Sexual Artifice Through "Transgression":

The Revival of Cross-Gender Performance in *Jingju*

by

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Abstract

This study is about—and beyond—the unprecedented revival of cross-gender performance in theatre, especially the male-to-female cross-gender performance of *jingju* (Beijing Opera), known as *nandan*. Through years long pre-investigations of the scene, archival work of its history, and case studies of individuals, this project examines the specificity and universality of the (in)coherences between sense of gender, sexuality, gender identities, gender mannerisms, transgressive desires and cross-gender performance behind the advocate of "historical authenticity" and "the return to the social and cultural norm." Over twenty informants have contributed to the research with their narratives and observations in the scene.

The project ends up with the observation that the transgressive potential of performing out of one's biological sex is peculiar not only to one individual or one theatrical form, but to humankind in general. The conclusions drawn from the qualitative analysis may subvert some of the prevailing epistemologies of gender and sex. Firstly, there is no singular gendered subject. Gender discourse only exists in a "signifier-and-signified" relation to the subject's perception of other gendered bodies. Secondly, it is not precise to claim that gender is socially or culturally constructed. Gender is reconstructed or amplified out of its ontological attributes based on biological differences, whose existence should be acknowledged. Reiteration does not precisely "do" gender, but may affect it to some extent, as there is a core sense of gendered self, albeit unsettled oftentimes, which is "inalienable" and "inseperatable." Thirdly, gender may be performable, as in *jingju*, while gender performance and gender performativity are interchangeable only when they are not placed in a context to discuss their association with identity. In this sense, incoherence does not only exist between gender, sexuality and desires, but also between gender identities, gender mannerisms and gender behaviours. It may be concluded that gender transgression should not be understood on its own terms, but in a context of all social and cultural regulation and institutionalization that regard the interchangeability of signifiers of maleness and of femaleness as a threat to mainstream perception.

Keywords: cross-gender performance; gender; sexuality; *jingju*; theatre; gender transgression

Dedication

This is dedicated to my entire family and especially to my poodle, Bowbow, for his full-hearted, abiding companionship, his needing so little and giving so much, and for inspiring me with so many virtues from which I think human beings, who struggle with cynicism and sophistication, should strive to learn.

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Chapter 1.

Introduction

This study is the outcome of twenty-one years of theatrical, sociological and social psychological research as well as journalistic experiences with several generations of *nandan* artists—male to female cross-gender performers of *jingju* (Beijing Opera). Notably, since the founding of the PRC, *nandan* performers were no longer trained officially. There have been quite a number of newly emerged *nandan* performers in recent years, signifying a vibrant revival of the *nandan* art.

The *nandan* art is a unique aesthetic practice in a unique theatrical form, and has raised numerous questions prior to this study, revolving around the making of gender, both on stage and off stage, and of desires deeply rooted in practice that almost always go unnoticed. If the *nandan* art is perceived as a stylized male construct of women rather than a mere mimetic practice intended to produce an intelligible reflection of reality, then what is the original referent of the female gender for the construction? If it is simply conscious mimicry of women, then what is the prototype for the stylized conventions that define and distinguish the female gender from the male one? If all performers follow the same stylized conventions, why are some accepted by audience members as producing high culture while others end up exposing themselves to ridicule and laughter? How much unconscious mimicry does a performer bring to his performance out of his own gender identity or sense of gendered self? How much of a psychological hurdle (if any) does the performer's male gender identity cause to his performance? Conversely, how much does the reiteration of the cross-gender performance affect or shape the performer's gender identity? Is there really no pre-existing gender identity? If gender is a process, instead of a stable essence, is it constructed at the same time as the personal identity in its totality is formed? If it comes afterwards, when does gender identity become an integral part of personal identity or FPP (first person perspective)? And, if

household labour pre-eminently and fundamentally constitutes the routine production of gender, as believed by most sociologists, what else contributes to the making of what is socially, culturally and politically perceived as gender? If gender has been discursively produced, reiterated and socially constructed into a fixed pattern, why do we see cross-gender practice cross-culturally and trans-historically not only as a theatrical technique, but also a socio-psychological phenomenon? Why has this tradition not totally perished from the patriarchal societies where women were kept off the stage? Why is it re-appearing vibrantly and unabashedly when cross-gender performance is no more a theatrical norm? Does this reappearance reflect a desire to seek transgressive pleasure, which may not be so restricted in theatre, which by itself may serve as a way of self-justification? Is there such a desire in our lived realities and among human beings in general? The prefix "cross-" suggests a kind of fluidity within the gender spectrum, signifying transgression across established boundaries. This gender transgression exists everywhere and elsewhere, extending from its most representational form in theatre and other media, such as film and television, to our lived realities, disrupting societal or cultural norms, mobilizing the imaginative, and creating a new reality.

My study is about—and beyond—cross-gender performance in *xiqu* (indigenous Chinese theatre) and its relational extension into realities, as theatre is a way, via anti-mimetic theatricalizations of cross-gender performance, for us to rethink the hegemonic epistemologies of sex and gender. The revival has become phenomenal. Sun Peihong (1947-), an adjunct professor at the National Academy of Chinese Theatre Arts (*zhongguo xiqu xueyuan*) and a former *xiaosheng*[1] performer with China's National *Jingju* Theatre (*guojia jingju yuan*) observes that after decades of absence from the stage, *nandan* performers in *jingju* "are increasing rapidly, more and more are being trained" (2012). In particular, my study focuses on historical and cultural studies of the *nandan* tradition and its vibrant revival during the last few decades. Much scholarship has been done on cross-gender performance, but little on the revival of it. As such,

[1] *Xiaosheng* is the sub-category of sheng—literally the male role category in *jingju*. Compared to another sub-category, *laosheng*, which is a dignified older role, *xiaosheng* means young male characters. *Xiaosheng* performers sing in a high-pitched falsetto voice with occasional breaks to represent the voice changing period of adolescence. In *jingju* plays, *xiaosheng* characters are often involved with romantic affairs with beautiful women. *Wusheng* is another sub-category of *sheng*, which means martial characters for roles involving combat.

scholars have concentrated on the male-to-female cross-gender performance that was set in historically patriarchal Chinese society, but have largely ignored the revival of the tradition in present-day China, where women are actively involved in all theatrical activities, playing legitimately female roles that no longer have to be done by their male counterparts. The ongoing revival has also raised numerous questions, after such a long time of disappearance from most stages across China. Female performers of female roles, known as *nüdan* or *kundan* as opposed to *nandan* or *qiandan*,[2] have emerged, flourished, and replaced most of the *nandan* performers who had been active before the PRC's ban of the cross-gender performance, and many of them have achieved artistic perfection and secured their position on the *jingju* stage. What then has triggered the contemporary revival of the *nandan* art? What is validating this revival? Have there been any voices from above that seek to justify the necessity and legitimacy of the revival? How do these newly emerged *nandan* performers foresee their future careers? Do they encounter more or fewer institutional obstacles nowadays than before? Do they have any concerns about the public or state attitudes? Do they have sufficient opportunities to appear on the stage? Is the revival creating any competition between *nandan* and *kundan*? How do *kundan* performers see the revival of *nandan* and their *nandan* counterparts? And does their perception of their *nandan* counterparts mingle with their reverence towards the renowned *nandan* masters from the older generations, especially the *Four Great Dan*[3] in Republican China (1912-49)?

The revival does not mean that the *nandan* art will regain its past glamour, glory, and male dominance of the *dan* roles in *jingju* from this historical era when women were not allowed on stage. It may suggest, however, new readings of the old aesthetic tradition in a new socio-cultural and political context, as well as new discoveries with respect to the gender dynamics within the practice enabled by our cognitive progress.

[2] In the *I-Ching,* also known as *The Book of Changes*, *qian* and *kun* symbolize heaven and earth or *yang* and *yin*. Thus *qiandan* equates to *nandan*, meaning men who play female roles in *jingju*; while *kundan* means women who play female roles in *jingju*.

[3] *Four Great Dan* refers to the four most accomplished *nandan* performers in Republican China in the 1920s through 1930s—Mei Lanfang (1894-1961), Shang Xiaoyun (1900-76), Cheng Yanqiu (1904-58), and Xun Huisheng (1900-68).

The revival also requires analytical positioning of the gender performed and the gender performing.

Additionally, I will examine *yueju* (*Yue* Opera or *Shaoxing* Opera), which is a gendered parallel to *jingju*, given its predominantly all-female casting. *Yueju* has experienced a "roller coaster" journey from its original all-male casting, to male-and-female mixed casting, and finally to its contemporary nearly all-female status, under Western influenced feminism in Republican China, then Maoist feminism in the PRC (People's Republic of China), and its own naturalized feminine aesthetic mechanism, suggesting a gendered accommodation to its aesthetic specificity. The normalization of all-female *yueju* indicates that femininity in male characters constructed through female impersonation by males is more acceptable in the public eye than male femininity, even when manifested unconsciously, in reality. In examining the revival of all-female *yueju*, we will be able to find out how and why it has undergone far fewer institutional obstacles than has been the case with the revival of the *nandan* art of *jingju*, all of which points to the drastically different societal and institutional tolerance levels of female masculinity and male femininity.

The revival of *nandan* in *jingju* during the last few decades is not a singular case. It is also interesting to note that almost simultaneously Western societies have experienced an unprecedented revival in the cross-gender casting of Shakespeare's plays, where actors play the opposite sex. Male-to-female cross-gender practice in Shakespeare's plays seeks to advocate "historical authenticity" in male actors' construction of femininity and creation of "double consciousness" of "old and new" and "then and now" (Conkie, 2010, 190). Both male-to-female and female-to-male cross-gender productions have come back to the stage, echoing their Eastern parallels, *jingju* and *yueju*. I see this as an interesting intersection of a globalized trend that establishes grounds for part of my hypothesis: Behind the advocacy of return to "historical authenticity" lies a re-discovered transgressive potential that puts the theatre and other media at the forefront of the political agenda envisioned for its execution. I describe this potential as "transgressive" because given women's status on stage the subject is not actually following current norms regardless of the normative status of male-to-female cross-gender performance in history. As one of my interviewees has said, "We say in

public that [male-to-female cross-gender performance] is and should be normal and authentic, but we are pretty clear that it is not; and that's why it has been so difficult" (Sun, 2014).

Historically, *jingju nandan* performers were following the law, not transgressing it. The *nandan* students and performers that have emerged especially during this past decade, however, seem to be giving a transgressive meaning to the revival. Cross-gender performance is simply one of the "symptoms" of the transgressive instinct, while theatre has created a safe space for its presentation. I have, therefore, coined the term "transgressionism" to define this instinct and desire to transgress, drawing on behavioural studies and socio-psychology. This term, along with a grouping of ideas, may contest modern beliefs and classifications of gender and sexual deviance, with a strategic significance in building a more inclusive coalition of sexual minorities.

As a particular gendered culture has long shaped its people's attitudes towards gender patterns, my research will first examine the gendered aesthetic tradition in the history of *jingju*. The larger part will be based on qualitative analysis of the aesthetic tradition of the *nandan* in *jingju* and the recurring *nandan* and male-and-female mixed casting. I will also review comparable revival trends in other theatrical traditions globally (Conkie, 189-209, Rose, 210-230 and Bulman, 231-245). While all-male casting in the early modern period was partly a way of policing gender norms,[4] the revival of the cross-gender performance tradition is underlined by a revolution of rediscovering genders and gendered behaviours, sexual orientation, sexual desire, transgressive potential and feminism. This study will be an original contribution that will also deconstruct the cultural implications behind the revival, interrogating the constructedness and performativity of gender. While my work is chiefly concerned with the interpretation of the revival of that tradition under the influence of queer theory that subverts the binary mode and propagates multiple subjectivities, I will also raise issues around other gendered transgressive "symptoms" that are outside of cross-gender performance but share with it a common productive motive.

[4] Even though all-male casting was largely a theatrical norm in *jingju* in the Qing dynasty as well as Republican China, the selection of *nandan* trainees was still based on female qualities in the candidate and individual interest.

My work seeks to solve epistemological problems in gender studies by situating my research in a large unity of case studies that include the *nandan* performance of *jingju*, all-female *yueju*, and other aesthetic activities in popular media that reflect influence or inspiration from *nandan* in *jingju*. The importance of my work lies not only in its critique of the present-day revival of the cross-gender performance tradition, but also in its contribution to a variety of academic fields and disciplines. *Nandan* indeed is more transgressive in the modern sense today than it was before, and its bumpy and yet vibrant revival is evidence that the transgressive motivation is intensified by a progressive self-realization, self-liberation, identity reconstruction and increase in the knowledge of the world outside. In self-realization, cross-gender performance does not only have to overcome the difficulty in expressing the traits of the opposite sex on stage, but also has to overcome the difficulty of reconstructing a personal identity in reality, which takes the form of transgressing gender norms and subverting a coherent on-and-off-stage persona in the public eye.

Of research methodology, among others, I primarily use interpretive qualitative research methods, narrative analysis and case studies. Gender is not a quantitative matter or a measurable phenomenon, but is fluid, personal and individualized. As such, I am not simply interested in approaching a generic phenomenon in its fixed form (in my case, cross-gender performance in general), but am also interested in interpreting each phenomenal representation within a particular time period and a particular context. The importance of qualitative research in the social sciences lies in how the meaning given to it by each individual breaks free from its uniformed constraints and interacts with their world and the spectators' world. The following methodologies serve as a unity, working together and informing each other.

Data are collected through interviews, observations, and documents.[5] My study features intensive case study to approach each phenomenon or entity in depth. In a

[5] Observational data are sufficient through numerous first hand encounters, as I have been a member of the scene as an occasional trainee, a translator, and an event organizer. Thus I have been participating while observing as both an insider and observer. Because of this background and connections in theatre circles, I also have access to sources from theatre archives and government records in China.

sense, it is not only a case study, but is also an ethnographic case study combined with narrative analysis. I have employed dual focus-group discussions and focused in-depth individual interviews to collect data. Interviews with *jingju* (and *yueju*) performers, especially *nandan*, will be the major vehicle in this study for collecting data. Since a lot of information about the *nandan* scene has not been recorded in any published sources due to the sensitive nature of the subject matter, the interviews are particularly crucial to the research. According to Alessandro Portelli, oral history "tells us less about the events as such than about their meaning" and "not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, and what they now think they did" (1991, 50). As a researcher, I am not only interested in what my informants try to mean by what they say; I am more interested in how they make meaning out of what they say. Points of view on *nandan* can be individualized and subjective, and each interviewee may reveal unknown events or unknown aspects of known events. In addition to measurements of a speaker's subjectivity, the attitude and "psychological cost" revealed in the speaker's subjectivity are particularly pivotal to my research. In my project, for example, I will not only analyze and interpret gender portrayals and sexuality studies in *xiqu*, the history of cross-dressing tradition as an aesthetic ideal, the historical emergence of feminism in relation to the concurrent disappearance of the all-male *jingju* performance tradition and the evolution of the all-female *yueju*, and the shifts in attitude towards the tradition of gender and sexual ambiguity under communist ideological control, for which we can also find published sources to aid the work; I will also analyze and interpret the data on how *nandan* performers from different generations deal with public attitude, their own identities and personal life, and competition from their female counterparts. Such information has to be collected through interviews because of a lack of published sources.

Jingju is not only a theatrical genre, but also a systemic, independent cultural regime "behaviourally and cognitively shared by an identifiable group of people," which exists "with some permanency through time and across space" (D'Andrade, 230, 1992). Although contemporary transgender theory is useful in enhancing our awareness of gender issues in all their complexity, and our capacity to distinguish homosexuality from transsexuality or transvestism, analysis within the specific cultural context is also important. *Jingju* does not only seem foreign and exotic to people in non-East Asian

cultures, but it also has a specific cultural scene with which most outsiders in the larger culture may not be familiar. As such, the interpretation of the data will be conducted through an ethnographic lens.

My project features intensive case studies to approach each phenomenon or entity in depth. Some of my research subjects are worthy of a unit of analysis given the typicality of the case. Wen Ruhua (1947-), for example, who has been the witness, observer, and experiencer of many events in the evolution of the *nandan* art, will be the subject of a unit of analysis. In a sense, his is not only a case study, but also an ethnographic case study combined with narrative analysis. In addition, during my pre-interviews in a previous independent project undertaken gather background information, some of my informants entrusted to me their deepest secrets, which are not secrets any more, and their most private visions that they now want to make public. As such, there will be psychological and biographical analysis, attending to the subject's motivations and relation to society, and taking into account the influences of gender, sexuality, and environment.

As I am not only conducting case studies of individual experiences, but also examining the context, critical qualitative research will be the vehicle for me to critique and challenge Western-centric cultural and psychological assumptions about the cross-gendered Other. In fact, many Western scholars in the past have misperceived *nandan* art, along with many other similar aesthetic activities, assuming that there is an acquired gender dysphoria in reference to heterosexism and/or that reiteration "makes" gender. This kind of presupposition has been challenged in theatrical scholarship, albeit not yet so much in transgender-related interdisciplinary scholarship. In fact, even in the past when *jingju* was dominated by men, *jingju* performers were able to learn to "perform characters of their own and/or the opposite sex, depending upon their vocal and physical strengths" (Wichmann, 2). Disciples started the training in childhood and continued the cross-dressing practice into their adulthood. This is to say that prior to the actualization of gender transformation onstage there were pre-existing female qualities in the performer. Therefore, the practice of cross-dressing in *jingju* is essentially different from Western drag. It is also different from boy actors in all-male Elizabethan theatre.

In my case, observational data will be sufficient through numerous first hand encounters, as I have been a member of the scene as a part-time trainee, a translator, and an event organizer. In 1997, I was involved in a series of *jingju* promotional events with the Ministry of Culture's Art Bureau, primarily working as a translator working on the English translation of *jingju* scripts and promotional leaflets and brochures. Through the help of cultural officials, I seized the opportunity to meet with and interview several top-level *nandan* performing artists including Zhang Junqiu (1920-97) and Wang Yinqiu (1925－2001) before they passed away.

The second chapter examines traditional gender aesthetics in China and the formation of the cultural obsession with the *nandan* performance in *jingju* especially with the rise of Mei Lanfang[6] (1894-1961) as Republican China's national icon and the leading member of the *Four Great Dan.* Almost simultaneously, all-female *yueju* flourished in Shanghai, a Westernized metropolis and the first city in Republican China to embrace Western modernity and feminism. The coexistence of male-to-female *jingju* and female-to-male *yueju* in Republican Shanghai demonstrates a highly gendered aesthetic regime that applies to a specific *xiqu* genre, each having formed its own homoerotic cultural scene.

The third chapter will move on to the political intervention that began in the wake of the founding of the PRC with the formality and content of *xiqu* in terms of abolishing cross-gender performance and training and eliminating of plays with so-called "feudal" content or Western influenced plays from its repertoires. The series of campaigns reached a climax during the Cultural Revolution, during which period of time traditional plays were totally banned while only eight model plays were allowed, which were also made into films. The model plays embodied Maoist feminist thought and created a new gender model for women through constructing female masculinity by portraying the female protagonists as courageous, fearless, determined and rebellious, and employing bodily movements normally used by males on stage. In the meantime, none of these female characters was in a romantic heterosexual relationship, as romance was

[6] Mei Lanfang was one of the most famous *jingju* artists in modern history, exclusively known for his *huashan* roles, a type of *dan* role.

considered to be feudal and bourgeois and the pursuit of such was degraded and counter-revolutionary. Most of the *nandan* performers who had been active on stage or had been trained prior to the Cultural Revolution were kept off stage during this period of time. Thus, the art of *nandan* had transformed from a cultural obsession to a cultural taboo. Under the influence of Western homophobia, *nandan* also became a social taboo, as homosexuality was classified by the Chinese Psychiatric Association as a mental disease in the PRC until 2001.

The fourth and fifth chapters are about the revival of cross-gender performance in *jingju* and y*ueju* after the Cultural Revolution to date. Comparing and contrasting the revivals of *nandan* in *jingju* and all-female *yueju*, I will uncover the institutional obstacles and social biases that *nandan*'s revival has undergone based on the oral accounts of some of my interviewees. I will analyze why the revival of all-female *yueju* has almost always had a smooth journey compared to that of *nandan* in *jingju*, in consideration of the differential tolerance levels of male femininity and female masculinity in the gender perceptions of society. If the ban on female-to-male cross-gender performance in *yueju* was politically enforced, the revival, however, has occurred naturally without any top-down directives, a process that I call "natural selection in the aesthetic regime" of *yueju* in a sense that the revival is determined by internal factors including the genre features, repertoires and the gendered aesthetic expectations of the audience, once released from the institutional confinement. Aside from *jingju* and *yueju*, the revival of cross-gender performance is also manifest in pop art and in mainstream media, where singers and dancers reportedly incorporate *nandan* elements in their performances. This chapter will include interviews with Wen Ruhua, the renowned *nandan* performer who was once referred to by the media as "the last *nandan*," and with *jingju* performers of a different role type who appreciate and endorse *nandan*. It will include as well interviews with newly emerged *nandan* performers, trainees or students, and drag performers who are drawn to the *nandan* art and/or who have absorbed *nandan* performance techniques. The fifth chapter is particularly about the new generation of *nandan* performers.

The sixth chapter will explore transgressive desires behind the contemporary revival of cross-gender performance, especially the *nandan* art in *jingju*. If *nandan* was a theatrical norm during the Republican era when women had been largely kept off *jingju*'s

stage, how do we read the revival of it in our contemporary era when female performers have taken most of the *dan* roles? Is it simply trying to advocate resuming "historic authenticity" because the art form was created and developed by males? Or are *nandan* performers claiming their legitimate share of the stage? Since the newly emerged *nandan* performers and students are obviously voluntary practitioners, does their chosen artistic journey reflect a transgressive desire that should be examined through the lenses of sexuality, gender identity and sexual desires? Does the revival as a vibrant phenomenon mirror a trend of self-expression and self-realization in social realities?

The fact that the revival of *nandan* has received almost unanimous unofficial support from performing artists, patron-scholars and *jingju*-literate audience members in the currently female-dominated *dan* scene, according to the oral accounts of the interviewees, may suggest that there is more than a mere resumption of an old cultural and theatrical norm in the revival. This study seeks to find out the myth behind the holistic revival through uncovering individual secrets and their private visions and through disclosing a common area in gender aesthetics featuring either a latent or a manifest desire to transgress the norms.

Chapter 2.
Cultural Obsession

The Making of China's National Icon

To study the contemporary revival of the *nandan* art in *jingju*, it is necessary to review gender dynamics and ideology in the history of *jingju*, especially in the evolution of the *nandan* art and its culmination during the Republican era of China, signified by the emergence of the *Four Great Dan* and the rise of Mei Lanfang as a national icon.

Xiqu in its totality has not always been all male or all female in history. It has had a much richer blend of gender and sex relationships than many outsiders have thought. Cross-gender performance with men playing female roles and women playing male roles has existed since the Tang dynasty (618-907) according to recorded evidence (Wichmann-Walczak, 2012). In the Mongol-ruled Yuan dynasty (1271-1368), not only did actors and actresses, male impersonators and female impersonators co-exist on stage, but also actors of both sexes could switch between playing male roles and female roles, demonstrating highly acclaimed performance skills that continued into later dynasties as the theatrical norm (2012). While during the Ming dynasty (1368-1644), all-male and all-female troupes increasingly became the norm, in the following Qing dynasty, which strictly pursued neo-Confucian doctrines, female performance became increasingly objectionable to the government and was constantly banned and eventually totally forbidden.

As a relatively young *xiqu* genre, *jingju* was born in Beijing in 1790, when four *huiju* (Anhui Opera) troupes, namely, Three Celebrations, Four Delights, Gentle Spring and Spring Stage came to Beijing to celebrate the eightieth birthday of Emperor Qianlong (1711-99) at the Qing court (Goldstein, 2007, 20). They were later joined by famous Hubei troupes, gradually forming *jingju*'s melodies, *xipi* and *erhuang*, on the

basis of which *jingju* was formed, with many conventions of staging, performance elements, and aesthetic principles derived from *kunqu*[7] (Huang, 1989, 152-195). Becoming increasingly popular because of the simplicity as compared to *kunqu*, *jingju* achieved its prominence over *kunqu* and was consolidated during the reign of the Empress Dowager Cixi (1835-1908), whose obsession with *jingju* spurred the court's enthusiasm for it from 1861 to 1908, the year when she died.

Throughout the Ming and Qing dynasties there was a growing prudery that first divided male and female performers and finally did away with the female performers altogether, at least in *jingju*, and other forms controllable by imperial edict. Compared to Ming, the Qing court exerted a more strict gender segregated moral discipline. The Emperor Yongzheng (1678-1735), the father of Qianlong, replaced female performers at the court with eunuchs in 1723, followed by the customary ban of all female performers in commercial theatres as well (21). In 1772, Qianlong officially banned all female performers in Beijing. Female performers returned to the stage unofficially during the 1870s, and also began to impersonate male roles. By the late nineteenth century, female *jingju* troupes appeared in Shanghai's commercial theatres, gradually increasing the popularity of female *jingju*. As a result, after the founding of the Republic of China in 1911, the Republican government lifted the ban of female performance in 1912, while *nandan* performers continued to be popular during this period of time (Chou, 1997, 130-152).

Nandan's prominence over *kundan* during the Republican era was related to the male homoerotic sexual culture of antiquity in China which survived in the late imperial period when male sexual desire for women as well as for boys were not mutually exclusive. As such, it was considered normative, as shown by "countless examples from late imperial literature," that a male was attracted to the beauty of both women and boys (Vitiello, 2011, 16-17). Thus, the contextualization of the *nandan* both as a profession

[7] *Kunqu*, known as "the mother of *xiqu*" and listed as one of the Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO since 2001, is one of the oldest and most refined styles of *xiqu* genres performed today. Developed as a synthetic theatrical form of opera, dance, poetry recital, musical recital, mime, farce, acrobatics, ballad recital and medley during the early Ming dynasty (1368-1644), it has influenced many other *xiqu* genres including *jingju*.

and a cultural reality associated with homoeroticism in Republican China in the wake of the late imperial period contributed to its normalization.

Besides, the inception of *jingju* was male dominated. As *jingju* is performer-centered rather than playwright or director-centered throughout its history, and creation in *jingju* has been chiefly focused on form and style (1990, 146-147), the creators in the past were mostly performers. Under the aforementioned social circumstances, the inception of *jingju* was an exclusively male pursuit when women were banned from the stage, with outstanding contributions from such *nandan* names as Mei Qiaoling, Yu Ziyun, Mei Zhufen, Zhu Lianfen, Chen Delin, Lu Sanbao, Wang Yaoqing, Yan Lanqiu, Feng Zihe, Zhao Junyu, Xu Biyun, Zhu Qinxin, Shi Xiaofu, Zhao Tongshan, Yu Lianquan, Huang Guiqiu, and Ouyang Yuqian (Wei, 1997, 16-18). While creating *jingju*, they also created the *nandan* art in a manner that best suited their individual and male traits. As has been documented by Wichmann, the enhancement of performance techniques and skills for the subcategories of *dan* from the refined *qingyi*, vivacious *huadan*, martial *daomadan* and relatively new *huashan*, to melodic and vocal styles, was achieved by such *nandan* performers as Chen Delin,[8] Wang Yaoqing,[9] Mei Lanfang and Zhang Junqiu (147). In developing the form and style, they also developed different performance schools (*liupai*). Thus, the normalization of *nandan* performance in *jingju* was largely premised on a stylized male construction of femininity rather than realistic mimicry. Premised on the male-dominated inception of *jingju* in the Qing dynasty, the prominence of *nandan*, which was achieved during the Republican era, along with the formation of *nandan* as a "cultural obsession" of the Chinese (Li, 2006), were associated with the nationalization of *jingju*, accompanied by the rise of the *Four Great Dan* and the iconization of Mei Lanfang.

To study the iconization of Mei Lanfang and how *nandan* became the "cultural obsession" of the Chinese, I will first examine Mei's early innovations in *jingju,* inspired

[8] Chen Delin (1862-1930) was one of the earliest *nandan* performer of *jingju* in the *qingyi* and *daomadan* role types as well as a *jingju* educator, who students included Wang Yaoqing and Mei Lanfang. He particularly made great contribution to the vocal styles of *qingyi*.

[9] Wang Yaoqing (1881-1954) was an accomplished *nandan* performer and an outstanding *jingju* educator who taught all the members of the *Four Great Dan*—Mei Lanfang, Shang Xiaoyun, Cheng Yanqiu and Xun Huisheng and also founded the new *huashan* subcategory of *dan*.

by Western style spoken drama, and his initial interaction with the West, comparing and contrasting these two theatrical forms. Innovating with Western influenced modern plays was also a process of rediscovering the essence of *jingju* and accommodating *nandan* performance while reflecting contemporary lives. Notably, as a *nandan* performer, Mei Lanfang was not simply imitating a woman on stage; rather, his was a well planned re-creation, his popularity and success owing to his "copying nature" and reproducing of female traits, developing and innovating stylized performing techniques. The way he impersonated a woman was more or less similar to the way in which a novelist created a female character in a story, like Leo Tolstoy creating Anna Karenina. This is according to the contemporary leading *nandan* performer who has retired from the Beijing *Jingju* Theatre, Wen Ruhua (2012), and perhaps suggests that Mei was able to convey a sense of interiority through his performances and this does not separate suppositionality (*xuni*) from imitation. I do think that Wen's analogy makes some sense, since I believe that, having been a screenwriter myself, as a creator of a character, either as a writer or a performer, it requires a certain degree of self-internalization of the fictional character, and regardless of the suppositionality of *jingju*, the performance still aims at re-creating the artistic truth. I will also analyze why Mei Lanfang stopped creating modern plays and instead concentrated on new classical plays to further explain the "suppositional" nature of *jingju*'s male construction of femininity as contrasted to Western style spoken drama's realistic performance.[10]

Suppositionality is the essence of many Chinese art forms, including *xiqu*, which defines certain *xiqu* techniques "primarily in terms of their distance from realism" (165). Suppositionality determines that *jingju* does not perform genders in the form of a mimetic reproduction, but rather as a stylization and abstraction of reality. With *jingju* being a typical example, the creation and maturation of a new theatrical form is also the progression of innovating itself based on pre-existing patterns, forms, and external influence. The early process of innovating culminates in a fixation of conventions and genre limitations in a framework that may resist any content or concepts that do not

[10] When *jingju* was first developing in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, and *nandan* were the primary performers, they not wore clothing very close to contemporary dress of the time. This tradition changed later on during the process of male-dominated innovation.

seem to fit in. Hence, continued innovations are required to be strategically balanced with the preservation of the formalistic and artistic essence of the theatrical tradition, for no innovations should uproot what makes *jingju jingju*, as many *jingju* performers and experts have contended. Mei Lanfang's innovations in *jingju*, after all, were successful through experimentation and introspection into the limit of its intrinsic flexibility, and managed to sustain and increase the popularity and vitality of this art form throughout his lifetime. In the case of his *nandan* performance, his innovations did not disrupt this art form, nor did they damage his career; instead, they revitalized *jingju* and elevated *nandan* art to the highest level since the inception of *jingju*.

During a long pre-interview that I conducted for my research in Beijing in May 2012, Sun Peihong (1948-), adjunct professor at NACTA and former Communist Party branch secretary and *xiaosheng* performer with the China National *Jingju* Theatre's Second Troupe, addressed his deep concern for the ongoing recession of *jingju*. He described a typical scene of a *jingju* performance by a renowned *jingju* performer, where there seemed to be more performers on the stage than audience members in the theatre. Now teaching at NACTA, Sun has informed me that the Academy has recently begun to waive tuition for all students enrolled in *jingju* performance programs to encourage and increase applications. If *jingju* had to compete with TV and film for audience members in the 1980s (1990, 149), present-day *jingju* is facing even more intense competition from the Internet and pirated DVDs; needless to say there have been more Hollywood blockbusters and Broadway musicals imported to the PRC's entertainment market since the country became a member of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001 (AP, 2001, 1). Sun emphasizes that *jingju* needs to go through substantial reform and innovations to attract more audience members, especially from the younger generation, but nobody knows to what extent *jingju* can continue to be innovated after all attempts.

