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

The act of cross-dressing in the theatrical and cinematic traditions has been consistently employed as a method of transgressing and thus exploring the limits of the boundaries in gender but also in identity and selfhood. In some cases, these transgressions were a response to prevailing institutional, cultural and social restrictions of the day. This essay attempts to address the cross-dressing performances of Brigitte Lin (more widely known as Lin Ching-hsia to East Asian audiences) in the context of the *wuxia* performance tradition, its sense of spectacle and the Hong Kong film culture of which the actress is an integral part. It aims not at a deductive outcome, of whether gender manipulation and ambiguity in the films possess any implications for a culture's social practices, but instead attempts to investigate the act of cross-dressing as a *performative* act, locating its enactment as the site on which arguments of (trans)gender identity, social expectation, and so on, may converge. As Annette Kuhn puts it, "On a cultural level, crossdressing may be understood as a mode of performance in which—through play on a disjunction between clothes and body—the socially constructed nature of sexual difference is foregrounded and even subjected to comment: what appears natural, then, reveals itself as artifice."¹

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

Alisa Solomon makes a significant distinction between male-to-female cross-dressing and female-to-male cross-dressing, arguing that “men dressed as women often *parody* gender, women dressed as men, on the other hand, tend to *perform* gender.”³ This is borne out by the parodic performances of Tony Curtis in *Some Like It Hot* (Billy Wilder, USA, 1959), Robin Williams in *Mrs. Doubtfire* (Chris Columbus, USA, 1993) and Dustin Hoffman in *Tootsie* (Sydney Pollack, USA, 1982), although there are some exceptions such as Jaye Davidson’s performance in Neil Jordan’s *The Crying Game* (UK, 1992). In contrast, although *Calamity Jane* (David Butler, USA, 1953) and *Victor, Victoria* (Blake Edwards, USA, 1982) can be considered comedies, the performances of Doris Day and Julie Andrews are not in themselves parodic. Solomon argues that “as the presumed universal, maleness is more invisible in its artificiality.... Precisely because ‘man’ is the presumed universal, and ‘woman’ the gussied up other, drag changes meaning depending on who’s wearing it, depending on which way the vestments are crossed.”⁴ To put it simply, because the semiotics

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

Thus, the liberation of gender, or “moments of *jouissance*”⁷ as Kuhn puts it, in cross-dressing performances takes place on the level of the performance, rather than on the body of the performer, and the audience is often left in no doubt of the performer’s “true” identity.⁸ This perception, which Judith Butler argues “is naturalized knowledge, even though it is based on a series of cultural inferences, some of which are highly erroneous,”⁹ remains true of Lin’s transgender roles, in spite of their attempts to blur the boundaries.

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

The supernatural change demands that he endeavour exactly a corporeal alteration of castration, and because she/he lingers in this ‘borderless and disturbing’ in-between space of masculine and feminine while in transit, the final transformation does not make Fong [Asia] a bona fide woman. Instead, Fong becomes the undifferentiated abject, a monster—and even worse, a ‘monstrous feminine.’¹⁰

I would, however, hesitate to assert that the price for the power is his “manhood” in the conventional sense, for although Asia undergoes a castration, her attainment in physical and metaphysical prowess is exponential. Castration, in the realm of Hong Kong martial arts cinema, denotes not so much the lack of power, but a radical means of achieving it, as evidenced by the diabolical villainy of the near-omnipotent eunuchs of the royal court in many of these films; or rather, it can be seen as both embodying power and its lack, as it appears to empower mostly villains, who then pose as emasculating threats to the hero.¹¹ At the same time, any accusation directed at Asia of monstrosity and demonic abjection must take into account the transformation of Ying’s father, who although refusing castration (he

