Research on the Differences in the Development and Construction of Gender Identity Concepts Between China and the West: Using Cross-Dressing as an Example

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Abstract: Gender awareness and concepts in society are increasing over the years. With the rapid development of the economy and art in China and the West, cross-dressing has entered the public's field of vision and is continually attracting attention from the media and censorship authorities. The artistic aesthetics presented by cross-dressing and the commercial effects associated with it have received widespread attention. However, the basic gender education and the mental issues of cross-dressers are still lacking in awareness and discussion. This paper analyzes the development and construction of cross-dressing in different cultural contexts in China and the West, as well as the influencing factors. This paper concludes that the different forms of artistic inheritance, traditional gender concepts, and business models have led to different constructions of cross-dressing in China and the West. Based on this, this paper puts forward the following suggestions: standardize gender education, return to the aesthetics of cross-dressing art, and create a healthy industrial chain.

1 INTRODUCTION

Cross-dressing is the act of wearing clothes that do not traditionally belong to one's gender, and or applying cosmetic products to change one's gender characteristics. In different historical periods and social structures, cross-dressing has different forms of expression, such as art performance, identity exploration, self-enjoyment, or entertainment, etc. Considering both China and the West, cross-dressing can be traced back to historical traditions. Yet, with the development of time, it has experienced various changes; therefore, it has gradually become a kind of individual identity politics while retaining the pursuit of aesthetic concepts, and thus extended business models.

The differentiated development of cross-dressing and its special forms of expression has attracted widespread attention to the LGBTQ+ community and has resulted in a business value chain, but there is still a lack of constructive deficiencies, such as model planning and cognitive norms. This article focuses on Chinese and Western culture and analyzes the development and construction of cross-dressing in different cultural contexts, as well as the influencing factors.

2 DEFINITION AND REGIONAL DIFFERENCES

2.1 Definition

Cross-dressing refers to changing a person's appearance and clothing to become an image that does not conform to their gender. Different people have different purposes for cross-dressing. Cross-dressing can extend to many fields, such as religion, fashion, and film and television. It can be an individual's expression of self or resistance to society, or it can be a personal hobby and performance technique. In essence, the meaning of cross-dressing is different from "drag queen", "transvestism", "Otokonoko (disguise-woman)", etc. It is a behavior in itself and cannot be directly linked to gender identity. In the context of today's society, the expression of cross-dressing has undergone a series of developments and has become specifically

directional, whereas people are unconsciously using cross-dressing to describe gender identity or even sex orientation. The phenomenon of such a social definition requires looking back on the long history of cross-dressing.

2.2 The History of Cross-Dressing

In the history of China and Western countries, cross-dressing can be seen as an artistic narrative with the purpose of spreading religious culture and consolidating military regimes, using drama as a medium. Back to the ancient Greece period, cross-dressing seems to come about in three ways: for the sake of a god, despite a god, or, as with Agathon, for oneself (Elder, 2015). For example, the male hero Achilles in Greek mythology hid as a woman to avoid participating in the Trojan War. After being discovered, he accepted his mission and became a warrior. This dramatic technique closely integrates war vocation and heroic identity with masculinity, which is an expression of social order. Nevertheless, the female gender that Achilles pretended to be was thus portrayed as someone who escaped from war and could not have her rights. This also reflected the low social status of women in ancient Greek society at that time. Such a functional narrative has similarities in Chinese history. The most famous one is the Northern Dynasty poem "The Ballad of Mulan", which describes the deeds of the patriotic woman Hua Mulan who dressed herself up as a man and joined the army for her father. It promotes cultural virtues by praising cross-dressing women to consolidate the masses' "loyalty and filial piety" values. To a certain extent, it also represents the awakening of women's consciousness and power. However, whether in China or Western countries, gender has always been binary and labeled, and cross-dressing has been firmly fixed in the male social order. For example, The Ballad of Mulan traps the protagonist in a context of a binary structure of men and women. The prerequisite for Mulan to achieve her goal is that she has to give up her gender role and identify with the male role norms (Yang, 2021).

