



Article scientifique

Article

2011

Accepted version

Open Access

This is an author manuscript post-peer-reviewing (accepted version) of the original publication. The layout of the published version may differ .

Queering Cultural China: Performing Nation through the Feminine Body

Madsen, Deborah Lea

How to cite

MADSEN, Deborah Lea. Queering Cultural China: Performing Nation through the Feminine Body. In: Textual practice, 2011, vol. 25, n° 4, p. 671–687. doi: 10.1080/0950236x.2011.586775

This publication URL: <https://archive-ouverte.unige.ch/unige:75235>

Publication DOI: [10.1080/0950236x.2011.586775](https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236x.2011.586775)

published in *Textual Practice*, 25. 4 (August 2011), pp. 671-87.
 link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2011.586775>

Queering Cultural China: Performing Nation through the Feminine Body

Deborah L. Madsen

In this essay, I want to consider the ways in which national and ethnic as well as sexual identities are functions or artefacts of particular representational regimes, characterized by ethnocentric and heteronormative imperatives. My context is "cultural China"—the entity supposedly formed by the common culture shared by Chinese communities located outside the mainland: primarily Hong Kong, Taiwan, Macau, and Singapore but extended to include a global network of diasporic communities: from Jakarta to Johannesburg. Weiming Tu's image of Chinese culture as "a living tree" crystallizes this understanding of a shared, if geographically dispersed, Chinese culture.¹ The linguistic complexities of Chinese understandings of the concept "overseas Chinese" can be seen in the range of nuanced terms used to describe what we might simplistically call "Chinese diaspora": *Huáqiáo* (simplified: 华侨; traditional: 華僑) refers to Chinese citizens residing temporarily in countries other than China. *Huáyì* (simplified: 华裔; traditional: 華裔) refers to ethnic Chinese residing outside of China. Another often-used term is 海外华人 (*hǎiwài huárén*) often used by the PRC government to refer to people of Chinese ethnicities who live outside the PRC, regardless of citizenship. *Waiji huaren* names foreign nationals of Chinese descent; southern Chinese refer to "Overseas Chinese" as 唐人 (*tángrén*). *Liuxue* is the common word used for Chinese students studying abroad.

The common characteristics of this shared culture include a commitment to Confucian values (especially filial piety) and a Buddhist or Taoist religion, observance of specific cultural rituals (such as the moon and hungry ghost festivals), and a Han (as opposed to, say, Tibetan) somatic identity. My contention (following Rey Chow, Wang Gungwu, Ien Ang, and other commentators) is that this common Chinese culture is a deliberate construction that serves specific political interests; a construction that is enacted at its most literal in diasporic Chinese beauty pageants.² By my title, "queering cultural China," I mean to address the intersection of national with gender and sexual identities in the construction of this diasporic community. I am following queer theorists like Judith Butler (as will become apparent), Annamarie Jagose and Dennis Altman. Altman, in his essay "On Global Queering," argues that

"Queer theory" shares with much of contemporary postmodernism an emphasis on representation as an aesthetic rather than a political problem, a desire to deconstruct all fixed points in the interests of "destabilising" and "decentering" our preconceptions. ... [and he concludes] I would argue that "queer" is an enormously useful term for aesthetic criticism; a film like *Orlando* or *The Crying Game* can be described as "queer", meaning precisely that they unsettle assumptions and preconceptions about sexuality and gender and their inter-relationship. I am less convinced that the term provides us with a useful political strategy or even a way of understanding power relations.³

I would contest this easy separation of the aesthetic and the political, especially in the context of transnational identity formation, where the aesthetic unsettling of assumptions and preconceptions about the relation of sexuality and gender, and the relation of both to ethnicity and nationhood, carries powerful political implications. I am in sympathy with Annamarie Jagose who writes of queer theory as an instrumental methodology, a way of "ceaselessly

interrogating both the preconditions of identity and its effects." She argues that, "The discursive proliferation of queer has been enabled in part by the knowledge that identities are fictitious—that is, produced by and productive of material effects but nevertheless arbitrary, contingent and ideologically motivated."⁴

