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Changing the Angle of Perception: Making Meaning for Identity Performance in China and on the Internet

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Changing the Angle of Perception: Making Meaning for Identity Performance in China and on
the Internet

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature
of Bard College

by
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Introduction

Each morning I spend about twenty excruciating minutes trying on different shirts, pants, and jewelry combinations, searching for the perfect outfit that will accurately express both how I feel that day and how I want to be perceived. Some of that indecision is grounded in wanting to feel and look good, maybe get a compliment to satisfy some vain desire or more realistically, invalidate my insecurities. It is a process of constructing an outward aesthetic, one that, if executed successfully, will inform those around me with an idea of “who I am”, what I like, what to expect from me. Some days I choose to wear a skirt, wanting to emphasize a greater sense of femininity that I might feel. Other days, baggy pants and a T-shirt publicize a deterrence from that femininity, hiding my body and often, myself all together. Everyone whom I become romantically involved with tells me that I’m cute; I’ve been counting down the days until I can get a big, threatening dragon tattooed on my shoulder in the hopes that “cute” will no longer be the first adjective out of their mouths, maybe to be instead replaced with something along the lines of “badass”. It would be remiss to say that my visual Asianness has nothing to do with this, as the hypersexual and infantilizing stereotypes of Asian women embed themselves into my physicality. The inseparability between my gender and race defines the means of my identity performance as I negotiate the conflicting personal and social perceptions within different temporal, cultural, and political contexts. My interest in the topic of this project has emerged from this personal exploration of my identity as a mixed-race Chinese American, as a woman, and how the social implications of such realities have influenced the expression of my identity.

The performance of one’s identity - the everyday decisions that people make based on emotions, social situation, values, etc. - is highly personal in that it changes constantly. What

motivates those decisions and modes of personal expression varies from person to person, as ownership of one's identity belongs to the self and the self alone. Yes, we look to others for inspiration, comparison, cues to relate the self to others as distinctive or alike. Such a comparison is circumstantially both detrimental and affirming to the self, representing the variance inherent in factorial negotiation of which makes us individuals. While highly personal and thus authentic to the self, the context within which a person is situated is important to consider in understanding the powers that govern both external and internal understanding. As such, social constructs that produce the criteria for understanding and social intelligibility constrict the subject within the boundaries of what the structural power deems acceptable. However, if we look closer into the intricacies of expression that define the subject's individuality - the notion of *individuality* itself embodies the discourse of a greater, reigning power - community may be found in resistance to and subversion of such constructs. While I yearn for a world where the expression of subversive identity is unconstricted by the discursive operations of intelligibility, I celebrate the community found in what the discursive powers deem to be the unlivable, unrecognizable, and alien bodies. The bodies that are deemed unintelligible and a threat to the hegemonic powers of dominance, yet in themselves emulate the fluidity of meaning, and thus provide a greater understanding of selfhood that such powers could never reach. In this project, I aim to explore expressions of identity that subvert the norms that institutions, discourses, and cultures have constructed for intelligibility, yet in their subversion highlight the mutability of meaning to produce a lived body that is recognizable within discursive constructs.

By nature of living in a world where understanding the human experience renders the expression of identity inescapable from questions and criticisms as to why and how the subject

constructs their identity, this project is a product of my own personal wonderings of the process for creating personal and social understanding. While the scope of this project is broad, I use literary, cinematic, and pop cultural devices situated in the context of both China and America to explore just a few examples of identity performance that reflect the ways political and cultural ideologies inform and are negotiated in the construction of identity. As I approach this topic through the lens of gender and race, it is important to note that by the complex nature of these identity categories, an analysis of how the social meanings and structural inequalities affect the various realities faced by different gender identities and races is unfortunately beyond the scope of this paper. As such, it is not my intention to generalize or devalue the complexities of these realities in leaving them out. Rather, this project aims to provide a few examples of gender expression displayed in selected pieces of Chinese literature and film and racial performance displayed in, yet not limited to the commodification of Asian features online.

Throughout my discussion of the different ways people perform their identity and the codes negotiated in such a performance, I use the term “intelligibility” to describe the objective for successful identity performance. My argument draws upon Judith Butler’s use of the term in her theories on gender performance, specifically for the repetition of discursively prescribed norms necessary for successful performance. What defines this success is the ability to be understood, recognized, and thus *intelligible* to the outsider’s perception, remaining within the defined knowledge accepted by discourse. Furthermore, the notion of subversion that I discuss is intended to describe a type of identity performance that conflicts with the constructed norms designated to gender, yet remain within the boundaries of intelligibility. In other words, the examples of gender performance that I describe as subversive do not cross into the realm of the

unintelligible or abjected, but rather aim to highlight the agency of the subject in negotiating the possibilities of expression within a discursively constructed binary.

In speaking of identity as constructed by the negotiation and perhaps subversion of discursively prescribed norms, I felt it necessary to first debunk the notion of human conventionality by which such norms are dictated. Han Shaogong's novel "A Dictionary of Maqiao" presents us with an example of subversion in the Maqiao people's creation of a distinct system of linguistic understanding. The dictionary is a dictionary of Maqiao and Maqiao only, yet exemplifies language as interpretive and thus unreliable for the confirmation of reality and universal meaning. Through a discussion of this novel, the possibilities for gender subversion within a linguistically constructed binary structure are made known, highlighting determinants of gender as socially and discursively constructed.

The discursive constructs that blur the distinction between gender performance and gender identity are seen in Chen Kaige's "Farewell My Concubine" as the protagonist, Dieyi, struggles to distinguish his life on stage and in the real world and subsequently, his gender identity and the gendered role he performs. Through this blurring of reality and theater and the unresolved question of Dieyi's true gender identity, the unreliability of discourse to confirm reality is exposed. As such, the material body and its linguistically impenetrable experiences - specifically pain - are situated as central to the solidification of knowledge. While the confusion between role performance in the theater and role performance off stage highlights the ingenuity of authenticity of theater performance, it is in the exact presence of the accepted unreal when Dieyi may find agency in feminine identity performance. The juxtaposition of these two texts

introduce the negotiation and internalization of governmentalized power discourses that construct the means necessary for successful role performance.

Such a success, exemplified by these texts as both social intelligibility and fulfillment of social role, is redefined in the context of the internet. Through the body-centered performance of identity seen on TikTok, an internalization of capitalist and neoliberal rationales motivates the adornment of racialized features as beauty attainment and self improvement for digital success. An analysis of racial performance through the foxeye makeup trend informs a new way of the ways the Asian face has crossed geographical and geopolitical boundaries and the production of meaning as mediated through the perception of a Western audience.

In discussing the various modes and understandings of identity performance through pieces of literature, film, and popular culture that traverse temporal and geographical space, we may understand how the objectives of different power structures exemplify meaning as perpetually in motion, produced and negotiated in the performance of selfhood. In establishing the nature of language as fluctuating in meaning and unable to confirm reality through my discussion of the novel, I lay the foundation for understanding the fluidity of gender and the possibility for subversion within a binary structure. As such, the body is seen as a central site upon which the infliction of physical pain initiates a subversion of idealized gender roles while simultaneously functioning to solidify the relations of power that govern discourse. The political and cultural conditions that award success to the instance of a man playing a woman may be related to the similar dynamics of a white subject playing an Asian on social media for online success. Just as the real life and theater roles are blurred in the film, the distinction between the

online persona and the offline subject is blurred, calling into question the importance of genuinity and authenticity when the objective of identity construction is social success.

To support my argument in the first section, I draw on Judith Butler's theories on gender performativity and the erasure of subjectivity within gender performance for the sake of social intelligibility. Working to reject the idea of gender as a natural quality of human conventionality, Butler explains that the presence of subjectivity when subverting gender norms produces discursively unintelligible and abjected bodies. Compensating for this is the presence of personal agency in the ways the subject chooses to perform their gender. By highlighting gender performance as an intentional repetition of norms, the subject has agency in either repeating or subverting these norms. Also important to my discussion is her notion of the heterosexual matrix. The heterosexual matrix is the foundation upon which the intelligibility and stability of the sexed body as natural operates. Upholding the means of intelligibility is a male/female binary structure that relies on heterosexual implications of desire to affirm the success of one's gender performance. While Butler works to denaturalize gender through a rejection of the materiality of the body, I draw from Franscesca Bray's writing to question such a rejection of materiality through the experience of bodily pain. Bray offers an alternative to the hyperliterate assertions of the body, pondering the experiences of the material body that sit outside the reach of discursive expression.

With the understanding that the modes of expression negotiated in identity performance varies among geopolitical, cultural, and ideological context, the first chapter of this project begins by examining the various constructs produced by institutionalized discourses and how they function to design and maintain the criteria for intelligible identity expression. Focusing my

discussion around gender, I will provide an analysis of the characters Brother Wan and Wanyu from Han Shaogong's novel "A Dictionary of Maqiao" and the protagonist of Chen Kaige's film "Farewell My Concubine", Cheng Dieyi, to explore examples of gender expression not only within the binds of discursive constructs, but the possibilities for how such constructs might be subverted. Through my discussion of the Chinese novel, I work to denaturalize the concept of gender through questioning the stability of language to confirm knowledge and reality.

Foundational to my argument is Judith Butler's idea of gender performance to highlight identity as an unfixed process of *becoming*, of which successful repetition of gender norms grants the subject intelligibility. In discussing the selected characters in the novel, the visible body is seen as a central determinant of how one's gender is perceived. While this social perception of gender is predicated on visibility and affirmed by biological assertions, Butler's theory proposes a rejection of the body's materiality, stating rather that the body serves as a site upon which the cultural articulation of performative constructions frame and assign meaning. In denaturalizing the body and rejecting it as independently intelligible, the presumption of discursive structures as unwavering may be debunked, the linguistic fluidity deconstructing the stagnance of cultural conventions upon which identity is conceptualized.

In acknowledging the interpretive fluidity of discourse upon which the construction of identity categories are dependent, I move my discussion towards the role of the body and the material experiences that the linguistic constructions of identity cannot penetrate. Drawing from the instances of corporal punishment that initiate a gendered transformation in "Farewell My Concubine", I ask the question: If the construction of identity categories are dependent on a discourse that intrinsically fluctuates in meaning, how then are categories such as gender

consequently constituted? As seen in the character, Dieyi, the experience of bodily pain initiates a transformation from his masculine identification to a feminine one. The story is set during a time when the political and cultural atmosphere of China actively opposed the subversion of gender roles, making the portrayal and acceptance of a character who visually presents as male yet performs as female a cause for consideration. Thus, I explore the ways pain functions as a mechanism of power that simultaneously deconstructs the discursive understanding of the body and gender while solidifying the gendered associations of dominance and submission. An examination of the process of the character's feminization through bodily pain reveals a gendered layer to the motivations for submission. The idealization of gender roles are imagined in accordance with highly gendered power dynamics of masculine dominance and feminine subordination. The depiction of femininity as embodying the realm of submission sits in opposition to the power dominance of hegemonic masculinity, the female association with absence of power reflecting a patriarchal idealization of gender roles that affirm male power.

In the second chapter of my project, the linguistic and institutionalized forces that work to construct the characteristics and behaviors necessary for intelligible identity performance are materialized within the highly visual arena of the internet. While the internet is often assumed to be an apolitical space, a curated virtual simulation for stimulation, the presented modes for successful expression of selfhood are mediated not only by the discursive constructs of various geopolitical ideologies, but by the highly critical and comparative intricacies of visibility. In this section, I present visibility as central to the performance of identity on the internet, particularly on social media. I will explore the phenomenon of the social media trend on the app, TikTok, where trends come and go at an unprecedented rate and are highly motivated by the prospect of

going viral. Reflecting a rapid circulation of commodified visibility, the temporally fleeting nature of the TikTok trend calls for an examination of the political and theoretical implications that work to construct the visual markers necessary to be performed for the awardance of online success. I explore the conflicts that emerge with the convergence of entertainment for gaining digital capital and the politics of identity categories through the example of the foxeye makeup trend on TikTok. The trend became popular on and off the app yet received an outpour of criticism for the racially-imitative look that the makeup technique produced. It is through the context of this trend that I will examine the commodification of racial features for beauty enhancement and digital capital.

