Shifting Gender Roles: Male Dan in Chinese Theatre

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This is dedicated to
Zhang Lifang 張立芳 (1935–24 October 2018),
my grandfather,
who passed away on the day
of submission of this thesis.
He created for me the brightest childhood life.
ABSTRACT

In this thesis I examine male dan, male actors who perform female roles in Chinese theatre. I argue that due to the function of theatre as a key site of public discourse, the rise and fall of male dan actors illustrates changes in the social zeitgeist of China, especially the politics of gender and sexuality. The rise to prominence of male dan actors during the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1636–1911) dynasties was partly due to their artistry, but it also reflected a homoerotic sensibility amongst the scholar-élite and well-off patrons. Following the fall of the Qing dynasty male dan came to be seen as remnants of the past. In response, prominent male dan and their supporters redefined the role and developed its artistry, making the female roles in jingju accord with their ideal of “new women.” Their use of qiao, or stilted footwear, was an integral part of this redefinition of the role, but following the establishment of the People’s Republic of China this became the focus for renewed attacks on male dan. The Chinese Communist Party equated qiao with bound feet, a “feudal” remnant that had no place in the new China. The Party-State fostered a rigid gender hierarchy that constrained the space for male dan, and it was only by “aestheticizing” the cross-dressing integral to their artistry that they have been able to escape the accusation that their artistry is nothing more than a manifestation of deviance.
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**LIST OF FIGURES**............................................................................................................................................... vi

**INTRODUCTION.** Chinese Theatre and Male Dan...................................................................................... 1

**CHAPTER ONE.** Practising Homoeroticism: The Rise of Male Dan Actors in the
Ming and Qing Periods ................................................................................................................................. 37

**CHAPTER TWO.** Light from the West(?): The Recreation of Tradition ............... 88

**CHAPTER THREE.** Reinventing Disciplinary Femininity: Traditions and
Innovations of Male Dan Actors.................................................................................................................. 136

**CHAPTER FOUR.** Virtuosic Artistry or “Feudal Remnants”?: the Use and
Prohibition of Stilts in Chinese Theatre ................................................................................................. 176

**CHAPTER FIVE.** Reconstructing Chinese Masculinity: The Prohibition of Male
Dan Actors .................................................................................................................................................. 208

**CHAPTER SIX.** A Millennial Predicament: Male Dan Actors in a Homophobic
Country ....................................................................................................................................................... 247

**CONCLUSION.** Male Dan Actors and Chinese Society in Transition................ 287

**GLOSSARY OF CHINESE TERMS**........................................................................................................... 294

**APPENDIX.** The Musical Dimension of *jingju* ................................................................. 303

**BIBLIOGRAPHY** ..................................................................................................................................... 309
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1 Jinghu 京胡........................................................................................................172
Figure 2 Meng Jinbang 孟金榜, in Yannen Pass..........................................................173
Figure 3 Shang Xiaoyun 尚小雲, in Shelter in a Mulberry Garden ............................174
Figure 4 Mei Lanfang 梅蘭芳, in The Regrets of Life and Death ..............................175
Figure 5 Ying qiao 硬蹺 .................................................................................................206
Figure 6 The way to use ying qiao ..............................................................................206
Figure 7 Bi Guyun 畢谷雲, in Visiting the Grave.........................................................207
Figure 8 Wen Ruhua 溫如華 and Zhang Junqiu 張君秋 .............................................243
Figure 9 Yang Chunxia 楊春霞, in Azalea Mountain ..................................................244
Figure 10 Wen Ruhua smoking in full dan costume ......................................................245
Figure 11 Wang Peiyu 王珮瑜 .......................................................................................246
INTRODUCTION

Chinese Theatre and Male Dan

This thesis focuses on male dan, male actors who perform female roles in Chinese theatre (xiagu 戏曲). By exploring Chinese history through the lens of male dan, I intend to analyse the evolution of jingju (Beijing/Peking Opera) artistry, as well as examine the politics of gender and sexuality in China from the late Ming dynasty (1368–1644) down to the present.

As one of the most popular forms of entertainment for Chinese people, theatre has been “a key site” of public discourse. It was a place where different voices, derived both from the lower levels of society and promulgated by the court and the local élites conflicted. Successive generations of rulers strove to exert their influence over the theatre, transforming it into a highly politicised medium through which they could promulgate their ideological concerns and pragmatic demands across all social, cultural, and political levels. At the same time, as Andrea S. Goldman argues, the theatre was able to “upset social hierarchies” by making “men of means and privilege vulnerable to the charms of lowly cross-dressing boy actresses.” Therefore, theatre can be considered as a bellwether for Chinese society, and the issue of male dan provides a lens through which we can explore Chinese understanding of gender and sexuality.

2 Goldman, Opera and the City, 13.
Many actors performed dual roles, both as performers and prostitutes (or courtesans). A majority of the male dan actors in the Ming and Qing were forced to serve well-off patrons as social companions and sometimes as sexual partners. As they were primarily “consumed” by people of means and/or privilege, they were thus subject to the power of the scholar-élite and wealthy patrons. On the eve of the 1911 Revolution, Chinese understandings of gender and sexuality were swamped by the influx of Western ideas, including psychoanalysis, which redefined homosexuality as abnormal or pathological. Demonised during successive social movements following the fall of the Qing dynasty (1636–1911), due to their historical connection to homoeroticism, male dan were constantly forced to reestablish their legitimacy by reconstructing their identity, which in many cases required the construction of a “masculine” self. An exploration of their efforts allows us to dissect phobias surrounding homosexuality and effeminacy, which remain deeply rooted in modern Chinese society.

An examination of the changing fortunes of the male dan actors thus provides us with a valuable perspective from which to explore the evolution of Chinese theatre, as well as how ideas about gender and sexuality have changed in the modern era. Due to the central position of male dan in the development of the wider dan role category, and also the broader realm of jingju as a whole, it would be difficult for someone to obtain a full understanding of jingju without a good understanding of the changing fortunes of the male dan. Following its emergence in the 1840s, jingju soon became one of the most popular art forms for Chinese people. Its historical evolution reflects China’s painstaking transformation from the “Heavenly
Dynasty” (tianchao 天朝) to a modern, Western-style nation-state. Similarly, the fate of male dan reflects shifts in power within Chinese society and the transformation of ideas about gender and sexuality.

Chinese theatre is the English-language translation of xiqu 戏曲, a term which was sometimes referred to as “Chinese Opera” in earlier Western scholarship because of its focus on vocal arts. All the dramatic elements that were to form Chinese theatre were seen in fragmented form in the sacrificial performances of the Bronze Age, however, it was not until the Tang dynasty (618–907) that these elements were first brought together in the plays Damian 大面 (Mask) and Tayao niang 踏搖娘 (Stepping and Swaying Lady), and the performance of the court fool (canjun 参军, lit. “adjutant”).³ Then in the twelfth century (c. 1120), a new theatrical form known as nanxi 南戏 (lit. “southern drama”) emerged and became fashionable in the coastal cities of Wenzhou and Yongjia in southern Zhejiang.⁴ In one nanxi play, the story was unfolded over numerous chu 閣, or scenes (sometimes over fifty), before it arrived at the finale.⁵

The Mongolian Yuan dynasty (1271–1368) saw the earliest mature form

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of Chinese theatre, known as zaju 雜劇 (lit. “miscellaneous/variety drama”) or Yuan zaju. With rare exceptions, a zaju play began with an introductory prologue (xiezi 楔子), which was followed by four main acts (zhe 折). Only the leading character (whether male or female) sang arias in each act in zaju plays, while the other actors used prose and/or poetry to develop the story. This differentiated zaju from nanxi, in which everyone was allowed to sing. Although the form of zaju was first developed in the late Tang dynasty, the term zaju is primarily used to refer to Yuan zaju, as it represented the maturing of classical theatre, hence making its emergence a landmark in the development of Chinese theatre.

After the fall of the Yuan empire, a new type of dramatic form, known as chuanqi 傳奇 (lit. “transmission of marvels,” or romance), developed. Based on the southern form of nanxi, chuanqi became dominant in the theatrical domain during the fourteenth and the fifteenth centuries. The forerunner of chuanqi was Gao Ming’s 高明 (or Gao Zecheng 高則誠, c. 1301–1370) Pipa ji 琵琶記 (The Lute). The success of this “led to efforts to standardise chuanqi’s literary form.” In terms of vocal arts, sometime during the period between 1540 and 1566, Wei Liangfu 魏良輔 (1489–1566) revised a musical form primarily in circulation around Kunshan in Jiangsu province, which was known as kunshan qiang 崑山腔 or kunqiang 崑腔. This new type of music,

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6 William Dolby, “Yuan Drama,” 47.
8 John Hu, “Ming Dynasty Drama,” 62–67 & 72. Other examples of early chuanqi dramas included Jingchai ji 荊釵記 (The Thorn Hairpin), Baitu ji 白兔記 (The White Rabbit), Baiyueting 拜月亭 (The Moon Prayer Pavilion), and Shagou ji 殺狗記 (Killing a Dog).
involving vocal performance accompanied by the Chinese flute (dizi 笛子), was said to be as soft as flowing water and was admired by the scholar-élite. The appeal of this “stimulate[d] many critics to try to codify a new music prosody for…chuanqi’s musical form.” In 1579, Liang Chenyu 梁辰魚 (c. 1521–1594) tailor-made a chuanqi drama Huansha ji 浣紗記 (Washing Gauze) to suit Wei’s kunqiang, and in doing so initiated a trend of using kunqiang to perform chuanqi dramas. This type of dramatised kunqiang is therefore habitually referred to as kunju 崑劇.10

Kunju was considered orthodox by the élite class for at least two centuries before it went into decline. During the reign of the Kangxi emperor, yiyang qiang 弋陽腔 (a musical form of Yiyang), which had arisen during the Ming dynasty and was localised and known as jingqiang 京腔, began to challenge the dominance of kunju. As Colin Mackerras argues, “this particular variant [jingqiang] became popular not only among the masses of the city but even among the aristocracy.”11 After the 1770s, troupes of actors came to Beijing from Sichuan, Anhui and Hubei provinces in order to perform for Emperor Qianlong’s (r. 1736–1796) birthdays. They brought with them local versions of plays that, due to the vitality of their performances, would finally undermine kunju’s premier status.12 Around 1840, on the foundation of the musical forms

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9 Hu, “Ming Dynasty Drama,” 70–71.
10 Hu, “Ming Dynasty Drama,” 71–72. Kunju is also known as Kunqu Opera, while I would use kunju to refer to the dramatised musical form of kunqiang.
12 Colin Mackerras, “The Drama of the Qing Dynasty,” 102–104.
used by the Anhui troupes—xipi 西皮 and erhuang 二黄—a new theatrical form called pihuang 皮黄 (a combination of pi from xipi and huang from erhuang) was born. As it was formed and developed in Beijing, pihuang was later referred to as jingju 京剧, which is usually translated as Peking Opera or Beijing Opera.\(^\text{13}\)

The term “role-category” (hangdang 行當) refers to the criteria used to classify the roles actors perform in Chinese theatre and to how they are trained. In jingju, any actor is assigned one of the four categories: sheng 生 (males), dan 旦 (females), jing 净 (painted-face roles), and chou 丑 (clowns). Each category has a different set of virtuosic artistry. According to the common view, an actor of Chinese theatre does not directly perform particular roles in a realistic way, but uses a series of “stylised” and “conventionalised” (chengshi hua 程式化) artistic skills, known as the “Four Skills and Five Methods” of performance (sigong wufa 四功五法). According to Wang Guowei’s 王國維 (1977–1927) ground-breaking research, the reason why female roles are called dan is that women were referred to by this term in the Song (960–1279) and Jin (1115–1234) dynasties, when the prototype of Chinese theatre first formed.\(^\text{14}\) The dan category of jingju is divided into laodan 老旦, qingyi 青衣, huadan 花旦, daomadan 刀馬旦, wudan 武旦, and huashan 花衫.\(^\text{15}\) Except for laodan actors who perform the roles of elderly women, the

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\(^\text{13}\) Colin Mackerras, “The Drama of the Qing Dynasty,” 102–106.
\(^\text{15}\) (1) Qingyi 青衣 (lit. “black clothes”), or zhengdan 正旦 (leading female roles), perform
dan are primarily younger women, who use a delicate falsetto voice in their vocal performance.

This thesis is primarily focused on male dan, male actors who perform female roles. Utilising male dan to perform female roles is a time-honoured tradition in China, but it is a term that is not easily translated. The English term “female impersonator” does not fully convey the connotations of “dan” in Chinese theatre. For an ordinary dan actor, a basic requirement is professional proficiency in the artistry required for the roles they perform. In order to develop this virtuosic artistry, male dan actors undergo rigorous training from their childhood years onwards, which indicates that they are quite different from female impersonators or drag queens. They are also different from the boy actresses in Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre, who performed female roles before puberty then shifted back to male roles after becoming adults. Male dan continued to perform female roles throughout their careers.