Individuals who have nearly non-existent knowledge about *jingju* may have learned of the theatrical form through the Academy Award nominated cinematic masterpiece, *Farewell, My Concubine* (Dir. Chen Kaige, 1993). They tend to form two theatrical assumptions about *jingju* based on the film, at least in the classes that I have taught: One is that *jingju* has always utilized an all-male cast; the other is that since it is

grounded on conventional stylizations, *jingju* would resist any attempted reform or innovations that may undermine its traditional authenticity. In fact, as I have discussed previously, *jingju* is not a monolithic form, but coalesced and synthesized many older theatrical forms in the late Qing dynasty. In other words, *jingju* was created on innovations. Since the inception of *jingju*, performers, regardless of their genders, have engaged in innovations in both form and content to enrich this theatrical form. The early innovations culminated in the golden age of the *Four Great Dan* from the late 1920s through 1930s, during which period of time *jingju* became Republican China's national drama (*guo ju*) through the National Drama Movement (2007, 175-208). During the golden age of *jingju*, through benign competitions, the *Four Great Dan* masters, Mei Lanfang, Cheng Yanqiu, Shang Xiaoyun and Xun Huisheng not only elevated the *dan* performance to a level that had surpassed the formerly prominent "models of heroic masculinity" of the role category of *laosheng*[11] (54), but also established their own distinctive styles—the schools of Mei, Shang, Cheng and Xun, based on each individual's vocal and physical features along with repertoire and characterization. "If we say Mei Lanfang's artistic style carries the dignity of a palace noblewoman, Cheng Yanqiu's style captures the simplicity of the common woman, and Shang Xiaoyun's artistry has the vehemence of a filial heroine, then Xun Huisheng's style more resembles the adorable liveliness of a humble family's precious daughter" (Ren, 1994, 81, translated by Goldstein, 2007, 246).

As *jingju* was performer-centred traditionally as opposed to the playwright/director-centred Western theatre, the lead innovators were also the performer-managers. In other words, the leading performers initiated the innovations. The *dan* performance in *jingju*, in which Mei specialized, has been predominantly male-centered, even though female *dan* performers have flourished and surpassed male *dan* performers in both numbers and prominence since the founding of PRC. Therefore, early innovations in *dan* performance and *dan*-centred plays were mostly initiated by male performers and exercised in a male-centered aesthetic context.

[11] *Laosheng* as a subcategory of the role category of *sheng* refers to dignified older male roles.

Jingju did not have any serious influence on Western theatre until Mei's 1935 tour of the former Soviet Union, where he received unanimous praise and admiration from renowned dramatists including Stanislavsky, Brecht and Eisenstein (Cosdon, 1995, 183). Prior to Mei's tours in America and the former Soviet Union, he had exercised his bold innovations from content to form, inspired by Western-style spoken drama. This intercultural influence was one of the first cultural exchanges between China and the West in *jingju*'s history. As the lead performer-manager, Mei Lanfang had greater creative authority over the troupe's productions than most Western directors did (147). Thus, Mei had full control of his own experiments, implementing new ideas and techniques to best suit himself as a *nandan* performer, which advanced the male construct of female characters in a self-initiated *jingju* language. To him, to embrace Western stage technology and styles was also the process of modernizing the male construct of female characters, during which time he himself had gradually become a national icon as a *jingju* master *and nandan* performer. This process may be compared to a game player who also makes the rules of the game, rules that service himself the best and which also become the norms for upcoming players who emerge subsequent to the player and rule maker himself.

Wichmann believes that *jingju* plays were created "primarily through a process of interpretations, synthesis, and transmutation," leading to traditional *jingju* languages and performance techniques expanded by adapting "numerous folk, regional and Western styles and techniques" (147). Mei Lanfang grew up and trained as a *dan* performer just at the time when Western style drama was introduced to China by Spring Willow Club (*chun liu she*), a Chinese students' art club in Tokyo, Japan around 1907 and named as "new theatre" (*xin ju*) or "modern theatre" (*wenming xi*) as opposed to *xiqu*. After the May 4th Movement in 1919, a series of anti-imperialist, anti-feudal, political and cultural campaigns under the influence of the October Revolution in the former Soviet Union and led by intellectuals nursing the rudiments of Communist ideology, more European plays were introduced to China, laying the foundation for modern Chinese theatre. In 1928, Western style theatre was formally named "spoken drama" as opposed to *xiqu*—Chinese indigenous sung drama.

During this era of Enlightenment in post-Qing dynasty China, early dramatists in China not only adapted European plays such as Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*, Oscar Wilde's *Lady Windermere's Fan*, and George Bernard Shaw's *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, but also staged a great number of newly written modern plays to reflect contemporary lives, address patriotic nostalgia, and criticize imperialists running roughshod over the Chinese people. Coupled with feudal ethics and rites, these new plays advocated liberty and freedom; among them were *Mourning for Southern China (Ai jiangnan), The Soul of the Republic (Minguo hun), The Spring and Autumn of the Mainland (Dalu chunqiu)* and *Bad Marriage (E yinyuan).* Spoken drama became increasingly popular in Republican China during this period, largely because most of the plays not only attracted audiences with its stage techniques, easy-to-understand vernacular speech and realistic acting methods, but also had a close proximity to social reality and addressed contemporary concerns about the nation. This social context established a starting point for Mei's overall innovations in *jingju* in order to create modern *jingju* plays to complement his mostly traditional repertoire. His initial contact with Western-style modern plays was made during his first Shanghai tour in 1913. While in Shanghai, the most Westernized metropolis in Asia at that time, he saw newly written modern plays that had incorporated *jingju* elements, including *Victims of Opium (Hei ji yuan hun),* a tragedy about a Chinese family that indulged in smoking opium, *A New La Dame aux camellias (Xin chahua),* a Chinese adaption of the French novel, and *Uncle Tom's Cabin (Hei nu yu tian lu)* (Hou, 2011, 214). Although they maintained singing, musical accompaniment and scenes in the *jingju* style, these newly written modern plays modernized make-up and costumes, inspiring Mei greatly. Aside from these modern plays that contained *jingju* elements, Mei was also impressed with the modern ideas and techniques of Western-style spoken drama. Overall, he was very much drawn to the crescent-shaped stage, make-up, costumes, lighting and content of new plays. He began to conceive innovations in *jingju* facial make-up during his stay in Shanghai (Mei, 1987, 187). Facial make-up for *dan* roles in traditional *jingju* in the past was nothing that could be considered attractive, especially the style of make-up for eyes, which made the eyes look rather lifeless. Mei did not only improve eye make-up by highlighting the eye lines, but did the same for make-up for the lips (Xu, 1994, 109). According to Mei Baojiu (1934-), the youngest son of Mei Lanfang and also a *nandan* performer, Mei Lanfang

even attempted to include piano and violin into *jingju*'s musical accompaniment to increase the musical momentum.[12]

This initial inspiration derived from Western-style theatre not only encouraged Mei to innovate by appropriating Western concepts and techniques, but it also enlightened him to pursue innovations within a purely Chinese cultural context and even within *jingju* itself. These innovations, including improvements in singing, classical costumes and ornaments, gesticulation, and dance-like movements in addition to the musical accompaniment. The *erhu,* also known to the West as the "Chinese violin" or "Chinese two-stringed fiddle," for example, was included in the musical accompaniment to complement the high pitched timbre of *jinghu*[13] with its virile tone. Later, the *erhu* was modified to be more harmonious with *jingju* and became what is called *jing'erhu* nowadays.

Indeed, in what he observed of an alien world, Mei saw great potential for improvement of his own artistry, with sources of inspiration not just limited to the alien world's theatre, but also expanded to other disciplines of Chinese arts.

From 1914 to 1918, he staged five newly written modern *jingju* plays to reflect social reality, which were aimed at enlightening and educating the masses, similar to Ibsen's problem plays. Before then the *jingju* repertoire was full of historical plays with "feudal" content depicting emperors, kings, generals and ministers (*di wang jiang xiang*) or talented scholarly men and beautiful women (*cai zi jia ren*), and extoling feudal ethical codes such as patriotic loyalty, filial piety, moral integrity and righteousness. Mei was a keen observer of Western influences in Shanghai and the resulting social upheaval in which Western bourgeois-democratic ideology was pounding China's millennia old feudal absolutism, While Chinese intellectuals embraced Western democracy, science and technology, Mei realized that the revitalization of *jingju* needed a vigilant response to social reality (Shen, 2008). The new modern plays he created during these years

[12] See the interview with Xinhua News Agency's CNC on April 15, 2011. Reporting by Zhou Ning, Chen Xin and Zhang Shuang.

[13] *Jinghu* is a Chinese bowed string instrument in the *huqin* family, used primarily in *jingju*. It is the smallest and highest pitched instrument in the *huqin* family.

included *The Waves of the Karmic Ocean (Nie hai bo lan), The Tide of the Officialdom (Huan hai chao), A Strand of Hemp (Yi lü ma)* and *Deng Xiagu.* Based on true stories, *Waves of the Karmic Ocean* and *Deng Xiagu* utilized a critical eye to inquire into the oppression of Chinese women under the feudal patriarchy, and appealed for emancipation for women. *Waves of the Karmic Ocean* exposed the physical and emotional abuse of women in prostitution, a legalized industry rampant in the Republican era, while *Deng Xiagu* criticized arranged marriage and called for freedom of marriage; in it a long, heartfelt monologue condemning money-driven forced marriage was warmly applauded. Like *Deng Xiagu*, *A Strand of Hemp,* a tragedy about a woman who committed suicide due to a devastating marriage arranged by her family, also criticized the current marriage system. The play had overwhelming social repercussions. According to one account, an arranged marriage engagement was cancelled after the play was staged.

Mei Lanfang was also the first *jingju* master who became alert to the need to improve the visuality of *jingju* in stage and costume design. His 1919 *jingju* tour to Japan—the only Asian country that had embraced Western modernization and had completed industrialization by then ended with a public speech that mentioned the insufficiencies of *jingju* as compared with Western-style drama:

> *Our country's xiqu received more attention to its aural aspect than the visual one. So, for us, we have been stimulated by all areas during the Japan tour this time. First of all I think jingju in the past has not been in contact with the times; furthermore, we have not enough consideration on scenery and costumes. We should reform from these areas, otherwise jingju will not improve…* (Toshiko, 1927, translated into Chinese by Naoko, 1982, 93).

Mei Lanfang started his scenic innovations beginning with *The Goddess of the River Luo (Luo shen)* in 1923, a play with great visual potential, based on a fairy tale depicting the romance between the goddess of the River Luo and Cao Zhi, who was a historical figure. In the last scene, Mei had realistic landscape scenery built on the stage to highlight the very locale of the River Luo. A few years later, he further improved the scenic design upon the advice of Rabindranath Tagore, the Indian poet, who visited China and saw the play in May 1929. Tagore believed that a mythical play should reflect

a poet's imagination by all means, and that the scenic design he saw was "plain" (Mei, 2006, 57). Mei accepted his advice and redesigned the scene. Despite the aesthetical tradition where *jingju* artists and their scholar-patrons valued visual simplicity and would concentrate on virtual representations—a philosophy with a hint of *Zen (Chan),* these new attempts at scenic design greatly increased the drawing power and popularity of the play. Mei's scenic innovations during this time period could also be seen in *Shih Tzu (Xi shi)* and *The Unofficial Life History of Yang Taizhen (Taizhen wai zhuan).* His experimentation with realistic stage scenery was largely an outcome of the "stimulation" he had encountered in Japan, where he was exposed to more Western-style spoken drama. While experimenting with Western-style set dressing, however, he also realized that the essence of *jingju* aesthetics conflicted with the use of overly decorative devices. Therefore, he employed Western style scenery only in certain plays or certain scenes in a play, while sustaining traditional set dressing[14] in most of his plays. He remarked on one occasion after the founding of the PRC:

> *For a time I was enthusiastic about experimenting with the use of scenery. I recall my first time performing in Japan in 1919, there were people critiquing in Japanese newspapers the absence of scenery and props in Chinese theatre, saying that it was primitive. But there were also other authorities, such as Aoki Masaru, Naito Torajiro, Kanda Choan,*[15] *who criticized the former for "having not the slightest qualification for art appreciation." … I was not influenced by these two attitudes, so I tried the use of scenery in certain scenes… but not the entire play. The Goddess of the Luo River cannot use scenery except for the last scene…* (Mei, 2001, 703).

Also inspired by Western-style spoken drama, Mei Lanfang began innovating with lighting starting in 1915, when he utilized following spotlights in *Chang'e's Flight to the Moon* (*Chang'e ben yue*)—the first on the *jingju* stage. In *The Heavenly Maids Scatter Blossoms (Tiannü san hua),* electric lights of imparted colours highlighted the mystic atmosphere. In *Farewell, My Concubine (Bawang bi ji),* light blue following spotlight highlighted the female character, Lady Yu. The reason why Mei used dramatic

[14] Traditional set dressing normally consists of a table and two chairs on each side, and a screen in centre stage to indicate an interior locale.

[15] Aoki Masaru (1887-1964) was a Japanese scholar specializing in contemporary Chinese literature. Naito Torajiro (1866-1934) and Kanda Choan (1897-1984) were Japanese historians and Sinologists.

lighting as well as realistic scenery selectively was because of his art-for-art's-sake principle as previously mentioned.

Mei Lanfang's last modern play was *The Virgin Slays the Snake (Tongü zhan she),* staged in 1918. The story was about a teenage girl who kills a huge snake that devours virgins, bringing to an end the ritual of sacrificing them in order to satisfy the snake's insatiable appetite for blood and flesh. In adapting the ancient fourth-century tale to the late Qing dynasty, *Li Ji Slays the Snake,* Mei was hoping to educate his fellow countrymen and banish feudal superstitions by creating more sense of the contemporary era, while the late Qing dynasty was not so far away from his time. The play was an overall effort at reforming *jingju*, with innovations in make-up, costumes, singing, movement and speech, all close to reality and inspired by spoken drama (1987, 557-568).

Mei's modern *jingju* experimentation received good reviews from both domestic audiences and world-renowned cinematic and theatrical artists. While Mei was performing in Moscow, Sergei Eisenstein [16] was not only impressed with Mei's performance but also asked to film a combat scene from the play, *Rainbow Pass (Hong ni guan),* at Mosfilm. During a meeting afterwards, Eisenstein shared with Mei his impression about Mei's newly created modern *jingju* plays, as well as those of Charlie Chaplin:

> *"[Mei Lanfang] fills traditional forms with new content and touches upon social problems in his newly devised plays. Mr. Charlie Chaplin has pointed this out quite clearly: from amid the great quantity of scripts that Mr. Mei wrote, one play dealt with the problem of women's low position in society, and another struggled against backward religious superstitions and prejudices. He is skilled at manipulating traditional forms and historical narratives to address modern problems, infusing into classical*

[16] Sergei Eisenstein (1898-1948) was a Russian filmmaker and the founder of the theory of montage, known for his *Battleship Potemkin*.

Chinese opera a special vitality" (2010, 426-434, translated by Anne Rebull).[17]

Mei himself was not quite satisfied with his modern experimentation, however. Since *The Virgin Slays the Snake,* Mei gave up creating modern *jingju* plays and turned his attention to creating new classical plays. There were two reasons for this turning point in his progression of innovations. One was that he felt, as an aging performer, it was not appropriate for him to impersonate teenage girls and young women in modern plays. The other reason, more importantly, was that in trying to reflect contemporary lives artistic measures were still limited due to the conflict between form and content in *jingju* (1987, 57). Indeed, as a particular theatre genre marked by its conventional stylizations and suppositional concept, *jingju* perhaps could neither borrow wholesale everything from Western-style spoken drama, nor reflect every aspect of contemporary life and legitimate itself by applying Western theatrical theory to it. But why should *jingju* be placed in a comparison with Western theatre, especially in respect of its realism? Mei discarded his early attempts to create modern plays primarily because of his "dislocation of interpretation" of his own performing aesthetics, in that he read his own performing aesthetics in terms of European standards rather than the internal characteristics of *xiqu* itself (Zou, 2008). While Mei saw the limitations of *jingju* as compared to Western-style spoken drama, Western and Russian artists and theatrical critics were enlisting *jingju*'s strengths to validate their theatrical assumption and concepts. This East-West intercultural influence exemplifies what I have tried to convey in this chapter by raising the need to strategically strike a balance between innovation and preservation. In fact, there were Western and Russian artists who could interpret *jingju* aesthetics from a complementary rather than a purely exclusive Eurocentric perspective. Mei himself noted Eisenstein's appreciation of *jingju*'s strengths, which Russian theatre and cinema could benefit from:

> *Although in Chinese opera all emotions have a fixed, stylized expression, the result is not dull in the slightest. All of the achievements of realism in*

[17] This text has been excerpted and translated by Anne Rebull from *Mei Lanfang, Wo de dianying shenghuo [My film career]* (Beijing: Zhongguo dianying chubanshe, 1962). Reprinted in *Mei Lanfang quanji [Complete works of Mei Lanfang]*, vol. 4 (Shijiazhuang: Hebei jiaoyu chubanshe, 2001).

> *Russian theater are also more or less present in Chinese theater. I can see that Chinese theater really has many strengths; how can it be that they have not been taken up in Chinese film? Russian cinema will adopt Chinese opera as a means to enrich the performance* (2010).

The "strengths" that Eisenstein refers to from a Russian and Western perspective are documented as a collection of many responses by such names as Stark Young, Bertolt Brecht, Meyerhold, Eisenstein, Tretyakov and Nemirovich-Danchenko (Tian, 2010). Stark Young analyzes *jingju* aesthetics in terms of a "classically minded" approach that the artist utilizes to "find itself" (124). Brecht, however, finds what in "Chinese acting" can fully exemplify his "alienation effect" (131-142). Nemirovich-Danchenko, Meyerhold, Eisenstein, and others all appreciated *jingju* conventions in consideration of potential appropriation of formalistic aesthetic approaches into the naturalistic Soviet theatre (271-334).

In his eager and ongoing innovative experiments, however, Mei had to determine what to adopt and what to discard with a critical eye. This was a process of self-negotiation for the innovations without losing the essence of *jingju*. Critical debates have arisen since Mei's time up to the present day about what constitutes the essence of *jingju*. One predominant attitude that I have observed is that despite the multi-facetedness of *jingju*, the aural dimensions—language, music, voice and orchestra—are its major features (1991). Mei's innovations never exceeded the four dimensions. In sum, in the process of innovating he not only created new modern plays with Western theatrical techniques and concepts but also created new classical costume plays or improved singing, musical accompaniment, movement and speech; or revised and removed any unhealthy feudal content from the scripts. Mei's innovations in *jingju*, after all, were successful through experimentation and introspection into the limit of its intrinsic flexibility, and he managed to sustain the popularity and vitality of this art form throughout his lifetime. His contributions to *jingju*, along with his masterly performances, his personality and charisma were instrumental in his becoming the cultural icon of Republican China.

According to Goldstein, what eventually consolidated Mei's national icon status was his successful six-month American tour in 1930 (379 and 408, 1999). Theatres were full. Media and dramatic critics gave unanimous high acclaim. Pomona College and the

University of Southern California granted Mei two honorary doctorates. Paramount Pictures approached him for a movie deal. A private airplane was offered to Mei so that he could dine with a mayor. Stars were shown dining with Mei (377 and 410).

What made his American tour successful? Did Mei have any initial concerns about *jingju* and particularly about himself being a *nandan* performer prior to his American tour? How would American audience members and theatre critics see a man performing female roles? Would they see the Chinese "cultural obsession" as a form of perversion? It is noteworthy that audience members in America were not simply diasporic Chinese. In New York, for example, there were six audiences—"the Chinese of New York, American friends of China, actors who were not themselves playing that evening, dramatic critics who were coming again and again, the smart; and the Broadway itself" (Carter, 1930, 828).

The warm reception in America clearly indicates that American critics and audience members acclaimed Mei more as a performing artist than as a mere female impersonator. American audiences did not relate his cross-gender performance to perversion or gender dysphoria, as they did not see any "impropriety;" nor did media question Mei's sexuality (184). He was seen as an artist with a great ability to capture traditional femininity without doing so in drag. Theatre critics and mega stars such as Chaplin highly appreciated him as an amazing all-round performing artist and contrasted all-male *jingju* with Elizabethan theatre. Obviously, the attitudes and reception Mei received in America were essentially not very different from what he received in China. That said, it has to be acknowledged that in the case of Mei's stylized cross-gender portrayal of female characters, there were moments that "transcended the trammels of the foreign medium and became universal" (Warren, 1930, 24). What made Mei significant to American critics and audiences was the "universality" of the "technique of gesture" that he employed, which was "utterly right" (Lockridge n.d.). The artistic perfection of Mei's use of the head, the neck, shoulders, hands and waist, and his stage walk, his expressions in the eyes and his use of the sleeves, were "a joy to behold" and drew crowds to the Forty Ninth Street Theatre in New York, suggesting that aesthetically speaking Broadway had "come of age" (828-829). Audience members remembered him, not because he was "quaint and foreign," but because "there was something universal in

his art" (829). It has to be accentuated that in both Chinese and the Western drama "the woman is often the important character," making the male performer's impersonation of the other sex all the more important to the gaze of an audience member as well as a critic. Thus the female impersonator has been "the absorbing figure" (829). The immense success of Mei's six-month American tour, however, reaffirms that, despite cultural differences, there is a universal cognitive tendency in the theatre as a laboratory where audience members maintain "dual consciousness" (Shapiro, 1994, 2) and join the performers in creating a new reality while disrupting and dismantling the lived reality.[18] Apparently, audience members in both Mei's native country and in this foreign land were conscious of performed gender as prosthetic and the imagined body beneath. It was not only that Mei was engaging with passive foreign audiences. Rather, the audiences also engaged with him with much effectiveness in the give-and-take of cross-cultural theatrical communication. As has been argued by Bruce McConachie, spectators are much more proactive in the theatre, for culture and cognition need not be antithetical, and reason and emotion are not necessarily separable in the processes of spectating, which is an intellectual activity (2008). Though it is generally believed that spectators respond differently to performances based on their cultural positions, McConachie asserts the universality of the mental concept of "verticality" in the heads of people in all cultures even though "its particular expression varies across cultures" (4). Mei's success in America may serve as additional empirical evidence in cognitive sciences about the processes involved in spectating in the cross-cultural theatrical setting. Therefore, good art belongs to the world regardless of cultural barriers.

Nonetheless, the masterful publicity or what today we would call audience education campaign carried out by Mei's advisor Qi Rushan and his team in America prior and during his American tour has to be acknowledged. A memoire by Cao Lin, the president of CISD (China Institute of Stage Design) (*Zhonguo wutai meishu xuehui*), the Chinese centre of the International Organisation of Scenographers, Theatre Architects, and Technicians, documents the numerous areas where Qi Rushan and his team plotted an outreach campaign prior to and during Mei's American tour. This campaign included

[18] It is also noteworthy that Mei's select repertoires were tailored to suit American audiences with the language and cultural barrier taken into account (Goldstein, 1999, 412-413).

outreach work aimed at American intellectuals and diplomats to discuss details of the planned tour, creating promotional texts with illustrations, converting the Chinese musical score into Western staff notation with an English translation of the introduction, selection and condensing plays with a focus on dancing out of Mei's repertoire in consideration of reduction of the language barrier, and arranging Mei's guest lectures at American universities (2014). Wichmann-Walczak has noted these preparatory measures undertaken weeks before Mei's arrival in Hawaii from California, such as the lengthy texts published o a daily basis in the *Honolulu Star Bulletin*. This was one of the city's two major newspapers at the time, which introduced Mei, his company, and/or Chinese theatre, along with paid advertisements for the performances (2014). The audience education campaign may have prepared American audience members for a theatre art that was totally foreign to them, but not to the extent that many have imagined nowadays. As my subjects without any prior knowledge of *jingju* claim in an experiment that I conducted in Ontario, Canada, in October 2014, the effects of preparatory measures similar to those employed by Mei's team prior to showing them *jingju* are very limited, albeit helpful, since it takes too much time for the audience to "digest" the instruction. This is to say that the intense publicity of Mei's team is not sufficient reason to repudiate the universal cognitive tendency as previously discussed.

Mei Lanfang's American tour, which won international recognition for him, contributed to his becoming an icon in Republican China. Three "interpretive layers" converged in his productions: the offstage modern male persona, the onstage performer of "traditional femininity," and the package of a Chinese aesthetic essence (416). It is noteworthy that Mei achieved his status as a cross-gender *jingju* performer, or, say, a *nandan* performer who "crossed" the gender barrier, re-created femininity, and portrayed female characters in *jingju* out of his years of rigid training while appearing as a modern gentleman in his offstage life. This gendered contrast is naturally part of the evaluation of the display of his overall artistry.

The Rise of an All-Female Utopia

There has not been much scholarship on female-to-male cross-gender performance. Here, I need to bring to critical attention female-to-male cross-gender performance and female bodies in all-female *yueju*. Firstly, it should be noted that the gender and sexual dynamics in *xiqu* are not limited to male-to-female cross-gender performance. Female-to-male cross-gender performance, not only in *yueju* but also in *jingju*, should not be excluded from research of this nature. Secondly, the discrepancy in social attitudes towards male-to-female and female-to-male cross-gender performance needs to be taken into account, as they reflect an aesthetic double standard for male femininity and female masculinity along with different tolerance levels of off-stage homoeroticism associated with the practices.

Although *yueju* is a local *xiqu* genre primarily popular in Zhejiang province, Shanghai, Jiangsu province and Fujian province, it is a local *xiqu* genre with a national influence, and enjoys an overwhelming popularity among overseas Chinese. Also known as Shaoxing Opera, *yueju* originated in present-day Shengzhou, a city upgraded from the former Sheng county in Zhejiang Province at the beginning of the 20th century. One of the youngest *xiqu* genres whose heavy Zhejiang dialect makes it hard to understand for native Mandarin speakers, *yueju* flourished in Shanghai in the 1930s and 1940s, and rapidly became the second largest *xiqu* genre in China after *jingju*. As a Chinese *xiqu* genre, *yueju*'s uniqueness is marked by its strength in love drama and its long tradition of all-female casting, though we must not forget that it was all-male from its inception, but only lasted for a very short period. To examine the gender dynamics of *yueju*, it is necessary to examine it through the lens of Western-influenced feminism in Republican Shanghai that resisted *yueju*'s patriarchal power structure. It is also important to examine the nature of the genre to find out why this form of *xiqu* could be developed into a nearly all-female practice distinct from its original all-male and subsequent male-female mixed state.

Unlike *jingju*, all-female *yueju* places a woman's body at the centre of representation, disrupts the previously male-dominated state and power structure, and denaturalizes gender. Interestingly, the first all-female *yueju* troupe appeared in Shanghai only in 1923 (Ma, 2012, 214), and gradually all-female *yueju* gained popularity

and dominance as female performers replaced their male counterparts (Tian, 2008, 222). In Shanghai and the surrounding southern provinces such as Jiangsu, Zhejiang and Fujian, *yueju*'s female-to-male cross-gender performances have also been a cultural norm since then, attracting a wide range of working class audience members in the following decades. This was possible largely because *yueju* is "more suitable for females to perform and more attractive to a female audience because of its focus on love" (quoted in Bai, 2012).

If male-dominated *jingju* suggests "the resistance of Chinese female players as agents in negotiating patriarchal containment and male ideological authority in performance" (3), as seen in the cases of the *Four Great Dan* establishing and perpetuating their prominence in the history of *jingju* and particularly the national iconization of Mei Lanfang, then *yueju* represented working class women's resistance to patriarchal oppression and their struggle at the bottom of the social hierarchy to "establish themselves" in metropolitan Shanghai. This was a struggle that was part of and contributed to the social change in twentieth century Shanghai (Jiang, 2008). The process of *yueju* evolving from all-male to male-and-female, and then to all-female was one of peasant women from villages of the adjacent provinces constructing a female regime in the then most Westernized city in Republican China, seeking freedom to express themselves against feudal ethical constraints through female agency, and challenging male authority in performance, boosted by their growing awareness of feminist rights. While *nandan* in *jingju* was a cultural obsession that had culminated out of an old customary continuation, all-female *yueju* was given a more historically and politically progressive and radical meaning as it subverted male dominance by edging out male performers within such a short period of time, not only having given the female roles to female performers, but the male roles, too.

As aforementioned, *yueju* as a *xiqu* genre has its particular strengths (and/or genre limitation in a different perspective) in love drama, usually featuring an elegant, virtuous woman and a sentimental, fair-complexioned young man. It draws a largely female audience, and renders it theatrically realistic for female performers to impersonate the male protagonists without taking the risks of causing any unwanted alienation effect.

Butterfly Lovers, for example, is one of the most representative of all *yueju* plays. The story is a typical "hero doesn't know she is a woman" romance as called in the West.[19] In the ancient times in China when women were not encouraged to go to school, Yingtai, the daughter of the Zhu family, disguises herself as a man in order to get into a school. While there, she falls in love with her schoolmate, Shanbo. The two become "sworn brothers" or, say, lovers more on the Platonic side, as friends with a romantic flavour. After three years, Yingtai is called home. Shanbo escorts her there for eighteen miles, and on the way, Yingtai constantly hints to Shanbo about her real gender using analogies, but Shanbo does not get her message. She has no choice but to lie to him that she has a sister at home that resembles her in looks and personality, suggesting that he should propose marriage to her. Eventually, realizing that Yingtai is actually a woman, Shanbo proposes marriage to the Zhu family, but it has been arranged by her parents that Yingtai marry a rich man. Sad and angered, Shanbo falls ill and dies. Yingtai thereafter dies of a broken heart and is buried next to Shanbo's tomb. People have added a romanticized "happy ending" to the truth-based legend: Shanbo and Yingtai both have transformed into butterflies flying side by side and will never part.

Although there are many *xiqu* genres that have adapted the legend of *Butterfly Lovers*, including *jingju*, *chuanju* (Sichuan Opera) and *huangmeixi* (Huangmei Opera), the *yueju* version has become the best-known and most influential one. Yingtai's struggle for freedom of education, love and marriage and her rebellion against feudal ethics echo the rural immigrant women's desires for emancipation from patriarchal containment and gender inequality. *Butterfly Lovers* foregrounds how they utilized a historic and cultural legacy to reflect upon and condemn social reality associated with the long patriarchal tradition. While doing so, they were also creating a new urban history and shaping modern cosmopolitanism.

The process of *yueju* becoming all-female not only detailed women's struggle to claim independence through artistic representations, but also built an all-female utopia, where women sought coalition and developed a homoerotic scene through patronage.

[19] The story is based on a romance legend that has been selected by NESCO as one masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity since 2006.

Jiang Jin writes about the patronage tradition in *yueju* in Republican Shanghai, which was given a homoerotic meaning when certain female patrons looked for homosexual relationships (12-13). Same-sex casting and patronage tradition no doubt could create a space of convenience free from social taboo and cultural norms for those who sought "legitimate" homosexual relationships in the name of "sworn brothers" or "sworn sisters." The need for "legitimate" homosexual relationships in a compatible setting and an existing same-sex casting theatrical regime, therefore, boosted one another and justifed each other's reasonable existence. As Jiang has noted, "While upper-class men customarily attended Beijing opera and patronized famous Beijing opera actors, the women socialized with Yue opera actors and actresses. Thus, for example, while Huang Jinrong, the king of Shanghai's Green Gang was a great patron of Beijing opera, his daughter-in-law was the adoptive mother of Xiao Dangui, the famous Yue opera star" (2011, 9). Same-sex relationships between women have been largely silent throughout Chinese patriarchal history as "an area seemingly of little consequence to patriarchal authority" (11). As a consequence, women's going to the theatre, socializing with other women, and patronizing female performers did not receive as much concern and opposition from their husbands and fathers as they would have if the objects of their socialization within the theatrical scene were men. Also, there had always been a blurred line between female romantic friendship and homosexual relations between women in the past, and it was of little interest to the tabloids to figure out if the relationship was one way or another, as compared to sexual relationships between male and female stars. Thus, all-female *yueju* "appeared to be pure and clean, with a hint of virtue and chastity" (11).

Patronage from women made great contributions to an all-female *yueju* as they provided financial and emotional support even though those female patrons might have had different purposes. As Jiang has concluded, "Some want to be respectable senior adoptive mothers, others want to find concubines for their husbands, still others are interested in homosexual relations with the actresses" (11-12). Regardless of the purpose, the phenomenon of all-female *yueju* in Republican Shanghai has generated a female patronage culture that "highlighted women's entrance into society and their influence in fashioning the city's public culture" (20). While the *nandan* culture in *jingju* is believed to be a feudal legacy, the same-sex culture in *yueju* initiated by the grassroots

female performers and further developed by their sisterly supporters in metropolitan Shanghai signified women's embrace of modernity and female agency.

