

**A study on the sexuality of transsexuals in**  
**Hong Kong**

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## **I. Introduction**

Transsexuals studies did not gain much attention in the local academia until 90s. The studies in the late 80s were mainly on the psychiatric perspective such as the work procedures and history of Gender Identity Team or things transsexuals might expect to discuss with their doctors before they decide to undergo SRS. (Ng et al.1989) Transsexual desire was framed as gender “dysphoria”/ “disorder” or sexual “dysfunction” in the clinical outlook though most articles are alert in emphasizing their normality. ((ibid)

Some papers have placed the focus on the social work practice in helping transsexuals through the SRS (Ma 1990 & 1999) and the possible difficulties transsexuals may face in their interpersonal relationships. (Ma 1999) Some researches have probed explanations for the rigid sexual perceptions in Hong Kong in rejecting non-normative gender and sexual practices. (Winter 2002) Escalating efforts were attempted on researching the social problems faced by the transsexuals (Winter 2003), the legal rights of transsexuals (Emerton 2003, 2004A & 2004B) and the public’s attitude towards transsexuals (King 2003).

Efforts are seen in discussing transsexual practices from a sociological and gender studies perspective in foreign academia (Bolin 1999; Schlock 2005). Transsexual behavior and cross dressing are considered as subversion to the rigid gender dichotomy. It is suggested that people who identify themselves as preoperative, postoperative, and nonsurgical transsexuals, as well as cross-dressers, collectively form a community that is in the

process of creating the possibility of numerous genders and multiple social identities (Bolin 1998). Yet, similar discussion on the transsexual identity construction is relatively underdeveloped in Hong Kong.

In the following parts, we will first of all introduce the general situation transsexuals face in Hong Kong, followed by a report and discussion on the interview results of three Male-to Female (MtF) transsexuals regarding their sex and gender identity, sexual desire and how they experience their bodies in sex before and after their sex reassignment surgery. Through scrutinizing the subjects' sexuality out of a clinical discourse and affirming the subjects' sexual experiences, we hope to probe insight into the complexities and ambiguities of our sexuality formation and culture.

## **II. Situation in Hong Kong**

Generally speaking, Hong Kong is largely intolerant towards transsexuals. The most widely used Cantonese term for transsexuals, yan yiu, bears the meaning of man-monster literally. Once a transsexual's identity is exposed to others, loss of job and friends and possible ridicule and despise in the neighbourhood could easily be expected. Most media coverage presented transsexuals' social life as public gossip and the attitude was utterly negative.

Systematic diagnostic and clinical treatment were only developed in the territory in early 80s and the first Sex Reassignment Surgery (SRS) took place in 1981 though transsexual behaviour was rather common sexual tradition in ancient China. (Winter 2002) Since the founding of Sex Clinic, which was administrated by the University Psychiatric Unit of Queen Mary in 1986, there were altogether 376 reports identified. 342 were referred for assessment relating to sexual dysfunction and 48 subjects were referred for assessment of suitability for SRS. (Ko 2003) Diagnosis of sexual dysfunction of patients and their partners were made according to DSM-IV, the internationally recognized diagnosis for Gender Identity Disorder (GID) patients It is recorded in the International Encyclopedia of Sexuality that there are now 1 transsexual in every 200,000 residents in Hong Kong (Ng & Ma 2001), though the actual number is believed to be well above such estimation.

As Hong Kong law only recognizes and is abided by a person's chromosomal sex in case of judicial disputes, transsexuals have much less civil rights than other ordinary citizens.

(Emerton 2002) Any documents or contracts they sign may become legally invalid if they do not state their chromosomal sex on paper (Ng & Ma 2001; Emerton 2002). The transsexual community is therefore believed to remain virtually invisible in Hong Kong and seems to be highly stigmatized and marginalized by the society. (King 2003)

With the deliberate effort of some voluntary groups, namely Transgender ASIA Research Centre, Transgender Equality and Acceptance Movement, Amnesty International Hong Kong and Civil Rights for Sexual Diversities Group etc, more local concerns are aroused on the inequality faced by this minority but significant group. Recently, these groups are pushing forth the “anti-discrimination legislation based on sexual orientation” which is favourable for buttressing a more gay and transsexual friendly environment.