According to some Qing scholars, the earliest prototype of the male dan the female roles who have higher pedigrees and who adhere to the Confucian moral codes of chastity and filial piety. They are primarily good women, faithful wives or filial daughters. The name comes from the robes worn in a few qingyi roles that indicate extreme poverty. (2) Huadan 花旦 (lit. “flower dan”) refers either to unmarried women, known as guimendan 閨門旦 (lit. “boudoir dan”), or flirtatious demi-monde, known as tiedan 貼旦 (secondary female roles). Generally, maid-servants are performed by huadan actors. (3) Daomadan 刀馬旦 (lit. “blade-and-horse dan”) play the part of a female commander who wears armour and uses a lance. (4) Wudan 武旦 (lit. “martial dan”) refers to a lower-ranking female warrior who performs the most intricate gymnastic and acrobatic feats. The aforementioned four categories had their origins in the late Qing dynasty, while (5) huashan 花衫 (lit. “flower clothes”) was developed by twentieth-century dan actors. It combines the artistry of qingyi, huadan, daomadan and wudan into a single role.
was documented in *Han Shu* 漢書 (*The Book of Han*) where it is recorded that Shusun Tong 叔孫通 (d. 194 BCE) had male performers disguised as female entertainers, or *wei jinü* 偽伎女. During the late Wei dynasty (220–264), Emperor Cao Fang 曹芳 (r. 240–254) let his young jesters Guo Huai 郭懷 and Yuan Xin 袁信 perform wanton female characters in public performances of the play *Liaodong yaofu* 遼東妖婦 (*Liaodong Coquette*). Apparently their behaviour in these performances was so lewd that passers-by covered their eyes. Instances of cross-dressing were occasionally recorded during the ensuing dynasties, but not as part of classical theatre. It was only during the mid-to-late Ming that we find frequent references to male *dan*, partially due to the emergence of *kunju* and also to the increased acceptability of homoerotic sensibilities amongst the scholar-élite. The heyday of male *dan* came during the Qing dynasty, as all female roles in the theatre were performed by males, due to the Qing court’s strict prohibition on female entertainers. This was especially the case in *jingju*, which emerged during the late Qing period, where, due to the absence of female entertainers, the artistry of the performance of female roles was created by male *dan*. These creations are still valued as the fundamental artistic criteria of the *dan* category and are

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16 Jiao Xun 焦循, “Ju shuo,” 創說 [*Comments on Theatre*, in *Jiao Xun lunqu sanzhong* 焦循論曲三種 [*Three Works on Theatre by Jiao Xun*], ed. Wei Minghua 韋明鴻 (Yangzhou: Guangling shushe, 2008), 16. See also Anle shanqiao 安樂山樵 (Wu Changyuan 吳長元), “Yanlan xiaopu” 燕蘭小譜 [*A Small Book of the Orchids in Beijing*, in *Qingdai yandu Liyuan shiliao congkan* 清代燕都梨園史料叢刊 [*Historical Records of Beijing Theatre during the Qing Dynasty*], ed. Zhang Cixi 張次溪 (Beijing: Zhongguo xiju chubanshe, 1988), 26. However, the claim by Jiao Xun and Wu Changyuan that Shusun Tong employed *wei jinü* cannot be found in the *Jiaosi zhi* 郊祀志 (*Records of Sacrifice*) chapter of *Han shu*, nor can it be found in Shusun Tong’s biography in this text.

followed by contemporary dan actors and actresses.

When the collapse of the Qing empire saw the birth of a Chinese nation-state, a group of Westernised scholars launched the New Culture Movement (Xin wenhua yundong 新文化運動) and the ensuing May Fourth Movement (Wusi yundong 五四運動), and as part of their efforts to modernise China they redefined the cross-dressing in jingju performance as an “historically arrested development” (yixing wu 遺形物) which should be eliminated for the sake of Chinese society. Despite such proclamations, the “Four Great Dan Actors” (sida mingdan 四大名旦) Mei Lanfang 梅蘭芳 (1894–1961), Cheng Yanqiu 程硯秋 (1904–1958), Shang Xiaoyun 尚小雲 (1900–1976), and Xun Huisheng 荀慧生 (1900–1968), all of whom were males, still dominated Beijing theatre. They developed further the artistry of the dan category, thereby enabling jingju to reach the pinnacle of its popularity, despite the criticisms of their art form coming from intellectuals associated with the New Culture Movement. During this period, Mei Lanfang, arguably the best dan actor, also introduced jingju to foreign audiences, establishing a far-reaching fame for both himself and for jingju artistry.

After the establishment of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) used the power of the state to attempt to eradicate male dan roles from Chinese theatre. The Party also demonised cross-dressing as deviant behaviour which violated state-sanctioned norms, namely the “natural” binary that was believed to be intrinsic to gender and sexuality. As a result, male dan were absent from the theatrical domain for a whole decade during the Cultural Revolution (wenhua da geming 文化大革命,
1966–1976). The end of the Cultural Revolution prefigured a new era of Reform and Opening (gaige kaifang 改革開放), but Chinese society remained in the grip of an ideology promulgated by the state that defined male dan as an expression of deviant behaviour. Due to an essentialist way of considering gender and sexuality, the phobia of effeminacy and homosexuality continues to haunt Chinese society. This casts a shadow over the future of male dan actors, who are conceived of as effeminate or even homosexual because of their profession. All in all, the rise and fall of male dan is a mirror of the transformation of China from the Ming and Qing dynasties to a communist Party-State, and continues to be reflective of the politics of gender and sexuality in twenty-first century Chinese society.

The audience of traditional Chinese theatre, during the Ming dynasty, was primarily the scholar-élite, or shi 士, who were educated in the Confucian classics and claimed the dominant position in the four-tiered social hierarchy (si min 四民) of traditional Chinese society. Those who failed to pass the higher levels of the civil service examination system, and those who retired from court service, retreated to their native places and continued to play a leadership role in their local communities, and are usually referred to as “gentry” (shen 紳, or shi shen 士紳).18 Besides these “Confucian scholars,” a wider group of literati (wenren 文人), or “men-of-letters,” were also central to theatrical activities during the Ming dynasty. They were educated, but in addition to the Confucian classics, literati also openly and publicly read novels, such as Dreams of the Red Chamber, and other forms of popular literature. They

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18 Yu Yingshi 余英時, Shishi lunheng 士史論衡 [Discussions on the History of the Scholar-Elite] (Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1999), 6–9.
also wrote poetry, which was of no use in the civil service examination.  

Reading and writing was a privilege enjoyed by the scholar-élite (including literati), while a majority of Chinese people remained illiterate. It was thus difficult for them to enjoy *kunju*, the text and music of which were refined in order to cater to the taste of the scholar-élite. As a result, the audience for, and commentators on, élite theatre during the Ming-dynasty, as exemplified by *kunju*, were one and the same. However, from the Qing dynasty onwards, well-off patrons (*haoke* 豪客) and ordinary urbanites also visited the theatre frequently. The well-off patrons, the majority of whom were successful merchants, imitated the scholars’ love for the arts, and came to play a very import part in the lives of *dan* actors, who they employed as escorts. This transformation of the social character of audience resulted in the rise of folk theatre and the decline of *kunju*, leading to a sense of vulnerability for the scholar-élite. However, due to their low level of education, the well-off patrons and ordinary urbanites produced few direct commentaries about the theatre and the plays they saw. The majority of the material that remains available to us today still reflects the views of the scholar-élite, projecting their particular preferences and prejudices.

A similar problem occurs in modern China, where “intellectuals” (or *zhishi fenzi* 知識分子, a term borrowed from Japanese) exerted their influence

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19 On this matter, see Lu Xun 魯迅, “Shanghai wenyi zhi yipie,” 上海文藝之一瞥 [A Glimpse of the Literature and Arts in Shanghai], in *Lu Xun quanji* 魯迅全集 [Complete Works of Lu Xun] (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2005), vol. 4, 298.

in order to rejuvenate China in order that it conform to the norms associated with Western modernity. During the New Cultural Movement (Xin wenhua yundong 新文化運動), intellectuals were extremely critical of traditional Chinese theatre, especially jingju. For instance, Lu Xun 魯迅 (1881–1936), one of the most prominent of these new culture intellectuals, was convinced that it was the male dan actor Mei Lanfang 梅蘭芳 (1894–1961) who ruined jingju, as popular audiences would find it difficult to understand his performances, which were tortuously refined (see Chapter Two). However, Mei’s performances continued to be widely admired by audiences right through until the Second World War. Therefore, the identity of “who is watching” was often very different from that of “who is commenting”. Throughout the thesis, I have tried to convey the complexity of these issues, within the limits of what the surviving source materials allow.

It is really only since the 1990s that male dan actors have received significant scholarly attention.21 In 1997, the Taiwanese scholar Zeng Yongyi 曾永義 published a literature review of historical documents that mention cross-dressing, covering the period from the second century BCE until the late

Qing dynasty. While its scope is broader than just the male dan role, this work includes many references that discuss dan actors. Chen Jiawei’s MA thesis (2005) is focused specifically on the male dan in the Qing dynasty. Both of these works are valuable for the references they make to cross dressing and male dan actors, but neither provides an analytical assessment of the many issues surrounding the historical significance of male dan. In contrast, Chou Huiling reminds us of the fact that dan actors were also boy courtesans (xianggong 相公) who served well-off patrons in their private playhouses (siyu 私寓), calling attention to the erotic dimension of dan actors. Developing this line of analysis, Min Tian uses the term “aestheticizing” to describes the “paradox of identification” of male dan. What he means by this is that they had to distinguish their offstage “male” identity from their onstage roles as feminine characters, which they did by means of demarcating the art of the performance (the “aestheticizing” aspect of their roles) from the nature of the performer.

Other scholars have explored the patronage of male dan actors as boy courtesans on the basis of evidence contained in a type of notation book (biji

23 Chen Jiawei 陳家威, “Qingdai jingju zhong zhi qiandan yanjiu,” 清代京劇中之乾旦研究 [Study of Male Dan of Jingju in the Qing Dynasty] (UG diss., Lingnan University, 2005).
筆記) called *huapu* (manual of flowers 花譜), in which members of the scholar-élite commented on famous *dan* actors. For instance, using such evidence, Yao Shuyi 么書儀 (b. 1945) dissects *dan* actors’ lives as boy courtesans in late Qing Beijing, considering them as one of the most important impetuses in the development of Chinese theatre. In her *Opera and the City*, Andrea S. Goldman delves into the functioning of Beijing society through the lens of the late Qing literati’s commentary books about theatre. She argues that the theatre was a place where conflicting voices from the court, the local scholar-élite, and ordinary Beijing dwellers intersected, and in this way it served as a forum in which public mores were formed and transformed.

In two different theses, Wang Zhaoyu 王照璵 and Zhang Yuan 張遠 both discuss how the Qing scholar-élite used these *huapu* books to develop a set of criteria to evaluate famous male *dan* actors. These criteria, in turn, became criteria for assessing the performance of actors, thus influencing the training and artistry of male *dan* actors.

Recently, Wu Xinmiao 吳新苗 provides a panoramic assessment of the private playhouses in Beijing in his *Liyuan siyu kaolun* 梨園私寓考論 [An Evidential Study of Private Playhouses]. Wu offers by far the most intensive study of the running of private playhouses in late Qing Beijing. He also describes the historical development of over fifty private

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27 Goldman, *Opera and the City*.

28 Wang Zhaoyu 王照璵, “Qingdai zhonghouqi Beijing “pinyou” wenhua yanjiu,” 清代中後期北京“品優”文化研究 [Research of the Culture of Commenting on Actors in Mid-and Late Qing Beijing] (MA diss., Jinan University, 2006). Zhang Yuan 張遠, “Qing zhongqi Beijing liyuan huapu zhongde xingbie tezhi jiangou,” 清中期北京梨園花譜中的性別特質建構 [Theatrical *Huapu* in Mid-Qing Beijing and the Construction of Femininity and Masculinity] (PhD diss., Taiwan University, 2010).
playhouses on the basis of extensive research.29

Another body of research focuses on the homoerotic dimension of the interaction between male dan and both the scholar-élite and well-off patrons. Cheng Yuang’s 程宇昂 2012 book Mingqing shiren yu nandan 明清士人與男旦 (The Scholar-Élite and Male Dan Actors in the Ming and Qing Periods) portrays a panoramic picture of the development of male dan actors from the Ming to the Qing dynasty. Cheng argues that during the Ming dynasty, because a majority of male dan were kept by the scholar-élite in their family troupes, the relationship between the actors and the scholar-élite tended to be more romantic, while in the Qing dynasty, theatrical patronage tended to be more commercial due to the rise of well-off patrons. Despite the different patterns of theatrical patronage, the homoerotic interactions in fact followed the same basic structure of “fictitious” heterosexuality.30 Sophie Volpp also analyses the interaction of late Ming scholars with male dan actors, but she uses the term “homosocial” instead of the more frequently-used “homosexual” to describe this interaction.31 In so doing she challenges the claim that homosexuality was prevalent in the social life of late Ming China. For her, the scholars’ homoerotic interaction with male dan was more a case of social

30 Cheng Yuang 程宇昂, Ming-Qing shiren yu nandan 明清士人與男旦 [The Scholar-Elite and Male Dan Actors in the Ming and Qing Periods] (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2012).
expectation than sexual attraction. In contrast, Wu Cuncun 吴存存 believes that homosexuality was indeed widespread in Ming and Qing society, and was the primary reason for the scholar-élite to associate with male dan (as boy courtesans). Whether Volpp under-estimates the homoerotic sensibility of the scholar-élite in Ming and Qing society, or Wu over-estimates this, the term “homosexuality” as defined in modern Western psychoanalysis and sexual psychology does not really apply to the situation in late imperial China. Male dan actors, as indentured protégés in either the family troupes of the Ming dynasty or the private playhouses of the Qing dynasty, were forced to perform female roles and serve well-off patrons as social companions, and sometimes as sexual partners. This relationship was a reflection of the heteronormative structure under the patriarchy of traditional China.