Emphasizing visibility as necessary for identity expression, I propose that beauty attainment is a prominent, even crucial key to gaining digital capital. However, the criteria for who is awarded success is predicated on Eurocentric beauty ideals and thus complicated by reductionist perceptions of racial difference. To contextualize the position and accessibility of racialized subjects to gaining digital capital through beauty attainment, I conduct a historical and theoretical inquiry on how capitalist structures intersect with ideologies of authenticity. The production of a commodified Asian aesthetic as exemplified in the foxeye trend reflects a historical construction of Asianness based on fetishized and exoticized stereotypes of Asian racial and ethnic difference. In examining the social conditions that permeate the Asian American experience, defining Asian features as momentarily desirable on TikTok is seen as downplaying the impact of American racism within the logic of visibility for racial inclusion. To help solidify my argument, I trace the origins of the foxeye trend to the cosmetic surgery procedure of the same name. In confirming the racial origins of the makeup look, the exoticized

commodities of Asian features become subject to ever-changing angles of perception in the highly temporal context of the TikTok trend.

Chapter 1:

Identity Performance in China

Consistent with the trajectory of this project as tracing how the means negotiated for identity performance change within different geopolitical contexts, this section discusses examples of identity performance as displayed in the context of China. The stories told in both the novel and film take place amid the politically tumultuous backdrop of the Chinese Cultural Revolution. The political and cultural ideology in China during this time emphasized the fulfillment of personal and social roles, an aspect of which was the importance of filial piety. In considering the importance of role fulfillment within these aspects of Chinese culture, gender is constructed as another role to be fulfilled for personal and social success. As such, the imagined and promoted criteria for performing masculinity and femininity highlight gender as utilized to affirm the structures of power. Through an examination of the representations of gender in Han Shaogong's novel "A Dictionary of Maqiao" and Chen Kaige's film "Farewell My Concubine" I aim to provide a glimpse into the cultural and discursive constructions of identity within a distinctly Chinese context.

As this project works to explore how external forces - political and cultural institutions, discourses and ideologies - inform personal and social understanding, it is important to consider the temporal context within which a work is produced and how that context subsequently informs the reflection of events portrayed in the work. Both the Chinese novel and film are set in the era of the Cultural Revolution, yet were produced in the 1990s when it was beginning to be acceptable to talk about and critique the era of Mao's leadership. While the two works do not

explicitly convey a negative tone towards the era, the way gender is presented highlights a protection of the ideological powers through a discursive promotion of gender norms. In presenting characters who exemplify a subversion of these gender norms however, the stability of the discursive power to define human conventionality is exposed as non-absolute. The distinction between the historical context reflected in the works and the time during which they were produced draws attention to the dislocation of time. The various ways time is experienced and marked are indicative of the fluctuation of meaning as dependent on a subjective understanding that changes within the context it is produced.

Part 1: Denaturalizing Gender: Performance and Subversion

Han Shaogong's "A Dictionary of Maqiao" is a postmodernist novel that, while novelistic in characteristics of themes and symbolism, departs from the classic form of fiction writing. The novel is a compilation of dictionary entries that define the Maqiao understanding of each word through prosed storytelling of the village people. While some entries are more definitive in style, most tell stories of the lives of the Maqiao people, embedded with philosophical symbolisms that exemplify the ways in which the Maqiao linguistic structure represents their distinct ideologies. The story is told from the perspective of one of China's Educated Youth sent to the countryside for reeducation during the Cultural Revolution. Through the narration of an outsider, emphasis is placed on the uncommon and seemingly absurd logic of their language. When compared to accepted meanings of the mainstream linguistic logic, many of the Maqiao words hold antithetical meanings. For example, the word "awakened", while popularly understood as

becoming conscious from a state of unconsciousness, is understood by the Maqiao people as stupidity. Furthermore, its antonym “asleep” means clever, drawn from the Maqiao people’s own experiences and folklore that inspired the defining of the term. Their distinct system of language, while potentially confusing to the outsider, reflects the histories and experiences of the village and its people. The novel itself is a discourse on language, exemplifying its lethal power as well as its performativity. In their creation of a distinct system of linguistic understanding, the Maqiao people exemplify a subversion of the structural discourses that define meaning as universal and thus absolute. The dictionary is of Maqiao and Maqiao only, yet offers an illustration of language itself as interpretative and unconfirming of reality.

To explore the topic of gender in the novel, I will focus my discussion around two characters introduced in the novel. The first is Brother Wan, who is introduced in the entry titled “Clout”. While described by the narrator as emulating everything associated with a man - authoritative, strong, capable worker - Brother Wan is a woman. The nature of this character’s behavior aligns with the characteristics understood by the Maqiao people and their language as that of a man; she is consequently treated and labeled as such. It is this linguistic and social construction of Brother Wan’s identity that constitutes her gender subversion and my inclusion of her in this section. The second character I discuss is Wanyu, a Maqiao villager introduced throughout a series of dictionary entries to convey his reputation as Maqiao’s best singer but a lowlife womanizer whom few people admired or took seriously. Contrasting the construction of Brother Wan’s gender as determined by others’ perceptions, Wanyu performs his masculinity on his own terms. There is no question of his gender until after his death, when the realization of his castration removes his consideration as a ‘real’ man. As such, my discussion of Wanyu focuses

on the discursive meanings constructed upon his body that determined people's perceptions of him.

In the entry, 'Spirit', of "A Dictionary of Maqiao" Han Shaogong explains that the Maqiao people, above all else, were anxious to affirm human ordinariness; to prove that humans were conventional and followed essential behaviors that defined them as such. Through the structure of their language, rules of societal behavior, and gendered expectations in interpersonal relations, a general understanding for what was 'natural' to humans and how they were intended to function permeated throughout the village. As such, any behavior that deterred from the means of understood conventionality was considered inhuman; derived from the "mysterious shadows of the netherworld, from superhuman forces of heaven or destiny." (Han, 222). This assertion of 'natural' human behavior is not a unique phenomenon to the Maqiao people, as patriarchal societies have long utilized the prescription of a conventional ordinariness inherent in humans as the foundation for imposing structural and psychological inequalities - the codes for intelligible identity performance are subsequently produced. Imperative to the affirmation of human conventionality is what Judith Butler proposes as an essentially heteronormative gender performance. With successful gender performance as necessary for the intelligibility of one's identity, how do we perceive those who stray from the expected lines of behavior? In Han Shaogong's account of the inter-relational happenings of Maqiao, we are thrust into a rural village where unique linguistic definitions not only reimagine the meanings of day to day life, but the conventional gender binary is intrinsically questioned. Drawing from Judith Butler's thoughts on gender and the discourse of subjectivity, the Maqiao citizens, Brother Wan and

Wanyu, serve as analytical devices to explore gendered subjects and the deconstruction of 'natural' gender roles.

Through each dictionary entry in Han Shaogong's "A Dictionary of Maqiao", the lives and ways of thinking of the people of Maqiao is made manifest. The turbulence of the multilayered and unfixed definitions of their dialect - in conversation and often in opposition to mainstream definitions - represents the fluid nature of their identity as such. Their use of language demonstrates the dismantling of a fixed structure of meaning, further emphasizing the effect of discourse upon the construction of identity. Although my intention is not to focus too heavily on the topic of language itself in the novel, the functionality of discourse and the production of such is foundational to understanding its role in the construction of identity categories, specifically gender. The critical point I would like to stress in the discussion of discourse is to distrust its role in relation to confirming reality and knowledge. The Maqiao people's reversal of the meanings of "asleep" and "awakened" for example, may help us loosen our reliance on language as definitive of knowledge and reality. By emphasizing the constantly changing variables in linguistic structure, any assertion of absolute meaning is consequently falsified.

The falsification of absolute meaning in discourse is not to say that knowledge is unimportant, rather it is up for interpretation. This leads us to Judith Butler's thinking on identity as an *effect* of discourse rather than a *cause* of it (Claeys 2007, 43). If the construction of identity categories emerge from a discourse that is intrinsically fluctuating in meaning, the defined conventionality of identity categories such as gender are consequently unfixed; the existence of gender fluidity may be realized. As such, discourse around and about assertions of gender is

institutional, these discourses regulate and impose ways of being. This phenomenon is not confined to affect, it leaches into linguistic and epistemic conventions. As a result, these forcibly imposed gender roles are not victimless, the characters who dare to trouble or skirt these boundaries are not venerated. Rather, they are cast out of discourse, made abject as a result of their transgression. It is the discourse of a false 'natural' that renders the gender non-conformist unintelligible, cast to the outskirts beyond recognition and stripped of their subjectivity (Claeys 2007, 54).

Consistent with the shaping of identity through linguistic and institutional structures, gender in Maqiao is formulated in correspondence with the interpretive nature of its language. The Maqiao vocabulary indirectly prescribes the requirements that dictate the intelligibility of a person and how they may be perceived as a gendered subject. A person's perceived identity is categorized most clearly in the Maqiao understanding of the word "Form". A person's form or character is determined by and can be changed by both internal and external factors, informing others' perception and judgement on who and what that person embodies. The determination of one's form differs between men and women as elements such as wealth, authority, study record, background, and even reproductive capabilities might constitute a man's form. Women on the other hand, most commonly obtain or lose form through men, whether it be her husband or father. Since a woman cannot establish form on her own, when she does so through the attainment of 'clout' or the enactment of authority, she is stripped of her consideration as a woman (Han, 194).

Before we dive into the analysis of Brother Wan and the rejection of her subjectivity as a female, we must first address the idea of gender as a performance and the reliance on successful

enactment of gender for one's intelligibility. In accordance with her claim that identity is unfixed, an active expression of the ways discourse and institutions are made manifest, Judith Butler asserts that gender is not a natural phenomenon that people are born with. Rather, gender is performed and reenacted, a culmination of behaviors and norms that inform how one is perceived in society. Attributing to the discourse on gender, certain norms and characteristics are established that constitute the production of gender performance and gender identity. This is not to say however, that one's gender identity is equivalent to their gender performance. Butler removes personal subjectivity from a passive performer of gender. By preserving agency in the way one chooses to perform their gender, she separates the meaning of performance away from the association of a falsification that is inherent in theater performance, instead claiming that gender performance is an intentional repetition of prescribed norms. In doing so, gender performance is not only rejected as a 'natural' quality and separated from the subject, but the person performing gender maintains their agency in the possibility to subvert the norms or repeat them differently (Claeys 2007, 43). The sheer notion that an unfixed discourse produces gender norms exposes the false characterization of gender as natural. Placing emphasis on the linguistic use of the *production* of such gendered performance inherently enables the possibility of the performer to subvert conventional behaviors.

With the understanding of gender as something that is performed, the introduction of Brother Wan provides an interesting example of the erasure of subjectivity in gender performance. Indicated by the masculine gender identity imposed upon her from the context within which she is introduced, the discursive associations with her performed behaviors render her female subjecthood nullified. Brother Wan is positioned as the only female with "clout", a

quality possessed only by men that implies authority and having the last say. In awarding her with clout, her femininity is stripped away and she is perceived as a man (Han, 192). The word “clout” here serves as the linguistic determinate of the gendered norms that she is performing, its discursive meaning solidifying the definition of a gendered identity. In categorizing her as a man, any subjectivity in her gender performance is erased. Moreover, the ‘clout’ emulated by Brother Wan’s demeanor awarded her with ‘form’, a trait I have previously mentioned as only being accessible to women through their husband or father. By obtaining the gendered characteristics of both ‘clout’ and ‘form’, turbulence arises between her gender performance and her prescribed gender identity, as her preferred gender identity as a woman becomes nullified by the fixed identity determined through discourse. The juxtaposition of her subversion of female gender norms and the fixed discourse of identity renders her personhood unintelligible. Han Shaogong recounts her erased subjectivity in saying:

“She just represented official business, a concept, a symbol called Brother Wan that lacked any flicker of a smile, of emotion, warmth, or understanding, and so to many people she had an unreal quality; if you shut your eyes and thought about her, she was no more than an illusion, as if there, but not there.” (Han, 193).

In looking at the ways in which language limits and even prohibits the existence of a person who does not conform to the discourse that gender performance is an effect of, we may go so far as observing that in addition to Brother Wan’s femininity being erased, so is her entire personhood as such. The boundaries of prescribed gender norms produce a dichotomy of external and internal perceptions of the self, both relinquishing her femininity and prohibiting her from being truly seen as a man because of her material body and the meanings attached to it. Thus, on the

basis that gender is a key component of identity subjectivity, her personhood is rendered unrecognizable, dissolving her into a mere illusion.