In this essay, I want to explore the arbitrary and contingent relations among sexuality, gender, ethnicity and nationhood in the politically motivated project of creating a unified transnational community. I begin by thinking about the matrix of discursive relations among heterosexuality, femininity, class, and especially nation, represented by the beauty pageant; as Sarah Banet-Weiser shows in her study of national pageants: "The Miss America pageant produces images and narratives that articulate dominant expectations about who and what 'American' women are and should be at the same time as it narrates who and what the nation itself should be through promises of citizenship, fantasies of agency, and tolerant pluralism. Therefore the beauty pageant provides us with a site to witness the gendered construction of national identity, and I mean this in its doubled sense, as both a statement of the gendered nation and the feminine body as nationalist."⁵ From this matrix of gendered national values, I turn to the diasporic beauty pageant as a staging of gendered transnational values and the spectacle of the disciplined feminine body as an icon of cultural nationalism and community identity, such as Banet-Weiser describes. A few literary examples of gender performance or spectacle, read in the context of Judith Butler's theory of queer performativity, will bring to a conclusion my argument that the beauty pageant (or any specular gendered performance) exposes to view the disciplinary regimes by which normative subjects are produced.

In her 1990 book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Judith Butler explores the epistemological relations that discursively produce what she calls "the heterosexual matrix"; she asks, "what configuration of power constructs the subject and the Other, that binary relation between 'men' and 'women,' and the internal stability of those terms?"⁶ Her answer is the presumption of heterosexuality—a male subject desiring a female object. Assuming this relation as an instance of heterosexuality causes us to assume collaterally that the identities involved "are" male and female—so Butler destabilizes this assumption by asking: what happens when the female position is occupied by a female impersonator? This upsetting of the opposition between the natural and the artificial "queers" gender identity by replacing women's reproductive characteristics with only the cultural markers of gender and suggests that both gender and sexuality are constituted by "a kind of persistent impersonation that passes as the real."⁷

I will come back to this idea of female impersonation later, but here it is the concept of gender identity as a cultural performance, a matrix of signifiers that enables members of a cultural group to "read" the signs of gender and to be read as a gendered subject, that I want to stress. Butler takes as one of her key assumptions the idea that the vocabulary of gender should be seen as a series of relational terms, having little meaning outside a network of social relationships. Thus, Butler suggests that feminism should refuse "to search for the origins of gender, the inner truth of female desire, a genuine or authentic sexual identity that repression has kept from view."⁸ This timeless, universal, gender "essence" shared by all women of all times and places is an illusion, and a distracting one. What it distracts us *from* is questioning "the political stakes in designating as an *origin* and *cause* those identity categories that are in fact the *effects* of institutions, practices, discourses with multiple and diffuse points of origin."⁹ By searching for the truth of an originary femininity we are blinded to the "compulsory heterosexuality" that produces feminine cultural effects.

The beauty pageant ritualizes these "gender effects": it is significant that these competitions are named for the spectacle and ritual they stage. For a pageant is no simple contest: it is a highly formalized display that serves particular cultural purposes. One purpose is to stage and resolve conflicts concerning the public status of women and the commodification and objectification of femininity in patriarchal culture. In recent popular films that deal with the beauty pageant scene, feminist criticism of beauty contests becomes itself a cultural conflict in search of resolution. Let me remind you of the first major

demonstration against the Miss America pageant: in 1968 a group of feminists conducted a well publicized protest in Atlantic City. They crowned a live sheep to dramatize the objectification of feminine bodies and, in what they called a "freedom trashcan," they burned instruments of female "torture" such as girdles, bras, and hair curlers.¹⁰ These women condemned the beauty pageant as a "meat market" where women are put on display as sexual objects, consumable by men.

Organisers of such contests, however, have been careful to downplay the sexual element of the pageant, stressing instead the existence of a feminine community where what we might call the gender effect of feminine "personality" is more important than sexuality. Sarah Banet-Weiser describes the value of "respectability" as one of the most important guiding principles of the Miss America pageant, as the pageant promotes itself: mediating the discourse of sexuality through understandings of girl-next-door "ordinariness." So what constitutes the "ordinary" in the context of a beauty pageant raises complex questions about heterosexuality, femininity, class, sexuality, and the performance of those values in the public space. The pageant is a public spectacle that performs various cultural functions including the affirmation of community values and the notion of civic pride, as Banet-Weiser makes clear: "The beauty pageant, in fact, represents a ... complicated arrangement of claims and is the embodiment of a variety of nationalist expressions: it is a civic ritual, a place where a particular public can tell stories to 'themselves about themselves'; it is often a mass mediated spectacle, firmly embedded within commodity culture, in a historical moment where so many forms of social participation and social meaning are determined by a continuous interplay between representation and consumption."¹¹