National Identity and the Formation of the Gender Aesthetics

If theatre is the queerest art (Bulman, 11, 2010), *xiqu*, especially *jingju* and *yueju*, two of the most influential *xiqu* genres, may be among the queerest theatrical art forms, given their aesthetic tradition in gender blend, which is also perceived as gender transgression in a modern Western sense. The evolution of these two *xiqu* genres is evidence that cross-gender performance was not only a practical necessity, but also a choice of the genre, the performers, and audience members who drove the consumerist economy. Compared to Western gender aesthetics, which embraces masculine supremacy, the gendered aesthetic tradition in China favours gentility and delicacy (Yi, 1996, 95). While the Western binary ideological mode is the product of patriarchy, feminized aesthetic customs stem from the maternal worship in the Chinese tradition, which is deeply rooted in the "original complex" in the cultural consciousness of the Chinese nation (96). In China's equally patriarchal traditional society, though marginalized in politics and ethics and positioned at the bottom of the social and familial hierarchy, the mother figure was placed in a spiritually authoritative position in the familial conception as the outcome of an incomplete societal transition from matriarchy to patriarchy in ancient China. In addition, traditional philosophy and beliefs of *yin* and *yang* interaction still "inform the most basic medical conceptions of the human body" (Mann, 2011), even though contemporary China has experienced a change in attitude towards gender and sexuality. The paradoxical values of *yin* and *yang* still influence the cultural dimension, having shaped the Chinese cultural identity as "they give rise to, exist within, reinforce, and complement each other to shape the holistic, dynamic, and dialectical nature of culture" (Fang, 2011, 25). The unity model of *yin* and *yang* that underlies Chinese gender culture is not equal to the Western binary gender pattern; rather, *yin* and *yang* not only co-exist, but also exist within one another and oftentimes transform into one another in a fluid movement. This has made androgyny, or gender ambiguity, more normative in traditional Chinese culture, for which it has further served as an unconscious basis for the construction of national identity. I should point out that it

is also paralleled in other Asian cultures without the direct *yin yang* philosophical underpinnings, i.e., the *alus-kasar*[20] continuum of characters in Indonesia and Malaysia, with *alus* male being the most spiritually powerful, such as Rama and Arjuna, but also the most refined and "effeminate," and fully *kasar* characters being fully masculine beings, like ogres.

Further, I want to bring to critical attention how traditional East Asian cultures have been deeply influenced by Confucian doctrines that favour intellectual work over physical labour. Thus hyper-masculinity associated with physicality is not seen as desirable, and scholarly men who normally have fair complexion, delicate facial features and gentle mannerism are the aesthetic ideal. This is confirmed in many of the nation's classics such as *Dream of the Red Chamber*,[21] whose male protagonist, Jia Baoyu, is depicted positively, using analogies with objects that are normally perceived as feminine. In the third chapter, Baoyu's face, for example, is compared to "the moon of the Mid-Autumn," his skin tone is like "the flower on a spring morning," and "his eyes are shining like lake ripples during an autumn wind…"[22] While Jia Baoyu is described as being girlish by both critics and other characters in the book, the novel does not have a scathing or ironic tone, but in fact seeks to "sanctify the feminine" (Edwards, 1988-89, 37). In addition, male femininity is pervasive throughout the novel. Baoyu's friendship with two other male characters, Qin Zhong and Liu Xianglian, whom Baoyu venerates according to the third person account of the author, is based on a "mutual femininity" (Chan, 1980, 169).

Xiqu, along with the vernacular literature of the Ming and Qing dynasties, with which it has strong ties and shares historic legends, values and aesthetic traditions, largely reflects the national identity of the Chinese people, particularly in the aspect of

[20] *Alus* (refine) characteristics in Javanese art in Indonesia are highly admired.

[21] *Dream of the Red Chamber*, a Qing dynasty masterpiece of Chinese literature written by Cao Xueqin during the 18th century, is one of China's Four Great Classical Novels. It is believed to be a semi-autobiographical novel remarkable not only for its huge mélange of characters, but also for its meticulous observation and vivid depiction of the everyday life typical of Chinese aristocracy during the18th-century Qing dynasty.

[22] Translated from Chapter 3 of *Dream of the Red Chamber,* reprinted by People's Literature Press in 2008.

gender aesthetics and the collective perception of sexuality. In the *jingju* scene, qualities in a male performer that are perceived as feminine have always been regarded as an essential condition for onstage representation (Sun and Wen, 2012). This tradition in *jingju* has been compatible with the gender aesthetics in the Chinese history. It is, therefore, not hard to understand that *nandan* could not only become a cultural norm, but also a "cultural obsession" in Republican China, even though women were *not* kept off the *jingju* stage anymore during that period of time, and *nandan* apprentices were trained alongside a new generation of female ones in the *dan* roles (Li, 2010, 98). It has to be mentioned that even though *nandan* enjoyed a large number of patron-scholars, not every literatus appreciated it. Zheng Zhenduo, an influential historian and critic commented on it in 1929, disparaging *nandan* as "disgusting" and "a cruel, inhuman, artificial and most despicable trick" (76). The "trick," in the eye of many others, however, was how the *nandan* gained their legitimacy and where the value was in the *nandan* art—the *Four Great Dan* demonstrated their "ability to differentiate their onstage roles as icons of femininity from their offstage lives as modern male citizens" (238). In other words, while some literati were disgusted by the proximity between the biological sex and the gender performed, many others acclaimed the disjunction between representation and reality.

It is also not to hard to understand why a hero played by a woman is totally accepted and even welcomed by audience. In sum, *yueju* is primarily by women, for women and of women in love with a man with qualities that are normally perceived as feminine especially in the present-day society. On the one hand, the increasing popularity of *yueju* and its rise to the status of a national rather than local *xiqu* genre, gaining prestige only after *jingju*, demonstrates its aesthetic compatibility with the national identity and the collective unconscious of the Chinese, in which a blurry line is drawn between the binary masculine and feminine gender identities within the context of an aesthetic appreciation that resists calculation. On the other hand, the feminist movements in Republican Shanghai, which influenced all-female *yueju* also helped shape the modern Chinese female identity in the urban culture.

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Chapter 3.
Mao's "Gender Trouble"

The Downfall of the Cross-Gender Performance Tradition

The CCP employed a more rigorous political intervention in the country's art and literature after the founding of the PRC, which culminated during the Cultural Revolution (1966-76). Since my study is about the revival of cross-gender performance, to move on to the revival, I will first uncover the downfall of cross-gender performance during the political campaigns, particularly in *jingju* and *yueju*, the two most influential *xiqu* genres. In doing so, I am hoping to bring to critical attention that not only male-to-female cross-gender performance, which was considered to be "feudal legacy" as aforementioned, but also female-to-male cross-gender performance in *yueju*, which was once considered "progressive" and anti-feudal, were largely terminated. Why was cross-gender performance not encouraged any more? Why did the PRC stop training *nandan* students officially? And when and how did cross-gender performance become a social taboo in the PRC? Was the ban influenced by Western homophobia or transphobia?

Siyuan Liu states in his *Theatre Reform as Censorship: Censoring Traditional Theatre in China in the Early 1950s* that Mao already planned to revolutionize traditional theatre as of 1948, prior to the founding of the PRC (2009, 387-406). Then "[s]hortly after the formation of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the Chinese government pushed through a reform campaign aimed at the repertoire, artists, and organization of traditional Chinese theatre collectively known as *xiqu* (sung drama). This reform caused an extensive shortage of performable plays by the mid-1950s…" (387). The theatrical revolutionary campaign banned a large number of plays with "harmful" feudal content that advocated "feudal oppression and slave mentality…racial disloyalty…superstition

and ignorance…as well as those plays advocating licentious hedonism and obscenity…" (389).

A typical example that may show a "roller coast"-like journey would be *Butterfly Lovers*, a *yueju* play starring Yuan Xuefen (1922-2011) as the heroine Zhu Yingtai and the female-to-male performer Fan Ruijuan (1924-) as the hero Liang Shanbo. It became a national classic during the First National *Xiqu* Joint-Performance Assembly in the PRC in 1952. Not only did it receive a series of awards due to the artistry, it was also highly praised by three top ranking CCP leaders: Chairman Mao Zedong, Premier Zhou Enlai and Liu Shaoqi,[23] who all went to watch the play, one acclaimed for fighting against feudal familial oppression, as had been encouraged by the CCP leaders. Since Mao believed that the communist revolution could not be thoroughly successful, if women, who, as Mao said, "hold up half the sky," were not emancipated from feudal patriarchy, *Butterfly Lovers* served as a tool to educate people. One of the reasons for women's social subordination was their sexual inferiority to men as viewed in China in the past, so, to liberate women, the first goal was for them to break free from arranged marriage and to seek free choice of marriage. By eulogizing Shanbo and Yingtai struggling against arranged marriage and opposing feudal ethics, the play fell into one of the three categories as divided by a *People's Daily* (*Renmin ri bao*) editorial in 1948 that echoed Mao's vision of "revolutionizing old traditional theatre," a category labeled as "beneficial." Even though the budget for a colour film would be doubled compared to a black and white one, Mao urged the play to be made into a colour film regardless of financial inadequacy. The signification of implementing this project was that it was not only the first colour film in the PRC, but also was an honourable political mission to create an artistic product that could represent the new China. It took Shanghai United Film Studios (*Shanghai lianhe dianying zhipian chang*) eleven months to produce the film despite technological difficulties, which eventually received overwhelming approval by the CCP leaders. Zhou Enlai praised it greatly even upon watching the fine cut at the studio, hoping to entertain foreign ambassadors with the PRC's own colour film. He called *Butterfly Lovers* "China's *Romeo and Juliet*," an analogy widely perceived as intended to

[23] Liu Shaoqi (1898-1969) was then Chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress.

subvert the dominant Western stereotype that the PRC suppressed art and manipulated it as a weapon for communist propaganda. My reading of the success of *Butterfly Lovers* is constructed on two dimensions, one demonstrating a pure artistic perfection that had been achieved through the seamless compatibility between the genre and the content, along with the cast and crew that had excelled most of the other *xiqu* genres that had adapted the same story (China Encyclopaedia, *Xiqu* and *Quyi*, 2004, 212), and one suggesting great potential in its artistry of serving Mao's requirement of liberating women from the shackles of feudal familial ethics. In short, the film adaptation was a successful propagandistic tool for instiling Mao's communist feminist thought largely because of its artistic perfection.

The film was also successful outside of the PRC. It reportedly received an overwhelming reception when it was presented by the PRC delegation to the conferees and media at the Geneva Conference in Switzerland in 1954. During the following year, the film also received the Best Musical Award at Karlovy Vary International Film Festival, Czechoslovakia as well as a screening award at the Edinburgh International Film Festival. In the same year, it was also screened in Paris, France, as the first film from the PRC screened in France. The crew also toured East Germany and the former Soviet Union in 1955. All in all, it was regarded by the top cultural officials and critics as a play that could "represent China" and that had "reached an international level" (Yi, et al, 1951, 229). In a *Beijing Today* (*Jin ri Beijing*) report by Han Manman on August 31, 2010, the PRC Ministry of Culture submitted the *yueju* play *Butterfly Lovers* and the *kunqu* play *The Peony Pavilion* to Culturescapes, a culture festival in Switzerland. Xiang Xiaowei, Assistant Director-General of the PRC Ministry of Culture recalled that former Premier Zhou brought a copy of the film *Butterfly Lovers* to Switzerland in 1954, helping "many Western countries understand Chinese culture and how Chinese people thought." In a sense, the film has been remembered with historic significance more as a political device to change the negative impression of the young PRC in the West, and as a diplomatic lever to improve the bilateral relations between the PRC and Western countries in the Cold War context, than pure art for art's sake.

The immense success of the film advanced the *yueju* star Yuan Xuefen's career, as she was able to join the CCP in 1954, and became the President of Shanghai *Yueju*

Theatrical Company, founded in 1955. Her co-star Fan Ruijuan, the female-to-male cross-gender performer who appeared as Liang Shanbo in the film, also joined the CCP in 1956. As of April 1956, the film received the Prize of Honour from the PRC's Ministry of Culture as one of the most outstanding films produced between 1949 and 1955.

It is interesting to note a dichotomy in attitudes towards the female-to-male cross-gender performance in *yueju* in the early years of the PRC. It has come to my attention that Zhou Enlai, who himself was involved in cross-dressing in spoken drama at Nankai Middle School in his early years, playing female roles extensively, was exceptionally concerned about erasing the cross-gender performance tradition in *xiqu*, having offered many important instructions on numerous public or private occasions ever since the founding of the PRC, while I have found no archival records of Mao's remarks on the issue. It is intriguing to me that a high-ranking political leader who had cross-dressing history was voluntarily and actively involved in the cross-gender issue in theatre. In 1913, Zhou, aged 15, entered the Nankai Middle School, which was known for its Western influenced teaching methods and enjoyed a reputation for its disciplines and strict moral code (Gu, 2011). Zhou was an outstanding student there who not only excelled in Chinese but also took an active part in the school's speech club, news press as well as spoken drama club. He primarily played female roles in spoken drama, achieving his fame in school through his acting and those plays of which he was a part. At that time men and women were not allowed to attend the same school, not to mention act on the same stage. According to Gu Baozi's biography of Zhou, *Zhou Enlai Through the Red Lens (Hong jing tou zhong de Zhou Enlai)*, it is believed Zhou's good looks and convincing cross-gender acting skills brought him over a dozen female roles in Nankai's spoken drama club, such as Sun Huijuan in *One Yuan (Yi yuan qian)*, Fan Huiniang in *Qiu Daniang*, the incense burner in *Gratitude or Resentment (En yuan yuan)*, Gao Guiying in *Qianjin Quande*, and Hua'e in *The Story of Hua'e (Hua'e zhuan)*.[24] It is unclear whether or not Zhou chose to cross-dress for pleasure or simply there were no better candidates than Zhou for female roles in an all-boy school, but apparently he could always have a chance to withdraw from such roles if he disliked doing it.

[24] Retrieved from the digital version of the book at http://vip.du8.com/books/sep4ogu.shtml

Of all high-ranking politicians in the pre-Deng PRC, only Zhou Enlai and Jiang Qing[25] openly opposed cross-gender casting and supported male-and-female mixed casting on public occasions. Yuan Xuefen recalls in her 1977 *People's Theatre (Renmin xiju)* article that though Jiang Qing was generally believed to be the first one to publicly advocate male-and-female mixed casting in *yueju*, as she called all-female *yueju* "an abnormal phenomenon," Zhou first elucidated the need for male-and-female mixed casting for *yueju* in a political context as he conversed with her regarding cross-gender casting as early as 1949—

> *Once he asked me about the evolution of yueju in great details, how the tradition of women-playing-men was formed. The Premier pointed out that men-playing-women in jingju and women-playing-men in yueju were both the production of the old society. This kind of phenomenon should come to an end in the new society, and yueju should be played by both men and women… The premier enlightened and guided us so meticulously. Obviously, he believed that to reflect contemporary life and better service the workers, peasants and soldiers, we should tackle the two crucial matters: male-and-female mixed cast and the reform of music…*[26]

Yuan also recalls in the article that Zhou came to Shanghai in 1953, asking her if there were still any older male *yueju* performers. Upon knowing that there was only one older male performer left at the company, Zhou specially watched a play by him, saying, "Isn't mixed casting good?" In 1960, a young male *yueju* performer who played male roles from Yuan's company travelled to Beijing. Zhou not only listened to him sing, but also showed concern about his needs and ideas. Five years later, the Premier came to Shanghai again, "squeezing time out of his busy schedule," according to Yuan, to watch modern *yueju* plays by a male-and-female mixed cast. All these details noted by Yuan Xuefen in her article are largely evident that Zhou, as a supporter of male-and-female casting and an opponent of the traditional cross-dressing practice in *xiqu*, was, if not solely, instrumental in impacting the reform of the cross-gender performance tradition in *xiqu*. This has been confirmed by other informants including Wen Ruhua (1999, 2012

[25] Jiang Qing (1914-91), commonly known to the West as Madame Mao, was Mao Zedong's last wife. Originally named Li Yunhe, she took the stage name Lan Ping during her acting career in Shanghai. She married Mao in Yan'an in November 1938 and served as Communist China's first first lady. Jiang Qing was most well known for playing a major political role in the Cultural Revolution.

[26] See more at http://www.zelyj.com/yjlw/html/?1918.html

and 2014), Lin Ruikang (1997 and 2012), Sun Songlin (1997) and Sun Peihong (2012 and 2014).

Former President of NACTA, Sun Songlin, himself an amateur *nandan* of *jingju,* informs me that though generally Jiang Qing was believed to be responsible for terminating the cross-gender performance tradition, it was Zhou who was the real decision maker. He continues to remark, "All these are just for one word—sexuality." He does not elaborate, however. Sun Peihong explained during the interview in 2012 that what Sun Songlin meant was obvious, as it is widely known in *xiqu* circles that the tradition of patronage of *xiqu* performers in the *xiqu* scene in the past was usually associated with homoerotic consumerism, as depicted in the Oscar-nominated Chinese cinematic masterpiece by Chen Kaige, *Farewell, My Concubine*. In *jingju* circles, there is an old saying, "Of ten *nandan* performers, nine can't get away with it (*shi dan jiu bu qing*)," suggesting that about 90% of those *nandan* performers may be involved in homoerotic relationships. As Chen Jun explains in *Nandan and Lesbians: Xiqu Culture's New Modes, nandan*, for example, was the synonym of *xianggong* (male prostitutes) serving male patrons in the past, and hence was stigmatized with pederasty. It is interesting to relate the part of cross-dressing history in Zhou Enlai's teen years with his consistent oppositional attitude towards cross-dressing tradition in *xiqu* when he became the country's Premier. It may make a great deal of sense that to erase the cross-gender performance tradition in *xiqu* using his supreme political power was for him to erase a leading politician's cross-dressing history or a memory that could trigger massive imagination in relation to the stigmatized *xiqu* circle full of homoerotic sex scandals that could devastate an established political career and international reputation.

Jiang Jin also writes about the patronage tradition in *yueju* in Republican Shanghai, which was given a homoerotic meaning when certain female patrons looked for homosexual relationships (12-13). It is clear that with either all-male *jingju* or all-female *yueju*, the same sex casting and patronage tradition had created a realm of convenience free from social taboo and cultural norms for those who sought "legitimate" homosexual relationships in the name of "sworn brothers" or "sworn sisters." The need for "legitimate" homosexual relationships in a compatible setting and the existing same-sex casting in the theatrical regime, therefore, boosted one another, justifying a

reasonable mutual existence. Political interventions, however, would terminate this "feudal" tradition permanently, replacing the feudal and bourgeois culture with a "proletarian" one.

Many sources record how *xiqu* troupes followed Zhou's instruction regarding reforming the cross-gender performance tradition. In an article in memory of Yuan Xuefen by Li Donghuang, *Yuan Xuefen Cared for Male-and-female Mixed Cast for Modern Plays*, the author mentions that the first male-and-female *yueju* troupe was founded in Zhejiang Province in the early 1950s—Zhejiang Second *Yueju* Theatrical Company (*Zhejiang di'er yueju tuan*), in response to Mao's call "to push out the old and bring in the new." By September 1958, when Zhou watched modern *yueju* plays in Beijing, eleven *yueju* troupes in Shanghai and Zhejiang Province had been reformed into male-and-female mixed casting. He also said to the entire crew and cast that male-and-female casting was the result of "liberating thought and eliminating superstition." In the meantime, however, all-female casting remained popular among spectators. There were purportedly concerns about foreign reception of the female-to-male cross-dressing practice prior to the *yueju* tour to East Germany and former Soviet Union in 1955, according to a source from the Shanghai Archival Information Network,[27] but the concerns proved unnecessary as the shows were such a mega hit in the two countries. The source also indicates that Zhou Yang (1908-89), Chinese literary theorist and former Deputy Minister of the CCP Department of Publicity and of the PRC's Ministry of Culture, claimed in 1959 the importance of both male-and-female casting and all-female casting in *yueju*. He remarked that male-and-female casting and all-female casting were the "two flowers on a vine" that could both blossom, while the all-female casting as one "flower" was particularly popular among the masses. Taking this remark as an instruction to further develop all-female *yueju*, Yuan Xuefen expedited training female-to-male cross-gender performers while actively responding to Zhou Enlai's instructions by forming a male-and-female mixed cast and creating modern plays for it, such as *Xianglin Sao*, *The Family (Jia)* and *Early Spring in February (Zao chun er yue)*. She stated in her *People's Theatre* article that male-and-female mixed casting and all-female casting were both needed by *yueju* itself, complementing one another, while the appearance of a male-

[27] See more at http://www.archives.sh.cn/docs/200806/d_204129.html

and-female cast would benefit *yueju*'s thematic expansion without undermining the expressive force. Until the Cultural Revolution, however, all-female casting in *yueju* was not entirely off stage and even continued to flourish, especially marked by the immense success of the all-female *yueju* film in 1962, *Dream of the Red Chamber*, a successful adaptation of the original Qing dynasty novel by Cao Xueqin. The unanimous acclaim by critics as well as audiences stems from the fact that this particular *xiqu* genre is perfectly compatible with its favourite genre romance and its enduring female-to-male cross-gender performance. Like *Butterfly Lovers*, *Dream of the Red Chamber* is also a tragic romance, whose hero is an adolescent boy with feminine features as aforementioned. Apparently, it could be well played by a male impersonator. Due to the generic strength and all-female casting, *yueju* does not need to be as surreal as the traditionally all-male *jingju*, which uses exaggerated make-up, headpieces and costumes to disguise the masculinity of a man playing a female role and transfigure him into a beautiful woman. The realistic make-up and contour costumes used by *yueju* highlights women's femininity, allowing women on the stage to look more authentic to the spectators. Yet the heroes, based on traditional Chinese aesthetic standard for men, are mostly young scholars with feminine beauty, all making it ideal for a male impersonator. The music is soft, delivered in a refined and restrained style, not as dramatic or high-pitched as some of the other *xiqu* genres such as *jingju*, *yuju* (Henan Opera) of Henan province or *qinqiang (Qinqiang Opera)* of Shaanxi province. The lyrics are somewhere between classical and vernacular, conveying the beauty of classical style poetry yet not so dull and heavy to understand. Martial arts are not its strength, nor is portraying emperors, kings, generals and ministers, which is a strength of *jingju*.

It is also noted in Yuan's memoir that in 1963, during a talk addressed to cultural cadres and literature and art workers from across China at Beijing's Huairentang, one of the main buildings at the Zhongnanhai,[28] Zhou proclaimed once again that some *xiqu* genres needed to be revolutionized radically, such as *yueju*. He raised doubts on how *yueju* could stage a modern play with its all-female casting such as *The Sentries Under*

[28] Zhongnanhai is an imperial garden west of the Forbidden City in the central area of Beijing, which now functions as the central headquarters for the CCP and the State Council (Central government) of the PRC.

the Neon (Nihong deng xia de shaobing) which depicted the life of the PLA (People's Liberation Army) soldiers. Yuan also writes that on one private occasion after the talk, the Premiere said to her, "Isn't it funny to have women playing male iron workers and the PLA soldiers? Isn't that distorting heroic images?" On another occasion, as noted in *The Biography of Zhang Junqiu* (*Zhang Junqiu zhuan*), Zhou offered instructions on modern plays with cross-gender performance in both *jingju* and *yueju* in a context of commenting on the art of Zhang Junqiu, who was one of the greatest *nandan* performers that emerged after the *Four Great Dan* and the founder of his Zhang school (*Zhang pai*), during a talk at the National Modern *Jingju* Festival (*Jingju xiandaixi guanmo yanchu dahui*) in 1964, "Men playing women [in *jingju*] will come to end gradually, as well as women playing men in *yueju*. It's permissible to demonstrate on the stage for a few people to observe a movement or gesture, to see if it works, but it should not be done widely… Training your successors and demonstrating to them are not necessarily on the stage, but at schools, for a small number of people to observe and learn…" (An, 2014, 135, translated by Bao). Apparently, Zhou believed that it was acceptable for cross-gender performers to demonstrate for the purpose of training their apprentices and students, but acting on the stage was not recommended. In short, they could teach, but not do it. This perhaps can be understood as a formal call to terminate the cross-gender performance tradition from the top official level, as the Festival in 1964 served as a political and cultural mobilization using the state machine to end the *xiqu* reform campaign and launch the subsequent model play movement.

Following the aforementioned festival, on December 26, 1966, *People's Daily* published an editorial titled *Carrying Out Chairman Mao's Line on Literature and Art: Brilliant Models*, celebrating the creation of revolutionary modern theater under the guidance of Mao on literature and art. Eight model theatrical works dominated the PRC's cultural scene throughout the Cultural Revolution. The eight productions were five modern *jingju* plays–*The Red Lantern* (*Hong deng ji*, filmed in 1970), *Shajiabang* (filmed in 1971), *Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy* (*Zhi qu wei hu shan*, filmed in 1968), *Raid on the White Tiger Regiment* (*Qixi bai hu tuan*, filmed in 1972), and *On the Docks* (*Hai gang*, filmed in 1973), two ballets–*The Red Detachment of Women* (*Hong se niangzijun*, filmed in 1971) and *The White Haired Girl* (*Bai mao nü*, filmed in 1972), and one

symphony, *Shajiabang* (first recorded in 1971). A Xinhua News Agency news report on July 16th, in the following year set the tone in evaluating these model plays.

> *The eight model theatrical works have prominently propagated the shining Mao Zedong thought and prominently eulogized the workers, peasants, and soldiers who are the masters of history. Threading through all the plays in Chairman Mao's revolutionary line on art and literature, which stresses that literature serve the workers, peasants, and soldiers as well as proletarian politics…* (Translated by Bai, 2010, 188)

Of the aforementioned eight modern model plays, *On the Docks* was about stevedores working at the seaport and fighting the class enemy, while the others were all wartime stories featuring soldiers and communists as prominent characters. *Yueju*, given its traditional all-female casting and genre strengths in love drama, did not fit in the scope. While Zhou Enlai was overly concerned about the cross-gender performance as a backward feudal heritage, Jiang Qing, wife of Mao, who oversaw the production of all the model theatrical works, openly expressed her dislike of *yueju* because she believed that the art form ruined the masculine heroic images with feminine features. She was granted power by Mao after having been kept away from political involvements. Jiang herself put on a unisex image at the same time, consistently wearing a military hat and uniform on public occasions, a revolutionary Mao style feminist behaviour that was emulated by women all over China. In the article, *Yueju During the Cultural Revolution* from the online journal of *Shanghai Yueju* by Shanghai *Yueju* Art Research Center, it is noted that on May 29, 1964, Jiang Qing delivered a speech to the film crew of *The Great Wall of the South China Sea* at Beijing's Zhongnanhai. She said, "What decadent music! We have settled in the cities for thirteen years but *yueju* is still having women playing men… Because some cadres like it, *yueju* is touring all over China. Several hundreds of troupes are spreading the decadent music, leaving soldiers in a daze." According to this source, on November 5th of the same year, Jiang Qing received six art workers from Shanghai Aihua *Huju* (Shanghai Opera) Theatrical Company, saying, "*Yueju* as a genre must be reformed, as female performers playing male revolutionary figures make people feel uncomfortable. The music of *yueju*…is indeed kind of decadent music." On the evening of May 19th, 1968, Jiang Qing received representatives from the Zhejiang Cultural Revolution Committee, saying, "Women playing men has been an abnormal phenomenon in the 1960s, and it is so disgusting! … The music of *yueju* is despondent.

It must be played by both men and women, and the music must be reformed." The same article also mentions that Yao Wenyuan, then a member of the Central Cultural Revolution Group and later a member of the *Gang of Four (si ren bang)*,[29] added, "Through the Cultural Revolution, men playing women and women playing men will be totally ended from now on." Thus faced with the accusations of "decadent music" and "abnormal phenomenon" from Jiang Qing, the "standard bearer" of the Cultural Revolution and the supervisor of model theatrical works, all-female *yueju* finally came to end. Like other *xiqu* genres, not only were most *yueju* troupes in Shanghai and all over China disbanded, but also art workers were forced to change their profession or sent to "reformation" through labour. *Butterfly Lovers* and many other highly-acclaimed traditional *yueju* plays were banned and criticized as "poisonous weeds" for differing and shared accusations while Yuan Xuefen was arrested and brutally tortured. *Butterfly Lovers* was no more a "progressive" play that opposed feudal oppression, but a counter-progressive play that depicted the lifestyle of the feudal landlord class and advocated a degenerated view of love, coupled with Jiang Qing's two other accusations concerning its "decadent music" and "abnormal phenomenon."

During the 1970s, as the model theatrical works became increasingly popular across the country, it became trendy for many local *xiqu* genres to adapt the *jingju* model plays since adaptation of model plays carried much less political and ideological risk than creating brand new plays. In 1972, the Shanghai *Yueju* Theatrical Company *(Shanghai yueju tuan),* one that was luckily retained, adapted the entire new model *jingju* play, *Song of the Dragon River (Long jiang song)*. In 1975, the Company adapted another new *jingju* model play, *Panshiwan*. These *yueju* adaptations along with a number of their own newly created plays were all modern plays by a male-and-female mixed cast. As these productions were all revolutionary tasks undertaken to coordinate the propagandistic campaign despite the incongruity between the genre and the content, these *yueju* plays lost their genre essence.

[29] The *Gang of Four* refers to a political faction that consisted of four CCP officials—Jiang Qing, Zhang Chunqiao, Yao Wenyuan, and Wang Hongwen. They came to political prominence during the Cultural Revolution controlling ideological powers of the CCP. After Mao's death in 1976, they were arrested and were subsequently charged with a series of treasonous crimes.

The Cultural Revolution erased traditional *jingju* from the stage. In doing so, it also erased *nandan*, especially in big cities. According to renowned *nandan* performers such as Shen Fucun (1935-) and Wen Ruhua, *nandan* performers during the Cultural Revolution were all kept off stage (Li, 2013, F03 and 2012). Shen Fucun, who was primarily a *nandan* performer but who could cross-play other role types such as *xiaosheng* and *laosheng*, had to give up *dan* and switch to *sheng*, playing Li Yuhe, the male protagonist in *The Red Lantern* (2013). According to Wen Ruhua, who had switched from his assigned *xiaosheng* to his aspired *dan*， became a *jingju* music editor in 1965, working with Zhang Junqiu, who had "promised Premiere Zhou not to train *nandan* anymore" (2012). He and Sun Peihong both informed me that during the Cultural Revolution, another *nandan* performer, Mei Baojiu, the youngest son of Mei Lanfang, worked as a sound technician while he was kept offstage from 1965 to 1978 (2012). Of the *Four Great Dan*, Mei Lanfang and Cheng Yanqiu died of heart disease before the Cultural Revolution, while Shang Xiaoyun and Xun Huisheng were physically and mentally tortured and verbally humiliated, and both died during the Cultural Revolution (2013).

The *Four Great Dan* were survived by Zhang Junqiu, one of the greatest *nandan* artists to emerge after the *Four Great Dan*. He formed his own singing style by integrating the individual features of the *Four Great Dan* and his own vocal talent, enriching the *dan*'s singing in *jingju* with a fresh "musical vocabulary" (132, translated by Bao). Regardless of his remarkable talent, achievements and unique contributions to the singing of *dan* in *jingju*, he did not receive any exemption from the ban of *nandan* during the Cultural Revolution. In the wake of the modern play campaign prior to the Cultural Revolution, he attempted to impersonate female roles in newly created modern *jingju* plays such as *The Sparks in the Reed Marshes* (*Ludang huozhong*), an adoption of a *huju* play later developed into the model *jingju* play *Shajiabang*, and *Surplus Year After Year* (*Niannian you yu*), despite skepticism about *nandan*'s realistic representation of modern female characters (136). After the Cultural Revolution was launched, he was immediately removed from the stage, and subjected to animadvert, seizure of personal assets, persecution and "reformation" through physical labour and self-confession. He was criticized by "red guards" not only for performing plays with feudal content, but also for "uglifying industrial workers, peasants and soldiers" by playing female roles in

modern plays as a male performer (138-141). Realizing his talent in *jingju* vocal music could be utilized for model plays, authorities dispatched him to the China *Jingju* Theatre (*Zhongguo jingju yuan*) to help female *dan* performers improve their singing of arias. Many female *dan* performers turned to him for help thereafter, including Liu Changyu (1942-), who played Li Tiemei in *The Red Lantern*, Qi Shufang (1942-), who played Xiao Changbao in *Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy*, and Yang Chunxia (1943-), who played Ke Xiang in *Azalea Mountain* (141). Zhang was able to return to the Beijing *Jingju* Theatre only after the Cultural Revolution ended in 1976.

From Theatre to Reality: Normalization of Female Masculinity

Some Western feminist scholars commonly assume that "there must be a universal basis for feminism, one which must be found in an identity assumed to exist cross-culturally…" and that "the oppression of women has some singular form discernible in the universal or hegemonic structure of patriarchy or masculine domination" (Butler, 3). Such assumptions of universality fly in the face of feminist scholarship's simultaneous injunction to listen to the subaltern and to honour experience. This leads us to ask, for example, does socialist feminism in the PRC share common ground with Western feminisms? Feminist scholars such as Mohanty, Spivak, Anzaldua and Rey Chow have questioned the universalist assumptions that all feminist movements go through a common process. In this section, I will examine the particular dynamics of socialist feminism in Maoist China.

Although his famous slogan, "women hold up half the sky," earned him global feminist applause, Mao Zedong, and likewise his wife, Jiang Qing, have been criticized by diasporic Chinese feminist scholars in recent years for the detrimental effect of so-called feminist politics on flesh and blood Chinese women (188-202). Mao and Jiang employed literature and art as a propaganda tool to enact a romanticized feminist project. Unlike Western feminism, socialist feminism in the PRC was mobilized by the state leadership and given some cultural authority in artistic production.

