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## **Why Passing Matters: Gender Expression among Transgender Women in Public Spaces in China**

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### **Abstract**

This study examines why passing matters for transgender women in China by focusing on their gender expression in public spaces. It explores how passing is accomplished in everyday interactions, how it is interpreted by others, and what consequences arise when it is not achieved. The analysis draws on interviews and participant observation conducted with three transgender women and one cross-dresser living in China. The findings indicate that passing is not simply an individual achievement but a practical and context-dependent process shaped by social expectations. The standards for passing vary across different spaces and are particularly strict in women-only environments, where gender boundaries are closely monitored. In practice, external markers of femininity—such as appearance, bodily presentation, and the degree of vocal feminization—play a central role, often outweighing legal gender status or surgical transition. Even transgender women who have undergone sex reassignment surgery (SRS) and legally changed their gender may be excluded from women-only spaces if they are not perceived as sufficiently feminine in appearance or voice. When passing is unsuccessful, individuals are more likely to encounter exclusion, suspicion, and discrimination from others who read them as not conforming to gender expectations. These findings suggest that passing is closely tied to the social recognition of gender identity in everyday life. By managing appearance, voice, and behavior, transgender women actively negotiate their presence in public spaces and seek to reduce potential risks. The importance of passing thus points to the strict regulation of femininity in contemporary Chinese society.

**Keywords:** Transgender Women; Passing; Public Space; Femininity; Gender Expression