in activist and academic circles. For example, when I returned to Beijing in 2009 and 2012, several younger activist *lalas* [note: PRC slang for lesbians] whom I would previously have considered *T*-identified explicitly called themselves *trans*, using the term *kuaxingbie*, and they would contest being addressed with female titles such as *jiejie* (big sister), or as *Ts. Lala*, however, remains a collective umbrella term that covers *kuaxingbie* (p. 55).

To see if there was a similar shift in Hong Kong, I reached out to Hongkongese participant Piper (a twenty-seven-year-old, *no label* financial planner). Piper said she had not heard of the term GID until she was watching the Japanese drama *Last Friends* in 2008, and that she had first come across the term "transgender" in college in 2011. In sum, the transgender category appears to have become much more widely used in the lesbian communities across the Sinosphere by the end of the 2000s. It also appears that masculine practices and expressions that were previously recognised through the rubric of the *tomboy* are now re-organised under the new category of transgender, and are subsequently relegated as "exterior" to the domain of female-bodied lesbianism. Wanting's story at the beginning of this chapter exemplifies the ways in which new exposure to the trans category might invite a change in self-identity. In the past (i.e. the 2000s),

Wan-ting interpreted their preference for masculinity as evident of their *tomboy*-ness, and now this past preference is re-allocated under their transgender/agender identification.

Section Two: Border Wars

There are certainly strong resemblances between this re-organisation of masculinity from *tomboy* to transgender and the lesbian/FTM border war described by Jack Halberstam. In his seminal work *Female Masculinity*, Halberstam notes that “[i]n the last part of this century, the invention of transsexuality as a medical category has partly drained gender variance out of the category of homosexuality and located gender variance very specifically within the category of transsexuality” (1998, pp. 142–143). He notes that in 1990s America, members of both the lesbian and the FTM communities came to see a *clear* distinction between lesbianism and FTM masculinity. This perception hinges on, on the one hand, an interpretation of lesbianism as “women-loving women” (itself a product of lesbian feminism), and on the other hand the idea of a stable and absolute transgender identification. Such imagination forecloses the possibilities of unstable, changing, complicated relations one may have with gender. This insistence on absolute distinction (i.e. that one is *either* a lesbian *or* an FTM) appears to have travelled from the 1990s Anglosphere to re-emerge in 2010s Sinosphere. Take for instance this quote from Fang-fang, a thirty-eight-year-old popular lesbian blogger and entertainment news reporter from Shanghai:

I like women because they are women. I don't need them to be very sexy, I don't need them to look like Fan Bing Bing or Shu Qi. But they have to have

that feminine aura. But on the internet, you see these *T* saying, well why do you have to define women like that? Why can't we just dress in masculine ways? The way I see it [...] real women, they are born with female hormones, right? So naturally women are feminine. You can say you want to be masculine or whatever, but most women are just born feminine! And I like this feminine aura that you can only see in women. Otherwise, how am I supposed to define my homosexuality? How can I tell you that I'm not heterosexual? Of course you can be bisexual or pansexual. But I know with absolute certainty that I am a lesbian. I know I am a lesbian, and gender is crucial to my homosexuality. This isn't "born in the wrong gender but finding the right love" (the literal translation of the Chinese title of *Girls Love*). I'm not born in the wrong gender and there's nothing wrong about the way I love. **That's a transgender concept** [emphasis mine]. [...] I think both homosexuality and heterosexuality are defined by gender. If not, then how can you say that you are oriented towards a particular gender? Otherwise just say you are pansexual, right? Even bisexuality requires two genders. But I know with absolute certainty that I am a lesbian. I know that I love women.

Fang-fang makes an attempt to "clarify" the very concepts of homosexuality and heterosexuality. For her, homosexuality requires stable gender as its foundation. In particular, lesbianism is defined by a woman's attraction to the feminine aura that her fellow women naturally exude by reason of hormones. Fang-fang's loathing of *tomboys* is therefore not just a personal preference for feminine rather than masculine presentations, more importantly it is a critique questioning whether masculinity has any place in lesbianism at all.

This hostility towards masculinity and relatedly the attempt to define lesbianism via a stable gender identity in the sexual object choice clearly parallels two historical developments in the Anglo-European sphere. The first is the isolation of sexual object as a primary metric for conceptualising sexuality in the twentieth century. According to George Chauncey (1982), in the Victorian era medical literature on sexuality primarily understood non-heterosexual sexualities through the category of inversion. Inversion referred to a full range of sexual roles and gender characteristics that were thought to be unnaturally embodied by inverts (i.e. feminine traits and passive/penetrated sexual role embodied by men and vice versa). This view necessitates that sexual relations between members of the same biological sex must involve some forms of gender inversion. The emergence of the term “homosexuality” throughout the twentieth century presented an alternative conceptualisation. “Homosexuality” referred *only* to sexual object choice, independent of gender and sexual role, according to Chauncey. David Halperin (1990) would later go on to suggest that sexual object choice has become the primary determinant in late twentieth-century sexual discourses. He (1990) writes:

The conceptual isolation of sexuality per se from questions of masculinity and femininity made possible a new taxonomy of sexual behaviours and psychologies based entirely on the anatomical sex of the persons engaged in a sexual act (same sex vs. different sex); it thereby obliterated a number of distinctions that had traditionally operated within earlier discourses pertaining to same-sex sexual contacts and that had radically differentiated active from passive sexual partners, normal from abnormal (or conventional from unconventional) sexual roles, masculine from feminine styles, and paederasty

from lesbianism: all such behaviours were now to be classed alike and placed under the same heading. *Sexual identity was thus polarized around a central opposition rigidly defined by the binary play of sameness and difference in the sexes of the sexual partners...* (p. 16, emphasis mine).

Sexuality-as-sexual-object-choice requires, as Fang-fang suggests, that the gender of the sexual object remains wholly differentiated from its opposite gender. This is where the second parallel to Anglophone definitions becomes apparent. In *Epistemology of the Closet*, Eve Sedgwick points out that this stance presumes that there are polarised and irreconcilable anatomical differences between men and women (Sedgwick, 1990). Sedgwick, like Halberstam, identifies 1970s lesbian feminism as the source of this gender separatism, and similarly sees a gender-separatist framework as denying the possibilities of cross-gender or liminal spaces between the two genders. Fang-fang's description of her lesbian identity demonstrates precisely this separatism, and her vision of a strictly female lesbianism is unsettled by the masculine-presenting *tomboys*.

Not all gender separatist visions of women-loving-women lesbianism are threatened by *tomboys*' masculine clothing, however, as the next story will show. Many participants saw *tomboys*' outward fashion as a mere aesthetic choice that simply reflected their individualities (an interpretation that affirms the true self discourse identified in the previous chapter); however, they were much more uncomfortable with body modifications and sex untouchability (i.e. unwillingness to be penetrated during sex), which they in turn interpreted through the newly emerged trans and GID frameworks. Illustrating these points, below is my conversation with Yan—a twenty-

six-year-old nurse from Hong Kong who identified as *pure*—about her experience watching *Last Friends* in the late 2000s.

Me: In *Last Friends*, Ruka is struggling with gender identity disorder. When you watched the show [when it first came out], did you ever see the character as a *tomboy*, or did you think otherwise?

Yan: In my mind I knew she was dealing with gender identity disorder. But in my heart I still just wanted to see her as a *TB*. I thought of her as a *TB* even though I knew she wasn't. At the time I was already researching about these on the internet, so I knew the differences [between a *tomboy* and someone experiencing GID]. [...]

Me: Can you elaborate on what you think those differences are?

Yan: Back then?

Me: Either back then or now.

Yan: Well of course now I know that it's about someone being very uncomfortable about their gender identity. I know that some people are born male but on the inside they are actually women. When they see their own bodies, they would want to harm themselves, to beat up and cut their own bodies. And I know that if they could change their genders and live as women, they would be more comfortable. [...] [On the other hand,] *tomboys* are people who don't like to dress in feminine clothing like flowery patterns or lacy fabric, and prefer to wear clothes that are typically worn by men. That is just their personal aesthetic choice. And they are just more comfortable, more themselves

that way. **But I don't think *tomboys* would hate their own bodies... Oh! Except those who think their breasts are too big. Those who bind their chest.** I think that's pretty similar to the concept of gender identity disorder. **And there're also the *Iron T***, who are not mutual when it comes to sex [emphasis mine; note: *iron T* refers to *tomboys* who take the penetrating role exclusively in sex, as I will explain]. But if we exclude those, most *tomboys* I know personally would allow themselves to be touched in sex. So I think those are the differences.

In spite of the fact that Yan does not exclude *tomboys*' masculine clothing from lesbianism, her insistence that masculine clothing is an aesthetic choice that has no bearing on the wearer's gender identity reveals the same wish to safeguard a lesbianism exclusively available to female-identifying subjects. The *tomboys* dressed in masculine clothes are according to Yan still firmly within the domain of female-identifying lesbianism. It is, however, the chest-binding and sexually untouchable *iron T* who troubles the absolute distinction between female-bodied lesbians and trans men that Yan wishes to draw.

To prevent the chest-binding and sexually-untouchable *tomboys* from blurring the (perceived) line between lesbian and trans, their practices are re-configured as tell-tale signs of body dysphoria, as opposed to a matter of personal preference (while masculine clothing remains a private aesthetic choice for many). Even more curiously, body dysphoria in Yan's imagination (and in many others') is crucially definitive of female-vs.-trans identity. According to Yan, the trans figure and the lesbian each has one singular and totalising relation to gender. The former experiences absolute

discomfort (“They would want to harm themselves, to beat up and cut their own bodies”), and the latter, absolute comfort. While writing about the 1990s lesbian/FTM border war, Halberstam repeatedly bemoans the way that in-between bodies have been made invisible and indeed unthinkable by this insistence on absolute female-vs.-trans identification and on total gender dis/comfort. There are—without a doubt—complex bodies and experiences that occupy a zone, or even travel, between male and female identifications, both in the literary and cinematic representations Halberstam identified (Halberstam, 1998) and in the examples I will provide in the final part of this chapter. The point, it must be emphasised, is not to discredit those who do experience dysphoria and see it as central to their gender identity, but to address the extent to which gender dysphoria has become the definitive criterion that symbolically segregates gender variance from lesbianism.

In the following, I will take a closer look at chest-binding and sex untouchability. I argue that both threaten the gender separatist dream of female-bodied lesbianism, and that those who practise them consequently stand at risk their memberships in the lesbian community being symbolically revoked.³ Sex untouchability was a much-contested ground in the 1990s Anglosphere lesbian/FTM border war. The untouchable butch—known as the stone butch—was widely seen as a preoperative mode of the FTM, according to Halberstam. This view necessitates hormonal and surgical intervention for the stone butch, and “expect[s] [...] the stone butch [to be] become fully functional” upon complete sex reassignment (Halberstam, 1998, p. 151). Halberstam warns that this view not only pathologises what could very well just be a sexual preference (rather than a sexual “dysfunction”), but also dismisses the possibility of stone butch bodies that simply do not wish to “progress” to become FTM bodies. In the 2010s Sinophone lesbian world, the same view clearly prevails.