As we know, Mao's government enacted a reform campaign to examine and reorganize the repertoire, artists, and the regulation of theatres, keeping some "good" plays while banning those with "harmful" feudal content. Before too long, the campaign developed into a ban on all traditional and Western-influenced plays as well as cross-gender performance. Meanwhile, the campaign led to the creation of the eight "model plays," which included modernized *jingju* plays and ballets, all communist-themed.

As aforementioned, the eight productions were five modern *jingju* plays—*The Red Lantern*, *Shajiabang*, *Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy*, *Raid on the White Tiger Regiment*, and *On the Docks*, two ballets–*The Red Detachment of Women* and *The White Haired Girl*, and one symphony, *Shajiabang*. In many of these, and in other *jingju* plays, subsequently added to the revolutionary repertoire, such as *Song of the Dragon River* (filmed in 1972) and *Azalea Mountain* (filmed in 1974), a prominent female protagonist represented an idealized communist-liberated woman. Such figures included Li Tiemei and Grannny in *The Red Lantern*, Aqingsao in *Shajiabang*, Fang Haizhen in *On the Docks*, Wu Qinghua in *The Red Detachment of Women*, Xi'er in *The White Haired Girl*, Jiang Shuiying in *Song of the Dragon River*, and Ke Xiang in *Azalea Mountain*. These characters demonstrate qualities such as courage, determination, inner strength and rebelliousness, normally perceived by people as "masculine." Nor is any female protagonist depicted as a wife or in a romantic heterosexual relationship; they are all independent small business owners or fighters, unmarried or widowed, or with an unclear marital status. In fact, one of the major features of the family policy of the CCP was the strict sexual moral norms, which imposed a sexual puritanism on its art and literature (Stacey, 1983, 186-187). The CCP's sexual puritanism was in a sense a policy beneficial to women, as the Party believed that under the existing social conditions, sexual freedom could only exploit women rather than emancipate them (187-188). Additionally, male characters are also not depicted as in romantic or marital relationships; this independent interpersonal status is equally applied to all characters and therefore presumably represents something other than a desired masculine or feminine trait. Apart from gender, this independence was meant to symbolize communist puritanism, a Western analogy that grew out of chapel puritanism often applied to describe communist self-discipline at the time, for which sexuality was strongly discouraged.

These productions all employ masculine bodily movements for female characters in creating heroic images. In *The Red Detachment of Women*, for example, the *pas de deux* is eliminated or "modified to eliminate classical ballet's dual objectification of the female body" (Roberts, 2010). In the model *jingju* play, *On the Docks*, Fang Haizhen, the secretary of the CCP branch for the dock gang, played by female *dan* performer Li Lifang (1932-2002), not only disguised female attributes by wearing gender-ambiguous clothing, but also employed gestures, movements and poses normally perceived by people as heroic and hyper-masculine and often used by male characters. Besides, she also sang in her natural falsetto voice with strong, majestic and sonorous qualities, which are similar to the vocal qualities of *xiaosheng* in traditional *jingju* (Wen, 2012).[30] As a female *dan* performer performing a modern, revolutionary female character, her performance and singing styles obviously disrupted the traditionally male-initiated and male-dominated *dan* performance in *jingju*. The success of *On the Docks* and its portrayal of Fang Haizhen proved that women could not only perform the *dan* as well as their male predecessors and colleagues, but also subvert the traditional feminine qualities—which were considered to be feudal, backward, and exemplifying the victimization of women under patriarchal oppression—of the *dan* by masculinizing this role type. I consider this also a form of gender transgression: Not only is cross-gender performance transgressive; but depicting female masculinity to create heroic images is also transgressive because it disrupts traditional gender order, power structure, and coherences between sex, gender and sexuality, and challenges normative perceptions of masculinity and femininity.

Such masculinization suggests that women's liberation requires the destruction of "the traditional concept of female sexual stereotypes" (2010). Women's true emancipation is to be achieved only by participating in the class struggle led by the CCP (2010). Despite these works' promotion of women's liberation, social justice and gender egalitarianism, and their condemnation of feudal patriarchy and gender oppression, some feminist scholars have recently questioned the de-gendered and asexualized images of women as ideal, normative, and pro-revolutionary (Bai, 2010; Roberts, 2010). While the revolutionary artistic repertoire appeared to embrace female agency, it also

[30] The role type of *xiaosheng* was removed from modern *jingju* during the Cultural Revolution.

erased women's specificity, and in particular their sexual desires. In contrast, other feminist scholars considering Mao's artistic legacy reject this more negative interpretation. Wichmann-Walczak argues in a conversation (2012) that since masculinity and femininity are culturally constructed, female traits as shown in these model plays should not be perceived as "unnatural" and disruptive. Criticism of Mao's heroines as suffering from "de-gendering" or "gender erasure" ultimately seems premised on a faith in a pre-existing gender pattern assigned to women, a pattern that contemporary gender studies calls into question. In addition, I will also raise my own questions about the "emancipation" of women's gender: If masculinization of women[31] is revolutionary, progressive, and liberatory, and if feminization of men is feudal, counter-revolutionary and backward, then gender politics are still based on patriarchal ideology and thus contribute to the male hegemonic double standard. The feminist heroines of Mao's communist theatre challenged long-standing stereotypes of Chinese womanhood, but at the price of eliminating the aesthetic tradition of appreciating feminization of both women and men. Created to stir up "gender trouble" in their own time, Mao's feminist acts now provide a potent source of debate for feminist scholarship.

The interrogation of the female gender and the socially "assigned" gender pattern under Mao's feminist politics leads to another question: If the female traits as represented in the model plays should not be perceived as unnatural or disruptive since there is no pre-existing gender essence, why are *nandan* or males who possess or demonstrate qualities that are perceived by people as "feminine" not equally perceived as natural? And, if there is no pre-existing gender essence, which may justify the presumption that the male and female genders are interchangeable in terms of representation, why was cross-gender performance considered "unnatural" and counter-revolutionary during the Cultural Revolution? Apparently, the argument on the "naturalness" of the female traits represented in model plays is internally contradictory given the actual practice undertaken under Mao's feminist politics that was subjected to an arbitrary double standard.

[31] Although masculinity and femininity are constantly interrogated by feminist scholars, there are definitely distinctive bodily styles in *jingju* that are categorized as being masculine and feminine.

The Production of a Social Taboo

While Mao's feminist politics and the model play campaign that invoked such politics served to emancipate women from the patriarchal tradition and all feudal oppression, the victimization of cross-gender performance as a theatrical tradition and its practitioners eventually led to the production of a social taboo which has continued to this day.

Nandan as an occupation was not as stigmatized in Republican China as it has been since the Cultural Revolution except that the acting career was denigrated as a "*jianye*" (debased occupation), "the lowest of the low in society" (Li, 2010, 34). As has been discussed in the previous chapter, *nandan* had never been considered a social taboo before the time of the PRC for its customary association with homoeroticism. While late imperial literature established "the equivalence between male and female beauty and their legitimacy as objects of a man's sexual desire" (17), and rendered male sexual desire for both women and boys natural, the sexual objectification of a human being to the male gaze was not gender-based, and thus heterosexual and homosexual desires were thought "to potentially arise in the same individual" (18). This wide tolerance is evident in the fact that though in the late imperial period *nandan* was almost a synonym for *xianggong* or catamites (Heinrich and Martin, 2006, 15), it did not undermine the status of *nandan* as a societal and cultural norm, nor the status of male-dominated *jingju* as the favourite pastime of the Qing imperial court and the pre-modern literati. In the Republican era, the delegitimation of *xianggong* occurred during the national modernization of Republican China as a semi-colonial nation, where Chinese intellectuals and officials yielded "a new sensitivity" to "a perceived western gaze" (16). As Republican China's embodied modernities included sexual modernity or sexual Westernization, the past tolerance of the male homoerotic culture had to surrender to a "self-policing response" to the imagined Western gaze (16). Lu Xun,[32] for example,

[32] Lu Xun (1881-1936) was an instrumental figure in shaping modern Chinese literature. A novelist, editor, translator, literary critic, essayist, and poet, he had a profound influence on Chinese national modernization after the May Fourth Movement, which began around 1916.

attacked Mei Lanfang openly and consistently in his writing for fear of the "double crime" representing China with an effeminate image and as a female impersonator to the Western gaze (Luo, 2008).[33] While Mei's cross-gender performance skills were highly acclaimed in the USA and Soviet Union during his tours, back home in Republican China those "self-policing" intellectuals charged him for his transgression into the female realm. As aforementioned, Zheng Zhenduo, a historian and critic, also attacked the *nandan* art, regarding it as "disgusting" and "a cruel, inhuman, artificial and most despicable trick" (Li, 2010, 76). To their perceived notion of the Western gaze, *nandan* was not a national treasure, but a national humiliation. Others critics advocated "gender-straight acting" as in spoken drama and films as a symbol of Westernized modernity and opposed cross-gender performance for having violated "universal truths" (Goldstein, 243, 2007). Although cross-gender performance was seen as "a shameful throwback to China's feudal days," all-male and all-female theaters still remained extremely popular in *jingju* and *yueju* while in some other *xiqu* genres mixed troupes were becoming increasingly common. While the reasons for the naturalization of male-to-female cross-gender performance in *jingju* and of the female-to-male cross-gender performance in *yueju* were essentially different, as discussed in the previous chapter, Goldstein emphasizes that Mei's successful American tour, which received high acclaim in the USA, turned "the Western gaze into a spectacle itself" and "naturalized Mei as a national icon" who overcame the challenges from colonial modernity by embodying both authentic Chinese cultural essence and modern national citizenship (1999, 415). In this sense, it was Mei's status as a national icon facilitated by his American tour that helped the *nandan* art almost silence its critics and survive Chinese intellectuals' advocacy of a pure Western modernity. Mei basically employed the Western Orientalist gaze to beat back the objections generated from the "perceived" Western gaze. As such, though critical voices embracing Western modernity were trying to impose gender-straight acting as in spoken drama and films on *jingju* in Republican China, the *nandan* art was eventually immune from total stigmatization and therefore remained popular in *jingju* theatres.

In my view, the production of a social taboo out of cross-gender performance, *nandan* of *jingju* in particular, commenced during the Cultural Revolution, for institutional

[33] See more at http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.act2080.0047.223

suppression was imposed from the top down, as compared to the previous discursive battles. The making of the social taboo during the Cultural Revolution, however, was not only associated with the legitimacy of the "heroic image" that was supposed to embody revolutionary masculinities in both the male and female genders, but also contingent upon the growing awareness of homosexuality as a pathological term (Sun and Wen, 2012). While *nandan* was associated with homoerotic culture, which was perceived as normative in the late imperial dynasty as well as in Republican China, the influence of Western homophobia in contemporary China was the catalyst for the stigmatization of *nandan*. Although data on homosexuality are nearly non-existent in the PRC since 1949 (Ruan and Tsai, 1988, 1990), homosexuality was not only considered representative of the "decline and the evil of western civilization" (Ruan and Tsai, 1988, 190), but also a severe crime, which sometimes even received the death penalty (Li, 2003). Numerous homosexual crimes are documented in *The Legal Status of Chinese Homosexuals* by Chinese sociologist, Li Yinhe, who observes that during the Cultural Revolution individuals involved in homosexual acts were convicted of "sodomy or hooliganism" while one informant's verdict was reversed by the court in 1980 after being diagnosed with homosexuality (2003).

Homophobia during the Cultural Revolution is typically reflected in the following letter collected by Ruan and Tsai:

> *We should absolutely prohibit homosexuality…. Widespread homosexuality will lead to epidemic deterioration of our racial spirit and destroy our society…. The reasons why people despise, prohibit, punish and persecute homosexuals are precisely because the behaviour is evil, ugly, anti-human morality, an insult to human dignity, promoting of crime among youth, ruining their mental and physical health, and leading to the destruction of our race and civilization…. It is imperative that we not only expose homosexuality lest it create a flood sweeping away our marital, moral, legal and customary dam and destroy our socialist civilization* (192).

Such homophobia during the Cultural Revolution has had a profound influence on the subsequent Chinese society (2003). Homosexuality for a long time was not only seen as amoral and evil, but also a mental disorder. In 1989, the *Chinese Classification and Diagnostic Criteria of Mental Disorders* (CCMD) released by the Chinese Psychiatric Association, defined homosexuality as a "psychiatric disorder of sexuality." It was not

until 2001 that the new CCMD edition revised this definition, emphasizing that only homosexuals who suffer distress have a mental disorder, while removing homosexuality as a mental disorder from "aetiologic and symptomatologic" perspectives (Mendelson, 2003, 682-683). It was the Chinese Psychiatric Association's formal exclusion of homosexuality from the list of mental disorders, twenty-eight years later than the USA (Gallagher, 2001, 22-24).

In addition, though the Chinese Supreme Court ruled in 1957 in response to the Higher People's Court of the Heilongjiang province that sex between two consenting male adults was not a criminal act, voluntary "sodomy" was criticized as an immoral and perverted behaviour in the legal correspondence.[34]

The removal of homosexuality as a mental disease in the new edition of CCMD does not, however, remove the stigma attached to it. Nowadays, regardless of the growing public awareness of the naturalness of homosexuality in the PRC, a new homophobia has emerged. Due to the markedly increasing HIV infection among men who have sex with men, as demonstrated in the evolution of patterns of transmission over time, where HIV infection in injecting drug users has fallen while men who have sex with men have become a main subgroup for the transmission (Vermund, 2013, 912-914), homosexuality has caused a new homophobia due to the outbreak of the HIV/AIDS epidemic while the old homophobia based on the misperception of homosexuality being a mental disorder has weakened. In contemporary Chinese society, HIV positive status has added new stigma while AIDS is not a mere disease, but a stigmatized identity that is terribly discriminated against by family, neighbours, employers and the whole society (He and Rofel, 2010, 511-536). While in recent years, Western societies have become more accepting of homosexuals who are HIV positive or live with AIDS, none of the informants that I have met with regards to this matter claims that they see significant changes in attitudes despite governmental efforts or organization practices that are vigorously shown on state-run media. In fact, they claim that in most cases homosexuality is a synonym for AIDS, an identity on which another identity is imposed. If homosexuals are compelled to downplay their "gayness" due to

[34] See more at http://www.law-lib.com/Law/law_view.asp?id=1218

homophobia, cross-gender performers, such as *nandan* performers of *jingju* who are widely known for the male embodiment of femininity as an occupation and oftentimes a habitual continuation in reality, face more judgment and social prejudice caused by homophobia. While true homosexuals can downplay or conceal their "gayness," *nandan* performers who have typical occupational mannerism in offstage life exactly fit into the gay stereotypes about how gay males are expected to look, act and behave. In a sense, as *nandan* performers represent the visible gay population, the *nandan* art form continues to be a social taboo in this day and age. Being a *nandan* performer has never been easy unless one achieves real stardom. To be a *nandan* performer by profession means having to take the risk of being associated with being a male prostitute in the Republican era, a debauchee, a sodomist, a sissy man and an evil man during the Cultural Revolution, a psychopath and now a potentially HIV infected individual or an AIDS patient.

Chapter 4.
The Revival

White Faced Gentleman: The Unofficial Return of Nandan

Elizabeth Wichmann-Walczak, who visits the PRC regularly for *jingju* conferences as well as preparations for student *jingju* productions at the University of Hawaii at Monoa, observes that *nandan* performers in *jingju* "are increasing rapidly," and "more and more [*nandan* performers] are being trained" during the last one or two decades (2011). Sun Peihong informed me during interviews in 2012 and 2014 that, while more and more *nandan* performers have been trained most unofficially, there were quite a few *nandan* performers hired by *jingju* companies, from the National *Jingju* Theatre in Beijing to local *jingju* companies in provinces outside of Beijing. He also sent me photos of seven young *nandan* performers whom he met at a *jingju* conference on *nandan* in Beijing in 2013. Retired *nandan* performing artist Wen Ruhua revealed in his interviews that he had received quite a few *nandan* performers or trainees at his residence in Beijing, who were soliciting his advice on performance skills and technique. Among them was Liu Bing, a student at NACTA, whom I also interviewed (2012). In fact, numerous news reports in China suggest that there have been many appeals from high-ranking cultural officials, theatre critics, professors of *xiqu* and leading *jingju* performing artists for more training of *nandan* and public performance by *nandan* performers of the young generation (2012).

It has also come to my attention that almost simultaneously the cross-gender casting of Shakespeare's plays, where actors play the opposite sex, has returned in England in the last two decades. As a matter of fact, during Mei Lanfang's visit to New York in 1930, Western theatre critics saw amazing similarities between *jingju* and Elizabethan theatre, especially in the case of "suppositionality" and male-to-female

cross-gender performance. “The Elizabethan parallels with the Chinese theatre are obvious. There is the fixed scene, with certain properties and conventions; …there is a bush for a forest at the Globe, a whip for a horse at the Peking [Beijing] theatre, there are the four men to stand for an army… There are the men playing female roles” (Young, 1930, 305-306). Western theatre artists and critics may have nostalgic feelings for the same old tradition. David Lister, Fellow of Royal Society of Arts, UK, for example, calls for more cross-gender plays. He says in the *Independent,* “The Bristol Old Vic may be the country’s oldest working theatre, but it is doing something radically new. It is staging an all-male version of Oscar Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest*. In a feature about this in *The Independent* this week, Paul Taylor reminded us that Sir Peter Hall had the same idea at the National Theatre in the Seventies. But it was opposed by Harold Pinter, then an associate director at the National Theatre” (2012). Like Lister in UK, I have observed that there are also many Chinese scholars and performing artists in *jingju* who appeal for more *nandan* performers. But why?

The return of *nandan* in *jingju* dovetails with a revolution of gender-alternative expressions that extends from theatrical practice into lived realities in contemporary Chinese society. The reasoning is based on two facts. Firstly, the revival has been taking place in an era when women are not kept off stage any more, and cross-gender acting is not compulsive. Secondly, there is no shortage of highly acclaimed and widely accepted performers who play roles of the same sex and thus no need to reaffirm patriarchal gender construction or reassert “historical authenticity.” In the case of *jingju*, while cross-gender performance was a cultural and theatrical norm within the feudal patriarchal structures in the past, the revival may be interpreted as a transgressive phenomenon that challenges gender boundaries, and this has brought thoughts on gender complexity to the forefront. The theatre serves as the laboratory for gender-alternative expressions given its legitimate cross-gender tradition and patriarchal structure. Under the names of a “renaissance” of “historical authenticity,” the revival of *nandan* is in fact a reflection of a growing revolution that questions gender boundaries and seeks to subvert social and cultural assignments to biological genders. Through the revival, we do not only see the return of a long lost tradition on the stage; we also see an arena where many individual cases gather narrating stories that advance our cognition of sexual desire, sexual orientation and gendered behaviours. In the revival of cross-

gender performance in *jingju*, performers and spectators are negotiating a new gender politics and contesting "normalized" knowledges and disciplinary powers. It is neither a retrograde action against female empowerment on the stage nor a resumption of patriarchal oppression, since it advocates freedom of choosing role types and freedom of cross-gender expressions; rather, it presents advances in thought within a gender spectrum. Through the revival we also hear voices advocating a different gender equality. Whereas men monopolized female roles in Republican China while female performers struggled to get parts (Washington Post, 1928, 7), now it is *nandan* performers who are struggling to be acknowledged and get more parts (Liu, 2012).

In the case of *jingju*, the revival of *nandan* also has politically critical meaning based on communist perceptions of genders, as the notion of "revival" here is set in a context that is opposed to the political ban since the founding of the PRC, especially during the Cultural Revolution. As aforementioned, one reason was because cross-gender casting was construed as a backward, risqué feudal heritage, in that *nandan* in the "old society" was usually associated with homoerotic consumerism. Another reason was because cross-gender performance might have distorted the revolutionary heroic image in those modern model plays that served the proletarian class (2012). In theorizing the fear of losing the righteous revolutionary qualities I have coined the term, "socialist femmophobia," in that male performers impersonating women or male characters played by female performers all impart anti-heroic feudal feminine qualities either to performers or characters. Hence, cross-gender performance disappeared from the stage in nearly all cities in the PRC. Song Changrong (1935—), the renowned *nandan* performing artist of the *Xun* school in the small city, Huaiyin, in Jiangsu province, was kept playing female roles in revolutionary model plays (Wichmann, 7), but Song's case was very exceptional at the time.

The Cultural Revolution was ended right after Mao's death in 1976. With Deng Xiaoping assuming the reins of the government and bringing order out of chaos, classical *jingju* plays and former *nandan* performing artists were able to return to the stage, including Zhang Junqiu, Zhao Rongchen (1916-96) and Mei Baojiu. Since *xiqu* schools and *jingju* troupes no longer officially trained *nandan* students after the founding of the PRC in 1949 (Riley, 1997, 244), other than those former *nandan* performing artists

who achieved recognition prior to 1949, there were no newly trained *nandan* performers known to the public until Wen Ruhua performer staged a customized newly written play, *White Faced Gentleman (Bai mian liang jun)*. In this new play he demonstrated his superb *dan* technique and artifice by switching between the impersonation of a young man and a beautiful woman.

Of the many revival cases that I have investigated, the one about Wen Ruhua is the most time consuming, not only because the once-upon-a-time allegation that he was "the last *nandan*" needs much clarification, but also because, as a shrewd observer, a thinker and a self-developed queer theorist who has formed his own theory to make sense of himself and other *nandan* performers, he can always talk for hours on this subject matter.

White Faced Gentleman was created and first staged in the mid-1980s, starring Wen Ruhua, whose character in the play had to disguise himself as a woman, according to the story. A 2001 report by the state-run *People's Daily*, overseas edition, concludes that the success of *White Faced Gentleman* marks the "formal" revival of the *nandan* tradition (Zhou, 2001, 7). While it is not possible to substantiate this claim with other sources, according to Wen himself he was the first *jingju* performer who received official approval of his transfer from his assigned *xiaosheng* role category to his desired *dan* category, and *White Faced Gentleman* played a crucial role in this transition. Although by then such renowned *nandan* performers as Mei Baojiu had returned to the stage, and Zhang Junqiu was teaching at NACTA, it has been confirmed to me by a large group of *jingju* experts, artists and government officials from the Ministry of Culture and the Beijing Cultural Bureau that those who had established star status as a *nandan* performer prior to the Cultural Revolution could perform again, while there were no new *nandan* performers formally recognized. These star performers' return to the stage was the resumption of jobs that had been terminated during the Cultural Revolution, not the revival that I am addressing here.

I first met Wen at his guest lecture on the *nandan* art in Beijing in 1996, at the Lu Xun Academy of Liberal Arts (*Lu Xun wenxue yuan*), a state-run institution founded in 1950 to train writers, literary critics, literary editors and translators. He did not strike me

as a “typical” *nandan* performer, as he appeared to be very masculine. His facial expressions, mannerism, speaking voice and behaviours did not suggest the slightest effeminacy. In the summer of 1999, Wen invited me as well as two American scholars from Rutgers University to watch excerpts (*zhe zi xi*) from his *White Faced Gentleman* that highlighted the contrast between him as a *nandan* performer and two female *dan* performers. Without knowing the story beforehand, the two American scholars did not even recognize him, nor did they realize that one of the three women characters on the stage was actually impersonated by a man.

Born in Beijing in 1947, Wen is now retired from the Beijing *Jingju* Theatre (*Beijing jingju yuan*), but has constantly been invited to teach and perform, as well as serve as a judge for *jingju* competitions. His post-retirement schedule is even busier than before. His wife and his son, who do not seem to have the slightest interest in *jingju*, are running a TCM (traditional Chinese medicine) practice affiliated with a state-run hospital. By the time I interviewed him back in 2012, he had been expecting his grandson to be born. His son and daughter-in-law had been making plans to emigrate to either Canada or New Zealand to escape the air pollution in China.

Wen was admitted to the National School of Chinese Theatre Arts (*Zhongguo xiqu xuexiao*), the predecessor of NACTA, when he was eleven years old in 1958. He informed me that though his then desired role type was *dan*, he was assigned, along with a group of other fellow male students who aspired to study *dan*, to the role type of *xiaosheng*. Of all the other role categories and their subcategories, *xiaosheng* is the closest to *dan*, largely because both *xiaosheng* and *dan* require the use of falsetto voice for speech and singing. *Xiaosheng* performers have to sing in falsetto voice and speak in it as well with occasional breaks to represent the adolescent crack period. It has to be noted that although all role types share the same principles for bodily movements, such as roundness and the *yin* and *yang* diagram, as well as specific movements such as *yunshou* (cloud-hands), [35] there are variations between role categories and subcategories “in verbal, melodic, percussive, and movement composition, and in

[35] The movement *yunshou* is used between movements as the means of passage between states (Reily, 1997, 299). In doing so, the body stands as axis and the arms move as if the performer were holding a ball in front him/her, and then extend to strike a pose.

performance technique" (1990, 147). For example, when performing *yunshou*, a *dan* performer "keeps the arms closer to the body while the male role may open the movement more away from the body" (Reily, 1997, 301). Since the *xiaosheng* role type usually portrays young gentlemen of scholarly bearing, its movements emphasize elegance and gentility and thus possesses some of the *yin* qualities of *dan* role.

Wen was not too disappointed as these two role categories were interchangeable in a sense because of the gendered similarity. In explaining this gendered similarity, I need to re-emphasize here that in ancient Chinese society ruled under the Confucian ideology and with a traditional aesthetic tendency favouring male femininity, a young scholar with refined qualities such delicacy and gentility was perceived as an ideal while hypermasculinity in a man was considered to be coarse, barbaric and unattractive. In this sense, *xiaosheng* is always considered the role type closest to *dan*. Wen graduated in 1966, the year when the Cultural Revolution erupted. He became a playwright and director at the Comrades-in-Arms *Jingju* Company (*Zhanyou jingju tuan*), where he had not even the chance to perform in the *xiaosheng* role type because it was banned. Being multi-talented, he was most of the time composing and editing music scores for modern *jingju* plays during the Cultural Revolution, through which he seized the opportunity to study with Zhang Junqiu, the then best known *nandan* performing artist and founder of his own style, known as the Zhang school. According to Wen, from 1976 till 1982 he did not have any chance to perform in the *dan* role, except that in 1978 he played the female lead, Tan Ji'er, in *The Riverview Pavilion (Wang jiang ting),* one of Zhang Junqiu's more representative works based on a Yuan dynasty play. Though performed on a small scale, this play was good enough to impress a distinguished member of the audience—the then renowned *jingju* playwright, Weng Ouhong (1908-94), who had written about 100 *jingju* plays and who had written for a great number of *jingju* stars including Cheng Yanqiu, Li Shaochun, Yuan Shihai, Ye Shenglai, Tong Zhiling and Wu Suqiu. Upon watching his *dan* performance, Weng bestowed on Wen a poem, hoping that he would be the successor to the *jingju* masters—Mei Lanfang and Zhang Junqiu. In 1982, Wen transferred to the more prestigious Beijing *Jingju* Theatrical Company (*Beijing jingju tuan*), later renamed as Beijing *Jingju* Theatre. According to him in the in the 2012 interview, he and Weng Ouhong contemplated strategies to legitimize Wen's desired transfer to the *dan* role category. Weng Ouhong wrote for him a customized play based

on a sub-story from one of the four great Chinese classical novels, *Water Margin (Shui hu),* a 14th century novel written in vernacular Chinese with the story set in the Song dynasty about how a group of 108 righteous outlaws gathered at the Mount Liang (*liang shan*) to rebel against the imperial government, who eventually are granted amnesty by the Emperor and sent on campaigns to suppress other local rebel forces. *White Faced Gentleman*, also known as *The Manor of the Cai's (Cai jia zhuang),* is a story equivalent in genre to a Hollywood production of a combined genre of crime/gangster and romance. Falling into genre romance, it may be headlined as "heroine doesn't know she is her husband." The story, set in the Song dynasty, is about how Zheng Tianshou, a young man nicknamed as "white faced gentleman" due to his fair complexion, rescues his wife from the kidnappers, Cai Jiquan and his sister Cai Furong, the owners of the Manor of the Cai's. To approach Cai Jiquan, Zheng Tianshou is disguised as a woman. Obsessed with Zheng's beauty, Cai Jiquan relaxes his vigilance and takes liberties with him. Zheng seizes the opportunity to assassinate Cai, but unsuccessfully. Joined by his sworn brothers and fellow outlaws, Lu Zhishen, Li Kui and Wu Song, he is finally able to defeat the villains and reunite with his wife. In this play, Wen plays Zheng Tianshou in the *xiaosheng* role category, but when Zheng Tianshou is disguised as a woman to rescue his wife, Wen needs to switch to the *dan* category. In this sense, it is the story that makes Wen's switch plot-wise necessary and politically legitimate.

The success of the *jingju* adaptation of the widely known *Water Margin* story that required singing and acting skills of both *xiaosheng* and *dan* role categories helped a great deal with Wen's transfer from his assigned *xiaosheng* role category to his desired *dan* role category. The début and increasing popularity of the play made Wen an overnight celebrity in the *jingju* scene: In 1984 alone he did over forty shows. He was eventually allowed to transfer to the *dan* role category, and thus became the first *nandan* performer recognized after the Cultural Revolution. Because of the very exceptional nature of the approval, he was also believed to be the "last" *nandan* performer.

Wen confessed during the interview that *While Faced Gentleman* was a strategy for his transfer, for *White Faced Gentleman* created a perfectly justifiable chance for him to showcase his long reserved *dan* performance capacities and increasingly mature personal style which had evolved from the Zhang school. First of all, he was still in his *xiaosheng* role type, but playing a young man disguised as a woman in a "play" within a play; in other words, he was not actually transferring to the *dan* role type officially, but was playing in a *dan* role according to the needs of the story. According to Wen, Weng and he conceived the idea of adapting this *Water Margin* story under the overwhelming pressure of the social bias against *nandan* in the 1980s, which has more or less continued up to this day (2012). The social bias against cross-gender performance in the PRC, especially male-to-female cross-gender performance is not a sole outcome of the political campaigns to forge proletarian literature and art against bourgeoisie and feudal ideology. In my view, which is shared by Wen himself as well as many other theatre critics and sociologists in China, the pressure that Weng and Wen had felt then was also associated with the influence of Western homophobia. *Nandan* has always been associated with homosexuality, sassiness, transvestism and sodomy, while homosexuality was for a long time a pathological term in the PRC, considered representative of "the evil of Western civilization," "evil, ugly, anti-human," and "an insult to human dignity," which could "destroy socialist civilization" (Ruan and Tsai, 1988, 190-192).

While to be a *nandan* performer by profession means having to take the risk of being suspected to be "perverted" or "abnormal," Wen emphasizes that *nandan* is "art for art's sake" and that a *jingju* performer should have the freedom to play whatever role category suits him or her the best. For himself, he believes that he is great *dan* material, given his vocal and physical attributes. He stands five feet and six inches tall, which is not an ideal height for *xiaosheng*. He has a smallish face, though rather o the masculine side, a slim build, and narrow and round shoulders, which enable him to transform into a woman with great ease. Although his speaking voice is very deep and masculine, he has a naturally high-pitched falsetto voice, sonorous, strong, with a wide range and "metallic qualities" (Sun, 2012) even though he has been a lifelong heavy smoker. His soprano-like falsetto voice and bass-like speaking voice always surprise people, with such a drastic contrast. Given the penetrating power of his falsetto voice, when he sings and

speaks while performing *jingju*, his voice can be transmitted to the last row in a medium sized theatre without the use of microphone and speakers (2012). Due to his vocal strengths, he was chosen to sing behind the scene for the character Cheng Dieyi in the film, *Farewell, My Concubine*.

Wen reaffirms that a *jingju* performer should be able to choose a role category based on his or her vocal and physical strengths rather than gender. In fact, before the ban of *nandan* training, *jingju* performers were able to learn to "perform characters of their own and/or the opposite sex, depending upon their vocal and physical strengths" (2). Another major reason for his determined role category transfer was because he had always been drawn to the role category of *dan* and its glamour culminating at the time of the formation of the *Four Great Dan* until the 1950s when the Zhang school emerged. Indeed, *dan* had never been so glamorous in the past till the time of the *Four Great Dan*, who had sublimated the role category through unprecedented skills and innovations to a level that represents an ideal of poise and beauty in the portrayal of female characters. His creative urges have consistently been fuelled by a desire to create women on stage to achieve the glamour he has seen and desired regardless of all the bias and obstacles he has faced. That desire has a more transgressive nature than ever under the aforementioned circumstances. It has to be clarified, however, that he has never fantasized about being a transvestite. He believes that a real performing artist should be able to distinguish on-stage performance from off-stage life. In fact, he strikes me as such. *Nandan*, according to him, is unlike a drag queen in cabaret. The common Western perception of *nandan* as parallel to cross-dressing or transvestism is conceptually incorrect, as female impersonation in *jingju* is not simply undertaken to mimic a woman, but also to demonstrate through formulated conventions the qualities of "neatness, cleanliness and correctness of dress" (Scott, 1971). An experienced spectator's gaze concentrates on how well those qualities are demonstrated, rather than how accurately a man imitates a woman. Therefore, *nandan* is rather a male construct of women characters, which re-produces the female gender in a male-created theatrical form from the male perspective and, in the sexist, misogynist past, for the male gaze only. I would emphasize here that even though he justifies the normality of *nandan* vigorously in terms of the performance art, he also acknowledges the transgression behind it, largely because *nandan* nowadays is no longer a practical necessity, since

there are many women performing *dan* very well. Many contemporary female *dan* performers, known as *kundan*, have in fact surpassed most of their male predecessors in terms of their overall artistic skill level (Lin, 2012). In this sense, since the ban on *nandan* training and female dominance of the *dan* role type, *nandan* has become a form of voluntary transgression rather than the theatrical norm. So, to be a *nandan* performer is not to "have to" do it anymore, but to "want to" do it. In subsequent interviews in 2012 and 2014, Wen confessed multiple times that he chose *dan* because he loved this role category, loved creating female characters as a performer, and saw it as a lifelong obsession. And yet occasionally he exhibited self-mockery, saying, "Sometimes I really want to quit, and ask myself, 'What are you doing at this age?'" He also quoted the foul language of a hostile spectator, "What the heck are they doing over there on the stage with their dick and balls squeezed in between their thighs?"

