

Affect and Sociology: Reflection and Exploration through a Study of Media and Gender in Urban China

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ABSTRACT: This paper aims to explore how affect can be registered to the interests of sociological research. It investigates how affect can be operationalised in empirical studies through a review of existing sociological literature, and illustrates the arguments made with ongoing research on *zhongxing* (neutral sex and/or gender) sensibility in urban China. I illustrate how social sciences literature attempts to operationalise affect and how sociological literature in the sociology of emotion and the sociology of the body has addressed the corporeal and the emerging. This paper concludes that affect may provide an additional lens to sociological research, but, when appreciating the insights of affect, we should not abandon the established concepts and paradigms of sociology as a discipline.

KEYWORDS: Affect, Feeling, Symbolic Interactionism, Zhongxing, Neutral Sex/Gender, Chinese Popular Culture

Introduction: Coming Across Affect

This paper, drawing on part of my doctoral project that studies the reception of *zhongxing* (neutral gender and/or sex) stardom and the reception and practice of *zhongxing* sensibility in urban China, aims to explore how and to what extent affect is related to sociological research. I first introduce my research by explaining the background, terminology and research questions. Then, I expand upon



critiques of existing writings on affect. The work of social psychologist Margaret Wetherell (2012) serves as a toolkit to register affect to the interests of empirical research and I elaborate on her approach to operationalise affect as embodied meaning-making. Recognising the insights of writings on affect in the humanities, I then take a step back to review how sociological literature has responded to the concern of the corporeal, the body, and the emerging. Finally, I illustrate how affect may offer an alternative reading of my interview findings.

In post-millennial East Asian Chinese popular culture across mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, *zhongxing* has emerged as a media phenomenon due to the success and stardom of female stars such as Chris Lee¹, Bibi Zhou in mainland China, Denise Ho in Hong Kong, and Ella, MISSTER, and Jing Chang in Taiwan. Although theatrical gender ambiguity and androgynous representations are not uncommon in Chinese history (Chou 2004), the representation of androgynous women has been revived, popularised, and contested. In urban China, the fever of the 2005 reality show and singing contest *Super Girl* has circulated the term ‘*zhongxing*’ to a new height. Chris Lee, champion of the contest in 2005, together with other popular contestants such as Bibi Zhou and Liu Xin in subsequent years, are said to have the style of *zhongxing*, androgyny, female masculinity, or ‘T’.² Young girls were said to be imitating *zhongxing* by dressing up and performing in non-normative manners. Public visibility of non-normative gender and sexuality has increased as a result.

*Zhongxing*³ literally means ‘neutral sex and/or gender’ and is commonly translated as androgyny in English. Androgyny and *zhongxing* are not the same though (Li, forthcoming). In the Chinese expression, *Zhongxing* connotes ‘not man and not woman’ while the English expression of androgyny refers to *both* man and woman. In its usage in Chinese, *zhongxing* is a vernacular term, while androgyny is less frequently used and mostly appears in academic discussions. More intriguingly,



Figure 1: Chris Lee in Chengdu, China, November 2013 (Courtesy of Sina Weibo user Wangyi)

zhongxing is neither an identity label equivalent to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and so on, nor an established social category. There exist both straight and non-straight girls self-describing as *zhongxing*. It has to be noted that female *zhongxing* and male *zhongxing* are asymmetrical as male *zhongxing* is more related to derogatory terms. Nonetheless, the popularity of female celebrities has provided several templates of *zhongxing* and served as nodal points of *zhongxing* sensibility.⁴ *Zhongxing*, in the context of post-millennial East Asian Chinese societies mainly refers to, but is not limited to, a particular fashion style, non-normative sexualities, female masculinity, being modern, being independent and authentic, and so on. *Zhongxing* has become a contested space of gender performativity and negotiation of selfhood.

My research aims to understand the emergence of *zhongxing* as a post-millennial media phenomenon and as a contested space of negotiating gender and selfhood. It interrogates the cultural politics of *zhongxing*: how is *zhongxing* being negotiated and consumed in post-millennial Chinese societies? What are the practices of *zhongxing*? And in what ways is *zhongxing* used to resist normative identities including, but not limited to, youth, gender, consumer-citizen, and modern self? My methods include content analysis of newspapers, textual analysis of popular culture texts and fans' writings, and in-depth interviews with fans of *zhongxing* stars⁵, which are triangulated. I will explain and justify my methodology in the section 'Researching *Zhongxing* Sensibility in Urban China'. Intersecting the field of audience reception studies and gender studies, my study aims to explore how *zhongxing* is received and practised, negotiated, and used. Affect, in my research, is used as the practice of embodied meaning-making and serves as an additional lens to analyse the affective experiences of my informants.