The increase in cross-dressing performers comes from the phenomenon of gender imbalance. In Shakespeare's time, although there was no law explicitly stipulated, women's performance on stage became taboo in Western countries led by Britain. In England, female roles in the theatre were played by boys, and women did not appear on stage until the restoration of the monarchy in 1660 (Grist, 2001). Men were trained to please the audience and were sought after by the upper class at that time. The same

taboo also appeared in ancient China. Women were prohibited from performing, and women's roles were played by men, the most famous of which was the "Dan" role in Peking Opera. It was not until the last Qing Dynasty that a few female actors appeared in the opera troupe. The sovereigns stipulated that men and women could not perform on the same stage. Eventually, a troupe dominated by women appeared, and female actors could also cross-dress (Ren, 2024). At this period, men controlled the discourse, and cross-dressing was a means of performance for humans to achieve art and beauty.

It was not until the third wave of feminism in the Western and the awaking of queer theory that a new concept of cross-dressing was given. The unique performance style of drag queens gradually came into the public eye. It was a performance evolving from cross-dressing. In Gender Trouble, the famous scholar Judith Butler supported the theory that gender is controllable and acquired through the deconstruction of drag. The book uses drag to show that the naturalized knowledge of gender operates as a preemptive and violent circumscription of reality (Butler, 1990). Cross-dressing, mainly involving drag queens, has become a kind of body politics, and society has de-binarized gender and blurred people's definition of identity symbols.

2.3 Regional Development Differences

In contemporary times, there are significant differences in the dimension of demonstration, form of existence, and method of expression of cross-dressing between China and the West. From the perspective of film and television entertainment, Western films tend to revolve around the personal perspective of cross-dressers, integrating cross-dressing into the narrative of identity exploration of the LGBTQ+ community, and telling the individual's yearning for spiritual freedom through the process of cross-dressing, such as "The Danish Girl". China's mainstream culture has maintained its tradition, integrating cross-dressing into the grand narrative, rather than focusing on the individual's expression of self-gender. Chinese films that have entered the public eye still use cross-dressing as an element of "disguise", such as "Mulan" and "Liang Zhu", etc. While this kind of expression can show potential gender inequality and trigger people's reflection.

In terms of context, the West is relatively precise. The media has moved away from using the term "transvestism" which is related to mental illness, and has made an official classification for "cross-dressing". For example, based on traditional gender

orientation and non-binary gender characteristics, the West has classified secondary terms such as "cross-dressing enthusiasts", "transgender cross-dressers", "drag queens", and "drag kings". People can find their preferences when learning gender awareness knowledge. However, when groups speak for themselves for identity recognition and push the diversity of identity and gender into the public's vision, they ignore the potential identity crisis. When an identity is defined, there will be ethnic divisions and comparisons between individuals. When people mention cross-dressing, they focus on its "trans gender" characteristics and infinitely magnify the flow between identities. Overly standardized divisions and radical forms of expression are controversial in terms of social acceptance, which is bound to cause psychological problems such as anxiety, depression, and contradictions in the identity recognition of transgender and cross-dressing enthusiasts (Valentine & Shipherd, 2018).

China still has an ambiguous approach to cross-dressing, semantically single, even narrow, and the most common word in the media is "Otokonoko", which directly means the disguised woman, which has a certain gender discrimination meaning. The official language does not systematically deconstruct cross-dressing, but rather uses one word to describe a huge system.

On the other hand, the forms of cross-dressing on social media platforms also show differences. Western mainstream media regard cross-dressing as an individual's exploration and voice of self, and provide a considerable number of performance venues to support more cross-dressing behaviors. Although China's mainstream media pays attention to the continuation of culture and focuses on promoting cross-dressing performing artists headed by Li Yugang, the influence of traditional culture such as cross-dressing in today's media communication has eventually declined; instead, "Otokonoko", which is classified as a subculture, has become a new trend. In reality, groups related to cross-dressing choose to seek like-minded people on the Internet, especially live broadcast, game, and animation platforms, such as TikTok, Bilibili, etc. People choose to express their gender identity in a highly instant way, has a large network viewership, and has fast updates and iterations.

It is worth mentioning that although there are regional differences in cross-dressing, whether in China, Western countries, or even globally, women cross-dressing as men is naturally more accepted than men cross-dressing as women. When people see

cross-dressing as an out-there behavior, it often refers to men dressing up as women.

