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Cross-Dressing in Taiwanese Dramas: A Reinforcement of Heteronormativity

Abstract

An examination of temporary cross-dressing in Taiwanese romantic comedy dramas that seeks to analyze how gender, sexuality and romance are portrayed. The following discourses will be used to demonstrate how these dramas often support heteronormative ideals: the absurdity of gender, the utilitarian cross-dresser, the idea of the true (bio)gender, the eroticization of the female body, the bivalent kiss, the Sexuality Crisis Bro trope, 'gender does not matter' as romance, and relationship dynamics.

Keywords

Taiwanese dramas, heteronormativity, cross-dressing

Disciplines

Asian Studies | Film and Media Studies | Gender and Sexuality

Comments

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Introduction

It would be hard to find someone who does not know the story of Mulan. The tale of the daughter who disguised herself as a man to take her father's place in the army is one that resonates with people across the world. Chinese people grew up hearing the folktale, and practically everyone else saw the Disney movie. However, what is not universally shared is the interpretation of Mulan's cross-dressing. Is she a paragon of filial piety? A feminist hero? A symbol of nationalism? A transgressor of gender roles? Depending on the version being told, Mulan can mean any of these things. However, no matter which interpretation, something is always said about cross-dressing and the nature of gender. More significantly, even the earliest version of the story, *The Ballad of Hua Mulan*, implies that gender is a social construct (He 627). The very nature of cross-dressing reflects a culture's ideas about what gender is and what is expected of these genders. Regardless, this does not always mean that these cross-dressing stories criticize conservative ideas about gender. In fact, in some cases cross-dressing is used to reinforce ideals of a patriarchal, heteronormative society. Although Mulan's story is an inspiring one, the different versions of Mulan usually stop at revealing the performative nature of gender; there is little subversion of the heteronormative society.

This cultural tradition of the temporary cross-dressing heroine can still be found in Chinese cultures today. For example, Taiwan has produced a number of TV shows that feature a cross-dressing female lead. Unfortunately, like the many versions of Mulan, these shows also

often fail to undermine the heteronormative society. In order to examine how gender, sexuality, and romance is portrayed within the context of cross-dressing, this paper will be examining the following shows: *Hanazakarino Kimitachihe* (2006-7), *Fabulous Boys* (2013), and *Bromance* (2015-6). Although these dramas vary in the presentation of gender and sexuality, nonetheless they all support patriarchal, heteronormative standards. The way heteronormativity plays out in these shows will be explored through the following discourses: the absurdity of gender, the utilitarian cross-dresser, the idea of a true (bio)gender, the eroticization of the female body, the paradoxical bivalent kiss, “gender does not matter” as romance, the couples’ relationship dynamics, and the Sexuality Crisis Bro trope. Before delving into these ideas, it is important to first establish how cross-dressing reveals the constructive nature of gender and how this relates to heteronormativity.

Cross-Dressing as a Deconstruction of Gender

Cross-dressing can be simply defined as when someone impersonates a gender that they do not identify as. This impersonation is often within the limits of the gender binary. It is commonly thought of as a man dressing up as a woman or vice-versa; not as a person dressing up as a genderqueer or non-binary individual. In the past, crossdressers were frequently called transvestites (Nissim). However, this term is antiquated and should not be used to address someone unless they have indicated their preference as such (GLAAD). Unfortunately, transvestite is still often used in discourse on cross-dressing, and sometimes inaccurately equated to being the same as transgender (Straayer 417; He 622). A transgender person is someone who does not identify with the sex they were assigned at birth. If a trans woman wears a dress, then this would not be considered cross-dressing because this clothing item aligns with the cultural

expectations of femininity. What is important to remember about transgender people is that they are indeed “real” women and men. If a cisgender woman wears a dress, then she is not cross-dressing; the same applies to a transgender woman wearing a dress. Women fulfilling the cultural expectations of female gender expression is not cross-dressing. On another note, it is also important to clarify that cross-dressing is not an indication of sexuality or gender identity. Drag shows are a cultural component of the queer community, but not representative of all forms of cross-dressing.

There are various reasons for dressing up as another gender, such as performance, social mobility and as a sexual fetish (Bullough 319). No matter the reason for the act, many scholars agree that cross-dressing reveals gender as a construct. It is through the dimensions of “voice, behavior, look, and dress” that gender is revealed (Purvis and Longstaff 177). According to Judith Butler, gender is a continuous performance, and those who do not go along with this social construct are punished (177-178). Cross-dressing sheds light on the true nature of gender because, “In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself- as well as its contingency,” (Butler 175). Gender is something that requires a continuous performance, thus it cannot be something that is naturally occurring. In a Western context, this gender performance exposes the gender binary for its absurdity, as well as questions the institutions that are buttressed by the belief in its existence. For example, cross-dressing is often useful for revealing the absurdity of society’s heteronormative ideals.