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

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

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

Ling meets Asia, his interest in Ying is apparently genuine, though put aside in the interest of finding Ying's father who has been imprisoned by Asia. At the end of the film, even with Asia's "death," Ying's communal loyalties finally win out over her love for Ling and she helps Ling escape with Kiddo. Ying, in this sense, is the sacrificial woman, abandoning her desire for duty, and risking her life for her lover's safety. However, Ling leaves not with the memory of Ying's sacrifice, nor with the pleasure of Kiddo's company, but with the memory of Asia/Cici, the woman he has lost. In spite of Asia's monstrous transformation, Chu argues that because of the femininity of Brigitte Lin, the actress, and in all likelihood, the audience's knowledge of her role in Hong Kong film culture as a desirable woman, "the viewer is set up to want the Ling and Fong [Asia] characters to be together."¹³ However, it must be noted that Ling's memory of Asia is mediated by the memory of his sexual encounter with Cici (played by Candice Yu), of whose identity he remains unaware. Cici is the substitute, the "stand-in" for Asia's womanhood, and as such, the "truth" of Asia's body (is it male or female?) remains undisclosed both to Ling and the audience. Closure is denied and, as Chu puts it, "we too are left forever with the undifferentiated subject."¹⁴

This lack of closure, making for a compelling sequel, also underscores the limits of gender determinism in the social construction of identity. The "problem" of Asia's identity, thus, must be taken in the context of the other roles in the film. The question is not of whether Asia is male or female, neither or both, but given that the other characters themselves do not provide any concrete answers, whether the question is even relevant at all. Asia's gender ambivalence refuses bipolarity but also offers no solutions by way of a third option. This argument is advanced and explored in the sequel, *The East is Red*, where gender identity is no longer in question, but that of identity itself. The narrative of *The East is Red* seeks not the vanquishing of Asia the Invincible, but the defining of who she might be. Ironically, Asia's existential crisis serves not so much to reveal her identity, as to problematise it further

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

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

“William the Conqueror” or “Attila the Hun.” Once the Spaniards begin to invoke her name in place of God, she changes her title to *Dongxifang Bubai*, or, literally, “the undefeated East-West.” In encompassing East and West—i.e. the world—the role of the undefeated East is rendered irrelevant, since East and West are now one and the same. So rather than ending on a triumph, this is the point of Asia’s downfall. Having gained and simultaneously lost her identity, she seeks to have it validated by Snow, who at this point in the film is near death. Chu argues that “it is Snow’s human love, affection, and worship that is the key to proving Fong’s [Asia’s] humanity.”¹⁵ Perhaps so, but even at the very end, Asia’s last demand of Snow is “I have to take you back.” Snow, like Ying, is the self-sacrificial female in this sequel, but unlike Ying, her sacrifice is one of complete supplication. Rendered frail and helpless, she is the prize to be fought for between “men.” And the victory for each is inconclusive. Although Koo, the *de facto* male “hero” of the film, the government official set on defeating Asia, manages to “win” Snow from Asia for a time, she dies shortly after. Asia then snatches Snow’s corpse up in a sail and they fly off to “start over.” Of course, the victory is pyrrhic, and the last image is not of the steely-eyed Asia the Invincible, but of a markedly softer image of *Brigitte Lin*, tears streaming and long hair flowing behind her. It could be said that Asia is humanised more by the *actress’s* femininity, than by any act of redemption of the character in the narrative.

As in *Swordsman II*, Asia’s identity in *The East is Red* is better read in comparison with the other characters. Snow presents an intriguing case. Unlike Kiddo in *Swordsman II*, who is effectively sexless (ironically played by beauty queen, Michelle Reis), Snow’s sexuality is brought to the fore time and again, both when she is in male drag and when she is dressed in female clothes. *The East is Red* takes the representation of gender and sexuality further than its predecessor. Where Ling’s physical encounter with Cici-as-Asia is shrouded in darkness, masking Cici’s identity, Snow-as-Asia’s sex scene with her concubine, complete

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

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

It would make no sense, then, to define gender as the cultural interpretation of sex, if sex itself is a gendered category. Gender ought not to be conceived merely as the cultural inscription of meaning on a pre-given sex (a juridical conception); gender must also designate the very apparatus of production whereby the sexes themselves are established. As a result, gender is not to culture as sex is to nature; gender is also the discursive/cultural means by which 'sexed nature' or 'a natural sex' is produced and established as 'pre-discursive,' prior to culture, a politically neutral surface *on which* culture acts.¹⁹

As such, I am less certain that the character of Asia the Invincible is finally able to cross or transgress the bounds of gender bipolarity, at least not without cost. Her "humanity" (or sentimental weakness, depending on how you look at it) appears to have been achieved at the expense of a vast struggle between *anima* and *animus*, or what Carl Jung describes as the feminine embedded in the unconscious of man, and the masculine in the unconscious of woman, respectively,²⁰ in which there appears to be no winner.