3 FACTORS INFLUENCING CROSS-DRESSING DIFFERENCES

3.1 Traditional Art

The inheritance and cohesion of art are important cornerstones for the development of cross-dressing today. The differences in customs and habits bring about differences in artistic styles between China and the West. Cross-dressing in China originated from the long-standing art of fǎn chuàn (reverse role) in opera. As one of China's traditional folk customs, opera is a cultural symbol of China. The male Dan role in Peking Opera is a popular profession of cross-dressing. Although it is necessary to admit that there is a separation between the actor and the role in every art performance, the job of male Dan has been retained until now, and it requires extremely high artistic attainments and qualities of the performer. Opera art can reflect the national characteristics and historical value of China, and is the main treasure of China's publicity and protection. However, the nature of cross-dressing in opera art remains in the behavior of "pretending" and "playing", rather than exploring the fluidness of gender, which weakens the voice of postmodern cross-dressing enthusiasts in the mainstream media.

Nonetheless, there is no professional tradition of cross-dressing in Western countries. Its artistry comes from theatrical elements. Artists use breaking gender, tradition, and marginalization as the matrix of their creation, forming a symbol of rebellion and self-awareness, which is also a key propaganda concept of mainstream media in later generations. For example, camp culture is a sensibility of combining artistic criticism with cross-dressing. This form of expression is a double-edged sword, which focuses too much on identity politics and boldly pursues freedom and rebellion, symbolizing genders, thus weakening the pure artistic aesthetic expression (Zhang, 2023).

3.2 Gender Concepts and Social Pressure

The essence of cross-dressing is to switch between different genders. Gender concepts in different regions affect the expression form of cross-dressing. Chinese cross-dressing is more restrained, and

Western cross-dressers are more accustomed to showing themselves.

Chinese society is deeply influenced by Confucian culture, and it is based on a gender binary. Confucian culture assumes that the characteristics of men and women are distinct and innate, and people's self-value and contributions are specified by their innate gender. Men representing Yang have greater social responsibilities, and women representing Yin have greater family responsibilities; therefore provide social stability. Any deviation from this assumption is seen as deviant, and therefore wrong, bad, or at least undesirable. A woman who behaves actively like men is seen as violating the Yin role and therefore behaving inappropriately (Rosenlee, 2023). Thus, the gender conversion of men and women represented by cross-dressing is considered unethical, which disrupts the balance created by men and women. Moreover, in China, one's gender identity and orientation are related to family. The Classic of Filial Piety states that "the body and hair are inherited from parents," comparing maintaining one's physical characteristics to being filial to parents. Therefore, individuals face social and family pressures when choosing to become the opposite gender.

The West has carried out many feminist movements based on gender performativity. Cross-dressing is based on the acquired constructions of gender rather than biological determination, as Beauvoir wrote in The Second Sex: "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (Beauvoir, 1949). Later, the queer movement provides a space for cross-dressers to have "gender fluidity", making society more accepting of gender transitions and reducing a certain level of social pressure on individuals when they undergo gender transitions. In Western societies, people face fewer challenges in choosing their gender.

3.3 Business Model

The commercial effects of cross-dressing in China and the West are fundamentally different. The West pays more attention to the industrialization of cross-dressing, and it is distributed in every branch of the entertainment industry. In China, the booming Internet celebrity economy has brought cross-dressing into the Internet viewership-driven age.

The queer culture in the West has driven commercial development. As a branch of it, cross-dressing is not only a way of expression in theater performances, but also compounding into various entertainment investments, distributed in film and television, fashion, variety shows, pop music, and cosmetic areas. For example: the famous reality show RuPaul's Drag Race, pop singers David Bowie and Lady Gaga's performances with cross-dressing elements, the queer genre of the film festival, and the fashion Met-gala. The consumers have various channels to receive information about cross-dressing, and the business model is diversified. Under a similar decentralized business model, although cross-dressing has not gained a unique topic in the West, it has penetrated all aspects of people's lives.

