What Have the Ladies Forgotten?〈淑女忘記了什麼〉(Original Essay)

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Translated by Dingru Huang and Kyle Shernuk

馬翊航（1982 年生），卑南族，作家與文學評論者。國立臺灣大學臺灣文學博士，曾任《幼獅文藝》主編。著有詩集《細軟》，散文集《彈幕》、《假城鎮》、《山地話／珊蒂化》，並合著《終戰那一天：臺灣戰爭世代的故事》、《百年降生：1900-2000 台灣文學故事》，合編有《臺灣原住民文學選集》。現任東華大學華文系助理教授，居住於花蓮。

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The stage was set up where there used to be a lecture desk. The space for movement was long and narrow. For a performance, it felt a bit too close to the audience. The lighting was designed for teaching: 5500K color temperature so bright it stung like a ruler smacking your palm. Lucidity and ambiguity can't coexist. When the music started, Mei-tzu and I slithered in from left and right, wriggling up onto the platform with the coquettish sway of mudskippers. Instead of wigs, we wore headpieces decorated with silver and gold beads woven into tassels to give the effect of an upturned bowl with a few stray, dangling noodles. Chen-chen stood at center stage. She wore a dress left behind from a film shoot, oversized and glimmering with a scaly iridescence, like the belly of a rainbow fish. Chen-chen dreaded the headaches wigs caused and would tear them off straightaway after every show. Large-framed, close-cropped, and thickly painted, she looked just like Ho Chuen-juei.[1]

(What's strange is that it never occurred to us to ask for payment when we "performed" back in our student days. Our props and costumes were cobbled together just like the furnishings of a first rental—pastoral bedsheets, urban curtains, and minimalist cabinets all crammed into one room.)

Chen-chen held a shallow tray, in the middle of which she had glued a Star of Bethlehem scavenged from the top of a Christmas tree. At the bottom shimmered scraps of gold paper we had cut up the night before. We lip-synced to Louise Tsuei's song "Fireworks." At the line "beautiful, blazing flames," Chen-chen started spinning in place, and the sparkling scraps flew from her fair hand and silver dish, drifting through the air until they landed on Professor Chang Hsiao-Hung's face,[2] on Professor Chu Wei-cheng's face …[3]

When I was a student, the university ran a "Campus Gender Awareness Month." There were films, lectures, and booths, all designed to cultivate or "awaken" gender consciousness on campus. I often slipped and called it "Campus Gender Resurrection Month" instead, my mind jumping to *The Mummy* and Imhotep scheming to resurrect Anck-Su-Namun from her eternal death. Our performance was one of the events during "resurrection" month. It landed us on the evening news and in the next day's paper, which trumpeted the spectacle: three Indigenous NTU students from Hualien High, dolled up in flamboyant drag, "Who can tell if I am male or female?"—breaking gender boundaries, and all that.

[1] Ho Chuen-juei, a leading figure in Taiwanese feminist activism.
[2] Chang Hsiao-hung, a professor and feminist scholar at the Foreign Languages and Literatures Department at National Taiwan University, who studies literature and consumer culture.
[3] Chu Wei-cheng, an associate professor and queer studies scholar at the Foreign Languages and Literatures Department at National Taiwan University.

Wasn't this supposed to be positive and uplifting, even in line with the gender-activist script we had long revered? Didn't we go to Taipei because we were so moved by *Boys for Beauty*? Seeing as we acted in the first Taiwanese film about drag queens, we should also be able to contribute a little to the community with our own drag. So there we were: a student drag show, opening with "Fireworks," launching the press conference for a series of events. But when the TV crew interviewed me afterward, I was groggy, like still-warm leftovers. Hadn't my mother always said you shouldn't put hot dishes straight into the fridge? The heat was still in my body, and my tongue snapped like a broken string: "Oh no, if you interview me like this, I'll end up on TV! Maybe we should bring our own pixelation blur to cover our face … Oh God, Dad, please take care of yourself!" Of course, in the actual news there wasn't any pixelation to be seen, just the unforgiving clarity of 5500K. That night, the photographer HoHo called: "Hey, beautiful! You made the news! How could you be so unfiltered?" I suspected the damage was done. Maybe my younger aunt in Chishang had already seen it, or perhaps the chanting sisters at Yuqing Temple got there first. And yet, the azaleas were only just beginning to bloom, and Gongguan[4] hadn't fully awakened from its little winter.