In terms of the transformation that male dan have undergone in modern China, in his book Drama Kings Joshua Goldstein illustrates how dan actors developed new explanatory frameworks to establish the legitimacy of jingju artistry in response to the constant challenges they encountered during the twentieth century. Goldstein uses the term “self-Orientalising” to describe Mei Lanfang’s strategy during his visit to the United States in 1930. In order to rebut the critical “death sentence” imposed on jingju by the New Culture Movement scholars, the supporters of Mei Lanfang deliberately differentiated jingju from realistic Western drama by re-narrating its artistic feature as

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32 Wu Cuncun 吴存存, Ming Qing shehui xing’ai fengqi 明清社會性愛風氣 [The Sexual Ethos of Ming and Qing Society] (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2000) and Homoerotic Sensibilities in Late Imperial China (London: Routledge, 2004). For an earlier discussion about Chinese homosexuality see Bret Hinsch, Passions of the Cut Sleeve (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).
“conventionalised.” They argued that it needed to be preserved because it had a different intrinsic value from the dramatic forms of the West.\textsuperscript{33} Catherine Yeh also discusses the ways in which male dan actors reconstructed their identity. She focuses her analysis on the use of tabloids (\textit{xiao bao} 小報) as a modern medium to shift the public understanding of dan actors from their past as boy courtesans to stars of popular entertainment.\textsuperscript{34} She also examines the different programmes that Mei Lanfang selected for his performances in Japan, the United States, and the Soviet Union, to show how the image of Chinese women and the Chinese nation-state were reconstructed on the stage.\textsuperscript{35} Yeh reminds us of the fact that the identity of male dan is not static, but has been defined and redefined from the late Qing onwards. In a more recent work, Wang Anqi 王安祈 also examines the case of Mei Lanfang, discussing how Mei’s identity as a man influenced the artistic features of his performance, which became known as the “Mei School” (\textit{meipai} 梅派) of jingju performance.\textsuperscript{36} Not all recent work on male dan is focused on Mei


\textsuperscript{36} Wang Anqi 王安祈, \textit{Xingbie, zhengzhi yu jingju biaoyan wenhua 性別, 政治與京劇表演文化 [Gender, Politics and the Culture of Jingju Performance]} (Taipei: Taiwan daxue chuban zhongxin, 2011).
Lanfang. For instance, in *The Soul of Beijing Opera* Ruru Li explores the way Cheng Yanqiu painstakingly demarcated his offstage identity as a man from his onstage image as a demure, delicate female character.\textsuperscript{37}

In his *Cross-Dressing in Chinese Opera*, Siu-leung Li re-examines how the essentialist norms of gender and sexuality are enforced in the theatrical domain.\textsuperscript{38} Employing a Foucauldian social-constructionist view, Li absorbs Jill Dolan’s and Judith Butler’s theories of gender and sexuality, declaring that “masculinity” and “femininity” are not in fact endowed by nature but are “transferable and reiterative.”\textsuperscript{39} Li combines historical analysis with oral history, drawing on a series of interviews he conducted with Wen Ruhua 溫如華 (b. 1947), whom he refers to as “the last male dan.”\textsuperscript{40} Two recent PhD theses continue this line of analysis developed by Siu-leung Li, exploring the predicament of male *dan* through the lens of gender and sexuality. Xu Wei 徐蔚 analyses the development of male *dan* from the Bronze Age to the present, attributing their identity crisis to the “feudal” idea that women are inferior to men (*nanzun nübei* 男尊女卑).\textsuperscript{41} Male *dan* who perform female roles are

\textsuperscript{37} Ruru Li, *The Soul of Beijing Opera: Theatrical Creativity and Continuity in the Changing World* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010).
\textsuperscript{38} Siu-leung Li, *Cross-Dressing in Chinese Opera* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2003).
\textsuperscript{39} Li, *Cross-Dressing in Chinese Opera*, 166.
\textsuperscript{40} Li, *Cross-Dressing in Chinese Opera*, 2. Wen Ruhua is officially a *xiaosheng* (young male role) actor but learned *dan* artistry for a long time as an unofficial protégé of Zhang Junqiu 張君秋 (1920–1997).
\textsuperscript{41} The CCP’s use of the term “feudal” (or “feudalism”) is different from standard Western understandings of the term. Having its origins in the linear Marxist historiography, it is more of a rhetorical criticism of China’s imperial past, a stage in the development of human society that is less progressive than capitalism and socialism/communism.
conceived of as “effeminate,” therefore demeaning themselves to a secondary social status, which means they are despised in the misogynist environment of Chinese society. In contrast, Huai Bao carries out an anthropological survey amongst some contemporary cross-dressing actors. He focuses primarily on the homophobia and femmephobia in Chinese society, arguing that jingju creates a safe place to realise transgressive desires. However, it should be noted that not all of Huai Bao’s interviewees are professional jingju performers of the dan category; many of them are drag queens. Obfuscating these two different groups, Bao believes that a majority of male dan are subject to anima, the Jungian notion of an underlying feminine personality.

Huai Bao’s study is not the only case where there is a failure to distinguish between professional male dan and general cross-dressing actors. When discussing the officially recognised cross-dressing vocalist Li Yugang 李玉剛 (b. 1978), He Chengzhou 何成洲 generally refers to him as a “male dan.” This discrepancy between the definition and denotation of the term “male dan” casts a shadow over male dan. He Chengzhou doubts the applicability of Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity to Chinese society and advances a revisionist interpretation of her framework. He believes that due to the “different social and cultural context” of China, what

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cross-dressers imitate is pre-existent gender types which are not performative.\textsuperscript{45} He Chengzhou obviously confuses “performance” and “performativity.” According to Judith Butler, “sex” is an ideal construct, which is not a fact or a static condition but a process of materialisation through a forcible reiteration of regulatory norms.\textsuperscript{46} Butler argues that “gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original.”\textsuperscript{47} In so doing she develops the ideas of feminist theoreticians such as Simone de Beauvoir, who criticised gender as a social construct on the basis of women’s biological fragility.\textsuperscript{48} Butler denies the “mimetic relation of gender to sex whereby gender mirrors sex or is otherwise restricted by it.”\textsuperscript{49} Doubting the validity of the term “sex” by querying whether it is “natural, anatomical, chromosomal, or hormonal,” Butler discloses the fact that what we call “sex is as culturally constructed as gender,” and its “natural facts” that are “discursively produced by various scientific discourses” serve “other political and cultural interests.”\textsuperscript{50} Butler argues that “acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this on the surface of the body.”\textsuperscript{51}

\textsuperscript{45} He, “Trespassing, Crisis, and Renewal,” 163–164.
\textsuperscript{49} Judith Butler, Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (New York and London: Routledge, 1999), 10.
\textsuperscript{50} Ibid. For a discussion about sex as either anatomical or chromosomal see the case of David/Brenda Reimer in Judith Butler, Undoing Gender (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 57–74.
\textsuperscript{51} Butler, Gender Trouble, 173.
For historical reasons, Chinese understandings of gender and sexuality have different characteristics from those that are dominant in the West. Unlike He Changzhou, Kam Louie puts forward a distinctive perspective on the Chinese ideal of “masculinity” by considering it within the binary structure of wen 文 (civil) and wu 武 (martial). According to Louie, Chinese masculinity cannot be understood solely within the dimorphic framework of masculinity and femininity. Although wen refers to the modest quality of Confucian scholars, who were sometimes considered emotional or fragile, and hence effeminate, this was a legitimate form of masculinity that was admired in pre-modern China. In contrast, wu masculinity was often used to describe brave and robust warriors or knights-errant. While wu masculinity was more similar to the contemporary understanding of masculinity and wen masculinity was often considered effeminate, wen masculinity was associated with higher social status in pre-modern China.52

The politics of gender and sexuality are often seen simply as cultural constructs, especially within the social constructionist perspective that is widely accepted by Western theoreticians. However, in the Chinese context, normative ideals of “masculinity” and “femininity” became widely accepted in the twentieth century, and they remain influential today. Due to the historical and philosophical differences between China and the West, there is a risk of adopting a simplistic binary response to this issue. For example, in “Sexual Artifice through ‘Transgression’,” Huai Bao examines the performance of some contemporary male dan in China and argues that their

52 Kam Louie, Theorising Chinese Masculinity: Society and Gender in China (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
performance of the female gender has an ideal form, thereby calling into question the validity of Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity.\textsuperscript{53} In contrast, in \textit{The Fragile Scholar} Geng Song analyses the Chinese politics of gender and sexuality within Foucault’s theoretical framework.\textsuperscript{54} In doing so, Chinese experiences are divided into fragments so that they fit within the Foucauldian framework.\textsuperscript{55} The methodology of this thesis is historical, and I have no ambition to develop a theory that bridges China and the West. My aim is to scrutinise each case within its own context—which for the most part means recognising that a hierarchy of a dominant “masculinity” and a subsidiary “femininity” was a powerful force shaping the individual experiences of actors (for example, the heroines in model plays; see Chapter Five).

The Chinese politics of gender and sexuality has its origins in, and is one dimension of, Confucian hierarchical ideology. The case of male \textit{dan} reflects not only the issue of gender and sexuality, but also the overall discipline of patriarchy in Chinese society. This thesis is primarily focused on the evolution of \textit{dan} actors after they became one of the major forces in the élite theatre of the Ming dynasty. I consider how the politics of gender and sexuality executed by the state affected male \textit{dan} and how prevalent ideas about effeminacy and homosexuality influenced them. I also explore the


\textsuperscript{54} Geng Song, \textit{The Fragile Scholar: Power and Masculinity in Chinese Culture} (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2004), 2.

\textsuperscript{55} Mizoguchi Yuzo, \textit{Zhongguo de siwei shijie} 中國的思維世界 [\textit{The World of Chinese Thought}], trans. Diao Liu 刁榴, Mou Jian 牟堅, ed. Sun Ge 孫歌 (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 2014), 68.
development of social thought through the lens of male dan. Their struggle for legitimacy is a mirror of the dominant Neo-Confucian patriarchy in late imperial Chinese society, and also a reflection of the drastic social transformation that China has undergone as Chinese people have tried to build a modern nation-state. The analytical focus of this thesis is the mutual interaction between male dan actors and the wider society, and the various ways this interaction has helped mould social ideology.

Chapter One examines the issue of male dan within the context of the homoerotic sensibilities prevalent in Ming and Qing society. In the first place, I clarify the difference between these homoerotic sensibilities and how homosexuality is understood within the constraints imposed by Western theories of psychoanalysis. I argue that the homoerotic interaction between well-off patrons and male dan was homologous with patriarchy in China. The people of means and/or privilege occupied the position of the dominant partner in such relationships, while the imaginary heteronormative hierarchy required that male dan, who were of a lower social status, occupy the more submissive, effeminate position.

The rise of male dan during the Ming dynasty was partially due to the emergence of a more visible homoerotic sensibility amongst the scholar-élite class, for whom theatrical artistry was less valued than the emotional commitment that actors displayed towards their masters. During the Ming, a majority of male dan actors were indentured servants in the family troupes (jia yue 家樂) kept by the scholar-élite, and played the roles of both performer and confidant. This intimate relationship between actors and their masters
was broken in the wake of the founding of the Qing dynasty. As a result of the court’s prohibition on female entertainers, who were both performers and courtesans, male dan came to perform both roles, as actors and boy courtesans. Furthermore, with the rise of consumerism during the Qing empire, well-off patrons came to play a more prominent role in theatrical activities than the scholar élite. Male dan actors escorted well-off patrons as social companions at banquets, and also sometimes served them as sexual partners. During the late Qing, the primary concern of these well-off patrons regarding male dan was the actor’s physical beauty and effeminacy. As a result, the artistic proficiency of male dan became less of a concern, and with that their theatrical importance decreased.

Technically, the relationship of male dan with the scholar-élite and well-off patrons was somewhat different from what is usually meant by the Western term “homosexuality.” The scholar-élite and well-off patrons both enjoyed socioeconomic privilege and were therefore more socially dominant than male dan actors, who, as performers, occupied a position of low social status. In performing their role as boy courtesans, male dan actors artificially cultivated “femininity” in order to cater to the tastes of well-off patrons. This relationship between the low social status and femininity of male dan boy courtesans reflects the politics of gender and sexuality in pre-modern China. To the extent that it was a form of “homosexuality” it was one that corresponded to the heteronormative social structure.

Chapter Two analyses the new predicament that male dan found themselves in after the overthrow of the Qing empire, as they struggled to
come to terms with the post-imperial rush of modernity. Through a
diachronic analysis of different interpretations of the “essence of jingju” that
were advanced by Mei Lanfang’s supporters from the late 1910s to the
mid-1930s, I explore the development of understandings about jingju artistry
during these two decades. In this chapter I advance a revisionist
interpretation of current theories about jingju, contesting the view, common in
Chinese scholarship, that jingju, or Chinese theatre has an a priori “essence.”
While it is true that jingju has some features that differentiate it from other
theatrical forms, the way in which Mei Lanfang and his supporters explained
its “essence” shifted back and forth over the decades. Their claims about
jingju’s fundamental essence were advanced primarily in order to justify its
legitimacy in the theatrical domain, which was increasingly dominated by
Western-style drama.