In speaking about the erasure of femininity and thus subjectivity with Brother Wan, it is crucial to clarify that the ‘femininity’ in question is one that represents a fixed (and faulted) identity that remains within the binary. It is one that prohibits the diverse realities of feminine identification and further promotes the exclusivity of prescribed gender. In congruence with her assertion that identity is unfixed, Butler explains that the category of “woman” is falsely presumed as a stable category because it is predicated on the notion that gender is produced and maintained by cultural and institutional intersections that deem it ‘natural’. Both femininity and masculinity assume a very specific set of characteristics on the basis of categorical *difference* among humans that are the result of and perpetuated by discourse. Gendered behaviors that are performed outside of the expected gender distinctions or in other words, the binary, are unrecognizable within this discourse.

Brother Wan’s title as “brother” exemplifies the institutionalization of gender discourse within society, a clear example of what Butler stipulates as a manifestation of the effect of a false sense of ‘fixed’ identity. It is the juxtaposition of her gender performance and the fixed idea of identity that constitute Brother Wan’s categorization within the lines of masculinity. If our thinking remains stagnant within the discourse of fixed identity, we may view Brother Wan as a prisoner of the binary, her subjectivity at stake as a consequence of an externally-dictated performance of gender. However, in accordance with my intention to shed light on the ways ‘natural’ gender roles are deconstructed, we may view Brother Wan as a paradigm example of the mobility and fluidity of gender and identity. This is made clear by Judith Butler’s rejection of

gender as fixed masculinity and femininity, as despite Brother Wan's lack of subjectivity, her agency in subverting the prescribed gender roles remains steadfast. Thus, she provides an illustration of how one might consider the mobility of gender performativity away from the binary as well as the detachment of gender from the body (Claeys 2007, 51).

Considering the body's role in how people perceive identity and gender, Butler rejects the material body as independent. Rather, it is a surface that is moulded by performative acts, gestures, and desires that produce an effect of an internal core or substance (Claeys 2007, 57). The discourse around the body and sex is supported by a biological understanding of it as material and therefore inherently 'natural'. Looking back to Han Shaogong's discovery of Brother Wan as female, he writes "Amazed by this, I also went to have a look and saw that Wan Whoever-it-was, squeezed in among a table of men, really had started out life a baby girl." (Han, 191). It is clear here that Brother Wan's masculine performance initiated her *becoming* a gendered subject in opposition to her "starting out life as a baby girl". The inherent 'naturalness' of the sexed body thus creates conflict in the process of self subjectification through gender performance. This conflict may be eliminated in Butler's deconstruction of the materiality of the body through an exploration of where the boundaries of nature and culture begin and end.

In sum, Butler asserts that the material body is made intelligible by how it's framed through the discursive constructs of science that work to naturalize gender and sex (Claeys 2007, 74). Similar to the framing of gender through discourse, the body is socially constructed through the biologically-based designation of a sex at birth. Using the example of intersexed children, Butler makes the claim that the variation of physical attributes exposes how the body is not an absolute indicator of sex, but rather a template upon which gender and sex are performatively

enacted (Claeys 2007, 57). There are a few constructions that promote the solidification of the body's naturalization in relation to gender performance and most prominently, to sex. What must be clarified however is Butler's distinction of 'sex' from 'the body'. She does so by highlighting the discursive power of sex that emerges from the biological assertion that outward genitalia is the determinate of one's sex, thus naturalizing the discourse around it (Claeys 2007, 56). In deconstructing the naturalization of sex, the materiality of the body may be called into question through the notion that, without the cultural articulation of performative constructions such as sex and gender, the body itself is not independently intelligible (Claeys 2007, 77).

An Example of Butler's questioning of how the material body is made intelligible is Wanyu in "The Dictionary of Maqiao". Wanyu is introduced as a lowlife who was often found in the presence of many women, not in a romantic way, but through occupation and his personal desire to ignite laughter or anger from his words, a sort of entertainment for the women. Physically, Wanyu deterred from popularly understood masculine characteristics, his voice high and shrill and his body practically hairless. At the time of his death, it was revealed to the villagers that he had been castrated and thus lacked a penis. This aspect of Wanyu is what draws our attention to the relationship between the body and gender performance. His heightened performance of masculine gender behaviors is an intentional adoption of identity through which his 'non-male' biological physique is rendered obsolete. In the dictionary entry "Ligelang", Wanyu is described as consistently inserting himself into the matters of women, delighted at the villager's consideration of him as "ligelang", a word used to describe lovers talk (Shaogong, 65). His performance of undying determination and adoration of women thus affirmed his masculinity, serving as a prominent indicator of his gender performance, a maintenance of his

idealized masculine self. It was only after his death (when he could no longer perform his gender and adopt this identity) that he was stripped of his masculinity and considered as not a “real” man (Han, 69). If we view Wanyu’s intense performance of masculinity as a sort of compensation for his lack of male genitalia, Judith Butler’s theory of the heterosexual matrix facilitates yet another understanding of the conflict of identity that arises from the naturalization of the body as indicative of gender.

According to Butler, the heterosexual matrix is a phenomenon embedded in the binary system of male/female and operates on the surface of the materialized body (Claeys 2007, 75). Imperative to this is the necessary opposition to homosexuality that drives an overperformance of one’s gender and implications of desire for the purpose of identity formation. The body comes into play here through the heterosexual opposition of sexes and their reproductive capabilities, relying on those biological characteristics to initiate a gender identity. In other words, the heterosexual matrix asserts that both the sexed body and successful masculine and feminine performance is imperative proof of heterosexuality, emphasizing that same-sex desirability ‘panics’ the established gender order (Claeys 2007, 80). It is within the heterosexual matrix that the binary of male/female is naturalized and the stability of sex as ‘natural’ is made intelligible. Thus, in the case of Wanyu, the intense expression of desiring women helped solidify his position as a man despite his “non-male” physicality.

Wanyu’s body is only made intelligible through the discourse around sex that is produced by the heterosexual matrix. It is through his castration that we may deconstruct the association of the body from gender performance in the formation of identity, thus dismantling the discourse of the body and sex as natural indicators of gender. Bodies are contoured by the cultural structures

of sex and gender rather than shape them, therefore Wanyu's lack of a penis does not inhibit his masculine gender performance. It is only after his death and the realization of his castration that renders him emasculated, calling into question his intention for such a gender performance. If we consider Wanyu's gender performance in tandem with the heterosexual matrix, we might assume that his intense adoration and self-sacrifice for women was to compensate for his loss of "manhood". It must be clarified however, that this assumption only arises with the knowledge of his castration and the villagers' rejection of his masculinity as such. Subsequently, it is *because* of the heterosexual matrix that allowed him to embody the masculine, thus demonstrating the unintelligibility of his body as an independent indicator of masculinity. Without offering a resolution for the question of Wanyu's intention in his gender performance, I think it is important to offer an alternative standpoint from Butler's rejection of body materiality in shaping identity. In discussing bodily pain, Francesca Bray proposes the existence of bodily experiences that lay beyond the reach of discourse. She questions popular feminist theory that dismisses the role of material reality in shaping identity because of the physical experiences that language cannot reach (Bray 2005, 301). In thinking about Wanyu's performance of such a heterosexual display of masculinity, it would be remiss to disregard the material reality of his physical state and its possible impact on his self perception.

When thinking about the processes through which humans define what is normal and natural in the construction of identity categories, discourse is a powerful tool through which structures and ideas are devised. As such, these structures are presumed as unwavering and natural, governing the multitudinous cultural conventions upon which we understand identity. While these conventions are commonly assumed as stagnant, "A Dictionary of Maqiao" provides

us with exemplary characters who embody the exact linguistic fluidity that work to deconstruct the naturalization of identity categories. Through the example of Brother Wan, absolute meaning and the notion of fixed identity is called into question in her active subversion of female gender performance. The mobility of gender away from the binary and separate from the body is brought to fruition through her participation in what is discursively understood as the male-dominated arena of official, political business. The castration of Wanyu further debunks sex and the body as ‘natural’ determinates of gender, emphasizing the performance of gender and how one *becomes* a gendered subject rather than born as one. In its linguistic variation of meaning, the Maqiao language serves as a discursive power upon which gendered subjects are reimagined, its sheer divergence from mainstream linguistic meaning deconstructs the heterosexual assertion of the natural.

Part 2: The Role of Bodily Pain in the Construction of Gender

If we consider Judith Butler’s questioning of the processes for how identity categories such as gender come into being, the broad stipulation is that discourses, practices, and institutions construct the framework and necessary roles for such categories. However, with the understanding that the variables of linguistic structure are constantly changing, language alone lacks the stability to confirm and define reality and knowledge. Thus, the discourse that constructs identity categories is exposed as lacking any sense of absolute meaning, further debunking the notion of gender and sex as ‘natural’. What I would like to bring into question next is, if the construction of identity categories are dependent on a discourse that intrinsically

fluctuates in meaning, how then are categories such as gender consequently constituted? While this question, broad as it is, may be approached and answered in a variety of ways, one way we might consider the construction of gender is through a phenomenon outside the reach of language: bodily pain.

Judith Butler and other feminist theorists have made arguments somewhat dismissing the role of material reality when thinking of the body's role in the shaping of identity, arguing that discourse is what invented the perception of the body, thus making the materiality of it obsolete. What these hyperliterate arguments fail to take into account are the bodily experiences that discourse cannot penetrate because of the limiting nature of such discourse (Bray 2005, 301). The reliance on linguistic structures to establish knowledge and reality is inherently limited to the discursive expressions of feeling, which often fail to capture the reality of material or physical experiences, particularly that of pain. In questioning whether there exists a physical body prior to what is perceptually perceived, Butler clarifies that the intelligibility of the body is constrained by a set of norms that, when diverted from, produce a "domain of unthinkable, abject, unlivable bodies". (Claeys 2007, 73). Within this linguistic domain of the unthinkable body resides the experience of bodily pain; a phenomenon that is linguistically inexpressible and thus reliant on materiality. How then, might the experience of pain factor into the construction of an identity that discourse has claimed rule over? In Chen Kaige's film "Farewell My Concubine" (released in 1993), the character, Dieyi, experiences a series of violent physical and verbal punishments that work to transform his gender identity from the masculine to the feminine in the name of the Chinese opera. The institutional and societal discourse that initiates Dieyi's immersion into his female character is seen as unequipped to stand alone, requiring an infliction

of pain and sexual humiliations in order to solidify the character's total submission to his feminization and role performance. Through an exploration of Dieyi's gender identity, the material body may be seen as a central site upon which discursive power produces intelligibility and the infliction of pain submits the subject to a transformation of identity.

During a time when China was considerably "in the closet", Chen Kaige's film "Farewell My Concubine" showcases a male character embodying a highly feminized role, bringing the topic of a transforming gender identity into the forefront. The film traces the politically tumultuous China of the twentieth century, beginning with the early days of the Republic of China and ending with the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution. During these times, the political and cultural landscape of China underwent immense transformation, further complicating the relationships of the characters and the production and reception of their art. Much like how the characters of the film blur the lines between real life and opera performance, the line between gender identity and gender performance is blurred as the film's protagonist, Dieyi, endures a gendered transformation at the hands of both institutional and violent force. Through Dieyi's navigation - and often confusion - of his gender in and outside of the opera, the ways in which gender norms and behaviors are defined and made intelligible by institutional forces is made manifest, further exemplifying the performativity of gender.

The film begins with Cheng Dieyi, then nicknamed Xiao Douzi, a boy who is given up by his prostitute mother to an all-boys Peking opera troupe. There, he is trained in the art of the *dan*, a male actor who plays female roles in the opera, one that he is suitable for due to his more feminine physique. He befriends Duan Xiaolou (nicknamed Xiao Shitou at the time) who is trained to play Dieyi's male counterpart in the opera of which the film is named after. The two

begin a life-long friendship, the boundaries of which are blurred between real life and the stage as Xiaolou becomes the object of Dieyi's suspected romantic desire. While training in the Peking opera troupe together, Dieyi endures violent corporal punishments and symbolic castrations juxtaposed with the troupe master's insistence that, in order to become a successful actor, one must immerse themselves fully into the art of opera. As a result of the institutional force of sexual humiliations and physical canings, Dieyi undergoes a gendered transformation, masking his masculine gender identity in order to depict an idealized feminine role as the king's concubine, Yuji. The storyline of the opera they perform is about a King during the dynastic rule of China and his devoted concubine who kills herself at the end of the opera to express her undying loyalty to him. This loyalty and unrequited love between the opera characters complicates the relationship between Dieyi and Xiaolou as they (particularly Dieyi) grapple with separating life on stage and real life. Indicative of this is the questioning of Dieyi's sexuality when Xiaolou marries a prostitute, Juxian, sparking betrayal and conflict between the two friends. The film ends with a pinnacle example of the character's confusion of theater performance and reality and the blurring of gender identity and gender performance when Dieyi and Xiaolou reenact the last scene of the opera, this time Dieyi actually killing himself with Xiaolou's sword.