### **III. 1 Methodology**

Qualitative research method has been adopted in this paper because the study aims to decode and come to terms with the meaning, not the frequency, of the social phenomenon. (Van Maanen, 1983) Adopting a qualitative perspective allows the researchers with more room to understand the individuals' perceptions of the world. (Bell 1990) In-depth and semi-structured interviews were adopted as we find they serve the purpose of this research the best. Such structure carries two advantages. First, taking the form of semi-structured questions makes us easier to aggregate the results. Second, semi-structured interview also functions like a conversation between interviewer and respondent, so useful information from the respondents could thus be elicited adaptively.

We have altogether conducted three interviews in June 2005. Each interview was about two hours in duration. Persistent attempts were made to explore the underlying views and perceptions in the subjects' answers during the interviews by asking follow-up questions.

Our interview questions are set upon three themes, namely transsexuals' gender identity and history of realization; sexual orientation and their object of desire and their sexual practice. Because of the sensitivity of the questions and the varied profile of the interviewees, the choice of words in the questions addressed to each of them were in some way different but certainly with the same themes.

### **III.2 Ethical Consideration**

Indeed, asking comments from transsexuals about their sexuality is somehow a sensitive issue. This led to careful consideration on how the information would be collected, divulged, and written up. The personal information of the subjects is treated with strict confidentiality and names are stated according to the subjects' own preference.

After all, there could be problem that the interviewees did not wish to open up during interviews or have their comments moderated before voicing out. This measure of deceit has been deemed acceptable (cf. Punch, 1998) In addition, follow up answers could be somewhat different from the data sought from earlier questions, and hence care was taken not to cause harm while noticing indirect disclosure of discrepancy in the subjects' revelation. (Easterby-Smith et al., 1991)

Bearing all these considerations in mind, the ultimate goal of the study is to gather information that is useful, provides insights, and valid to the extent that it is somewhat truthful and free of subjective bias about Hong Kong transsexuals' experiences.

#### **IV. Background of the subjects**

We acquainted the interview subjects, Joey, Yuen Yuen and Karen, on the Internet. They are local Hongkongers and were all born and have lived most of their lives here in Hong Kong. Joey, aged 31, is now waiting for her operation to be carried out in coming June and she considers herself an incomplete woman. For Yuen Yuen (aged 40) and Karen (aged 35), they have undergone the operation in 1991 and 1998 respectively and now fully identify themselves as women. Yuen Yuen has her operation done by a private doctor in Hong Kong while Karen has it in Bangkok.

The three subjects have relatively different education backgrounds. Joey has obtained her university degree; Karen has finished Form 5 study and Yuen Yuen has studied primary school. They all have different career exposures in the past, such as being sales, clerk or actor. Their salary range also differs from one another, ranging from about HKD \$5,000 to \$20,000. At the moment, Joey is working as a professional, Karen as clerical staff and Yuen Yuen is in between jobs.

Despite their difference in career and education experience, their sex change is generally accepted by their family members now. Joey, who was married eight years ago, is now living with her wife and two daughters. Being the eldest grandson of the family, she has experienced immense pressure from her family before. However, the pressure has receded after the death of her grandfather. Having two elder and two younger sisters, Yuen Yuen had been occasionally dressed up as a girl by her sisters when she was young

and her change in sex has been accepted by her family members with less difficulties in comparative sense. Karen faces less pressure from her family members in these few years and she is living with her sister at the moment. Yet, discrimination is encountered at workplace and in the neighbourhood to various extents. Unnecessary attention and criticism were commonly received from relatives or when shopping, just to name a few situations.

