Prof. Matthew H. Sommer - Discover Untold Transgender Histories from Imperial China's Archives

Welcome to this episode of Exploring the Humanities Voices from the Hong Kong Polytechnic University. Our podcasts allow us to showcase the exciting and innovative work being done by our colleagues in the humanities. Intersecting with fields as varied as aviation, mental and physical health, virtual reality, religion, GenAI, design, neuroscience.

I am Renia Lopez from the Faculty of Humanities.

With us today, we have Professor Matthew Sommer, Bowman Family Professor of history from the Department of History, Stanford University. We are very lucky to have him here today to talk about a topic very close to us, which is Imperial China.

- Well, thank you, Professor Lopez, for your warm welcome. It's an honor to be here, it is flattering that people are interested in my work.

Your work centers around society in the late Ming early Qing dynasties, specifically on the 17th to 19th centuries. Tell us a little bit more about that.

- I am a social and legal historian of the Qing dynasty, the last dynasty in China from 1644 to 1912. I use legal cases from the archives as the main source for all of my research. As a social legal historian using legal cases, my main interests are gender, sexuality and family. I'm especially interested in the lives of ordinary people in China, influenced by the classic social histories of England and France that influenced me as a graduate student.

Specifically, you cover topics such as abortion and transgender issues, autopsies... What is a common thread running through all of this work?

- Since the vast majority of people in China in the Qing dynasty were illiterate, the evidence and the legal cases, their testimony, their confessions, this is really the closest we can get to their own experiences, given the sources that survive. So, I guess the common thread is that I use legal cases from the archives, original legal cases from the archives in China to look at a range of issues related to legal and social history, especially sexuality, gender and family. Everything that I have done falls under that broad umbrella.

Tell us, how did you get into the legal aspect of things, especially in Imperial China?

- I did my PhD at UCLA, and my advisor and mentor there was Philip Huang, *Huang Chung-Chih*, in Chinese. He had started working on Qing legal history. He was somebody who pioneered the use of these huge archives of legal cases that exist in China. Very few people had looked at them before. This was back in the late 1980s.
- I started my PhD in 1989, in the fall, and in that year, among other things, professor Huang had a research seminar in which he showed us examples of various kinds of original primary sources that he thought offered big opportunities that were either ignored or underexplored. One of the things he showed us was some examples of Qing dynasty legal cases, a couple of

examples from the county courts, which was the lowest court, and a couple of examples from the central courts: death penalty cases, reported up from the provinces to the center for approval. I was absolutely captivated by these. I think that the historians first task is to tell a story and these are often very colorful stories. This is why legal cases make such good novels and such good movies. I was absolutely captivated by, not just the interesting and dramatic stories, but also the fact that so many of them featured gender relations and sexual relations among very ordinary people. Ordinary peasants but also marginalized people, beggars, sailors, soldiers, hired laborers.

- As people may know, in Qing China there was a very skewed sex ratio, a sex ratio imbalance. There were far more men than women. That was especially extreme among the poor. There were many all-male communities or many villages where you might have a surplus of 25 or 30% of men who would never marry. I became interested in how ordinary people lived under these circumstances in China.
- The legal cases gave all sorts of interesting examples of sex relationships, marital relationships and so on that were not orthodox. The more I read, the more fascinated I became. I also realized that past scholarship about gender, sexuality or family, to the extent we had any—there wasn't very much—, it all focused on the elite. That it generally focused on the writings produced by the elites about themselves. What little they said about ordinary people tended to be very stereotyped and prejudiced. It seemed to me that not only was this material very interesting in itself but also it offered an opportunity to tell a new story about what life was like for most people in China. So that's really how it began. And then, you know, one thing led to another… and here I am many, many years later.

Tell us a little bit more about the legal system at the time so that we understand how come those cases were actually documented.