1. Iron Tomboy

In the lesbian Sinophone, an untouchable *tomboy* is known as an *iron* (鐵 *tie*) *tomboy*, often abbreviated as *iron T* (*tie T*). An obvious comparator is that of the stone butch in the Anglosphere, which describes masculine butch lesbians who similarly decline to be penetrated sexually and is a term that was popularised by Leslie Feinberg's novel *Stone Butch Blues* (1993). I considered translating *tie T* to "stone T" thinking that it would make it easier for an Anglophone reader to follow, but I ultimately opted for a more direct translation so as to not dismiss the connotations of the word "iron" in the lesbian Sinophone contexts.

The Chinese word "iron" has historically been used to refer to armour, and at the same time connotes firmness, determination, and masculinity.⁴ In classical Chinese lexicon, the phrase *tie shi xin chang*⁵ translates as *tender heart hardened by the iron and stone guarding it*, and is used to describe a person so determined in their goal that no other factors could sway them. The phrase *iron tomboy* therefore projects the image of a shield covering the *tomboy's* body; a chastity belt guarding and suppressing her sexual desire. Consider, for example, the following stories:

I was with an ex-girlfriend for five years. In that time, she never took off her clothes and never let me touch her. She wouldn't even let me caress any part of her body, but she would do that to mine. She was completely an *iron T* and we used to fight about this all the time [...] Over time I really grew to hate sleeping with her. It was so uncomfortable. I felt like I was sleeping with a man because the sex was never mutual [...] To me, if someone refuses to be penetrated during sex, if this person can only have sex the way a man does, then this person is

actually transgender. [...] Because if you cannot tolerate having things done to you sexually, then something must be wrong with the state of your body, right? [...] If you cannot be touched, then [sex with you] is essentially done in heterosexual mode. Right? Cause you just want to be a man.

— Fang-fang, thirty-eight-year-old popular lesbian blogger and entertainment news reporter from Shanghai

My friend once dated an *iron T*, and she wanted to touch this *T*. [...] And they fought about it for a long time [...] [*Iron tomboys*] just strike me as very strange. [...] I think *iron T* is an issue of gender identity. To me, it seems that this is an issue beyond the category of homosexuality. Because their gender identity is actually male, right. It's beyond homosexuality.

— Huang, a twenty-two-year-old *bufen* college student from Taipei

I must be clear that I do not wish to invalidate the feelings of hurt expressed by ex-partners of *iron tomboys*. However, we can acknowledge these feelings of hurt while also examining what I see as a very narrow interpretation of lesbian sexuality. By narrowing lesbian sex to mutually penetrative sex, this view casts the wide range of sexual practices and pleasures that occur outside of mutually penetrative sex as “un-lesbian” and, worse still, as “heterosexual.” Rather than understanding untouchability as itself a sexual practice and a form of sexual pleasure,⁶ the speakers here see untouchability as strictly a sexual dysfunction. Additionally and more importantly, this pathologising view also interprets this sexual dysfunction as indicative of deeper gender dysphoria. It assumes that the *iron T* *must* hate their own body, that they *must* hate their

assigned gender, and that what this iron chastity armour really conceals is a deep transgender aspiration. I do not wish to deny the possibilities that such *iron tomboys* exist, but like Halberstam, I believe we have to be very careful about presuming any *necessary* linkage between untouchability, body dysphoria, and transgender identity.

This perceived linkage between untouchability and transgender identity is in fact yet another variation of the false consciousness narrative. Let us consider another example of this view:

There are different types of *tomboys*. The first are people who just look that way, people like me who just look very *tomboy*, but actually we accept our genders and our bodies. But in *Last Friends*, Ruka does not accept her own body and cannot identify with her gender. But I've heard of these *iron Ts*. *Ts* who'd not take off all of their clothes in bed, who'd refuse to be penetrated. And they want you to treat them as men. But somehow they don't call themselves transgender. Maybe they just haven't thought about it yet, but they have certainly reached the level of [having] gender identity disorder. [...] [Switching to English temporarily, in italic] [*These iron Ts*] *think they are lesbians but I think they should check if they are transgender or something, but you know that* the psychology here [in China] is not very developed, both in terms of the medical experts we have and just people's awareness in general. And there aren't any psychologists reaching out to these *iron Ts*. So *iron Ts* still say they are women because they haven't realised that they can say they are men.

— Jerry, a thirty-four-year-old Shanghainese journalist who declined to label herself

This reading of untouchability interprets untouchability as symptomatic of gender dysphoria (“reaching the level of gender identity disorder”), and attempts to “explain” *iron tomboys*’ lack of transgender identification by suggesting that they just have not realised they are actually transmen yet. In all these accounts there is a perceived movement from unarticulated gender dysphoria (which is supposedly betrayed by the subject’s untouchability) towards acknowledgement of such dysphoria and ultimately the achievement of a fully-formed transgender gender identity, a narrative that strongly resembles the true self narrative examined in the previous chapter. The danger of this progressive model lies of course in its denial that one can simply exist—or even move back and forth—between mild gender discomfort and sex reassignment, as Halberstam has suggested. Another example of this progressive model can be seen here, in my interview with thirty-six-year-old Shanghainese educator Sophia (who declined to label herself):

Sophia: To me, a *tomboy* is someone who not only dresses in androgynous or masculine clothing, but also cannot let herself be touched during sex. [...] Actually how you look outwardly does not even matter that much, it’s the role you take in sex that is more crucial to whether you are a *T*. [...] [For example,] the girl in *Yes or No* looked pretty *tomboy*, but it was still within the appropriate framework. It hasn’t reached an unacceptable degree. Because her gender identity was still female, right? [...] [But] for some *tomboys*, their gender identities, the role they take, are actually male.

Me: What would you say would be the difference between this type of *tomboys* and people who are transgender?

Sophia: Well those *tomboys* just haven't gone through surgeries yet! [...] The way some people see themselves, and see their own bodies, they just can't quite accept their own female qualities. I think the way they understand their biology are leaning towards the direction of trans. They just haven't quite done it yet.

Those *iron tomboys* just haven't gone through surgeries yet, so the story goes. The figure of the surgically operated on FTM is instated and centralised in all these descriptions of the *iron tomboy*, and presented as the *iron tomboy's* ultimate destination. In the same vein, other participants described what they saw as a form of *tomboy-trans* continuum, within which the *iron tomboy* occupies the central position:

There's a spectrum comprising of women, *iron tomboys*, and then transgender men.

— Yu-wen, a twenty-seven-year-old *bufen* psychologist from Tainan

There's a *tomboy-trans* spectrum. I think what separates *tomboys* from transgender men is the commitment to undergo sex reassignment surgery.

— Hui-ju, a twenty-seven-year-old *bufen* tutorial schoolteacher from Taipei

These accounts clearly resemble the “masculine continuum” that Halberstam wrote strongly against. He speculates that many readings of the stone butch in the lesbian/FTM border war presumes a continuum that looks like this:

Androgyny—Soft butch—Butch—Stone Butch—Transgender Butch—FTM	
(not masculine)	(very masculine)

Table 2. Halberstam's masculine continuum

He goes on to cite a story from a FTM man who said that some of his butch friends were more masculine than him without having had surgeries or injected hormones. Halberstam therefore proposed that the *intensity* of masculinity is not positively and proportionally correlated with hormonal and surgical modifications. Besides, “not everyone who experiences gender dysphoria deals with it the same way” (Halberstam, 1998, p. 151). Indeed, not only is untouchability not necessarily linked to gender dysphoria, but gender dysphoria itself does not always take the form of *total* discomfort. As I will show later in this chapter, there *are* mild discomforts—discomforts that lessen over time; discomforts that linger but do not compel surgical modifications.

2. Chest-Binding Tomboy

Like the *iron tomboy*, the figure of the chest-binding *tomboy* tends to be interpreted through the languages of both body dysphoria and self-repression. But perhaps it is the self-repression narrative that takes prominence in these readings. Consider my interview with Lao Wang, a twenty-nine-year-old graduate student from Guangzhou who declined to label herself:

There is this type of lesbian—or maybe I should call them bisexual women—who push their partners to become more masculine. They want their *T* partners to cut their hair short like Tina [actress Tina Jittaleela from *Yes and No*], and

they want their partners to bind their own chest. As a feminist, I strongly oppose this because binding does a lot of damage to the female body. And the other thing is, are these women who only date *T* really attracted to women? I feel like perhaps they aren't.

By addressing the partner of the chest-binding *tomboy* rather than the *tomboy* herself, what this statement does is on the one hand theorise chest-binding as a form of restriction on the “natural” female body, and on the other hand cast doubt on whether coupledness between chest-binding *tomboys* and their partners amounts to “real” lesbianism. I discussed the yearning for a return to natural femininity/femaleness in the previous chapter, and suggested that such a “natural” state of embodiment is an impossible dream.⁷ Second, the question of whether the attraction between chest-binding *tomboys* and their partners should even register as legitimate lesbian desire again reinforces the narrow definition of lesbianism as mutual attractions between (“naturally”) female-bodied people.

This inclination to limit lesbianism to strictly female-bodied individuals is reflected in the broader trend of disappearing chest-binder advertisements in online lesbian spaces across the PRC, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. The 2000s was a time when binders enjoyed enormous popularity in those spaces. My exchange with Fang-fang suggests that their popularity in the three regions was not isolated but were connected through intra-regional trades.

Fang-fang: When I started this lesbian website [in the early 2000s], Tudou [a popular video sharing platform] was not even in the picture yet, so I built my

own e-commerce website selling copies of lesbian media. Cause you know it was hard for people to find lesbian media content online then. Then, this Taiwanese lesbian approached me and said, “hey I’ve been making these binders, and if you want to sell them we can split the profit.” At first I said no. I was like, why would I sell such a thing? And she told me, “you should really try it out before you dismiss it. I’ve only started making these because I want them myself, and I’ve made them according to my own needs and experiences. And they sell very, very well in Taiwan!” So I was like, well it doesn’t hurt to give it a try. And she was right! So many people brought them!

Me: Oh! They were really popular in Hong Kong too. I remember seeing binder advertisement everywhere on this Hong Kong lesbian forum we used to visit.

Fang-fang: Was the shop called T-Max?

Me: Yes! I remember T-Max.

Fang-fang: Yes! You used to get them in Hong Kong too!

Those binder advertisements have all but disappeared in Hong Kong’s lesbian online space. Another participant confided in me that the Hong Kong lesbian dating app *Butterfly* now refuses to carry chest-binder ads. In the PRC, Fang-fang also stopped reselling binders in her lesbian-themed e-commerce business, and moreover has become a vocal opponent of chest-binding. Ahead of our meeting she sent me a blog post she penned, titled “Dear *T*, why do you have to bind your breasts?”.⁸ The blog is quoted at length in translation below, with permission.