Under China's censorship system, cross-dressing relies on network platforms as a dissemination path. The public is influenced by imported culture. The most widely spread "Otokonoko" is the borrowed word from the Japanese ACG industry's special term "disguise woman", which mainly comes from anime and games. The emergence of Otokonoko is closely related to Japanese teenagers' passion for cosplay and Kabuki culture. This art form was introduced to China through the Internet in the 21st century under the catalysis of the popularity of Japanese entertainment. China lacks gender awareness education and does not have a clear classification of queer themes, making Otokonoko culture a subculture element that quickly penetrates the youth pop community and develops marginalized financial benefits. For example, cross-dressing vloggers headed by "DuoYuMaoMaoJie" became popular on Chinese TikTok, gaining as many as 30 million fans and bringing in live streaming profits. Vloggers on live streaming platforms such as TikTok and Bilibili rely on video viewing numbers, fan population, and the ability to sell goods to implement rewards. After the success of "DuoYuMaoMaoJie", numerous cross-dressing vloggers have created videos attempting to make a profit. Whether it is to arouse the gender enlightenment of the Chinese LGBTQ+ community or to gain attention, the cross-dressing behavior of vloggers satisfies the curiosity and even imitation psychology of most viewers. When the vloggers master the key to viewership of cyberspace, after the accumulation of time, the algorithm of short videos will increase the intensity of pushing the cross-dressing culture into the public. More viewers will pay attention to it on the Internet, and even extend to peripheral products, fan creations, etc., prompting people to learn and imitate transvestites on social platforms, forming a positive feedback loop. The characteristic of this business model is that attention and economy accumulate rapidly, but most vloggers who do not know enough about cross-dressing are attracted to take shortcuts to success on the Internet; it is possible to create a negative image of the cross-dressing community (Zhao, 2022). When the

audience is familiar with cross-dressing videos and the trend of cross-dressing fades away, the further development direction of cross-dressing is questionable. How to find new platforms or ways to continue to show the nature of cross-dressing faces challenges.

4 EXPRESSION AND IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION PATH

4.1 Education and Norms

From a global perspective, social education is the main influencing factor in the development of human behavior. Every country should carry out basic gender education in schools so that the new generation of young people will no longer be exposed to gender awareness through the Internet. First of all, people need to realize the diversity of gender temperament. For example, the gender stereotypes in historical tradition do not apply to today's society. Masculinity can be diverse, and female characteristics are not inferior to males. The word "Otokonoko" with feminine connotations should not be a derogatory or stigmatizing word. Secondly, non-traditional and binary gender and identity knowledge should be popularized. This popularization method should avoid educational tendencies, but simply let young people have a certain degree of cognition about the transformation of gender identity while eliminating negative social pressure.

When quality education is popularized and people's gender awareness rises, individuals should deal with the problem of social acceptance. The country should systematically open psychological counseling for transgender and cross-dressing enthusiasts, such as university psychological counseling rooms, and community help groups. A complete mental health system requires professional settings to increase practitioners, regular surveys and visits, and settings to protect the privacy of consultants to avoid turning cross-dressing into a mental illness.

4.2 Internet Censorship

In the era of online communication, the commercial space of the entertainment industry needs in-depth planning. Entertainment should set up categories for cross-dressing themes, such as a rating and grading system. Also, countries provide opportunities for cross-dressing individuals to perform in theaters within the permitted scope, allow more representatives to step out from behind the scenes to the front of the stage, and make the vague image of cross-dressing more concrete and vivid, so people will not feel unfamiliar or curious about gender identity. At the same time, the media should avoid using "cross-dressing" as an element to increase the exposure of topics, but introduce it to public platforms from a neutral perspective. Internet platforms should have a review system to improve the quality and novelty of cross-dressing videos and reduce content that is discriminatory or vilifying a certain gender.

5 CONCLUSION

In summary, through the analysis of regional differences in cross-dressing, it can be concluded that there are differences in semantics and artistic expression between contemporary China and the West. The development of cross-dressing is tied to industrialization, commercialization, and network viewership, but there is a lack of gender education and mental health norms in both China and the West. For the trend of cross-dressing to develop healthily and positively in the future, it is essential to popularize gender education, establish mental health organizations, and government development and planning of commercial space.

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