In Shuqin Cui's "Subjected Body and Gendered Identity: Female Impersonation in Chen Kaige's *Farewell My Concubine*", Dieyi's transformation from 'biological' male to cultural female highlights the body as situated as a central site "upon which power produces knowledge and force transforms identity" (Cui, 2003, 151). The reference to knowledge as produced by power is indicative of the linguistic forces that define what makes the body intelligible.

However, that power is also dependent on a subordinated subject, the presence of which is initiated through corporal punishment. Therefore, pain serves as a necessary experience to initiate the submission of the subject and enable the gendered transformation. This interplay of power and submission is seen clearly in an early scene of “Farewell My Concubine”, where Dieyi’s transformation from male to female manifests. As a child, when instructed to perform for an opera troupe commissioner, Dieyi messes up the line “I am by nature a girl, I am not a boy.”, instead reciting “I am by nature a boy, I am not a girl.”, indicating his understood identity as male. In response to his mistake, another boy in the theater troupe, his friend Xiao Shitou, forces a metal instrument into Dieyi’s mouth, causing blood to flow and the boy to sit transfixed. This symbolic castration however, proves effective as Dieyi stands and recites the line correctly, indicating a psychological transformation into the embodiment of the female. As I will discuss further, the infliction of pain through forceful penetration of the body initiates a feminization that is embodied in both Dieyi’s opera role as the Concubine, Yuji, and his personal gender performance outside the opera.

The gendered transformation that occurs in Dieyi is a result of the layered and highly gendered power dynamics of the ruling patriarchal ideology. The first layer I have already discussed as an institutionally promoted discourse that produces the framework for which idealized gendered characteristics are established and understood. Because such a discourse is unfixed and lacks absolute meaning, I argue that a material and thus physical enforcement of this discourse acts as a stabilizing force to resolve what language cannot. Within the culture of a Chinese patriarchal structure, filial piety emphasizes a male-dominant power relation of authority and subordination that feminizes the realm of the submittant. Regardless of gender, the

subordinated subject carries out the assigned social tasks of the authority under the pretense of future success and personal fulfillment. This is where corporal punishment serves as the second layer of the patriarchal ideology and the focus of my argument comes into fruition; a forceful solidification of the discursive framework for psychological and physical submission.

The violent corporal punishment inflicted upon the young members of the opera troupe centers the body as a signifying site of suffering with cultural implications that such a suffering leads to success. It is the opera master's verbal explanation of suffering as a means to improve oneself (in this case become revered opera actors) that initiates an internalization of self-discipline and self-improvement within the boys, Dieyi specifically. The material body is thus centered as a product of patriarchal discipline and filial relationship for subordination. Internalization of the patriarchal ideology of corporal punishment as a doorway to success therefore produces practiced bodies that are trained to carry out the assigned tasks of the authority. Implied in this is an active construction of a physical body, underneath which the biological body gradually dies away. Thus in the case of Dieyi, the reception of corporal punishment serves as a submission to power that initiates a rejection of his biological essence and the creation of a feminine gender identity is made possible. It is the physical correction and psychological tribulations of material pain that enables Dieyi to fully immerse himself in the art of opera and mask his male subjectivity in the feminized male (Cui 2003, 151).

If we return to Judith Butler's discussion of the heterosexual matrix of power as producing the discourse around the body and thus giving it materiality and meaning, Dieyi's self-denial of his biological essence as trained through corporal punishment and symbolic castrations both complicates and confirms the powers of discourse. The infliction of pain both

destabilized the discourse that defines the body by highlighting its materiality while at the same time breaking down the biologically discursive structure of it through transforming Dieyi's gender identity. While the structuring/destructuring of the body is linguistically occupied by the relations and objectives of power, the presence of pain complicates the intended results of such power. Moreover, while the objectives motivating the theater troupe leader's infliction of pain claim the role of power, the submission that the pain is intended to produce is one that conflicts with the institutional naturalization of the body and gender. Corporal punishment not only physically pounds theatrical skill into the body but also psychologically transforms identity away from what language has constructed. Thus, power through pain both deconstructs the discursive understanding of the body (and gender) as well as solidifies the power to submit the subject to a transformation of identity and performance. In other words, the power that is established through discourse paradoxically disrupts the biologically naturalized idea of the body by manipulating the psychological consideration of one's gender and body, while simultaneously confirming the body's materiality and role of such a gendered transformation when pain is present. Because of the culture of the *dan* actors to fully embody their female roles, the inherent submission brought upon them through bodily pain positions these actors within a domain that inherently disrupts the institutionally permissible definition of gender roles.

Corresponding with Butler's denaturalization of gender and sex, Dieyi's rejection of his male biological essence poignantly exemplifies a false reliance on biological sex that discourse imposes upon determining the characteristic of gender roles and identities. However, the gendered implications of the power of such discourse remains prevalent in the idea that, when Dieyi's masculine subjectivity is lost, the feminine must appear. Therefore, while the film goes

beyond the biological or sexual difference and sociocultural construction of such in defining gender, the psychological element of gender transformation remains in an oppositional, binary understanding of dominance and submission. The psychological permanence initiated by corporal punishment may be noted in Dieyi's full embodiment of a feminine identity both in and outside the context of the opera. The tradition of the dan actor requires the performer significant skill and stylized artistry through extensive training to mask his gender identity and depict an idealized female role, the loss of masculine identification is necessary for female embodiment under the logic of patriarchal power. Thus, while the impersonation of a female identity was made under the pretence of success, the required subjugation for the embodiment of such a role highlights the consideration of femininity to be one of submission.

The depiction of femininity in "Farewell My Concubine" and the process of Dieyi's feminization is centered around patriarchal ideals of a submissive femininity that sits in opposition to masculinity and its implied power dominance. The film showcases several instances of symbolic castration that signify Dieyi's loss of masculinity and subsequent feminization. The first instance of symbolic castration comes at the beginning of the film when Dieyi's prostitute mother cuts off his extra finger so that he may be accepted into the opera troupe. The symbolic castration, while initially a move out of desire for cultural acceptance and to de-feminize Dieyi from his association as the son of a prostitute, actually proves to further feminize Dieyi in his acceptance into the troupe and the future it sets for him. This symbolic castration and the many more that follow signify castration as a result of the threat of loss, and in Dieyi's case, the threat of lost masculinity. The fear that his mother held that prompted Dieyi's castration is indicative of the ways historical trauma interferes with one's relation to the symbolic

order of society, a desperate act to prevent an association with the lower echelons prescribed to femininity (Cui 2003, 153).

The centrality of the body exhibited throughout the stages of Dieyi's feminization may be traced not only through instances of corporal punishment and symbolic castration, but through the subjugation and subsequent feminization of Dieyi's body through sexual penetrations. Early in the film when Dieyi is still a child, he is delivered to a eunuch as a sexual offering after giving an opera performance. Xiao Douzi, which he was still named at the time, is dressed as Yuji, donning full opera makeup and costumed as his female role. The eunuch, also in makeup, forcefully grabs the boy before the camera pans away from what the viewer may predict to follow as a forceful rape. In its association with feminine submission, the sexual penetration of the body serves as another stage in Dieyi's feminization. The scene that directly follows Xiao Douzi's sexual penetration sees the two boys, Xiao Douzi and Xiao Shitou (later known as Xiaolou), happen upon a baby who has been abandoned. Heedlessly, Xiao Douzi scoops up the baby into his care, thus locating him into another feminized realm, the position of a mother. The adoption of motherhood further solidifies and confirms Dieyi's successive embodiment of the female, the psychological impact of the physical feminizations taking form in the understood and idealized traits of femininity.

In considering the forceful and physical initiation to Dieyi's feminization, the question of fate is enwrapped in highly gendered implications that are informed and complicated by Dieyi's experience. When Dieyi approaches the abandoned baby, one of the opera troupe masters tries to deter him from taking the baby into his care saying "Douzi, fate has determined each of our lots. Leave him to his destiny." When considered in the context of Dieyi, the notion of fate as

predetermining one's course is conflicted by the application of the gendered transformation endured by him. His masculine fate was governed, even nullified by corporal punishment, thus the destiny set for Dieyi is defined by his feminization. Now in the position of the feminine, the idealized and discursive fate of women to embody the maternal takes form in Dieyi's choice, perhaps non-choice, to care for the baby. The highly controlled and inherently gendered process of assigning a destiny for Dieyi, ironically propagated as being out of individual control by the opera master, exhibits a patriarchally-motivated idealization of the fate each gender is intended to adopt. If we ponder the agency or cognizance of Dieyi in his initiation into the feminine, we may speculate that, in embodying the role of the mother for the baby, he is perhaps attempting to save the child from a fate that he could not escape, a fate that is out of his control.

Through Dieyi's castration, corporal punishment, and costuming, the social construction of what it means to define the self as a woman is made manifest in visual representations of a patriarchally idealized femininity. The physical and psychological processes that Dieyi experienced that initiated his transformation of gender are solidified through a public display of personal presentation. Feminine costuming and makeup adorned for his opera role as a concubine provided outward codes of gender, visualizing what is regarded by men and the patriarchal mind as essential elements of gendered characters. The visualization of femininity is equally crucial to both Dieyi's sense of self as well as the audience's perception and subsequent acceptance of Dieyi's feminine identity. Necessary for such a public intelligibility is the embodiment of a symbolic womanhood, one that is conceptualized and embodied by men through stylized imitations such as the gendered cultural elements of dress and makeup. The conventions of cross-dressing in opera tolerates a gender ambiguity between the actor and their

role that the audience willfully accepts, going so far as to feminize the actor off stage. Thus, while such a gender ambiguity is granted when the actor is in character, Dieyi's inability to separate real life from opera performance renders his feminine costume an embodiment of inner desire and an accessible form of identification (Cui 2003, 157). The constructed outward symbols of ideal femininity served to replace the masculine identity that was violently, yet necessarily stripped from Dieyi. Indicative of the ways in which an institutionalized discourse constructs what it means to define the feminine and provide the code for intelligibility, Dieyi's own identity is made manifest through feminine symbols of costuming and makeup.

The power relations of male patriarchal authority that subject the body into submission come to the forefront in the infliction of violent force and sexual canings upon Dieyi to transform his gender identity. The actor's initial resistance to the imposed feminization highlights the need for corporal punishment in order to render him the spectacle of submission and subsequently feminize him. However, the conventions of the dan actors accepted within the culture of the opera offer a certain level of mobility under the conditions of masked masculinity and full embodiment of the feminized role. Such conventions create a gender ambiguity between the actor playing the female role and the audience. The audience willfully accepts the male actor as female and feminizes him even off stage (Cui 2003, 158). In impersonating the female in his opera role, Dieyi's personality is transformed to that of a woman and his original masculine identity is no longer recognizable. The feminine role he performs in the opera merges with the self, the lines of real life and role performance are blurred, and the threat of failed masculinity that initially caused him harm is realized as female success. He is able to find his identity within the female role and without it has no self. In a Chinese tradition that intertwines the self and the

role, defining the self in relation to its duty to others (social role), Dieyi's pursuit of a unique individuality by erasing the lines between self-definition and the role he plays may be problematic to the Chinese social hierarchy. However, the femininity that Dieyi finds refuge in is constructed by a patriarchal ideal centered around male desire (Cui 2003, 160). Thus, the portrayal of an actor masking his masculinity both on stage and throughout the film itself exposes and promotes the power of masculinity to take on a double form and perform ideal femininity.

Conclusion

In examining gender performance through the lens of Han Shaogong's novel and Chen Kaige's film, the representations of gender subversion may be seen as reflecting a time when China was relatively "in the closet". The culture and ideology of China at the time did not openly accept the fluidity of gender or acknowledge the subversive representations of gender as indicative of the binary structure of gender as unstable. Rather, the portrayal of gender subversion remains within the discursively promoted criteria for gender performance understood and intelligible to the public perception. In the novel, we are provided with examples of how discourse is a powerful tool through which cultural conventions and institutional structures define the means for intelligibility in gender performance. Drawing from Judith Butler's discussion on language as lacking absolute meaning, I explore the denaturalization of gender with an emphasis on gender performance as an intentional repetition of norms shaped by linguistic strategies for defining human conventionality. I conclude that, if discourse is unstable in confirming reality and meaning, the notion of gender and sex as natural is exposed as

unreliable and thus falsified. Furthermore, Butler's idea of the heterosexual matrix provides us with an understanding of successful gender performing as motivated by a highly heterosexual notion of perceptibility and implied desire.