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It's not that I willingly dwell on these memories. In December that year, UG, Chih-heng, and I held a drag-related lecture called "Brazen Queens Talk About Love." We got together, and each of us girls revealed a small piece of our drag history. There was a segment for sharing anecdotes about our drag in our lives. I offered one or two compact, concise, vivid accounts, aiming to be serious without being heavy, yet sprinkled with jokes at my own expense. (I'm far too cautious, constantly calculating every angle, hardly "brazen.") I didn't bring up the news incident. What went unspoken was a chain of endless little moments, one strand after another, one bead after another. Who among the audience really wanted to hear about them? Clutches of pink apple snail eggs clinging to the damp walls of a little ditch. Please destroy them, but please don't destroy them …

After the news aired, my mother called me. The following week, I was set to attend an interview for the master's program at the Department of Taiwanese Literature. She asked, "Do you think this will affect the professors' impression of you?" She never asked, "Are you … really?" or anything like that.

I ended up getting into the program, and because I ranked first, my parents were overjoyed. They came to Taipei from Chishang for my college graduation ceremony. The night before, they stayed at my Third Aunt's place in Taipei. My uncle casually asked my father, "I heard your kid's gay?" My father was irritated by my uncle bringing up this sensitive topic at the worst possible

[4] A neighborhood next to the campus of National Taiwan University.

moment: Tomorrow was his son's graduation ceremony. The two men nearly came to blows, and my father grabbed his luggage, ready to find another hotel. It was only years after the ceremony that I finally understood my parents' sadness and thoughtfulness.

Luckily, one joke survived among my sisters. At the time, Mei-tzu's high school homeroom teacher was thoughtful enough to call him up: "I don't want to hear other people's gossip. I just want to hear what you have to say." Touched, we imagined a different scenario: What if a more meddlesome teacher had called, their nasally voice of concern accidentally saying the opposite? "Yi-hang, I saw the news … but I don't want to hear what you have to say. I only want the gossip …"

When we became the subject of gossip, the atmosphere might have resembled a short viral clip that was circulating online: two women leaning against a counter, one speaking, one listening. The camera clearly zoomed in from afar, a profile shot without audio, but the speaker's expressions and gestures, sometimes earnest, sometimes scornful, made for a tempest in a teapot. One commenter wrote: "I have no idea what they're talking about but, in just those few seconds, someone's reputation has clearly been ruined."

Turning the newsworthy drag incident into a deliberately casual joke among ourselves might also be a kind of personal "gossipification." I didn't want this accidental coming-out event to merely leave the impression of someone being "ruined." After all, we had spent a long time cutting out those little pieces of gold paper.

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The film *Splendid Float* hit theaters in 2004. At the special screening held at NTU's GIS Convention Center, someone asked the cast how their families felt about them appearing in such a film. From his seat in the audience, Chen-chen's younger brother gave a brief, straightforward, almost macho reply: "I think my brother is amazing." Mei-tzu shared that, even though he never directly discussed certain "identity" issues with his family, one time when he returned home to Taitung, his mother, who looks strikingly like him, took out a file folder. Inside, neatly arranged, were all the clippings from the film's production and publicity. It was a moment of unspoken understanding, moving everyone who heard about it. But I was distracted, nearly bursting out laughing on stage. Because in that stack of clippings, of course, were all the headlines and captions from the promo photos. I still remember one shot: taken before shooting the film's grandest scene, the riverside parade-float ball. The six queens posed in costume, laughing, legs outstretched for the camera. The fabrics looked like they'd been sourced from the wrapping-paper aisle of a stationery store (today we might call it "dopamine dressing"). Our outfits glittered so brightly that the ink nearly burst off the page. And yet, the caption beneath read: "A lineup of 'beauties' showing off their legs and comically oversized feet. (Photo/Report by NTU Hsiang)." The feet, admittedly, were quite large. But still, I wish the reporter had been more confident and dropped the quotation marks around "beauties."

Those quotation marks were also a kind of frame, squeezing inward, squeezing the "beauties," squeezing the oversized feet, squeezing brothers, mothers, and sons. Sometimes, that pressure even reached the people around me, who perhaps feared that breaking the frame might let the "beauties" spill out for a grand parade. Or else maybe it was like being suddenly thrown into that frame, without time to figure out how to breathe again. My cousin in Hsinchu was only in junior high at the time. After the news of my accidental coming-out, she was inevitably shocked. My aunt told her: "You don't need to cry, and you don't need to feel sad for your brother, because he's still the same brother."

(I'm not sure if I am the same brother. But my aunt, surely, is still the same aunt.)