Heteronormativity is the notion that everyone is a heterosexual, cisgender person (Goodrich et al. 841). It is the belief that, “one’s biological sex, gender, and gender expression should align and that one’s sexual orientation should be heterosexual,” (Goodrich et al. 841). In accordance with a person’s assigned gender, there are also certain behaviors and manners of

dress that people are expected to follow. Unsurprisingly, under heteronormativity, homosexuality is considered inferior and often bisexual, transgender, and intersex people are assumed to not exist (Jeppesen 493). Due to existence of heteronormativity, society is built to privilege those who are heterosexual. This can be seen in media, the education system, religion, the government, and other institutions (Jeppesen 494). Furthermore, heteronormativity is also responsible for helping to maintain and support the patriarchy and the gender binary (Goodrich et al. 844). Cross-dressing disrupts heteronormativity by revealing that gender is a social construct. If gender is a social construct, then this means that people's behaviors are not something dependent on their sex. Cross-dressing also allows for a more fluid reading of sexuality and gender expression, which further reveals heteronormativity as a falsehood. However, cross-dressing does not always weaken the institution of heteronormativity. Chengzhou He argues that in a contemporary Chinese context, cross-dressing does not necessarily subvert heteronormative standards, even if it reveals them to be unnatural (622). For the sake of analyzing Taiwanese dramas, He's observations will be used when assessing whether or not the cross-dressing is transgressive in nature. First, however, it is important to look at how cross-dressing has been used throughout the course of China's long history.

Cross-Dressing in Chinese Culture

There is a long history of cross-dressing in Chinese and Taiwanese culture, particularly in the theater. Beginning in the Tang dynasty (617-908 AD), there is evidence of men and women cross-dressing (Chou 132). The golden age of theater, the Yuan dynasty (1271-1368 AD), saw even more women participating in the opera, often playing male roles (S. Li 2). They would even portray men in mixed-sex casts (Chou 134). During the Ming dynasty, women were more active

in private acting troupes that practiced the *Kunqu* style (S. Li 2). As for the Qing dynasty, there was a sharp decline in actresses after Emperor Qianlong banned them from the Beijing stage in 1772 (Chou 132). This was responsible for bringing about an even more refined tradition of female impersonation on the Beijing stage (Chou 133). It was also during this time that the “sexually ambiguous figure of the male *dan*” became a cultural obsession that reached a peak in the 1920s to 1930s (S. Li 2). At present time, the most well-known forms of Chinese opera are Beijing opera and Yue opera. Historically, Beijing opera features an all-male cast, while Yue opera features an all-female cast (Jiang 3). Furthermore, there are also opera forms that contain cross-dressing native to Taiwan, such as *zidixi* or junior theatre (Wu 225). Although the popularity of *zidixi* and Beijing opera are beginning to fade, the *fanchuanxiu* (cross-dressing show) was extremely popular in the 1990s in Taiwan (Wu 225). The Redtop Arts troop’s performances were so well-known that male cross-dressing was “perceived as a new cultural phenomenon in Taiwan,” (Wu 226).

Concerning Beijing and Yue opera, it is important to mention the significance of the *nandan* and *nü xiaosheng*. Respectively, the *nandan* is the female impersonator in Beijing opera, and the *nü xiaosheng* is the male impersonator in Yue opera. These two roles represent the ideal version of a man and a woman. Yue opera’s male impersonator embodies, “women’s ideal men—elegant, graceful, capable, caring, gentle, and loyal,” (Jiang 223). The content of the Yue opera was also tailored to a female audience, and explored the pain that selfish and irresponsible men caused women (Jiang 224). The *nandan* role was designed to fulfill men’s sexual expectations about women, and used over-feminization to disrupt the homoerotic undertones (Zhang 302). The *nü xiaosheng* represents women’s ideal man through a female body. Conversely, the *nandan* represents men’s ideal woman through a male body (Jiang 223; Zhang 302). This leaves the

question of what the cross-dressing female lead could possibly represent in modern Taiwanese dramas. Is she the ideal man or the ideal woman? Or perhaps she represents neither of these things?