Similar to other transsexuals' experience, all three claimed that they were trapped in a wrong body when they were male. They all agreed that they came to realize this without the initiation of any special incident. They were certain that they truly belong to the female gender. It was simply natural calling to realize the fact that they disliked or felt uncomfortable with their male bodies and to practice masculinity in daily life. However, their discovery of the desire to change their sex was experienced at different ages. Joey and Yuen Yuen discovered their sex change desire at a very young age, around five to six years old. Karen noticed this desire only until she was 18.

Yuen Yuen and Karen had practiced cross-dressing, including wearing make-up, skirts and long hair etc, for six to eight years before the operation and Joey is still practicing now. All of them have taken female hormone to stimulate biological changes. Physically, they experienced breast growth, reduction of body hair, change in body fat composition, skin improvement, voice change and shrinkage of male genital with the estrogen intake. Apparent psychological changes are also experienced. Joey believes that she is not as aggressive and decisive as before while all three feel that they are more emotional and

can better empathize others' feeling after the hormonal change. They are all happy with the state of being able to look, behave and think more feminine now.

In terms of sexual activities, all three are sexually active with steady sex partners now. They all have sex experience with females and Yuen Yuen and Karen had sex experience with other males before SRS.

## **V. Findings**

The interviews focused on three aspects, namely gender identity, sexual identity/orientation/desire, and sexual practices and satisfaction.

### **V.1 Gender Identity**

Joey is a pre-op who started taking hormonal treatment about three years ago, and Yuen Yuen and Karen had been through the SRS 7 to 12 years prior to the interviews. When they were asked to define their gender identity in the interviews, all defined themselves as definite female. As predicted, all subjects pointed out some sort of evolution of gender identity over their lifetimes, which was a conflicted process that included realization, confusion, tolerance of the male identity, and acceptance of the female identity. Both Joey and Yuen Yuen reported to have recognized their female identity at an early age. For Karen, although she came to recognize her female identity when she was about 18 years old and started cross-dressing at 18, she defined herself as a male before the SRS and a female after the operation at the age of 27. It is interesting to note that Joey, who came to recognize her female identity when she was small, had also defined herself as a male before she had fully accepted her female gender, and had entered into a relationship with her wife. In the early phase of the development, the gender of the objects of desire plays a role in the subjects' definition of the self.

One interesting finding related to construction of the female identity that has seldom been mentioned in the existing literature is how Yuen Yuen and Karen faked their menstrual periods. On top of their bodies as a proof of their identity, menstruation serves as an unambiguous proof for them to pass as genetically born females. They have set their own menstrual cycles during when their partners are not allowed to have sex with them, and they will create used sanitary napkins by fabricating menstrual blood with squashed “red worms”. They also reported this to be a very effective way to eliminate the suspicion of unknown friends when they can be involved in the “female ritual” of lending napkins to friends in need.

### **V.2 Sexual Identity and Sexual Orientation**

Yuen Yuen and Karen defined themselves, at the time of the interviews, as heterosexual women attracted to heterosexual men. Joey declared an attraction to both women and men, and later added that she was attracted to the tenderness of women but was more attracted to men on the erotic side.

All three of them showed difficulty in defining their sexual identities prior to SRS:

- (1) Yuen Yuen said she was a “gay man” during the time when she as a mannish male engaged in same-sex sex, but she found it difficult reconciling herself to the fact of her maleness. Later she moved on to be a cross-dresser and she used the Cantonese term “yan yiu” (she-male) to describe herself. Yuen Yuen also

described her sexual behaviours with other men as “homosexual acts” before the operation and “heterosexual acts” after.