The construction of the cross-dressed woman as "not-man" also surfaces in *New Dragon Inn*. Brigitte Lin once again plays the role of a martial swordswoman travelling in male guise. Unlike the gender ambivalence of Asia the Invincible, Lin's character in *New Dragon Inn*, Qiu Mo Yan, is all-female, sentimental and lovelorn, though externally cool and determined. Here, her foil is the mistress of the inn, Jin Xiang Yu (played by Maggie Cheung), who is not just her opposite, but almost could be read as Lin's character turned inside out. Jin's sexual manipulation of men for personal gain is wholly opportunistic and unsentimental. At the end of the film, the triumph belongs to her, not the hero Zhou Huai An, who rides off into the sunset, dejected at the death of Qiu. In the final scene, Jin makes an active decision to burn down the inn and seek out Zhou (played by Tony Leung Kar-Fai). The relationship between the two women blurs the gender divide not in terms of the body—in the *Swordsmen* films, the mystery of Asia's body—but in terms of costume and behaviour. In

their first encounter, Jin attempts to flirt with Qiu but soon realises that she is a woman. Far from losing interest, she spies on Qiu who is attending to her bath. For the viewer at this point, although only presented with glimpses of bare shoulder and leg, it is clear that Qiu/Brigitte Lin is female, and this is confirmed by Jin complimenting her figure. The mock tussle between the women, resulting in one trying to disrobe the other, does not advance the plot in any way, but serves to establish a relationship between the two in the audience's mind. In attempting to strip Qiu in a symbolic effort to strip her of her disguise, the inn-keeper ends up herself being stripped, and her dress being transferred to the body of the other. In naked defiance, she sits on the roof of the inn and sings her presence to the desert night. In the meantime, Qiu remains in her room dressed in Jin's clothes. The transfer of vestments from one character to the other titillates the audience with hints of the naked body beneath, the body that is to be the final revelation of gender identity. There is never any ambiguity, though, about the sexuality of either Jin or Qiu, only one that is manifested differently. A nude Jin taunts Qiu and asks if she is still a virgin, while the clothed Qiu mutters that all Jin can think about is men. In a sense, it can be read as the Madonna/whore dialectic in Chinese clothes, except that the whore in this instance is an earthy female (there are even references to her menstrual cycle), and the Madonna, an icy, cool figure dressed in men's clothes.

Yet, although Jin wears a peasant skirt, and Qiu men's trousers beneath a long tunic in the convention of Chinese historical drama, the relative lack of differentiation in their upper-body dress, a kimono-style robe tied round the waist, with one collar flap over the other, stresses the need to read figure behaviour when allocating gender identity. Jin's hair is even done up in a relatively masculine style of a top-knot with a band around the forehead, and yet no one will mistake her for a man. In fact, it is the male response to her coquettish behaviour that serves to define their masculinity for her. When Qiu does not look at her, Jin concludes immediately that she is a man, since no one who is a man would fail even to glance at Jin.

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

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

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

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

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

I would like to offer yet another mode of reading through the lens of Hong Kong film culture and its preoccupation with spectacle. It is, however, not quite the pleasure-making, verisimilitude-based spectacle we have come to expect from Hollywood. It is a spectacle of possibilities, rather, one that is ever based on the hypothetical question that Tsui Hark alludes to in the excerpt above, the question of "What if...?" The spontaneous, kinetic energy—what has been called "guerrilla film-making"—of Hong Kong cinema stems in part from the