Off the stage, Chinese folklore also has its fair share of cross-dressing characters. As mentioned earlier, the most famous example is the story of Mulan. Another well-known folktale is *The Butterfly Lovers*. In this story, Zhu Yingtai disguises herself as a man in order to attend school; while there she falls in love with her classmate, Liang Shanbo. The story ends in tragedy, but they are united after death by being reincarnated into butterflies (Stokes 34). These two examples both feature female characters cross-dressing in order to access a part of society restricted to them. Mulan needs to cross-dress in order to join the army, and Zhu Yingtai needs to cross-dress in order to receive an education. This reflects a trend where women cross-dressing is often seen as more socially acceptable because it is only being done to upgrade one's social status (He 628). The goal of these women is to temporarily access a man's world, and after achieving their goals they will promptly return to femininity. The dressing up is not attempting to thwart men's power, so it is deemed acceptable (He 628). This is reflected by the fact that these stories are presented to children in a patriarchal society. As mentioned by Lisa Odham Stokes, these folktales are the type of things a person grows up hearing (34). If the gender disguise was truly threatening to men's place of privilege in society, then it is unlikely that these stories would be told to the younger generation. The non-threatening nature of male impersonation is something that is further seen in the three Taiwanese dramas that will be analyzed.

The Dramas

Three Taiwanese dramas have been selected to explore the facets of women cross-dressing, they are: *Hanazakarino Kimitachihe*, *Fabulous Boys*, and *Bromance*. All of these shows are romantic comedies that have had relative success in the international market. Due to time constraints, these three were mainly selected because they shared a similar genre, and were under twenty episodes each. All of these shows will be examined for how and to what extent they promote heteronormative ideas. Things to look out for will be whether or not these shows support the gender binary and traditional gender roles. The portrayal of sexuality and LGBT issues is also important for determining how heteronormative these TV shows are. First things first, it is important to know the general plots of these dramas.

The 2006-2007 drama *Hanazakarino Kimitachihe* (better known as *Hana Kimi*) is an adaptation of the 1996-2004 Japanese manga, *Hanazakari no Kimitachi he*. The show stars Ella Chen of S.H.E. as Lu Ruixi. When watching TV one day, Ruixi is inspired by the high jumping skills of Zuo Yiquan (played by Wu Chun of the boyband Fahrenheit), and decides to attend the same school as him. The only problem with this is that he goes to an all-boys school. In order to get close to him and “prove the existence of love”, she cross-dresses to attend the same school. Ruixi proves to be fairly lucky and ends up as his roommate. Hijinks ensue as Ruixi attempts to hide her true gender; completely unaware that Yiquan already has discovered her secret.

Fabulous Boys is a 2013 adaptation of the 2009 Korean drama, *You're Beautiful*. The main character, Gao Meinu (Lyan Cheng) is a nun-in-training on the brink of officially joining the church for the rest of her life. However, trouble arises when her twin brother, Gao Meinan, has a botched plastic surgery job and has to fly to the US as soon as possible to correct it. This turns out to be a problem because Gao Meinan needs to be in Taiwan in order to sign a contract

to join the famous boyband, A.N.JELL. For the sake of helping her brother, Meinu is convinced by Meinan's manager to disguise herself as him and temporarily join the band. This turns out to be easier said than done because the lead singer of the band, Huang Taijing (Jiro Wang), does not want another member to join at all. Meinu must figure out how to protect her secret identity, and appease Huang Taijing.

Bromance is a 2015-2016 drama that features Megan Lai as a woman that must hide her gender for the first twenty-six years of her life. After Pi Yanuo was born, her parents went to visit a fortune teller who told them that her fate would only be good if lived as a man, and that if she lived her life as a girl, then she would not make it to the age of twenty-six. The drama starts with only a hundred days left of Yanuo living as man, but things become more complicated when she runs into triad leader, Du Zifeng (Baron Chen). After helping Zifeng fight off some thugs and saving his younger sister from being run over, the two end up becoming sworn brothers. They eventually fall in love, but Yanuo is anxious about what will happen when the hundred days are up and she must reveal her true gender.

The following three subsections: The Absurdity of Gender, Utilitarian Cross-Dressing, and The True (Bio)Gender; will focus on how these dramas explore the nature of gender and gender performance. In accordance with He's theory, these shows do reveal gender to be unnatural, but they nonetheless present a limited view of gender (622). As will be seen, gender roles are revealed but not questioned, and the futility of cross-dressing is argued for.

The Absurdity of Gender

The cross-dressing in *Hanazakarino Kimitachihe*, *Fabulous Boys*, and *Bromance* reveals that gender is a construct. Perhaps one of the most telling scenes takes place in *Bromance*. As

mentioned earlier, Pi Yanuo has to live the first twenty-six years of her life as a man due to the advice of a fortune-teller. When Yanuo is explaining her predicament, she acknowledges that the fortune-teller was a fake, but she is fine with living this way because it is what makes her parents happy. Just based on the advice of one fortune-teller trying to preserve his reputation (he predicted Yanuo would be a boy), the parents make her live at least a quarter of her life as a man. This determination of gender presentation reflects on the reality that at the beginning of every person's life, gender assignment is beyond one's control and solely relies on parents' whims. Just this one moment of being assigned as a boy or a girl determines how that person is expected to act by society.