Lois Banner, in her history of beauty pageants in America, notes that in order to find mainstream acceptance, promoters of these contests found a way to combine popular culture entertainment with elite culture festivals, in a national setting that represented young women as symbols of national pride, power, and modernity.¹² For instance, the Miss America pageant distinguishes itself by claiming, "other pageants are looking for a model, but Miss America is looking for a role model."¹³ The commercial motivation of promoters (who fund the event through sponsorship), and of the contestants themselves, is obscured by a discourse of idealism and, specifically, nationalism. Paradoxically, the subjective value of national identity becomes "real" only when performed in a public space, a space where the nature of national identity becomes ambiguous because it is an embodied individual who must represent the abstract value of "nation." This is one of the contradictions engaged by the beauty pageant contestant: she must be ordinary and representative yet exceptional, "one in a million" yet also "one of us."

Ethnic beauty pageants, especially in the context of Chinese diaspora, are on the rise. At a time when beauty pageants such as the Miss Universe competition generally are losing popularity, these contests have found a new locus of approval in places like China. Recently, the Chinese beauty scene hit the headlines with the staging of a Miss Artificial Beauty pageant in Beijing, to which I will turn in a moment. In this transnational context, issues of gender, sexuality, and nationalism are played out in bold political terms. Carole McGranahan, in her essay "Miss Tibet, or Tibet Misrepresented? The Trope of Woman-as-Nation in the Struggle for Tibet," points out that "it is clear that while Tibetan Woman is the object upon which our gaze is focused, she is not the subject of the pageant. Instead, the Tibetan nation and the Tibetan state are the subjects under contention."¹⁴

As June Gong, the first winner of Miss Chinatown U.S.A. in 1958 explained, the pageant was not so much "a beauty contest"; it was "more like a matter of ethnic representation."¹⁵ The performance of feminized Chineseness is a key component of the beauty pageants that take place every year throughout the Chinese diaspora. Indeed, I would argue that the very existence of a Chinese diaspora—a transnational network of communities linked by their common cultural affiliation with China—depends upon such rituals as these beauty pageants to sustain a sense of common Chineseness. These rituals shore up such concepts as "China" and "Chineseness" because what constitutes China as a nation state and

Chineseness as an ethnic category is a set of unstable definitions. These contested definitions inevitably find their way into the staging of beauty pageants that unashamedly adopt nationalistic rhetoric and idealism as part of their rationale. The Miss Chinese International pageant, for example, was heavily sponsored by the Republic of China (ROC) as the Taiwan-based Nationalist government sought means to retain the support of overseas Chinese communities for itself, and its own interpretation of Chineseness, at the expense of the mainland PRC. The winner of a regional pageant, like Miss New York Chinese or Miss Malaysian Chinese International, goes on to compete in Miss Chinese International, one of a network of ROC-sponsored regional beauty pageants that bring together representatives of diasporic Chinese communities across the world.

Images of recent Miss Chinese International pageants, feature contestants from Canada, the USA, Australia, the Philippines and Hong Kong.¹⁶ The Miss Chinese International pageant is broadcast by Hong Kong-based Television Broadcasts Limited and is made available to overseas Chinese communities through subsidiaries and subscription satellite services. The structure of the pageant, which involves cultural performances and special awards like "Miss Oriental Charm" or "Miss Motherland" or "Miss Chinese Culture" promotes the practice of a common Chinese culture.

These contests claim to promote pride in Chinese culture but the Chineseness of the pageant and its contestants is compromised by images such as this photograph of Miss Chinese International 2004, posing in the competition that has been most contentious throughout the history of beauty pageants: the swimsuit competition.



“Canadian Linda Chung, from Vancouver, British Columbia, poses during the Miss Chinese International pageant in Hong Kong late January 17, 2004. Chung was crowned Miss Chinese International on Saturday after beating 19 other Chinese contestants from around the world” (*China Daily*, 18 January 2004, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/en/doc/2004-01/18/content_299990.htm Accessed 28 May 2008.).