- Sure. So, the Qing empire, was a pluralistic empire that included many different regions and peoples. I focus on the Chinese, China proper—the 18 traditional provinces of China proper that belonged to the former Ming that were conquered by the Qing. The Qing basically continued the former Ming system for administering China and so it was divided into basically 18 provinces, subdivided into about 175 prefectures, which were in turn subdivided into about 1,500 counties or districts.
- This was a very centralized system in many respects. The court of first instance, the lowest court, was on the county level. There was a magistrate there in charge of the county. He was in charge of tax collecting, law and order, solving murder cases, suppressing rebellion and so on. If there was a crime or some other lawsuit, it would be reported to the county court, and then the way it was supposed to work with crime—violent acts especially—depending on how serious the act was, it was supposed to be sentenced according to the Qing code (*Da-Qing lüli*). And then, depending on the severity of the penalty it had to be reviewed at a certain level of the hierarchy. If there was just a simple beating then the county magistrate could do that on his own authority. If it was a death penalty case, like a homicide or a rape or something political, that had to go all the way to Beijing, because in theory, only the emperor could take lives. He was the giver and taker of life through his amnesties and famine relief on the one hand, and then through a monopoly over the taking of life on the other. One of his godlike attributes.

- And so, in Beijing, we have an archive of something like a million of these death penalty reports from all over China proper, most from the 18th and 19th centuries. That's a huge ocean of material. People have barely scratched its surface. There are also some in Taiwan.
- So there was the county court at the bottom and then there was the central court system at the top. And, depending on the nature of the case, it might or might not be reported up the chain of command.
- People who do Qing legal history like me, we tend to rely on these two kinds of archives. We don't really have any archives from the middle, unfortunately. But there are a couple of quite rich ones from the county level. The most important ones are in Sichuan. It's unfortunate so little seems to survive, but there are a couple that are very rich and those are county archives. There you see all sorts of things. You see major crime, but also all sorts of mundane petty disputes, lawsuits, fighting over a cow, marital problems... In the Beijing Archive you see the worst violent crimes. The majority are homicides but you also see rape, banditry, some very few—but some—cases of heterodoxy, political things.
- The cases I talk about relate to transgender, the crime being "a male masqueraded in female attire". Those were considered related to heterodoxy. They were death penalty cases. They were reported all the time. These are the kinds of materials that exist and they reflect the sort of centralized nature of the system.

Your latest book is *The Fox Spirit, the Stone Maiden and Other Transgender Histories from the Late Imperial China*. What is the definition of transgender?

- I think we have to begin by drawing a distinction between transgender identity as we know it today on the one hand, and how historians think about transgender in the past. A core value of transgender politics and identity today is self-determination. In other words, it's not up to some doctor or your parents or the government to tell you what your gender is. Rather, your gender is a matter of self-determination based on your own subjective understanding of who you are. And from that standpoint, the body is not destiny. Your anatomy or your genes those are not determinative. Rather, it is your subjective understanding of yourself, your identity, which defines your gender as opposed to biological sex. There is a debate about where to draw the line, but that's the rough and ready distinction that we make.
- But if you think about it as an historian, if I want to talk about people in the 18th century in China, and I take seriously the value of self-determination, who am I to put labels on people who cannot speak for themselves? And so, we have to be very cautious. But the other thing is that people who transgender, in other words, who moved away from the gender assigned at birth, they have existed, it seems, at all times and places. So, this is a topic that is very interesting and worthwhile to study as a historian.
- At the same time, the kind of vocabulary we use now, the kind of identity concepts that we use now, these are new. For example, the term transgender is a kind of identity category or umbrella category. This really didn't become widespread until the 1990s in the United States. My sense is that it really began in the United States and now has spread elsewhere as well, Western Europe probably as well. But that was the 1990s (I'm old enough to feel like that was just yesterday!) and so, we have to be very careful about anachronism. In other words, when

we study, for example, 18th century China, I have to be very careful not to assume what is familiar today in terms of categories and vocabulary and project it onto people in the past.

- We look at practice, what people do and how they talk about what they do and how others talk about they do. This is inspired by the work of Susan Stryker, who was a very important pioneering transgender activist and historian. She has this great work, *Transgender History*, which is a history of this movement in the modern United States (everyone interested in the topic should read that). She defines transgender as practice. And to paraphrase what she says: transgender people are those who move away from the gender assigned at birth across a socially imposed boundary towards some other destination. I find this very useful. This is basically what historians are now using to think about this, because by looking at practice and not assuming motivation, not assuming a given identity, her definition allows us to think about different times and places and to compare them, to notice what's different about them, what is similar about them. And, in a sense, we can get past the roadblock of trying to guess whether if they were alive today they would identify as transgender. So, for example, there were people who cross-dressed in the past. We don't know if they would identify as transgender today. We just don't know. I mean, there are people today who cross-dress who don't identify as transgender.