- (2) Karen had her first and the only short-lived, nonsexual experimentation with a girl in her teens. She started cross-dressing once she started to realize her urge to be a female at 18, and had several homosexual relationships during her pre-transition lives, although the level of commitment is unknown to us. Karen defined herself as a gay man before the SRS and a female after the SRS. When asked if she sees herself as a straight woman after the SRS, Karen said no although she later remarked that she is a woman who loves straight man.
- (3) Joey had her first sexual relationships with a heterosexual woman, who is now her wife, and they still live together with their two kids. Joey said this was largely motivated by wanting to fit the masculine gender role; she turned to her wife because she felt confused and guilty about her desire to be a woman, and felt she ought to try out heterosexuality because it might cure her of her dysphoria. Her wife, to her at that time, is a socially approved and easily obtained target. Similar to Karen, Joey defined her sexual identity as “homo” because she, with a male body, is attracted to men; but she would define her sexual identity as “hetero” after the SRS next year. It is interesting to note, firstly, that the subject has erased her self-claimed attraction to women by defining herself as a homosexual rather than a bisexual; secondly, she understood gender identity as related to “internal self”/self-definition (as she said that she felt that she was a woman) while sexual identity as related to the external body (a person with a male body attracted to male hence a homo, her gender identity does not play a role here).

Although none of them became involved in significant sexual or romantic relationships with men, all three subjects did exhibit a clear preference for sexual and romantic relationships with men during their pre-transition years. At present, they all expressed an interest in establishing relationships with whom they identified as heterosexual men. Yuen Yuen and Karen identified their partners as heterosexual men because of their prior romantic and sexual histories, and more importantly these men are not aware of their SRS operation.

### **V.3 Sexual Practices and Sexual Satisfaction**

All three subjects are in monogamous relationships with their partners. Yuen Yuen and Karen are in romantic relationships with heterosexual men who are not aware of their SRS treatment. Yuen Yuen and Karen maintain very active sexual lives (on average two times a week) to meet the sexual needs of their partners. Their sexual activities are mainly of the manual, oral and coitus type. Karen also reported to have used sexual aids such as the vibrator during sex acts.

The situation for Joey is more complicated. It is interesting to note that she identified her wife as her present lover and sex partner, an assertion that did not quite go with her self-identification as a female and a homo. Joey had male lovers in the past but she eschewed sexual relations with them because she could not accept same sex genital sexuality. She still practices regular sex with her wife, about once every two to three months, which was

said to satisfy the sexual needs of her wife although Joey would also periodically take some enjoyment in the sexual aspects of their marriages. No penile penetration has been involved since Joey started taking hormone which affects the function of her penis. Sexual aids such as dildo were used.

As reported in most studies in the literature, the subjects highlighted the drastic decrease in libido after the hormonal treatment (Yuen Yuen, who had SRS more than ten years ago, claimed that she has no sexual desire at all), and that sexually they feel less aggressive than before. All subjects reported a notable decrease in masturbation frequency, and for Yuen Yuen she had ceased to masturbate after SRS. Moreover, all mentioned not only a decreased ability to achieve and maintain erection but also a rapid diminution of genital pleasure during sex acts. Among them only Karen considers oral sex to be pleasant.

As for orgasm, Yuen Yuen is the only one who reported not to have any orgasm although she would from time to time fake it to charm her partner. Joey and Karen, interestingly, both assert to experience “woman’s orgasm” in the sense that the heightened pleasure was not a physical but a mental one. This is related to how they imagined a “real” woman should be, that sexual pleasure for women is less bodily but more subjective and psychological. Yet, we should also note that all subjects considered their sexual and sentimental relationship to be positive and satisfying.

## **VI. Discussion**

Bolin claims that genital alteration can be seen as the final, inescapable rite of passage, one that signifies anatomical completeness and the possibility of “normal” sexual encounters. (Bolin:1988 cf Nye 1999). However, we note from our subjects that the process of incorporation into the new status of women does not end there. For Yuen Yuen and Karen, they were highly conscious of the “limitations” of their female bodies and have to develop tactics to tackle possible questions in physically intimate circumstances. The inherent fear of being discovered by their partners can be a distressing factor that affects their enjoyment in sex. For example, Yuen Yuen insisted on having sex in darkness to avoid her partner seeing the scars on her genitals and has to resort to a superstitious reason for this. Karen also insisted on having sex in dim light and forbade her partner from inserting his finger into her vagina to avoid him reaching the end of her vagina.