During the late Qing years, some scholars believed that the theatre could
provide an ideal medium to promulgate Western learning, and thereby help
transform China into a Western-style nation-state. For instance, in his
“Revolution of Three Fields” (sanjie geming 三界革命) Liang Qichao 梁啟超
(1873–1929) argued that male dan should play an active part in helping to
popularise the modernisation of Chinese society. Similarly, after 1913 Mei
Lanfang also performed a series of “modern costume plays” (shizhuang xi 時
裝戲) that echoed the efforts of scholars to use “problem plays” (wenti ju 問題
劇) to confront current social issues. However, from the mid-1910s onwards,
scholars associated with the New Culture Movement argued that jingju, and
indeed the whole repertoire of Chinese theatre was an “historically arrested
development” of China’s shameful, retarded past. Despite Mei Lanfang’s new plays, which helped disclose the “darkness” of Chinese society, some of the New Culture scholars attacked him, viewing him as an obstacle to be overcome in order to carry out a wholesale revolution (or Westernisation) of China.

These harsh critiques of jingju created a high degree of anxiety for male dan and their supporters. Following Mei Lanfang’s successful overseas performances, his supporters developed a discourse about the “essence of jingju” which used the support of overseas critics to respond to the challenges directed at male dan by the New Culture scholars. In 1919, Mei’s supporters claimed that his performance of the newly composed play Tiannü sanhua 天女散花 (Heavenly Maiden Scatters Flowers) incorporated aspects of Chinese, Asian, and Western choreography. Despite such attempts to appease their New Culture critics by suggesting that there were Western elements in the artistry of jingju, Mei’s supporters found that their opponents remained extremely hostile to jingju. As a result, they then redefined jingju as a “conventionalised” (chengshi hua 程式化) art form, which was fundamentally different from the “realism” (xianshi zhuyi 現實主義) of Western drama. This idea that jingju has an “essence” was very influential and continues to find support among scholars in the early twenty-first century.

Chapter Three focuses on artistic aspects of jingju, discussing how male dan actors reformed the training and performance of the dan category. Aside from their development of jingju artistry, famous male dan and their scholar-collaborators composed new plays in which they constructed a new
ideal image for Chinese women. On the surface, these female roles, primarily of military heroines, bravely defend the state from the invasion of nomadic tribal peoples when men have failed to do so. But on a deeper level, the heroines remain within the grip of the grand narrative of the nation-state. The women fight for their country during times of conflict, yet voluntarily resume the duties of family service and filial piety as either a wife or a daughter during times of peace. Despite the claim that they were emancipating women from the restrictions of “feudal” society, the new nation-state now assumes the role previously taken by the patriarchal imperial order.

With the help of the “conservative” scholars who admired the value of Chinese tradition, famous male dan actors such as Wang Yaoqing 王瑶卿 (1881–1954) and his protégés, the “Great Four,” created a set of new criteria for the “ideal” woman by developing the artistry of the dan category. Firstly, these famous male dan actors reformed the soaring vocal art of the category. They lowered the common modes of vocal performance from G major to E or F major, making the vocal performance softer and more melodious. Secondly, Mei Lanfang refined the facial makeup and hairstyles used by dan actors, adapting techniques from the southern (primarily Shanghai) actors and from real-life women, rendering the female roles he performed more attractive. Besides these technical refinements, the reform of the male dan actors’ performance also reflected the changing taste of urban intellectuals. They revived the Ming scholar-élites’ admiration for “theatrical reality” (xiju zhenshi 戲劇真實), which has been lost in the late Qing due to the rise of folk theatrical forms with their excessive focus on skill. With a closer understanding of the emotional nature of the roles they performed, the dan
actors raised the artistic value of *jingju* to a higher level by shifting it away from its earlier form as a type of vaudevillian or acrobatic performance.

Following this discussion of the technical dimension of *jingju*, Chapter Four examines a type prop, *qiao* 蹺, or stilted shoes, which were devised by male *dan* actors in order to imitate the bound feet of traditional Chinese women. By elaborating the functions of *qiao* in *jingju* and other theatrical forms, I counter the widely accepted idea that *qiao* are simply a synonym for footbinding. The late Qing *jingju* artists of the *dan* category developed virtuosic skills known as *qiao gong* 蹺功 (the skills of *qiao*), which are a valuable legacy in the corpus of *jingju*’s tradition, notwithstanding their historical connection to Chinese men’s passion for women’s bound feet.

*Qiao* were first introduced to Beijing from Sichuan by the *huadan* actor Wei Changsheng 魏長生 (1744–1802) in the 1770s, when he came to Beijing to celebrate Emperor Qianlong’s (r. 1736–1796) birthday. The use of *qiao* was followed by many male *dan* actors and was accepted as a *sine qua non* for *huadan*, *daomadan*, and *wudan* actors after the emergence of *jingju*. *Qiao* were still used after the fall of the Qing dynasty, right up until the CCP ordered that they no longer be used during the Drama Reform (*Xigai* 戲改) movement. In a reductive discourse, CCP cadres reduced *qiao* to simply a replication of footbinding, declaring that they reflected Chinese women’s history of humiliation and had therefore to be eradicated from the new communist state.

There was indeed a sense of sexual attraction conveyed to audiences by the use of *qiao*, because bound feet were integral to ideas of feminine beauty.
However, *qiao* were not simply a synonym for footbinding, because using *qiao* was not as easy as wearing a pair of shoes. It was common for a *dan* protégé to be trained for almost a decade in order to control the “false feet” so that they could walk and run freely and deftly. The virtuosic artistry related to the use of *qiao*, and the technical skill demonstrated by actors in using them was fundamental to an audience’s appreciation of the artistry of male *dan* actors. After the Cultural Revolution ended in 1976, the prohibition on the use of *qiao* was relaxed. Yet their historical connection to footbinding meant that people remained reluctant to see them reintroduced into *jingju* performance. Due in part to the prevalent “progressive” dogma promulgated by the CCP, *qiao* continue to be considered a manifestation of “feudalism.”

Chapter Five focuses on the prohibition directed at male *dan* in the wake of the founding of the PRC. After the establishment of the PRC, the CCP raised the social status of actors from one of the humblest professions to that of “people’s artists” (*renmin yishu jia* 人民藝術家), and accepted the most prominent as cultural officials. However, Premier Zhou Enlai 周恩來 (1898–1976) ordered the training of new *dan* actors to stop. After the CCP’s Drama Reform movement of the early 1950s, male *dan* actors’ performances were confined to traditional plays (*chuantong xi* 傳統戲), while the female roles in modern plays (*xiandai xi* 現代戲), which were considered more “progressive” by the CCP, were all performed by actresses. This reflected the Party’s “realistic” criterion that actors/actresses should perform roles related to their own sex. Then, with the launching of the more radical model play movement during the Cultural Revolution (*yangban xi* 樣板戲, a type of standardised
modern play), the CCP banned all traditional plays, and male dan actors were thus absent for a whole decade.

Furthermore, as an aftermath of the successive social and political movements after the establishment of the PRC, male dan actors were demonised because their performance was believed to cultivate effeminate behaviour. The trauma of these movements had a lasting effect on the legitimacy of male dan, even after their re-emergence in the Reform era from the late 1970s onwards. In this chapter I explore the double standard prevalent in Chinese society toward male-to-female and female-to-male cross-dressing activity. For instance, in the film Mei Lanfang 梅蘭芳 (Forever Enthralled), Mei’s past as a boy courtesan was discreetly erased. Instead, the focus of the film was Mei’s whole-hearted devotion to jingju artistry and his commitment to the Chinese nation-state. While male dan are ostracised for their performance of female roles, which is deemed to be harmful to their masculinity and to the wider society, female-to-male cross-dressers, specifically laosheng actresses in Chinese theatre, are seen as being less socially deviant, if not admired. This double standard concerning male-to-female and female-to-male cross-dressing activities reflects the continued inferior position that women occupy in China, despite the CCP’s declaration that they hold up “half of the sky” (banbian tian 半邊天).

The final chapter traces the transformation in social attitudes towards cross-dressing activities and the ways in which male dan have sought to justify their profession and their artistry in the face of such attitudes. By differentiating professional male dan actors from cross-dressing vocalists, I
identify a problem with much current scholarship that conflates these two different groups of actors.

Through a study of David H. Hwang’s play *M. Butterfly*, Chen Kaige’s 陳凱歌 (b. 1952) film *Bawang bieji* 霸王別姬 (Farewell, My Concubine) and the Beijing Polo Arts’ play *Lianxiang ban* 懷香伴 (A Romance: Two Belles in Love), Chapter Six portrays the development of people’s understanding of the association of male dan with homosexuality. For instance, there is a widespread belief that the training required for a boy to become a dan protégé will in all likelihood lead the boy to become a homosexual. This also casts shadow on the future of male dan, as homosexuality is still conceived of as deviant in China.

Although male dan have returned to the stage since the beginning of the Reform era, a majority of state-owned educational institutions remain hesitant to train them, and few boys are officially accepted as students of the dan category. The Reform era also saw the advent of cross-dressing vocalists. However, many of them lack self-confidence in their profession. They use jingju as a safe place for their cross-dressing activities by declaring that they are male dan of jingju, which is deemed to be less deviant due to its historical connections to the cultural legacy of China. For instance, one of the most successful cross-dressing vocalists in recent times is Li Yugang 李玉剛 (b. 1978), who has been officially recognised by the CCP as a “treasured national treasure.” However, Li’s anxiety about his identity has meant that he has declared himself to be a male dan of the Mei School (Meipai nandan 梅派男旦). Similarly, Hu Wenge 胡文閣 (b. 1967) even withdrew from his successful
career as a vocalist in 2001 in order to learn jingju performance from Mei Baojiu, which resulted in him being officially recognised as a male dan of the Mei School. At the same time, male dan often highlight their professional proficiency in jingju artistry, which they have only achieved as a result of long years of training from their childhood years onward (you gong 幼功). This chapter reveals the ways in which the continued hostility towards homosexuality, and the enforcement of a rigid binary between “masculinity” and “femininity,” continues to affect the status and legitimacy of male dan actors in contemporary China. This remains a problem for the future of the artistry of the dan category, and for the development of Chinese society.

The research for this thesis involved a wide range of Chinese language source material. These historical sources can be classified into four types. Firstly, there are the memoirs of and reminiscences about outstanding dan actors. The most informative ones include Mei Lanfang wenji 梅蘭芳文集 (The Collected Works of Mei Lanfang) and Wutai shenghuo sishi nian 舞臺生活四十年 (Forty Years of Stage Life); Cheng Yanqiu xiju wenji 程硯秋文集 (The Collected

Works of Cheng Yanqiu; Xun Huisheng yanju sanlun 荀慧生演劇散論 (Xun Huisheng’s Scattered Comments on Theatre Performance), Xun Huisheng Wutai yishu 荀慧生舞臺藝術 (Xun Huisheng’s Stage Art); and Jingju huadan biaoyan yishu 京劇花旦表演藝術 (The Performing Art of Jingju Huadan). In addition, in recent years a large number of Republican-era journals have been republished.

Another important body of material includes the critical commentaries from theatrical scholars, playwrights, and/or aficionados. During the Ming


and Qing periods, theatrical reviews were included in the notation books produced by members of the scholar-élite. In the late Qing, scholars developed a particular type of notation book (huapu, or “manual of flowers”) which were specifically devoted to commentary about famous dan actors in Beijing. These huapu books were collected and edited by the gazetteer historian Zhang Cixi 張次溪 (1909–1968) and published under the title Qingdai yandu liyuan shiliao congkan 清代燕都梨園史料叢刊 (Historical Records of Beijing Theatre during the Qing Dynasty). After the establishment of the PRC, the Beijing branch of the Political Consultative Conference sponsored the publication of commentary on and memories of the development of jingju by prominent scholars and actors, under the title Jingju tan wang lu 京劇談往錄 (A Record of Comments on Past Events in the Jingju Domain). In addition to these collections, the sons of Mei Lanfang and Cheng Yanqiu, Mei Shaowu 梅绍武 and Cheng Yongjiang 程永江, have also been making available to the public material left by their fathers.

Another useful source of material is the body of video and audio...
recordings of outstanding male dan actors. Due to financial and technical reasons, only a small number of plays were produced as videos or films during the first decades of the PRC. The CCP was highly selective in deciding which play of which performer should be filmed. The plays chosen include: Mei Lanfang’s Shengsi hen 生死恨 (The Regrets of Life and Death, jingju, 1948), and Mei Lanfang de wutai yishu 梅蘭芳的舞台藝術 (The Stage Art of Mei Lanfang, 1955), Luo shen 洛神 (Goddess of the River Luo, jingju, 1956), two scenes of Mudan ting 牡丹亭 (Peony Pavilion, kunju, 1960); Cheng Yanqiu’s Huangshan lei 荒山淚 (Tears on the Barren Mountain, 1956); and Shang Xiaoyun’s Shang Xiaoyun wutai yishu 尚小雲舞台藝術 (The Stage Art of Shang Xiaoyun, 1962). More audio recordings have survived and in 1985 the Cultural Ministry initiated a project to add videos to the LPs. They invited the children or protégés of the performers of the audio recordings to perform in the video version, and then combined the original audio track with the video. By 2002, around 355 plays were recovered in this way.