I was casually looking through pictures on a certain [chest-binder retailer] website. They were photos of these beautiful young ladies, each blessed with a pretty face, but their breasts were all tightly wrapped up. All these sweet young faces, but where have their breasts gone? [...] Many years ago, our female ancestors fought against chest-binding, against corsets, foot-binding, and all sorts of repressions of the female body. In 1927 during the Republican era, Chinese women started a “natural breast movement” and liberated their chests from binders. But, the binder that restricts the natural development of our breasts has made its return in the modern lesbian community. Worse still, these so-called *iron Ts* would not even let themselves be touched during sex! Look at the buckles on these binders, these buckles that repress the human body. Are they good for your chest? Are they good for your body? For your sex life? [...]

Next, let’s look at some pictures of a supermodel. Very manly, right? She’s a *T* with a 32DD chest size! Her name is Rain Dove. A model with a masculine face. Now let’s look at the out lesbian celebrities in Europe and America, and see who among them binds their chest. Does Lord K (“K *Ye*,” mainland Chinese lesbians’ nickname for *The L Word* actress Katherine Moennig) bind her breasts? Does Daniela Sea⁹ [another *The L Word* cast member]? Prince F (“F *wangzi*,” nickname for Freja Beha)? Little K (“*Xiao K*,” nickname for Kristen Stewart)? [...] How about Ruby Rose? Cara Delevingne? Sara Ramirez? [...] Does auntie Ellen (“*ai lun yi*,” nickname for Ellen DeGeneres) bind her chest? Does Kelly McGillis? Granny Ho (“*he nainai*,” nickname for Holland Taylor)? [...]

The other day, I came across this picture of a lesbian couple from Anhui province who threw a wedding for themselves. [One dressed in suit and the

other in a dress,] they look just like a heterosexual couple! And recently there's an *iron T* music group from the Hangzhou nightclub scene that's been going viral. It's because of these people that the mainstream society think that all lesbians are like this. [...]

I have been running this blog for 18 years, and witnessed how we went from adopting the Taiwanese's *T/P* categorisation, to now saying *H* and not differentiating. Indeed, *T* and *P* labels are disappearing in the mainland lesbian circle. **This is progress** [emphasis mine]. Because you can finally embrace yourself without being limited by labels. As a lesbian, you no longer have to be restricted by rules that say you can only do a certain thing, or not do a certain thing. The greatest thing about being a lesbian is that you can appreciate the beauty of women and leave behind the outdated, conservative heterosexual conventions that govern straight love. [...]

If, as a lesbian, you are still letting heterosexual values dictate your love life, then your relationship will become problematic eventually, because you are imitating an unequal relationship. And if your relationship is a poor imitation [of heterosexuality], and not genuinely how you want to love, then you are not true to yourself. You are just an imitator. [...]

A lesbian friend once said on Weibo: "*Iron Ts* are not even lesbians. They just lack the money and courage to transition!" That was pretty mean, but very true! [...]

For young lesbians who are new to the community and inexperienced in the ways of the world, it's easy for them to fall victim to *T/P* categorisation before

they actually develop a mature understanding of themselves. They may mislead and cause harm to themselves.

I quote this blog post at length not because Fang-fang's anti-*tomboy* critique is different from those I already discussed above, but precisely because she is voicing so many aspects of the discourses I have been analysing over this thesis in a neat and consolidated form, in such a way that this blog post can actually serve as a summary for what I have discussed so far.

In this blog post, the most obvious equation is the presumption that chest-binding *tomboys* must also refuse to be penetrated, and vice versa, even though it is obviously quite possible to practise one and not the other. Next, this binding-*iron tomboy* is again described through the language of the *tomboy* repressive hypothesis and false consciousness. She is characterised as immature (Chapter Three), self-repressing (Chapter Five), an imitator of unequal, traditional Chinese heterosexual values (Chapter Five), who does not know her true self (Chapter Six). The false consciousness narrative also takes on an additional layer here. "Not only is she blind to her identification with the outdated Chinese model of masculinity, she is blind to her true transgender gender identity!" so the argument goes. But there is also another undercurrent, an unspoken desire bubbling under each harsh word directed at the Anhui *tomboy-po* couple and the Hangzhou nightclub *tomboys*. This is a dream of not just a female-bodied lesbian utopia, but a female-bodied lesbian utopia *with a Euro-American touch*. If chest-binding is (mistakenly seen as) Chinese, then liberated breasts must be Euro-American. They belong to (mostly white) *The L Word* actresses, movie stars, and models (Chapter Four). Indeed, chest-binding is a double signifier here gesturing to (perceived) repressed

transgender identity on the one hand, and functioning as a set of buckles that *binds* mainland Chinese lesbians from reaching the progressive dream of Euro-American female-bodied lesbianism, on the other hand.

Section Three: Localisation of the Trans category vis-à-vis the *Tomboy*

I have explained how the *iron tomboy* and the chest-binding *tomboy* are read as pre-FTMs who are now asked to either “fully realise” their transgender aspiration through reassignment surgery or “liberate” their natural, innate femaleness. These are examples of how the *tomboy* category has been reinterpreted through the concepts of body dysphoria/GID and transgender. I will now consider the ways in which the transgender category—which I suggested above is a foreign concept introduced to lesbian communities in the 2000s and 2010s—is itself modified through local discourses, specifically through the *tomboy* repressive hypothesis and the false consciousness narrative I have sketched out.

There are two variations of this localisation process. The first variation reads the trans person as an extreme version of the delusional *tomboy*. If gender stereotypes cease to exist, this view suggests, then transgender aspirations would disappear altogether:

If there is no gender stereotype, then no one would want to take up male roles, and nobody would ever want to modify their bodies, because you would only want to change your natural body if you over-believe in gender stereotypes.

— Nana, a thirty-one-year-old Shanghainese graduate student who did not use identity labels

About that character in *Last Friends*, I think [*Last Friends* shows that] a *T*'s gender identity and inner psychology are to train themselves to be stronger, tougher, and to take on more responsibilities. And this is reflected in how the *T* sees their own body. [...] The *T* in *Girls Love* was also like this. I felt that she wanted to take on the responsibilities of a man. But if you compare that to Bette in *The L Word*, even though Bette is very tough, her gender identity is still female. She is still very beautiful, right? [...] But the *Ts* in *Girls Love* and *Last Friends* lack this feminine aura [that Bette gives off]. Because perhaps they don't quite accept their own bodies, and their *T* identities actually came from gender inequality in society. It makes them think that they have to be a *T*, to protect women. Because if you were never exposed to gender inequality in the first place, if you have always believed in gender equality, then probably you wouldn't want to take up the male role and become a man.

— Sophia, a thirty-six-year-old Shanghainese educator who declined to label herself

Radical feminists have made similar accusations. In *The Transsexual Empire* (1979), Janice Raymond wrote:

Ultimately transsexual surgery reinforces social conformity by encouraging the individual to become an agreeable participant in a role-defined society, substituting one sex role stereotype for the other. The medical solution becomes

a “social tranquilizer” reinforcing sexism and its foundation of sex-role conformity (Raymond, 1979, p. xvii).

Another author, Gary Kates (1991), similarly attacks male-to-female transsexual people for reinforcing stereotypical femininity “[MTF] transsexuals [...] take on an exaggerated and stereotypical female role.” Writing in response to both Raymond and Kates, trans scholar Sandy Stone argues that, in the clinical context, trans people wishing to undergo surgery are in fact performing normative gender roles for the medical gaze (Stone, 2013). It is in fact the psychologists accessing the trans subjects who are creating and maintaining a rigid construct of gender. Stone also adds that such accusations infantilise trans people and deny the complex relationships they forge with normative gender roles.

Stone’s explanation that trans people actually harbour complicated feelings towards the gender roles they perform is relevant here because *tomboys* who perform a normatively masculine role (i.e. the protector-provider husband archetype) *can also form complicated and uneasy relationships to that role*. This is in fact the case in the counter-examples I will show. The assumption that *tomboys* must unquestioningly accept gender stereotypes, which consequently “explains” (some) *tomboys*’ cross-gender identifications, not only infantilise the *tomboy* but also again reinforces the impossible fantasy of a pre-socialisation self. As Butler (1999) demonstrates in *Gender Trouble*, all performances of gender are re-enactments of gender itself. “Natural femininity” *is itself also* a recitation of the social concept of femininity. It is learned, socially reinforced, and naturalised. Although for Butler there are both straightforward recitations and deconstructive, subversive recitations (and I have so far avoided

claiming that *tomboys* are *either* reinforcing *or* transforming the gender role they cite), the point remains that the fantasy of a natural pre-socialisation gender is truly only a fantasy. Besides, not all straightforward re-enactments of gender roles are repressive, there may very well be positive pleasures, as the counter examples below will show.

The second variation of interpreting the trans figure through the *tomboy* repressive hypothesis and the false consciousness narrative is the view that positions the FTM as the “good” counterpart to the delusional *tomboy*. The logic dictates that whereas the *tomboy* fails to be self-aware of her misidentification with normative gender stereotypes, the FTM is highly self-aware. The FTM knows that he is born in the wrong body, and now embraces himself through a surgical restoration of his true maleness. Examples of this discourse can be seen here:

I think trans people are brave people because they embrace themselves. But *tomboys* just want to compete with men.

— Twenty-eight-year-old Jui-ju, a Taiwanese *bufen* and tutorial schoolteacher

TB are totally different from transgender people. Transgender men are people who are men but born in female bodies. They know that what is outside does not match what is inside. So they know that they just need to fix what’s outside. Right. They know what they want. [...] They might go through periods of confusion, but ultimately they know that they are born in the wrong bodies. But *TB* are just conflicted. They have an issue with *self-conflicted identity*. [...] To me, a *TB* is someone who is *against* her own *feminine identity*. She loves it when people call her handsome. She works out at the gym to make her arms bigger

and her chest smaller [...] She doesn't *embrace* her own identity, she is against it! Never one to wear dresses or makeup, never one to do anything *feminine*. To put it quite bluntly, it's just Freudian penis envy!

— Kit, a thirty-four-year-old *pure* lesbian and retailer in Hong Kong

There are two implications here. The first is the characterisation of gender identity as a form of true consciousness. *Transgender men know that they are born in the wrong bodies. They are not confused.* The second is the contrast drawn between this true transgender maleness and the *tomboy's* supposedly false identification with normative masculine role. I have already cast doubt on the fantasy of real gender identity—which is not to suggest that those who do want to transition are in fact identifying with something that is not there. Feelings of cross-gender identification are very much real. What I am suggesting is that one could not identify with the so-called opposite gender (or with one's assigned gender) if the very social concept of gender (i.e. gender roles, gender stereotypes etc) did not exist. Therefore, the proposition that some attachments to the so-called opposite gender are externally imposed and therefore false, while others are real expressions of inner gender realities, misses the fact that *all* attachments to gender are the internalisations of the social category of gender.