As *zhongxing* constitutes a sensibility (Li, forthcoming), there exist both ideological and emotional dimensions of it. Why do *zhongxing* celebrities such as Chris Lee attract millions of followers in mainland China, why do some of the young girls choose to be *zhongxing*? Why do girls identify as *zhongxing*, and what has *zhongxing* celebrity triggered or helped them to articulate about their own gender and life stories? How can we elicit and unpack affective experiences and memory, such as being impressed by a *zhongxing* star on screen and such encounters triggering responses like crying and trembling? Affect, here, seems to offer at least some preliminary explanations.

However, when looking at how affect has been described in the humanities, it seems that empirical research of affect is not encouraged. While I cannot provide a thorough overview of theories of affect or bridge sociological and philosophical research due to the limited scope of this paper (for such an endeavour see, for example, Gregg and Seigworth 2010 or Wetherell 2012), I pose the question of what lessons affect might be able to offer sociological research, how to research affect methodologically and empirically, and what sociology has been offering on the subject of affect already.

Critiques of Affect

What is affect? Is it a concept, a theory, a methodology, or a paradigm? Affect has been defined differently, and even contradictorily. More importantly, it is seldom defined clearly, as remarked by feminist theorist Clare Hemmings (2005, 551). Some discussions of affect, such as that of Brian Massumi (2002) and Nigel Thrift (2004), are grounded in Deleuzian theories to conceive affect as force and intensity (Massumi 2002), while other work such as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's (2003) and Daniel Smail's (2009) draw from the 'basic emotions paradigm' (Tomkins, 2008) to conceptualise affect as free flow. According to Hemmings (2005), some theorisations of affect claim to go beyond signification to theorise a new ontology outside culture and the social; resolves the deadlock or dead end of current poststructuralist theory; offers affective freedom as the alternative to social determinism; and brings the body and embodiment back to social and cultural theory. Ruth Leys (2011, 443) argues that many writings of affect share the premise that affect is independent of signification and meaning. The scholarship on affect has also made a clear distinction between affect and emotion. For example, Massumi (2002, 61) argues that an emotion or feeling is a recognised and identified affect that has been named and interpreted, thereby equating emotion with feeling. Emotion is therefore 'a contamination of empirical space by affect' (ibid.).

Side-lining my argument with scholars who are sceptical of this 'magic' of affect, I here follow the critique offered by Hemmings (2005) and Leys (2011). Both of them have provided a critical analysis of the existing theorisations of affect in the humanities without totally rejecting its use. Hemmings (2005) closely examines the work of Massumi (2002) and Sedgwick (2003) and affirms that they have

overstated the limitations of post-structuralism in order to argue that affect is an alternative to cultural theory. Leys (2011, 435) concluded that the fascination of affect in the humanities and social sciences is mainly due to problems in existing theories, which have overemphasised reason and meaning while neglecting the role of corporeal-affective dispositions in their understanding of human agency and social reality. Both Leys (2011, 452–8) and social psychologist Margaret Wetherell (2012, 56–8) have illustrated how Massumi and like-minded theorists have only partially interpreted the neuro-scientific research conducted by Benjamin Libet (1985). In brief, Libet's research describes how participants were asked to flex their fingers at a moment that they chose and to report when they were first aware of their decision of doing so. Research results seemed to suggest that participants were conscious of their action only half a second later than their brain activity measured (Leys 2011, 453). Affect is thus argued to be autonomous: 'Bodies do their own thing. Language is, actually, almost beside the point now' (Wetherell 2012:58). However, Leys has discussed the flaws in Libet's experiment, such as informants being told to comply and perform according to researchers' expectations, and being asked to practice the action of flexing fingers beforehand (Leys 2011, 455)⁶. The experiment has been selectively read to conclude that the mind is a 'purely disembodied consciousness' and intention or willingness comes 'too late' in performing an action (Leys 2011, 456–7; Wetherell 2012, 56–6).

However, writings of affect do not only cause problems for empirical research due to their vague definitions, but also due to their idealisation of the mind as disembodied consciousness, and the irrelevance of discourse. As Wetherell (2012, 75–76) has argued,

[...] many of us are interested in developing more dynamic, sensual and lively accounts of social life. Yet we are asked to do this with no concept of discourse [...], with overly simple distinctions between representation and non-representation, and so on [...] Without this sense of discourse as practice, and as a core part of affective assemblages, work on affect as excess remains stuck with nowhere to go except further away from the empirical which theorists seem to prize but seem unable to engage with in any useful way.