Almost all the texts of jingju and kunju plays are available. A list of these can be found in Tao Junqi 陶君起 Jingju jumu chutan 京剧剧目初探 (A Preliminary Exploration of Jingju’s Repertoire) and Huang Ke 黄克 Zhongguo The Stage Life of Mei Lanfang includes four excerpts from the jingju repertoire—a scene of Baishe zhuang 白蛇傳 (The White Snake), Yuzhou feng 宇宙鋒 (The Cosmic Blade), Bawang bieji 霸王別姬 (The King’s Parting from His Concubine) and Guifei zuijiu 貴妃醉酒 (The Intoxicated Imperial Concubine). The Stage Art of Shang Xiaoyun consists of two jingju scenes: Zhaojun chusai 昭君出塞 (The Sorrow Outside the Border) and Shizi jingfeng 失子驚瘋 (Getting Mad for Losing Her Son).

This state project, known as yin pei xiang 音配像, was launched in 1985 by Li Ruihuan 李瑞環 (b. 1934) in Tianjin city in order to save the vanishing jingju plays. The plays recovered by the yin pei xiang project were primarily from the 1940–60s.
Only a small number of the plays in the Chinese theatre repertoire have been translated into English, the majority of which are chuanqi plays from the Ming and Qing periods. These include Yang Xianyi and Galdys Yang’s *The Palace of Eternal Youth*, Chen Shih-hsiang [Chen Shixiang] and Harold Acton’s *The Peach Blossom Fan*, William Dolby’s *Eight Chinese Plays*, Jean Mulligan’s *The Lute*, and Cyril Birch’s translations, including *The Girl Washing Silk*, *The Plantain Kerchief*, *The Peony Pavilion* and *The Swallow Letter*. There are no significant translations of jingju plays and other local theatrical forms, but Siu Wang-Ngai and Peter Lovrick introduce fifty-five plays, including some jingju plays, in *Chinese Opera: Images and Stories*.

The main resource base for this thesis is published and archival material. However, I also conducted some interviews with contemporary professional and amateur male dan artists. A list of these interviewees is included in the bibliography.

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CHAPTER ONE

Practising Homoeroticism: The Rise of Male Dan Actors in the Ming and Qing Periods

With the maturing of zaju 雜劇 (lit. “miscellaneous/variety drama,” or northern drama), during the Yuan period (1271–1368) Chinese theatre began to flourish. At the same time, cross-dressing performance became a significant phenomenon. As William Dolby indicates in his *A History of Chinese Drama*, while “there were both men and women performers” in the theatre of the Yuan period “it was the actress who was predominant in Yuan zaju.”¹ Only with the transition from the Yuan to the Ming (1368–1644) dynasty did more opportunities open up for male performers on the stage.

The collapse of the Yuan empire fostered a few new features in Chinese theatre. The chuanqi 傳奇 (lit. “the transmission of marvels,” or romance) style of southern drama (nanxi 南戲) developed into the most popular theatrical form amongst the literati, taking the place of the previous northern form of zaju.² The romance between talented scholars and beautiful women

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² The term chuanqi once referred to a genre of Tang (618–907) fiction, or “marvels,”
(caizi jiaren 才子佳人) was one of the common motifs in chuanqi. According to the Qing polymath Li Yu 李漁 (1611–1680), “nine out of ten chuanqi describe lovesickness.”³ Unlike the Yuan zaju in which male roles were dominant, the new repertoire required more female roles, and thus dan performers were in greater demand.⁴

During the course of the Ming dynasty, the text form of chuanqi plays became increasingly linked to kunqiang 崑腔 (or kunshan qiang 崑山腔), a musical form developed and circulated around Kunshan city (near Suzhou). After this musical form was revised by Wei Liangfu 魏良輔 (1489–1566) during the 1540s–1560s, it came to be admired by the scholar-élite and would dominate the theatrical domain for at least two centuries.⁵


involved vocal performance accompanied by the Chinese bamboo flute (dizi 笛子) and was renowned for its softness, hence the name shuimo qiang 水磨腔 or shuimo diao 水磨調 (lit. “water polished music”). In the vocal performance of kunshan qiang a word is often “extended to a few breaths.” It was believed that men generally have greater lung capacity than women and thus can hold notes for longer, so the new trend favoured the dan actors. As the Ming scholar Lu Rong 陸容 (1436–1497) indicated, “those who mimic women are called zhuangdan 裝旦 (fake dan), while the dan actresses are called zhendan 真旦 (real dan).” In such scholarly accounts, zhuangdan was categorised as parallel to zhendan, and as a result male dan actors came to be on a par with their female counterparts.

Furthermore, the rise of male dan actors was inextricably associated with the increased indulgence in nanfeng 男風 (lit. “male mode,” or homoerotic attachment) during the Ming and Qing (1636–1911) dynasties. The first section of this chapter clarifies this Chinese term and describes the ascent of

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8 Wu Cuncun 劉存存 explains the term nanse 男色 as “Male homoeroticism, love, or a marker of taste” and interprets nanfeng as the “male-mode, or a marker of physical analogy.” See Wu Cuncun, Homoerotic Sensibilities in Late Imperial China (London: Routledge, 2004), 85. Sophie Volpp renders nanse as “sexual attraction between men” and expounds on nanfeng’s (Southern Mode) origin from a southern custom. See Sophie Volpp, “Classifying Lust: The Seventeenth-Century Vogue for Male Love,” in Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies, 61-1 (2001): 77 & 94. I consider nanse a neutral term used to describe “male beauty.” Both males and females can appreciate nanse, while a male’s sense of being attracted by nanse accounts for his indulging in nanfeng, or homoerotic attachment.
dan actors during the Ming dynasty. The term nanfeng referred to something that was distinct from how the term homosexuality came to be understood in the twentieth century as a result of the development of psychoanalysis and sexual psychology. The homoeroticism of pre-modern China was homologous with its patriarchy. In this structure, the members of scholar-élite who occupied the highest social standing were active or dominant in their interaction with male dan, who were engaged in one of the “nine humblest professions” (xia jiuliu 下九流). Following this explanation of the nature of nanfeng, the first part of this chapter continues with a focus on the two main types of male dan in the Ming dynasty. Despite the existence of freelance song boys (xiaochang 小唱) in private playhouses, the most successful male dan were raised and trained in the family-owned troupes (jia yue 家樂) operated by the scholar-élite. As a result of the criterion of “true emotion” (zhenqing 真情) in artistic creations promulgated by the “Study of Mind” (xinxue 心學), first-class male dan were admired by the scholar-élite because of their ability to portray human emotions.

The second section chronicles events following the Manchu conquest of China in 1644 and the establishment of the Qing empire. The Manchu rulers considered the fall of the Ming dynasty to be a result of the decadence of social morality, which was due in part to the excessive addiction to theatre by the scholar-élite. Therefore, the Qing court forbade them from keeping family troupes and banned female entertainers completely. Male dan, primarily freelance ones, emerged to dominate the stage. As many female entertainers had dual functions, both as performers and prostitutes, the prohibition forced
the well-off patrons of female entertainers to shift their attention to male dan.\(^9\) Many male dan served as xianggong 相公, or boy courtesans, for economic reasons, while well-off patrons frequently visited their private playhouses (siyu 私寓) for social companionship and sometimes for sexual partners. In the late Qing, paradigmatic theatrical forms shifted from the élite theatre (kunju) to rustic forms of folk theatre, which sometimes attracted urban audiences by presenting flirtatious performances. This also stimulated the emergence of boy courtesans. Due to the economic recession at the end of High Qing, many actors flooded into Beijing from southern China. The ensuing oversupply of actors frustrated many male dan, as few of them were able to perform in plays. Because they had to earn a living by escorting well-off patrons, the profession of male dan actors was increasingly associated with boy courtesans.

The third section analyses the reduction in the age at which male dan were recruited and the consequential decline in emphasis on theatrical skills in the late Qing. Over time, the well-off patrons developed a preference for younger male dan. When the famous Sichuan and Anhui actors came to Beijing for the emperor’s birthday celebrations in the 1770s and the 1780s, they were already in their thirties or forties. In contrast, by the early nineteenth century few actors were over twenty-four years of age. The increasingly young age of male dan led to a dramatic decrease in the artistic

\(^9\) The term patron refers to one’s behaviour, not status. A patron can be either a scholar or an uneducated, but well-off merchant, while the criterion differentiating a patron from the general audience was whether he paid for extra escorting services besides watching the theatre performance. In Qing notation books, well-off patrons were often called laodou 老斗 (roué).
ability that was displayed in their performance. In contrast, an attractive, or specifically effeminate, face and behaviour were deemed as the key to success for male dan. This indicated the fact that an individual male dan’s identity as an actor was subsidiary to his role as a boy courtesan, because his primary concern was catering to the demands of the well-off patrons for commercial gain. The well-off patrons’ penchant for effeminate male dan attests to the statement on nanfeng in the first section that the performance of the female gender was in fact an analogical form of the patriarchal hierarchy in pre-modern China, where those who were of means and/or privilege occupied the dominant position in a homoerotic relationship. In contrast, male dan were consumed as luxury playthings by the political élite and the wealthy.

The Rise of Male Dan Actors in the Ming Period

While the increasing popularity of dan actors was partly due to the changes that occurred in the theatrical world, of greater importance was the spread of nanfeng, or male homoeroticism, from the imperial court out to the wider society from the late sixteenth century onwards. Specifically, the acceptance of nanfeng amongst the scholar-élite class, the most important appreciators and sponsors of theatre throughout the entire Ming dynasty, was arguably the primary reason for the unprecedented development of dan actors during this period of time. However, the pre-modern Chinese practice of nanfeng requires careful consideration, in order to avoid overinterpreting it so that it accords with modern understandings of gender and sexuality. Descriptions of China’s past as either a Land of Promise or, in contrast, a Land
of Sodom reflect contemporary understandings of these issues rather than the situation in Ming and Qing China. Neither explanation portrays a plausible image of nanfeng, which was fundamentally different from “homosexuality” in the modern West. It was nearer to the convention of ancient Greece and Rome, where homosexual relationships constituted and reflected part of the social hierarchy.

**Defining Nanfeng in Pre-modern China**

The Chinese practice of nanfeng does not equate directly with the modern Western definition of homosexuality. Modern understandings of the term homosexuality have been very much shaped by Havelock Ellis (1859–1939). Well-known as one of the earliest scholars to analyse homosexuality at the beginning of the twentieth century, Ellis interpreted it as a kind of “sexual inversion,” as it deviated from “normal heterosexuality.” This framework dominated Western academic discourse thereafter, and perhaps still influences some people’s understanding of homosexuality, despite the considerable criticism that has been directed at such arguments.

The connotations of the term “homosexuality” far exceed its prefix “homo,” a loanword borrowed from Greek which means “same.” Despite its superficial meaning of one’s physical and/or emotional attraction to persons of the same sex, homosexuality is often interpreted in value-laden ways.

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Havelock Ellis, *Psychology of Sex* (London: William Heinemann, 1933), 188 & 193. The Chinese scholar Yao Shuyi 么書儀 has done a number of studies on nanfeng in the Ming and Qing societies, but she still thinks of it as a kind of “abnormality.” See Yao Shuyi, *Wanqing xiqu de biange 晚清戲曲的變革* [*The Revolution of Chinese Theatre in the Late Qing Period*] (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2008), 120.
Within the bipolarity of “normal” heterosexuality and “abnormal” homosexuality, homosexuality is always identified as “other,” a deviation from the norm. This Western connotation was not widely disseminated in China until the New Culture Movement (xin wenhua yundong 新文化運動) in the mid-1910s, when “new” scholars fiercely criticised the values of China’s past. For example, Zheng Zhenduo 鄭振鐸 (1898–1958), influenced by Western ideas of sexual dimorphism, dismissed nanfeng as a kind of “inversion,” considering it as “a shameful stain on the history of China.”

As Bret Hinsch remarks in his book Passions of the Cut Sleeve: The Male Homosexual Tradition in China, “classical Chinese lacked a medical or scientific term” on which “homosexuality” was based. Rather than articulating it within a narrative of “lack” or “failure,” the absence of an equivalent term for homosexuality suggested distinct way of considering homoeroticism. Unlike the harsh treatment of homosexuality in the twentieth-century West, nanfeng was relatively and conditionally tolerated in pre-modern China, even though it was not endorsed within the Neo-Confucian order. Despite the attempt to

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11 Zheng Zhenduo 鄭振鐸, introduction to Qingdai yandu liyuan shiliao congkan 清代燕都梨園史料叢刊 [Historical Records of Beijing Theatre during the Qing Dynasty], ed. Zhang Cixi 張次溪 (Beijing: Zhongguo xiju chubanshe, 1988), 7.
12 Bret Hinsch, Passions of the Cut Sleeve: The Male Homosexual Tradition in China (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 7. In China today, “homosexuality” is translated literally as tongxing lian 同性戀 or tongxing ai 同性愛, terms which, as Hinsch notes, carry over some of the Western medical connotations. See Ibid., 169. I therefore avoid the use of value-laden terms “homosexual” or “homosexuality.”
13 Suggesting that “many of Foucault’s followers have vulgarised” his “distinction between two types of control of the sexual object,” Volpp disagrees with “the assertion that there was no pre-modern notion of the homosexual as a character type.” See Volpp, “Classifying Lust,” 82. However, while “homoerotic practice” did exist in pre-modern China, it was not understood in the same way as the modern Western term
manage people’s lives through a set of codes of conduct, Neo-Confucianism
left grey zones for individual behaviour once the social expectation of one’s
social role was adhered to. Although Sophie Volpp argues that “the
superfluity of sexual relationships between men contrasted with the apparent
necessity of procreation and of the family system,” well performed social and
familial responsibility shielded men from the stigma of practising homoerotic
activity.14 Volpp’s argument is somewhat undermined by the example she
cites from Feng Menglong’s 馮夢龍 (1574–1646) notation book (biji 筆記)
Qingshi leilüe 情史類略 (The Anatomy of Passion), in which Wan Sheng 萬生
arranged a marriage for his homosexual lover Zheng Sheng 鄭生. Under the
veneer of a heterosexual “marriage of convenience,” Wan and Zheng are thus
able to continue their homoerotic relationship.15

The story of Wan and Zheng was one of the very few examples of “deep
love” between homoerotic partners.16 In contrast, the homoerotic relationship

“homosexuality” is, with its distinction of “the other” (homosexual abnormality) from
the norm. In contrast, pre-modern China’s homoerotic practice was perceived more in
terms of social power than sexual orientation.