Here, wearing a bikini and stiletto heels, Miss Chinese International presents an image that appears more western than Chinese. The question that arises, concerning how "Chinese" are the criteria used to judge such a pageant as this, is further complicated by the use of competitions such as the "Alluring Eyes Award," which is one of the categories of competition in the Miss Malaysia Chinese International pageant (now named the Miss Astro Chinese International after its sponsor, the Malaysian Astro satellite television network), one of the regional pageants of the Miss Chinese International competition. This category is suspect because the single most popular form of cosmetic surgery in Asia is the operation to make almond-shaped eyes more round, and more western. The next most popular cosmetic intervention is surgery to narrow the face and make cheekbones more prominent. The *Manila Times* in 2004 claimed that: "The (Chinese) government said the country's fast-growing cosmetic surgery industry rakes in \$2.4 billion a year as patients rush to go under the knife to widen eyes, narrow faces and fill out lips and breasts, emerging as *renzao meinu*—man made beauties."¹⁷ So the standard of beauty being judged in these pageants is, in nationalistic terms, suspect. But this is not simply a case of western versus Chinese concepts of beauty; the entire set of ethnic markers signifying "Chinese" is destabilized by these diasporic pageants.

The Miss Chinese Cosmos pageant, a rival to Miss Chinese International, is a contest created and broadcast by Rupert Murdoch's Hong Kong-based Chinese TV channel, Phoenix TV: part of Murdoch's strategic interest in entering the mainland PRC media sector. In keeping with the diasporic or "greater China" theme of the Miss Chinese Cosmos mission statement, this beauty pageant is open to Chinese girls all over the world. The only requirements are that the entrant be Chinese and have a good command of the Mandarin language. This requirement that the contestants speak the Mandarin dialect excludes from the competition all those Southern Chinese—Cantonese, Fukkien, or Hokkien speakers—who, for historical reasons, comprise the bulk of overseas Chinese communities, and the language requirement also underlines the authority of northern China (Beijing) and Taiwan to define "Chineseness." So a very particular kind of Chineseness is promoted by these pageants, with specific allegiances to Chinese political states (Taipei/ROC or Beijing/PRC) but also, I would argue, with specific grounding in one kind of Chinese ethnicity: Han Chinese ethnicity rather than any other of the more than fifty recognized ethnicities in China. This emphasis on a specific kind of Chinese ethnicity becomes clear as we analyse two recent controversies in the pageant world, where the discursive constraints placed upon the cultural markers of Chineseness are exposed.

First, in May 2003, China obstructed the participation of Taiwan's representative in the Miss Universe contest. Chen Szu-yu, who registered with the Miss Universe contest authorities as "Miss Taiwan," was required to wear a name sash reading "Miss Chinese Taipei" after Chinese authorities intervened, arguing that Taiwan is a disputed territory of China and therefore cannot be represented as a nation state.¹⁸ Secondly, in 2005 Miss Tibet was excluded from the Miss Tourism pageant in Malaysia and also from Miss Tourism World in Zimbabwe. Chinese officials complained that a woman who lives in India, in Dharamsala where the Tibetan government-in-exile is based, could not represent a "province" of China. Organiser of the pageant, Alaric Soh, told Tibetan officials that the Chinese embassy in Malaysia had objected to the participation of a Miss Tibet. Soh tried to solve the dispute by re-naming "Miss Tibet" as "Miss Tibet-China" but this solution was unacceptable to Tibetan organisers.¹⁹ These political interventions on the part of the Chinese government suggest a concerted effort to ensure that the Chineseness performed in transnational beauty pageants conforms to clear ethnic and national definitions.

We might ask, then, what is the relation of gender categories to these nationalistic and ethnic categories? Miss Tibet and Miss Taiwan, representing disputed sites of Chineseness, are excluded from the ritualized performance of Chinese femininity displayed in the beauty pageant. Who else is excluded? Another disagreement with the organisers of an international pageant arose when Chinese organizers allowed a transsexual woman to enter a regional competition that would entitle the winner to compete in the Miss Universe pageant (despite

the fact that transsexuals are disqualified from participating in the Miss Universe competition). However, the attempt by a woman who underwent extensive cosmetic surgery in preparation for her appearance in a Beijing pageant caused her to be disqualified – and her case motivated the staging of the recent Miss Artificial Beauty pageant in Beijing, where competitors had to provide written evidence of having undergone a cosmetic surgical intervention.

The winner, who had surgery to widen her eyes and narrow her face, again raises questions about the westernization of Chinese standards of beauty. Feng Qian is reported as saying that she was proud of her glamorous, albeit artificial looks, achieved through botox injections and surgery to widen her eyes and remove fat from her cheeks and waist. "This is recognition of the girls like us."²⁰ But it is the contestant who shared the award for Best Media Image who raises more interesting questions about the performance of racialized gender in this pageant. Liu Xiaojing was the only transsexual entrant in the pageant and her presence highlights the performance of specific cultural codes and gender markers by all contestants in the pageant.