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In college I developed some strange habits. If I went to a café to cram for finals, I had to dress elegantly and sharply, to look dazzling and gorgeous. But when it came time to sit the exam, I always switched into our department's ruffle-collared uniform, relaxed and ready to give it my best. Years later, during the pandemic, people began throwing around the neologism "ceremonious feeling." Looking back, I suppose that was exactly it. That afternoon I got dolled up for the occasion, wrapping myself in a robin's-egg blue mohair sweater with a wide collar and thick stitches, and then going to study with Mei-tzu and Chen-chen at the Ikari Café on Roosevelt Road. The café always looped Tracy Chapman's "Fast Car" (also an androgynous voice), easily ten times in a single afternoon. To be ceremonious meant breaking out of one's daily routine, but it also meant repetition. Amid the endless loop, someone came over to our table to strike up a conversation. The handsome-looking woman asked us, "You girls have any interest in auditioning?" We'd already noticed another striking figure in the smoking booth, an actor from *Crystal Boys*, apparently talking about work. And we'd already read the call in *Pots Weekly*: an indie film looking for queens, with the premise "Taoist priests by day, queens by night." We squealed in the café: "But we're just college girls! Could we really?"

Later, Mei-tzu slipped into a pale-blue cheongsam, strapped on a coconut-shell bra, and danced to Shakira (she had to be barefoot anyway since she had no heels). I wore a slinky black negligé that I'd borrowed from a classmate. Chen-chen had only come along to keep us company, but Zero handed him a script, asked him to give it a try. Somehow, all three of us landed roles. Maybe it was our blend of tacky, clumsy, yet still oddly charming energy. "Sis, this time we're really gonna blow up—" became the mantra of our junior spring semester.

In the middle of the night, we met up at the computer center to print out scripts, then giddily read them. None of us had ever seen a film script before. The first time we were handed one, the director patiently explained how to read it: The hollow triangle marked a scene description, not dialogue.

(△ A yellow rose drops by the wheel of a car. The queens' high heels strut past the scattered petals.)

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One type of film I've always loved is "women's film." Women's film isn't about one or two female characters' life stories, struggles, or conflicts. It's the kind of film where several women come together, and things just happen. François Ozon's *8 Women* is a women's film (yes, I really went to see it with Mei-tzu and Chen-chen at the Wonderful Theatre). Almodóvar's *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* and *I'm So Excited!* are women's films. In Japan, there's *Like Asura*; in Hong Kong, *The Heroic Trio* and *Robotrix*; in Hollywood, *Ghostbusters* (2016 all-female lead cast version), *Mean Girls*, and *Charlie's Angels* (perhaps even *White Chicks* counts). Even in *Princess Mononoke*, my favorite character is the bold yet innocent female blacksmith from Irontown. I suspect this interest traces back to *Female Comedian Theatre* I watched as a child. (An ex-boyfriend once told me that when I dressed in drag, I didn't resemble glamorous film stars but rather Teng Ch'eng-hui from *Female Comedian Theatre*—truly a kindred spirit.)

Hamaguchi Ryūsuke's *Happy Hour* is my favorite women's film in recent years. By the time I saw it, I had already begun writing and publishing, so the scene of the book launch event was breathtaking. It played with the rules of time between film and real life. (Who would actually film an entire reading at a book launch?) The life portrayed, advancing (or dispersing) at a one-to-one scale, troubled me deeply: What if it were me? What if it were us?

In the film, four friends attend a workshop called "Finding the Body's Center of Gravity." The instructor guides them to try listening to each other's internal organs, the operation of the universe within. Jun presses her ear over Akari's exercise top to her belly button. "It sounds like water …" "So warm …" We each identified with a character from the film: I was Fumi, Mei-tzu was Akari, Chen-chen was Jun, Ah Ch'ou was Sakurako. When I saw this scene, I couldn't help but shrink inward—could I let Mei-tzu listen to my belly? Would the sloshing sounds he heard inside me be absolutely rotten to the core?