Furthermore, critiques of affect are not only voiced from the social sciences, but

also from within the humanities. Witnessing various efforts at muddling constructively with the definition of and differentiation between affect, emotion, and feeling, Ann Cvetkovich (2012, 5) argues that the commonality of these three terms being points of departure to the texture of everyday life should be emphasised:

I tend to use affect in a generic sense, rather than in the more specific Deleuzian sense, as a category that encompasses affect, emotion, and feeling, and that includes impulses, desires, and feelings that get historically constructed in a range of ways [...] – but with a wary recognition that this is like trying to talk about sex before sexuality. I also like to use feeling as a generic term that does some of the same work: naming the undifferentiated “stuff” of feeling; spanning the distinctions between emotion and affect central to some theories; acknowledging the somatic or sensory nature of feelings as experiences that aren’t just cognitive concepts or constructions.

Preferring ‘feeling’ for its ‘ambiguity between feelings as embodied sensations and feelings as psychic or cognitive experiences’ (ibid, 4), Cvetkovich’s approach is seen as both eclectic and pragmatic because the abstract ontological distinction between affect, emotion, and feeling does not help in translating affect to fieldwork research: how does an ethnographer observe affect? How does a researcher ask informants to articulate something said to exist before consciousness and beyond signification? Therefore, Cvetkovich’s approach can be regarded as an attempt to engage affect into empirical research by bypassing the dichotomy between affect and emotion/feeling, as well as the philosophical debate about the relation of mind and body. This move is particularly helpful to operationalise affect as a useful conceptual tool to study the emerging and less-well-articulated dimensions of social life.

Wetherell’s Toolkit Approach: Operationalising Affect as Practice

Wetherell’s (2012) *Affect and Emotion: A New Social Science Understanding*, an extensive inter-disciplinary literature review, is one of the most recent and substantial interventions into affect studies within the social sciences. As a social

psychologist, Wetherell is sceptical of the humanities' reading of sociobiological experiments and the conceptualisation of affect as free and/or autonomous. Nonetheless, she also sees affect as helpful in expanding the scope of social research by bringing embodiment, moments of feeling, the dramatic and the everyday back into social analysis. Her work can be read as a toolkit for registering affect to the interests of empirical research. Wetherell (2012, 4; 90) argues that affect and emotions can be understood as embodied meaning-making, which is largely constituted by discursive actions, reflexive representations, and verbal articulation. In order to make affect fruitful for empirical research, Wetherell (2012, 24) operationalises it as affective practice, which serves as the most coherent unit of analysis.

Practice is a concept which social sciences are mostly familiar with. In its simplest definition, practice refers to the nexus of doings and sayings (Schatzki 1996, 2), implying embodied and interpretative features. According to Wetherell (2012, 22), a practice approach for affect 'focuses on processes of developmental sedimentation, routines of emotional regulation, relational patterns and 'settling'. It highlights the interconnected nature of social life and is defined as the 'figuration where body possibilities and routines become recruited or entangled together with meaning making and with other social and material figurations' (ibid., 19), and as an organic complex where bits of the body, feelings, interaction patterns, social relations, interpretative repertoires, personal histories and ways of life are relationally assembled and ordered (ibid., 13–4, 19–20). In this way, the mind and the corporeal are connected and affective practices become relatively, if not entirely, observable for fieldwork research.

Affective Practice and Practice Theory

Although Wetherell suggests developing and conceptualising affect as affective practice, she does not go further into articulating a practice approach by engaging with practice theory in the social sciences. Devoting most of her efforts to compare and seek compatibility between writings of affect in the humanities and social sciences literatures, Wetherell (2012) leaves an explicit development of the practice approach to her readers. Therefore, the following section introduces the practice approach and how it potentially informs the study of affect as embodied meaning-making.

The concept of practice has appeared in diverse disciplines. Therefore, as philosopher Theodore R. Schatzki (2001, 2) notes, no unified practice approach exists. Sociologist Alan Warde (2005, 135–6) further argues that most theories of practice tend to be abstract and not readily applicable for empirical analyses; they tend to be idealised in assuming an implausible level of shared meaning and effective consensus of understandings, and are inadequate to account for social processes of the creation, reproduction and transformation of practice. Chronologically, there are two waves of contemporary scholarly references to practices (Postill 2010, 6). The first wave includes theorists in the twentieth century who have laid the foundations of practice theory such as Pierre Bourdieu, Michel de Certeau, Michel Foucault, and Anthony Giddens. The second wave consists of scholars testing and extending the foundations of the first generation such as Theodore R. Schatzki, Andreas Recktwiz, and Alan Warde. In addition to the two waves of literature on practice identified by John Postill (2010, 6), the emergence of a third wave of work provides more clues for empirical research as they aim at deriving highly specific and contextualised approaches to practice. Examples here include *Theorising Media and Practice* edited by Birgit Bräuchler and Postill, centring on media anthropology and media sociology, and *Practicing Culture* edited by Craig Calhoun and Richard Sennett (2007), devoted to bridging the analytical disjuncture of cultural studies and sociology of culture (Hall 2009, 193). Essays in these volumes demonstrate different degrees of adaptation of practice theory concerning the compatibility of the social ontology of practice theory and the specific practice theorists that they follow.