In the book you do give a number of examples of different individuals. For some of them it seems to have been a choice, to do this change of gender. But for others it seems to have been imposed. Tell us a little bit more about those examples.

- I have a number of fascinating cases, not very many I should say. This was the crime according to the state, the crime of *nán bàn nǚ zhuāng*, “a man masquerading in women's attire”. That was a crime prosecuted under the laws against heterodoxy. I can get into that in a minute, if you want. But those cases involved individuals who had what was judged to be a normal male anatomy but who were living as women. They were wearing women's clothing. They had their hair done up in the way a woman would. In the Qing dynasty, men had to shave the front of the head and grow out the back into a long single braid. Failure to do this for men was punished by death. It was a sign of loyalty to the Manchu Qing dynasty.

- The individuals who had done this [masquerade as women], they had pierced their ears, some of them had bound their feet loosely and they were living as women. They were playing women's roles. They were doing occupations otherwise traditionally thought of as women's roles. Those individuals, I hesitate to use the word “choice", although I do in the book, these are people who chose to transgender, if you will, in the sense that at some point they made a decision to do this. Nobody forced them to do it. But I would put quotation marks around the word “choice” because I think that most transgender people would probably say they didn't “choose” to be transgender any more than I “choose” to be cisgender. It's just the way I am. I mean this in the specific sense that these are individuals who at some point made a decision to start presenting as a woman, to live as a woman at great risk to themselves.

- So you have those cases. But, because of Susan Stryker's definition based on practice, based on moving away from the general side of things, to me, it's interesting to use this to think about a range of other kinds of people who in the past have not usually been thought of as transgender. So here I include, for example, the male clergy and the female clergy among the Daoist and Buddhist. If we look, for example, at Buddhist clergy, they would shave their heads,

they would wear a gender-neutral robe, they would move away from their families. The term in Chinese is *chūjiā*, to move away or out of the family into a monastic community of ritual kin. They would change their names, taking the Buddhist surname *shi* from Shakyamuni, *shìjiāmóuní*, so they all had that, and then they would take a given name, which was usually two characters from a sutra. This would be assigned by a mentor or a master teacher, and they would join this ritual lineage of clerical kin. They would forswear sex, procreation, marriage and having families. They would replace the family, or replace the lineage, with the ritual community. They did not identify as the opposite sex, but they certainly did not identify with normative gender roles, which were based on family roles organized around marriage and procreation, because they have forsworn all of that.

- So from that standpoint, leaving the family *chūjiā,* meant leaving behind normative gender roles. And while that has not usually been thought of as “transgender”, it's very interesting for me to think about that in relationship to other kinds of practices, transing practices that we can find in Qing society. If we look at the figure of the “male masquerading in female attire”, that was criminalized. The assumption was that that person was a sex predator who insinuated himself into female company in order to seduce or rape chaste wives and daughters of good families. This is similar to the current paranoid fantasy about transwomen as well. That somehow, they're trying to sneak into women’s spaces. In other words, they're fake women. That's the paranoid fantasy.
- But there was a parallel stereotype of clergy as the same thing. These male monks, they may claim to have abstained, to have forsworn sex and meat and wine and all these things but we know what they really want to do. What they really want to do is get people to lower their guard so they can sort of get in there and rape or seduce women. There are all sorts of versions of this in fiction and folklore. What's interesting to me is that the stereotype of the clergy as sexual predators is basically the same stereotype as that of the female presenting man. And this is the stereotype. And they are two sides of the same coin. To me, once I make the move of thinking about the clergy and leaving the family as a transgender maneuver, it sort of illuminates these connections, things that I would not have noticed otherwise. For me, that's very interesting.
- I also talk about eunuchs. When a boy was sold, usually by his parents, to the eunuch establishment, he was castrated and enslaved into the imperial service. That was also called leaving the family to a job, the same term they used for clergy. Obviously, they had to forswear sex, at least conventional sex, but they also had to forswear marriage, adoption, having families and so on.
- There were similar fantasies about eunuchs. There was a paranoid fantasy that an intact male would somehow pretend to be a eunuch, disguised as a eunuch get into the palace, and then rape or seduce the emperor's women. There were also these notions that eunuchs could use black magic to restore their genitals in order to do the same thing. You have this body of paranoid fantasies around sexual predation in which the surface presentation is a disguise to enable this nefarious predator to somehow get into spaces where he's not supposed to be. In a sense, that stereotype of the predator unites these various scenarios, if that makes sense.