The re-creation of women applies to a concept that I have used—the "natural selection" in the aesthetic regime in theatre (Bao, 2012). As Wichmann-Walczak has put it, men occupied the *jingju* stage at the beginning of its development, with the inception of *jingju* established by all male performers (4). Those earliest and prominent *nandan* performers created and developed a series of tactics to construct a woman on stage, including the use of falsetto voice for singing and speech, except for *laodan* (elderly female characters) and *choudan* (female clowns); the use of non-authentic, heavy makeup and head pieces and loose, non-contour costumes to hide male attributes as much as possible; and highly stylized gestures and movements. In this sense, the aesthetic regime initiated and set by men, regardless of subsequent innovations by either male or female *dan* performers, has secured and perpetuated a creative and existential space for *nandan* performers, and thus has suggested theoretical feasibility for the revival of the *nandan* art.

Since and aside from *White Faced Gentleman*, Wen has also played in leading *dan* roles in many other plays, including *The Misfortune of the Beauty (Chanjuan wu), Daiyu Buries Flowers (Daiyu zang hua), The Story of Ms. Qiu (qiu nü zhuan)* and *jingju-kunqu* joint production of *The Peony Pavilion (Mudan ting).* Despite his successful transfer, the government did not really lift the ban on *nandan*. Given the exceptional approval of his transfer, he was called by pessimistic media and supporters of *nandan*

"the last *nandan*." Nowadays *nandan* training is not officially forbidden anymore, but it is still not widely encouraged and *nandan* students are still very rare (Sun, 2012). Although he was given the title, "the last *nandan*," one with honour mixed with a pessimistic mood, Wen says that he has never liked the designation, as he always hopes for more *nandan* performers emerging.

"Natural Selection" in the Aesthetic Regime: The Return of Traditional Femininity

The revival of cross-gender performance in *xiqu* is not only about *nandan* in *jingju*, though I am focusing on the revival of the *nandan* art. It is also critically important and necessary to mention the revival of all-female *yueju*, as it was banned during the Cultural Revolution under "socialist femmophobia," and to compare and contrast it with the revival of the *nandan* art in *jingju* to explore the gender-related differences.

As aforementioned, the model plays during the Cultural Revolution embody Mao's feminist politics and "socialist femmophobia." No female protagonists are depicted as a wife or in a romantic heterosexual relationship as the plays try to tell us that they are all revolutionary beings, not sexual ones. Grandma Li in *The Red Lantern*, for example, is a widow, whose son, Li Yuhe, the male protagonist, is adopted. In *Shajiabang*, Aqingsao also appears to be a single woman, whose husband's whereabouts remain unknown. In *The Red Detachment of Women*, the male and female protagonists could have developed a romantic relationship under the critical circumstances, but do not seem to give the slightest hint of it. In *On the Docks*, the female protagonist, Fang Haizhen, is a devoted Communist Party secretary whose marital status is not even revealed. Not only are they "asexualized," but all these women also demonstrate qualities normally perceived by people as "masculine." No plays portray female characters with traditional feminist qualities, such as gentility, vulnerability, obedience and emotionality. As a matter of fact, they could take the lead and be as brave and determined as their male counterparts, if not more.

In addition, as discussed previously, cross-gender performance as a backward feudalistic product that reveals a distorted gender representation may "ruin" or "uglify"

the heroic image of the proletarians. Therefore, women should not only play women in these productions, but also should employ masculine bodily movements, with *xiaosheng* movement as the main source, and reduce stereotypical femininity to a minimum, as this kind of masculinization means progressive, revolutionary and liberating to women by destroying the traditional concept of femininity (Bai, 2010).

During the 1970s, as the model plays were intended to be copied, and were therefore "popularized" to a great extent—ultimately perhaps even an enforced extent—across the country, many local *xiqu* genres began to adapt the *jingju* model plays, since adaptation of model plays carried much less political and ideological risk than creating brand new plays. In 1972, the Shanghai *Yueju* Theatre (*Shanghai yueju yuan*) adapted the entire new model *jingju* play, *Song of the Dragon River*. In 1975, they adapted another new *jingju* model play, *Panshiwan*. These *yueju* adaptations along with a number of their newly created plays were all modern productions performed by a male-and-female mixed cast.

Mobilized by the state leadership, the model play campaigns courted "socialist femmophobia," a phobia of traditional femininity under Mao's socialist feminist politics. It did not only remove *nandan* from the *jingju* stage, but also killed all-female *yueju*.

If women's liberation relies on the erasure of their desired femininity and sexuality, then the liberation is to add new gender oppression to many women while disrupting feudal patriarchy and embracing female agency. What is natural and what is not natural is a subjective question. Although some women do not see traditional femininity as necessarily "natural," innate or compulsive, many may find it desirable and embrace it as the ideal to follow. In fact, after Mao's death, during the progression of implementing the open and reform policy in the late 1970s and the 1980s, the "socialist femmophobia" virtually came to an end. This is evident in a film, *The Hibiscus Town (Furong zhen)* (Dir. Xie Jin, 1986), that featured a rumination on the ultra-Left Cultural Revolution and derision of "de-gendered" and "asexualized" women as the products of Mao's feminism.

The Hibiscus Town, set amidst socialist politics that may be alien to Western audiences, reflects the dilemma of Mao's feminism through contrasting two women, a

peasant and a Party cadre. As revealed in the story, the fact that both characters are victims of political campaigns suggests the detrimental effect that Mao's feminist movements had on Chinese women of his time. It tells the story of a hard-working woman named Hu Yuyin, who runs a bean curd food stall with her husband, Guigui, and who earns enough money to have their new house built in a town called Hibiscus. In 1964, the officially sanctioned so-called "Four Clean-ups" (*si qing*) movement sent a Communist Party work-team to the region to eradicate Rightists and new rich peasants. Led by Li Guoxiang, a single woman who is apparently sexually frustrated, the team persecutes Hu and her husband, who later commits suicide in despair. During the Cultural Revolution that follows, the still obviously recalcitrant Hu falls in love with Qin Shutian, who is being persecuted as a member of the "Five Black Categories" (*hei wu lei*)—landlords, rich farmers, anti-revolutionaries, bad-influences, and right-wingers. She becomes pregnant. Their relationship enrages Li and her accomplice, Wang Qiushe, a sexually starved man whose lust for Hu is unrequited. Li and Wang later form a secret sexual relationship. At the end of the film, Hu and Qin's destiny changes for the better. They reunite as Deng Xiaoping (1904-97) seizes power after Mao's death. Li remains unhappy, albeit promoted.

The dramatic contrast between Hu, the virtuous and oppressed heroine who supposedly is a "natural" woman and Li, the Party cadre, antagonist, and a seemingly "unnatural" woman, raises questions about the official feminism embodied in the film. One woman's emancipation (Li's) seems to require the sacrifice of another's (Hu), hardly an effective gain for liberation. If female agency is merely employed as a tool to maximize and deepen class struggle in order to stabilize Maoist doctrine and its dominance, then all those seemingly feminist claims may have been propagandistic and lacking in real meaning. Unlike Hu, who strikes the audience as a "normative" woman in the film with her hyper-femininity and heterosexual relationships, Li lacks traditional femininity. She, too, is a victim of Mao's feminist politics—while she has achieved political power, she sacrifices her sexual desire.

The victimization of both women places Mao's feminist politics at the core of contemporary feminist criticism: "Natural" women are associated with "capitalism," while the idealized Communist-liberated woman loses apparent femininity and sexuality. Many

films in the 1980s, such as *The Hibiscus Town*, question the detrimental effects of the "puritanism" of Mao's feminism on women.

Since Deng Xiaoping seized power and regained prominence in the CCP following Mao's death and the closure of the Cultural Revolution, traditional *xiqu* plays have reappeared on the stage, while model plays are basically viewed as products of that special historical era. It is interesting to note that though *jingju* casts remain largely male-and-female, all-female *yueju* quickly revived after the Cultural Revolution, with the male-and-female mixed casting being marginalized. While censorship and regulation still remain rigid in media, art and literature in the present-day PRC, particularly regarding content that may threaten social "harmony," political intervention in cross-gender performance has been kept to a minimum, even for the more controversial male-to-female cross-dressing practice. All-female *yueju*, which has never been too controversial, has trained a new generation of stars, such as Mao Weitao, who is a woman playing male roles under the *xiaosheng* role category. She is also currently the President of the prestigious *yueju* troupe in the Zhejiang province—"Little Hundred Flowers" *Yueju* Company (*xiao bai hua yueju tuan*).

During my interview with Lin Ruikang, a veteran *kunqu* performing artist and former Deputy Director of *Jingju* Revitalization Office (*zhenxing jingju ban gong shi*), Bureau of Arts (*yishu ju*), at the PRC's Ministry of Culture, she conveys the reasons she has discovered behind the enduring popularity of *yueju*'s all-female casting. According to her analysis based on the repertoire and style of *yueju*, it is a feminine theatrical art form that works best with an all-female cast in narrating romance, which is loved by most women (2012). *Yueju* fans including those who seek romantic friendship with other women—either performers or fellow fans or amateur performers—and have contributed to creating the norms in the *yueju* economy over the years. The initial tone set for the genre has determined the suitability and stability of its all-female status, which has gradually removed male performers from its arena. Moreover, since *yueju* audience members and fans have always been mostly female (Jiang, 2011, 1), an all-female crew renders the "sisterly" interaction much easier. In the 1930s and the 1940s, concubinage was legal in China. Under the patriarchal structure, the all-female *yueju* scene in metropolitan Shanghai created a safe utopia for rich men's wives, concubines and

daughters to seek same-sex friendship and to build coalition as a getaway from male domination and patriarchal rule. Patronage was an important part of the *xiqu* tradition between the fans and performers, serving as a means to form relationships as what they called "sworn sisters" back then. For *yueju*, this was mostly between women patrons and women performers in Shanghai in the 1930s and the 1940s. As Jiang observes, "[W]omen's *[y]ue* opera companies appeared to be pure and clean, with a hint of virtue and chastity… Furthermore, the very absence of male actors backstage was convenient for women patrons, permitting them to move in and out freely and appropriating it as a women's space" (10-11). This somehow suggests that the critical promise of all-female *yueju* has to do with the systemic failure of heterosexual regimes ever fully to express their own ideals, and in the *yueju* scene the failure of heterosexual regimes is a "natural selection" in the aesthetic regime, which has boosted the enduring cross-gender expression, causing the flourishing and revival of all-female casting before as well as after Mao's time.

Having developed from its initial all-male casting, to male-and-female mixed casting, then to all-female in Republican Shanghai, male-and-female during the Cultural Revolution, and finally to the revival of the all-female casting, nowadays *yueju* remains primarily all-female. As of 2005, 112 private *yueju* troupes had been registered in the city of Shengzhou, the former Sheng County and the birthplace of *yueju*, launching some 36,000 performances each year, with *Butterfly Lovers* being one of the most performed, let alone those prestigious troupes and fan clubs in nearby cities, Hangzhou and Shanghai. The revival of all-female *yueju* suggests that cross-gender performance is not necessarily backward or feudalistic, but has artistic vitality and market value based on a solid foundation among the masses. Jiang Qing's attempt to erase femininity and de-gender women ended up being unsuccessful, as women's desires can never be completely extinguished, even though their secondary sex characteristics can be tentatively disguised. The economy of desires in the aesthetic regime of theatre has been fuelling the revival of this art form and its cross-gender performance tradition as its organic compound.

All-female *yueju* revived under that retrospective social situation that questioned puritanism, waking up women from constraints on female sexuality to rethink female

subjectivity and specificity. It was a parallel to the emergence and formation of all-female *yueju* in Republican Shanghai, seeking to reconstruct women's autonomy centered in the theatre. As I have discussed previously, *yueju* as a *xiqu* genre has its own aesthetic regime grounded upon traditional appreciation of male femininity or the beauty of *yin* as well as female audience members' enduring interest in love drama. Unlike *nandan* in *jingju*, the revival of all-female *yueju* ran into far fewer institutional and social obstacles, which ontologically demonstrates the differential political and social attitudes towards male femininity and female masculinity.

Since all-female *yueju* has revived, what about the whereabouts of male *yueju* performers? Although *yueju* remains primarily all-female, there have been a few male performers who play male characters under the *xiaosheng* role category, such as Zhao Zhigang (1962-), who created a new historic play, *The Orphan of Zhao (Zhao shi gu er),* in 2005, hoping to add to the *yueju* repertoire a play more suitable for a male-and-female cast. His ambition was to make *yueju* more inclusive of diversified themes, instead of being restricted to ancient themed love dramas, so that there would be more male performers who could fit in. He chose *The Orphan of Zhao* because it is the first Chinese play known in Europe through Joseph Henri Marie de Prémare, who translated the play into French as *Tchao-chi-cou-eulh*, first published in 1735. Also known as *The Orphan of China* and based on true historic events, this epic play is far more challenging to an all-female *yueju* cast than a love story like *Butterfly Lovers*. Despite all the efforts made to bring more male performers onto the *yueju* stage so as to build up a solid male-and-female mixed cast, the art form still remains primarily all female. Accepted to the Shanghai *Yueju* Theatre during the Cultural Revolution in 1974 to contribute to the mixed casting, Zhao Zhigang, the "Prince of *Yueju*," is one of the very few successful male *xiaosheng* performers of *yueju* (2006) to also work as Artistic Director of his company.[36] During a media interview, he expresses the hardship he has had as a male performer playing male roles emerging in the all-female *yueju* scene and the difficulty in finding a play suitable for mixed casting (2006). In another media interview, he claims that the male-and-female mixed *yueju* is "in great danger," due to the lack of policy support (Wang, 2010), and that the number of male *yueju* performers is decreasing

[36] See more at http://www.chinaopera.net/html/2006-11/856.html

(2006). He also notes that only two *yueju* companies still have male-and-female mixed casting, while the others are all all-female (2006). To conclude, gender-straight performance in *yueju* has encountered even more obstacles than the revival of all-female *yueju*. This may sound ironic if we compare it with gender-straight performance in *jingju*. In fact, all-female casting in *yueju* seems more normative than gender-straight performance to the gaze of cultivated *yueju* audience according to Lin Ruikang. She contends that *yueju* audience members and audience members in general cannot accept the effeminacy of male performers who play male roles, but have no problems accepting male characters played by female performers. She also claims that people may feel that men playing men in *yueju* are "sissie" (*niang niang qiang*). This is to say, firstly, given the feminine qualities of *yueju* as a genre and its love drama-related content, even gender-straight performance as seen in a male performer playing male roles is seen as male femininity, and, further, that the femininity of the fictional male character is more acceptable than the femininity demonstrated in a real male. This may suggest that, if dual consciousness is taken into account, audience members are not really annoyed by cross-gender performance, either male to female or the other way around, but by the gender-straight intervention of a long formed imaginary all-female regime. This, however, is not applicable to *jingju*, as *jingju* has a broader, diverse repertoire and *jingju* itself does not "have" a gender.

The attempt to transform all-female *yueju* to one that is male-and-female gender-straight during the Cultural Revolution has obviously failed. Despite the mobilization by state leadership during the Cultural Revolution, female-to-male cross-gender performers in *yueju* have far outnumbered their male counterparts, and currently, as brought up by Zhao above, because of the insufficient institutional support from the government, the number of male *yueju* performers continues to decrease.

I call this "natural" revival of all-female *yueju* "natural selection" in the aesthetic regime of theatre, which bears its own market-oriented law of evolution and which is subject to a gender politics independent of external social political intervention. Operating within its special mechanism, the subject is to select what suits the sustained development the best and abandon the "misfit." Indeed, the revival of the all-female casting of *yueju* is firmly constructed upon "natural selection" in the aesthetic matrix,

meaning that a particular theatrical art form has its own gendered law and economy which determines what works and what does not. The “naturalness” here is not about gender, but rather defines the evolution of the specific theatrical tradition. Despite the political manipulation of the genre along with its repertoire, making it a propagandistic tool to promote the liberated image of the Chinese women against feudal patriarchy in the early period of the PRC and to erase traditional femininity from revolutionary heroic plays during the Cultural Revolution, the feminized aesthetic tradition as a natural choice has eventually survived the state intervention. Theatre is not only an isolated regime that rejects political involvement deep within its own system of national identity, but also an epitome to reflect the current reality in which we live, where women have achieved more discursive power and the right to voice their need and desires.

In conclusion, the revival of the all-female casting of *yueju* is constructed on what I call the “natural selection” in the aesthetic regime of theater, meaning that a particular theatrical art form has its own gendered law and consumer economy which determines what works better and what does not work, and what needs to be kept and what can be abandoned. In the case of *yueju*, this particular *xiqu* genre is perfectly compatible with its favourite genre romance and its enduring female-to-male cross-gender casting. Despite the political manipulation of the genre along with its repertoire, making it a propagandistic tool either to promote the liberated image of the Chinese women against feudal patriarchy in the early period of the PRC or to erase femininity from revolutionary heroic plays during the Cultural Revolution, the “queer” aesthetic tradition as a natural choice has eventually survived the state intervention which is largely gender-based. Theater is not only an isolated regime that rejects political involvement deep within its own system of national identity, but also an epitome to reflect the current reality we live in, where women have achieved more discursive power and the right to voice their need and desires.

The Mainstreaming of Drag in Popular Media

Jingju or *xiqu* in general demonstrates typicality of gender transgression in its tradition of cross-gender performance and the homoerotic subculture that derives from

that theatrical tradition, but it does not mean that the transgression belongs to *jingju* or *xiqu* exclusively. In fact, the typicality is also suggestive of a universality of gender transgression which has extended to aesthetic practices as seen in popular media, entailing a plethora of approaches to gender expressions with a transgressive nature. If a male dancer voluntarily and habitually employs in his performance bodily movements that are perceived by people as feminine, for example, it may be suggestive of an expression of gender transgression (but still the specificity of each case needs to be taken into account). If a man *habitually* hums the tune of a song exclusively sung by female singers, it may also be considered an expression of gender transgression, even though not to the extent of the extreme behaviour of doing drag, cross-dressing, transvestism or even receiving a sex reassignment surgery. One of my interviewees, who is a male in his late 50s, almost always sings or hums songs that are normally sung by women or unisex songs, either at home, or when driving, or at *karaoke*. He expresses a natural "resistance" to singing "men's songs." The incongruity between the voluntary, habitual behaviour and the biological gender of the subject suggests the tendency to transgress one's assigned gender. The outer gender-variant expression is always mobilized by the sense of a gendered self relatively stable at least within a certain length of time.

Although *jingju* has created a relatively safe space for gender transgression, due to the legitimate status in its tradition, when the growing desire for gender transgression cannot be fulfilled due to the lack of proper theatrical training or an accommodating theatrical setting, other forms of gender transgressive aesthetic practices may emerge consciously or unconsciously in lieu of theatrical performance. These practices may include—but are not limited to—drag or gender-ambiguous performance in popular media. Li Yugang (1978-), for example, is a "grass-roots" independent drag artist who has become mainstream. He launched his vocal concert at the Sydney Opera House in 2009 dressed as a classical Chinese beauty,[37] and also performed in drag at the China Central Television's (CCTV) Chinese New Year Gala (*chun wan*) in 2012 and 2013. In 2009, he was accepted to the prestigious China Opera and Dance Drama Company (CODDC) (*Zhongguo geju wuju yuan*) for a permanent position after his rise to stardom

[37] See more at http://ent.sina.com.cn/j/2009-07-29/07522629275.shtml

through participating in the CCTV's "Avenue of Stars" (*Xing guang da dao*), a popular Chinese talent show similar to "American Idol" (Yang, 2009). CODDC hosted a press conference for the appointment, witnessed by some of the nation's top celebrities, who had been invited as special guests to the event. He is now entitled China's State First-Class Performing Artist (*guojia yiji yanyuan*).

Although he is constantly mentioned by critics, media and his fans in the same breath with Mei Lanfang, he is not a *nandan* performer of *jingju*, nor has he ever trained to be one, as he primarily performs Chinese folk songs and dance. He has, however, largely integrated *jingju* elements into his song-and-dance performance, such as the musical style, bodily movements, and the headdress and costumes for *dan* in *jingju*. In addition, some of his shows reference such *jingju* plays as *Farewell, My Concubine* and *The Drunken Beauty* (*guifei zui jiu*). He also performs excerpts from the newly created symphonic historical *jingju* play, *The Concubine of the Tang Dynasty* (*da tang guifei*). The effort he makes to "implicate" the *nandan* art of *jingju* in his performance is somehow a strategy many drag artists would utilize to legitimatize and normalize their art. This has been confirmed by two drag queens I interviewed in Beijing, Li Mei and Zhang Bing (2003), both of whom have at some point employed *jingju* elements in their shows or compared themselves to *nandan*.

His success is definitely not an accidental singular case, given the numerous supportive factors involved. What I find most interesting in the Li Yugang phenomenon is the drastic contrast between his rise to mainstream stardom doing drag with the support of the PRC's mainstream media (including but not limited to the CCTV) along with the connivance of the state government[38] and the fear of discrimination he underwent during the earlier stages of his drag career (Gao, 2009). The dramatic dilemma that Li has typically experienced perhaps conveys the paradoxical attitude of society. On the one hand, as previously discussed, the making of a social taboo out of *nandan* over time has courted homophobia and femmophobia among the masses, and hence all those

[38] Li Yugang is the second artist from the PRC to hold a vocal convert at the Sydney Opera House in Australia. Over 2,000 people attended his concert including high-ranking officials from the PRC's General Consulate in Sydney. See more at http://jlrbszb.chinajilin.com.cn/html/2009-07/30/content_539946.htm

institutional obstacles for its legitimacy and normalization; on the other hand, the increasing popularity of drag on mainstream media is an outcome of a consumer economy that accentuates demands of audiences as consumers within the very terms of marketability of the visual products. This paradox is perhaps suggestive of a transgressive pleasure that both the performer and the spectator experience simultaneously in doing and watching the cross-gender reiteration—and also an insubordination—of the "original" other. In other words, the transgressive pleasure does not only lie in the theatricality of "doing" a different gender while maintaining the consciousness of the subject "being" a different gender; it also stems from the process of witnessing the dialectical correlation between the truth of the illusory and the illusory of the truth. The process of witnessing of the spectator is also a kind of participation or "complicity" in the gender-transgressive activity of the performer; the performer and the spectator co-exist, inspire, stimulate, and validate one another. While *nandan* in *jingju* requires much performance technique and stylized conventions in "doing" a gender, non-theatrical cross-gender aesthetic activities that do not require as much can go mainstream may underline a more realistic, collective view on a created gendered reality by destructing dominant gender paradigms.

Chapter 5.
The New Generation[39]

This chapter will proceed from the historicization of cross-gender performance in *xiqu* to its extension into lived realities in the process of the contemporary revival of *nandan*. I will present cases that explore new readings of the old aesthetic tradition in a new social and political context, and rediscover genders and gendered behaviours, sexual orientation, sexual desire, transgressive potential, and feminism in aesthetic practice as well as lived realities. Revival does not mean that the *nandan* art will resume its historic status, but rather profoundly suggests a matrix of genders in relation to internal and external impacts with *jingju* contextualized, in which I seek more accessible vehicles to assist me in deconstructing the cultural implications of interrogating the constructedness and performativity of gender, and in exploring the interplay between gender, sexuality and sexual desires.

Not much critical attention has been paid to the complexity of gender issues in the revival of the *nandan* art. In fact, many of the areas go unnoticed to the public eye, for the practice is often reduced to a mere voluntary personal choice of profession out of individual strengths. As always is the case, other than the association of the subject with homosexuality, little has been discussed regarding how transgressive this art is and what the transgression may reflect. In examining gender issues in the contemporary revival of *nandan*, I have chosen to interview and follow up thirty individuals including *nandan* performers and those associated with them, collecting, gathering, comparing and contrasting their oral accounts. In this study, which has gathered subjective views of many informants, how they say something on a given topic is more meaningful than how accurate the information they provide is. In fact, “accuracy” has an individualistic

[39] The “new generation” here refers to the *nandan* performers that are trained after the Culture Revolution.

meaning in many of the topics they talk about, as each individual may choose to interpret or perceive the same matter according to his likes, dislikes, beliefs and disbeliefs. Within the frame of officially released sources of information, there have been many differing allegations of details or judgments. As such, I am not interested in approaching a phenomenon in its given form or challenging the veracity of their subjective views, but in interpreting and analyzing it within a particular social, cultural and political context.

I had started this process long before I embarked on the doctoral program. I have become very familiar with many of the informants over the years. Aside from pre-interviews and interviews, in April 2014, I returned to Beijing to conduct more interviews and followed up with up-to-date data added to my research. The informants that I pre-interviewed and interviewed from 2012 to 2014 can be divided into three categories. The first one consists of retired *jingju* performers who had begun their training prior to the Cultural Revolution and thus experienced the proletarian theatrical reform campaigns during that period of time, among them Wen Ruhua, the alleged "last *nandan*" who successfully—and yet with much frustration—transferred from his assigned *xiaosheng* role category to his desired *dan* in the 1980s. Many of these interviewees, including Wen, have friends of mine for around two decades. The second category consists of younger professional *nandan* performers and students who have emerged in recent years, including Liu Zheng, who is currently a fulltime *nandan* performer with the National *Jingju* Theatre in Beijing. I met them mostly through interviewees from the first category. The *jingju* circle is relatively small, let alone the *nandan* circle. In fact, many *nandan* performers of the new generation have trained informally. Some of them have sought guidance from Wen Ruhua or other accomplished *nandan* performers from the older generation. The third category includes some of the *jingju* amateurs (*piaoyou*) who engage in the *nandan* art in one way or another, as a hobby, and individuals who are associated with *nandan*, such as *jingju* performers who used to train with *nandan* students or who have worked with *nandan* performers. Although they are not fully or directly involved in the *nandan* art, they have been observers and supporters of it for years and thus can share their views. Besides, I have also interviewed a mélange of individuals who are interested in discussing gender alternative expressions and cross-gender performance in any form. These informants talk on a wide range of topics,

including motives, construction of identities, obstacles and social progress, and the interplay between bodies, pleasures, desires and identities. Whereas there is considerable overlapped content aside from individual perspectives and visions, I will not be going through the cases one by one. Instead, I will break down the interviews, reorganize and categorize them into four major scenarios. The first scenario features a typical "genderqueer" case, in which the subject does not have a fixed gender identity but is constantly in a state of self-negotiation in accordance with the setting. The second scenario examines psychological compensation through cross-gender performance as a process of "make-believe." The third is focused on an intersex individual who has a primary gender identity and yet a secondary one, who has to switch in between the two to fit into a given situation. The fourth covers individuals who do not pursue cross-gender performance as a career or a long-time hobby, but do it occasionally for a variety of reasons, which may be evidence of the relatedness between one's desire of the moment and the degree of resistance to or acceptance of self-indulgent of cross-gender performance. There are areas within four scenarios that overlap, and yet each of them is distinguished from the others, as it represents a group of individuals who have more in common than those who fall into other scenarios.

The names used here are a mix of real names and pseudonyms. Most of the informants choose to remain anonymous or to use a pseudonym for content that they perceive as "sensitive." For that reason, I may use both the real name and a pseudonym for the same informant according to the sensitive nature of the information they provide, as I believe that their privacy should be respected.

"Two Spirited" *Nandan*

This case is a typical example that suggests relatedness between one's acts and instinctual desires, while there is no adequate evidence that has been observed off external influence. Splitting his time between his birth country, China, and the adoptive homeland, Canada, Wang Zilin (pseudonym) was born in Beijing in 1957 and came to Canada as a student in 1984. He considers himself to be an amateur *nandan* performer, who started training in classical Chinese dance—whose movements share many of the principles of both Chinese martial arts and *jingju*—at the age of seven and later

extended that training to *jingju*. He particularly likes the model plays, including both the modern *jingju* productions and the two ballets. While living in Canada, he was hired by Cirque Du Soleil for a short while thanks to his excellent acrobatic training in China. In Vancouver, British Columbia, he also played an extra in a Canadian rendition of the Broadway production, *M. Butterfly*. He wished that he could get the part of M. Butterfly, but his spoken English was not so good. Now in his late 50s, his youthful short haircut and the eye catching shiny eardrop on his left ear provide a sharp contrast. He wears a fashionable jacket with a high-end designer look, slim-fit dress pants, and a pair of vintage style sneakers with stripes on both sides. His face is chiselled, and his mannerism passably masculine, while there is much gentility and elegance in the way he carries himself. Technically, it is hard for a first time observer to determine if he is masculine or feminine by his looks. Many of those who have met him briefly would claim that he is flamboyant, but definitely "not effeminate."

Self-identified as gay now, he contends that he had all "symptoms" of GIDC (Gender Identity Disorder in Children) during his childhood. He does not mind talking about the "symptoms" at all. At age five, he felt an intense desire to become a girl. He claims that that desire had nothing to do with any environmental influence, largely because his only brother, who grew up with him together in the same household, behaved quite "normally." His brother, who was two years older, also served as his bodyguard to protect himself from other kids' bullying due to his "sissy acts." From age five until puberty he exhibited an obvious and persistent cross-gender identification. He enjoyed doing embroidery, knitting, and playing with dolls, and envied girls for being able to wear beautiful skirts. He only played games with girls, always imagining himself being one of them. His parents, who were both singers of Italian opera, and his brother sometimes tried to stop him from engaging in girls' activities, but, according to him, they did not really take it seriously, and so let him be. Until he hit puberty, he had always fantasized that when he grew older he could receive a sex change surgery to become a woman. As an adult, he is not interested in a sex reassignment surgery anymore, nor is he interested in passing as a woman in reality. He says, "It is such a great feeling to have a male penis. You know, when you swing it from side from side, it makes you feel so proud of having it." As a regular gym goer, he says, "I used to have fantasies about women's big breasts, but now I love men's pecs. I not only want to have big pecs myself,

but also want to touch and stroke a man's big pecs." While saying this, he looks down at his own chest and grabs a bit of it outside of his shirt, complaining that his workout still has not enlarged his pecs to a desirable size.

Although he feels perfectly comfortable with male primary sex characteristics, such as male genitalia, he asserts that deep inside he has "always been a woman." He feels uncomfortable if someone calls him "brother," and prefers to be called "sister." He admits that he has all female psychological traits, since he is sentimental, hypersensitive, emotional, and passive—especially when he is on date, meaning that he hopes to be chased, courted and treated like a lady. He claims several times that he would never "make the first move" when dating. He almost always sings or hums songs particularly written and composed for female singers. He goes to karaoke a lot, where he always picks "women's songs" to sing. He points at his heart, saying, "It is a woman in here." He has an intense passion for ballroom dance and has a regular female dance partner, whom he sees as a "sworn sister." While they dance, though he has to do the man's part to lead the lady, he says that secretly he prefers to be the lady and be led by a man. This matches the oral accounts of many male instructors of ball room dance, that they do lady's steps as well as gentleman's and in private prefer doing the lady's steps. I have also met male ballet dancers who can also dance like a ballerina, even better. Wang says that that is not rare in the dance world, but he claims that the percentage of queer men in dance circles is not as high as for some other lines of work often associated with homosexuality, such as fashion design. He passionately demonstrates a lady's swivels in the Rumba. I ask him whether or not he feels comfortable dancing with a woman. He says that when he and his dance partner dance Cha-Cha, which is all about a man flirting with a woman, he has to imagine that he is dancing solo, or flirting with a handsome man. For him, doing the *nandan* performance in *jingju* is a more legitimate way of being a woman without having to erase his primary male sex characteristics and/or permanently sacrifice his secondary male sex characteristics. He observes that many gays like him are drawn to the arts because "the arts have no essential gender," and have much potential for them to assume both male and female sensibilities. In particular, they are also drawn to cross-gender theatre because the stage creates another domain of reality for a more audacious gender expression.