Furthermore, these shows also reflect quite a bit on gender roles through the stereotypes presented. For example, in *Hanazakarino Kimitachihe*, it is brought up that only girls like salads, are "cutesy", have dreamy eyes, do not have deep voices, have good skin, are indecisive, and moody. *Fabulous Boys* also presents similar ideas by offering that only girls have soft and clear skin. It also shares more sexist ideas about what men should be like by claiming that boys do not cry, and are incapable of controlling their sexual desires. All of these traits are not determined by gender, but are something that can be taught and reinforced. The dialogue of these shows reveal constructive ideas about gender, and how by doing these things is performing gender. The sexist gender roles come to light because of the cross-dressing, but there is no attempt to question why boys and girls must do these things. The female protagonists acknowledge that certain gestures, clothing, and actions are assigned by gender, but they do not go against these societal expectations. They are not upset that certain things are expected of them because of their gender. Although gender roles are revealed by the performance of cross-dressing, there is no desire to deny them; they are presented as something that is natural. By not

subverting gender roles, this helps to uphold the heteronormative idea that the sexes are fundamentally different and that their roles in society should reflect this. When the main characters are cross-dressing, they attempt to conform to traditional ideas about masculinity, but as soon as the performance is over; they immediately return to femininity. The temporary nature of their male impersonation is further reflected on in the discussion of utilitarian cross-dressing.

Utilitarian Cross-Dressing

The female protagonist's cross-dressing in these shows is not presented as transgressive because it is simply a means to an end for the characters. Yanuo, Ruixi, and Meinu are not cross-dressing because they do not identify as a women or because they want to defy society's gender expectations; they are cross-dressing because it is the best method to achieve their goals. Ruixi is cross-dressing for the sake of pursuing heterosexual romance. Meinu is cross-dressing to help her brother join a boyband that will potentially make him famous enough to find their missing mother. Yanuo is cross-dressing to satisfy her parent's desire to keep her safe. These reasons do not challenge society's ideals, but instead fall in line with the tradition of filial piety and heterosexual romance. They are done in order to participate in these systems, not challenge them. This is further supported by the fact that their time spent as man has a set time limit known to the audience. Yauno only has a hundred days of cross-dressing left, Meinu only needs to do it for a month, and Ruixi will be done when she graduates from school. Their cross-dressing is only a temporary transgression to fulfill socially acceptable goals; it is not threatening to the patriarchy nor heteronormativity. Moreover, the female leads do not enjoy the cross-dressing experience; all of them express their desire to return as soon as possible to femininity. In fact, there are multiple scenes where they briefly wear dresses to have a moment of relief. In these scenes, there is an

assurance that that they are indeed female, and that they do not see themselves as otherwise. There is no doubt about their gender identity.

The “True (Bio)Gender”

The transphobic idea that sex equates gender is often promoted within these Taiwanese dramas. In her analysis of gender-bender manga, Sarah Kornfield explains, “Despite constant gender bending throughout these stories, each series stipulates that the protagonists have a ‘true gender’ and that their true gender matches their biology(sex),” (223). She calls this the “true (bio)gender.” The stories’ assertion that gender and biological sex are always the same is an inaccurate statement that upholds the gender binary. In reality, transgender people do not identify with the biological sex assigned to them, and there are also intersex people who do not align with society’s definitions of being biologically male or female. However, the dramas being analyzed present that sex determines gender.

In *Bromance*, Pi Yanuo claims that besides not having a penis, she is 100% a guy. This clearly demonstrates the view that sex determines gender. Although, Yanuo has lived twenty-five years of her life already as a man, she still could not be considered a true man because she lacks the genitalia. It should also be mentioned that Yanuo makes this claim after displaying her proficiency in martial arts; defeating a man much larger than her. In this particular scene, having a penis is placed above a masculine gender performance in determining the legitimacy of someone’s gender. *Fabulous Boys* also has a number of scenes that support the gender binary. When Gao Meinu is first approached by her brother’s manager to ask her to pretend to be Gao Meinan, she immediately panics and has a vision of having to get a sex reassignment surgery. This displays her belief that it is impossible for her to become her brother because they do not

share the same genitalia. She did not instantly think of dressing up like her brother, but having to physically change her body in order to be convincing. Her thought process here further demonstrates that biological sex is on the top of the hierarchy for determining someone's gender. Another key scene in *Fabulous Boys* that helps display this is when the stylist -who is in on the secret- helps Meinu put ping-pong balls in her pants. In an attempt to create the image of having a penis, Meinu is instructed to stuff her pants with ping-pong balls. It should be noted that this stuffing event is the only measure Meinu takes to disguise her gender besides wearing baggy, more masculine clothes. There are no scenes where she attempts to learn how to walk or talk in a masculine fashion. For the purpose of hiding her gender, the only things deemed necessary are to hide her feminine body and present the facade of having a penis. This all points to the belief that sex equates gender.