It makes sense. What's also interesting is that this is quite popular in the literature, isn't it?

- It is indeed. Yes.

Why do you think that is?

- I try to use fiction in the in the book to illuminate this. Now, most people in China were illiterate, as I said before. You have these genres of fiction, popular fiction, written in more or less a kind of vernacular language. These were written by literate men, who are mostly members of the elite, and basically for an elite male audience. And what's interesting is that these people, these men, both the readers and the writers, they had the same Confucian education as the officials did. So, they were all in that sense, broadly speaking, part of the same Confucian worldview.
- If you look at this fiction, all these wild stories of ghosts and fox spirits and sex predators and so on, you get a sense of how people thought about this outside of the law, outside of the orthodox context. I think that, in a sense, that fiction, those stereotypes, they give voice to wider perceptions.

One of the case stories you mention was of this man who masqueraded as a woman for most of his life until he was, or they were, 60 and they were found out

- she was a midwife.

The midwife. Tell us a little bit more about that story.

- I would refrain from judging whether this was a masquerade. It was judged to be a masquerade. I think this is just how this person wanted to live their lives. But who am I to say. One of the challenges is that we can only see this, these stories, through the legal cases and those are heavily biased by the people who produced them, these judges. Because the stereotype of the sexual predator was so strong, when they encountered someone like this they assumed they already knew what was going on: “Oh, this is obviously a sex predator”. And so, what they tended to do was torture the people into producing a confession that would satisfy their preconception. In the case you mentioned of this midwife, the governor who reports to the emperor, he says: “we can tell we know, without even asking this person, what they were up to. They must have raped and seduced lots and lots of women”
- Well, from the evidence of the case itself, there's no evidence this person ever had sex with anybody, quite frankly. The governor or the magistrate, they already know. In that case this is a person who had what the midwife later said was a normal male anatomy, who had been assigned male at birth, as we say now, who at some point in their 20s started to live as a woman and they moved away from their home, their home community, for anonymity. This is something that transgender people do sometimes today as well to get a completely fresh start with a new persona.
- So, this person moved away from home and then showed up in a rural community dressed as a woman, with a woman's hairstyle, bound feet, earrings and so on, and said: “I am a widow and my evil in-laws were trying to force me to remarry to another man. But I am a chaste Confucian widow. I was loyal to my dead husband, so of course I would never remarry. I had to run away in order to escape this fate. I ran away first to a Buddhist nunnery. I shaved my head and became a nun. But then I decided I wanted to return to lay life so that I could adopt a son to carry on my dead husband's line”. This is the most loyal and chaste thing a widow could do. And so they had grown out their hair. Now bear in mind, if this person had their hair tonsured the way a man should, the front is all shaven and the back is long. So how do you

switch hairstyles from that to a woman's style? What this person had done is shave the whole head. And as a nun, you can do that, and then had grown it out in a uniform length and done it the way a woman would. It's kind of an interesting back story.

- This person shows up in this community, living as a woman and says: "I'm a midwife". Long story short: they end up living in this community, practicing as a midwife. Apparently very successful because they've managed to earn money and they use that money to buy land, and they are living of the rent. By Communist standards in the 20th century, they would have been a rich peasant, at least, if not a small landlord.
- And then, they start to assemble a kind of family of what you might call "chosen kin". They adopt a son, supposedly to carry on the dead husband's family line, then find a wife for the son, and then, for some reason that it's not clear, they adopt a son for the son or grandson. So you have a whole lineage established through adoption and marriage.
- Also, apparently, this person was very popular in the community. They had three *gānnǚér*, this is a kind of adoption of women. These were these women, young women who had been sort of like goddaughters. This *gānqīn* kind of adoption was done between people of different generations who have a very close, quasi kinship, relationship of affection and mutual support.
- So this person over time, over some 20, 25 years, they assemble a whole family and they have a house people are living in, and they have land and a successful practice as a midwife and so… Do you want to know what happens next?

Yes! But before you tell us what happens next, what about the neighbors? Did they know about this?

- We don't know. There's not enough in the case about that. All we have is the governor's report on this case, on a memorial to the emperor, where the governor is shocked, horrified to find this case of a sex predator in disguise, living in heterodoxy, blah, blah, blah. There's a lot we don't know. It is—unfortunately in these legal cases—often the questions I would most like to ask, as a historian, the magistrates didn't ask. Or at least they did not record them in the case report. It was irrelevant to judicial purposes. You usually only get information that is somehow relevant to identifying and prosecuting the crime.

So tell us, what happened at the end?

- So this person, their name was Xiong MuMu, which means sort of sister in law Xiong. That's the name they went by. The family name is Xiong. They had kept in touch with their brother. They had one sibling, as far as we know, a brother. And their home county was…, I forget it's in the book, but it was maybe 50 miles away or something like that. It was far, but not that far. They somehow kept in touch with each other. Apparently, their father had died at some point. And so, the brother had taken over the family land.
- What was typically done with inheritance in China was that sons would inherit equal shares. Daughters did not directly inherit. If you had three sons then the estate would be divided in three equal pieces. Each son would receive an equal share. There was no primogeniture, as you have in Europe. In this case, Xiong MuMu, the heroine of our story, told their brother that they wanted to have a full half share. And the brother basically said "No, I'm going to take it

all”. And so, Xiong MuMu then filed a lawsuit against their brother, in court, accusing the brother of trying to seize his older “sister's” land. And so, they are summoned to court and the brother begins by saying: “Well, that's actually not my sister. That's my brother. And he's been pretending to be a woman all this time.”

- The magistrate orders a midwife to do a strip search, an examination of the body of Xiong MuMu, and the midwife reports that this person indeed has what she identified as normal male anatomy. So the magistrate declares it to be a man masquerading as a woman. This person has lived in their community with no trouble, as far as we know, for more than 20 years. I forget exactly how many, but a long time. The neighbors, if they knew, they didn't care. This was a successful midwife, a very good midwife. This raises all sorts of questions. For one thing, the lawsuit is kind of crazy. Why on earth did this person file a lawsuit bringing themselves to the attention of the magistrate? But also, it seems like the brother's logic was: “if you want to live as a woman, then you get a daughter's share of the land, which is zero".
- And so Xiong MuMu seems to have wanted to have their cake and eat it too. To live as a woman but retain somehow the privileges of a man and inheritance. This is a complete contradiction.

She was very confident in her position within the community.

- Indeed, indeed, it's really kind of amazing. I mean, the chutzpah of this person.

what happens at the end?

- Xiong MuMu and the brother are both arrested. This is reported to the governor. And the governor reports it to the emperor in a secret palace memorial. Because the governor interprets this as falling under this broad category of heterodoxy “a man masquerading as woman, in woman's attire”. The governor proposes that Xiong MuMu will be beaten to death, which is a kind of an extraordinary, extralegal punishment. You don't always find it in the code The emperor says: “Well, as far as you tell me, there's no evidence of any crimes that are really deserving of death”. As an act of lenience, the emperor orders that this person, first of all, be dressed as a man, have their hair done the way a man should, and then sent to the far north of Manchuria to spend the rest of their life as a slave in the military.

We assume it wasn’t a very long life.

- Exactly. I'm not sure which would be worse: being put to death or being sent to be a slave in the military on the Russian border, on Siberia. I guess that counted as lenience from the Emperor's point of view. And then that's it, we don't hear anything more. The brother was punished too, for having kept the secret all this time.

So why was it so unacceptable to masquerade as a woman?

- That is an interesting puzzle. Especially when you consider that, in the opera, boys played female roles on stage all the time, and that was legal. It was stigmatized, but it was legal.

There was a whole kind of elite male fan culture focusing on a fascination with these beautiful boys who performed female roles in the opera. So why then, was this so unacceptable offstage?

- This goes back to something I started talking about, the question of choice versus not choice. People, like the actors of female roles, they didn't choose to pick these female roles as an act of self-expression. They generally were sold by their parents. Some of them were kidnaped as young boys and then, if they were seen to have aptitude, they were trained to perform these roles. When they reached their late teens and, unmistakably masculine features became too obvious, then they tended to be sidelined, let go.

- So those people did not choose. I think part of what made these other kinds of gender transing acceptable is that they happened within institutional contexts with specifically coded protocols. They were not subversive acts of self-expression that were challenging the normative gender order. In the case of these boys who played female roles, there was a whole sex trade on the side, they were kind of escorts and prostitutes for elite male patrons. In a sense, they were serving the pleasure of elite men. Far from being subversive of the order, you could say they were sort of reinforcing and upholding a kind of order, even though they were stigmatized.

  - Same thing with the clergy I talked about and the eunuchs too. They were an accepted part of the normative order, in some ways, they respected normative gender roles. None of that was a subversive act of self-expression. In the case of Xiong MuMu, this was interpreted very differently. And here we have to bear in mind the misogyny that underlies all this. Basically, I think Qing elites and judges and lawmakers, they could imagine no good reason why a man would “pretend to be a woman”, except to try to sneak into female space as a predator. Hence the stereotype of the male masquerading in female attire in order to seduce or rape women. There's a sort of long tradition of this stereotype in fiction of folklore. For the Qing, the sort of locus classics of this image was the case from the early Ming dynasty, from the 15th century, about this figure known as Sang Chong.

- Sang Chong appears to have been a real person because there is a brief summary of their legal case in the *Ming shilu,* the Veritable Records of the Ming dynasty. This was a kind of official chronicle compiled by the imperial court. After an emperor would die, at the beginning of the new emperor's reign, they would compile this chronicle of important events and edicts on things from the previous emperors’ reign. The fact that this case summary about Sang Chong appears in that context means that at least the people who compiled that record believed this to be true.

- The story of Sang Chong is that he was a beautiful male youth who learned black magic from this master sorcerer. This black magic consisted of dressing as a woman, pretending to be a beautiful young woman and learning all the women's arts of sewing and embroidery and so on. And then by presenting as a woman, traveling about and then seeking employment in the households of good families, maybe to teach the daughters embroidery or something like that. He would be staying in the female courtesan household and then at night would come out of his disguise, as this male, and either seduce or rape women. If the victims of this predation yielded, then he would simply have sex with them. If they resisted, then he would use black magic, demonic possession to rape them and drug them.

This behavior is so deviant that you can only explain it by saying that this person is using black magic and is in cahoots with the evil…

- That's right. It was associated with heterodoxy. It was prosecuted under this famous statute: ’using heterodox methods to deceive and swindle the people‘. Usually that statute was used to prosecute religious sects or sworn brotherhoods that were believed to be seditious, believed to be anti-state, leading rebellions and so on. That's also worthy of skepticism, by the way, it was used for persecuting popular religion really that the elites didn't like. But, one of the connections here with the so-called heterodox religious sects is that the authorities believed them all to be frauds. The leaders of these heterodox sects were basically con-artists. They were conmen, fraudsters who were using some elaborate fraud to deceive the ordinary people who were gullible and ignorant, and then exploit them for sex, exploit them out of their money, or to rebel against the government.

- And so, at the heart of heterodoxy there was a kind of fraud and exploiting other people through deception. That, in a sense, is the conceptual link to this image of a sexual predator who is “masquerading” as a woman in order to do these kinds of things, to get women. The heart of it is this notion that this is all fraud. These are not real women. Rather, they are men pretending to be women for an ulterior motive. And again, in some ways, the world hasn't changed that much. This is the stereotype you get in transphobia in the modern world today, in the United States and Britain, and perhaps elsewhere.

- In the United States, we've had these bathroom laws banning transgender people from using public restrooms that suit the gender, that is, their identity. The reason behind that is that there's this paranoid fantasy that trans women just want to get in women's bathrooms in order to seduce or rape little girls or women. It is actually pretty baroque, if you think about it. Because if some if some man wants to do that, why should he go to the trouble of dressing up as a woman? Why not just go in the bathroom? It doesn't make any sense to me but what's striking is that, in a sense, it's the same kind of paranoid fantasy you get in 18th century China, a completely different society and legal system. And yet there does seem to be this deep fear on the part of some people that is attached in particular to the trans woman. And trans women generally tend to be the targets of really virulent and vicious fear and persecution, quite frankly. In the United States, at least, trans women are targets of a great deal of violence. And the suicide rates are quite high as a result of this kind of persecution. There seems to be less obsession with trans men. For reasons that aren't totally clear to me, but it is interesting that you see these parallels across different times and places. And again, you can draw parallels between patriarchy in different times, of misogyny in different times. These are all somehow linked, I think. If that makes sense?

It does. Two questions here. You just mentioned that it doesn't seem to be the case the other way around. So, females masquerading as men, that didn't seem to be an issue in Imperial China and it doesn't seem to be that much of an issue today.

- Yes.

So why not then?

- Well, so I think, again, it relates to this obsession with control of female sexuality, control women's chastity and access to women. The assumption is that, to use their terms, the man "masqueraded as a woman", is a sexual predator who was targeting the chaste wives and daughters of "good families". That's the rubric, that's the threat. It's the threat as to female chastity, that's what they are really worried about.

- If a woman "pretends to be a man", that's not nearly as threatening. What are they going to do? Sneak in the male space? I think they do not feel threatened by that. If you look at Qing law and imperial law in China, generally, the sexual really was defined around the penis, the male organ and what male subjects did to female or feminized objects. What they did to women or what they did to boys was framed in terms of an act of penetration where a man is either raping or having marital intercourse those are the two sides of the coin. Marital intercourse is legitimate. Sex outside of marriage is adultery or rape. And the law sort of focuses on the boundary between these and how you define the crimes and how you punish the crimes. But all of those are organized around a man with male anatomy acting upon a female or feminized object.

So this is basically about having control of women.

- Yeah. Oh, yeah. For sure. One of the things about the stereotype of the predator is that it's not really about transgender at all. These individuals are not understood to be homosexual, for example, or having gender dysphoria or being transgender—any of these concepts people might use today in the modern era to talk about gender crossing of this kind. No, on the contrary, this is a hyper sexual predator who is targeting females. So, in a sense, it's a hyper heterosexual predator, to use modern terminology. Far from being gender ambiguous or interested in men or anything like that, this is somebody who wants women and this is a kind of nefarious masquerade, a ruse.

What is China like today in terms of transgender issues and this relationship between men and women?

- I don't really claim expertise on the situation in China and it's a fairly fluid situation legally and politically. But I think a lot of these old ideas survive in one form or another. This figure of the cross-dressing predator I mentioned, —in Chinese the term *rényāo* is often used for this. The *rényāo* in Ming and Qing times is a very frightening kind of demonic figure, like a vampire or something. A kind of a sexual vampire. But you see, in post-Mao popular culture in China, the term *rényāo* is used in new ways. It's a term of abuse for effeminate gay men. It does have the sort of negative usage but also, increasingly, it has been used for glamorous trans women, very beautiful, glamorous trans women.

- One thing that's interesting about this is this sort of glamorous *rényāo* figure is it's always a glamorous, trans woman who conforms to beauty ideals that are very mainstream. They are *báishòuměi*, the fair skinned, thin, pretty ideal that you see in starlet and fashion models in China. These *rényāo* trans women, they all conform to that. And yet what's interesting is that their glamor and their appeal, their fascination, it's not that the audience members think they are women, cis women, it's that they know they're trans women.

- It reminds me of the boys who played female roles in the opera back in Beijing opera. The whole appeal there is not that the aficionados thought they were cis women. Quite the contrary. And it was not just that they were boys. Rather specifically, it was that they were boys who were performing a certain kind of ideal femininity on stage that appealed to elite

taste. I think in a way, you have something like that going on with the sort of this glamorous trans woman phenomenon now. They appeal to a very specific kind of male gaze. But the fascination is based in part on the fact that they're known to be trans women. I think the idea behind this male fascination is that this is a kind of artificial kind of performance of female glamor ideal. Again, there's misogyny there.

So 200 years on and we have not changed.

- I got to say people are people with all of our foibles.

Thank you so much. Do you have any last thoughts for our listeners?

- Well, I will say that right now, at least in my country, trans people are under assault and are the objects of increasingly intense persecution. I'm very aware of that. I wasn't thinking about that so much when I wrote the book, but I do hope that my book will be of some value or some use to trans people. I want to express my friendship and solidarity with trans people everywhere. And my hope that they will simply be left alone and allowed to live their lives.

Professor Matthew Sommer, thank you so much.

- Thank you very much. It's been an honor.

Thank you for joining us on exploring the humanities from the Hong Kong Polytechnic University. For more episodes or information, do visit our website or follow us on Spotify. Stay tuned for discussions with leading voices from the Faculty of Humanities and beyond.