We can return here to Judith Butler's question concerning what happens when, in the heterosexual matrix, the position of "the female" is occupied by a female impersonator? The opposition between natural and artificial is upset as women's "natural" sexual characteristics are replaced with cultural markers of gender. Liu Xiaojing—who is neither an impersonator, nor a drag queen, nor a transvestite—told the *Manila Times*: "I am now legally a woman, and this contest is my first formal step toward womanhood."²¹ The prospect that the pageant validates a femininity created by surgery and makes it real—more real than the surgery alone could accomplish—underlines Butler's point about the importance of the desiring gaze and the inherent instability of gender categories. But this gender instability is somehow not so important in the view of Chinese pageant organisers who are willing to allow "artificial" women (transsexuals) to compete but exclude surgically enhanced "beauties." So men who become women are legitimate but women who change their physical characteristics are not. Why? I want to suggest that, within the discourse of Chinese nationalism, markers of one specific kind of Chineseness or Chinese ethnicity are privileged: markers of Han ethnicity are more importantly preserved than are the cultural markers of gender. In other words, whether a contestant is a Han woman or a Han man *performing as* a Chinese woman is irrelevant so long as "Chinese" remains synonymous with Han. What cannot be tolerated are surgical interventions that make a *non*-Han woman *look like* a Han woman. That is to say, the grounding of Chinese nationalism in "natural" or blood or inherited ethnic characteristics is of paramount importance, more important than interventions that might disrupt the "natural" grounding of gender categories.

The performance of gender is permitted but the performance of ethnicity is not. Nationalistic identities must be "authentic" and grounded in stable, physical, somatic markers of ethnicity. However, as the surgical westernization of the Miss Artificial Beauty contestants shows, these ethnic markers are not stable and the ethnic glue of "Chineseness" that holds together the transnational network "cultural China" must be disciplined in ways that emphasize Han dominance. The feminine or "feminized" body then becomes the contested site of gendered national/ethnic definitions and power relations.

Judith Butler reminds us that "[i]f the 'reality' of gender is constituted by the performance itself, then there is no recourse to an essential and unrealized 'sex' or 'gender' which gender performances ostensibly express."²² For this reason, she explains, "the transvestite's gender is as fully real as anyone whose performance complies with social expectations." But alternative gender performances that do *not* conform to social expectations are regulated and punished by coercive means. I want to offer a brief discussion of Catherine Lim's story "Father and Son," which explores the significance of an alternative gender performance in the context of patriarchal Chinese cultural expectations.²³ Briefly, the story begins with "the old man" who sits all day in his room in an agitated state pointing, when questioned about his son, to a yellowing snippet from the *Straits Times* that is his son's

obituary. The omniscient narrator then takes us back and recounts the events that have led to this situation. The account of the son's birth is contextualized in terms of Confucian patriarchy—the narrator reports the man's hostility towards the wife who has produced only daughters, his inability to love his daughters, and his doting on his only son. While the father's desires are fulfilled through providing his son with every material benefit he can offer, the son's desire is fulfilled only by dressing in his sisters' clothes. This desire is, predictably, disciplined and increasingly violently: first by the father, then by schoolteachers, finally by his dispossession and exile from the family. What precipitates this crisis is the news that the son has attended his National Service interview dressed in women's clothes. This particular performance ensures that he is exempted from military service but it also exempts him from the life he has known; his father declares him "dead" and publishes his son's obituary in the local newspaper.

Balanced, in the narrative, against this gender performance is another: naming himself "Fay," the boy enters and wins the "Miss Oriental Queen" beauty pageant. The narrator dwells on the acts and gestures that transform the boy into a beautiful woman, "the clothes, the trinkets, the hairdo, ... the steps, the expression of coy winsomeness" (p. 7). But perhaps even more, the "looks" that define his gendered identity are stressed: his own gaze reflected in the mirror; the adulation of the pageant crowd, "the looks that took in his eyes, large and sparkling, his soft complexion, the pleasing slenderness of his legs" (p. 8); the admiring looks of two European men who "winked and smiled" (p. 8) at him in the hotel dining room. The feminine performance which the boy has been practising most of his life is perfected and made "real" in the context of the beauty pageant. It is for the reality of his subsequent performance before the military authorities that he is punished by his father—the "outraged patriarchal authority" (p. 1) to whom we are introduced at the beginning of the story—but this punishment gives way to a more general social punishment. When he fails to return home to beg forgiveness, his father goes searching for his son among the transsexuals of the city's red light district. There, amid women "heavily made-up so that their faces were like those of dolls or mannequins in shop windows" (p. 12), he finds his son "transformed almost beyond recognition, ... laughing and drinking with the Europeans" (p. 12). The implication here of gay sex tourism introduces a lurid and sinister element that is emphasized by the narrative detail that the father "brushed aside with impatience" (p. 12) street purveyors of printed pornography.