Additionally and equally crucially, I reject the view that cross-gender identifications are only valid when they amount to a clear, “wrong-body” transgender identification. Is one's discomfort with makeup, dresses, and indeed all things feminine not itself a very *real* experience of gender? Is the desire to make one's arms bigger and one's chest smaller not itself a very *real* kind of gender embodiment? Why must ordinary discomfort and dis-identification with one's assigned gender intensify to the

point of trans identification (as characterised by surgical intervention) for these to be considered valid and real experiences?

If it seems that I have made repeated arguments against the view that casual discomfort, body dysphoria, sex untouchability, and non-surgical modifications (e.g. breast binding) *must* progress to the crystallisation of surgical trans identity in order to be seen as valid experiences, it is because such a view underlies all the critiques that have been levelled at the non-FTM *tomboy* in this chapter. There are, as Stone suggests, pluralities in people's gender experiences. The reductive view that one is *either* cis-gendered *or* transsexual, that one is *either* wholly comfortable *or* wholly uncomfortable with gender, authorises only cis and transsexual bodies. All other bodies—the in-between bodies—become culturally intelligible (Halberstam, 1998; Stone, 2013).

Section Four: (Un)intelligible Bodies

During the writing of this thesis, I have kept in addition to my thesis draft a separate document consisting of taxonomies from participants who have expressed varying “non-cis” experiences of their assigned gender. Some identify as *tomboys* at present, some were *ex-tomboys*, and there is one participant who never identified as *tomboy* but has always maintained an uneasy relationship to their gender identity. This document has sat alongside the other chapters as I struggled to relate these experiences in a way that clearly corresponds to the critiques of the *tomboy* that I have been reviewing. Only now have I realised that it is precisely these experiences' (un)intelligibility that is at stake. These in-between bodies, their complicated relationships to normative gender roles, and their ordinary discomfort are exactly what

have been muted and made impossible by currently dominant discourses of sexuality and gender.

Take for example the popular proposition that the decision to bind one's chest must stem from deep-seated body dysphoria and gender dysphoria. In Taipei, I talked to long-time friends Yu-wen and Ting-ting. Ting-ting is an engineer from Kaohsiung and Yu-wen a clinical psychologist from Tainan City, both are twenty-seven years old and both identify as *bufen* but are often called *tomboys* by others because of their somewhat masculine appearances. When the topic of breast-binding came up in our conversations, Ting-ting said: "Just because someone binds their chest doesn't mean that she hates her own body. Sometimes I just want to look cool, it's more comfortable that way." Nodding next to her, Yu-wen agreed, "that's how I feel about it too." "It just feels easier to make your breasts smaller," Ting-ting added. This assertion is particularly interesting because it views chest binding as a casual fashion choice that has nothing to do with gender identity whatsoever (almost akin to the *tomboy* fashion culture discussed in Chapter Three), rather than conceptualising this act to be indicative of an interior "real self."

But what of those who do experience discomfort with their body and gender? The second proposition dictates that discomfort must lead to surgery, and anything less would mean that the person experiencing such discomfort must be actively repressing their true trans-ness and living a false life. This is not always true. As Halberstam (1998) already pointed out, the decision to be operated on is informed by not only discomfort but also by a variety of reasons such as health and financial concerns. Such is the case for Jackie, a Hong Kong *tomboy* and a thirty-two-year-old hairdresser. Jackie said:

Ever since I was a child, I have thought about transitioning. But I started to do more research when I grew older, and I thought that surgery probably isn't good for my health. You might live a shorter life. It comes with that kind of risk, you know. And you have to go through not just one but many procedures. And I thought life is too short to waste time on something like this. There is already too much we have to deal with in life. There's no need to take on more burden. And so as I grew older, I thought, well it's not that necessary. In the past I thought it was. But now I don't think so. If I'm saving up that amount of money I might as well spend it on vacations.

Jackie's testimony indicates that the desire to transition is not always urgent, consistent, or unbearable. While the desire to transition is clearly there, it exists as an ordinary feeling that Jackie can simply live with. Far from the self-denying figure deeply troubled by their own body that the other participants have hypothesised, Jackie was fully aware of their desire to transition, had considered it and weighed the risks, ultimately decided against it, and still managed to live a comfortable life not weighed down by this decision.

The second popular proposition is challenged even further in another example. In Hong Kong, I met Charlie, a twenty-eight-year-old research assistant at a local university. Charlie used to identify as a *tomboy* in high school and still sometimes socialised as one, but said that they did not find the label fitting anymore. "What would you like me to call you in the thesis?" I asked. "I think I'm a *bisexual crossdresser*," Charlie said, "Because people see my [masculine] appearance and think that I must be

attracted to women exclusively, but I don't think my gender and sexuality line up that way." But how would they describe their gender, I broached. "Oh I don't really hate my body parts, it's fine." Charlie said nonchalantly, "But you know, if I could change some parts, say if I could get top surgery, I'd probably go for it. But that really doesn't mean I'm trans either. It's just like getting laser eye surgery, it's just surgery, it doesn't need to mean more. Just because I'd want to change my chest, it doesn't mean I hate it, or that there's any significant gap between me and my gender identity." While the second proposition expects a causal or at least correlational relationship among discomfort, surgery, and a trans self-identity, Charlie directly challenges this presumption. It is not only that surgery is something Charlie can live with or without (as is the case for Jackie), for Charlie the desire to change their body is not even directly related to a deeper sense of discomfort or cross-gender identification. Similar to the other assertion that chest-binding may not be linked to a deeper sense of self, Charlie's statement here also suggests that, contrary to what the majority of participants suggest—what one does with the body may not be directly connected to deep gender dysphoria or identification.

A third popular proposition argues that *tomboys* only wish to transition or that they only take on a masculine role because they unconsciously over-identify with normative masculinity. Jackie's story again stands to prove the contrary:

I don't think the *TB* has to be the person who sacrifices everything for her partner. You know a lot of *TBs* put all of their money, time, and energy into the relationship. I don't think things should be like that. All men and women are equal, right. *TB* and *TBG*, *1* and *0* [note: Hong Kong and Taiwan slang for top

and bottom in male-male relationships], they are just additional labels we put on same-gender relationships. It doesn't have to mean anything more.

Despite the fact that Jackie is a *tomboy* who *had* considered transitioning, they also feel strongly about maintaining an egalitarian standard in intimate relationships, much like the vocal critics of *tomboys*. This alone challenges the presumed correlation between identification with non-egalitarian provider-protector masculine role and surgical intervention.

Another counter-example is the story of Hannah, a twenty-eight-year old *tomboy* from Hong Kong who works in a non-profit organisation. Contrary to Jackie, Hannah actively takes pleasure in taking the protector-provider role criticised in the *tomboy* repressive hypothesis. She says:

When I first watched *Last Friends*, Ruka made me realise that I could protect another person. I thought it was so cool that she was protecting Michiru. [...] I like to be the provider in a relationship. It brings me more joy to be the one who adores rather than the one adored. And I like to date older women because, if I can take care of women older than me, instead of being taken care of by them, then I feel like I have really succeeded.

Contrary to the idea that taking up the protector-provider role must be a result of false consciousness, Hannah not only proves to be fully conscious of her appropriation of this role but also takes great joy in doing so. What complicates this even further is that Hannah also at times longs for an egalitarian relationship, as she explains:

I think relationships between *pure* lesbians are more egalitarian. Like when I said earlier, in *Last Friends* it was Ruka who protected Michiru, I feel like in *pure* relationships there is no need for one person to protect the other. [...]

Sometimes I think that perhaps I am a bit jealous of *pure* relationships, but I can't see myself dressing femininely [to become a *pure*]!

There seems to be an undercurrent of frustrations in these “ill-fitting” stories. For Yu-wen and Ting-ting, it's the frustration of being seen as resenting their own bodies when they only bind their chests for aesthetic purposes. For Charlie, it's the frustration of being seen as deeply uncomfortable with their body if they were to get top surgery. For Jackie, it's being seen as a *tomboy* who must play the provider-protector role. And for Hannah, it's her dual allegiance to both the provider-protector *tomboy* role and egalitarianism. This frustration with *the language with which they are described* became even more clear when Hannah told me the following story:

Recently, I learnt this term *pure B*, or *B pure* [note: both portmanteau of *tomboy* and *pure*]. I was meeting this woman I knew from *Butterfly* [the local lesbian dating app]. And when we met, this woman said to me “oh you're quite feminine for a *tomboy*, are you a *Pure B*?” And that's how I know there's even a *tomboy* role within pure relationships! It's all so complicated! It's all *too* complicated for me!

Elsewhere, Alex, a twenty-five-year-old Hongkongese-Taiwanese graduate student based in Hong Kong, expressed similar frustrations with identity categories:

In *Yes or No*, Kim said that she dressed the way she did just because that's how she wanted to present herself. As a teen, I was also quite boyish but resisted being called a *tomboy*, so there's a desire to say that I just dressed like this [and it doesn't mean anything more]. [...] In the past [when I first learnt about the label *TB* as a teen], I just really resisted giving myself a label. [...] But if I'm just considering my gender identity, then I guess I'm probably leaning toward trans, but I *don't* want to be operated on either.

By presenting these stories and noting Hannah's vexation with *pure B*, and Alex's resistance to *TB* and hesitation towards trans, I am not suggesting that the true self actually lies outside of the languages currently available, nor am I advocating for the creation of new categories that will somehow better suit these participants and serve as "better" or "more progressive" alternatives to existing categories. Instead, the point is that there are a *variety* of experiences *between* total comfort and total discomfort that individuals can have in relation to gender, and that there can be significant gaps between the languages that are available (of which the *tomboy* repressive hypothesis, the protector-provider role, and the wrong-body trans narrative are all examples) and the lived experiences that arise in relation to these languages. What these illegible experiences and bodies show is precisely the problem of taking these languages to be prescriptive, deterministic, and unchanging dogmas.

Chapter Conclusion

The limitation of prescriptive languages and absolutely clear-cut categories is the core problem I have outlined in this chapter. I began by citing the story of Wan-ting, whose self-identity over the years evolved from *tomboy*, to *bufen* and eventually to transgender/agender. Because of their new understanding of their gender identity, Wan-ting expressed doubts about whether they would be a suitable candidate to be interviewed for this project on lesbian communities. This example and the following stories clearly show that there is a new “frontier” for these lesbian communities, one that “defends” lesbianism as an identity based exclusively and narrowly on the basis of sexual object choice, independent of non-normative gender experiences, bodies, or identifications. In fact, this new interpretation of lesbianism *demand*s a stable gender identity from not only the object being desired, but the desiring subject herself. It is an interpretation that sees lesbianism strictly as the sexuality of *women-loving women*, for which the womanhood of both subject and object must remain stable, consistent, and unquestionable.