The Eroticization of the Female Body

In continuation with the obsession of sex indicating gender, there are multiple instances in these dramas where gender is almost revealed through increasingly sexual encounters. Because sex is the ultimate indicator of the female protagonist's gender, there are various scenes, usually involving bathing, where a male character almost comes across her nude body. Often accompanied by cheery music, these scenes are presented as comedic moments in which the female character must do ridiculous things to disguise her nudity. Chris Straayer describes this type of comedy as, "corrective humor in preparation for the eventual narrative reinstatement of rigid sex roles and heterosexuality," (423). The characters may be able to temporarily hide their true gender, but this is offered as a futile delay of the inevitable.

Furthermore, *Hanazakarino Kimitachihe* presents these exposure scenes within the lens of heterosexual desire. In this show, the male lead has already discovered the female lead's true gender by the time of the nudity scene. In *Hana Kimi*, Ruixi unknowingly enters a hot spring that Yiquan is already occupying and tries to keep her distance from him. Yiquan, although trying to respect her privacy, nonetheless has difficult time looking away. There is also a scene where he accidentally walks in on Ruixi taking a bath at the exact moment she is sticking her leg out of the tub to admire it. As explained by He, this type of situation makes sure, "cross-dressing does not provide scenes of misguided desire as her femininity is constantly recognized in and through the eyes of [the male character]," (630).

The nudity does not have to necessarily be the female character, but can be her exposure to male nakedness. There is a tendency in these dramas for virginity to be eroticized. Since sex typically requires the removal of clothes, the audience knows that the female characters must be virgins or else their identity would have already been compromised. *Fabulous Boys* uses this type of exposure the most; Meinu is constantly being bombarded with imagery of the phallus. The former nun-in-training is exposed to naked statues, perverts in trench coats, and undressed men in the locker room. Her embarrassment during these scenes is a testament to her innocence and virginity. It also supplies the male characters with an opportunity to become endeared with her. Her innocence and helplessness is presented as an attractive quality because it allows the male love interests a chance to rescue her and be the hero in her eyes. The eroticism of virginity is always presented within a heterosexual context; the male protagonists during these situations already know her female gender. Female virginity is being eroticized, not male. This fetishization of purity is also reflective of traditional gender roles. Women are expected to be virgins, while men are much more free to have sexual liaisons.

However, the exposure scenes in *Bromance* do not strictly reinforce the heterosexual gaze. This is mostly due to Zifeng not knowing Yanuo's true gender for the majority of the show. In one particular scene, the two have to share a bed, and Yanuo, fearful that he might discover her gender through physical contact, creates as much distance between them as possible. Nevertheless, Yanuo moves a lot in her sleep and eventually ends up cuddling with Zifeng, even putting her hand in his back pocket. Yanuo is fearful of his reaction when they wake up, but Zifeng was amicable and found the situation to be amusing. There are multiple ways the audience could potentially view this scene. One: as a positive representation of male friendship or bromance, two: as a heterosexual couple, or three: as a gay couple. Zifeng's acceptance of this scenario despite not knowing Yanuo's female identity, allows this scene to be viewed not in a strictly heterosexual light. Out of all the shows, this one was broadcasted closest to Taiwan's legalization of gay marriage (May 2017), so perhaps it is not that surprising that *Bromance* would allow for more liberal readings (Chappell). As a society becomes more tolerant of LGBT individuals, it would make sense for the media to also reflect this acceptance.

Nonetheless, it should not be forgotten that beautiful women are playing these cross-dressing female characters. With the exception of Ella Chen who plays Ruixi in *Hana Kimi*, whom at the time was known for being *zhongxing* or neutral sex/gender, the actresses were known to be feminine beauties (E. Li 76). The audience's knowledge of these actresses allows them to be seen as "a beauty in male disguise," (He 630). In this way, the cross-dressing can be used to emphasize how beautiful they are despite the masculine clothes. This also contributes to the audience's sense of disbelief in the character's disguise, thus making a heterosexual reading of scenes more likely.