14 Volpp, “Classifying Lust,” 93. Similarly, Hinsch argues that homoeroticism was “a
great enemy of the family structure.” See Hinsch, Passions of the Cut Sleeve, 171.
15 Volpp, “Classifying Lust,” 107. This kind of fulfilment of one’s social role expectation
as a shield from being stigmatised exists in a wider Asian context. See Ahmed Afzal,
“Islam, Marriage, and Yaari: Making Meaning of Male Same Sex Sexual Relationships in
Pakistan,” in Cultural Politics of Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary Asia, ed. Tiantian
16 For example, the senior Qing official Bi Yuan 畢沅 (aka. Bi Qiufan 畢秋帆, 1730–97)
was financed by his homoerotic lover, Li Gui Guan 李桂官, a famous actor. (Guan was a
suffix that was commonly seen in the names of actors/actresses. I would romanise it in
this way, rather than Li Guiguan.) After Bi came the first in the Civil Service Examination,
Li was admired as Zhuangyuan furen 畢沅夫人, or “Number-One Scholar’s wife” by his
contemporaries. Bi Yuan, Bi Yuan shiji 畢沅詩集 [Collected Poems of Bi Yuan], ed. Yang
Xun 楊君 (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2015), 1054.
in pre-modern China was largely based on patronage and prostitution.\textsuperscript{17} But
the Chinese case had its own complexity. Corresponding to the active (\textit{erastēs})
and passive (\textit{erōmenos}) roles in homoerotic intercourse, prostitutes in the
Roman world were classified as active \textit{exoleti} and passive \textit{catamiti}.\textsuperscript{18} However,
it is rare to find cases of \textit{exoleti} who played active roles in pre-modern China,
where a person’s position in a relationship was primarily determined by
social hierarchy.\textsuperscript{19} The dominant or active role in the relationship was
attributed to a superiority in power, status and/or wealth, while the
submissive or passive position indicated a lack of these qualities.\textsuperscript{20} In Sophie
Volpp’s view, the homoerotic serves both to “reinstall” the heteroerotic as the
norm while at the same time it “trouble[s]” the norm by providing an image
of deviance which “draws heavily upon the paradigms of heteroerotic
romance.”\textsuperscript{21} In doing so, she still bases her argument on the modern
understanding of “homosexuality,” in which the heterogenic “other” attempts
but fails to fit itself into the “heteroerotic norm.”

\textsuperscript{17} Hinsch, \textit{Passions of the Cut Sleeve}, 126.
\textsuperscript{18} Hinsch, \textit{Passions of the Cut Sleeve}, 9.
\textsuperscript{19} The newly emerging “vernacular” literature reveals the paramount importance of
status in homoerotic liaisons, in which the sexual relationship reflected and was
reinforced by social status. For example, Zhang Ji 張機 who is mentioned in the “\textit{Qing
xia ji} 情俠記 (Chronicle of Chivalric Love)” section of \textit{Bian er chai 弁而釵 (Hairpins Beneath
His Cap)} and Shutong 書童 who is a character in \textit{jin ping mei 金瓶梅 (The Plum in the
Golden Vase)} were both forced into a passive role, because of their humbler status. Hinsch,
\textit{Passions of the Cut Sleeve}, 134–136. It was most unlikely for a prostitute to be active in a
homoerotic relationship, as Hinsch notes in his discussion of the relationship between the
\textit{roué} Xue Pan 薛蟠 and the actor Liu Xianglian 柳湘蓮 in \textit{Honglou meng 紅樓夢 (Dream
\textsuperscript{20} Paul Weyne, \textit{Sexe et Pouvoir à Rome}, trans. Xie Qiang 謝強 (Shanghai: Huadong shifan
daxue chubanshe, 2013), 181.
\textsuperscript{21} Volpp, “Classifying Lust,” 87, 102, 104, 109 & 117.
How different cultures defined nanfeng/homoerotic attachment enables us to develop a better understanding of the situation of dan actors in late imperial China. The Ming literati’s notation books provided ample accounts of the homoerotic affection that the Ming Emperors such as Zhu Houzhao 朱厚照 (r.1505–1521), Zhu Yijun 朱翊鈞 (r. 1572–1620) and Zhu Youxiao’s 朱由校 (r. 1621–1627) had for their courtiers. By the end of the sixteenth century, the practice of nanfeng proved widespread amongst scholar-élite, especially after Wang Yangming’s 王陽明 (1472–1529) revisionist “Study of Mind” (xinxue 心學) liberated the scholar-élite form the highly moralistic Song Neo-Confucianism by foregrounding the value of the individual. This wave set off by Wang finally culminated in the late Ming radicalist Li Zhi 李贄 (1527–1602) who was focused on individual freedom. Although it is an exaggeration to argue, as Wu Cuncun does for instance, that nanfeng was “prevalent” during the Ming dynasty, there are some instances of such homoerotic relationships recorded in notation books from the late Ming period onwards.22

People’s viewpoints on the practice of nanfeng kept developing over time. During the reign of the Wanli emperor (Zhu Yijun, r. 1572–1620), the court was not lenient towards officials over their obsessions with dan actors. In 1584 and 1585, two scholar-officials, Tu Long 屠隆 (1544–1605) and Zang Maoxun 臧懋循 (1550–1620), were accused of overly indulging in nanfeng and were dismissed from the court. Their friend Tang Xianzu 湯顯祖 (1550–1616) even felt their dismissal shamed another official who was also dismissed, who out

22 Wu Cuncun, Ming Qing shehui xing‘ai fengqi 明清社會性愛風氣 [The Sexual Ethos in the Ming and Qing Societies] (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2000), 3.
of loyalty had advised the crown. However, half a century later, by the time of the Ming-Qing transition, a man’s “true love” for a serving boy could be openly admired by his contemporaries. In 1665, Zhang Dai 張岱 (1597–1679), a “left-over scholar” (yimin 遺民), wrote in his Epitaph for Myself (Ziwei muzhiming 自為墓志銘) his love for handsome serving boys (luantong 孌童).

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23 For details see Wu Cuncun, “Ming zhongwanqi shehui nanfeng liuxing zhuangkuang shulue,” 明中晚期社會男風流行狀況述略 [A Brief Introduction to the Prevalence of Nanfeng in the Mid- and Late Ming Society] Zhongguo wenhua Z1 (2001): 256–60. Wu argues that Tang Xianzu’s 湯顯祖 The Peony Pavilion has “Sympathy of, and even admiration of homosexuality,” as the King of Hell’s verdict on Li Hou’er 李猴兒, who is fond of nanfeng, is just to reincarnate him as a bee. Ibid., 259. See also Hinsch, Passions of the Cut Sleeve, 120–121. Wu also mistakenly claims that Tang Xianzu wrote a poem “to defy Confucian orthodoxy” (Ibid., 259). What Tang was objecting to in this poem was the dismissal of Tang Renqing 唐仁卿 instead of Zang Maoxun. As he wrote, “Ironically Tang Renqing, who advised the court out of loyalty, was dismissed as well.” Clearly the implication here is that while Zang Maoxun was dismissed for his homoerotic behaviour, Tang Renqing’s dismissal was completely unnecessary. See Tang Xianzu, “Song Zang Jinshu zhe gui hushing,” 送臧晉叔謫歸湖上 [To Zang Jinshu on his Demotion], in Tang Xianzu quanji 湯顯祖全集 [The Complete Works of Tang Xianzu] (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1973), vol.7, 204. Furthermore, in Shier lou 十二樓 (The Twelve Structures), Li Yu wrote: “For someone addicted to nanfeng, his penis is redundant, having already become a woman. It would be convenient to cut it off.” These translations follow Hinsch, see Passions of the Cut Sleeve, 121–123 and Li Yu, “Shier lou,” in Li Yu quanji, vol. 9, 150. Similarly, in Li’s Nan Mengmu jiaohe sanqian 男孟母教合三遷 (A Male Mencius’s Mother Educates His Son and Moves House Three Times), Ruilang/Ruiniang 瑞郎/瑞娘 castrates himself in order to avoid heterosexual matrimony, remaining loyal to his homoerotic partner Jifang 季芳. In the end, the scar heals into the shape of a vagina. From this time forward Ruilang/Ruiniang binds his feet, dresses as a woman, and remains indoors like a virtuous wife. Hinsch, Passions of the Cut Sleeve, 124–128. Originally in Li Yu, “Wusheng xi,” 無聲戲 [Silent Drama] in Li Yu quaiji, vol. 8, 122. We can, however, hardly argue that Li Yu was tolerant of homoerotic behaviour. His stories were based on sexual dimorphism. The way to maintain this kind of relationship was for Ruilang to transform himself into a “woman.” Li Yu acknowledges that this story was probably a fabrication, yet he still seeks to “persuade people to stay away from this wrong path [of indulgence in nanfeng].” Li Yu, “Wusheng xi,” 130.

24 Those (scholars, officials, et cetera) who maintained loyalty to the previous dynasty after its fall.
without being afraid of blemishing his posthumous reputation.25 Zhang also expressed his admiration for his friend Qi Zhijia’s 祁豸佳 (1595–1670) love for his favourite serving boy A Bao 阿寶. After the fall of the Ming court, Qi Zhijia and A Bao fled Nanjing, returning home to Shaoxing, in Zhejiang province. As Zhang notes, Qi “left his wife as one would cast off an old sandal, but saw his serving boy [A Bao] as his life.”26

Despite this, Ming-dynasty China was not a Promised Land for “homosexuality” in the Western sense. Although Bret Hinsch argues that Chinese homosexuality had its roots back in the Bronze Age and was widely accepted and even respected in many periods, it was basically extramarital and only tolerated so long as it did not disrupt family duties.27 Due to the puritanical nature of the dominant Neo-Confucian ideology, while nanfeng


26 Zhang Dai, Langhuan wenji 瑯嬛文集 [Collected Writings from the Wonderland] (Shanghai: Shanghai shudian, 1982), 35–36. Sophie Volpp argues that Zhang Dai “Gave voice to a fear of exclusive homoeroticism” in these comments about Qi Zhijia (or Qi Zhixiang). This over-interprets Zhang’s essay. As Volpp herself notes later on, Zhang Dai’s comments on Qi Zhijia’s “abandonment of his wife” displayed his fear of the destructive function of qing 情 (passion). However, as a “left-over” scholar from the Ming, Zhang Dai was not likely to maintain the Manchu order. See Volpp, “Classifying Lust,” 92 & 116.

27 Hinsch, Passions of the Cut Sleeve, 4.
may not have been considered sinful, it was still shameful for an individual to ignore social expectations through excessive indulgence in homoerotic relationships. Furthermore, the popularity of *nanfeng* amongst the Ming scholar-élite should neither be overestimated nor underestimated. For example, Wu Cuncun believes that “Male homosexual [sic] practice was not restricted to some] individual cases but was part of a widespread atmosphere in the late Ming and Qing societies,”²⁸ whereas, Sophie Volpp argues that there was simply “a vogue for describing, explaining, and debating its merits” rather than openly practising it.²⁹ Both statements seem a little too extreme. Although Volpp’s anxiety about the over-interpretation of *nanfeng*’s prevalence in late imperial China is reasonable, our examples of relationships between the Ming scholar-élite and *dan* actors suggest that it was indeed practised rather than simply narrated in literary work. Despite these arguments about the extent of homoerotic relationships in late imperial China, there is no denying that its wider acceptance amongst the scholar-élite provided more opportunities for *dan* actors.

**Freelance and Domesticated Dan Actors**

In order to enforce the moralistic codes enshrined in Neo-Confucianism, prostitution was forbidden soon after the founding emperor of the Ming empire, Zhu Yuanzhang 朱元璋 (r. 1368–1398) seized control of China. Any

²⁸ Wu Cuncun, *Ming Qing shehui xing’ai fengqi*, 3.
official, as well as their family members, who dared to violate this would be subjected to sixty strokes of the cane, in accordance with the Daming lü 大明律 (The Law of the Ming Dynasty). 30 Arguably adhered to during Zhu Yuanzhang’s reign of terror, this prohibition was relaxed after his death. As Shen Defu 沈德新 (1578–1642) wrote, “During the reign of the Xuande emperor 宣德 [Zhu Zhanji 朱瞻基, r. 1426–1435], a lot of officials were addicted to the brothels and therefore derelict in their duties. This was forbidden because of the memorial of Gu Zuo 顾佐 (1376–1466), Censor-in-Chief. Any official who violated this restriction was to be dismissed at once.” 31 In some serious cases, they were “never reinstated.” 32

Not only were female entertainers in the brothels banned, but so were “actors in women clothes” (dan actors). According to Yu Jideng 余繼登 (1544–1600), “During the reign of the Hongzhi emperor [Zhu Youcheng 朱祐樘, r. 1488–1505], Director Gu Mi 顧謐 drank at Commandant Zhang Tong’s 張通 home. [Others] noticed actors playing in women’s clothes, so [the court] at once dismissed [Gu and Zhang]. Now the restriction is much more relaxed.” 33 This suggests that the attraction of dan actors was not simply a result of the ban on female prostitution. The changes within élite culture that led to the increasing acceptance of homoerotic affection and the consumption of nanse 男色 (male beauty) may also have been an important factor in the

30 “Guanli suchang,” 官吏宿娼 [Officials House Prostitutes], in Daming lü 大明律 [The Law of the Ming Dynasty], vol. 25.
increased public presence of dan actors. While Shen Defu considered the imperial prohibition against prostitutes the reason for officials’ shifting their affections to dan actors, this seems both oversimplified and anachronistic.\(^{34}\)

There were two types of dan actors in the Ming society—freelance and domestic. The freelance dan actors, or “song boys” (xiaochang 小唱) in Beijing were mostly based in Lianzi Alleyway (Lianzi hutong 蓮子/簾子衚衕). Despite the name “dan actor,” their primary business was to escort the well-off patrons at banquets, and/or to offer sexual services. This conflated their roles as actors and courtesans, for whom physical beauty outweighed theatrical skills. The other kind of dan actors were raised by wealthy scholar-officials as part of their family troupes. Private troupes were first seen in the imperial family, while after the reign of the Jiajing emperor (Zhu Houcong 朱厚熜, r. 1522–1566), well-off scholar-officials started to form their own troupes, and this practice reached its apogee in the seventeenth century.\(^{35}\) Mostly teenagers from the Jiangnan region, these boy actors were raised and educated purely to entertain the official’s family and friends. Additionally, as the boys in family troupes were literally “sold” to an official as a kind of bondservant, they were obliged to cater to the desires of their male householder if he was addicted to nanfeng.

There was a strict gender segregation that prohibited men and women from co-existing and collaborating in a single troupe in pre-modern China. There were arguably more female troupes throughout the whole of the Ming

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period, but the number of all-male troupes grew. The Qing scholar Huang Yang 黃卬 wrote that “Many gentry and well-off families of the previous Ming period raised actors.” Examples of all-male troupes indeed abounded. For instance, Pan Yunduan 潘允端 (1526–1601), the owner of the Yuyuan Garden, had a group of “xiaosi 小厮” (male servants) as members of his family troupe. Other officials such as “Zou Diguang 鄒迪光 (1550–1626), Wu Yueshi 吳越石, Wang Jixuan 汪季玄, and Shen Shixing 申時行 (1535–1614)” all preferred all-male troupes. In Wuxi city, many officials had famous male dan actors living with their families. For example, Zheng Wang 鄭望 had over twenty actors in his family troupe, the best of whom were Liu Fengchun 柳逢春 and Jiang Qiushui 江秋水. When Liu and Jiang visited brothels, female prostitutes were said to feel eclipsed when standing with them.

In Jinping mei 金瓶梅 (The Plum in the Golden Vase), the family troupe of Wang the Second, the distaff relative of the imperial family, consisted of twenty actors (xiaosi). As they “performed Hsi-Hsiang chi [or Xixiang ji 西廂記], or The Romance of the Western Chamber,” dan actors obviously existed in this Wang family troupe. Similarly, the Eunuch Director He Xin 何訢

37 Pan Yunduan 潘允端, Yuhautang riji 玉華堂日記 [Diaries of Yuhuatang], 12 June 1588.
38 Yao Shuyi, Wangqing xiqu de biange 王清戲曲的邊記, 117.
39 Huang Yang, Xijin shixiao lu, vol. 10, 609.
“maintained a troupe of twelve household musicians,” which, in the original Chinese text, were referred to as xiaosi as well. In terms of freelance dan actors as escorts, Ximen Qing (or Hsi-men Ch’ing 西門慶) once called four actors in to entertain An Chen (or An Ch’en 安忱), the first scholar on the list of jinshi examinations (huishi 會試, the Metropolitan Examinations). The one who played “the leading female roles...is called Chou Shun [or Zhou Shun 周順].” The one who played “subsidiary female roles, is called Yüan Yen [or Yuan Yan 袁琰].” Ximen Qing even “told Shu-t’ung [or Shutong, 書童, a boy serving in a scholar’s study] to get dressed up...As a result, there were three actors playing female roles.”

As family troupes were fully financed by the officials who were their owners, an actor was provided financial security when compared with freelance actors who were escorts for well-off patrons, and were therefore able to focus on the development of theatrical skills. Thus “the master of the troupe gains in insight as day follows upon day, whereas the skills and artistry of his young charges become more remarkable the more they perform.” For example, Hou Fangyu 侯方域 (1618–1655), one of “the Four Celebrities” in the late Ming Jiangnan region, “was addicted to and skilful in

42 [Xiaoxiaosheng] Hsiao-hsiao-sheng, The Plum in the Golden Vase, or, Chin P’ing Mei, vol. 4, 308. David Roy gives two different translations, “actors” and “household musicians,” for the Chinese term xiaosi. (cf. vol. 3, 21) However, the translation “musician” does not indicate their sex. The Chinese version xiaosi clearly shows that these musicians are men. For a Chinese version of this term, see Lanling xiaoxiaosheng 蘭陵笑笑生, Jin ping mei cihua 金瓶梅詞話 [The Plum in the Golden Vase], ed. Mei Jie 梅節, Chen Zhao 陳昭, Huang Lin 楊霖 (Hong Kong: Mengmei guan, 1993), vol. 2, 506; vol. 3, 944.
44 Jonathan Spence, Return to the Dragon Mountain, 41 (Taoan Mengyi, 4/12).
music. He found talented teenagers and skilful instructors in Wuchang 吳閶 (Suzhou), and checked the music score himself, in order to avoid any errors in it.”45

Whereas dan actors witnessed a significant improvement in theatrical skills in these troupes, their entanglement with their owners in turn overshadowed this aesthetic tendency. Since actors, or even servants (e.g. Ximen Qing’s Shutong) were “owned” by or personally attached to the official, there was always the possibility that they would be required to provide sexual services to their owners if they were attracted to the practice of nanfeng. No wonder then that Chen Longzheng 陳龍正 (d. 1634), a rigid Neo-Confucian scholar claimed, “nine out of ten [family troupes] have lewdness.”46 Hence, the ascent of dan actors in family troupes was partially related to the trend of nanfeng, which suggests that there were more than just aesthetic concerns at play.

Ideal Dan Actors: Emotional Devotion to Scholar Masters

There is little direct evidence, however, linking these aforementioned officials who supported family troupes consisting of dan actors to a fascination for nanfeng; nor can we know whether all the dan actors and their owners had sexual and/or emotional interactions. But the scholars’ ideal of dan actors was not simply a matter of artistic proficiency. The most hailed dan

actors were always those who were emotionally devoted to their masters or patrons.

The late Ming scholar Pan Zhiheng 潘之恒 (c. 1536–1621) was one of the foremost theatrical critics and a close friend of the eminent playwright Tang Xianzu, the author of *The Peony Pavilion*. Unlike former theatrical reviewers, who simply focused on the textual and/or musical issues of the classical theatrical arts, Pan shifted attention to the actors for the first time. The performance of current *dan* actors, therefore, was a foremost constituent of Pan’s reviews.

All the *dan* actors mentioned in Pan’s reviews were evaluated under a set of criteria. These included: (1) *cai* 才, one’s inborn quality, for example, a beautiful face, slender torso and sweet voice; (2) *hui* 慧, one’s mastery of training for the fulfilment of theatrical artistry; and (3) *zhi* 致, one’s ability to empathise naturally (italic mine) with a character by carrying out “the creation of the life of the human spirit in the role and the communication of that life onstage in an artistic life” in a quasi-Stanislavskian way in which an actor’s first self merges into his second self.\(^47\)

The male *dan* introduced in Pan’s reviews fulfilled at least one of his aforementioned criteria. With regard to *cai*, the beautiful face and voice of an actor, the standout performers were Hao Kecheng 郝可成, Fu Yu 傅瑜, and Fu Mao 傅卯 (son of Fu Yu)\(^48\), as well as Xiao Guan 小管 (a *dan* actor in *Shen

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\(^48\) Both Yao Shuyi and Xu Wei 徐蔚 believed Fu Mao was a *dan* actor. But as Fu once
Shixing’s family troupe) and Xiao Pan 小潘 (a dan actor in Zou Diguang’s family troupe). But Pan placed greater value on hui, and especially zhi. Pan considered Zhang San 張三, a dan actor in Shen Shixing family troupe, as “unrivalled.” Pan wrote that “when performing the role of Hongniang 紅娘 [maid of Cui Yingying 崔鶯鶯 in Xixiang ji, or Romance of the West Chamber], Zhang was indeed like a woman.”

It is notable that Pan considered alcohol to be the reason for the excellence of Zhang’s art, since he failed to fulfil himself in the role when not drunk. Pan Zhiheng’s argument that the alcohol enabled Zhang to overcome his inhibitions and fully inhabit the role verified the importance of zhi, the ultimate criterion for an actor to merge naturally his first self into a second self, or the self-recreating spirit onstage. Another performer who met Pan’s aesthetic ideal was Jiang Ru 江孺, as he “understood Du Liniang 杜麗娘 [the heroine of The Peony Pavilion] so well.” Foregrounding the naturalness in his performance, Pan found no need for him to “act” Du’s lovesickness for her dreamed lover Liu Mengmei 柳夢梅. As Heng himself was full of lovesickness, his emotion was in fact Du’s emotion.

This kind of “lovesickness” (qingchi 情癡), however, was not limited to aesthetic concerns. By emphasising the actor’s lovesickness as the embodiment of zhi, Pan in fact encouraged the actor’s attachment to the owners of the troupes through a conflation of life and fiction. As one of the commonest motifs of chuanqi is romantic stories between talented scholars played Sima Xiangru 司馬相如 (c. 179–118 BCE), he was obviously a sheng, not a dan actor. See Pan Zhiheng, Pan Zhiheng quhua, 51.

49 Pan Zhiheng, Pan Zhiheng quhua, 136.
50 Pan Zhiheng, Pan Zhiheng quhua, 73.
and beautiful women (caizi jiaren), a dan performer would extend the female role’s love for the scholar to his/her owner in life. According to Pan Zhiheng’s critique, for example, a female dan Fu Shou 傅壽 was hailed as she died from her lovesickness soon after she was presented by her owner to his friend. In his notation book, Zhang Dai gave a similar example of the famous freelance actress Zhu Chusheng 朱楚生 to explain this: she died from “too much sadness in her heart,” as she “could not release all the turbulent forces that consumed her.” Although Fu Shou and Zhu Chusheng were both females, their encounters were in fact equivalent to those of dan actors. To the scholar-élite connoisseurs, actors were a kind of “luxury good.” Whereas Sophie Volpp suggests that dan actors might be “humanised” into an “ideal listener” (zhiyin 知音, or confidant) of the scholar-élite through the “devotion to their protectors and their attention to the Confucian principles of chastity and loyalty,” this is a contradictory explanation. As their humanising came at the price of adhering to the Neo-Confucian codes of chastity and loyalty, these dan actors’ relationship with respectable scholar-élites was in fact a metaphor of concubinage, despite their pseudo-equal identity as confidants.

All in all, dan actors became an integral part of literati leisure life in late imperial China. But particular attention needs to be given to analysing the development of dan actors during the Ming period in order to avoid an

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51 Pan Zhiheng, Pan Zhiheng quhua, 127.
overestimation of their theatrical skills (and popularity).\textsuperscript{54} Firstly, in contrast to a significant improvement in their theatrical skills, the practice of nanfeng in the late Ming period constituted a more important reason for dan actors’ rise. For most freelance dan actors in Beijing, their foremost business was not theatrical performances, but escort services for well-off patrons at banquets. With regard to the domesticated ones, raised and educated in scholar-officials’ family troupes, their status was still not as art-oriented as it appeared through the scholars’ interpretations. Even though Pan Zhiheng shifted the scholarly focus on theatre from textual and/or musical issues to the actors, he in fact admired the actors who were devoted wholeheartedly to the scholar-élite by means of conflating different realms of life and fiction.\textsuperscript{55} Neither freelance nor domesticated dan actors were able to avoid these kind of sexual demand from their patrons/owners. This overshadowed the future of dan actors by confusing the identities of performers (ji 伎) and prostitutes (ji 妓).

Secondly, the preference for female performers still proved more influential although a number of the scholar-élite visited freelance dan actors and financed all-male family troupes.\textsuperscript{56} Furthermore, a few officials even indicated dan actors were inferior to actresses, as the latter were “real” (or

\textsuperscript{54} A doubtful view, however, is enunciated by Yao Shuyi and Xu Wei, “Male dan obtained a similar status as female dan [in the Ming dynasty].” See Yao Shuyi, \textit{Wanqing xiqu de biange}, 116; Xu Wei, “Nandan: Xingbie fanchuan,” 男旦——性别反串 [Male Dan: Cross-Dressing] (Ph.D. diss., Xiamen University, 2007), 36.