Wetherell's proposal of theorising affect as practice is a step forward in the direction of operationalising affect for empirical research as she brings the corporeal body back into the realm of signification and interpretation and hence places both meaning and body at the centre of analysis. From the contemporary intervention of theories of practice, practice is a conceptual tool that shares a concern with affect over the body and the everyday. Yet, there are further issues to be taken into consideration especially if we understand practice as a specific analytical tool instead of a descriptive term, common to research in anthropology and cultural studies (Warde 2005, 150). How does the notion of affective practice make sense and make use of the existing literature on the theory of practice? And, if practice refers to 'doing and saying,' which implies embodiment, are not all practices affective?

What is the relation between affect and the ideal type of practice (Reckwitz 2002)?

Further work on developing affective practice as an analytical tool is needed as it is indeed highly context-specific, the three directions proposed by Wetherell (2012, 11–17) to study affect serve as a useful guide to conduct a multi-layered analysis of lived experiences. Wetherell suggests three lines of inquiry into analyses of affect by studying the directions of flowing activity; patterns, habits and assemblages; and power, value and capital. What she refers to as the flow of affective practice delineates how feelings circulate and recur; flowing activity therefore points to the articulation of affect in broader social contexts. This process will be particularly important for the emerging and ambiguous dimension of the social, for example, an emerging feeling of sexual minorities being ‘normal’ as a result of a multitude of factors, including cultural citizenship through popular culture. Secondly, the study of patterns highlights how possible sedimentation, routinisation, and even institutionalisation of emerging feelings take place. Thirdly, an attention to the interconnectedness and intersection of personal histories and social processes enshrines how power interweaves and operates in social life.

Re-Discovering the Discipline of Sociology

Affect has puzzled many of us in the social sciences for its vague definition and radical freedom. However, if affect is understood as feeling, a vernacular term that refers to the ambiguity of embodied sensation and cognitive processes, downplaying its pre-consciousness and emphasising the experience of the corporeal body, we actually find relevant works in sociology which have existed even before the emergence of the affective turn. The lessons that affect offers are not as new to sociology as many contend. For instance, Pierre Bourdieu (1984) has argued that the key sociological concept of socialisation treats the ‘body as “memory jogger” [...] by the evocative power of bodily mimesis, a universe of ready-made feelings and experiences’ (Bourdieu 1984, 474 cited in Wetherell 2012, 106). The corporeal, the bodily, and feeling bounded by context and institutional arrangements have played an important part in sociological imagination, although they have largely remained hidden from view (Shilling 1993, 8–11). Such relative neglect of the body has limited sociology as a discipline to acknowledge the fact that ‘humans have bodies which allow them not only to see, listen and think, but to feel (physically

and emotionally), smell and act' (Shilling 1993, 19–20). Therefore, I argue that some of the forgotten insights in the discipline of sociology have to be revived. In the following, I focus on the sociology of emotion, symbolic interactionism and the sociology of the body.

Sociology of Emotion

The sociology of emotion is devoted to the empirical study of feeling and emotion by articulating the links between cultural ideas, structural arrangements and feelings. It is characterised by a number of competing research agendas and debates, for instance, positivistic versus anti-positivistic, quantitative versus qualitative approaches, prediction versus description and so on (Kemper 1990; Turner 2009). These debates precisely reveal the tensions and complex relations between the corporeal and the social. I shall illustrate characteristics and issues of this scholarship with Arlie Russell Hochschild's feminist studies of emotional labour (1983, 1990), which are interpretative, ethnographic, symbolic interactionist and social constructionist in orientation. The interactionist approach regards physiological corporeal reactions as part of the emotional complex and as being largely subject to social management (Kemper 1990, 20). This is to acknowledge the interplay between and significance of feeling and social settings. Drawing from Darwin's biological approach (which Hochschild called the 'organismic model'), from Freudian signal analysis, and Erving Goffman's interactionist model (Hochschild 1983, 211–232), Hochschild's utmost concern is how social structure and institutions control and discipline how we personally control and manage 'feeling'.

Hochschild (1983, 220; 1990, 118) defines emotion as a special sense in humans for its orientation towards action and cognition, while feeling is a diffuse or mild emotion. Hochschild (1983, 233–43) has provided a list of existing defined emotions which is helpful, but not exhaustive to study emerging feelings in articulation. There are several problems in this scholarship. The first concerns the usefulness of differentiating emotion and feeling. The second relates to how the list of emotions identified and studied as produced leaves ambiguous and unnamed feelings outside the emotional categories defined by psychologists, and hence out of the scope of analysis. For instance, in the study of 'queer feeling', shame is often unrecognised and unacknowledged (Munt 2008, 5). Similarly, queers feeling dis-

comfort in heterosexual public culture (Ahmed 2004, 144–167) is not regarded as an emotional category. Nonetheless, an important insight offered by this scholarship is how social structure and cultural trajectories discipline and shape how we make sense of what we feel, and how social agents respond to and take up such space of feeling.