entrepreneurial, free-market conditions that propelled the Hong Kong film industry to its productive peak in the 1980s.²⁵ To a certain extent, these conditions supported and maintained, even thrived on snap-fingered time frames from conception to execution, often with production schedules of forty days or less. Hong Kong film culture is less concerned with the visual believability that Hollywood goes to expensive lengths to preserve, but more with precisely stretching the boundaries of plausibility. “What if...?” concepts are taken to the extreme: what if there were such a thing as a “man/woman/man,” as Tsui Hark put it, how would s/he have sex? Would one know if one had sex with such a being? David Hwang asks those questions in *M. Butterfly* to explore the extent of Guillemard’s self-delusion, taking the audience along with his deception until the very end. *Swordsman II*, however, cues the audience to its very *implausibility* from the start—it is Lin Ching-hsia on the screen, the shy girl from over fifty Taiwanese romances that came before: there is no escaping that fact. Hong Kong film culture has no interest in deceiving the audience with an illusion, in pretending that what is on screen is a slice of life, not a mere artefact; quite the opposite, it tends to luxuriate in drawing the audience in by complicity, sometimes even against the knowledge of the characters in the film.

This is true of the more serious dramas, such as the *Infernal Affairs* series (Hong Kong, 2002–2003), where the traditional duplicity of the undercover cop/hood is taken to its dialectical extreme by pitting one headlong against the other, as well as the silliest comedies, such as the over-the-top antics of Stephen Chow’s *Shaolin Soccer* (Hong Kong, 2001), where the unlikely partnership of Shaolin martial arts and soccer is forged. In other words, while boundaries may be stretched by using the medium to explore real-life issues (of gender politics and the like), they are also just as likely to stretch boundaries of *cinematic convention* by actively acknowledging it as a commodity for consumption: a new idea is a new product to be tested on the audience. If it works, a dozen films in the same ilk may be reproduced. If

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

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

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

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

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

At this juncture, it is thus necessary to address Lin’s popularity and status gained from the films she made in Taiwan and Hong Kong. Her status finds few equivalents in the Western context, although Akiko Tetsuya has described her as Julia Roberts, Audrey Hepburn, Grace Kelly, Marlene Dietrich and Elizabeth Taylor rolled into one.²⁹ Discovered as a teenager in Taiwan, Lin had become an overnight star by her second film in 1974. Between 1972 and 1979 she made over fifty films, mostly sentimental, romantic films, alongside two well-known male leads, Charles Chin and Chin Han. Exhausted, she left for America and returned in the early 1980s to relatively obscure films in the same vein as her early ones.³⁰ In 1983, Tsui Hark, a dynamic and radical filmmaker at the time, is credited with not only reviving her career, but also reinventing her screen persona, beginning with *Zu: Warriors from a Magic Mountain* (Hong Kong, 1983), which first cast her in a martial arts historical fantasy, and leading to, among others, *Peking Opera Blues* (HK 1986), which first cast her in a cross-dressing role. The *Swordsman* films and *New Dragon Inn* followed shortly after. In fact, the success of *Swordsman II* spawned sixteen more films in two and a half years,³¹ in many of which she played variations of her Asia and Qiu Mo Yan personas, i.e. as the steely-eyed cross-dressing heroine. It is mainly this visibility that Wong Kar-wai addresses in *Ashes of Time*, Lin’s last film to date.

Ashes of Time explores the futility of trying to fix time, to hold on either to the past, the present or even the future, contributing to a sense of nostalgia and loss. The film is Wong's re-working of a well-known martial arts story by Jin Yong called *The Eagle-Shooting Heroes*.³² Written for serial publication, the well-known story has been continually adapted for film and television, and its characters and plots are well known to Hong Kong and other East Asian audiences. However, what Wong does with the action-filled martial arts genre is to turn it into a treatise on time, emphasising not the action in the film but the interminable waiting in between. So each character waits in his isolation for a fulfilment that never comes, and as in Wong's other films, love in the film is often unrequited and each character is in love with the next one, and that one with the next one, the displacements and disappointments playing out like a game of tag, which eventually ends in a stalemate. It is what Ackbar Abbas refers to as a "skewing of affectivity,"³³ best embodied by the character/s that Lin plays, the figures of Murong Yang and Murong Yin, twin brother and sister. *Ashes of Time* plays on the martial arts film convention of women playing men, but also draws on the audience's knowledge of Lin's other roles as gender-ambiguous figures in other films like *Swordsman II*, *The East is Red*, and *New Dragon Inn*. In *Ashes of Time*, there is an initial ambiguity about whether they are two characters or one with a split personality.