Nevertheless, the career constitutes a new identity, adding a new dimension to the pre-existing one which is oftentimes stigmatized unless tied to the theatre.

Although he socially identifies himself as gay, he claims that his gender is "more female than male," and in this sense he is considered by some of his gay pals to be psychologically heterosexual. One of his best friends adds during a cross-interview, "[Wang] is not gay. He is attracted to men only, but in the way a woman is." But how male is he? Why does he love his own penis? I think that the male part of his gender is more associated with his narcissistic admiration for the male phallus, while the female part, as he puts it, is more "innate" or more "congenital." While part of him surrenders to self-identification as primarily a female, part of him still enjoys the superiority he has gained through "having" the phallus, which positions men as men and which psychologically has precluded him from pursuing a desire developed in early childhood, to undergo a sex change. In sum, he may be perceived in Western terms as genderqueer—a catch-all category for gender identities outside of the gender binary. About his gender and sexual identity, he confesses that he was very confused during his childhood and boyhood, as knowledge of or exposure to gender variations and homosexuality were extremely limited back then, except for a few Western magazines "secretly" brought into China by friends in artistic circles. Back then he would relate the difference between himself and most other males around him to a mental disorder, which triggered several suicidal attempts. He began to hear that there were other men like him out there who were identified as "gay," but only when he came to Canada in 1984. He claims that China has become far more open about homosexuality this past decade, though it still has a long way to go, in terms of supporting LGBT rights and legalizing same-sex marriage.

During the conversation, I asked him whether or not he had heard of the Two-Spirited[40] tradition in the First Nations culture in Canada. He shook his head, so I explained it. He seemed very inspired, saying excitedly, "Yes, I'm Two-Spirited, not gay!" Can we conclude that he is not gay? He is a male and is attracted to men, has only had

[40] Two-Spirit(ed) is a term used by some indigenous North Americans to describe or label gender-variant individuals in First Nations communities.

intimacy with men, and does not have the slightest interest in getting intimate with women. In this sense, he is gay, unless the widely acknowledged definition of gay has been officially revised. Although I don't see that the term Two-Spirit(ed) is applied to individuals outside of the First Nations communities, I have known a number of non First Nations individuals who would like to refer to themselves using this term and abandon such terms as "gay" or "homosexual," which they feel has been imposed on their self-knowledge and self-realization by discourse.

The Superior Woman Within

This case features a rising *nandan* star in China. Born in 1989, Wang Feng (pseudonym) is a *xiaosheng* student at a prestigious *xiqu* institution, but he spends more time studying *dan* outside of his class with a great number of male or female *dan* performing artists who teach him for free in a gesture of encouragement and support. In fact, prior to coming to Beijing, he had trained as a *nandan* performer at the local *jingju* troupe in his home city. Whereas the institution he applied to did not recruit *nandan* students, he was advised by admissions officers to transfer to the role category of *xiaosheng*. Although it is a role category he had never liked, he had to accept the offer in order to relocate to Beijing for a better future.

He had developed an interest in the *dan* performance of *jingju* long before he realized that *jingju* was male-dominated in history and that Mei Lanfang was actually a male. He started to fantasize about being the white snake when he watched *The New Legend of Madame White Snake* (*Xin bai niangzi chuanqi*), a very successful 1992 TV series that have been broadcast in the PRC multiple times.[41] After watching the TV series, he also watched *The Broken Bridge* (*Duan qiao*), an excerpt from the *jingju* adaptation of the legend, starring Du Jinfang (1932-), one of the most acclaimed female *dan* performing artists of the Mei school and a student of Mei Lanfang. Du Jinfang's *The*

[41] *The Legend of Madame White Snake*, also known as *White Snake*, is one of the greatest Chinese legends that had long existed in oral tradition before any written compilation. Since the Ming dynasty, it has since been fictionalized, and adapted in Chinese *xiqu* genres, films and television series. The 1992 TV series by Taiwan Television Enterprise has been one of the most popular adaptations up to today.

Broken Bridge triggered his tremendous interest in impersonating a woman in *jingju*. During this period of time, he primarily learned *jingju* by himself through watching television and videos and listening to audio materials. For him, *jingju* was a "make-believe" play that offered a space for him to enjoy the advantages of being a woman, such as the permissibility to show off feminine gentility, elegance, grace, and sensitivities. It may be maintained, through his narratives, that during most of his childhood, his sense of gender was towards the feminine side. He could have been diagnosed with GIDC, but as a matter of fact, as a young child, his sense of gender could have been almost non-existent back then without any trigger, such as the inspiration from watching a *jingju* play. GIDC is in fact seen from an adult's perspective in young children who have vague gender sense but have been assigned polar genders by social and cultural expectations.

Therefore, his real "mental disorder," as he has articulated, was not GIDC, but the phobia of being diagnosed with GIDC along with the melancholy and stress it caused during adolescence, that liminal, transitional stage of physical and psychological human development between puberty and legal adulthood. He confesses, "[As a teenager] I always suspected that I was a transvestite or had gender identity problems. I thought it was abnormal." But his worries were relieved when he found out while surfing on the Internet that Mei Lanfang was actually a man. He continued to search online for more findings of the *Four Great Dan* and *Four Junior Dan*,[42] who were all male, as well as the male-dominated *jingju* history. He felt relieved, and became more comfortable about his desire for cross-gender performance, as he realized that he was neither the first nor the only one who was passionate about impersonating women.

As an adult, he firmly identifies himself as heterosexual, and yet he does not hide his continued passion for being a woman on stage. He seems very self-confident and narcissistic about his good looks, saying, "To play a woman, you have to be a gorgeous looking man. Not every man could play a beautiful woman. I simply have the 'package' to be that superior woman." He emphasizes that he is gratified with the temporal

[42] The *Four Junior Dan* refers to the four most popular nandan performers of *jingju* that emerged after the *Four Great Dan* in Republican China. They were Li Shifang (1921-47), Zhang Junqiu (1920-97), Mao Shilai (1921-94) and Song Dezhu (1918-84).

condition of being the superior woman on stage, the cynosure to all eyes, and that he does not desire to be a permanent woman, nor has he ever wished it.

The typicality of this case lies in the common discovery among *nandan* performers of a fictional "superior woman" within. It may be hard simply to conclude that the engagement in the impersonation is completely independent of internalization. The interplay between the two has been noted by observers over the years. Firstly, impersonating a woman on stage magnifies the actor's physical beauty on the feminine side and thus boosts his self-confidence. Second, being a cynosure largely fulfills narcissistic desires and complements what is missing in the actor's off-stage sexuality. In this sense, I am more convinced than ever that sexuality is one central term for psychoanalysis.

Intersex

Of all the interviewees, Li Yu (pseudonym) is a very rare case. He is an intersex person with combinations of chromosomal genotype and sexual phenotype other than XY-male and XX-female. Anyone would be confused by his gender ambiguous look at first glance. He calls himself a drag queen (*fanchuan huanghou*), a cross-gender performer and a self-taught *nandan* performer, as he also performs female roles in *jingju* wearing feminine costumes at nightclubs. Thus, I use "he" to address him here instead of "she."

He entrusts me with his stories only after several meetings. He shares an apartment with another drag queen, whom I have also interviewed. They strike me as "frenemies," as on the one hand they stick to one another to build a coalition of support, mutual understanding and solace, and on the other hand they see each other as rivals, for they have to compete in the drag scene. He was born in a very impoverished family in a village in North-eastern China. As an infant, he had male outer genitalia, while the female genitalia were hidden inside, so his parents raised him as a boy. With both male and female chromosomes, gonads and genitalia, he started to realize that something was "wrong" with him when he grew up, and increasingly believed that he was "trapped" in the "wrong" body. Yet he was not sure whether or not the female gender was all he

wanted, since he enjoyed some of the advantages of being a male at times. Medical doctors that he went to see all recommended genital reconstruction surgery to surgically remove the male genitalia, so that he could become a 100% woman and even could procreate. As a chef working in the impoverished countryside, he earned only a few hundred *yuan* a month, so he couldn't afford the surgery. Years later, a private hospital would like to offer him the surgery for free in exchange for his consent to media coverage to promote the newly opened hospital. At first, he was very excited about it, but the pre-surgical medical examination indicated that he had severe diabetes, which precluded him from receiving the surgery due to high risks of complications. He was somehow disappointed, but not upset.

Currently he makes a living by singing and dancing and hosting events at bars, small theatres and nightclubs in Beijing. His favourite solo show is taken from the *jingju* play, *Farewell, My Concubine*. Standing five feet eleven inches tall and always wearing men's clothing, he does not grow facial hair, and exhibits both male and female secondary sex characteristics. He is quite average looking without make-up. His mannerisms are neither manly nor effeminate. When he walks on the street, he appears to be a gender ambiguous person who sometimes causes people to turn their heads or even stare at him out of curiosity. He feels worthless off stage, but on stage it is a different story. I have been invited to one of his shows at an upscale nightclub in the centre of Beijing. With the meticulous make-up, glamorous headdress and costumes, he has transformed into a striking beauty. The audience members, either male or female, can't take their eyes off him. In fact, I have heard many people talking about his dramatic changes on and off stage.

His views on gender identity are quite similar to those of Wang Zilin. Before puberty, he believed that he was a boy and was raised by his parents as a boy, though he was often seen as a girlish boy. When he became an adolescent, female secondary sex characteristics began to manifest in his phenotype, which evoked his confusion about his biological sex. He does not really have an "ontological" gender, nor has he felt any constitutive effects of the construction of a gender. When asked if he identifies more as a male or a female, he confesses, "I don't know. I go to the men's restroom and I stand to pee, so I think I'm a man. I date men and want a husband, and when I'm

thinking about it, I'm thinking like a woman, so I guess I'm also a woman." His gender identification also varies depending on the biological sex of his date.[43] He has dated women in the past. When he dates a woman, he claims that he feels more like a heterosexual man than a lesbian. He feels like a woman when he is dating a man, though. This has confirmed my hypothesis of "gender relativity," which is to say that our sense of gender is deeply influenced by those surrounding us who have an intimate meaning to us. He primarily dates men now, informing me that at one point he almost married a man who proposed marriage to him, but it eventually did not work out for him, for reasons he did not want to reveal. Under such a circumstance, the urge to have genital reconstructive surgery to transform himself into a total woman is extremely intense. This may further suggest that one's sense of gender is fluid and relative, subverting essentialist or constructivist narratives; it is shaped and determined based on one's reflex to how others around him or her perceive his gender. And yet it does not mean that there is no such relatively stable and substantial sense of a gendered self. In Li's case, his self-identification seems situational and somehow independent of the internal and more permanent sense of gendered self that has prevailed throughout his adult life. Realizing the slim likelihood of having the surgery due to aging, financial insufficiency, and most importantly, severe diabetes, he accepts the reality of having to retain the intersex status he was born with. Because of this, he also identifies himself as a homosexual man.

Regarding quitting his job as a chef to become a cross-gender performing artist, he contends, "It's all because of the demand. The pay is much higher [for a cross-gender performer]. I feel like trash off stage, but I feel I'm a big star, a desirable beauty queen on the stage." Indeed, the theatrical experience is the only time he can have the transformative "surgery" that he has dreamed of, a surgery with a temporary effect of turning Cinderella into a princess.

The reappearance of *nandan* along with other forms of cross-gender performance should not be simplified as the obligatory resumption of a socio-cultural and

[43] His account regarding the variation of gender sense is identical to those of some other intersex individuals that I have interviewed.

theatrical norm. During the course of my research on these case studies, I have observed that the subjects' voluntary engagements in the *nandan* art are in fact accommodating a transgressive gender expression and, in particular, pursuing a psychological fulfillment based on gender and sexuality. Performers and audience members all see the theatre (or TV and digital media) as a laboratory in which to experiment with a created reality motivated by a tendency to transgress the norms. The performer processes personification through self-actualization, while the spectator sees the shadow cast on his or her psyche. In this sense, both experiences are transgressive, though the degrees differ.

Occasional *Nandan*

During my investigation, I have observed that the revival of *nandan* not only includes those who become exclusively fulltime *nandan* performers, but also takes the form of occasionally transgressing one's chosen or assigned role category without the intention to permanently transfer to the role category of *dan*. This phenomenon is not uncommon these days.

Tang Jiahu, is one such occasional *nandan* performer. Born to a *jingju* family in Hengyang, Hunan province in 1984, he has been a full time performance agent, actor, print model, nightclub singer, and currently a self-employed club manager. As a graduate off NACTA, he used to major in the hyper-masculine role category of *jing*, also known as "*hualian*," literally meaning "painted face," though his desired role category was *laosheng*. Language does not re-shape his desire, as he has been told since childhood that he is as pretty as a girl and could be great *dan* material. About his desired and assigned role categories, he says, "I have never desired to be a *nandan* performer. You know, my desired role category was *laosheng* when I was accepted to NACTA, but they assigned *hualian* to me, which I have never really liked. But if I had rejected [the assigned role category], I'd have had to decline the admission offer, too. So, I accepted [the assignment] against my will. It was only because I wanted to come to Beijing, and to come to NACTA. I'm from an impoverished area in Hunan, and that was the only possible way for me to change my destiny."

As an “occasional” *nandan* performer, he performs solo at parties, business events and commercial shows at nightclubs. Having watched him performing *dan*, I marvel at his command of all the performance skills and technique of this role category, which he has never formally learned. This is an example suggesting that a man who is great *nandan* material does not necessarily have to be a *nandan* performer, nor does he necessarily desire to be one.

He is quite sure about his male gender. He does not feel any gender vacuum, nor has he ever been confused. His mannerisms are perceived by many people who know him well as very masculine, though he may often pass for a *nandan* performer due to his “pretty” look. He confesses that ever since he can remember, he has never fantasized about being a girl, nor has he ever participated in or wanted to participate in stereotypically women’s activities. He is mildly obsessed with laser or injectable cosmetic procedures for hairline correction or facial rejuvenation, but has never desired to alter sexual characteristics to simulate the other sex. He has a weakness for fashion, though. His dressing style is flamboyant and sometimes androgynous, which may be perceived as “too gay” in North America, but quite normal in big cities across East Asia such as Beijing, Tokyo, Seoul, Shanghai and Hong Kong. He has never wanted to remove his primary and secondary sex characteristics, though. On the contrary, he goes to the gym regularly in order to build muscle mass and get ripped to highlight his maleness. He does not identify himself as homosexual, though. He even brought an attractive woman with him to one of the interviews, telling me that she was his “new girlfriend.” At some point outside of the interview he has also revealed to me that he is not very interested in intimacy with women. This does not mean that it has to be one way or another. His self-claimed asexuality has been confirmed by other sources, including some of his closest friends. One of them analyzes that his “asexuality” may stem from narcissism, for he is “too cute to be interested in anyone sexually” and “he is only interested in himself.”

He emphasizes that he occasionally performs *nandan* only because it enables him to earn “quick cash.” He does not have the kind of intense desire to do it, unlike most of the other *nandan* performers that he knows. He claims, “I do *nandan* performance only for the demand of the show market. Audience members, either male

or female, all love watching cross-gender performance. They are not only curious about a man playing a woman; they also think cross-gender performance is the real performing art because it requires a lot of skills and technique that we have achieved through training and talent, while a man playing a man or a woman playing a woman (*nan yan nan, nü yan nü*) has less artistic value because they are actually playing themselves. And, there is never a shortage of that (gender-straight performance), but there are only a few real good ones (cross-gender performers), and so the pay is always higher [for cross-gender performers]." Notably, he has also participated in numerous reality TV singing competitions broadcast in the PRC. He believes that it is always a good idea to utilize some of the *nandan* singing and performance techniques to grab the attention of the judges and audience members, who are eager to discover a "new talent." In other words, he does cross-gender performance to fulfill the need of audience members in pursuit of transgressive pleasure through watching and participation. His theory reminds me of my observation about the increase of gender transgression in aesthetic activities on TV in the PRC these days. Male belly dancers, male sopranos, and men dancing wearing high heels and female lingerie can be seen in many popular reality TV competitions, such as *So You Think You Can Dance* (*Zhongguo hao wudao*) and *Avenue of Stars*. The politically conservative CCTV has added Li Yugang's drag show twice to its repertoire for the 2012 and 2013 Chinese New Year's Galas, the most popular TV variety show in the PRC.

While Tang does cross-role and cross-gender performance for the audience members' pleasure, others may do it to seek a forbidden pleasure. Born in Beijing in the early 1960s, Lin Peng (pseudonym) is one of the leading *xiaosheng* performers in the PRC and the Artistic Director of a prestigious *jingju* company in Beijing. He has requested that I not reveal his real name in this study. Albeit a *xiaosheng* performer, he is oftentimes seen on TV or at small local theatres singing or performing as a *nandan* performer. Audience members take this for granted, as *xiaosheng* and *dan* are interchangeable due to the use of the falsetto voice, and this cross-role category performance, known as *"fanchuan,"* has been a long tradition in *jingju* because of its fresh feel. But Lin has much more to tell. *Xiaosheng* is his full time job, while *nandan* is his passion, which has been suppressed for too long, according to associates of his whom I have interviewed.

I had met with Lin long before I conducted the interview. Our first interview was on the phone, which lasted for about one hour. We went on to meet at a restaurant, where he invited me and two other informants of mine to dinner. He is not evasive about his sexuality at all, entrusting me with all his "secrets," which, as he says, are not "secrets" anymore as "times have changed," meaning that society has become more open about such matters. A passably masculine man standing five feet ten inches tall and with a fit build, Lin looks at least fifteen years younger than his actual age. He has remained unattached and unmarried, and informs me that in the past colleagues at the company would set him up with a woman for blind dates, but now "they all know it," meaning that they should be all aware of why he remains unmarried. For those who do not "know it," they may be curious about his marital status, but no one would ask these days. "People today care much less about other people's personal life," says he. He adds, "Do not assume only *nandan* performers are gay; there are also many *laosheng*, *xiaosheng* and even *hualian* performers in *jingju* circles who are. They are just closeted to protect their career and their reputation, but I know it all." At some point, Sun Peihong also claims that it is not surprising to see many queer individuals in the *jingju* scene, for performing artists are "not like average people." Interestingly, four other informants all have assured me that one of our mutual friends as well as one of my most important informants, who was a *xiaosheng* performer before retirement, is a semi-closeted married man who keeps a wife at home "just for show."

Chang Lang (pseudonym), a film and television actor who plays a cross-dresser in a very popular TV series, informs me that to play the cross-dresser he has incorporated *jingju* skills and technique, using the bodily movements, gestures, and eye expressions of *dan* performers. He claims that he has never liked that role, to the extent that he has not even kept a photo of himself in it, because, in his own words, deep inside him there is a "resistance" to acting as a woman or being a transvestite. He believes that for some actors, cross-gender performance may be a mere job, while for others it could be a pleasurable hobby; the resistance or acceptance all depends on the internal sense of gender in the actor. He also contends that in every man there is a woman and vice versa, with one's father and mother being the archetype—the first gender patterns that a

child observes and follows, which reminds me of Carl Jung's terms, anima and animus.[44] In my view, resistance in a man to impersonating a woman may be read as a kind of castration anxiety for fear of losing masculinity, rather than indication of the total exclusion of the female gender. The subject is oftentimes one that feels superior with his masculinity rather than femininity. I have not observed an obvious coherence between that feeling of superiority and one's sexuality and internal femininity. In the case of Chang and others like him we may find that gender can be an internal psyche but not always manifest or performative.

Through investigating these cases I have observed a marked incongruence between one's experienced/expressed gender and cross-gender aesthetic practice, albeit not always the case. I have observed as well a marked congruence between an individual's desire for gender transgression through cross-gender performance and the transgressive pleasure of the "imaginary audience" in the individual's adolescent fantasy, which has become realistic actual his own self-realization.

Training

As previously mentioned, since the founding of the PRC, *nandan* performers were no longer trained officially. According to Sun Peihong, who is retired from the administration of China's National *Jingju* Theatre and who is currently teaching *jingju* at NACTA and Central Academy of Drama (*Zhongyang xiju xueyuan*), nowadays more and more *nandan* performers have emerged. Some of them are trained at local *jingju* troupes or *xiqu* schools outside of Beijing. Others are privately trained or self-taught. There are still no formally enrolled *nandan* students at NACTA. In a follow-up interview in 2014, Sun informs me that, compared to 2012 when I conducted the previous interviews for this study, quite a few more *nandan* performers have become known. He not only

[44] The anima and animus are described by Carl Jung as elements identified as the totality of the unconscious feminine psychological qualities that a man possesses or the masculine ones that a woman possesses, respectively.

shared with me their stage photos, but also introduced me to one of them in person at *Zhengyici*, a classical style *jingju* theatre in Beijing.

Song Changrong, a widely acclaimed *nandan* performing artist of the *Xun* school in Huai'an, Jiangsu province, for example, has a male disciple, Zhu Junhao, who, according to Song, is "the reason for his retirement."[45] Mei Baojiu, one of the sons of Mei Lanfang and a first generation successor of the Mei school, has accepted his only male student, Hu Wen'ge (1967-), and constantly performs with him in public together. In 2014, they had a tour in the U.S., performing in several major cities. Although there are more *nandan* students and performers nowadays, they still constitute a very small percentage of all *dan* performers (2012).

Sun's account has been confirmed by another informant, Tang Jiahu. According to Tang, NACTA does not have any formally enrolled *nandan* students as far as he knows, but Beijing Opera Arts College (*Beijing xiqu zhiye xueyuan*), another *xiqu* institution in Beijing that is not as prestigious as NACTA, has accepted at least two. There are no *nandan* students among his schoolmates, for there is no such "demand." He only performs *nandan* at the request of show promoters or audience members. He claims, "You see more and more *nandan* performing underground today because the market needs them and audiences need them. They need *nandan* because people are curious." He observes that most of those who love to see *nandan* are "middle-aged men and women."

Liu Bing, born in Hubei province in 1989, is an informant that Wen Ruhua introduced to me. He does not manifest any detectable signs of stereotypical *nandan* in his looks and manners. He seems very extroverted and is very outspoken. Before the interview, he had asked me on the phone if there would be a cameraman at the interview. It sounded to me that he might like some publicity. I clarified to him that it was a research project where the interviewer would be just me. The fact that the research was conducted primarily in English and targeted at an international audience did not disappoint him, though.

[45] See more at http://www.jingju.com/jingjurenwu/liyuanjishi/2008-04-23/11061.html

Currently a student at NACTA majoring in Beijing *quju*, a *xiqu* genre that derived from traditional Beijing style ballad singing, Liu has aspired to become a *nandan* performer of *jingju* since childhood. Before coming to study at NACTA, he had already trained in the *dan* role category of *jingju* with local *jingju* performing artists in his home city. When he was a first year senior high school student, he saw an advertisement of the *jingju* company of his home province recruiting new trainees. He inquired about it, but they were not recruiting any *dan* trainees, let alone *nandan*. He had to sign up for the role category of *xiaosheng,* due to the interchangeability with *dan*, for reasons discussed in previous chapters. During the audition, an interviewer asked him to demonstrate the bodily movement of *xiaosheng*, but he ended up doing *dan* movement "unconsciously." As a result, he was not recruited by the provincial *jingju* company. He did not want to give up, though. Upon graduating from high school, he applied to NACTA, hoping to study *jingju* as a *nandan* performer. Realizing NACTA did not admit *nandan* students, he chose *xiaosheng* and eventually was assigned this role category. For better chance of staying in Beijing with a Beijing *hukou* (registered permanent residence) after graduation, he chose to major in Beijing *quju*, an endangered *xiqu* genre that had been receiving more governmental funding than many of the other genres. He confesses that he is not very serious about his chosen major, but invests most of his time in the *nandan* art of *jingju*. In 2009, he became the first male disciple of the performing artist of *yuju*, Ma Jinfeng, as well as the second *nandan* performer of *yuju* (2012). "Most of the *jingju* companies or schools still do not recruit *nandan* students, but that doesn't mean we cannot get any training. In fact, there are many masters of *jingju* or other *xiqu* genres that accept *nandan* students. I know almost twenty of them in this country," says he.

The accounts of Sun, Tang and Liu are confirmed by an NACTA administrator who wishes to remain anonymous. She informs me that they neither encourage *nandan* nor forbid it (2014). She also informs me that years ago NACTA had accepted a *nandan* performer from a local *jingju* company whose desired role category was *dan*, but they requested him to transfer to *xiaosheng*. Currently there are no officially enrolled *nandan* students at NACTA. Students that are enrolled in all programs have the freedom to train as a *nandan* outside of the curriculum, but they do not count as officially enrolled *nandan* students.

Liu Zheng, born in 1974, is an officially recognized *nandan* performer at the National *Jingju* Theatre in Beijing. He is the first *nandan* performer formally trained at an accredited state-owned *xiqu* institution—Beijing Opera Arts College since the Cultural Revolution and the first *nandan* performer that has joined the National *Jingju* Theatre since Mei Lanfang (2012, 2014). Born to parents who are both *jingju* performing artists, he has also received artistic influence and inspiration from his famous aunt, Liu Changyu (1942-), one of the most acclaimed female *dan* performing artists who became known to nearly every household in China for successfully impersonating Li Tiemei in the Cultural Revolution's model *jingju* play, *The Red Lantern*. Our interview lasted for nearly four hours.

Starting ballet training at the age of twelve, Liu Zheng graduated from the Dance Department at the Art Academy for the People's Liberation Army (*jiefangjun yishu xueyuan*). Having always been interested in *jingju* under the influence of his family, he trained informally and became an amateur *jingju* performer in 2000. In 2003, his application to the Beijing Opera Arts College was accepted with the vigorous support of the then Principal of the College, Sun Yumin (1940-), one of the most acclaimed female *dan* performing artists in China and a friend of Liu Changyu. The acceptance enabled him to train as a *nandan* formally and to pursue it as a career, rather than a mere hobby. When asked if he had ever considered applying to NACTA, a more prestigious *xiqu* institute of higher learning that offers degree programs, he admits that the Dean of NACTA's Acting Department, Du Peng (1963-), was very supportive of his application, while the then Vice President disapproved, saying, "We will absolutely not accept *nandan* students." I have also been informed by other official sources of allegations that a then high-ranking CCP official was against *nandan* personally, implying a tacit prohibition of recruiting *nandan* students.

In general, all my informants agree that nowadays there is freedom for a male to pursue *nandan* training privately with *jingju* masters or at *jingju* schools or troupes granted more autonomy. Beijing Opera Arts College, according to Liu Zheng, is still accepting *nandan* students, while NACTA has not yet given it the green light. As Sun puts it, "NACTA is one of the very few *xiqu* institutes of higher learning in China. It represents the country, and has to be more careful."

In the follow-up interview in 2014, Sun Peihong pointed out that the current overshadowed status of *nandan*, albeit vibrant in the eyes of many observers, is owing not only to institutional obstacles, but also to a general lack of *dan* genius comparable to that of Mei Lanfang. He raises one commonly asked question, "If none of the *nandan* performers can surpass such female *dan* performers as Li Shengsu,[46] how can we justify and foresee the future of the revival of *nandan*?" He further illustrates the making of "*jue'r*" (star performer), saying, "Of all the currently active *dan* performers, only Li Shengsu and Zhang Huoding can be considered as '*jue'r*,' and they are both female. Audience members will line up to buy tickets to watch their shows, but none of the *nandan* performers I have known can compete."

Frustrations in Life

How family members, friends, fellow *jingju* performers, colleagues, schoolmates, audience members or even complete strangers see them performing as *nandan* is a crucial topic of my informants. Of frustrations Wen Ruhua talked for two hours. As previously covered, during the Cultural Revolution traditional *jingju* plays were banned. In modern *jingju* plays, the role category of *xiaosheng* was removed due to its feudal features for, as Jiang Qing claimed when offering "guidance" to the *Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy* crew, *xiaosheng* no longer "worked" [in modern, revolutionary *jingju* plays] because of the "resemblance to women" in singing (Li, 373, 2011). This was so even though the role category of *dan* in revolutionary plays incorporated *xiaosheng* elements to enhance the female masculinity embodied in a heroic image (227, 283, 299). New *xiaosheng* performers had been trained and assigned to troupes and companies all along, and those male performers who specialized in the falsetto-voiced young male roles, which were deemed feudal and reactionary during the Cultural Revolution, were driven from the stage in droves—many to become peasant farmers. Besides, as I have already covered, *nandan* performers were all kept off stage because of even more "feudal" connotations. For all these reasons, Wen Ruhua was not able to

[46] Li Shengsu (1967-), a multiple award winning female *dan* performer and the Artistic Director of Troupe One at the National *Jingju* Theatre, is currently believed to be the best performer of the Mei school.

perform on the stage, even as a *xiaosheng* performer, let alone as a *nandan*. Thus, he worked as a *jingju* music editor. After the Cultural Revolution, he was given opportunities to perform but still faced obstacles that precluded him from transferring to the role category of *dan*, until the immense success of the new *jingju* play, *White Faced Gentleman*.

According to several official sources including *China Yueju Encyclopaedia (Zhongguo yueju dadian)*, after the Cultural Revolution the revival of all-female *yueju* underwent a relatively more smooth revival, though the resumption of *yueju* after the Cultural Revolution was first based on gender-straight male-and-female mixed casting. In 1980, the CCP Committee of Zhejiang province, where *yueju* was born, called for the training of more "male and female" *yueju* stars to resolve the shortage of *yueju* talent caused by the Cultural Revolution (Ying, 2006, 20). While Wen Ruhua was still struggling to be officially transferred to the *dan* role category in Beijing, female-to-male *yueju* performers were being openly trained again by 1982. In that year, about forty women aged eighteen on average and selected from *yueju* troupes all over the country were gathered in Zhejiang for intensive training. In 1983, twenty-eight of them, including Mao Weitao (1962—), aged twenty-one by then, one of the leading female-to-male *xiaosheng* performers of *yueju* in China, were recruited to found the Zhejiang "Little Hundred Flowers" *Yueju* Performance Troupe (*Zhejiang xiao bai hua yueju yanchu tuan*), which was renamed as Zhejiang "Little Hundred Flowers" *Yueju* Company in 1984. In 1985, the company joined the Zhejiang *Yueju* Theatre (*Zhejiang yueju yuan*).[47] The 1984 mega-hit *yueju* film by the Changchun Film Studio, *Five Daughters Celebrate Father's Birthday (Wu nü bai shou)*, had an all-female cast. This suggests that female-to-male cross-gender performance in *yueju* has been officially re-accepted. Besides, when the Zhejiang *Yueju* Theatre was founded in 1985, only one of its three companies was male-and-female mixed, while the other two were both all-female (2006).[48] There is no doubt that after the Cultural Revolution the revival of female-to-male cross-gender performance in *yueju* encountered many fewer institutional obstacles than that of the *nandan* in *jingju*.

[47] See more at http://yj100.zjcnt.com/Article/2006-03-20/1098-4.shtml

[48] See more at http://xzdwws.blog.163.com/blog/static/4191162720079117123316 3

From the 1980s till the early 2000s, Wen was the only newly emerged professional *nandan* performer in the PRC. He was only allowed to perform on "non-critical occasions," and was not allowed to participate in *jingju* competitions or prize awarding activities, according to his own account.

Wen believes that people nowadays have become "more and more open-minded" as compared to one or two decades ago. The commercialization of media has contributed publicity and a demystification of the *nandan* subculture. He and his occasional *nandan* student, Liu Bing, both informed me that though NACTA did not recruit *nandan* students yet, the Students' Union of NACTA was going to sponsor Liu's *nandan* vocal concert. In 2012 and 2014, he invited me to two *jingju* plays with all major female roles played by elderly *nandan* performers, including himself. The overwhelming reception from the diverse audience members, which I observed, suggests that there is the wide acceptance of the *nandan* performance, at least by *jingju* audience.

Sun Peihong is one of many *jingju* authorities who support the *nandan* art. When asked about the legitimacy of the *nandan* art, he first illustrates in great detail the process of *nandan* transforming from a social and cultural norm in Republican China to a taboo in the PRC. He agrees that people today, especially those who are illiterates when it comes to the *jingju* scene, perceive the *nandan* art more as a sexual perversion and gender distortion than as a performing art. In fact, at some point I have heard that some university students in Beijing equate *nandan* with the transsexual (known as "ladyboys") cabaret shows popular in Thailand. These students are criticized by a university official that I have met for being "stupid and ignorant." Sun typically concludes that *nandan* art is an "indispensable" part of traditional *jingju* art for two reasons: Firstly, *jingju* originated as an all-male art form and continued to be male-dominated in the imperial and Republican ears. Secondly, all contemporary female *dan* performers, whether trained by their *nandan* predecessors or their female students, are technically following the artifice of *nandan*; and none of them has surpassed the *Four Great Dan* in artistic accomplishments. Sun enumerates examples to support his view, where the female *dan* performers of the Cheng school, such as Zhang Huoding, all duplicate the masculine vocal qualities of Cheng Yanqiu's falsetto voice—a husky, deep and stuffed voice with cracking sound when the pitch is suddenly lowered. In the line of succession of *jingju*,

the criteria for evaluating a *dan* performer's skill level lie in how well he/she resembles the *Four Great Dan*. In this sense, many *jingju* artists, historians and critics do not wish to see the disappearance of *nandan*. Sun emphasizes that for this reason Mei Baojiu accepted his first and only male successor to date, Hu Wen'ge, in 2001. Prior to that, all his official students had been female. Sun also observes that of all the students he has accepted, Mei Baojiu is most supportive of Hu for his *nandan* status as well as his excellence. With these two factors combined, Hu is to represent the authentic revival of the Mei school. Further to this, the master-and-successor relationship between them has been acknowledged by audience members, experts and government officials.