The father's interpretation of his son's sexual and gender identity is contrasted with that of the mother and sisters. In the closing paragraph of the story we are told that they "took special care to cut or tear out of the *Straits Times* any picture of Singapore's top fashion model who called herself Fay and whose lovely face and perfect figure graced the covers of many a fashion magazine" (p. 13). Fashion icon or prostitute? Model beauty or model deviant? The narrative leaves open the interpretation of the boy's transsexuality. What is stressed is the absence he constitutes in the family, as in the magazines from which his image has been excised. His absence defines the presence of the identifying boundaries and exclusions by which possible modes of subjectivity are enabled by specific cultural formations. In Lim's story, subjectivity is not so much recognized as misrecognized (hence the narrator's interest in mirrors and the reflective gaze).

The queering power of misrecognition mostly affects the patriarchal figure of the father who begins to die on the day he publishes his son's obituary. He retires from business, he ceases to leave his room, he receives fewer and fewer visitors; he lives in a constant state of what the narrator calls "agitation" and "perturbation." The instability of his "spirits" suggests the ontological instability of the cultural discourses within which he recognizes himself. All the normative values that made his world intelligible have been "denaturalized" as discursive constructions. This is emphasized by the narrator's refusal to assign proper names to the characters. They are "the father," "the son" or "the boy," "the wife" or "the mother." Only when the son's obituary is transcribed do we learn the names of the father and son—but that is at the very end of the story, after we are accustomed to reading these characters as familial

and social types, playing normative roles. The queering of these identities—patriarchal Chinese father; filial son and daughters; submissive Chinese wife—queers national, gender and sexual identities through the vehicle of the beauty pageant, the title of which—"Miss Oriental Queen"—offers a play on unstable ethnic and sexual identities.

To return again to Judith Butler: she reminds us that we are distracted if we go about seeking the origin or ground for a "natural" femininity. What we must attend to are the effects of gender: the cultural markers that perform femininity and masculinity in a complex interplay of private and public spheres. What the beauty pageant offers is an instance where the false assumption of gender origin (or any identity origin) is unmasked and the cultural markers of identity (sexuality, gender, nationalism, class, ethnicity and so on) are laid bare before us. The spectacle of the beauty pageant can then be appreciated as the performance of the subjective in the space of the public sphere.

How then does the destabilization of normative heterosexuality through the queering of gender identities involve the destabilization of national and transnational (diasporic) identities? To what extent can diaspora be seen as a gendered discursive matrix? How does reading diaspora in this way help us to understand Chineseness as what Rey Chow has described as a discursive formation within which the ethnically marked subject is produced and formed by a network of forces comprising language, economics, migration, and cultural tradition?²⁴ Seen in this way, Chow's description of cultural Chineseness recalls Judith Butler's contention that there is no subject before language; there is no subject that predates the "ethnicized," gendered and sexed subject. A sovereign migrant subject does not enter into a pre-existent "diaspora"; rather, diaspora is a discourse that creates and performs the diasporic subject. Here we might ask who is a diasporan and how do they differ from migrant workers, sojourners, permanent settlers, or foreign-born children and their descendants? The children of migrants are born into diaspora in ways that are impossible for their parents. And what of internal diaspora within the shifting borders of a complex nation-state such as China, consisting as it does of Special Economic Zones like Shenzhen and Special Administrative Regions like Hong Kong? Interestingly, from 2007 the Miss Chinese International pageant was opened to mainland Chinese (PRC) participants. The ideology of cultural China offers a common discursive framework that integrates these diverse modes of identification. At the same time, if we follow Butler's line of thinking, the subject does not choose freely the roles that constitute the self as "Chinese"; rather, the subject is performed by these cultural discourses and in that way is constituted by them.

The danger here is to generalize a common sameness, a cultural Chineseness that is identical in all times and all places for all subjects. I find useful in this regard Butler's concept of citation. In the same way that each speech act cites and calls into play the entire structure of language, but without articulating the entire abstract linguistic system, so subjective citation calls into play an entire system of cultural norms that provides the conditions of intelligibility for each identity performance. By continually citing the conventions and ideologies of our social world, we enact in our bodies those conventions and make them real by performing and "naturalizing" them in our bodies.²⁵ As Butler argues in the essay "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory" :

gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed, rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*. Further, gender is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self.²⁶

These actions or performances then produce changes in our bodies, in how we perceive our embodied subjectivities, and in how we live our lives. Maxine Hong Kingston prefaces *China Men* with the story that queers normative embodiments of gender. The fable, entitled "On

Discovery," tells of Tang Ao, an explorer who is captured in the Land of Women. Before he can be presented to the Queen he must be "prepared." So the women pierce his ears, break his feet, remove all his body hair and, finally, they

powdered him white, painted his eyebrows like a moth's wings, painted his cheeks and lips red. He served a meal at the queen's court. His hips swayed and his shoulders swiveled because of his shaped feet. "She's pretty, don't you agree?" the diners said, smacking their lips at his dainty feet as he bent to put dishes before them.²⁷

Tang Ao is transformed by a brutal regime of bodily transformation from a swaggering machismo, who leers at the prospect of being held captive by "ladies," into what we might call, following Foucault, a "docile body."²⁸ Not only is his body painfully and violently transformed but these changes involve a regime of gendered humiliation. He is "forced to wash his used bandages [that bind his broken feet] which were embroidered with flowers and smelled of rot and cheese. He hung the bandages up to dry, streamers that drooped and draped wall to wall. He felt embarrassed; the wrappings were like underwear, and they were his" (p. 4). This exercise in self-abasement, together with the stylization of his body (both externally and internally via the "women's food" he is fed), transforms Tang Ao's experience of embodied subjectivity to the point where his performance of submissive femininity is naturalized: "She's pretty, don't you think?" the diners ask each other. By using the verb "to be" ("she *is* pretty"), Kingston emphasizes the ontological instability that characterizes the display—maybe not the pageantry but certainly the spectacle—of gender.

But she does more than this. Kingston "queers" gender in this story and she also "queers" sexuality. When Tang Ao is taken prisoner the narrator comments "if he had had male companions, he would've winked over his shoulder" (p. 3). The appropriating gaze he directs at his female captors is supplanted at the end of the story by the objectifying evaluative gaze of the diners. And the gaze that evaluates the power of Tang Ao's sexual attractiveness is feminine. The narrator continues to refer to Tang Ao as "he"—"He served a meal"; "His hips swayed"—despite his cross-sexual transformation, and we forget that "the diners" who comment on his appearance are women (this is the Land of Women, after all). In this way, Kingston queers the assumption of normative heterosexuality that the reader might bring to this story. And then she takes this process of queering a step further. The stylization of Tang Ao's body is described in terms that could be labelled "*chinoiserie*": the bound feet, the jade ear-studs, the flower embroidery that decorates his bandages, the chrysanthemum tea that "stirred the cool female winds inside his body" (p. 4). These details bring into play a system of cultural norms that provides the conditions of intelligibility for Tang Ao's identity performance. In the citation of such oriental details, the narrator leads us to the assumption that, wherever the Land of Women might be located, it is certainly "Chinese." But the story ends with the words: "Some scholars say that that country was discovered during the reign of Empress Wu (A.D. 694-705), and some say earlier than that, A.D. 441, and that it was in North America" (p. 5). Kingston's queering of gender and sexuality here takes on a national dimension. She queers the US national origin narrative—the myth of discovery by Columbus in 1492—by suggesting a much earlier Chinese "discovery" of North America and, at the same time, she reveals the ontological instability of "cultural China" by suggesting not just an overseas Chinese community but an entire kingdom located in the diasporic space of a transnational China. Kingston's account of Tang Ao as "an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*" (to return to Butler)—a repetition of acts that is stylized in terms of national icons of gender, sexual, and national identity—queers "cultural China" on all these levels.

In conclusion, the beauty pageant (or any specular gendered performance) exposes to view the disciplinary regimes that produce normative subjects. The display of corporeality or bodily experience in the pageant is revealed as the effect of powerful cultural discourses; the

reiterated acting exemplified by the beauty pageant produces power—repeated and persistent discourse creates the object it names and instantiates the concept, whether that is a gendered notion of femininity, a sexed notion of heterosexuality, or an ethnicized notion of "cultural China." This understanding of power offers a way of thinking through the political potential of "queering" methodologies particularly in contexts such as the ethnic beauty pageant, where we see at work the disciplinary regimes that control the availability of sexual, gender and ethnic discourses. The instability of these regimes betrays the constructed nature of that which seeks to appear "natural": in the context of Chinese diaspora, the disciplinary regime of the nation ... and the transnation.