The Paradoxical Bivalent Kiss

Due to the character in disguise, these dramas often feature a scene where a kiss can be interpreted in multiple ways by the audience; this is called the paradoxical bivalent kiss. As explained by Chris Straayer:

Whether the kiss is consciously seen and experienced as heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual depends on several variables: whether the viewer predominately experiences the scene through the narrative point of view, the plot, or the direct image; to what degree the costume is convincing to the viewer; whether the viewer thinks or desires with a predilection for opposition or similarity; and whether the viewer chooses to believe or disbelieve the disguise, which relates to her or his preference for certain sexual encounters, available vicariously within a scene. In any case, the “sexual bivalency” carried by believable/unbelievable costume and performance allows for these readings. (426)

In terms of the Taiwanese dramas being analyzed, the effectiveness of this trope varies. To begin, *Hana Kimi* and *Fabulous Boys* present their kiss scenes in a similar way, so only *Fabulous Boys* will be used to explore kiss scenes. This drama veers on the more conservative side and tries to present the kiss scenes in the most heterosexual way possible. It does this by having Taijing find out Meinu’s gender early on, and Meinu being aware of this discovery. For the characters, the kiss scene does not have any homosexual implications. Although Meinu is in her male disguise for the majority of the show, it is not a particularly good one. The major efforts made were a haircut and some ping-pong balls stuffed into her pants; there was no attempt to learn masculine mannerisms or gestures. During the course of the show, Meinu never interacted with Taijing in a masculine way. In fact, the majority of their interactions displayed a rather unhealthy power dynamic with Taijing screaming or ordering Meinu around most of the time. Of course, there is still the possibility that someone may read Meinu and Taijing’s kiss scenes as

something other than heterosexual because she is cross-dressing. However, considering the way the romance and cross-dressing is presented this seems fairly unlikely.

Bromance is a drama that has a genuine bivalent kiss scene. The multiple readings are supported by the fact that it is not revealed until the last episode when Zifeng discovered Yanuo's gender. This means that every kiss scene in the drama before the final wedding kiss can be read with a queer interpretation. These potential readings are further supported by seemingly genuine scenes in which Zifeng comes to terms with his budding feelings for his sworn brother, Yanuo. Friends and family are all supportive of Zifeng's attraction to Yanuo, and encourage him to pursue a relationship. Zifeng and the other supporting characters' unawareness of Yanuo being a woman help to encourage a queer reading of the kiss scenes. The drama wants the audience to believe that Zifeng thinks he is engaging in a gay relationship. This is further encouraged by Yanuo and her cousin's concern that if Zifeng is attracted to Yanuo when she is pretending to be a man, then Zifeng might be gay and thus would never be attracted to Yanuo as a woman. Bisexual erasure aside, the characters' belief that Zifeng is queer in some way persuades the audience to also think this way. Nonetheless, at the end of the drama, Zifeng is reinstated as a heterosexual because it turns out he knew Yanuo's secret before the two even started to date. Great efforts are made to establish the leading men as straight. This is something that is also seen in side characters, even those who genuinely believe they are experiencing gay feelings.

The Sexuality Crisis Bro

In *Fabulous Boys* and *Hanazakarino Kimitachihe*, there is a male character that experiences enormous stress because of his sudden homosexual attraction to the cross-dressed female lead. The 'Sexuality Crisis Bro' trope is used as a comedic element. Because the audience

knows that he is in fact experiencing heterosexual attraction, his anxiety and efforts to prove his masculinity -and disprove his homosexuality- are presented as funny. The implications of someone thinking they are gay being treated as comedy, however, suggests that being gay is an undesirable thing. For example, Xiuyi, the second male lead of *Hana Kimi*, sees being gay as an abnormal thing that makes it so he cannot be a real man. When the Sexuality Crisis Bro discovers that he was experiencing heterosexual attraction all along it is met with enthusiasm and relief. This positivity about not being gay, only supports the idea that being gay is a negative thing. The presentation of homosexuality as abnormal and inferior, corresponds with the notion of heteronormativity.

These two dramas also try to discourage a queer reading of the Sexuality Crisis Bro by suggesting that his homosexual attraction was due to the undisguisable femininity of the cross-dressing character. There is the idea that these men were subconsciously responding to the biological sex of the female lead (Kornfield 222). This is shown during a scene in *Hana Kimi* where Ruixi is discussing with the school doctor, Mei Tian, about the guilt she feels for causing Xiuyi to think he is gay:

Mei Tian: Jin Xiuyi is utterly and completely a heterosexual. The reason that he fell for you is probably because he found some feminine characteristics that you couldn't hide.

This is what you would call basic instincts, a natural reaction.

The explanation that the cross-dressing lead was simply too feminine is also used outside of explaining the Sexuality Crisis Bro's predicament. Even in *Bromance*, when confronting his attraction for Yanuo, Zifeng assumes that it must have begun because "he" is so feminine. In these scenes, the dramas go to a great effort to make the homosexual attraction appear heterosexual.

Another explanation is also provided to excuse the Sexuality Crisis Bro's attraction to the main character: logic. In all these shows, the female leads are in situations where it would make no sense to question someone's gender, nor would it be a huge concern. Ruixi attends an all-boys school, why would a girl be a student at an all-boys school? Meinu joins a boyband, why would a girl be in a boyband? The situations these characters are in would make it illogical to assume that they were anything other than a man. That's why in *Hana Kimi* and *Fabulous Boys* when characters that are not aware of this logic come across the female lead, they immediately recognize her as a woman. In these shows, her femininity is too great that the clothes cannot disguise it alone. Using this train of thought, the Sexuality Crisis Bro's mistaken homosexual attraction can be forgiven because logically what else would they have thought. These characters had no reason not to believe in the cross-dresser's disguise. It also helps that the Bros are often the stupid male characters; who would have never even dreamed that someone was cross-dressing in their midst. In this way, the Sexuality Crisis Bro did not purposely have gay feelings, he was just not smart enough to figure out the truth.

Bromance lacking the Sexuality Crisis Bro trope may be a sign of growing acceptance of LGBT issues in Taiwan. As explained earlier, this is a homophobic trope that paints being gay in a negative light. The exclusion of the Sexuality Crisis Bro and the addition of Zifeng actually coming to terms with his attraction to Yanuo is a positive step forward in portraying queer issues on television. Zifeng discusses his feelings with his friends and family before quietly accepting that he loves Yanuo no matter what gender they are. Of course, it would be even better if there were LGBT-identifying characters on the show, but compared to earlier cross-dressing romantic comedies *Bromance* is quite progressive. This is not that surprising considering that acceptance for homosexuality in Taiwan has grown significantly in recent years leading to gay marriage

being legalized in 2017 (Cheng et al. 336; Chappell). This is reflected in the Taiwanese dramas' levels of progressive ideas correlating with how recently they were aired. *Bromance* aired in 2015-6 and is the most liberal, while the 2006-7 *Hana Kimi* is the most conservative. Perhaps the Sexuality Crisis Bro is a dying trope.

“Gender Doesn’t Matter” as Romance

Something all of the dramas do is present the male leads as romantic because they do not care about female protagonists' appearance. This has progressed over the years from falling in love with her despite her masculine disguise to admissions of “gender doesn’t matter” when it comes to love. The 2006-2007 drama, *Hana Kimi*, does not make any declarations about the unnecessary of gender, but it does have Ruixi maintain a fairly masculine appearance for the entire show. This does not stop Yiquan from falling in love with her. Because he fell in love with her despite the obstacle of male clothing, this is seen as a sign of his good character. It presents the idea that Yiquan does not care about looks, but about someone's personality. This puts Yiquan in the position of being an ideal boyfriend. As for *Fabulous Boys*, one of the side characters claims “gender doesn’t matter”, while the male lead acts in a manner similar to Yiquan. *Bromance* shows the most progressive attitudes with the male protagonist, Zifeng, proclaiming himself that “gender doesn’t matter.” This statement comes at the time of the couple’s first kiss. When Yanuo is bit shell-shocked about what just occurred, Zifeng reassures her with the words that he loves Yanuo no matter what gender they are. It needs to be noted, however, that “gender doesn’t matter” is ultimately said within a heterosexual context. As mentioned earlier, some of these dramas can be read as queer by the audience, but the statement that gender is not important when it comes to falling in love is weakened by the fact that all of

these dramas end with heterosexual couples. The phrase is much less sincere when taking this into account. The dramas use these moments to promote how romantic their male leads are, and how they would make the perfect boyfriend. Supporting LGBT rights, is not necessarily the main goal. These dramas are made for the heterosexual gaze, and they have no problem with appropriating queer-friendly phrases for the sake of romance.

Relationship Dynamics

In all of the dramas examined, all three of them have an unequal power balance between the male and female protagonist. To start, the male characters always occupy a higher social status, and have the ability to control the female characters' access to work and school. In *Bromance*, Zifeng is from an extremely wealthy triad family that owns an amusement park, and later offers Yanuo a job there as his assistant. Zifeng being Yanuo's boss means he has direct control over her income (and her father's as well because he also works at the park). Zifeng does not take advantage of this fact, but this situation had the potential to turn awry. In *Fabulous Boys*, Huang Taijing is the leader of A.N.JELL, and frequently threatens to reveal Meinu's gender and kick her out of the band. He uses this threat constantly in the show to get her to go along with his bidding. As for *Hana Kimi*, Yiquan could easily tell the school officials Ruixi's gender and have her expelled. He never thinks of doing this in the drama, but it is in his power to do so. All of these men have the power to cut off these women from their access to the male world. These shows reflect patriarchal society, with men being on the top, but they do not question this male superiority. For *Hana Kimi* and *Bromance*, this imbalance is something left unsaid. The female protagonists are fine with the power balance, even Meinu who is constantly being reminded of her place in society. Whenever she is criticized or threatened by Taijing, she

will immediately apologize and comply with his wishes. She does not show any frustration over her treatment or resentment towards Taijing for his behavior. The show even goes as far as to have Meinu fall in love with him.

Along with these male characters' superior social status, they are also presented as being more intelligent than the female characters. Both Ruixi and Meinu are described as being stupid by the male characters, with Meinu constantly being told so by her love interest, Taijing. Because these men are smarter and more capable than their female counterparts, they often take up the role of being a teacher. In one dumbfounding moment in *Fabulous Boys*, Meinu was completely unaware that the sun was a star. Taijing, of course, then uses this opportunity to demeaningly show off his capability. A more mild example of the teacher role occurs in *Bromance*. Zifeng is constantly teaching Yanuo how to do things. He teaches her how to cook, how to ride a motorcycle, and how to shoot a gun among other things. There is nothing inherently wrong with teaching someone a new skill, but in this situation the role of teacher is not alternated. Yanuo never teaches Zifeng how to do something; she is never the teacher.

However, there is one area where the female characters are frequently presented as being superior at: feelings. It is the women in these shows that help the men work through their emotional baggage. Yanuo helps Zifeng sort his feelings out on his amnesiac father and get to know him again, Ruixi encourages Yiquan to overcome his high jump anxiety, and Meinu is there for Taijing when he is going through a rough patch with his birth mother. Once again, discussing one's feelings and being there for a significant other is not an inherently bad thing, but it is not healthy when it is only the women providing this emotional support. When the female characters are emotionally distressed, it is always male-centered. For example, in *Bromance*, the only scenes where Yanuo breaks down is due to her being worried about Zifeng's

well-being. It is after he puts himself in harm's way, that Zifeng will have to comfort a crying Yanuo. In this way, the male characters are often heroes in a physical manner. They will physically rescue the women, but the women will be the ones to emotionally rescue the men. The behavior of the characters aligns with traditional Taiwanese gender roles. Boys are encouraged to be more dominant and active, while girls are raised to be passive and adaptable (Gu and Gallin, 850). Despite the female lead being disguised as a man, she often falls into these traditional gender roles. Even when the male lead is unaware of her gender, such as in *Bromance*, these conservative gender dynamics still make an appearance. A relationship being stereotypically traditional does not necessarily make it an unhealthy relationship, but it definitely does not push the boundary of gender roles. By having the female leads exemplify traditional gender roles, despite being disguised as a man, helps to uphold heteronormativity. Her gender performance does not matter in these shows because she is actually a woman.

Final Remarks

Earlier the question was raised, what does the cross-dressing female lead in contemporary Taiwanese dramas represent? Beijing opera's *nandan* is the perfect woman in the eyes of men, and Yue opera's *nü xiaosheng* is the perfect man in the eyes of women. I would argue that in the case of contemporary Taiwanese dramas, the cross-dresser represents someone relatable to the audience. Her imperfections are what allow the viewers on the other side of the screen to picture themselves in her shoes. Not to mention, that she is able to date the romantic male protagonist, despite her disguise being an obstacle. The socially average, cross-dressed female lead allows the viewers to fantasize about being in her place. Her cross-dressed body also turns the male lead into the ideal boyfriend. He falls in love with the female protagonist despite her male disguise,

thus proving the sincerity and intensity of romantic feelings. These dramas are designed to please the heterosexual gaze, not the LGBT one. Not all is lost, however, because these shows have the potential to ease in homophobic viewers to queer images. Like Peter Chan Ho-Sun's *He's a Woman, She's a Man*, these dramas are made for the heterosexual gaze, but have the potential to open viewer's minds to different ideas about sexuality and gender (Stokes 32; 38). *Bromance*, *Fabulous Boys*, and *Hanazakarino Kimitachihe* allow a place for a conservative audience to explore ideas about gender and sexuality without being challenged on their views too much. Nonetheless, the three dramas analyzed still do promote a heteronormative view of society. The shows do not question the legitimacy of gender roles, go to a great extent to eliminate non-heterosexual readings, and promote the authenticity of the gender binary. The current state of cross-dressing in Taiwanese dramas, makes it is more acceptable to appropriate queer imagery, instead of celebrating and acknowledging the world beyond heteronormativity.

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