There were far more institutional obstacles that Hu faced back in the 1990s than today. He began his cross-gender performance career in *qinqiang*, a local *xiqu* genre of Shaanxi province, and rose to fame as a pop singer and dancer doing drag, but was soon banned from media appearances by the government. He reappeared in the public eye roughly around the time he was accepted by Mei Baojiu as successor of the Mei school (Wen and Sun, 2012).

Both Sun and Wen attribute Hu's revival to the "liberalization" of Chinese society. As Sun puts it, "People are more open and liberal now in China. Many things that we did not dare to talk about before are being talked about openly everyday nowadays." Wen, however, shows a more cynical humour in his response, saying, "There is no more fear now at this age, as who knows when I will be going to *Baobaoshan*?"[49]

While the older generation has more personal experiences and historical references with which to draw the comparison, the younger generation confesses that they still experience discrimination from their peers and society. Tang Jiahu reaffirms that *nandan* performers face "pressure from public opinion," and that to be a *nandan* student at *xiqu* schools means gender exclusion—neither male nor female students will accept them into their social circle. He says, "Boys see *nandan* students as girls, and so

[49] *Baobaoshan*, which literally means "The Eight-Treasure Mountains," is usually referred to as the *Babaoshan* Revolutionary Cemetery. Traditionally, it is Beijing's main resting place for the highest-ranking revolutionary heroes and high government officials. In recent years, the cemetery has been open to individuals who have made great contributions to the country.

tend to keep them out. Girls may treat them as sisters but there is still a lot of inconvenience between them because of the difference [of biological sex]." He observes that the few *nandan* students he knows are mostly introverted, sensitive, vulnerable and unsociable. He adds that people normally will not associate female-to-male cross-gender performers (such as female *laosheng* or female *hualian*) with "sexual identity problems," even though they may not demonstrate any qualities that are perceived by people as feminine. In his words, "People never gossip about these women or suspect they are lesbians, unless they see *prima facie* evidence [for same-sex behaviour]." I should add that people did gossip and question the sexuality of Qi Xiaoyun (1932-2003), a renowned female-to-male *jingju* performer in the role category of *jing*, even in her old age, and, according to Sun Peihong, they still do about Wang Peiyun (1978-), a current female-to-male *laosheng* performer, though not to the same degree as with *nandan* performers. Tang Jiahu, among others, believes that male actors' being gay creates more public interest than their female counterparts.

Lu Peng (pseudonym) was only 23 years old when I first interviewed him in 2012. I have always been interested to hear what those youngsters in their 20s have to say. Lu was curious about cross-gender performance in his early boyhood, according to his account. As an adolescent who had not heard of the *Four Great Dan* or the *nandan* art, he suffered melancholy incurred by that curiosity, as well as by his passion for becoming a cross-gender performer and in addition to self-questioning and self-condemnation. When he won one after another award at local *jingju* competitions as a *nandan* performer, he was not yet aware of the existence of any *nandan* artists. Not only was he himself unsure about his own gender identity, but people around him also suspected that he was "abnormal." The stress was relieved only after he heard of the *Four Great Dan,* Mei Lanfang and the *Four Junior Dan*, and found out on the Internet that they were all male. His narrative reminds me of the case of Wang Zilin, as the onset of melancholy is triggered by the ongoing presumption that he may be one of the kind, thus "abnormal" or "perverted."

Unlike Wen Ruhua, Lu does not think that people of the PRC today are "open-minded." He claims that the faculty and students in the *jingju* school are supportive of his endeavours, but he complains about misunderstanding from many of his peers outside

of the school and is upset about being called "sister." While many people presume that he is gay because of what he does, he affirms that he has a supportive and accepting girlfriend, who is training in *jinju* (Shanxi Opera). His girlfriend, however, constantly receives inquiries from others about their relationship. She is often asked such questions as "how can you accept him [a *nandan* performer] as your boyfriend?" Many of her friends even like to probe into the details of their relationship.

While expressing discomfort about discrimination against *nandan* performers, Lu himself cannot accept effeminacy manifested in other *nandan* performers. He says, "I don't hang out with other *nandan* performers because they are all effeminate. They are way out of my league. I think that impersonating women only requires technique and artistry. We shouldn't act like [a woman] in real life." He also claims that he did not understand homosexuals before, nor know much about homosexuality, but has learned in recent years about the gay subculture and especially the gay slang terms such as "one" (pitcher) and "zero" (catcher). He observes that there are "many 'comrades'[50] among those born in the 1990s." Like the account of Tang Jiahu, his notion of "many gays" in their generation is not a reflection of an increase in the percentage of gays among the population at large, but of the popularization of the knowledge about homosexuality in this digital age. Indeed, today more people are able to recognize and announce their homosexuality via digital/social media, and it is not hard to find all the information in question.

Chen Zhen (pseudonym), currently one of the two *nandan* performers at a prestigious *jingju* company, impresses me with his humility, gentility, politeness and, above all, effeminate mannerism often stereotypically associated with *nandan*. Upon seeing a video clip of him off stage, many people that I know would yell out, "Oh dear, he does look like a *changxide*!"[51] He confesses that while studying at the *jingju* school, he did not feel any discrimination. Instead, the instructors and classmates were all very "natural" to him. Born in the 1970s, he experienced the more homophobic 1990s. I recall him offering heterosexual relationship tips in *Esquire*, a men's lifestyle magazine when

[50] A modern Chinese euphemistic term for gays or homosexuals.
[51] It is a mildly derogatory slang term for *xiqu* performers.

being interviewed as a newly emerged *jingju* star a decade ago. When I remind him of that feature interview, he laughs, confessing that he had to remain closeted back then for fear of being suspected to be gay. Now he is totally open about his sexuality. “Society is more open now [about homosexuality], so I’m not afraid to talk about it, and I’m not hiding it anymore.” Not only has he come out, but he has also tried to persuade his closeted friends from the older generation to come out, including one of my other informants who is evasive about his own sexuality but quite talkative and informative about others’. He also believes that Lu Peng is closeted, saying, “He is just pretending by telling us all those stories and stuff. You know I have been there. I was like him ten years ago.” Indeed, homosexuality was not only regarded as a mental disease back then, but also perceived as more of a moral stigma and social taboo than it is nowadays. Being a *nandan* performer in those days meant constant compulsory denial of homosexuality to the public. Currently, he claims that he does not broadcast his sexuality or deny it if asked, but he never talks about it with his parents. “Older people do not understand [homosexuality],” says he.

Employment Opportunities

Chen Zhen elaborates on these frustrations, most of which he has experienced since graduating from the *jingju* school in 2004. First of all, for a *nandan* student, graduation means immediate unemployment. “I had nothing to do for about a year, because no *jingju* companies were hiring *nandan* performers.” Despite the general interest in the rarity of *nandan*, most *jingju* companies did not want to take the risk of accepting him, for the employment of *nandan* remained a blank in relevant policies. His story was even covered by *Beijing Evening Post*, an influential newspaper that voiced concern about *nandan*’s survival, but that coverage did not help. In the years that followed, during a show at the Lao She Tea House (*Laoshe chaguan*) in Beijing, he was discovered by a friend of his father, who filed a letter of petition to a high-ranking government official, along with recommendation letters by two renowned *jingju* performing artists. The letters were forwarded to Wu Jiang, then Executive Director of China *Jingju* Theatre (now renamed as National *Jingju* Theatre), who happened to be a supporter of the *nandan* art. This has also been confirmed by Sun Peihong, who claims that he was called to an “emergency meeting” at the China *Jingju* Theatre to discuss

how to respond to the letters forwarded “from above.” Sun informs me that at the meeting most of the attendees proposed recruiting Chen Zhen for his talent, while the rest opposed for the reason that “there were no precedent cases.” The proposal, however, was approved with an overwhelming majority. Thus, Chen was finally able to join the Theatre in 2006.

While at the Theatre, he was assigned some performance opportunities in the first few years until the new Executive Director replaced Wu Jiang. He sighs, “The current [Executive Director] dislikes *nandan*, so, basically I don’t have any performance opportunities. He even dislikes *xiaosheng* and wants to remove it from *jingju*.” He adds that not all *jingju* performing artists support the revival of *nandan*. According to him, a renowned female *dan* performing artist of the Cheng school at the same Theatre disapproves of resuming *nandan*, saying, “It has been banned, so there is no need to have it back.” Her standpoint is not atypical, as one *jingju* expert that I have talked to has raised the critical question, “Whereas women can perform *dan* and well, why do we still need *nandan*?” Another *jingju* expert says, “If a man performs *dan*, he has to be really good in every respect—looks (*banxiang*), voice, and movement (*shenduan*). If he cannot surpass all the contemporary female *dan* performers, he’d better forget it.”

Currently, as many of my informants have put it, the PRC is still more of a man-ruled society than a law-ruled one. This has dimensions of meaning: Firstly, there are still blanks in legislations and regulations requiring government authorities to reach a political decision individually and flexibly, oftentimes based on personal beliefs, benefits, likes and dislikes. In the case of *nandan* in *jingju*, the ban in the past was virtually a verbal instruction that was nevertheless enforceable, and the subsequent release has largely been a tacit approval. Secondly, due to insufficient supervision, a government authority may easily overstep existing legislation and regulations for the sake of maintaining personal connections and/or for interest-driven purposes. Thirdly, for the same reasons, a government authority may have the right to interpret unclear, vaguely worded legislation and regulations to suit his or her needs. In the case of *nandan* in *jingju*, while the unofficial revival is vibrant, the lack of institutionalized permission or sustained support continues to be the cause of many obstacles. From the accounts of my informants, it may be maintained that the obstacles and frustrations they have felt

and experienced are more related to habitually imagined dominant gender norms associated with individual sexuality than with sexuality alone.

Success

During an interview in Beijing in 2014, when I returned to follow up with some of my informants, Sun Peihong showed me pictures of some young *nandan* performers whose names I had not heard of before. He had a get-together with many of them at a *nandan* meeting in Beijing earlier that year. He told me stories about some of them. Huang Huang, born in 1977, is a *jingju* performer with the Hunan *Jingju* Theatre (Hunan *jingju* yuan) who is trained formally in the *xiaosheng* role category at NACTA, but like Wen Ruhua, his desired role category has always been *dan*. He learned to play *dan* all by himself while studying at NACTA. He earns a decent living by doing drag at nightclubs, and by doing so, he has been able to purchase his own condominium in Changsha, the capital city of Hunan province, of which he is very proud. In the PRC nowadays, one of the measures of personal success is the financial ability to buy a property in big cities.

Liu Xinran, born in 1979, quit his full time job at Beijing Weather Bureau to become a *nandan* performer at the age of thirty-one, regardless of his parents' strong disapproval. The process of transferring from amateur to a full time performer is often referred to with a slang term in the *jingju* scene, *xiahai*, literally meaning, "plunge into the sea." Liu had been somehow confident about his choice of *xiahai*: He had won the gold award of the CCTV's *Jingju* Amateurs' Competition, and thereafter was invited to perform at the CCTV's New Year's *Xiqu* Gala as the only amateur. Since then, he has appeared in the *kunqu* play, *Lian Xiang Ban* (2010), the spoken drama, *Lao She Wu Ze* (2010), and the experimental *jingju* plays, *Cao Qiqiao* (2011), *Mei Lan Fang Hua* (2011), and *Feng Xi You Long* (2012).

According to Sun Peihong and several other sources, Liu Zheng, Yang Jun (1978-), Yin Jun (1988-) and Mu Yuandi (1983-) are the four most successful *nandan* performers of the younger generation born in the 1970s and 1980s. All of them have

been professionally trained and are currently professional *nandan* performers. Liu Zheng and Yang Jun are both performers with the National *Jingju* Theatre. Mu Yuandi is currently teaching *jingju* in Shanghai, and Yin Jun even performed in New York in 2011. Sun emphasizes in the 2014 follow-up interview that regardless of such unprecedented social acceptance of *nandan* since the Cultural Revolution, none of these four can be regarded as "*jue'r*," nor could compete with leading female *dan* performers such as Li Shengsu and Zhang Huoding. Sun affirms that the real revival of *nandan* should be marked by the potential rebirth of a new Mei Lanfang, a new master of *jingju* who can advance the art form, especially the performance of *dan*, to an even higher level. In his view, those who support and welcome the revival of *nandan* are expecting new masters of *jingju* and a renaissance of the national cultural essence, rather than politically endorsing a personalized gender alternative expression through the *nandan* art.

Chapter 6.
Rebel or Follow

When Theatre and Biology Intersect

The many cases that I have studied are suggestive of a nexus between cross-gender performance as an aesthetic practice and biological factors of the subjects. As a researcher investigating the cross-gender phenomenon, I have been asked the same questions by interested "outsiders" over and over again: What kind of people do cross-gender performance? Are they all homosexuals? Do they all have a complicated and confused gender identity? Does the theatrical reiteration shape or reconstruct their gender identity and sexuality? In the case of *nandan* in *jingju*, while in the past women were kept off stage, and young boys who were sent to *jingju* schools had almost no free choice of the role categories (as shown in the film, *Farewell, My Concubine*), nowadays, all the newly emerged *nandan* performers choose *nandan* as a career or hobby voluntarily. So, is the revival of *nandan* in *jingju* more of a return to a long forgotten theatrical norm and historical authenticity or a re-discovery of forbidden desires and gender-transgressive expression? The case studies seek to look at individuals and a group as a whole.

Here, I will first review and examine the informants who claim to have experienced significant "gender dysphoria" (discontent with one's biological sex and/or assigned gender)[52] during childhood but ceased to desire to be the other sex by puberty. Gender dysphoria is called by psychologists and physicians gender identity disorder in

[52] I personally do not encourage the use of the terms, gender dysphoria and gender identity disorder, Here, I use these terms for the purposes of interrogating and contesting some of the traditional pathological beliefs regarding gender variant children and the theory of social construction of gender, as well as for the convenience of discussing the specific cases.

children (GIDC). Most children who experience GIDC will grow up to identify themselves as homosexual. Some, as in the cases of cross-gendered *jingju*, may identify themselves as heterosexual after puberty, while the earlier "gender dysphoria" has developed into a theatrical gendered expression as a transgressive "symptom." My case studies may contest some of the prevailing scholarship on the social construction of gender with their in-depth first person accounts.

First of all, I should point out that the diagnosis of Gender Identity Disorder is likely to be removed in the future owing to controversy in academia. Controversy in the diagnosis of Gender Identity Disorder is very much like that in the 1970s regarding the inclusion of homosexuality as a diagnosable mental disorder by *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM). Based on my case studies, I would interrogate GIDC since the word "disorder" suggests that there should be a natural "order" of gender that children must follow in a certain manner. In fact, young children's gender constancy and gender differentiation in attitudes increase with age (Yee and Brown, 1994, 183-196). The increase is also a process and effect of physical growth and gender socialization, prior to which there is a period of time when young children have no stable sense of gender, if not imposed by external factors. Many who do not manifest the behaviour of a particular gender are in the state of what I call "gender vacuum," which is also not uncommon among adults.

In general, a diagnosis of GIDC today is based on the exhibition of an obvious and persistent cross-gender identification, which may include persistent preferences for cross-dressing (or simulating clothing stereotypically of the opposite sex), cross-sex roles in make-believe play, participation in the stereotypical activities of the opposite sex, playmates of the opposite sex, and/or intense fantasies about being the opposite sex. The mere desire to be of the other sex because of the perceived cultural or physical advantages possessed by the opposite sex is not a manifested symptom. Children who are diagnosed with GIDC when they have become adolescents and adults may manifest symptoms such as persistent discomfort with his or her sex and an intense desire to be the other sex, frequent passing as the other sex, a desire to live or be treated as the other sex, or the conviction that he or she has the psychological traits of the other sex.

Sun Peihong informed me during the interview that one reason why *xiqu* schools today do not encourage the training of young boys to become a *nandan* performer is concern about causing GIDC, while in the past such concern did not exist since people did not have the "modern knowledge" about gender and sexuality. Indeed, the training of a *nandan* performer entails theatrical cross-dressing and cross-sex roles in the "make-believe" of theatrical imagination, and also likely courts linguistic influence through constant conviction of the subject's similarity to the other sex. Sun affirms that it is better that the child not receive the *nandan* training until he has hit puberty, for as an adolescent or adult he should be able to have "a clearer sense of gender." Many young *nandan* performers, however, inform me that they were in fact drawn to the *nandan* art long before they hit their puberty, which is to say that they had some sense of the desired gender long before that critical period. Apparently, at the least we can say that they had already developed a persistent interest in *nandan* before they formed a distinct sense of gender. Regarding GIDC, what do those young *nandan* performers have to say?

From Wang Zilin's case, I wonder how much "truth" reflects the essence of the "truth," and how much "truth" is produced and re-produced by discourse and social beliefs. I also question the notion of "gender identity disorder" or "gender dysphoria," because the typical "symptoms," as manifested in my informant's childhood and even adulthood, only suggest that he is different from the majority or from what we know about the majority, rather than being a "patient" suffering from a mental disorder in need of a medical treatment. For him, the mental disorder he suffered the most in his earlier life was not gender variation, but confusion about his perceived difference from other men, along with the lack of relevant knowledge. He believes that everyone is born with two genders, while social norms seek to reduce them to one, and cross-gender performance offers those who want to find "the lost gender" the chance to do so.

In the most recent interview in 2014, he seems to have formed a new point of view regarding gender, which is of great interest to me, though he personally has never read any up-to-date scholarship on gender studies. He believes that even for an individual like him who wished to be a female during childhood and who continues to fancy being a woman on stage in adulthood, gender is still not "fixed." In his early 20s,

for example, when he was dating women voluntarily, he felt that his gender was more on the masculine side. When he switched to men and dated men exclusively in his later days, he felt that he was more on the feminine side. The reason why he refused to feel his masculine side was because, as he puts it, he lacked the masculine qualities and thus had to seek those missing qualities in other men. Now in his late 50s, he remains single and is not in the dating scene anymore. He claims that he has "returned to the male gender," in terms of clothing, mannerisms and behaviour, because there is no "reference" that requires him to choose a gender. He adds that it is the internal sense of gender that changes one's appearance to suit his preferred expression. I would conclude, based on long time observations, that his current status is "gender vacuum;" the masculine gender to which he has switched is only a default form out of his biological sex, as this is the interiorized outcome of social and cultural acceptance and denial. This is to say that, with him being a typical example, many individuals are given the "default gender" associated with their biological sex unless they encounter a catalyst stimulating them to seek non-normative gender expression. That default gender, which is in fact an ostensible gender manifestation, may be more or less internalized to the extent of impacting one's gendered self, though the internal sense of being a distinct gender is missing in many cases. During the course of conducting case studies, I have observed and been convinced that this is a most common phenomenon. While many scholars are struggling in the polemical debate concerning the formation of the male and female genders, they have ignored evidence that without a particular reference, many individuals—if not the majority statistically—choose the default form of gender associated with the social expectations of their biological sex, and lack or have inadequate internal gender. There are, of course, those who do not fall into this scenario, who firmly claim that there has always been a "core gender" in them.

In the case of Li Yu, he loves the *nandan* art as well as all forms of cross-gender performance, but prefers to be called *nandan* because the designation partakes more of "high culture" and "art-for-art's-sake" than other terms. For him, cross-dressing fulfills his forbidden desire to express the "ontologically inescapable and inalienable" gendered sense of self, though sometimes it may be situationally blurred. His narratives remind me of Carl Jung's notion of anima and animus in the unconscious. Arguably, the dialectic between the signifier and the signified in expressing one's gender and sexual desire also

plays an instrumental role in determining one's sense of gendered self. In brief, with anima being an inevitable component of a man's psyche, the exposure of his female qualities is dependent on the quantity of anima in his unconscious mind and this, at a certain level, may affect his sense of gendered self while external influences can only add to or reduce from the workings of one's gender identification. In this sense, it would be premature to conclude that behavioural manifestations are prior to one's gender identity—in the case of cross-gender *jingju* it is cross-gender identity that is prior. On the contrary, one's pre-existing sense of gendered self can be the source of continued creativity and perpetuate one's gendered self-exploration through performance, as Jungians believe that "every personification of the unconscious—the shadow, the anima, the animus, and the Self—has both a light and a dark aspect…the anima and animus have dual aspects: They can bring life-giving development and creativeness to the personality, or they can cause petrification and physical death" (234). As female qualities in a man's psyche are suppressed, cross-dressing is a way to seek liberation and self-actualization. Cross-dressers see the practice of cross-dressing not so much as a random hobby, but "an exciting hobby which allows the transvestite to make the best of himself, to explore different styles and fabrics" (Suthrell, 2004, 62).

I examine the intersection between biology and theatre because, firstly, the more *nandan* performers I interview, the more I find that many fall into the aforementioned scenarios, only that those who fall into the third are not necessarily physically intersex, but manifest a gender fluidity or what I call the "gender vacuum" state, a state that is undetermined and unidentified and a state that supports the presumption of the sex and gender distinction. In this sense, bodies only matter when they serve as the sites for cultural inscription by discursive means through a process of offering ostensible gender representations and materializations of the body, as I do not find any necessary nexus between the sexed body and gender based on the cases. The body may have been created with or acquired its sexed significance, but the sexed significance does not necessarily help determine the gender.

Interplay: Desires, Identities and Transgression

Why are there people who love doing cross-gender performance, and why do many people love watching it? What is the motive for the compulsive *nandan* pursuit? Is the *nandan* performance a pure performing artifice or a reflection of a suppressed desire for gender-alternative expressions? If it is the former case, does the performance have any subtle influence on the gendered subject? If it is the latter one, does that mean that the subject has a pre-existing sense of gender or, say, gendered ego? I have realized over time that the self-developed theories of my informants, coupled with their firsthand experiences are very insightful and inspiring. Drawing on these oral accounts of my informants in the cultural scene of *jingju*, I am moving on to discuss the relevance of theatre studies, performance studies, and gender studies, to an understanding of the difference between gender performance and gender performativity, or more specifically, the performative nature of gender as reflected in the context of theatricality and in our lived realities associated with bodies, desires, pleasures and sense of identity.

There has been a critical debate over the workings of the gender and sexuality of a *nandan* performer, especially since the global success of the Chinese cinematic masterpiece, *Farewell, My Concubine*, by Chen Kaige (Leung, 2010). Chen's film raises radical questions about the "points of contact" between onstage and offstage performances or, say, between aesthetic activities and social rituals. In the case of cross-gendered *jingju*, if the subject is considered to have one realistic gender and one theatrical gender, and if both genders are considered performative, then the theatrical gender is unquestionably more performative than the realistic one. Can we infer reversely, in this sense, that the realistic gender is more of an internal reality of the subject? In the aforementioned case of the intersexed Li Yu, if gender is entirely "produced all the time and reproduced all the time," why would he resist periodically, during the adolescent period and adulthood, the male gender that has been firmly and consistently infused and reinforced into his sense of self since his birth? Thus, it may be risky to conclude that no one "is a gender from the start." This is not to deny the social construction of gender. In fact, I have observed that a *nandan* performer sometimes may habitually and unconsciously "modify" himself to conform to others' stereotypical beliefs about a *nandan*'s persona. This external force may be understood as a social factor, but

the working is not one way, as the subject must have the potential to allow for the external factors to work on him as well.

Make-believe: Creating a Psychological Truth

It is clear that nowadays to be involved in cross-gender aesthetic activities as a *nandan* performer is totally a personal choice and a voluntary theatrical pursuit. For all of my informants, *dan* has been their desired role category, though some of them were assigned other role categories when they started training at school. As I have observed through case studies, the contemporary revival of *nandan* in *jingju* is, therefore, more of an aspiration for gender alternative expressions rather than a return to an abandoned theatrical tradition or resumption of an old social and cultural norm, though some of the supporters from the older generations expect the latter.

It is surprising to me that my informants all have their own self-developed theory in an attempt to make sense of themselves or others. About the motive for being a *nandan* performer, Wen Ruhua believes that it is a theatrical compensation for the inability to be a woman in reality. In other words, it is a "make-believe" process in which an individual seeks gender alternative gratification. "[Being a woman] cannot be fulfilled in life, but can on stage," says he, "It is just a psychological thing." He believes that *nandan* performers are all drawn to this art form because of their inclination to be a woman, at least momentarily on stage, but this inclination may alter during different phases of life. He elaborates that when one becomes elderly, for example, the inclination to become a woman on stage may diminish with the passage of time, as he has come to realize that there is nothing to be fulfilled after each show. His point of view is shared by Tang Jiahu, who observes that among the *nandan* performers he knows the cross-gender inclination is innate. "If one has the tendency of 'gender dysphoria,' he is very likely to desire the role category of *dan*," says he. He believes that the sense of the female gender in a male's psyche may precede the *nandan* training. In other words, it is not the *nandan* training that shapes or constructs one's gender identity; there is a pre-existing female "gendered self" in his belief. He articulates that despite alleged or observed exceptions, the *nandan* performers of his generation that he has met all fit into

his hypothesis. He enumerates a handful of names. Almost all of them, according to him, have inherent feminine qualities, are “gentle and vulnerable,” and manifest an inclination towards androgeneity.

Tang expresses a natural resistance to passing as a woman, though he does not mind impersonating one. His theory on “pre-existing gender” makes a great deal of sense in his case. When I explain to him the concept of “gender performativity” coined by Judith Butler, he claims that he believes in individual specificity and differences. Like many other informants, he doubts that “gender performativity” may apply to everyone in the scene. In his case, throughout childhood he was constantly told by neighbours and relatives that he was as pretty as a girl and was treated as such. It is not uncommon in China that young boys are raised as girls, especially in the rural areas. Having followed up a number of cases in that scenario, I have not observed a convincing nexus between the parenting style and the construction of gender identity in adulthood. While studying the role category of *jing* or, namely, *hualian* at NACTA, Tang was always mistaken for a *nandan* performer because of his appearance. It seems that language, parenting style and the environment where he grew up have not done much to “work” his gender, and his case is definitely not a singular one. “I have never had the slightest imagination in me, not for one second, that I could be a girl, because I know I’m a male,” says he. He adds that among the *nandan* performers with whom he socializes, most are gender ambiguous. To help me with my research, he has also introduced some other *nandan* performers for me to interview. Interestingly, he calls them “sisters,” and treat them as such.

Of the inclination to “be” a woman on stage, Wang Zilin believes that there is a woman in every man, and that everyone is born with two genders, which is why he loves the First Nations’ term, “Two Spirit(ed).” He adds that the desire to be a woman on stage does not necessarily suggest the existence of an intention to change his biological sex through genital reconstructive surgery; he believes that the desire to be a woman on stage falls into the gender category, while keeping the male genitalia is for sexual gratification. This theory has been shared by a number of other *nandan* performers, which is suggestive of an incoherence between sense of gender and the way to seek sexual pleasures, while, as they all agree, there seems to be a meaningful coherence

between gender identity and sexuality among *nandan* performers. This does not mean that being a homosexual has to be associated with the femininity in a male; rather, it means that how one perceives his own gender in a given period of time and how he handles a relationship with a sexual meaning at the same time influence one another.

Notably, Li Yu and his friend, Leslie Zhang, also a cross-gender performer and one of Li's competitors, bring to my attention the driving force of self-negotiation between inferiority and superiority and between their sense of maleness and that of femaleness. As Zhang articulates, many *nandan* performers do not manifest prominent male secondary sex characteristics or else lack the masculine attributes perceived by people as attractive in their appearance, but impersonating a woman wearing the make-up, headdress and costumes may "transform them into a striking beauty." "We all love the glamour on stage, even though it is momentary," says Zhang. In fact, all my informants tell me that they are drawn to the "glamour" of appearing as a beauty on stage. This also owes a great deal to the prominence of the role category of *dan* in *jingju* since the time of the *Four Great Dan*, who perfected the *dan* roles as the cynosure of all eyes. Interestingly, all the *nandan* performers that I have interviewed demonstrate a passion for being a cynosure on stage. My strong impression, based on years of observation, is that this kind of "hunger" is less seen in other role categories. As one amateur in the *xiaosheng* role category who has established his *piaoyou* status in Beijing has told me, "It's not just that *dan* performers are exhibitionists, but they do want to court publicity the most" (Zheng, 1998).

Unlike the other informants, during the 2012 interview, Liu Bing expresses his belief that female impersonation is a pure art that is totally independent of the subject's gender identity and sexuality. He admits, however, that he might occasionally exhibit some effeminate mannerism only because he is too invested in his character in a play. He denies that he has become a *nandan* performer to fulfill the unrequited wish to become a woman. He is passionate about the *nandan* art because he is confident about his "good conditions," which echoes the "glamour" talk by some of the other sources, only that his egocentrism is intensified when the "imaginary audience" he had fantasized about since young adolescence has become realistic. In the 2014 follow-up interview, however, he tells me excitedly that he has "gained new knowledge and new findings"

and “formed new perspectives” since I last met him, saying, “I used to think all those *nandan* masters were heterosexual and that the female impersonation was a pure performance skill, but now I have proved myself wrong!” The reason was because he had been exposed to more of the off-stage scenes of the *nandan* circle, as he informs me that he was invited to an all-*nandan* party, where he heard some of the most renowned *nandan* performers, including two of my other informants, “talking openly and fearlessly about the gay stuff.” He was shocked at the party. He still emphasizes that he is not like any of them. With regards to Liu’s newly discovered “coherence” between the subject’s sexuality and loved aesthetic career, another informant, Chang Lang, concludes, “We are all sexual beings. To know someone’s sexuality, just look at what he does voluntarily and what he avoids doing for a purpose. Everything happens for a reason. People do things for money, for hobby, or for others’ expectations, but if you are doing something for none of these, you must be doing it for your heart and for something missing in you.”

The Imaginary Gender

Although feminist scholars have constantly contested it, Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity, grounded on many precedents, has advanced our understanding of the theatricality of gender. Following Beauvoir’s words on one “becoming” a woman, Butler believes that gender is a constructed process rather than some “real” essence. Invoking Foucault’s belief in his *History of Sexuality* that a “real” sexual identity does not really exist, Butler argues that performative acts constitute identity rather than express it. Drawing on Goffman’s hypothesis that social presentation is basically dramaturgical, Butler has formulated her concept of gender performativity. In a sense, her “performanivity” is not so different from Goffman’s “performance,” as they both describe the social construct of presentation of self often misread as the representation of a “real,” “true” or “natural” essence. In her belief, gender is choreographed, rehearsed, and presented, and she elaborates it on the metaphoric model of gay drag, claiming that gender is “ the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (1990, 33). In the case of *jingju*, the gendered categories, such

as *sheng* and *dan*, are not realistic reflections of realities, but are constituted through a set of stylized bodily movements, “choreographed, rehearsed and presented” in the process of creation. They are repeated over time to produce “a natural sort of being” or gender patterns, and form our perceptions of masculinity and femininity. But does that mean that all these *nandan* performers will conform to the gender that they create and thus become accustomed to the same gender expression? Or can they all handle the inconsistency between the gender they create and the gender they have experienced in their lived realities? Moreover, as most of my informants have agreed, if there is an inherent femininity in them that precedes choosing *nandan* as a career, then where does that sense of gender come from in the first place? What do the *nandan* performers have to say?

The Performed and the Innate

Although Butler uses drag as a model in elaborating gender performativity and gender as the effect of reiterated acting, she does not regard drag as an example of a subjective or singular identity, where “there is a ‘one’ who is prior to gender, a one who goes to the wardrobe of gender and decides with deliberation which gender it will be today” (1993, 21).

During my investigation, I have raised questions in response to Butler’s “gender performativity.” These include, first, whether or not the intensive repeated *nandan* training and performance should count as “reiterated acting;” and, second, whether or not *nandan* should be regarded as a mere metaphor or a subjective or singular identity. In my view, Butler has touched upon one aspect of the working of gender, and I want to further discuss the force and counterforce between gender identity and cross-gender aesthetic activities, or, in my informants’ words, the “interplay between the innate and the performed.” In the case of *nandan* in *jingju*, although the male impersonation of the female gender perfectly illustrates the performative nature of gender, here, I want to focus on the variation of gender of the performer before and after practicing *nandan* performance.