Symbolic Interactionism and the Sociology of the Body

The creative and imaginative arguments proposed by post-structural and post-modern theorists are attractive to scholars studying gender and sexuality. However, sociologist Ken Plummer (2003, 520) suggests that they are of limited relevance since sociologists ground their research in the obdurate empirical world for contextual and situated knowledge. Following this vein, I insist that meaning still matters and affect is not as free-floating as claimed by affect theorists.

Symbolic interactionism shares certain similar interests with those of affect theory. Some of the emphasis of writings put forward in the humanities, such as the texture of everyday life and the interest in the temporal, are not new to this branch of sociology. The recent interest in affect persuasively reminds us that the elements of social life are not always well-defined but amorphous and ambiguous. In this section, I demonstrate that social theory has been engaging with some of the issues that affect addresses. I then consider Ken Plummer's (2003) notes about sexuality studies to illustrate that it is possible to adopt the symbolic interactionist framework to study affect in social research.

Symbolic interactionism rejects totalising and grand theories of the social and commits to the understanding and unfolding power and texture of everyday life (Denzin 1992, 20–23). It studies patterns and routines of interaction, but also epiphanic feeling and temporal experience, and tries to locate these situations within social structures (ibid, 26–7). There are three general premises that are central to this branch of sociological thought (Blumer 1969, 2): human actions are based on meanings available for them; meanings are obtained and derived from social interactions with others including objects; and meanings are processed as an interpretative process to help social actors evaluating and making sense of things that they encounter. As a branch of microsociology, symbolic interactionism highlights individual accountability and agency as well as addresses everyday

structural, cultural, and material conditions that people experience and reproduce (Fields, Copp, and Kleinman 2006, 157).

The 'pre-conscious' and 'pre-interpretative' is considered to be part of an on-going action which human beings reflectively evaluate and interpret at the symbolic level. Herbert Blumer (1969, 8) elaborates on George Herbert Mead's ([1934]1972) 'conversation of gestures' and 'use of significant symbols', using the example of a boxer who, when unreflectively or 'automatically' raising his hand to resist an attack, triggers a 'non-symbolic interaction', a form of unconscious communication. However, when the boxer reads the next attack as a trap and responds accordingly, his reaction constitutes a symbolic interaction. More importantly, the boxer may evaluate his own gesture after the game and interpret why he acted in certain ways and not others. This example shows that sociology does indeed approach the embodied pre-conscious but maps the body onto a wider web of social meanings and practices, rather than understanding it as an abstract concept beyond recognition.

Blumer's boxer analogy is useful to illustrate that unreflective temporal action is part of a larger action that we interpret in interaction with others. However, we are not sure if every boxer is aware of the unreflective acts in the fight. Does the boxer in Blumer's example actually internalise these unreflective acts? In other words, is his body trained in specific ways to embody such actions before he interprets? We may attribute the presumably unconscious actions to what Wetherell (2012, 129) calls the affective hinterland: affect rests on 'a large unarticulated hinterland of possible semiotic connections and meaning trajectories' where individuals refer to and draw resources from language and sign systems, cultural and historical repertoires and personal histories. The so-called unconscious, unfelt, and unformulated should therefore be regarded as the 'possible meanings and significances [which] exceed and proliferate what can be grasped and articulated in any particular moment' (ibid.).

The example of the boxer can also be seen as a response to the critique that there is a lack of a theory of the body in contemporary social theory. In developing a framework from symbolic interactionism to study the body, Dennis Waskul and Phillip Vannini (2006, 2) emphasise that the complex and layered experience of the body and embodiment lie not only at the level of human subjective experience, but also in 'interaction, social organisation, institutional arrangements, cultural

processes, society, and history.’ Refining the interactionist framework, we may then better make sense of the ‘contagion’ of affect. Inter-subjectivity is the result of shared emotional experiences in a particular social milieu, instead of mysterious movements such as affects ‘sticking’ and ‘sliding’ on objects (Ahmed 2004).

As an advocate of symbolic interactionism in sociological research on sexuality, Plummer (2003, 525) considers seriously the challenge of post-structuralist positions in sexuality research and seeks a sociological approach to tackle it. He draws our attention to new efforts by bringing the body back to social research, for example, the development of the ‘sociology of bodies’ (Shilling 1993) that recognises the importance of embodiment and subjectivity. The sociology of the body argues that the body has increasingly become a central site where a modern person’s sense of self, identity and subjectivity are constituted (ibid, 1–3). This suggestion parallels Wetherell’s (2012) understanding of affect as embodied meaning-making by emphasising the centrality of the body in social processes. Thinking about bodies, Plummer (2005, 526) observed that the discussion has been more tilted to the representation of the body instead of the corporeality and materiality of bodies.