NOTES

1. Weiming Tu, 'Cultural China: The Periphery as the Center' in Weiming Tu (ed.), *The Living Tree: Changing Meaning of Being Chinese Today* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), pp. 1–34.
2. See, for example, Rey Chow, *Writing Diaspora: Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993); Wang Gungwu, *The Chinese Overseas: From Earthbound China to the Quest for Autonomy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000); and Ien Ang, *On Not Speaking Chinese: Living between Asia and the West* (New York and London: Routledge, 2001).
3. Dennis Altman, 'On Global Queering', *Australian Humanities Review*, July 1996, n.p. <http://www.australianhumanitiesreview.org/archive/Issue-July-1996/altman.html> (accessed 28 May 2008).
4. Annamarie Jagose, 'Queer Theory', *Australian Humanities Review*, December 1996, n.p. <http://www.australianhumanitiesreview.org/archive/Issue-Dec-1996/jagose.html> (accessed 28 May 2008).
5. Sarah Banet-Weiser, *The Most Beautiful Girl in the World: Beauty Pageants and National Identity* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1999), p. 59.
6. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990, 2nd ed. 1999), p. viii.
7. Ibid., p. viii.
8. Ibid., p. viii.
9. Ibid., p. ix, Butler's emphasis.
10. See Judy Tzu-Chun Wu, "'Loveliest daughter of our ancient Cathay': representations of ethnic and gender identity in the Miss Chinatown USA beauty pageant", *Journal of Social History*, 31 (1997), n.p. http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m2005/is_n1_v31/ai_20378640 (accessed 7 October 2009).
11. Sarah Banet-Weiser, 'Figures of beauty, figures of nation: global contests of femininity', *American Quarterly*, 50.1 (March 1998), pp. 166–174 (166). See also Colleen Cohen Ballinero, Richard Wilk, and Beverly Stoeltje (eds), *Beauty Queens on the Global Stage: Gender, Contests and Power* (New York: Routledge, 1995).
12. Lois Banner, *American Beauty* (New York: Knopf, 1983).
13. Miss USA. <http://www.missusa.com/> (accessed 7 October 2009).
14. Carole McGranahan, 'Miss Tibet, or Tibet Misrepresented? The Trope of Woman-as-Nation in the Struggle for Tibet', quoted in Huma Ahmed-Ghosh, 'Writing the Nation on the Beauty Queen's Body: Implications for a Hindu Nation', *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism*, 4.1 (2003), pp. 205–227 (207).
15. Judy Tzu-Chun Wu, 'Loveliest daughter of our ancient Cathay', Op. Cit., n.p.
16. See <http://www.missshkbeauties.com>.
17. *The Manila Times*, 14 December 2004, "'Manmade beauties' get chance in China pageant', n.p.

- http://www.manilatimes.net/national/2004/dec/14/yehey/top_stories/20041214top7.html (accessed 7 October 2009).
18. 'Beauty Queen Renamed', *Taipei Times*, 23 May 2003, p. 4.
<http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2003/05/23/2003052269> (accessed 7 October 2009).
 19. AFP, 'Chinese pressure sees Miss Tibet ousted from Malaysian beauty pageant', July 11, 2005, n.p. <http://www.phayul.com/news/article.aspx?id=10175&t=0> (accessed 28 May 2008).
 20. BBC, 'China crowns Miss Plastic Surgery', 18 December 2004, n.p.
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/4107857.stm> (accessed 28 May 2008).
 21. *The Manila Times*, 14 December, 2004, Op. Cit., n.p.
 22. Judith Butler, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory' in Sue-Ellen Case (ed.), *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), pp. 270–282 (278).
 23. Catherine Lim, 'Father and Son' in *Or Else, the Lightning God & Other Stories* (Singapore: Heinemann Asia, 1980), pp. 1–13.
 24. See Rey Chow, 'Foreword' in Elaine Yee Lin Ho and Julia Kuehn (eds), *China Abroad: Travel, Spaces, Subjects* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2009), pp. ix–xii; also Ang, *On Not Speaking Chinese*, Op. Cit.
 25. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, Op. Cit., p. 185.
 26. Butler, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution', Op. Cit., p. 270, original emphasis.
 27. Maxine Hong Kingston, *China Men* (New York: Vintage, 1989, rpt. 1977), pp. 4–5.
 28. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Random House, 1975).