Most of my informants firmly believe that the *nandan* career means heavily "reiterated acting" within the gendered aesthetic domain of *nandan.* Tang Jiahu observes that a *nandan* performer may "habitually behave like a *nandan* performer." Aside from the habitual mental and behavioural expansion from the theatre to reality, I have observed in my subjects the unconscious conformity to the archetypal and stereotypical image of *nandan*. Liu Zheng concludes that *nandan* performers' theatrical activities may affect their gender identity to some degree. Theoretically, this is feasible as the theatre itself is a "make-believe" process especially for those *nandan* performers who are compulsively addicted to and invested in their art and characters. But is there a gender prior to the theatre? Both Tang Jiahu and Liu Zheng believe that to be drawn to the *nandan* art one must have the potentialities. Wang Zilin, however, claims that a male with female gendered potentialities is drawn to most aesthetic activities, which themselves embody "the feminine gender." While Goffman believes in his daily life performance theory that one's bodily practice itself is not associated with the pre-existing "essence" (1959), my informants all agree that what one performs should not be understood as a gendered expression, but what one *does* and how he *does* should.

Likewise, Wen Ruhua does not think that the performative side of gender is the "core" gender that constitutes most of one's gender identity, as there is also a relatively more stable sense of maleness or femaleness in one's psyche. When people first meet him, knowing that he has been an accomplished *nandan* performing artist, they tend to look for the feminine qualities in his entire external "package," including but not limited to his appearance and mannerisms, but always to no avail. Yet he emphasizes that all *nandan* performers must have a female gender deep within. In his sense, the external features and behaviours may or may not be the unconscious reflection of one's psyche. Likewise, with Wen Ruhua being his role model, Liu Bing, who does not manifest any effeminacy[53] in his mannerisms at all, also believes that a "good" *nandan* performer should be able to separate his onstage impersonation from his offstage life. He points out that as a matter of fact there are many "normal-behaved" (masculine) *nandan*

[53] Although the manifestation of masculinity and femininity is a subjective observation and perception, especially in various cultures concerned, here, I use the terms "masculinity" and "femininity" or "effeminacy" throughout this study for their symbolic archetypal meaning, not as psychic characteristics.

performers,[54] including Wen Ruhua, regardless of their repeated female impersonation onstage. He disparages the stereotypical legibility of those effeminate *nandan* performers, claiming that he never socializes with them. At the same time, he does not try to downplay his passion to be a woman onstage. In short, he believes that a good *nandan* performer should be male bodied, male-identified, masculine, and heterosexual. But where does the intense passion for being a woman onstage come from if one is thoroughly male and heterosexual?

Is an individual as a gendered subject one way or another? Why do those *nandan* performers have to be divided into the "normal-behaved," masculine type and the "queer-behaved" feminine type? I do not think that they should be because sexual symbolism is prior to the subject (Neumann, 1954, xxii, no. 7). As Neumann puts it, "In reality every individual is a psychological hybrid… [I]t is one of the complications of individual psychology that in all cultures the integrity of the personality is violated when it is identified with either the masculine or the feminine side of the symbolic principle of opposites" (1954, xxii, no. 7). That said, the understanding of gender must not be reduced to its social roles and behavioural patterns, for it is associated with a psychological tendency within one's unconscious that helps to constitute one's personality. We must acknowledge that each individual is a union of opposites (emotional or rational, introverted or extroverted, and masculine or feminine), and thus the sense of gender must not be one way or another, but is mobilized by the collective unconscious, and at the same time conditioned by the subject's individual experiences. Therefore, either sociology or sexology alone has its demerit in reading gender, which must be understood through a multi-disciplinary lens grounded in the psychoanalytic theory and social constructionism: Firstly, there must be an innate contra-sexual complex in the collective unconscious that forms the masculine or feminine archetypes—the pre-existent forms that are not developed individually but inherited. I have raised questions about Butler's notion of the "copy" and the "original," the non-existence of a gendered self prior to discursive effects, and the theoretical work on the mere basis of metaphysics of substance. If reiterated acting has an original to copy from, then where

[54] I'm quite aware of this notion, as of those renowned *nandan* performing artists I have met with many do not manifest any characteristics that are normally perceived by people as effeminate.

does the very original come from? And how did the discursive production begin in the first place? If performative acts constitute gender as "it is purported to be," then how shall we explain the typical case of my informant, Li Yu, who was raised as a boy but resisted his enforced and constructed "false gender" when hitting puberty? In that case, the social construction of gender has been a total failure and the chromosomal sex seems to have overwhelmed and destabilized the constructed gender. Secondly, masculine or feminine archetypal images are reinforced by social, cultural and religious discourse, shaping the personal unconscious. Thirdly, the process of social construction is one where the individual integrates the unconscious influences into his conscious personality. He may or may not carry those symbolically feminine qualities into his personality, and so is identified with either the masculine or the feminine side. Therefore, of all those *nandan* performers, there are the obviously masculine ones, such as Wen Ruhua and Liu; there are also the opposite ones and those anywhere in between. Finally, the self-identification is related to the personal experiences of the opposite sex, which may be exemplified by the case of Li Yu.

It is interesting and also important, however, that Wen Ruhua points out those male-to-female cross-gender performers who play *caidan* (female clowns), a sub-category of the role category of *chou* (clowns) in *jingju* should not be understood in the same manner as *nandan* performers. On today's *jingju* stage, *caidan* characters are still played by many male performers, because, according to Wen, "men are more uninhibited [then women] about self-mockery to amuse the audience." In this sense, the clowning of women under the sub-category of *caidan* does not provide as much reference as *nandan* performance to the female gendered potentialities. To be more specific, *caidan* satirizes *jingju* conventions of femininity, instead of realistic femininity, with an inherently meta-theatrical humour, for which, according to Wen, male performers are more uninhibited. This may explain why customers at nightclubs love drag queens with a razor sharp tongue so much. My observation through investigating these cases has convinced me that gender transgression behind what is performed should only be understood through reference to the internal aesthetic amalgamation between the subject and what is performed that exhibits corporeal legibility.

The Drama of Reality

Before I settled into academia I had been associated with many *jingju* performers, and had observed all kinds of activities of performance on and off stage. Indeed, not only the theatre stage is a stage, but also "all the world is a stage," as Shakespeare has said. In my view, *jingju* has created a perfect model for "points of contact" between theatrical and anthropological thought and ideas that have emerged in gender studies. During the interviews with *jingju* performers and my long term association with many of them in Beijing, I have observed a different kind of performance among them, where some may dramatically shift between masculinity and femininity in terms of facial expressions, tone of voice, gesticulation and bodily movements, depending on how familiar they are to the person with whom they are communicating and what roles they are playing in the communication. For example, these roles can be those of an authority, an instructor, an interviewee, or a close friend. The observed disintegrated gender manifestation is not the symptom of a split personality, but is evidence of the theatricality of social presentation within specific social establishments. In a sense, we are all performers within one or more than one social establishment where we attempt to manipulate the impression that we hope for the "audience" member to form. We particularly want to achieve our desired impression in front of a particular "audience" member by adjusting the setting and presentational patterns. The degree of performativity depends on the degree of the subject's purposefulness and the degree of familiarity between the subject and the "audience" member. The disintegrated gender manifestation observable among *jingju* performers exemplifies how an individual is not only able to present a certain impression of reality to an "audience," but also may manipulate the impression to achieve his desired impression. Indeed, we all act differently in different settings in our lived realities. A university professor may try to appear scholarly in an academic setting, but at a pop rock pub without students around on a weekend night he may appear to be a hippie. I have observed that *nandan* performers are more likely to perform habitually in their daily life. If we consider social presentation to be basically dramaturgic, when we look at the gender manifestation in an individual, we must not jump to any conclusions with regards to the individual's gender identification, since no temporal presentation reflects the inner essence of the subject. He may be performing "for the moment," or integrating the collective unconscious with

his conscious personality. I have also interviewed a film and TV series actor by the name of Kevin Li—a closeted gay man who is on the passive side in a secret same-sex relationship. He says, “I have played tons of macho heterosexual male characters, and I act like my characters in everyday life, but if you like, I could also act up to your imagination or expectation, had you known my real self” (2014). He also emphasizes that in his circle there are many gay actors like him who have to remain closeted and act macho for fear of losing parts once their sexuality is exposed. His account suggests that sometimes we are too trusting of—and also base our judgment on—what we see, but ignore the fact that gender may be independent of the body. The naturalness comes from within, not without. Reiterated gender norms and corresponding practices may generate coherent identities to the gaze of an object, but not necessarily in the subject. In conclusion, “gender” to the “audience” member is choreographed, rehearsed, and presented as the result of “ the repeated stylization of the body” (1990, 33), but that is not the gender inside of the subject, though the repeated stylization of the body does produce the appearance of substance over time and create the impression of “naturalness.” If we take into account how gender manifestations can be manipulated as just discussed, the effect of the repeated stylization of the body remains minimal and momentary.

Sexual Artifice in Gender Transgression

I have asked my informants the same question, which immerses them in thought before they can provide an answer: Since there are so many excellent female *dan* performers on the *jingju* stage and television today, such as Li Shengsu and Zhang Huoding, whose artistry no contemporary *nandan* performers seem to have surpassed, what’s the point of endorsing the revival of *nandan*? Is it only for creating a novelty? For reassuming the historic authenticity? If historic authenticity is a legitimate reason for the revival, then shall we also resume the boy actor tradition in spoken drama? No one could give a complete answer. Wen Ruhua argues that, owing to the male-dominated inception of *jingju*, *nandan* performers have better physical qualities for the *dan* performance, such as the broad timbre of the male falsetto voice and endurance for handling singing, dancing, bodily movements, and even martial arts and acrobatics

during a show. The effort that goes into "creating" a woman is another reason given for the revival. Tang Jiahu, Liu Bing and many other younger performers believe that the need for the *nandan* revival is because of the demand of the audience members. Tang reaffirms that the popularization and mainstreaming of Li Yugang's drag performance in the PRC primarily are associated with media tycoons' realization of consumer psychology. Having participated in numerous reality TV singing and dancing competitions, he emphasizes that drag is not simply for the gay male population, but for a wider audience. In fact, many individuals have told me that they are all interested in watching how gender can be "acted" and transgressed. This suggests to me that in the psyche of the audience there is a tacit collective desire to outrage or violate traditional gender norms and normalized perceptions. Therefore, traces of gender transgression are not only found in the performing art, but also in the spectators who validate the performance. Furthermore, the individual's experience of subjectivity determines how the transgression is processed and realized. In the male-to-female cross-gender performance, for example, a man may see a woman played by a male, while a woman sees the man playing a woman. The gender transgression that has thus created the illusion intensifies the theatricality of the aesthetic activity. On the one hand, it sustains and promotes polar genders as cultural fictions; on the other hand, it obscures the credibility of the aesthetic production. Audience members in experiencing the gender transgression enjoy the alienation effect between "the credibility of the productions" and the fictional polar genders. They also become accomplices of the performer, who happens to have sustained since adolescence this image of an imaginary audience. An informant, Leslie Zhang, has said, "All cross-gender performers, including *nandan* performers, are narcissistic and self-conscious. They take it for granted that all spectators love watching them and worship their beauty and grace [if they possess it], and fortunately, it is utterly true." This is to say that the cross-gender performers are not self-deceit in the make-believe theatrical "role play" to assume the credibility of their productions; they are re-creating together with the spectators the polar genders as a performed reality while subverting them as cultural fictions. In the collaboration, transgressive desire is not constrained and suppressed, but released and sublimated.

Cross-gender performance, either in public or in private, is where theatre and biology intersect, with theatricality converging with human behaviours and gender

transgression. This may be more common than we had imagined, and it is everywhere and elsewhere with an increasing visibility in a multitude of aesthetic events in our everyday lives. Behind the representations is a desire to subvert socially scripted identities and purported behavioural paradigms, and to resist constraints, prohibitions, taboos and repressions in society. It may be maintained that *jingju* establishes perfect "points of contact" between theatre, anthropology and gender issues; the lived realities of the *nandan* performers are the epitome of the larger world. There are no theatre forms other than *jingju* that have such a rich blend of sex and gender dynamics, as seen in its performance conventions, skills and techniques, casting tradition and gender-based role categories, apprenticeship and training system, performers' social persona and the audience-performer relationship, repertoire, and the hierarchical structure of characters. Unlike Western spoken drama, *jingju* is not only a performance process, but also has its own ritualized matrix that entails arbitrary iterability and culmination to actualization in performance, configuration and/or transformation in reality, and establishment of a new status quo. In this sense, *jingju* is a particularly transgressive theatrical art. In a larger sense, the revival of *nandan* of *jingju* foresees a discursive revolution in forming a new gender politics.

In addition, I want to point out that as an art form *nandan* in *jingju* displays sexual artifice in its construction of gender through its gender transgressive desires, for the performers wield the power within the art form to actualize the potentiality of extending the exploration and representations of sexuality from the aesthetic regime to the realistic domain. As a matter of fact, not only is cross-gender performance an art form, but the collective practice itself is also intrinsically a behavioural art. On the contested state of the revival of *nandan* in *jingju* and its cultural implications and social signification, the sexual artifice it displays expresses displacement in naturalistic terms through seduction of the sexual otherness in the performer-and-spectator exchange and thus challenges the radical alterity through commutation of polarities.

Chapter 7.
Conclusion

I have constantly run into individuals struggling with the term “gender studies” when they look at my academic curriculum vitae. Others may take it for granted that gender studies only deals with gender equality between men and women in households, employment, divorce settlements, and mainstream politics. I chose gender studies as my doctoral specialty when I determined to settle into academia, because I had come to realize, after studying and working in the media, theatre, film, and at a number of medical clinics and institutions of higher learning how gender, along with sexuality, operates as the axis of all mechanisms of creative and critical spheres and the continuum connecting corporeal legibility with psychical intangibility. Given the limitations of the approach in examining gender and analyzing in terms of gender in a single discipline, I foresee that gender studies as an inter-discipline will gain a more prominent position in scholarship in the future, and, given our cognitive progress, I can tell that there is still great potential for advancement of learning.

In preparing and proposing my research, I have found that cross-gender performance in the theatre and its variations in other types of aesthetic activities, especially in popular media as one major “symptom” of gender transgression, is one of the most complex and intricate areas of gender studies. Though its representations have been widely observed, documented and examined, the motives, desires, and sexuality of its subjects, and the social reality of the vibrant contemporary revival it reflects, along with variant representations in popular media, have not been researched sufficiently.

Interestingly, the informants whom I have interviewed are not only the objects of my investigation, but also the subjects of the theorizing of sensitivities derived from individual experiences with a sense of commonality. By all means, it may be maintained that their first person accounts and self-developed theories could have made a valuable

contribution to contemporary queer theory. Queer theory emerged in the 1990s with new concepts and ideas that attempted to correct or complement the limits of previous psychopathological and psychosexual views on non-normative sexual identities. Although queer theorists and transgender scholars have the advantage of examining the complex incoherencies in the interplay between biological or chromosomal sex, gender identity, gender expression, embodiment and sexual desire through a multi-disciplinary lens, presumed gender variability set in a Western context in which scholars cite their gendered and sexualized examples has limited their theoretical framework. Therefore, I have chosen *jingju* as a big holistic case study for its specificity and the universality seen through all the singular cases within it. With the cases that I have investigated in the scene, *jingju* proves to be a kaleidoscope of all the components and spheres we want to know about queer gender.

Whereas women are widely accepted for playing female roles in *jingju* nowadays, *nandan* performance today is considered more transgressive than ever, in that instead of simply following the historical norm, it is transforming the theatre into a laboratory for gender exploration, somehow like drag[55] and passing. Although I had presumed that *nandan*, drag and passing were fundamentally different, I have observed in the research a blurred line between them, as many individuals in the scene may be involved or interested in more than one of them. As Sun Peihong has put it, *nandan*, drag and passing are different vehicles for expressing the same desires, while *nandan* in *jingju* carries more social and demonstrative responsibilities. Some *nandan* performers may openly disparage drag or passing, but mostly as a way of self-defence out of a castration anxiety. I try not to look at these categories independently, as the problematic semiotics may have misled us to think separately rather than holistically. As a whole, these three practices are all subversive to the gender binary pattern, taking the form of a gender alternative expression.

Through my long-lasting investigation, I have come to the conclusion that the perception of the *nandan* art should not be reduced to a mere non-mimetic male

[55] I have observed different types of drag. Here, I refer to drag with the nature of "passing," instead of comic drag.

construct and re-production of the female gender. First of all, the embodiment and normalization of such stylized conventions for gender portrayal exemplifies the process of social construction of gender and yet does not fail to provide the source for gender citation. Second, as a matter of fact, the stylized embodiment of feminine qualities by male subjects is essentially the same as drag and passing in terms of gender expression. The difference lies in the interpretation each of them presents of the female bodies. The interrelations between the real body and the fictional one should not be ignored, as they reflect the "points of contact" between theatre and gendered reality. Given the fact that *nandan* performers have onstage and offstage performances, some may seem to be habitually continuing their onstage cross-gender performance into their lived realities, and others subverting their onstage persona. I think that the offstage self-presentation should not be used as behavioural evidence for the subject's gender identity, as it could be either a conscious or unconscious process of what Erving Goffman calls "the arts of impression management" (1990, 203). *Jingju* has provided great fieldwork for contemporary gender and performance studies, and facilitates critical attention to the analogies between performance behaviour and ritual. This is not only because the cultural scene of *jingju* demonstrates the incoherencies between sex, gender and sexuality, but also because *jingju,* given its non-realistic aesthetic tradition, reifies gendered acts, gesticulations, movements, and stylizations of the body, which all originate outside of the gendered subjects and which oftentimes are cited into daily life. How much work the reiterated cross-gender performative acts, and discursive effects from childhood training on a daily basis extending to adulthood, can do to construct or reconstruct one's gender identity? Why did the master of *nandan* art, Mei Lanfang, have to promote his heterosexuality offstage while his female images on stage were regarded as "a cultural obsession" in Republican China? Why did American mainstream media repeat that publicity of him as a gentleman living "a modest, unassuming life," "seldom showing himself…" and "a husband with a wife and children" (Matthews, 1930)? Perhaps media's emphasis on his "normality" was to highlight his mastery of theatrical performance, or, unintentionally, to underpin the idea that gender is performative. Indeed, of the theatrical acts and persona offered to the public, which is more of a performance or whether or not both are equally a performance remains a fascinating topic in contemporary performance studies, but at least they are both restored

behaviour, both having been rehearsed, prepared, then “framed, presented, highlighted or displayed” (1985).

Most of my informants believe, however, that because of increasing public awareness of gender variance, the fear of *nandan* being equated to a sexual pervert in the *jingju* scene has significantly decreased in recent years, which means that there should be less conscious performance of “impression” in their everyday life. That being said, while acknowledging the performative nature of both the onstage and offstage “performance,” I have observed an inter-subjective agreement on the congruity between sense of gender, transgressive desire and the cross-gender aesthetic practice. My research is not treating *jingju* as an object in the abstract, but rather its interactions and relationships to other objects. My research interest has thus enabled me to pay more critical attention to the ever-changing interfaces of academic disciplines.

In sum, the specific complexity of the cross-gender performance in *jingju* accounts for the universal multiplicity within the broad gender spectrum in reality, a spectrum “upon which human beings choose their places without regard to propriety or custom” (Heilbrun, x-xi, 1982). The contemporary widespread interest in examining cross-gender theatrical traditions and the appropriation of them in other aesthetic areas reflects a common transgressive nature in human beings that seeks to unsettle gender discourse from biological sex through representations of subversively embodied sexuality. I use “transgressionism” to define this phenomenon and the desire behind it. The significance of using this umbrella term lies in its inclusion of all gender identities placed between the polar mode of masculinity and femininity, and hence building a coalition of sexual minorities. The desire to transgress exists and is manifested and enacted in varying degrees, as it is constantly in an unstable and situational state of self-negotiation between the real self and the fictional self, sometimes reaching a climax when catalyzed by internalized external factors. The theatre navigates more space for such exploration and manifestation, and yet, not only the performers enjoy the space, but also audience members join the performers in co-creating the new reality and the “dual consciousness.”

Although my research field is situated in theatre, and *jingju* in particular, the significance of the project extends to all gender-related areas in the arts, humanities, and the larger world. It seeks to solve the epistemological problems in gender studies that have continued to this day—

First of all, there is no singular gendered subject. Gender discourse only exists in a "signifier-and-signified" relation to the subject's perception of other gendered bodies. In this regard, I have formed the theory of "gender relativity" to support the belief that gender should be understood only through referencing to other sexed bodies contrasted in an enduring interplay. Masculinity, for example, does not stand on its own, as it can only be perceived in comparison with referential bodies that are more or less "masculine" than the signified one. As one of the informants, Chang Lang, describes how he perceives his own gender, "If I stand beside the macho Arnold Schwarzenegger, then I think I'm more on the feminine side; but if you compare me with Wang Zilin (one of the other informants whom he also knows personally), then I'm definitely a masculine man. However, even Wang is not that feminine. He is more in the middle, if you compare him with many of the others" (2012). Thus, the perception of inner and outer masculine or feminine qualities is subjective, depending on the perspective and personal experiences of the observer and the agency as well as the specificity of the cultural contexts. It is relative also because gender has been given cultural meanings that place subversion within specific terms. While acknowledging the general presumption of masculinity and femininity as the two legible poles of the wide range of gendered representations and beliefs, according to my interviews and observations, none the informants, including the intersexed one, Li Yu, has a fixed and final self-perception of his own gender, and their perception of another individual's gender is often formed in a comparison and contrast between his perceptions of his own gender and of the other's.

Second, it is not precise to claim that gender is socially or culturally constructed, since we should not ignore biological attributes that give us the initial idea of the differences between a male and a female. Essentially, the social and cultural implications of gender can be traced to the initial distribution of work for man and woman in primitive society based on the physical differences and instinctual needs. What we understand as gender today is the reconstructed or amplified version out of its

ontological attributes based on biological differences and the internalization of that process. Of those informants who tell me about their perception of gender in North America as well as in China, many have expressed their finding of the shift in their sense of gender influenced by the change of their hair colour or of their hair length, let alone those more dramatic and more enduring impacts on the inner sense of gender, such as the way to seek sexual pleasure, though that impact is only perceived by the subject. Reiteration does not precisely "do" gender, but visualizes and maximizes the archetype to its more representative form. While I argue that gender is maximized, in many cases I have observed that there is a core sense of gendered self, albeit unsettled oftentimes, which surpasses other situational variations of gendered self, and which is "inalienable" and "inseperatable" big time. This reading of the making of gender in the first place and re-shaping of gender later on does not contradict "gender relativity," since without the former it would have been meaningless to discuss the latter.

Third, gender may be performable, as in *jingju*, while gender performance and gender performativity are interchangeable only when they are not placed in a context to discuss their association with self-identity. The informants who perform the *xiaosheng* role category, for example, do not feel any shared personhood in the assigned role category, but are deeply engaged in their desired one—*dan*. In these cases, I have observed coherence between what the subject strongly desires to do as a make-believe process, his sexuality, and his sense of gender, while in others I observe incoherence between gender, sexuality, gender mannerisms and gender behaviours. It may be maintained that gender transgression should not be understood in its own terms, but through reference to what the entire social and cultural regulation and institutionalization regarding the signifiers of masculinity and femininity see as threatening to mainstream perception of gender norms. Many *jingju* artists and scholars doubt that *nandan* will ever be as accepted as a theatrical norm in the future as it was in the past (Sun, Wen, Song, and Lin, 2012) given the status of women significantly enhanced nowadays, but the revival of *nandan* even on a limited scale does not mean social retrogression, but an advancement whose significance lies in proving that gender is not an individual status, but an art of living.

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Appendix A.

Major interview questions:

1. How do you view the ban of cross-gender performance (*nan yan nü he nü yan nan*) as well as training since the founding of the PRC and its contemporary revival?

2. Since there are so many excellent female performers playing roles of the same sex

(*sheng li xing bie*), why do you think there are still scholars, patrons, performers, trainees, and audience members who wish to retain and revive the *nandan* art?

3. What motivates you to be a *nandan* performer?

4. How do you see the interrelatedness, if any, between cross-dressing (*nan yan nü he nüyan nan*), drag (*yi zhuang biao yan*), and passing (*yi zhuang pi*)?

5. Could you possibly explain, according to your own experiences and observations, why the revival of all-female *yueju* has undergone much fewer obstacles than *nandan* art in *jingju*?

6. When you were admitted to the *xiqu* school, was *dan* your first choice? Were you accepted as a *dan* student or rejected? If you were rejected or assigned another role type, what was the reason given and what was the reassigned role type?

7. When you switched from other role types to *dan* and/or when you were studying as a *dan*, what was the general attitude of your schoolmates, your family and friends?

8. How do you see the *jingju* fans/amateurs (*piao you*) who are keen on being a *nandan* performer for hobby?

9. Are there any foreseen obstacles for the continued revival of *nandan* performance?

10. How do you see the mainstreaming of drag in popular media in recent years?

11. Do you think the contemporary *kundan* performers have surpassed their male predecessors and are able to replace *nandan*? In other words, do you think the fact that women are allowed on stage makes the existence of *nandan* unnecessary? If not, why?

12. Do you think the revival of *nandan* should be aimed at the re-mainstreaming of *nandan* in impersonating *jingju*'s *dan* characters? If not, what kind of prospective you may foresee in the revival? What is the revival expected to achieve? Where is it going?

Appendix B.

List of Interviewees

Anonymous NACTA administrator. 2012.

Bai, Yu. 2005-09.

Chang, Lang. 2014.

Chen, Zhen. 2012.

Li, Kevin. 2014.

Li, Mei. 2003.

Li, Yu. 2003-05.

Li, Yulan. 2015.

Lin, Peng. 2012.

Lin, Ruikang. 2012.

Liu, Bing. 2012-14.

Liu, Zheng. 2012-14.

Lu, Peng. 2012-14.

Song, Xiaochuan. 2012-14.

Sun, Peihong. 2012-14.

Sun, Songlin. 1996.

Tang, Jiahu. 2005-14.

Wang, Feng. 2012.

Wang, Zhujie, 2008.

Wang, Zilin. 2003-14.

Wen, Ruhua. 1997, 2012-14.

Zhang, Bing. 2003

Zhang, Leslie. 2003-14.

Zheng, Wenhao. 1995-04.

Appendix C.

Glossary

Ai jiangnan 《哀江南》 *Mourning for Southern China*

Bawang bie ji 《霸王别姬》 *Farewell, My Concubine*

Bai mao nü 《白毛女》 *The White Haired Girl*

Bai mian lang jun 《白面郎君》 *White Faced Gentleman*

banxiang 扮相 looks

Beijing quju 北京曲剧 traditional Beijing style ballad singing

Cai jia zhuang 《蔡家庄》 *The Manor of the Cai's*

cai zi jia ren 才子佳人 talented scholarly men and beautiful women

Chang'e ben yue 《嫦娥奔月》 *Chang'e's Flight to the Moon*

Chan juan wu 《婵娟误》 *The Misfortune of the Beauty*

changxide 唱戏的 *xiqu* performer

chou 丑 clowns

choudan/caidan 丑旦 / 彩旦 female clowns

chuanju 川剧 Sichuan Opera

chun liu she 春柳社 Spring Willow Club

chun wan 春晚 Chinese New Year Gala

Da lu chun qui 《大陆春秋》 *The Spring and Autumn of the Mainland*

Da tang guifei 《大唐贵妃》 *The Concubine of the Tang Dynasty*

Daiyu zang hua 《黛玉葬花》 *Daiyu Burries Flowers*

dan 旦 female characters, a role category

daomadan 刀马旦 martial female characters, a subcategory of *dan*

di wang jiang xiang 帝王将相 emperors, kings, generals and ministers

Duan qiao 《断桥》 *The Broken Bridge*

Du juan shan 《杜鹃山》 *Azalea Mountain*

E yinyuan 《恶姻缘》 *Bad Marriage*

En yuan yuan 《恩怨缘》 *Gratitude or Resentment*

erhu 二胡 the Chinese two-stringed fiddle

fanchuan huanghou 反串皇后 drag queen

Furong zhen 《芙蓉镇》 *The Hibiscus Town*

Guifei zui jiu 《贵妃醉酒》 *The Drunken Beauty*

guoju 国剧 national theatre

Hai gang 《海港》 *On the Docks*

Hei ji yuan hun 《黑籍冤魂》 *Victims of Opium*

Hei nu yu tian lu 《黑奴吁天录》 *Uncle Tom's Cabin*

hei wu lei 黑五类 Five Black Categories

Hong deng ji 《红灯记》 *The Red Lantern*

Hong lou meng 《红楼梦》 *Dream of the Red Chamber*

Hong ni guan 《虹霓关》 *Rainbow Pass*

Hong se niangzi jun 《红色娘子军》 *The Red Detachment of Women*

huju 沪剧 Shanghai Opera

huadan 花旦 vivacious female characters, a subcategory of *dan*

Hua'e zhuan 《华娥传》 *The Story of Hua'e*

hualian/jing 花脸 / 净 painted face, a role category

huangmeixi 黄梅戏 Huangmei Opera

Huan hai chao 《宦海潮》 *The Tide of the Officialdom*

huashan 花衫 a relatively new subcategory of *dan* that has integrated features of *qingyi* and *huadan*

huiju 徽剧 Anhui Opera

hukou 户口 registered permanent residence

Jia 《家》 *The Family*

jianye 贱业 debased occupation

jue'r 角儿 star performer

jing erhu 京二胡 the Chinese two-stringed fiddle used in *jingju*

jinghu 京胡 a Chinese bowed string instrument in the *huqin* family, used primarily in *jingju*

jingju 京剧 Beijing Opera

jinju 晋剧 Shanxi Opera

Jin ri Beijing 《今日北京》 *Beijing Today*

kunqu 昆曲 *kun* opera or *kunqu* opera

laodan 老旦 elderly female characters, a subcategory of dan

laosheng 老生 elderly male characters, a subcategory of sheng

liang shan 梁山 Mount Liang

Liang Shanbo yu Zhu Yingtai 《梁山伯与祝英台》 *Butterfly Lovers*

liupai 流派 performance school

Long jiang song 《龙江颂》 *Song of the Dragon River*

Lu dang huo zhong 《芦荡火种》 *The Sparks in the Reed Marshes*

Luo shen 《洛神》 *The Goddess of the River Luo*

Min guo hun 《民国魂》 *The Soul of the Republic*

Mudan ting 《牡丹亭》 *The Peony Pavilion*

nandan/qiandan 男旦 / 乾旦 male-to-female cross-gender performers in jingju

nan yan nan, nü yan nü 男演男，女演女 gender-straight performance

niang niang qiang 娘娘腔 sissie

Nian nian you yu 《年年有余》 *Surplus Year After Year*

Nie hai bo lan 《孽海波澜》 *The Waves of the Karmic Ocean*

nüdan/kundan 女旦 / 坤旦 female performers of female characters in *xiqu*

piaoyou 票友 *jingju* amateur

qingyi 青衣 refined female characters, a subcategory of *dan*

qinqiang 秦腔 Qinqiang Opera

Qiu nü zhuan 《仇女转》 *The Story of Ms. Qiu*

Qi xi bai hu tuan 《奇袭白虎团》 *Raid on the White Tiger Regiment*

Renmin ri bao 《人民日报》 *People's Daily*

Renmin xiju 《人民戏剧》 *People's Theatre*

shenduan 身段 movement

Shui hu 《水浒》 *Water Margin*

si da ming dan 四大名旦 Four Great Dan

si qing 四清 Four Clean-ups

si ren bang 四人帮 Gang of Four

si xiao ming dan 四小名旦 Four Junior Dan

Tai zhen wai zhuan 《太真外传》 *The Unofficial Life History of Yang Taizhen*

Tian nü san hua 《天女散花》 The *Heavenly Maids Scatter Blossoms*

Tong nü zhan she 《童女斩蛇》 *The Virgin Slays the Snake*

Wang jiang ting 《望江亭》 *The Riverview Pavilion*

wen ming xi 文明戏 modern theatre

Wu nü bai shou 《五女拜寿》 *Five Daughters Celebrate Father's Birthday*

xia hai 下海 become a professional *jingju* performer

xianggong 相公 male prostitutes

xiaosheng 小生 young male characters, a subcategory of *sheng*

Xin bai niang zi chuanqi 《新白娘子传奇》 *The New Legend of Madame White Snake*

Xin cha hua 《新茶花》 *A New La Dame aux camellias*

xing guang da dao 星光大道 Avenue of Stars

xin ju 新剧 new theatre

xipi erhuang 西皮二黄 two *jingju* melodies

xiqu 戏曲 Chinese indigenous musical theatre

Xi shi 《西施》 *Shih Tzu*

xuni 虚拟 suppositionality

Yi lü ma 《一缕麻》 *A Strand of Hemp*

Yi yuan qian 《一元钱》 *One Yuan*

yueju 越剧 Yue Opera or Shaoxing Opera

yuju 豫剧 Henan opera

yunshou 云手 cloud-hands

Zao chun er yue 《早春二月》 *Early Spring in February*

Zhao shi gu er 《赵氏孤儿》 *The Orphan of Zhao*

zhezixi 折子戏 excerpts

Zhi qu wei hu shan 《智取威虎山》*Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy*