

Frontiers of Gender Studies in Asia

The following is a condensed version of a seminar held at the Center for Southeast Asian Studies on February 2, 2108

Professor Peter A. Jackson (Australian National University) and Dr. Nguyen Thu Huong (University of Social Sciences and Humanities of Vietnam National University, Hanoi) are involved in a forthcoming book on the topic of transgender ritual specialists in Southeast Asia, of which Professor Jackson is the co-editor and Dr. Nguyen is a contributor. The book deals with, among other things, the phenomenon observed during the past two decades in which transgender, and sometimes gay men playing roles in rituals that in the past were dominated by women. This transformation of the gendering, from female gender to transgender, is currently found in at least three countries in Southeast Asia—Burma, Thailand, and Vietnam.

Queering Death Rites': Cultural Legacy, Identities and Rights among Transgender Funeral Performers in Southern Vietnam

Dr. Nguyen Thu Huong

Abstract

On 25 November 2015 the National Assembly of Vietnam passed a bill amending the Civil Code and for the first time recognizes transgender people's rights, legalizing sex reassignment surgery, thus allowing those who have undergone reassignment to register under their new gender. This came into effect on January 1, 2017 and the Ministry of Health is drafting a law on sex change. It is considered a landmark development for the transgender community while fulfilling the state's commitment to protect the civil rights of all its citizenry of which the transgender community, one of the most vulnerable groups, forms a part. Despite this important breakthrough, little research has been conducted on issues that have a direct bearing on the transgender community in Vietnam especially those who have undergone sex reassignment surgery or plan to do so. This study particularly takes a close look at the lived experiences of a number of trans women working as funeral performers in Ho Chi Minh City. It investigates how prevailing social and cultural discourses on transgenderism and their own perceptions affect the ways these trans women weigh up various options to change their sex and to what extent they are prepared to do this. The study also examines how the tradition of mixing music and entertainment with funerals particularly in the Southern part of Vietnam, has created a public space for trans women to take part in these funeral practices as we see them in Ho Chi Minh City today. Lastly it wants to explore the postoperative experiences of these trans performers, how their sex changes, total or partial, have impacted their lives against the backdrop of overlapping discourses of sex and gender identity and those of citizen rights.