Because of their perceived proximity to masculinity, *tomboy*-identifying individuals come to be scrutinised under this new interpretation of lesbianism. The new border of the lesbian community questions whether *tomboys* are “truly” its members. As the trans category becomes increasingly known within the lesbian community, there is a new imperative to distinguish the *tomboys* who are comfortably cis-gendered female from those who are not, and to purge those ill-fitting members. The metrics which this purging exercise relies on are: whether the individual in question feels comfortable with their body and with the gender they are assigned at birth, whether they reject chest-binding, and whether they can be penetrated during sex. Failing these exposes the person to being “truly” trans, so the story goes. At the same time, the trans category

itself has been localised and transformed by the *tomboy* repressive hypothesis, and turned into either an extreme version of, or the “good” counterpart to, the unconscious *tomboy*. In either case, it is still assumed that there are absolute ontological distinctions between lesbians and trans individuals based strictly on the three metrics laid out above.

What the counter examples discussed in the final part of this chapter have shown is that there are no absolute, necessary correlations between gender discomfort, chest-binding, and untouchability. They show that there are discomforts that are “bearable,” discomforts that do not lead to a decision to transition, and temptations to change one’s body that are not driven by discomfort at all. It raises the possibility that, perhaps, for some, the distinction between sexuality (defined by sexual object-choice) and gender identity are not absolutely clear. This is of course not a call for a return to some form of inversion model, which limits imaginations of homosexuality to same-sex relations that clearly resemble the gender polarity of heterosexual relations. There is, however, an urgent need, as Halberstam advocates, to recognise the danger in the “fiction” of absolute categories. These are no doubt useful fictions in the sense that they are fundamental to all self-understandings, but it is absolutely necessary to honour the differently configured bodies and experiences at whose expense these fictions operate.

Notes to Chapter Seven

¹ For a discussion on the (contested) differences between the terms “transsexual” and “transgender” in the Anglophone context, see Halberstam (1998).

² Although there was definitely earlier use of this category in academic queer circle in Taiwan, for instance trans scholarship was featured prominently at the 1999 International Super-Slim Conference on Sexual Politics held by the Center F=for the Study of Sexualities at the National Central University.

³ It should be noted that while many of my participants saw chest-binding and untouchability as outside the realm of lesbianism, the majority also stated that they refused to be openly hostile to chest-binding and *iron tomboys*. I am unable to gauge how much of the suspicions and hostilities privately projected to chest-binding and *iron tomboys* are openly expressed.

⁴ For example, see *Kangxi Zidian*, *Ci Hai*, and *Lu Shi Chunqiu: Gui Zu*. In addition, Chinese state feminism in the Maoist era also referred to “tough” women as “iron women.”

⁵ For example, see *Wei Wu Gushi*.

⁶ For related discussions on sex untouchability within female-female couples who practise polarised gender roles, see Sinnott’s (2008) reading of sex untouchability of Thai *tom* and her assertion that such an act is in fact disruptive of normative heterosexual sexuality.

⁷ Are bras and other undergarments more “natural” than chest binders, for instance? Such debates seem fruitless unless we propose some sort of radical clothing-free society. But even then one has to justify why a natural order of bodies is inherently better than an unnatural one.

⁸ An archived version of the blog post, originally posted on WeChat, can be accessed here.: Dongdong, “T, Why Must You Bind Your Chest?”, *WeChat*, 4 June 2018.
https://www.sohu.com/a/234053244_526391.

⁹ This is an odd choice since Daniela Sea is openly non-binary and played a transman on *The L Word*.

Chapter Eight: The Life, Death, and Future of the *Tomboy*

The idea for this thesis project first came to me when I was an undergraduate student at the University of Hong Kong in 2013. We were assigned French feminist and radical feminist literature and encouraged to discuss those theories in the context of our own everyday reality in Hong Kong. At the time, *tomboy* was still a widely used category, at least in my own personal circle, and *Yes or No* was the talk of the city's online lesbian space. My partner showed me a bootleg version of the film with simplified Chinese subtitles provided by mainland Chinese fans, and my friend sent me a link to a discussion thread about the film on PPT, a popular bulletin board in Taiwan. A few years prior, there had been similar hype around the Japanese show *Last Friends*. I saw before me two sets of discourses: a Euro-American theoretical canon, and these everyday articulations of the *tomboy* category that circulated between the PRC, Hong Kong, and Taiwan while also drawing from screen representations from across East Asia and Southeast Asia.

At the same time, I began to notice a growing sense of disdain towards the *tomboy* category among my lesbian friends. "Being a *tomboy* is just so patriarchal," a friend would say. "We are women dating other women, our relationships should be different from the straights, and these *tomboys* and *TBGs* got it all wrong," another would add. A few of our conversations revolved around how to *not* look like a *tomboy*, and how to dress instead in a way that "challenges gender stereotypes and heteronormativity." As I discussed in Chapter One, key feminist ideas were evidently circulating among my lesbian peers in non-academic settings. I began to notice the resemblances between everyday vernacular critiques and the Euro-American theories I was studying. For example, my friends' arguments shared with French feminists and radical feminists the proposition that lesbian love should be fundamentally distinct from

heterosexual relationships, and our careful examinations of our own fashion also shared with many queer researchers the conceptual presumption that gender practices must *either replicate or subvert* hegemonic gender norms.

My suspicion that these were not mere coincidences but were indicative of the extent to which the theoretical canon itself had circulated among lesbian women was confirmed when, during fieldwork in 2018, a Shanghainese participant sent me an academic paper she has seen circulating on Weibo. Titled “Analyzing the Lesbian Gender *T*” and written by Tianjin Normal University researcher Zhao Ran, this paper used Butler’s performativity theory to argue that *tomboys* are deliberately exposing the constructedness of gender in their citations of normative masculinity. This is precisely the approach I resisted using in this project. On the most basic level, I resisted emphasising the “intentionality” of *tomboy* (as this author did) because doing so suggests that we can all become masters of our own gender, and that is in my view a misreading of Butler. But most importantly, applying Euro-American theories to a context in which these theories are already in circulation would obviously foreclose any possibility of analysing that circulation. If I were to have written a thesis that was a purely theoretical interrogation of the *tomboy*, I would be doing a disservice to the lesbian communities within which vernacular critiques and debates were already thriving. If there were already debates about whether the *tomboy* was subversive and transgressive, then the task at hand was *to identify and analyse the terms upon which these debates operated*. To take seriously the richness of the lived experiences and discourses already emerging on the ground, ethnography seemed to me to be the only appropriate methodology.

The core objective of this project has therefore been to centre the *tomboy* and the debates around her as the primary objects of study. I began Chapter One by describing a

transnational Sinophone lesbian network that I see as a primary *site* of knowledge. This lesbian Sinophone—which is made up of both online and offline Sinophone connections and draws on screen cultures both within itself and from the East and Southeast Asian and Western mediascapes—is the material space in which knowledge about the *tomboy* is produced, maintained, and regulated. I have argued that this lesbian Sinophone in itself warrants academic attention, and that this lesbian Sinophone describes, imagines, and embodies the *tomboy* figure according to its own terms and logics. The goal of this project has been to critically analyse these terms and logics. The research questions I laid out were as follows:

1. What and who is the *tomboy*, according to members of the lesbian communities in the PRC, Hong Kong, and Taiwan?
2. How do intra-regional and transnational screen representations contribute to these lesbians' conceptualisations of the *tomboy*?
3. How do these lesbians' uses of intra-regional and transnational media in turn shape their imaginations of geographic entities (e.g. “the West,” “U.S.,” and “Asia”)?
4. What are the underlying cultural logics in their conceptualisations of the *tomboy*? What do they reveal about the ways in which these lesbians understand “self-identity” and “gender”?

Given that this thesis drew primarily from participants in their twenties to mid-thirties, the research findings based on these questions may represent only the views of this generation of lesbians. Only further research with a wider sample size can confirm whether the older generation understand and construct the *tomboy* in a different manner.

Chapter Two provided crucial historical contexts and screen materials with which I answer the research questions above. In that chapter, I considered on the one hand the different conceptualisations of the *tomboy* identity in the three Chinese-speaking societies throughout the twentieth century. I began with a brief discussion on conceptualisations of female masculinity in early twentieth-century Chinese translations of inversion theory. I then sketched out the general historical trends of conceptualising the *tomboy* figure from the points of view of the *T-P* bar culture of 1980s Taiwan and the lesbian culture of 1970s Hong Kong, to the 1990s feminist positions in both regions, and the *tomboy* fashion trends and flexible use of identity labels in the 2000s Sinophone. On the other hand, the chapter also provided important background information on the screen texts and introduce to the reader glimpses of plot points and visuals that become crucial to discussions of the *tomboy* in my fieldwork. Having established these contexts, I began to answer the research questions in Chapter Three.

Research Question 1: Conceptualisations of the *Tomboy*: *Tomboy Repressive Hypothesis*

Beginning at the third chapter, I examined the ways in which participants viewed their former *tomboy* selves and others who identify as *tomboys* as victims of internalised repression. Chapter Three focused on the retrospective interpretation of 2000s *tomboy* culture while the following chapter introduced what I termed the *tomboy* repressive hypothesis. The hypothesis assumes that the person identifying as a *tomboy* is being repressed, and it is in fact this assumption that generates new discourses and practices. The *tomboy* repressive hypothesis can be summarised in the following table:

<i>Tomboy</i>	Post-<i>Tomboy</i> Lesbian
Eastern / Chinese	Western / American
Traditional	Modern
Backward	Progressive
Patriarchal	Feminist
Unequal	Egalitarian
Stereotypical	Diverse
Immature	Mature
Unconscious	Conscious
Socialised	Natural
Self-denying	Self-actualising

Table 3. Conceptualisations of the *tomboy* vs. the post-*tomboy* lesbian

In sum, according to this hypothesis, the *tomboy*-identifying person is symbolically an immature adolescent prone to accepting Eastern, Chinese, traditional, backward, patriarchal values, which makes them adopt a normative social role usually assigned to cis-gendered men. This means that the *tomboy* acts according to unequal gender relations within her intimate relationship. In Chapter Six, I further elaborated that this hypothesis also operates on the logic of false consciousness. The *tomboy*'s gender identification is assumed to be unconscious, self-denying, and a product of socialisation. The flipside of the hypothesis is the dream of true consciousness: a state in which the person becomes mature, modern, progressive. She embraces egalitarianism in her relationship as well as a diversity of (non-*tomboy*, non-masculine) gender presentations. These are values that she sees in Western and American lesbian relationships and aspires to practise herself. She is in tune with her true desire, and most importantly she is expressing and actualising herself as her true nature dictates.

Research Question 2: Contributions of Screen Texts

In the introductory chapter, I explained that this project was initially conceived as an audience study project. The thesis structure I initially pictured would for example devote one chapter to interpretations of each of the screen texts circulating in the lesbian Sinophone. Yet, as the analytical chapters have clearly shown, these screen texts were rarely discussed on their own but were most often referenced to in connection with real-life *tomboys* as well as to each other. For example, in Chapter Three, participants made references to characters in *Girls Love* and *Yes or No* to illustrate what they saw as exemplary of real-life teen *tomboys*. In Chapter Five, participants drew on two texts, *Yes or No 2.5*, and *Last Friends* to explain what they saw as normative and heterosexist construction of the masculine role (i.e. what I termed the protector-provider husband archetype). Participants appearing in Chapter Six similarly used *Yes or No* to illustrate their own experiences of non-identification and self-exploration, while those in Chapter Seven used *Last Friends* to articulate the differences they perceive between being trans and being a lesbian. What these citations clearly demonstrate is that for these participants, the question of what these texts “mean” is not separated from the broader logics with which they conceptualise the *tomboy*, and likewise, the question of how they conceptualise the *tomboy* cannot be addressed independent of these screen texts because these texts are embedded in the very language with which to *think about* the *tomboy*.

This is also the case with my participants’ references to *The L Word*. At first glance, interpreting the data through an Americanisation model (Altman, 1996a, 1997, 2001) would suggest that even the lesbian circles of the PRC, Hong Kong, and Taiwan are not immune to the hegemony of American LGBTQ culture. However, in Chapter Four, I argued that it would be incorrect to read the prominence of *The L Word* as simply symptomatic of cultural imperialism and instead suggested that it is an example

of appropriation and localisation. In the lesbian Sinophone, *The L Word* is in fact a canvas upon which participants *imagine* the U.S. to be a *tomboy*-free utopia. Likewise, Chapter Five similarly illustrated how Asian screen texts (particularly the Thai film *Yes or No*) contribute to the idea of an inherently Confucian Asia which is supposedly held backward by its infuriation with conservative gender roles. In other words, it is not only that these screen texts are crucial to debates of the *tomboy*, but the texts are also materials with which participants of these debates picture the broader world and cultures around them.

Research Question 3: Geographical Imaginations: Lesbian Occidentalism and Self-Orientalism

Indeed, debates about *tomboys* are often processes that produce geographical imaginations of one's own culture and of Western culture. As the table above shows, a presumed cultural superiority was clearly attributed by my participants to the West. A cultural imperialist interpretation of the data would suggest that participants had internalised Western dominance to the extent that they genuinely believed in their own cultural inferiority. While I hesitate to reject this viewpoint completely (and I will explain my reasoning below), a more productive analytic framework might be that of Occidentalism. Xiaomei Chen (1995) provides a careful examination of seemingly West-worshipping discourses in Post-Mao China. Citing for example the controversial TV documentary *He Shang* (River Elegy) in which the producers argued that Western civilisations (i.e. Greek-Roman-Anglo cultures) have succeeded in trade and foreign expansion while Chinese civilisation has failed, Chen points out in the context of Post-Mao China in the 1980s, Occidentalism was a strategy that countered the State-

sanctioned glorification of Chinese culture, which was employed to strengthen and justify the Communist Party's rule. *He Shang's* naïve presentation of the West was therefore not truly interested in the West itself, but the mother country it critiques, according to Chen. Occidentalism in this sense *uses* the figure of the superior Western Other as a mean to criticise what is at home. Similarly, I propose that the *tomboy* repressive hypothesis is primarily concerned with what is happening locally. Though it continues to look to the West, its interest ultimately lies in its own locality. In other words, the West functions as the post-*tomboy* post-repression utopia that believers of the hypothesis want to see at home.

That is not to suggest Occidental projections of the West remain entirely in the realm of the imagination, however. As a researcher based in Australia and previously in the United Kingdom, my (perceived) Westernised background invited many questions about the West both during and after the interviews. For example, in one interview, a Taiwanese participant put our conversation about the *tomboy* on pause to seek my advice on applying for graduate degrees in the West. While it would certainly be a stretch to suggest that this fascination with the West is facilitated by the West's (perceived) post-*tomboy* culture alone—the so-called superiority of the West has been reinforced by centuries of imperialism after all—one can also reasonably speculate that the *tomboy* repressive hypothesis would, even in minor ways, reinforce this world order by producing material effects (such as East-to-West flows of queer students and travelers).

Another aspect to be discussed about the construction of an essential, trans-historical Chinese-ness that is perhaps fundamental to a project covering the PRC, Hong Kong, and Taiwan is whether this construction has an impact on or is influenced by contemporary geopolitical tensions between the three regions. Fieldwork for this project

was conducted and completed in 2018, a year before the 2019-2020 Hong Kong protests first triggered by the attempted introduction of the Extradition Bill and was subsequently suppressed by the PRC's National Security Law. The Hong Kong protests in turn at least partly contributed to the re-election of DPP President Tsai Ing-wen (who is openly hostile to Beijing) in Taiwan in 2020. At the time of writing, cross-strait relations are evidently deteriorating. If the *tomboy* figure in the repressive hypothesis is characterised by her "Chinese-ness," then how may we situate such a characterisation in this geopolitical context? I want to preface by saying that, first of all that this research only involved 12 mainland Chinese, 13 Hongkongese, and 15 Taiwanese participants and this sample size is too limited to address such a question comprehensively. Second, cross-strait and PRC-Hong Kong relations only came up very sparsely in the interviews. However, as I discussed in Chapter Five, there were moments in which Chinese-ness was clearly perceived to be cultural baggage, and this could have broader geopolitical implications. For example, a Taiwanese participant was explaining to me why she felt that the *tomboy* label was "no longer relevant in Taiwan." She prefaced this explanation by highlighting Taiwan's progress in gender equality and in legalising same-sex marriage in the past decade, and later added that the *tomboy* label was symptomatic of the island's ethnic-Chinese (*Huaren*) culture. Several mainland Chinese participants on the other hand explained that once feminism prevails in China, the *tomboy* label will cease to exist. There is, I suspect, a perceived synthesis between the decline of *tomboy*-roleplaying and progressive gender and sexual politics state-wise, based on the *presumption* that the presence of *tomboy*-roleplaying reflects the level to which society is held back by the cultural burden of Chinese-ness.

This may or may not complicate or be complicated by the ongoing Hong Kong crisis that is clearly re-shaping the political meanings of "Chinese-ness" both in the city

and presumably in neighbouring Taiwan. To give more context, in his paper “Making Hong Kong Chinese” (2020), Jean-François Dupré describes the ways in which PRC state nationalism has been employed as a political tool to cultivate a sense of nationalist and Han-Chinese-centric belongings among Han-Chinese Hong Kong citizens. This, according to the author, had the unintended consequence of highlighting the territory’s lack of political autonomy and in turn gave rise to Hong Kong separatism. The Hong Kong Public Opinion Research Institute similarly recorded a sharp increase in the percentage of citizens identifying primarily as “Hongkongers” (in place of “Chinese nationals”) in 2019.¹ Whether this would interrupt or modify the self-Orientalising language of a backward Chinese cultural burden—and more generally whether sexual identity and political identity would shape and transform one another in these emergent contexts—these are questions that remain to be examined in future research.

The construction of a backward Eastern/Chinese tradition relies also on a reductive imagination of Thai society. Throughout the data appearing in Chapter Five, Thai society is repeatedly described and imagined as equally backward as the Sinophone in its (supposed) belief in normative gender roles. References to Japan in my sample are comparatively limited and further research is needed to clarify the lesbian Sinophone’s perceptions of Japan in relation to their geographic imaginations of the U.S. and Thailand.

Another aspect worth highlighting is that the *tomboy* repressive hypothesis actually narrates two kinds of progressions: on the one hand, it describes a *society* that moves from Eastern/Chinese traditional normative gender roles toward Western/American and diverse gender expressions (this is the level Occidentalism and Self-Orientalism operate at); on the other hand, the hypothesis also narrates a form of *individual* self-development from an immature and falsely-conscious state to a mature

and conscious state. The binary oppositions in the hypothesis from the above table can be reconfigured into the following:

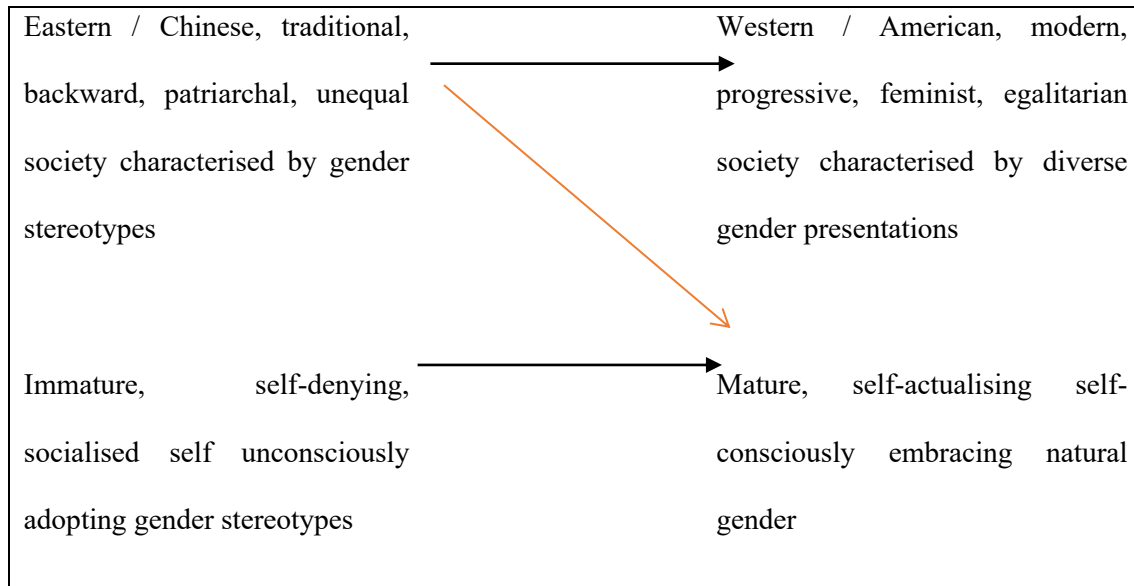


Table 4. Geographic imaginations in the *tomboy* repressive hypothesis

It is not only that the societal and the individual levels operate in parallel, there is also a perceived causal relation between the (perceived) oppressive mechanism of conservative Chinese society and the immature self who once identified as a *tomboy*. According to the hypothesis, it is the condition of a conservative society obsessed with normative gender roles (i.e. the protector-provider husband archetype) that makes the unsuspecting younger self identify with this role at her own expense. The left side of the table above is in fact a model of socialisation and internalisation.