While such discourses linguistically assign the means for identity performance, visibility is seen as a prominent characteristic, centering the body and the meanings constructed around the body as a site where these discourses must be negotiated. The topic of discourse as a structural, yet unstable institution of power influencing identity performance is questioned by the presence of pain in "Farewell My Concubine". Through the example of Dieyi, the body is seen as a central site where violent force confirms what language cannot and the distinction between a theatrical performance and a real life gender performance is blurred. The criteria for embodying an idealized femininity is outlined by both the culture of the *dan* actors in the opera and a patriarchal power structure that enabled a male character to perform a highly feminized role within a historical context when the public display of fluid gender subversion was less than acceptable.

Chapter 2:

Identity Performance on the Internet

In the first section of this project, we have explored the ways both institutionalized discourses and body-centered manipulations have constructed the means to perform an idealized subjectivity, the modes of such informing the individual's negotiation and/or subversion in their performance of selfhood and identity. Through the examples of Brother Wan and Wanyu in Han Shaogong's novel "A Dictionary of Maqiao" and Dieyi in Chen Kaige's film "Farewell My Concubine", the performance and expression of identity may be seen as negotiated in the context of a distinct Chinese political and cultural ideology. In the following section, we will turn to how that negotiation of modes of expression is mediated in not only a different geographical and geopolitical context, but a virtual one. Focusing on the reproduction and commodification of an Asian image circulated on the app, TikTok, I will examine how various modes of expression are mediated through different structures of power specific to geopolitical context and how the internet, as a geographically-transcendent space, becomes a site where those conflicting ideologies are confronted. Enthrallled in a capitalist and neoliberal commodification of visibility, the means of self performance and the construction of one's subjectivity become commodities in an online visual economy consumed and subsequently produced by social media users. While visibility as digital capital highlights the intricacies of how identities are expressed, the examination of racial representation on the internet and social media brings into question who is awarded that value, specifically in the context of beauty as an ever-shifting construct of subjectivity. On a virtual platform where geographical and political boundaries are traversed, even broken, and diverse ideologies, cultures, races, and identities come face to face, the

construction of identity becomes not only a performance of individual subjectivity, but a governmentalized reflection of the ways political and ideological structures have informed the presentations of identity.

In determining the concept of identity as an unfixed process of *becoming*, this section transports the discussion of identity performance from the context of China to the digital arena of the internet where American ideologies of capitalism and neoliberal rhetoric center visuality in the performance of identity. As such, the means provided for performing selfhood emphasize a discrepancy of availability when considering race. While applicable in varying degrees to all racialized groups, the Asian American experience and consideration of national identity exemplifies one instance of the unequal awardance of self subjectification in identity performance. The determination of American national identity for Asian communities is governed by racial difference and labels them as forever foreign, such that their subjectivity is constricted by American national ideologies of citizenship that construct the available means of identity performance online. Commodified and constructed images of Asianness circulated online through makeup trends work to limit the availability for consideration of national citizenship, removing subjectivity of the Asian American experience by centering racial difference in the facilitation of deploying women of color as objects in the self-construction of white personhood. While American ideologies of national identity hold a long history in the constrictive ability for Asian Americans to assimilate (yet pressures them to do so), the internet functions to mobilize the body through an affective economy of beauty, within which the Asian American is tasked with negotiating the Western conditions for beauty and the commodified constructions of Asianness they are expected to embody.

In the last fifteen or so years, the prominence of social media-based self representation has emerged as a seemingly necessary tool for constructing the self and developing a publicly consumed and personally reflexive identity. One could argue that the internet has played a major role in the psychological and even physical development of my generation and those adjacent, social media platforms making accessible a constant consumption of and exposure to endless displays of how different people are expressing themselves. The modes of expression have not changed drastically—makeup, clothing, hairstyles, etc. remain typical visual codes of identity—but the exposure to differing types of expression has increased tremendously, allowing the content consumer to step outside their local ideological bubbles, even travel across the globe from the comfort of their bed. While also a platform for inherent criticism, social media increased the possibilities for public representations of different genders, sexualities, and races that political and institutional discourses lagged behind in. Young people turned to the internet as both an accepting and competitive arena for self-expression and most importantly, entertainment. Performance on social media platforms is essential. Whether genuine or curated, users are able to construct an identity through performance and adornment to be consumed and celebrated by a virtual audience unprecedented in the “real world”. On the internet you can be whoever you want to be, you can construct an identity that you may not be able to embody otherwise, and find community with those doing the same. However, while social media provides an outlet for the creator to express themselves and help construct an identity, a characteristic of the internet still functions as a platform for entertainment, oftentimes subjecting the content and/or its creator to an inherent delegitimization of depth and meaning. The surface-level format of internet

consumption as simulation and stimulation raises a question of genuinity versus role performance under the pretence of viral recognition and entertainment.

Social media trends have long existed on platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook, following and sometimes governing the popularity of fashion trends, hashtags, music, and even romantic interactions. However, an increase in the rapidity of such trends and subsequently the circulation of images and ideologies they reflect, may be seen on the app, TikTok. The Chinese-originated platform rose to popularity between 2018 and 2019 when it merged with the app, Musical.ly, becoming one of the most highly used social media platforms. Similar to its viral predecessor, Vine, the app is used for making and sharing short videos, initially no longer than fifteen seconds but was quickly updated to one minute. Because of the app's algorithm-based format that dissolves the friend/follower-based format of other social media platforms, the exposure to different trends, content, and audiences is endless, making it easy to go viral. The prospect of going viral and obtaining the highly sought after “fifteen minutes of fame” is a prominent driving force for the creation of and participation in new trends. All these trends, while seemingly innocent in their function, have aided in the development of a new culture of self-expression, one that is constantly changing and highly reliant on what will make you popular online and subsequently in the real world. The culture of TikTok has emerged a style of personal expression that, trivial as it may be, constitutes an analysis of the way gender, sexuality, and race are being performed through the lens of the TikTok trend. My intention for including an analysis of self-representation on TikTok is not to highlight the many intricacies of social media’s cultural influence as a whole. Rather, my aim is to focus on the political and

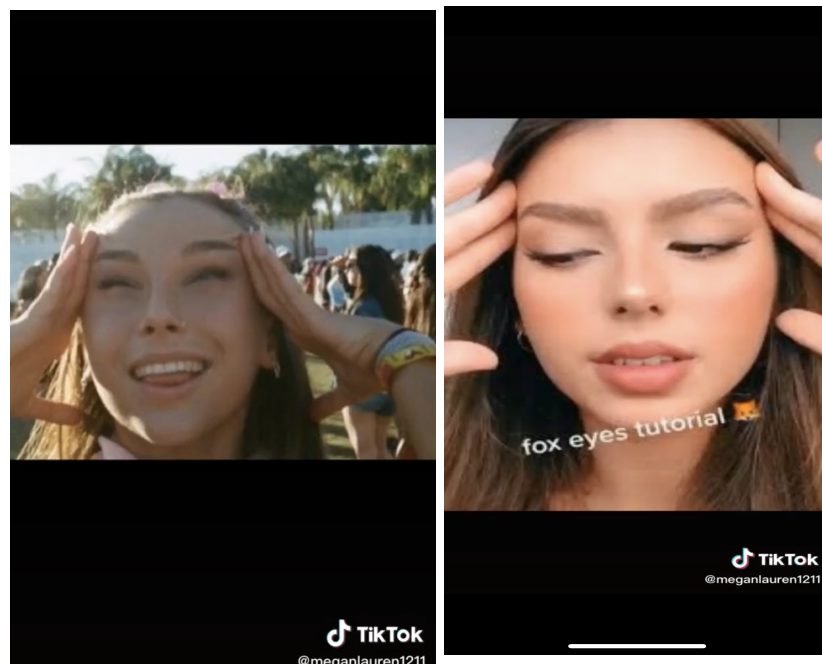
theoretical implications embedded in the temporality of social media trends, reflecting a rapid circulation of commodified visibility in the performance of identity on social media.

What makes TikTok an important grounds for analysis is the juxtaposition of entertainment and political discussion. While the platform is abundant with nonsensical, sometimes cringeworthy content, the minute-long format extended by TikTok introduced the potential for discourse to circulate at an unprecedented rate, challenging the assumption of the internet as an apolitical space. The prominent discourse that permeates the motivations for different modes of identity performance on the platform is a neoliberal rationale that functions to design the criteria for gaining capital, thus promoting a highly critical and comparative climate centered around visibility. In an era of strict political correctness, TikTok presents a community of youth who demonstrate an acceleration of neoliberal impulses which seek to critique on the bases of identity while foregoing the implications of material harm. In other words, under the pretence of gaining online capital through a performance of politically correct wokeness, the criticism seen on TikTok is exposed as another example of a highly performative mode of identity expression that paradoxically falls into the trap of the exact representational politics it aims to indict.

One of the fashion trends that rose to popularity on TikTok and other social media platforms is the “foxeve trend”. Also known as “designer eyes”, the makeup trend was most recently made popular by big celebrities and models such as Bella Hadid and Kendall Jenner. Often paired with the “migraine pose” that pulls the eyes up from the temples, foxeve makeup uses a combination of eyeshadow, eyeliner, false eyelashes, strategically placed concealer and sometimes even the shaving of the ends of the eyebrows to create an elongated look for the eyes,

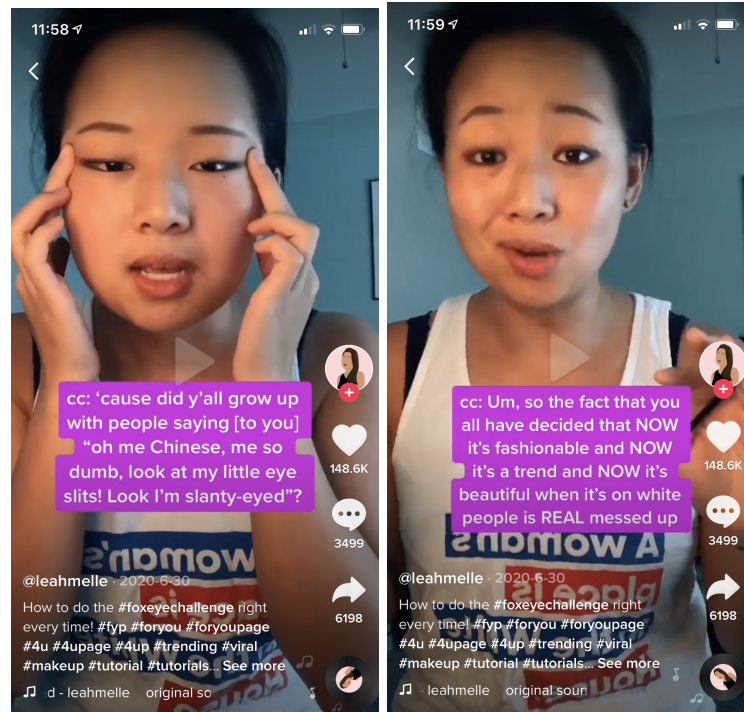
tilting them up and giving the illusion that they're more almond-shaped. When the trend went viral on TikTok, it was met with an outpouring of backlash from many Asian American TikTokers who flagged the makeup look as racist and appropriative, as most of the TikTokers who were participating in the trend and making tutorials for it are caucasian. The users condemned the makeup look as mimicking the characteristics of Asian eyes particularly when paired with the “migraine pose”, a pose that has historically been used as a racially offensive gesture against many Asian communities.

The critique against the makeup trend comes in varying forms, ranging from exposing racism in the comments of foxeye makeup tutorials, TikTok duets (the platform’s video mode of responding to other TikToks), blog-like opinion TikToks, and more humorous clips where Asian American users reclaim the trend by boasting they are the only ones who can successfully achieve the look since they are born with it.



One TikTok by the user @meganlauren1211 slideshows images of celebrities and influencers wearing the makeup look accompanied with more overtly racist images of people pulling their eyes back and features a clip of the song “iSpy” by KYLE feat. lil Yachty. The TikTok ends by cutting to the user as she lip syncs the lyrics “That’s a real hot album, homie, I wonder who wrote it, oh shit.” When the final lyric “oh shit” is heard, the user pulls her eyes back, mimicking the trend and highlighting the clear racial appropriation by reclaiming ownership over the commodified features that the trend attempts to resemble.

While some of the backlash follows foot with the platform’s less serious tone of entertainment such as the aforementioned TikTok, most of the TikToks responding to the trend illustrate the anger and frustration towards the subtle, yet glaring racism of foxeye makeup. A quick search of the hashtags #foxeye or #foxeyechallenge will supply you with a large selection of Asian American TikTokers voicing the problem with the trend as laden with racist undertones, supporting their statements with personal accounts of experiencing racism for their Asian eyes.



The consensus is that, after years of being made fun of for their appearance, their phenotypic Asian characteristics are only now celebrated as beautiful and desirable when presented on their white peers. One of the more viral TikToks that circulated in response to the trend was posted by the user @leahmelle who begins the video by claiming she has a hack for the makeup look that everyone is missing. She continues to instruct the audience to apply their makeup as they normally would, and with a swift change in tone says that the next step is to “STOP and you’re not going to do this challenge ‘cause it’s really freaking insensitive.” This rapid change in tone is a common tactic on the app to grab the attention of a viewer who, in this case, may have visited the hashtag for an actual tutorial on the foxeye makeup look. The quick-spoken opinion may then be exclaimed before the unsuspecting viewer can swipe away. The message is clear: if you didn’t experience racism for having Asian eyes, you have no right to decide that they’re “NOW fashionable and NOW it’s a trend and NOW it’s beautiful when it’s on white people”.

Much of the makeup content on TikTok ranges from highly experienced makeup bloggers who use their extensive technical skills to transform their face into illusional and fantastic masterpieces to more amateur, everyday makeup that can be incorporated into one's daily routine. While makeup artists and casual wearers all have different motives for why they use makeup, whether out of insecurity, for fun, a desire to feel more beautiful or a more artistic, hobby-like passion, a consideration of what that makeup look actually *does* - the final look that emulates a product - is worth noting. The nature of makeup as a cosmetic enhancement of one's features is utilized in trends such as the foxeye look to a varying degree that, while subtle, transforms the body and facial structure for the purpose of obtaining a desired look. While many beauty-correlated makeup techniques aim to enhance one's features - mascara to lengthen and lift the eyelashes, eyeshadow to compliment eye color - the notion of transforming the self becomes complicated when considering race. Situated in a highly visual arena where the boundaries between geopolitical structures and cultural ideologies are blurred, the costuming or cosplaying a specific look for identity performance and online success is complicated with the instance of racial cross performance to follow a beauty trend, of which *beauty* is a key term.

The emphasis on visibility on the internet for digital capital highlights beauty as a crucial alleyway to capital gain and online success. That beauty however, is engulfed in a global feminist discourse that situates the white American woman as the subject of liberation through individualized self-management. Such a discourse situates women of color, the Other, in a perpetual state of oppression, only to be 'lifted up' through tactics of neoliberal self-management, of which Eurocentric beauty standards reign supreme (Heijin Lee, 2016). With makeup and cosmetic surgery as performative modes of expression and thus, self-management,

the neoliberal ideology of beauty renders such a performance an act of not only a negotiation of expressive modes for subjectivity and identity, but a governmentalized reflection of how political representation within media platforms inform the performer in their construction of selfhood (So-Rim Lee, 2018). The exclusively visual nature of a platform such as TikTok thus serves as an arena where users may be seen negotiating and constructing subjectivity through various modes of self-expression, their performance mediated by geopolitical structures of power that determines the valuation of subjectivity through race, gender, and sexuality. Thus, in speaking about the use of makeup trends on TikTok as a negotiation of selfhood, specifically on their relation to a racialized practice of cosmetic surgery, we must engage in what So-Rim Lee highlights as an “interdisciplinary historical inquiry on how capitalism intersects with ideologies of authenticity” (So-Rim Lee, 2018).

Before we dive into the ways in which the political structures represented in media inform the motives for beauty attainment, it is important to understand the ideologies that reconcile the TikTok users’ appropriation of racialized features and highlight the performativity of representational politics. The imitation of Asian features as a performance aesthetic predicated on beauty enhancement and gaining digital capital in the foxeye trend exemplifies a form of commodity fetishism that allows the consumer to see only the product itself, erasing the social conditions and relations of power that render them commodified. Within this logic and paired with the “post-racist” rhetoric of inclusion, visual representations of Asian features define their intelligibility as commodified objects, such that the realities of their status in the American idealization of national identity is erased, their subjecthood made invisible. In other words, the product seen and desired by the consumer is an exclusively visual display of a constructed

Asianness that, in its commodification, downplays the existing tensions of racism, Orientalism, and Asian ethnic nationalism around which the images are constructed. While the imitation of Asian features is framed around the pretence of beauty and desirability, the means of what defines those features as desirable are embedded in a history of American racism and stereotypical constructions of an Asian image that assigns the visual markers for subjecthood and identity through racial difference.

Within the highly liberal atmosphere of TikTok, the performance of beautification and thus one's selfhood through the participation in the foxeye trend rewards the performer with a digital capital that simultaneously satisfies the individualized self image of the white performers as well as their perceived "wokeness" in celebrating non-white features as beautiful. Predicated on an ideological seduction of inclusion, defining the commodified Asian features as what is momentarily considered beautiful, removes the label of poor self-image and the presentation of such features may thus become fetishized commodities to be utilized in the performance of an individualized and liberated identity. Consistent with the internet's scopophilic obsession with the visual, the popularity of the foxeye trend is partly motivated by the ease in going viral on the platform, such that the imitation of commodified Asian features serves as a performance aesthetic that synchronizes beauty with systemic production for profit. On the pretence of gaining digital capital through performed self-management, a global feminist discourse legitimizes such racial representation as a mode of celebration for white users' perceived growth in their acceptance of such minority groups through their application of a racially commodified image. Through the adornment of the foxeye trend, white users are not only awarded the digital capital of online popularity, but a feminist sensibility that celebrates the malleability of whiteness

to transform itself self while upholding the liberated position with the notion that they themselves do not embody the racialized commodity being imitated.

Like many other makeup trends on the internet, the foxeye trend emerged on TikTok as a visual performance of the current criteria for beauty attainment. While the repetition of beauty trends have long been a reflection of the ebb and flow of societal tastes and style preferences, the highly performative nature of a platform such as TikTok highlights beauty as a performative construction of one's online identity. The algorithmic structure of the platform systemizes a constant exchange of production and consumption of content, rendering the perception of looks and beauty as perpetually in motion. Thus, in order to gain recognition and popularity, the rapid communication of visual selfhood, the display of beauty and the means of beauty attainment become central to one's successful performance and subsequent valued reception of individuality on the app.

Indicative of the centrality of beauty for social recognition is what psychologist, Nancy Etcoff, conceptualizes as 'lookism' and the operation of the beauty hierarchy within lookism. Etcoff argues a biological reasoning for humans' proclivity to valuing beauty as a product of human evolution, citing scientific studies in theorizing that beauty elicits a chemical response in the brain similar to that of addiction. Contrary to feminist thought on lookism, she insists that considering beauty as socially constructed actually serves to further establish a hierarchy of beauty, failing to situate lookism within the framework of patriarchal and capitalist structures that promote a beauty hierarchy for capital gain (Heijin Lee, 2016). While Etcoff might agree that the beauty hierarchy contributes to the inequality of human relations, the fact that her studies were conducted solely on male participants and their neurological responses to viewing beautiful

women points to the more feminist discourse on the hierarchy of beauty as a mechanism of a misogynistic, patriarchal and capitalist rhetoric. In the context of lookism as a product of these institutionalized structures, the beauty hierarchy functions as a condition of self-management that affects job and marriage prospects, the social circumstances of which are benefited off by the beauty industry. The rhetoric that beauty, as visual capital, is a self-entrepreneurial mechanism for economic success operates through the internalization of a neoliberal individualism that situates the self and the body to be managed and transformed as a condition for social advancement.

In discussing the significance of TikTok's circulation of beauty trends and the platform's algorithmic function in popularizing such trends, it is necessary to address the ways in which a neoliberal rationale contributes to and perhaps initiates the repetition of such beauty trends. In congruence with the capitalist equation of economic success with personal success, neoliberal rhetoric promotes a highly individualistic management of the self that centers the body, particularly the visibility of the body, as a mechanism for attaining social success (Heijin Lee, 2016). As a result, neoliberalism justifies an accelerated competition between bodies under the pretence of capital gain, indicative of the rapidly changing trends of body management seen on TikTok. In "Presentations of Gender Identity on Weblogs", Niels van Doorn et al. notes that online content produced by women tends to have a greater awareness of who is perceiving them, whether that 'them' is a curated, online persona or a more authentic presentation of the self (van Doorn 2007, 145). Suggested in this is a highly gendered consideration of visibility, to which the mechanisms of lookism/beauty and neoliberal self-management contribute. Resulting from the neoliberal rationale for self-management for success is the feminist narrative that economic and

social liberation may be attained through the means of visual capital. The conjunction of the rhetoric of lookism and neoliberalism pins women who choose not to “invest in themselves” as not fulfilling their potential, subsequently constraining female bodies and their choice to manage them in the name of social and economic success (Heijin Lee 2016).

In the context of identity presentation on social media, the idea of self-management is rendered a mechanism of identity performance for online success and going viral, of which visual beauty is a key strategy. Within the beauty rhetoric of lookism and neoliberalism, performing beauty trends on TikTok such as the foxeye look becomes a necessary mode for “investing in oneself” through popularized images of what is considered beautiful. Thus, self-transformation through the application of makeup, cosmetic surgery, and the most fleetingly temporary phenomenon of digital filters, the communication of subjecthood becomes a performative act for gaining digital capital. The term ‘performativity’ is crucial here, as the performance of self-transformative acts not only display a negotiation of selfhood and individuality, but indicates the ways in which such negotiations are interpreted by social media users in their performances (So-Rim Lee, 2018). While the notion of authenticity may be called into question regarding the emphasis on performance, a closer examination and cultural analysis of identity construction on social media reconciles the way meaning is reimagined and understood through the consumption and subsequent production of modes of expression.

On social media platforms such as TikTok that center their circulation of content around the visual, presentations of everyday life (clothing, sex and gender, age, racial characteristic, speech patterns, facial expression, bodily gestures, etc.) are rendered digital tools to be adopted in the performance of one’s social identity. The performance of digital tools for depicting a

positive and desirable self image manifest in the form of trends. Such trends are adopted as strategic tools to attract attention, encourage retention, and a reproduction of imagery formulated as desirable. For today's generation of youth whose personal development has been predominantly mediated through the internet, these trends serve as the characteristics through which meaning is made and subsequently, through which their performance of identity may be understood (Stokes 2017, 159). The meaning produced by these digital tools thus informs a new understanding of signifying traits for identity construction online, such that the authenticity between individuals' real-life persona and online persona is rendered almost obsolete. The self, whether online or in person, is constructed through a negotiation of digital markers to be performed, consumed, and reproduced.

The construction of one's identity through such digital markers is however, subject to the constant and rapidly-shifting nature of the internet's circulation of content. Especially on TikTok, where trends come and go within months, even weeks, the constant visual communication of selfhood produces ever-changing modes of identity performance within an arena where endless comparison and critique may take place. The rapidity of trend circulation requires of the individual a curation of identity performance that is in constant motion. Thus, the adornment and repetition of makeup trends under the pretence of gaining capital through beauty enhancement becomes just one tactic in a sequence of performative acts for visual capital and identity making. While beauty within a neoliberal discourse of self-enhancement premaced on lookism is promoted as a stable construct of patriarchal and capitalist structures, self-transformation through the adornment of rapidly changing makeup trends serve to destabilize the restrictive notions of beauty and identity as absolute (So-Rim Lee, 2018). Through performing different modalities of

the self, premised on what the trends popularize as desirable in the moment, beauty and subsequently the means of intelligibility for identity performance are mobilized as metamorphic sequences of performative acts.

While the rapidly-changing nature of the trend in itself aids in a destabilization of beauty and thus identity as absolute, the temporariness of what is considered beautiful or desirable is indicative of the capitalistic function of commodifying features that, when no longer valued in the economy of beauty, are discarded to the shadows of irrelevance for the next trend to prevail. What does remain however, is the performed governmentality of which the politics of representation within media centers a Eurocentric beauty ideal as the epitomization of liberatory self-management (So-Rim Le 2018). In her collection of dialogues and essays on multicultural feminism, Ella Shohat discusses the differing experiences of negotiating modes of performance and presentation of identity for non-white individuals. Positioned as the Other, presentation of identity is never one that is ‘natural’, as reductionist perceptions of race assign meaning depending on the geopolitical and cultural context within which such perceptions are received.

“Looks change with the angle of perception, with who is looking, and with how ‘we’ look back at ‘them,’ and with what it is that ‘we’ and ‘they’ want to communicate with ‘our’ looks. This differential perception of identity in shifting contexts calls for more situated articulation of the experiences of color.”

-Ella Shohat, *Talking Visions* (2001, 30)

On the internet, where social media platforms govern the angle of perception through a perpetuation of neoliberal ideals for beauty and identity performance, the representations of non-white images are conceptualized through the lens of a global feminist ideal, minimized to function as commodified mechanisms in the promotion of capitalist self-management. Thus, while identity may be seen as unfixed and mutable by the comings and goings of digital tools

online, the meanings assigned to racial difference—perpetuated by the commodification of racial aesthetics—limits personal control in determining the perception of identity for non-white individuals, no matter how they choose to perform it.

The foxeye trend, while popularized as a tactic of beauty enhancement, exemplifies a commodification of Asian aesthetics as digital capital to be transactionally sensationalized and consumed for individualistic gain. Situated within the visual economy of social media, perceptions of Asianness become fetishized images that are consumed and subsequently *produced* through the association with a global feminist idea of the oppressed ‘other’. Perpetuated throughout social media’s visual economy and circulation of images is a global feminist discourse that penetrates the modes of performance and representation. Such a discourse is grounded in the prospect of female liberation, however functions through the merging of the structuring violences of geopolitics and transnational capital in favor of a liberal ideal of individuality and modernity. In situating the white, American woman as the model for attaining such a liberation, the associative oppression ascribed to women of color equates their oppression with poor self-image (Heijin Lee, 2018, 7). Despite the equation of racial aesthetics as the signs of oppression, the narrative of white American women’s ability to achieve empowerment rationalizes an imitation of non-white features as celebratory of the Other, further promoting Western women as the blueprint for liberation and self-esteem. In transforming their features to mimic those of minoritized racial groups, the global feminist discourse legitimizes racial appropriation as a form of lifting the non-white woman and her features out of oppression. Thus, female bodies of color are reduced to commodities of visual capital to be consumed by the ‘modern’ Western woman in her self-making of individuality.

The accessibility for Eurocentric beauty to gain success by mimicking a commodified Asian aesthetic yet evade the discriminatory racial associations with such is not a new phenomenon. The exclusion of Asian actors replaced by instances of yellow face ran rampant through Hollywood films for years, nowadays it's less striking yet still exists (think Scarlett Johanson and Emma Stone cast to play mixed-race Asian characters). Makeup artists like Cecil Holland and Penny Delamar mastered techniques that intended to transform white actors into what was understood by the American spectator as "Orientalness". The image that the early makeup techniques produced at the time was one that reflected an American notion of Chineseness that emerged prior to most audiences' and actors' encounters with an actual Asian person. This idealized portrayal of Asianness, while modeled after imagined ideas of what an Asian person looked and acted like, did not actually make white actors look Asian at all but became a popular and desirable presence in theater and film (Ito, 2014). The notion that the white actors didn't actually look Asian was far from a problem for the spectator, demonstrating that white actors were believed to play Asianness better than actual Asians. They displayed the Eurocentric beauty standards while donning makeup and performing Asian stereotypes that were familiar and desirable to American audiences much more than the exoticized Asian actor might. Similarly, the adornment of the foxeye trend on TikTok reflects the circulation of an imagined and selectively desired image of Asianness adopted by white users, whose Eurocentric features distances them from the exotic, foreign image prescribed to Asians.

What is displayed by the makeup techniques used in the foxeye trend on TikTok is a constructed aesthetic of Asianness that draws on stereotypical images of Asian women in fashion and film. The physical foreignness of Asian women portrayed in media through the exoticized

tropes of the China Doll, Dragon Lady, Madame Butterfly, and more, represent a hypersexual and hyperfeminine idea of Asianness constructed in the media. In shaping these images as what Asianness looks like through an American lens, the issue of American racism is resolved by desire, positioning racial and ethnic difference as the main function of the spectacle. Thus, the Asian aesthetic is rendered an available commodity to be utilized in the ideology of inclusion. The inclusion of Asianness, especially in its function as visual cultural expansiveness on the fashion and style frontier, represents an aestheticized product for beauty and fashion available for the modern American woman. However, the discrepancy between the visual authenticity of Asian bodies and the ethnic commodity being adorned points to the firmly rooted position of Asian bodies on the other side of the geo-sartorial border, the lack of actual Asian bodies in media distinguishes the inclusion of their racial appearance as a mode of multicultural display rather than a legitimate act of inclusion (Yamamoto, 2000, 44).

The uncertainty of legitimacy in the act of including representations of Asian ethnic and racial difference lies in the oppositional and unwavering foreignness prescribed to Asians and Asian Americans in American ideologies of nationalism. Predicated on historical perceptions of Asia and Asian culture as obverse to American cultural and ideological hegemony, racial difference as spectacle emblemizes the function of foreignness in affirming American national subjecthood as abstracted and un-racialized (Yamamoto, 2000, 45). Imperative to the maintenance of this foreignness and exotification is the perpetual fetishization of Asian women and their sexuality as commodities. Centered around the racialized body as a visible marker of difference, the commodified image of Asian female sexuality emerges from erotically fetishized perceptions of Asian bodies as infantile, virginal, submissive, and culturally distanced from the

grasp of American feminism. Situated by the white male gaze as the object of desire and sexual domination, the Asian female body and its racial marking is tightly bound to this hypersexual coding of which submission and docile compliance is central (Yamamoto, 2000, 46). The removal of sexual agency in the submissive perceptions of Asian female sexuality while simultaneously upholding it in their sexual allure to the white male for sexual domination, helps construct what it means to be hyper visible as a racialized object; the images of which are circulated in a discursive and representational arena. In maintaining Asian racial difference as a spectacle of exotic foreignness, the commodification of Asian women's sexuality goes beyond voyeuristic fetishization and is intimately linked to upholding the imaginary of American national identity. Through opposition, circulated images of the exotic, submissive Asian woman embody the signs of inadequate American citizenship and emphasize the promotion of the white American body as the authority for maintaining national identity (Yamamoto, 2000, 51).

Such logic of visibility subtends the structure of American racism by naturalizing a commodified image of Asianness under the pretence of multicultural inclusion. In returning to the circulation of racialized features through the foxeye trend on TikTok, the logic of visibility for inclusion downplays the impact of American racism on Asians and Asian Americans for their eyes while simultaneously foregrounding the lack of racism in imitating them for beauty enhancement. The popularization and repetition of Asian aesthetics as seen with the foxeye trend highlights a continuation of the historical stereotyping and commodification of the female Asian body, reimagined through the lens of representational wokeness. As expressed in many of the TikToks critiquing the makeup trend, the designation of Asian eye aesthetics as temporarily beautiful and desirable not only maintains the erasure of subjecthood in the commodification of

Asian bodies and sexuality, but ignores the impact of racism experienced by Asians and Asian Americans for their eyes.

The commodified portrait of Asian women as hypersexual, submissive, hyperfeminine, and the object of desire for white men is a crucial piece to the adoption of their features especially on TikTok, where open display of sexuality is an imperative piece to online success and performance of desirability. Content seen on the app reflects varying displays of identity performance that are enwrapped in heterosexual desirability, of which the fetishization of racial aesthetics is no stranger. While the fetishized and hypersexual association with Asian women as erotically desired by white men has often been a source of tension (and thus resentment) towards Asian women, the appropriation of their features in the name of beauty enhancement affirms the primacy of Eurocentric beauty to establish the conditions of desirability on its own terms. Thus, while historically a site of exoticized and racist contempt on Asian women, the presentation of an Asian aesthetic on white women becomes a desirable look that is distanced from the highly foreign and perpetually exotic assumptions prescribed to Asian and Asian American women. White women may perform a temporary and sexually fetishized image while remaining ‘familiar’ and detached from racial associations.

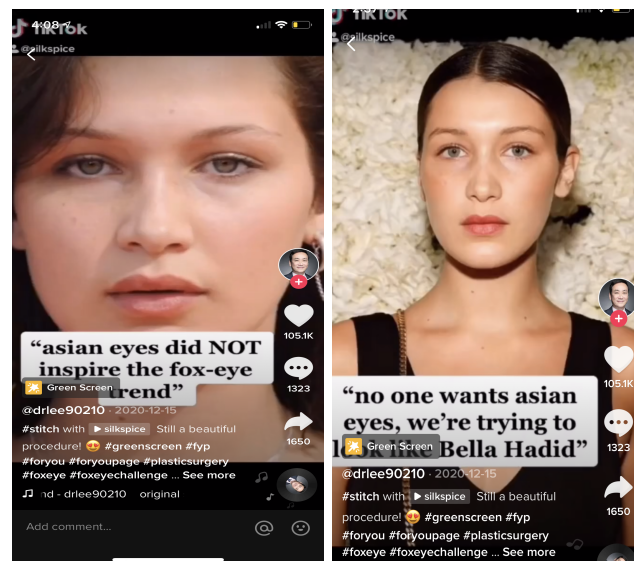
The abstracted malleability of whiteness functions in tandem with the naturalized commodification of Asian female sexuality in exemplifying a performance of desirability available for the Western subject’s construction of individualized identity, yet out of reach for the Asian American. By selectively and temporarily valorizing Asian features associated with sexuality and desirability, the otherwise restrictive stereotypes that commodify and construct the image of Asian and Asian American women may be performed without the assumed foreignness

and political implications of racial difference. Indicative of the erasure of subjective identity with the commodification of Asian women and their sexuality, the lack of authentic Asian bodies circulated in the media emphasizes a deployment of the Asian body as the object of spectacle for American ideological cultural work. The specifically infantilized and erotically sexual constructions of the orientalized other paired with the ability for white Western women to selectively reproduce the allusions of such functions to reassert the coherence and primacy of Western subjecthood (Yamamoto, 2000, 52). Situated in the ever-changing context of the TikTok trend, the adornment of the foxeye makeup look signifies a commodified and highly transient construction of Asianness, of which the abject allusions of racial difference and Asian subjecthood are obscured, unbound to the abstracted body and effortlessly wiped away with a moist towelette.

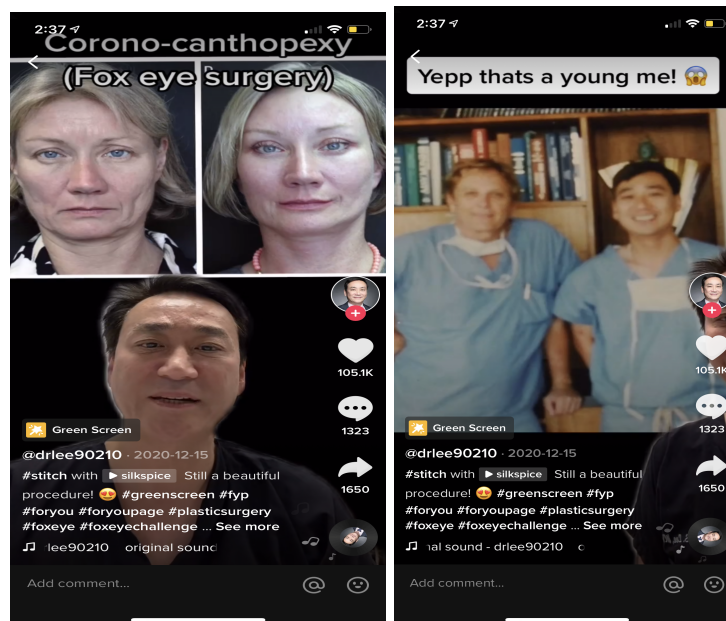
While the temporally fleeting nature of the TikTok trend in conjunction with the ability to wipe off the foxeye makeup demonstrates a capitalist mechanism that requires a constant ejection-replacement of commodities, the politics of beauty as necessary for self-entrepreneurship manifests in cosmetic surgery as a more permanent mode of performing the self. The practice of cosmetic surgery is a prominent form of body modification for beauty enhancement in both America and many Asian countries - Korea specifically - however, the conflicting motivations underlying the practice emphasize racial difference as a key benefactor in cultural and geopolitical prescriptions of meaning. In tracing the motivational origins of the makeup techniques used in the foxeye makeup look to a distinct, Western practice of racially-influenced surgical procedures, cosmetic surgery highlights a historical pattern of racial

imitation and the commodification of racial features as a mechanism in the negotiation of neoliberal beautification for intelligibility and social success.

While the debate of whether the foxeye trend has racially-influenced origins is discussed both on TikTok and through opinion piece articles on other media sites, the most incriminating evidence is provided by a plastic surgeon on TikTok who traces the makeup look back to its surgical predecessor: the corona-canthopexy procedure, or foxeye surgery. The purpose of the surgery is to lift the brows and tilt the eyelids up to elongate the eyes. One method uses botox that is injected at the outer edges of the eyes and around the eyebrows to create this lifted look, however a more extreme surgical procedure inserts threads under the skin that are then pulled up and back to hold the skin taught and produce the desired foxeye look. While the surgery is advertised as being performed under the pretence of looking more awake, younger, and high fashion, as seen on the previously mentioned models Bella Hadid and Kendall Jenner, one surgeon on TikTok has confirmed the surgery's racial origins.



In a viral TikTok captioned “Was Fox Eye Inspired by Asians?”, images of Bella Hadid are shown overlaid with comments typically seen defending the trend as not being inspired by Asian eyes: “no one wants Asian eyes, we’re trying to look like Bella Hadid”. The text reads quite ironically, as the model that the users claim to imitate has herself undergone the corona-canthopexy surgery which the TikTok quickly confirms as being inspired by Asian eyes. The surgeon, Dr. Charles Lee, explains that the fox eye surgery was developed in the 1960’s by Dr. Robert Flowers in Honolulu. With before-and-after images of the foxeye surgery in the background, Dr. Lee explains of Flowers “He loved the exotic look he obtained by tilting the eyelids up and lifting the brow. He was inspired by the aesthetic of the Asian eye in Hawaii.” Before the skeptic has time to question the validity of his claims, Dr. Lee confirms them saying “How do I know this? He was my partner!” a picture of the young doctors together appears on the screen as visual evidence.



Up until Dr. Lee's TikTok was posted, there was much debate around whether the look had racial implications or if the "designer eyes" were simply coincidentally imitative. Additionally, when researching the origins of the foxeye look and the surgery behind it, I found no historically comprehensive text on how or when the procedure was developed -- the only information about corona-canthopexy procedures came from either plastic surgery websites advertising a younger, more high fashion appearance or opinion-based articles with critiques similar to those found on TikTok. The fact that the most concrete information confirming the racial correlation of the foxeye look to the Asian eye aesthetic was provided through TikTok provokes an exploration of the complex and various ways the app, positioned in the greater context of the internet itself, serves as a platform upon which consumption and production of news and culture intersect as a reflection and reproduction of geopolitical structures of power.

The confirmation of the origins of the foxeye makeup trend as a temporary alternative to a racially-influenced surgical procedure thus requires a historical interrogation of how cosmetic surgery and TikTok trends on the internet reflects a new era of how the image of the Asian face can cross borders. With the rapid circulation of visual images on the internet, the consumption of the Asian image produces new meaning through its displacement within geopolitical structures. The understanding, or lack thereof, of Asianness is thus made mutable by the ideologies governing the perspective of the consumer. When situated on TikTok, where an imagined audience is established by algorithmic designation, racialized images are subjected to ever-changing angles of perception and subsequently the communication and interpretation of those images. Thus, while the commodified features of Asian aesthetics in the foxeye trend illustrates a discrepancy between visual Asian authenticity and what is reimagined through

makeup, it reflects the ways an online circulation of visibility produces differing meanings and understandings among varying contextual perspectives. Provided with visual imagery of bodies that have been constructed by the discourses of converging geopolitical systems online, consumers negotiate their exposure to an endless stream of visual content in the performance of their selfhood.

In considering agency in the negotiation of visual markers for identity performance, the stereotypes associated with Asian women, while utilized as a tool for beauty enhancement on white women online, limit the subjectivity and construction of an autonomous identity for Asian women in America. While their features are commodified online for the sake of performing beauty, Asian American women's beauty performance is intimately linked to the cultural and racial associations prescribed to them. While performing identity through acts of beautification reflects the liberated individuality of white women, any act of beautification for Asian American women becomes an act of assimilation because of the visual markers that preemptively assign identity to them.

Indicative of assimilation through acts of beautification is the practice of the Blepharoplasty procedure or double eyelid surgery within the Asian American community. Contrasting the intentional exotification of the foxeye surgery as a performance of subjectivity, the original purpose of this procedure was motivated by the pressure for visual assimilation to combat the image of Asians as forever foreigners in America. The procedure alters the shape of the eyes by removing "excess" skin from the eyelids to create a rounder, more 'awake' and open look similar to the typical Euro-American eyes. First introduced by military doctors during the Korean-American war as a humanitarian effort through medical services, the procedure

cemented a transnational communication of American ideologies of beauty, promising it as an alleyway to success (Heijin Lee, 2016, 9). In coding the procedure as necessary for cultural acceptance in America yet signified as choice, the neoliberal rational of self-management for success communicated cosmetic surgery as compensating for their racial difference and the abject associations prescribed to it. While the introduction and popularity of the double-eyelid cosmetic surgery conveyed the possibility of assimilation by way of neoliberal self-management, the centrality of whiteness in the conditions for attaining success through beauty renders the foreignness of the Asian body unable to attain the promised assimilation. Thus, the practice of cosmetic surgery within Asian communities is clouded by the contingency of cultural citizenship, viewed as a primitive attempt at assimilation rather than a performance of beauty and individuality. In centering the body's material clues of racial difference, the messy discourses of Euro-American racial hierarchies, Orientalism, and tensions between whiteness and Asianness manifest in the ideology of beauty (So-Rim Lee, 2018, 2).

Conclusion

In exploring the motivations and intricacies embedded in the foxeye trend, the long-standing historical implications and structural mechanisms are brought to light in the fleeting temporality of the TikTok trend. The logic of visibility on the internet highlights beauty attainment as a mode of self-management defined by neoliberal capitalism as the criteria for liberated individuality. Contextualized by American ideologies of national identity that hierarchically determines the perceptions of racial difference, the means available for self subjectification in the performance of identity are seen as unequally distributed. As such, the

commodification of racial features is utilized as a mode of identity performance adopted for white individuality. Such an individuality is affirmed by the political and ideological characteristics of American national identity that centers whiteness as the dominant ideal. Thus, the performance of identity through adopting racialized features is predicated on the idea of inclusion by ‘lifting’ the Other out of its associative oppression, repositioning it as momentarily desirable. However, such a repositioning is highly temporal and remains outside the possibility of legitimate structural inclusion, instead functioning within an American ideology as an affirmation of Western individuality. On TikTok, where the implications of heterosexual desirability functions as an objective of beauty attainment and online success, the fetishized stereotypes of Asian women permeate the motivations for imitating an Asian aesthetic. As such, the adornment of the foxeye trend not only evokes sexual desirability, but functions to affirm the gendered power structures of dominance and submission. The adornment of foxeye makeup provides just one example of how reductionist perceptions of racialized subjects work to erase the varying realities and social conditions of non-white individuals in the commodification of their features.

While this section emphasizes the erasure of subjectivity by reductionist constructions of Asianness through commodified images, I feel it necessary to acknowledge the agency maintained by Asian and Asian American communities in the construction of identity. Based on the criteria I’ve discussed, the construction of Asian American identity is seen as limited by the standards of American national identity. However, in recognizing identity as an effect of negotiated markers and personal tendencies, the variation within Asian American identities are vast and reflect different realities of experience. While Asian stereotypes inform the ways a

broader structure of power represented in media might perceive Asianness, such an awareness of these stereotypes is negotiated by the Asian American individual in the decision to actively embrace or subvert them for personal understanding. As a community that reflects the meeting of an array of cultures, often in conflict with each other, the construction of Asian American identity is complex and reaches far beyond the scope of this project. As such, it should be noted that the topics I have discussed in this section emblemize only one aspect of the Asian American experience in negotiating the conflicting cultures and conventions of America and Asia.

Conclusion

As I reflect on the topics addressed in this paper—the discursive constructs that assign meaning and inform the public perceptions of selfhood, structures that bind and constrict the availability to success and intelligibility, the mechanisms of commodification that erase the social conditions of racialized subjects—I wonder, what does such a discussion actually *do*? Whether this question has arisen out of pure frustration or a genuine curiosity, I am uncertain. What I might hope for, is that such an exploration of identity construction might serve to broaden the understanding of the greater discursive frameworks in motion for an individual pondering what constitutes their identity. However, when I consider the process of constructing and searching for meaning within my own identity, it is not the ideologies within political or discursive structures that I look to for self understanding. Rather, I look to the web of geographic migrations, religious and ethnic cultures, and consanguine bonds interwoven throughout my family history. I look to my friends, my peers, my community, and our interchange of intimacies and experiences. Feeling love, feeling pain, feeling confusion—of which resolution is either realized or accepted as unattainable and finding peace in that. I look to the times when my father would take us to dim sum. Sitting in the noisy dining hall, watching carts carrying plates of har gow and turnip cake roll past, practicing one of the few Chinese phrases I knew “xie xie!” after the waiter stamps a smiley face on our ticket. I look to the Saturday mornings when my mother had to force me out of bed so that I would make it to Hebrew school on time. Almost ten years to learn how to read enough Hebrew to prepare for my Bat Mitzvah and then never return to synagogue again. Most recently, I look to the focus of my studies. I read, watch, listen, write, and

converse to fill in the blanks of what I cannot articulate or make sense of in my identity and relation to the world around me.

As part of the generation who grew up with the internet as a prominent influence for constructing personal and social meaning, it would be remiss not to say that many of the choices I made in constructing a selfhood were and are still influenced by what I see online and how I want to be perceived online. While I am not someone who actively (or at least consciously) constructs an online persona that is separate from how I behave and perform my selfhood in the real world, social media aids in presenting the criteria necessary for emulating the type of person I believe and want myself to be. As a person who is admittedly addicted to social media yet ironically terrified of it, this project works to make sense of the ways the structural mechanisms apparent in the real world manifest in the virtual one. While I find comfort reveling in the illusion that the internet is an entirely fabricated space thus making how we present ourselves online truly meaningless, the ways in which the content consumed online has emerged as an informant of real world interactions and understandings are impossible to ignore. This is not to say that this is necessarily bad; I believe that the increased exposure to different identity expressions on the internet and social media has aided in the acceptance and representation of identities subverting normative conventions. It is a result of the exposure to and interpretation of these varying expressions on the internet that releases the consumer from the boundaries of physical, geopolitical, and cultural space in the making of personal meaning.

When thinking of the elements that construct my identity, it is the negotiation of personal, interrelational, and cultural understandings that make it mine. When I entered college and decided on a course of study, I was focused on the prospect of “finding myself”, of learning

enough about myself through personal relationships and academic studies to construct an identity that I would be able to articulate and resolve what I had never been able to make sense of. In the remaining days before I graduate, I have learned to articulate that the identity I so yearned for is not one to be realized, but a process of negotiating the contexts within which I reside and the meanings I make for myself within them. The institutional construction of identity and meaning is broad, an umbrella creating and promoting structural inequalities for the affirmation of power, under which we may hold agency in accepting or rejecting. If anything, this project does the work of exposing the illegitimacy and mutability of meaning that serve as the foundation for those structures. However, discourse is still accepted, the structures are still in place, and power still functions to create inequalities. As such, while these broad frameworks loom over the realities of human experience, the ability of individuals to create agential understanding for themselves is what has brought me to this topic. The reality of human experience as nondescript and in constant motion, varying from individual to individual. It is through the acceptance of this multiplicity of meaning where I believe community may be found.

At the time I began this paper, I yearned for the day I would get a menacing dragon tattooed on my body. The dragon, signifying a personal affirmation of the side of myself I see as exuding strength, tenacity, and the actions I believe constitute me as a badass. It is a symbol celebrating my Chinese heritage that rebels against the fetishized stereotypes that I question as motivating those who call me “cute.” Now, as I conclude this project, I sit with the dragon tattooed on my left shoulder, peering around the side of my arm to greet the onlooker with a threatening visage. I’m still called cute, but the ascribed meaning of that linguistic construct does not confirm nor deny my reality. Rather, I hold agency in deciding the ways I may negotiate or

subvert it in performing the elements of my selfhood. Perhaps another day I'll put my hair in pigtails. I'll call *myself* cute.

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