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The film was shot over the summer break. Before filming began, we gathered for classes in an old house on Shuiyuan Road—sometimes drama lessons, sometimes Hokkien-language lessons, sometimes practicing the film's songs over beer. Our Hokkien teacher was Ch'en Feng-hui, whom we called Teacher A-Hui. She wore a pale blue blouse with a tiny floral print topped off with a white cardigan. In the sweltering heat, Mei-tzu, Chen-chen, Little Ming (who played the lead, Rose), Mama (the film's most senior queen), and I sat cross-legged on the cool terrazzo floor. Little Ming was Atayal from Nan'ao, yet the script was dense with Hokkien lines. Sentence after sentence, sound after sound, he kept stumbling. We circled around a small, ochre-colored,

Japanese-style short table, knees knocking against knees, with nowhere to hide our expressions. “Don’t laugh! Otherwise, I’ll make you speak your Indigenous tongues. Which one of you can?” I was Puyuma, Mei-tzu was Amis, Chen-chen was Seediq—our Hokkien was only marginally better than Little Ming’s, but not one of us had a stronger command of our own Indigenous language than he did. Seeing us fall silent, the ever-gentle Teacher A-Hui led us back to the lines. I burned with shame—every nasal had to be nasal, every bilabial perfectly sealed. From then on, I made sure my face betrayed no expression in Hokkien class.

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(A small room. Four women are playing poker. Another three women are drunk. One woman is leaning against the wall, buttocks pushed out and a wine bottle wedged between them, displaying her muscular strength.)

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Splendid Float is both a women’s film and a film of the dead. The protagonist Rose’s lover, Ah Yang, dies right at the start. In one shot, Rose is backstage at her vanity, preparing a drag performance for him as though it were a funeral rite. She wipes condensation from the mirror, and Ah Yang’s smiling reflection rises into view—more than once, you could hear the audience gasp, their seats snapping up as if they had stumbled into a Hong Kong ghost movie.

In *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*, it says that in Saigon, because coroners cannot be on call around the clock, if someone dies suddenly in the middle of the night, the neighbors will hire a local drag troupe to perform within an hour, offering song and dance to console the family of the deceased. This is a ritual called “delaying sadness.” Thus, when music and laughter drift through the night, it also means that death has occurred. Because grief at its most extreme exceeds reality, it demands a surreal response. He writes: “The queens—in this way—are unicorns.”

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A year after Mei-tzu’s boyfriend passed away, we piled into Ah Ch’ou’s car and took a long-overdue trip together. (Wasn’t this exactly the beginning of *Happy Hour*?) Our destination was Dongshi Fishing Harbor. The March sun blazed down on County Road 168, and a roadside sign read: “To Suantou.” I turned to Chen-chen and asked, “Haven’t we been here before?”

I remembered then, it was during the film’s publicity tour, a rather peculiar event. The four queens from the film were sent to Suantou Sugar Factory to perform at a Candy Culture Festival on an outdoor stage. The stage was covered in short, red velvet, designed to look like a rustic manor. Behind the performance area, costumes for the scheduled acts were piled up in plastic storage bins—ants, bees, and pink sugar cubes. Little Ming had put us in sharp, elegant black-and-

white outfits. In front of the manor gate, flanked by chibi European guards, old men, and a hawk-headed figure, four performers who did but also did not resemble women sang the theme song and interludes from the film (which hadn't exactly been a hit, and so weren't well-known). As we danced, we wondered: If the handful of kids in the audience (no more than ten) asked, "Who are they?" how on earth were their parents supposed to answer? Some kind of "Redtop Arts" cross-dressing performers? Blackie's Teenage Club girl group? A student club showcase? And yet, we didn't slack off just because no one knew us. If anything, we wanted those puzzled little sisters in the audience to take away a memory they could jot down in their notebooks: "This week at the Candy Culture Festival, I saw a group of brothers—or maybe sisters?—dressed in a very unusual way, singing and dancing wholeheartedly under the blazing sun. I think that's what they call the spirit of sportsmanship …"

We thought back to the 2005 Candy Festival, shrieking with laughter as we drove and thinking of the eighteen years that had passed: "My God, those bewildered little sisters in the audience must be pushing thirty by now." That sort of oddball gig wasn't a one-off. We even showed up on a TV program hosted by Sun Hsieh-chih and Wang Jen-fu, the "Hip-Hop Beatles." That day's competition segment was limbo dancing, and the only celebrity backstage who actually talked to us was Ju-hua. When we think back on it, there is always a pang of regret—if only we'd had smartphones and social media back then. Who knows what posts, what Instagram stories we would've made?

(#CandyFestival #ShockedLittleSister #HomeDecorMagSpread #FakeBoobsFallingOff #JiufenCherryBlossomFest #ChouShou-hsunOffice #SapphoBar #GhostFestivalLanternsAtYunongBridge #HeelsStuckInTheMud)

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Terry Tempest Williams's *When Women Were Birds: Fifty-four Variations on Voice* recounts an episode from her childhood. She once believed that a bird she had seen was a previously unrecorded species. Her teacher dismissed the claim, but her grandmother told her: "It's enough if you believe it yourself."

Many years ago, my cousin Kuei-hua texted me a few days before her wedding: "Brother, where can I get a rainbow pin?" I suggested a few possible places but never checked whether she actually got one. Later she reassured me, never mind, she had. Her wedding was held at the tribal elementary school near her husband's home. When the bride entered, she rode in on a blue Ford Econovan, full of gallant flair. As the couple and their families and friends stood on stage to receive the guests' blessings, I noticed that both Kuei-hua and her husband had pinned tiny, round rainbow badges to their wedding outfits, at once discreet and impossible to miss. Amid the noisy, sun-baked banquet (and the inevitable question of "Why aren't you married yet?"), those two pins were ever

present. I had never encountered something like that before. Yet, when I returned to Taipei and told my boyfriend about it, he responded quietly: “How do you know it’s about you?”

(It’s enough if I believe it myself.)

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The summer I graduated from college, when it was settled that Mei-tzu, Chen-chen, and I would rent a place together in Xindian, I could hardly wait for winter to come so we could have our very own Christmas tree. We got it from the RT-Mart in Xindian. Chen-chen and I hauled it back on a scooter, and at NT$399 it already felt extravagant, momentous. We chose a white-needled model. Once we slit open the long cardboard sleeve, each branch had to be bent outward from the trunk and the plastic pine needles teased apart along their wiry spines. We wrapped a little string of lights around the tree, turned off the living room’s fluorescent lights, and plugged them in. The tree only gave off a faint shimmer, flickering on and off, yet none of us felt the least bit melancholy. The ornament set we bought along with it (NT$149) gave us red balls, green balls, a Star of Bethlehem, snowflakes, and bells as light as pea crackers. Even hung all together, the tree still looked sparse. What else could we add? Director Mei-ling had given us a stash of discarded film reels! They naturally curled like little snakes, and we draped them over the branches. We still had feathers! And bras! “Sis, our place really does have quite an atmosphere.” And didn’t it? Whoever walked in could tell that this was a home of queens (queens who had even made a film).

Beneath the Christmas tree we’d piled a few trinkets, among them were the gifts given to nominees at the Golden Horse Awards. One in particular stood out: a long, hard cylindrical case, the kind that could hold an A1-sized poster. When we returned to our little home in Xindian the morning after the ceremony, we opened it with great anticipation—because it was the biggest. Inside we found several sheets of plain embossed paper, pink and baby blue, unmarked by any text, without even a Golden Horse logo. But they were fragrant. The sort of artificial sweetness you would find in scented erasers or perfumed pens. We were puzzled, even a little at a loss for what to do with them. The rest of the gifts we’ve long forgotten, but that one persisted—effective and self-sufficient as memory, refusing all rhetoric, all function. It’s been sixteen years since we moved out of Xindian, and every time the news reports on the Golden Horse nominee gift bags—“matte black prestige Golden Horse Tatung rice cookers,” “Golden Horse mini-mahjong sets,” “Golden Horse Bluetooth earbuds,” “Golden Horse sleep pillows”—we can’t help but cry out in regret (to Peggy Chiao? Ang Lee? Ann Hui?): “Why didn’t we get any of those that year—?”

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On the fourth floor of Zhongshan Hall, the actress waits
for the digitally restored version of herself. The elevator rises
like a sports car-shaped rewinder rewinds a tape,

like the first time in her life dressed as a woman (before the camera)
singing the theme song. She lets the coffee slowly settle, feels the elevator nearing
time (even gloved in white) still cuts the lake's surface—an ice blade
pressed across her face. On the disc,
a fairy bathed in blue radiance
dances a slow dance on the night of the film festival. She stirs
    the hollow at the cup's center: the place she once rented, with her sisters-in-mimesis,
an ordinary house of joy.

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In screenwriting, there is a symbol now seldom used: a solid black triangle, which signifies an insert shot, a way of indicating the insertion of a flashback. I was at the Zhongshan Hall theater café with Po-yu, both of us working on laptops, handling chores and everyday writing. He said to me, "I have written a poem." The poem was a strange one: Its title, "Radiance," read as something so realistic and beautiful, as though looking into a mirror ("Have you been watching me just now?"). It was written here, in this very place. In the poem, a special screening takes place. I am taking place: wearing a silver fishtail gown, looking into a mirror, waiting for the elevator. Stirring my coffee. The black triangle, like an arrow drawn on the bow, stands in for my longing—for that ordinary house of joy once shared with Mei-tzu and Chen-chen. Even though, in reality, "*Splendid Float*: Digital Restoration Premiere at the Zhongshan Hall" never happened.