Cinematically, the conundrum of the dual identity played by a single actress is brought to a head when Murong Yang (the male twin) hires Ouyang Feng to kill Huang Yaoshi for jilting his sister, Murong Yin. However, before Ouyang Feng can do the job, Murong Yin turns up and offers to double his fee if he could kill her brother, Murong Yang, instead. Like a double-handed shootout in a John Woo film, the characters are caught in a stalemate, where, as Abbas puts it, "[n]othing can happen, and action moves elsewhere. In *Ashes of Time*, the affective reveals a problematic space controlled by a system of double binds where no real action can take place."³⁴ In other words, the double take has given rise to the double bind.

This is *Waiting for Godot* without the jokes, where the audience is invited not to laugh at the characters but to join them in the endless wait for fulfilment. At the same time, the realms of the fictional and the real are conflated into the figure of Lin's character/s. The stalemate is not only caused by the twin brother and sister wanting to kill each other but by the audience knowing that there is only one of Brigitte Lin Ching-hsia. It is a perfect moment in gender theatricality identified by Siu Leung Li's account of the history of cross-dressing in the Chinese performative tradition: "classical writings on acting imply that the perfect performer-in-role is one who transcends the boundary of the real and the fictional; or in other words, blends real life and playacting."³⁵ At the same time, the sexual ambiguity is over-written by a more conventional essentialism, borne out by Li's discussion of how classical theories of cross-dressing on the stage were also "vested in the binary oppositions of form/appearance [*xing*] on the one hand, and essence/psyche [*shen*] on the other."³⁶ Li argues that the cross-dressing actors and actresses "were essentialists in that they believed in the essence of a biological sex as given;"³⁷ their performances were in fact geared towards inhabiting the essence or psyche of the other sex. This drive towards essentialism contains what Li identifies as a "hidden contradiction," which one could argue is materially expressed in Wong Kar-wai's characterisation of the Murong twins: "If 'essence' is transferable and reiterative, it has to be redefined and understood in a different way, and this iterality reinforces gender as a performance act—even the 'essence' can be performed."³⁸

At the same time, this "essence" of gender taken to its most particular is also the "essence" of Lin's prominence as actress of her own time. Nearly every interview with her colleagues and contemporaries conducted by Akiko Tetsuya in her self-published book on Lin cites the actress as variously "unique" and "iconic;" Stan Lai, another director, refers to her as "a niche."³⁹ To affirm or dispute what is effectively a subjective claim is ultimately futile. It may be that the fact that she is still *believed* to be so more than ten years since she

made her last film, is in part a contributing factor to the decline in the genre in Hong Kong. As Abbas notes, *Ashes of Time* “does not obviously parody or ironize the conventions of the genre. Rather, the implications of the genre are followed through to their catastrophic conclusions, giving us in the end the complex continuum of a blind space and a dead time.”⁴⁰ I have argued elsewhere⁴¹ that Ang Lee’s *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, which Hunt sees as a successor to Lin’s films,⁴² has attempted to revive the genre and perhaps even to reclaim some of its old glamour. Why and how Lin’s glamour is attained from her cross-dressing/transgender roles is perhaps not too dissimilar from the androgynous figure Marlene Dietrich often cut. I do not believe that these transgender formations on screen necessarily “de-naturalise” bipolar gender distinctions into what Judith Roof calls “The Unnameable,”⁴³ though they certainly raise questions about its viability. Annette Kuhn likewise notes:

Just how transgressive such a strategy can finally be when deployed through the conventions of dominant cinema is arguable. But perhaps the pleasure of popular films of sexual disguise does nevertheless lie in their capacity to offer, at least momentarily, a vision of fluidity of gender options; to provide a glimpse of ‘a world outside the order normally seen or thought about’—a utopian prospect of release from the ties of sexual difference that bind us into meaning, discourse, culture.⁴⁴

At the same time, transgender performance introduces a “third” dimension which, as Marjorie Garber argues, “questions binary thinking and introduces crisis—a crisis which is symptomized by both the overestimation and the underestimation of cross-dressing,” but is nonetheless a “mode of articulation, a way of describing a space of possibility.”⁴⁵ What these *wuxia* fictions achieve, *spectacularly*, by placing a well-known and glamorous actress into an androgynous role is precisely to walk that delicate gender divide, occasionally venturing to dip their toes into the water on either side.

¹ Annette Kuhn, *The power of the image: Essays on representation and sexuality* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), 49.

² See Leon Hunt, *Kung Fu Cult Masters: From Bruce Lee to Crouching Tiger* (London: Wallflower, 2003), 136.

³ Alisa Solomon, "It's never too late to switch: Crossing towards power," in Lesley Ferris, ed., *Crossing the Stage: Controversies on Cross-dressing* (London: Routledge, 1993), 145.

⁴ Solomon, 145.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Jean-Louis Ginibre, *Ladies or Gentlemen: A Pictorial History of Male Cross-dressing in the Movies* (New York: Filipacchi, 2005), 8.

⁷ Kuhn, 56.

⁸ Ibid., 60.

⁹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990; New York: Routledge, 1999), xxii.

¹⁰ Rolanda Chu, "Swordsman II and *The East is Red*: The 'Hong Kong film,' Entertainment and Gender" (*Bright Lights Film Journal* 13, 1994, http://www.brightlightsfilm.com/31/hk_swordsman1.html [accessed 30 March 2006])

¹¹ From a comment by the editor of this issue, Leon Hunt.

¹² King Hu is credited with directing this film, although he left the project before it was completed. Directorial responsibilities ended up being shared by Ching Siu-tung and Tsui Hark, among others. The Hong Kong Movie Database (www.hkmdb.com) cites no fewer than six names under the category of director.

¹³ Chu, "Swordsman II and *The East is Red*."

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Jean E. Howard, "Cross-dressing, the theatre and gender struggle in early modern England," 36.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Chu, "Swordsman II and *The East is Red*."

¹⁹ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 11.

²⁰ Carl Jung's use of the terms is further fleshed out by his wife, Emma Jung in *Animus and Anima* (1955; Continuum, 1985).

²¹ Tsui Hark is listed as the producer of the *Swordsman* films, as well as *New Dragon Inn*, rather than the director, but it is well-known that he tends to have a fair amount of directorial control in the films that he "produces."

²² Akiko Tetsuya, *The Last Star of the East: Brigitte Lin Ching Hsia and Her Films* (Los Angeles: Akiko Tetsuya, 2005), 191.

²³ Chu, "Swordsman II and *The East is Red*."

²⁴ Hunt, 135.

²⁵ See Stephen Teo's account of the Hong Kong film history in *Hong Kong Cinema: The Extra Dimensions* (London: British Film Institute, 1997).

²⁶ Peggy Phelan, "Crisscrossing cultures" in Lesley Ferris, ed., *Crossing the Stage: Controversies on Cross-dressing* (London: Routledge, 1993), 156–57.

²⁷ Siu Leung Li, *Cross-dressing in Chinese Opera* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2003), 89.

²⁸ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 33.

²⁹ Tetsuya, viii.

³⁰ A capsule history can be found in Tetsuya's book.

³¹ Tetsuya, 140.

³² Jin Yong is sometimes known as Louis Cha and the title of his work is alternatively known as *The Condor-Shooting Heroes* or *The Vulture-Shooting Heroes*. The *Swordsman* films are also adapted from novels by him, but the stories have been substantially altered.

³³ Ackbar Abbas, *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1997), 60.

³⁴ Abbas, 61.

³⁵ Li, 158.

³⁶ Li, 165.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid., 166.

³⁹ Tetsuya, 167.

⁴⁰ Abbas, 58–59.

⁴¹ See Felicia Chan, “*Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*: Cultural Migrancy and Translatability” in Chris Berry, ed., *Chinese Films in Focus: 25 New Takes* (London: BFI, 2003), 56–64.

⁴² Hunt, 136.

⁴³ See Judith Roof, “Is there sex after gender? Ungendering/‘The Unnameable’” (*The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association* 35.1, Spring 2002), 50–67.

⁴⁴ Kuhn, 50.

⁴⁵ Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992), 11.