Another observation related to sexual pleasure is the claim of absence of genital pleasure in the subjects. It seems that all subjects were willing to put up with the absence of genital pleasure in sexual relationships, and they saw their existing sexual relationships as mainly a way to foster feelings and intimacy. This seems to go with the dominant thinking that many MtF are found to be asexual as for them sexual activity is based not so much on sexual needs. However, we question whether such association of MtF to asexuality is too simplistic and reductionistic, as our subjects admitted to having sexual desires and practicing sex and regular masturbatory activity before taking hormonal

treatment and SRS. Maybe this is more about the limitations of intervention and surgical technologies than being an inherent characteristic of MtF. Moreover, it seems to assume an extremely narrow and fundamentally materialistic conception of desire that excludes the enjoyment of intimacy and connectedness with one's partner.

A second point to be noted is that the subjects hold a rather firm and unyielding binaristic understanding of gender, sexual identities, practices and attitudes about the gendered body, which largely conforms to the dominant sex-role stereotyping that females are born to be gentle, sensitive, reserved while males are born to be tough, impersonal, aggressive, something that extended to the realm of sex. This is evident not only from the ways our subjects ascribed appearance and mannerism as either female and male, but also notably that the sexual pleasure experienced by female and male were psychological and physical respectively. This calls to mind Chiland's query that "[h]e-now-she has a different kind of orgasm from what he-now-she experienced with a penis and ejaculation, and that is apparently enough to justify them – period. Every individual's sex life is a mystery to everyone else, and satisfaction in intercourse is unpredictable." (Chiland 2003:110) Would it be that our subjects may have a tendency to categorize the possible change in sexual pleasure, and experiences that maybe dissimilar from their past, into the "female-only" domain?

This point is related to our third observation, that the subjects tended to hold rather critical views about the rigid, hegemonic, patriarchal definitions of maleness and masculinity, yet at the same time this critical attitude is absent in the definitions of

femaleness and femininity that they're trying to acquire. What we are referring to here is not simply the general shared meanings for sex and gender, which are to a large extent "essential" for all of us to be acceptable social actors, but an essentialist thinking of what a "real woman" should possess. What is worth our reflection here is the moving from one definite gender role that the subjects found oppressive to another definite gender role that they found liberating, which on the surface seems to be a move from one confinement to another confinement, a move against the prevailing effort in the study of sex and gender to destabilize gender dichotomies. Yet, we deem criticizing the subjects for reinforcing the gender ideologies an unfair imposition as they too are real people suffering from the confining gendered structure as most of us are. The subjects' concept of what a "real" woman is lies very much on how "woman" is being imagined, or possibly portrayed in a range of discursive contexts. So to change we must strive on to scrutinize and change from the root of the problem – the established binary logic of our society and interrogates its restrictions and regulation on our understanding of sexuality and desires. The recent departure in the discourse of transsexualism from the notion of stable identifications may continue to shed light on this aspect.

Jane M. Ussher points out the danger and limitations of the perennial material-discursive divide in the discussion of sexuality, and we would like to draw on this as our closing remarks. Ussher rightly points out that the split between analyses of the material and discursive body is a false divide and an inappropriate separation, and that to understand phenomena such as sexuality "we need to examine both bodily processes and practices, and the ways in which these processes and practices are constructed in the realm of the

symbolic. We cannot separate the two.” (Ussher 1997:7) This preliminary research on transsexualism reminds us of the importance of the physical body as a material presence in our understanding of sexuality instead of seeing both the body and sexuality as mere objects constructed within socio-cultural discourses. By interviewing individuals about their experiences, and examining the discursive constructions of that experience, we hope to be able to address the reciprocal relationship between discourse and its material context.

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