‘Radically free’ affect presents a puzzle to social research because it is said to constitute a drive, force, or intensity, which seem untranslatable as they are hardly or even impossibly observable. Even harder is operationalising this understanding of affect for empirical research. If we consider affect as an embodied experience, an emerging dimension of social life, a feeling that is emerging and not yet fully articulated, affect indeed reminds us of the irregularity, complexity, and even messiness of the empirical world that we are living in (Plummer 2005, 524). Plummer (ibid.) contends that symbolic interactionism does tackle the complexity of everyday life by refusing the false dichotomy of the biological and the social which interact, rather than contradict each other. Addressing the emerging and the messiness of social life, Plummer (2005, 524–525) highlights that

Of course, symbolic interactionism has always properly highlighted the fluidity, emergence and processual aspects of social life. Their analytic focus is always on becoming and emergence and change. But interactionism has never said that there are no stable patterns of routine interactions or that selves do not become routinised, lodged, committed and stabilised. Indeed, process and pat-

tern commingle and the task of interactionists is to chart this stable process. Thus the precarious everyday flux of life is open to constant stabilising and essentialising.

By considering embodied experiences in social analysis, we come to better understand the operations of power, how people produce and reproduce themselves and social arrangements, and how they resist and negotiate inequality (Fields et al. 2006, 175). Without abandoning the importance of meaning and interaction and taking the insights of the symbolic interactionist framework, the sociology of emotion and the sociology of the body on board, affective experience, emotions, and feelings are indeed social and multifaceted.

Researching *Zhongxing* Sensibility in Urban China

The aforementioned discussion has illustrated how affect is related to the interest of sociological research and how sociology has been addressing corporeal experience, as well as emerging and less sedimented phenomena in society. This offers an insight into how I approach my interview data with the additional lens on embodied experience and less verbally articulable feelings.

Plummer (2003, 524) has well reminded us that the empirical world is ‘messier’ than our imagination, but that constant sedimentation takes place. While acknowledging the contributions of poststructural and postmodern queer writings, Plummer (2003, 525) is critical of utopian views of free-floating and fluid identities and desires since ‘sexualities and genders tend to be organised very deeply indeed’ and gender ‘seems to have a very deep structure’. In the empirical world, we may not find many people living in such fluid desires and identities, and gender and sexuality are still powerful organising principles in many ways (ibid.). This position relates my study of *zhongxing* back to the empirical world. In spite of the ambiguity of its meaning, there are some features that are more sedimented, structured and institutionalised: the most observable forms as embodiment, alternative ways to do gender, and the relevance to female masculinity.

It may be relatively straightforward to study the representation of *zhongxing* by conducting textual analysis on the texts of popular *zhongxing* female stars. However, studying the reception, consumption, and appropriation, in other words, the

lived experiences of *zhongxing*, is more complicated. In my previous research that studied the fan community of queer singer Denise Ho in Hong Kong (Li 2011, 2012), I followed an approach enshrined by the ethnographic turn in audience studies, and the three waves of fandom studies that focus on power, hierarchy, resistance, incorporation, and capital (Gray, Sandvoss and Harrington 2007). However, besides meaning-making and signification, mediated experience and negotiation of identities also involve emotional dimensions and feelings. Furthermore, audiences' personal history and diverse trajectories matter in shaping their consumption and appropriation of text as Virginia Nightingale (1996, 148) summarised:

Just as people as audiences cannot be separated from personal, social and cultural continuity, so texts cannot be isolated from their broader cultural significance, or from the history of that significance. The audience-text relation is a chimera, which can only ever be apprehended partially. [...] Audience is a shifty concept.

While it is possible to investigate this topic in a more 'conventional' way by interviewing audiences about their interpretation of star texts, affect provides an entry point into approaching the process of contestation and negotiation involving *zhongxing* sensibilities. The strength of affect as feeling to social research, as discussed above, is that it refashions our understanding of the emerging by explicitly registering embodied experience and the corporeal body to social analysis. What does *zhongxing* sensibility project for modern Chinese women? How do we articulate these feelings and desires? What are these feelings and desires about? To transgress, normalise, resist, escape power, or something else? If affect is embodied meaning-making as argued by Wetherell (2012), what if meaning exists under constant negotiation and articulation? Are we able to articulate ambiguity through signification and interpretation? Furthermore, what is the potentiality of such ambiguity? What does this ambiguity and a less-sedimented dimension of *zhongxing* tell us about the transformation of gender and sexual contours and the broader social structure?

Due to the ambiguous definition of *zhongxing* and the fact that *zhongxing* is not a sexual or gender identity or practice, the result of recruiting voluntary informants who are 'self-identified *zhongxing* women' through a mass LGBT mailing

list in Shanghai⁸, my site of fieldwork in urban China, has not been satisfactory. I received two responses and interviewed only one voluntary participant. Considering female *zhongxing* stars as the nodal point of *zhongxing* sensibility which attract audiences with potential desires and resonances, I thus approached the fan community of Chris Lee, the most renowned and controversial *zhongxing* celebrity in contemporary mainland China as identified through content analysis of newspapers from 2000 to 2010. During 2013 and 2014, I have been to Shanghai twice to conduct in-depth interviews with 32 self-identified Chris Lee fans.⁹

Interview questions included the informant's subjective experience of being a fan, their interpretation of Chris Lee's *zhongxing* body and representation, and their own embodied experience of *zhongxing*. Most of them articulated what a female *zhongxing* body is like, for example girls wearing trousers instead of dresses and behaving 'less girly'. Nonetheless, there are also ambiguities arising from some of the interviews with some informants finding it difficult, for example, to account for their passion and fandom. Some of them expressed that 'Chris Lee's appearance on screen is comforting even at the first glance' and 'I have been into this type of not-too-girly person for long since I was small'.

I tried to find out how *zhongxing* sensibility is felt, from the non-verbal side of interview data such as my informants' gestures, facial expressions, tones of speaking alongside the story-telling of their everyday life. My informants are fans of the most hotly debated¹⁰ female *zhongxing* star in (mainland) Chinese popular culture, but their fandom experiences in everyday contexts are not merely limited to intimate text-audience relations. They consume and live with certain feelings and desires. When unpacking informants' mediated experience of receiving and consuming star texts, I found the affective dimensions of *zhongxing* sensibility, i.e. 'feeling': their bodily responses, the feeling of having company, what they seek to become through popular culture, their desires and anxieties, and how these experiences serve as resources for them to negotiate and become self-reliant and individualistic female subjects in post-socialist China (Zhang and Ong 2008).

To illustrate these complexities, I here narrate Xiao Hui's story. Xiao Hui is a 19-year-old girl from Chengdu in the Sichuan province. Her parents are peasants and she moved to Shanghai to work as an office clerk after graduating from high school. She had short hair and wore a pair of glasses with a black frame, and was cheerful and excited in sharing her experiences of being a fan throughout the in-

terview. Before I started asking her a single question, she eloquently told me how adorable Chris Lee was. At one point, I interrupted and asked if she could recall the first time that she encountered Chris Lee.

I was in junior high school at that time. I still remember how I felt when I first saw her (Chris Lee) in television. It was the quarter final of the (Super Girl) singing contest. For unknown reasons, I cried when I saw her performing on stage. I don't know why ... Perhaps it's because I finally saw somebody like me on screen. I mean ... I've always been like this and finally I saw somebody like me on TV and receiving applause from others too.

I asked her if she could further elaborate what she meant by 'people like me', she paused and then went on slowly,

I don't know if I am normal or not, but I've always been different from other girls in school. I like having short hair. I am sportive and I hate studying. I am not a girly girl. And it's Chris Lee who made me feel that I am not alone.

Despite its textual ambivalence, *zhongxing* has been associated with female masculinity, specific ways of styling bodies such as having short hair and dressing in loose clothes, and so on (Li forthcoming). It is obvious that Xiao Hui became a fan of Chris Lee not entirely because of what Chris Lee sang in the singing contest, but because of her gender representation and the applause she received. Xiao Hui has engaged in these bodily practices for years and the stardom of Chris Lee gave her resonance and even comfort. However, when it comes to the discussion and naming of these bodily practices, she hesitated:

Me: 'So do you feel comfortable when people say you are like Chris Lee? Are you being called *zhongxing* sometimes?'

Xiao Hui: 'To be frank I think Chris Lee is not *zhongxing*, she's actually very feminine ... Personally I feel comfortable with being *zhongxing*. Senior colleagues, those middle age aunties in my office said I am *zhongxing*. I don't think *zhongxing* is abnormal ... It is not really about homosexuality.¹¹ But people attack Chris Lee by saying she's *zhongxing*. To me, being *zhongxing* is not something to be

particularly proud of. It's just the way I am. But if you say I am *zhongxing*, I am fine. At least it's not something more negative.'

Xiao Hui's struggle with *zhongxing* is worth noting. She felt comfortable with being *zhongxing* as long as it is not explicitly named. She struggled with people attacking Chris Lee as *zhongxing* by implying *zhongxing* to be 'abnormal' and due to the homosexual undertone, but she tried to feel comfortable to be *zhongxing* in her own skin, since it is the least offensive term she could find to describe her non-normative way of doing gender. This is what I argue constitutes the affective dimension of doing gender. To Xiao Hui, being *zhongxing* does not only mean specific ways of dressing up, but also the feeling of one's body located in social space and negotiating one's gender performativity. Xiao Hui's affective practice of bodily stylisation and the uneasiness invoked by *zhongxing* help to further understand the negotiation of heteronormativity and gender performativity in post-socialist Chinese society, where the state, market, and tradition intensely shape the ideology of gender and sexuality.

Conclusion

When I first came across affect in my research on the lived experience of *zhongxing* sensibility in urban China, I did not find the line of reasoning often practiced by theorists of affect in the humanities particularly useful for my own work. However, after deeper engagement with the trajectory of affect theory, and despite the persistence of problems, or even flaws, in existing writings on affect, affect certainly has the potential to bring the corporeal, embodied, texture, feeling, and the emerging back to the realm of social and empirical research as suggested (Hemmings 2005; Leys 2011; Wetherell 2012). This paper did not aim to bridge sociology and the humanities in studying affect. Instead, it presents an attempt to explore how affect is registered to the interests of sociological research, illustrated by research intersecting media audience and gender and sexuality.

As Wetherell (2012, 56) argues, researchers engaging in empirical research need an eclectic approach that investigates how discursive formations or 'big discourse' are intertwined with the 'patterning of everyday, dynamic and immediate discursive practice'. Without discarding the relevance of affect for sociological

research, I argue that there have been relevant concerns within sociology even before the affective turn. In particular, symbolic interactionism as an established sociological framework that defies grand theory and generalisation has emphasised a commitment to the texture and interconnectedness of everyday life. Building upon Ken Plummer's position (2003) and the sociology of body, I have here offered a preliminary analysis of my research findings.

Reiterating the significance of discourse and meaning-making in the empirical world, affect benefits social research of the emerging and the ambiguous and brings the corporeal body back into the centre of analysis. Corporeal bodies are where power is incarnated and where personal trajectories encounter social history. When appreciating the insights offered by writings of affect, however, we should not abandon the established concepts and paradigms of our discipline.

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Endnotes

- ¹ Chris Lee, aka Li Yuchun, was crowned champion of the competition by receiving more than 3.5 million SMS votes, which is regarded as unprecedented in the mainland Chinese entertainment industry.
- ² For the emergence of this group of *zhongxing* stars and the articulation of *zhongxing* in East Asian Chinese popular culture see Li (forthcoming). For the term 'T-style singers' see the discussion of lesbian culture in urban China in Kam (2014).
- ³ *Zhong* literally means 'in-betweenness' and *xing* literally means sex and/or gender. *Zhongxing* together can refer to 'neutral', in the sense of a neuter, and also 'neutral sex and/or gender'.
- ⁴ For the conceptualisation of *zhongxing* sensibility, see Li (forthcoming). Drawing on Wu Cuncun (2004, 6), Lawrence Grossberg (1992, 72–3) and Rosalind Gill (2007, 148–9), Li argues that 'the media articulations and configurations of *zhongxing* that are largely influenced by the emergence of the post-millennial queer stardom and the related media discourses' which serves as a lens to 'explore the symbols, practices, feelings and other emerging features of *zhongxing* that arise from transnational queer stardom in Chinese popular culture in the recent decade'.

- ⁵ In my project, I have chosen Chris Lee from mainland China and Denise Ho from Hong Kong as the main case studies.
- ⁶ Leys has provided further references for the technical and conceptual problems in Lib-ert's experiment (Leys 2011, 455 n38).
- ⁷ Reckwitz (2002, 256) stresses the centrality of practice in social life and regards individu-als as 'the unique crossing point of practices, of bodily-mental routine'. To further estab-lish practice theory as a theoretical 'ideal type', Reckwitz differentiates it from other cul-tural theories in eight dimensions: location of the social, body, mind, things, knowledge (know-how), discourse, structure/process, and the agent.
- ⁸ Shanghai is the most populated and wealthiest city in China (National Bureau of Statis-tics of China 2013).
- ⁹ I have interviewed 32 self-identified Chris Lee fans (29 female and 3 male) in Shanghai be-tween 2013 and 2014. They were recruited through snowball sampling. Their age ranged from 19 to 46 and occupation ranged from student, office clerk, professional, housewife, to worker in a smartphone subcontractor company. 7 of them are local Shanghainese and the rest came from 15 other provinces in China. All interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese, transcribed to Chinese and then translated into English.
- ¹⁰ According to my informants and various newspapers, Chris Lee has been under heavy attack due to her androgynous gender representation on screen and her unfeminine vo-cal quality. There used to be large group of anti-fan and haters (known as *yu hei*) and the nickname *Chun Ge* (Brother Chun) is considered an ultra-offensive term to Chris Lee and her fans.
- ¹¹ It should be noted that in the course of the interview, I avoided using terms about same-sex desires such as lesbian, *lala*, and homosexuality unless my informants themselves used them, as homosexuality is considered a taboo for most people in China.

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