In Chapter Six, I described this model in the language of false consciousness and suggested that true consciousness is assumed to be a return to a state of pre-socialisation. As such, in the table above I am highlighting the fact that this figure of a truly and newly conscious self is conceptualised more directly in relation to the idea of a

conservative society, more so than by the vision of the Western utopia above it (although the associations between those two are clearly there). By this I mean that the utopian image of the West already presumes that Western lesbians are never repressed by the lesbian gender in the first place, it would then follow that according to this logic, it is only the lesbians in conservative Asian societies who will have to undertake the task of finding their pre-socialisation and truly conscious selves.

Research Question 4: Underlying logics: Nature, Gender, Trans, and Lesbianism

In the same chapter I also suggested that the wish to de-programme oneself from socialisation is also expressed as a wish to return to one's nature. The data I have quoted share a common aspiration to live one's life as one naturally is. This opens up questions about whether the natural self is ungendered or feminine (and whether femininity is natural), and whether masculinity can ever be a natural extension/expression of the natural self. These questions about nature and gender were carried over to Chapter Seven. In that chapter, I looked at ways in which the *tomboy* category has been modified by the emergent category of transgender and the associated notions of gender dysphoria and gender identity disorder. Earlier in Chapter Two, I noted that scholarship show that from the 1980s to 2000s, the category *tomboy* came to signify a fashion trend that draws on normative masculinity, and in Chapter Three I showed that this fashion culture is now retrospectively renounced. Chapter Seven demonstrates the ways in which this idea of "*tomboy-as-fashion*" is actually part of a longer narrative. This narrative begins with the immature and socialised *tomboy* being liberated from her *tomboy* identification, and in doing so she takes two different forms: one is the woman who "merely" dresses in a masculine fashion style and who identifies as female without

reservation, and the other is a transgender man embracing his true male identity (Table 5).

<p>Immature <i>tomboy</i> identifying with normative masculine role</p>	<p>→ A woman who dresses in a masculine way (i.e. the <i>tomboy</i> label functions as a fashion choice rather than as indicative of a true gender identity)</p> <p>↘ A trans man who undergoes gender dysphoria before embracing his inner, natural male identity</p>
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Table 5. Perceived distinctions between *tomboy*, lesbian, and trans

Both of these figures are the self-conscious counterparts to the *tomboy*, and there are in fact three conceptualisations of masculinity at play here. First, *tomboy*'s identification with masculinity as an unconscious and false identification with protector-provider husband archetype; second, *tomboy*'s masculine expression as a causal and immature form of self-stylisation that draws on conventional masculinity but has no connection to inner identity; and third, trans masculinity as a stable, serious, and conscious gender identity.

Chapter Seven describes a border war between the lesbian community and those suspected to be transgender men. The logic of this border war assumes that one must be either wholly cis-gendered, female-bodied, and same-sex desiring or wholly male-identifying, wholly uncomfortable with one's body to the extent that surgical reassignment is the only destination. In making this argument and subsequently appealing for a recognition of illegible in-between bodies and experiences, I am not

only drawing from Jack Halberstam's criticism on the lesbian/FTM border war in 1990s America but also highlighting the clear resemblances between the two border wars. Such resemblances I suspect are not coincidental but indicative of historical lineage. In that chapter, I referenced Halperin's (1990) and Sedgwick's (1990) proposition that since the rise of 1970s lesbian feminism in the U.S., lesbianism has been increasingly conceptualised in gender separatism terms. As both scholars point out, this post-1970s logic conceptualises "lesbianism" as "eroticism between women" independent of lesbian genders such as butch and femme. Halberstam similarly noted that the FTM/lesbian border war was driven at least in part by a wish to narrow the definition of lesbianism to that of "women-loving women." This narrowing interpretation of lesbianism is evidently present in my own data, most noticeably in the Chapter Seven but also in some participants' clear attempt to advocate for "purely" feminine-feminine lesbianism "devoid of masculinity and patriarchy" throughout Chapters Four, Five, and Six. Again, there are very strong resemblances between these discourses and radical feminism to the extent that they may point to what could very well be actual historical linkages.

To say this is to perhaps suggest that there may be some form of globalising model of women-loving-women lesbianism. There is certainly supporting evidence for this outside of the data analysed in this thesis. Sinnott's work on *tom-dee* cultures and lesbian organisations in Thailand suggests, for instance, that there have been women advocating for a *ying-rak-ying* (literally "women-loving women") image of lesbianism in the public consciousness to replace the dominant conceptualisation of lesbianism as being structured by polarised secondary genders (i.e. the masculine *tom* and feminine *dee*).² According to Sinnott, through a *ying-rak-ying* model these women imagine themselves to be part of a global lesbian community of same-sex and "non-gendered"

(i.e. not marked by secondary gender) sexual orientation. In Chapter Four I noted a similar globalist aspiration among women in the Sinophone, and my concern that there might be a globalising “woman-loving women” conceptualisation of lesbianism is shared by Gloria Wekker (2006), who writes:

Lesbianism, with or without children, is constructed as an exclusive desire for women, is ideologically invested in “equality” along several dimensions, e.g., age, income, and educational level, and is associated with “modernity.” [...] [L]esbianism will, sooner or later, prevail; [...] [It] is alive in commonsense discourses, but it is also fed by academic discourses that see an unproblematic unidirectionality in the field of sexual globalization, a triumphant progress and transfer of sexual forms and identities from the West to the Rest. (p. 225-226).

Yet, while I do strongly suspect that there is a linkage between the women-loving-women model of lesbianism advocated in the U.S. and the same model observed in my data, it would be a mistake to reduce the discourses analysed in this thesis as mere variations of the Western models, especially when they clearly have their own culturally specific logics (e.g. the *tomboy* repressive hypothesis, the protector-provider husband archetype, and the false consciousness logic). The point remains—as Chapter Seven’s discussion on the intersections of the *tomboy* and the trans figure and Chapter Four’s analysis of *The L Word* reception show—that globalising sexual knowledges do *not* form a one-way imperialistic force but are part of a process through which incoming categories and images transform and are transformed by local knowledges (Martin et al., 2008).

Epilogue

1. The Death of the *Tomboy*?

This concludes my genealogy of the *tomboy* category. In the remainder of this thesis conclusion, I will address a key question that emerges from my analysis of the *tomboy* repressive hypothesis. That is, is this the end of the *tomboy*? If the goal of this project has been to analyse what *use* the *tomboy* category has for lesbians in the three regions, is the conclusion here that, given widespread criticisms of it within these communities, it has no use for these women after all? Here is a story that may help us speculate on the answer:

One Friday evening in fall 2018, I sat down across from Penelope at a packed upstairs café in downtown Kowloon, Hong Kong. Penelope is a thirty-nine-year-old social worker and a friend of a friend. We had had made each other's acquaintance about a year earlier at a casual social meetup, and naturally we jumped straight into the interview without re-introducing ourselves. "Would you use labels such as *tomboy* or *TBG* to describe yourself? Is there a label that you currently identify with or have identified with in the past?" I asked. A brief moment passed and there was no answer, and I began to worry that I might have started off the interview on the wrong foot, that Penelope might be a strong opponent of *tomboy-TBG* categorisation or of sub-labels altogether. "Or perhaps you've never used these labels at all?" I hastily added. Across the table, she leaned forward to answer, clearly intending to speak loud enough for me to hear her over the rowdy crowd seated right next to us. But she caught herself just before the words came out. In the very limited time I had known Penelope before this interview, I had the impression that she was a very decisive and confident woman who always spoke her mind, and so her hesitation caught me quite off guard. Another moment passed before she finally started to speak, slowly, clearly examining her words:

Penelope: Hmm, so six months ago I re-installed [the local lesbian dating app] *Butterfly*, and I said on my profile that I was a *TBG*. But that was not my first time setting up a profile on *Butterfly*. The first time I used it, I picked *no label* on my profile. And internally I was just.....I just wanted to try it out. It wasn't really.....I don't think I really see myself as a *TBG*. It's just.....I just wanted to see what would happen if I said that I was. Because I am fairly certain that the people that I am attracted to would call themselves *tomboys*.

Me: So, there isn't a strong sense of identification with the *TBG* label, right?

Penelope: Actually, my belief is that we should not use labels at all. Because things are fluid. People are always changing. [...]

Me: Was there ever a period in your life where you had identified as one of those sub-labels?

Penelope: I would never let others label me, and I would never label myself.

Me: Is there a reason why?

Penelope: Because I think we shouldn't. Even in terms of, you know, being labelled a woman and having people project their expectations on me or make assumptions about me just because they see me as a woman, even that is something I despise.

Penelope is not alone in what seems to be a disjuncture between ethical beliefs and intimate practices. It was not uncommon to hear participants say that even though they do not wish to be categorised, they do in fact socialise as *tomboy*, *TBG*, *po*, or *H* in

online spaces. Even in the anti-*tomboy* essay quoted at length in Chapter Seven, the Shanghainese writer Fang-fang included this disclaimer at the very end: “Of course, there are many lesbians who genuinely want to categorise. They say that when it comes to dating, if they categorise first, they can avoid mismatching with potential partners. This is obviously true.”

One way to speculate on this dissonance between ethics and practice is to draw on Erving Goffman’s dramaturgy and scholarship on digital communication. In his book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman (1959) compares our everyday presentation of ourselves to that of a theatrical performance. Individuals perform idealised versions of themselves in social circumstances before a particular audience the same way actors perform a play on the stage. Behind this front, there is a metaphorical backstage in which the individual can relax and behave in ways that may contradict with the appearance they have to maintain on stage. Though Goffman’s frontstage-backstage metaphor is useful in highlighting the contradictions between outward self-presentation and inward self-understanding, its origin in the pre-Internet era means that this metaphor relies on the assumption that self-performance is bound by particular physical setting and continually observed by a known audience (for example, one might perform a particular personality at work every week in front of customers). This has ceased to be the case in the era of digital communications (Hogan, 2010). Discussing Goffman’s theory in the context of social media, Bernie Hogan argues that online self-performance is more akin to an exhibition rather than a performance. According to Hogan, individuals select, submit, edit and re-edit aspects of the self on digital platforms for an audience who may view the materials on display at any time without their knowledge (this is especially the case on dating apps where the viewer has the option of never “matching with” and therefore never disclosing their presence to the performer). In

digital courtship in particular, online daters have shown a tendency to highlight characteristics of themselves that they perceive to be desirable while minimising perceived negative traits (Cheeseman et al., 2012; Goode, 1996; Walther, 1992, 1996).

However, what is at stake in Penelope's story is not only a gap between the exhibition and the person, but a fundamental disagreement with the language she herself uses to curate that exhibition. In the process of recruiting participants for this research, I too set up a profile on *Butterfly* to take advantage of its bulletin board function (which runs side-by-side with displays of potential partners common to most dating apps). Setting up a profile required that I pick a "role," for which the options were limited to *TB*, *TBG*, *Pure*, and *No Label*. Similarly, browsing other users' profiles requires that one select the desired role of potential partners. In this sense, *tomboy* and other sub-labels serve as a pre-emptive sorting tool that helps exclude users one does not want to interact with, and likewise allows others to exclude one's profile from their searches.

Perhaps this is how the *tomboy* lives on. In spite of the increasingly prevalent view that sees her as an outdated if not outright incorrect model for self-identification, the *tomboy* lingers on as part of a language which lesbians use to sort through the seemingly endless stream of potential dating opportunities in the digital landscape. Self-categorisation is not only useful as an exclusionary method (Miller, 2018), but is also the very tool that renders oneself (or more precisely one's exhibition) visible and *legible* to potential partners (Ferris & Duguay, 2020). Even the post-*tomboy* labels (*pure* and *no label* in Hong Kong, *H* in the PRC, and *bufen* in Taiwan) can only fulfil their operational function *through* their semantic difference from the *tomboy*. For instance, declaring myself a *no label* clarifies to potential viewers that I am not looking for a *tomboy-TBG* partnership.

Given that this project was not originally conceptualised as a research on digital dating, I did not purposefully raise questions about online dating. With hindsight, I should have asked participants to elaborate when references to dating apps did appear. Despite these limitations, I believe it is clear that future research on the *tomboy* figure and on all emergent new sub-identities will likely have to address the aforementioned dissonance between ethics and practices, and more specifically the tension between, as I have hoped to show, the ethical desire not to be categorised as *tomboys* and *TBG/po* and the contradictory reality that such categories are practically useful or even necessary in self-curations and exclusionary searches in online dating spaces. In the online dating sphere especially, the *tomboy* “lives on” in practice in spite of the widespread ethical suspicion cast on her, because the very gathering and meeting of people depends on the continued existence of the *tomboy* as a linguistic currency with which to identify oneself (even to identify oneself as *bufen* or not a *tomboy* still requires the subject of the *tomboy*). Most importantly, this conflict between ethical conceptualisations and practical usage may very well lend itself to a contradictory form of sexual subjectivity. Penelope’s story already gives an example of the ways in which online identity (including the *tomboy* and related labels) can in fact directly contradict actual internal self-identity. Further research on the *tomboy* and related identity categories may have to address what appears to be a growing sense of divide between how one feels and how one addresses oneself socially.³

2. Language, Legibility, and Identity Interpellation

My brief analysis of dating apps suggests that the *tomboy* remains useful because it is the language that renders subject positions legible in digital self-other encounters. I have argued that anti-*tomboy* subjectivities (*pure, no label, H, bufen*) are only meaningful through their semantic opposition to the *tomboy*, and this is true not only in the practice of digital courtship but also on a general conceptual level. I will revisit the ex-*tomboy* personal stories recounted in Chapters Three and Six to illustrate this point.

To recap, these stories generally follow a common narrative structure. The speaker begins by recalling a period in childhood in which she harboured strong feelings towards other girls but did not interpret such feelings as expressions of homosexuality. This was until she became aware of the concept of homosexuality in adolescence. This exposure allowed her to identify previous attractions as indicative of her sexuality, and motivated her to seek out other lesbians. As she entered online and offline lesbian communities (such as those present in single-sex secondary schools), she realised that social interactions in these communities were structured along the axis of secondary genders (in that *tomboys* only date *TBG/po* and vice versa). “Well I must be a *tomboy* (or *TBG/po*) then,” she thought to herself. Years passed and as she matured into adulthood, she began to see secondary genders as a mistake. She realised that she had been blindly following *tomboy-TBG/po* conventions (i.e. that the *tomboy* partner must assume the role of a protector and a provider), which she now saw as the product of Chinese patriarchal traditions. There was now a shift in consciousness. She was no longer a *tomboy*.

In Chapter Three, I compared this narrative structure to the one Ken Plummer (1995) identified in late twentieth century gay and lesbian autobiographies in North America. The first half of the *ex-tomboy* stories obviously resembles the coming out stories in Plummer's book and in mainstream society in general. One way to analyse this type of narrative is to draw from Louis Althusser's (2001) interpellation theory. To explain what he means by interpellation, Althusser stages a scene in which a policeman calls out "Hey, you there!" in public. Hearing this, a person turns to answer the policeman. It is through turning towards the hailing that this person comes to recognise themselves as the subject being addressed, and they must now answer (i.e. be subjected) to the call of law enforcement. For Althusser, this is the process through which we become subjects. To transpose this back to the coming-out narrative, when the person becomes aware of the category of homosexuality and begins to interpret previously unnamed sexual feelings through this category, it is as if they are being hailed. "Hey, you there!" this person hears, "these feelings you have had...this means you are gay/lesbian/bisexual/non-heterosexual." Similarly, the speaker in the *ex-tomboy* stories is hailed into two new and overlapping subject positions: a lesbian subject, and a *tomboy* (or *TBG/po*).

As she comes to see secondary genders as restrictive and unnecessary, she undergoes—and this is my core proposition—a *second interpellation*, as follows:

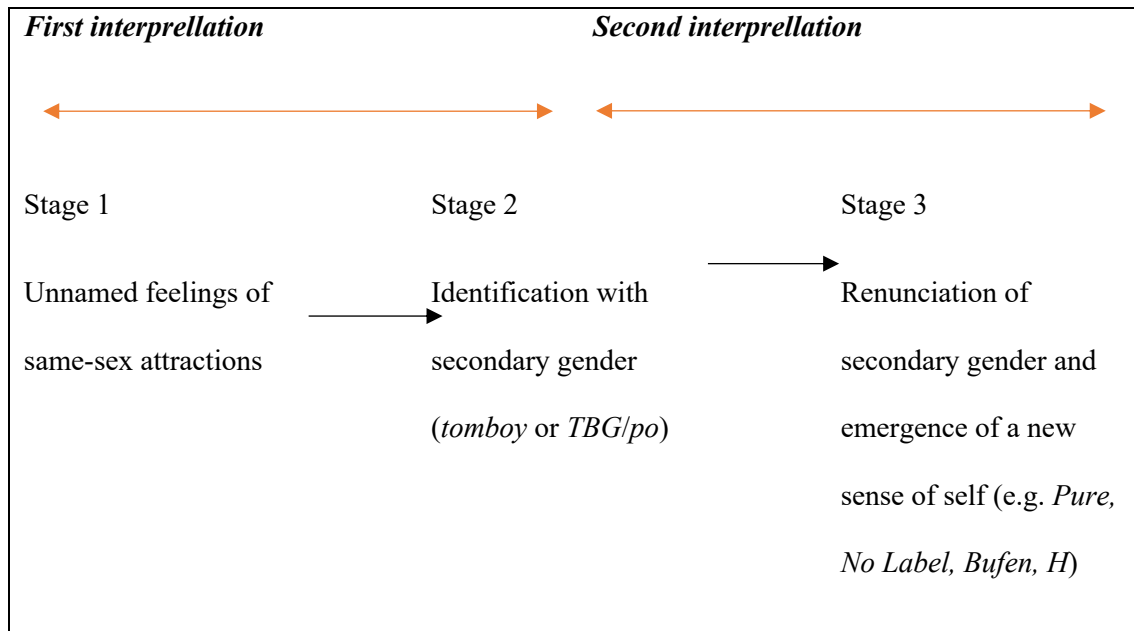


Table 6. Autobiography and interpellations

In the process of registering the (perceived) conservatism and restrictiveness of her secondary gender, she becomes aware of the workings of the first interpellation; that is, that she has been behaving in accordance with a set of conventions—a set of languages—common to the community. What emerges out of this realisation is a new subject position (“I’m not a *tomboy* anymore”), which depends semantically and therefore fundamentally on the category of the *tomboy* (and that of the *TBG/po*) as its negative reference.

A parallel example of this is found in Bobby Benedicto’s (2014) analysis of the *bakla* and the figure of the ideal modern gay Filipino man, the latter of whom relies upon the former as the backward, local, and undesirable Other of its own construction. In explaining this, Benedicto uses Jacques Derrida’s (1982, 1994) *différance* theory to illustrate how semantic differences are essential to meaning-making. Similarly, *différance* also applies here. The *tomboy* is a necessary negative, a necessary evil, a

necessary *language* for the reciprocal construction of the new, emancipated, truly conscious self.

This is not to imply that there is a further and final stage after this narrative; a truth existing somewhere that can be unlocked, unearthed, once the speaker has fully moved on from the social conventions structuring genders and secondary genders as well as from the language of emancipation (i.e. the *tomboy* repressive hypothesis) that I have analysed and criticised. Just as Foucault would insist that his analysis of the historical emergence of homosexuality by no means implies that people who identify as gay men and lesbians are “faking” their sexuality, and Plummer would likewise say that his analysis should not be taken to mean that people were “not really” gay or lesbian until they came to identify as such, what I am proposing is that *there is no ontological truth to be unearthed here*; that one’s sexual identity is not an essence already present in the body waiting to be discovered. What is at stake, rather, is cultural intelligibility; that is, the language with which we construct ourselves.

To use another parallel example, consider this quote from Judith Butler (2017) concerning the category of “woman”:

Consider the medical interpellation which [...] shifts an infant from an “it” to a “she” or a “he,” and in that naming, the girl is “girlled,” brought into the domain of language and kinship through the interpellation of gender (p. xvii).

For Butler, it is the language through which we understand ourselves and our relationships to one another that precedes and dictates our experiences of the world. The language of gender (which Butler calls the heterosexual matrix) is one such example.

Althusser (2001) similarly defines language (which he calls ideology) as “the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence” (p. 109). To transpose these back to the *tomboy*, my claim is that: despite being a language of negative critique, *the tomboy repressive hypothesis is a language that creates real experiences of the self and real experiences of the world*. It is a language that delineates and therefore produces subjectivities and real material relationships, despite lacking in itself a real ontological substance.

In Chapter Six, I described this hypothesis and its search for the pre-socialisation self as a never-ending journey for which the destination simply does not exist. But in thinking through the *productive* power of this hypothesis, it occurs to me that this search in fact takes the form of an ouroboros, in that the journey continually creates the very thing that it is chasing after. This is to say, the *work* we put into searching for our “true” identities is that which, in practice, creates moments of identity in the material world.

Notes to Chapter Eight

¹ See for example recent polling conducted by Hong Kong Public Opinion Research Institute. Unspecified author, "You Would Identify yourself as a Hongkonger/Chinese/Chinese in Hong Kong/ Hongkonger in China (Per Poll)," Hong Kong Public Opinion Research Institute, December 2020. <https://www.pori.hk/pop-poll/ethnic-identity/q001.html>.

² For an additional example, at the Asian Lesbian Network conference in Taipei in 1995, Thai feminist lesbians questioned whether there was an unbalanced power dynamics between *tom* and *dee*, according to this recap by Took Took Thongthiraj (1996).

³ Relatedly, Hu (2018) also identified a developing trend of disidentification in her research on Taiwanese lesbian identity labels. See Chapter Two for my summary of that work.

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