\textsuperscript{55} Pan Zhiheng, \textit{Pan Zhiheng quhua}, 232.

“natural”) women while the former were “fake” variants. As Yang Shen 楊慎 (b. 1488) once said, “One turns to zhuangdan (fake dan) if he is tired of zhendan (real dan). Likewise, one turns to Nan Xixiang 南西廂 (the southern version of Romance of the West Chamber) if he is tired of Bei Xixiang 北西廂 (the northern version of Romance of the West Chamber). [Whereas fake dan and Nan Xixiang satisfy our curiosity], real dan and Bei Xixiang are preeminent.” Shen Defu indicated, “The dancing of an actor can be as skilful as, but not as natural as that of an actress.”

Some stern Neo-Confucian scholar-officials were even concerned about the ascent of nanfeng and its impact on society, and advised scholars of “respectable families” to “avoid zhuangdan,” or dan actors.58

Dan Actors as “Boy Courtesans” in the Qing Period

If dan actors remained secondary in comparison to their female counterparts throughout the whole of the Ming period, the establishment of the Qing empire allowed more opportunities for dan actors’ development. As a group of nomadic conquerors, the Manchu conquest élite employed a hybrid way of governing the different ethnic groups within their vast territory. With regard to the Han Chinese, the Qing court attempted to reinvigorate the rigid Neo-Confucian order in order to eradicate the demoralised atmosphere, which was considered responsible for the collapse of the Ming empire. This

57 Shen Defu, Wanli yehuo bian, 651–652. Sophie Volpp suggests that the descriptions of homoerotic attachment in literati fiction and notation books were peripheral. According to her, the literati often “included stories regarding male love in their final pages.” For instance, in Feng Menglong’s Qingshi leiliüe the chapter devoted to nanfeng is titled “Qing wai 情外 (Beyond qing),” i.e., beyond heteroerotic, or “common” passion. Moreover, the introduction of Qing wai was “effaced” from the book’s Preface. See Volpp, “Classifying Lust,” 85, 103 & 108.

kind of thinking had its origins in the Han (202 BCE–220 CE) period. After Confucianism was institutionalised as a kind of customary law through which society could be governed, social stability was inevitably evaluated in moral terms. Due to this “long tradition in Chinese thought of associating political decline with moral laxity and strong government with a high level of public morality,” the Qing conquerors were determined to forbid female entertainers from the empire, believing this was a degenerate practice that contributed to the crisis of the Neo-Confucian order.

The Qing Court’s Continuous Ban on Female Entertainers

When the Manchu force first occupied Beijing in 1644 and built the Qing empire, their palace entertainment followed the former institutions of the Ming court. In the opening stage of his reign, Emperor Shunzhi (Aisin Gioro Fulin 爱新觉罗·福临, r. 1644–1661) still “used four officials’ wives as the leaders of the twenty-four female musicians.” However, for the benefit of the banner élite, the Shunzhi emperor ordered the court to exclude female entertainers from the empire, believing this was a degenerate practice that contributed to the crisis of the Neo-Confucian order.

59 Volpp, “Classifying Lust,” 83.

60 Kangxi huidian 康熙會典·卷七一 [Records of the Reign of the Qianlong Emperor], vol. 71, Libu, Ciji Qinglisi, Jiaofangsi chengying 禮部·祠祭清吏司·教坊司承應 [Ministry of Rites, Bureau of Sacrifice, Called-in Performance of the Music Office]. Also see Yongzheng huidian 雍正會典·卷一三〇 [Records of the Reign of the Yongzheng Emperor], vol. 130, Libu, Ciji Qinglisi, Jiafangsi 刑部·祠祭清吏司·教坊司 [Ministry of Rites, Bureau of Sacrifice, Music Office], no. 1.

61 Created by Aisin Gioro Nurhaci 爱新觉罗·努尔哈赤 (r. 1616–26), banners, or “the Eight Banners” (八旗 baqi), were originally organisations of the Jurchen conquest élite, which afterwards became the fundamental institution of Manchu/Qing society. In their prolonged military activities against the Ming empire, the Jurchen incorporated Mongol and Han forces, thus creating “the Mongol Eight Banners” and “the Han Eight Banners.” Members of these banners (or “bannermen,” 旗人 qiren) became a privileged group in Qing society. On this, see Mark C. Elliott, The Manchu Way: The Eight Banners and Ethnic Identity in Late Imperial China (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001).
entertainers from the Music Office in 1651, and used forty-eight eunuchs instead. There was once, for unknown reasons, some vacillation about this restriction, as female entertainers reappeared at the court in 1655. But finally, in 1659, the Shunzhi emperor dismissed female entertainers from the court again. As a result, “there were no females in the Music Office of Beijing.”

With the intent to indoctrinate the wider society with Neo-Confucian morality, the ban on female entertainers was introduced throughout China soon after the implementation of imperial prohibition at court. In 1652, the Shunzhi emperor allowed “the women of decent families who were reduced to the humble status of yuehu 楽戶 (entertainers) because of the Ming-Qing transition” to be reinstated to their previously respectable status. Yuehu, first recorded in the Weishu xingfazhi 魏書·刑罰志 (The Book of Wei, Records of Punishment), were groups of humble female entertainers who played in official venues for the well-off. They offered sexual services to well-off patrons as well. In 1673, the Kangxi emperor (Aisin Gioro Hiowan 爛新覺羅·玄煥, r.1661–1722) ordered “any official as well as his offspring who houses prostitutes to be given sixty strokes of the cane.” Furthermore, “[the Ministry

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62 Qianlong huidian 乾隆會典·卷一六二 [Records of the Reign of the Qianlong Emperor], vol. 162, Neiwufu, Zhangyisi 內務府·掌儀司·二 [Imperial Household Department, Office of Rites], no.2. Also see Jiaqing huidian 嘉慶會典·卷四一〇 [Records of the Reign of the Jiaqing Emperor], vol. 410, Yuebu, zhizhang, sheguan 楽部·執掌·設官 [Music Ministry, Administration, Positions].

63 Kangxi huidian, vol. 71, Libu, Ciji Qinglisi, Jiaofangsi chengying.

64 Yongzheng huidian 雍正會典·卷一三〇 [Records of the Reign of the Yongzheng Emperor], vol.130, Xingbu, liüli 刑部·律例·一 [Ministry of Justice, Laws], no.1.

of Personnel] shall keep a record of his faults. When he inherits his father’s title he shall be demoted by one level, and sent to the outlying districts.” 66 On the foundation of his father and grandfather’s actions, in 1722, the Yongzheng emperor (Aisin Gioro In Jen 愛新覺羅·胤禛, r.1722–1735) finally “abolished yuehu from all provinces,” 67 while employing those who were proficient in music as musicians for the Music Office. 68

There is no direct evidence to the effect of these edicts, however, a decline in the number of female entertainers seems to have occurred. The series of edicts from the Qing court effectively restricted opportunities for female entertainers, yet despite its superficial triumph it failed to facilitate the Neo-Confucian moral codes. Soon afterwards, well-off officials replaced

66  Kangxi huidian 康熙會典·卷一二三 [Records of the Reign of the Yongzheng Emperor], vol. 123, Xingbu, lüli 刑部·律例·十四 [Ministry of Justice, Laws], no. 14.
67  Yongzheng huidian 雍正會典·卷一五六 [Records of the Reign of the Yongzheng Emperor], vol. 155, Xingbu, lüli 刑部·律例·六 [Ministry of Justice, Laws], no.6. Also see Qianlong huidian, jiaqing huidian 嘉慶會典 [Records of the Reign of the Jiaqing Emperor] and Guangxu huidian 光緒會典 [Records of the Reign of the Guangxu Emperor].
68  Guangxu huidian 光緒會典·卷五二四 [Records of the Reign of the Guangxu Emperor], vol. 524, Yuebu yi, zhizhang, sheguan 樂部一·執掌·設官 [Music Ministry the First, Administration, Positions]. This was in fact an extension of the capital ban on female yuehu to the whole of China. Soon after, in 1725, the Yongzheng emperor again stipulated that “no official [female] musician was allowed in any province,” and promulgated more serious punishments for violators. “For anyone who conspired to run brothels and induced women [as prostitutes], the brothel owner should be immediately decapitated, and his associates exiled to Ningguta (a place in Heilongjiang) in the far Northeast, as servants of soldiers. See Yongzheng huidian 雍正會典·卷一三〇 [Records of the Reign of the Yongzheng Emperor], vol. 130, Xingbu, lüli 刑部·律例·一 [Ministry of Justice, Laws], no. 1; and Yongzheng huidian 雍正會典·卷一七三 [Records of the Reign of the Yongzheng Emperor], vol. 173, Xingbu, lüli 刑部·律例·二十四 [Ministry of Justice, Laws], no. 24. Chou Huiling 祖慧靈 erroneously considered the Qianlong emperor’s 1772 ban on female entertainers as unique, when in fact there were numerous such bans throughout the Qing period. See Chou Huiling, “Striking Their Own Poses,” 132.
female entertainers with effeminate dan actors. The male and female entertainers served an identical social function, so the ban on female entertainers really failed to contribute to the Qing court’s desire to amend the socio-moral environment.

These imperial prohibitions forced both female prostitutes and female entertainers (often one and the same) underground, while dan actor became popular as xianggong 相公 (escort, or “boy courtesan”).69 Xianggong was once an honorific for senior officials, first seen in Wang Can’s 王粲 (177–217) Congjun xing 從軍行 (Life in the Army) written for Cao Cao 曹操 (155–220). It literally indicated Cao’s status as both Prime Minister (xiang 相) and Duke (gong 公). Later, a lower-level intellectual and/or official was called xianggong as well. However, in the Qing context, it became a pejorative synonym for dan actors, which connoted the actor’s additional career as an escort. Some scholars called dan actors xianggu 像姑 (lit. looks like a woman) in order to forbid them the honorific of xianggong.

As Xu Ke 徐珂 (1869–1928) recorded in the Qingbai leichao 清稗類鈔 (Classified Jottings on Qing Unofficial History), “[during and] before the reign of the Daoguang emperor [Aisin Gioro Minning 愛新覺羅·旻寧, r.1820–1850], Beijing [patrons] were primarily focused on xianggong, while few prostitutes existed.”70 Xianggong flourished for the following two reasons. Firstly, “legal

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70 Xu Ke 徐珂, Qingbai leichao 清稗類鈔 [Classified Jottings on Qing Unofficial History] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1984), vol. 11, 5155.
constraints against female prostitutes had led to their decline.”

As the scholar-élite were afraid to defy the court ban on female entertainers, “it was common practice to use boy apprentices as male prostitutes in Chinese intellectual circles.” Secondly, as the continuous prohibition dealt a blow to the business of prostitution, the idolised, gesha-like courtesans disappeared from the Qing entertainment world. “In 1837 and 1838,” as Xu Ke complained, “the quality of prostitutes in Beijing was far worse than that of actors.”

These unlicensed prostitutes, “fat and overly dressed-up,” proved unattractive to patrons. On the contrary, xianggong were initially selected and trained for theatrical arts, so a majority appeared beautiful and proficient in vocal skills. Many even learnt the genteel hobbies of the literati, for example, painting, poetry and calligraphy. They became an equivalent of the courtesans of the preceding periods.

Whereas Ye Xiaoqing 葉曉青 (1952–2010) argues in her Ascendant Peace in the Four Seas: Drama and the Qing Imperial Court that the Qing court’s reiteration of the ban was concrete proof of its ineffectiveness, this is perhaps too harsh on the Qing emperors. The Qing court turned out far more successful than the Ming in prohibiting prostitution. Although the Ming emperors forbade female entertainers, they still abounded amongst the

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71 Mackerras, “Drama of the Qing Dynasty,” 104.
73 Xu Ke, Qingbai leichao, vol. 11, 5153.
74 Chen Sen 陳森, Pinhua baojian 品花寶鑑 [A Precious Mirror of Tasting Flowers] (Beijing: Huaxia chubanshe, 2016), 121 & 185.
75 Ye Xiaoqing 葉曉青, Ascendant Peace in the Four Seas: Drama and the Qing Imperial Court (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2012), 10.
households of the scholar-élite. As the Ming scholar Pan Zhiheng (a. 1536–1621) noted, “half of my friends were women,” all of whom were eminent female dan actresses for a time. While in the Qing period, few scholars wrote about their friendships with female entertainers. Scholars at large preferred to write notation books introducing dan actors as xianggong, or boy courtesans, even after their female counterparts reappeared after the reign of the Daoguang emperor.

*Aesthetic Transition and the Rise to Fame of Dan Actors*

Under the Qing court’s continuous ban on female entertainers, dan actors dominated the theatre for over two centuries, right through until the end of Qing. As late as in the 1870s, the actor Li Mao’er 李毛兒 founded the first female troupe (the mao’er troupe 髻兒班/貓兒班). Later, in 1894, the Meixian Tea House 美仙茶園 was built as a venue for female actresses in the British Concession in Shanghai, which was outside the control of the Qing court. In Beijing, female dan were not seen until after the Boxer Uprising in 1900, when Cixi 慈禧 (1835–1908), the Empress Dowager, fled to Xi’an. But this was after all a temporary relaxation, as once the court returned female dan again disappeared from Beijing. Therefore, throughout the entire Qing period, dan almost always referred to male dan, with female dan a deviant group that were known as kundan 坤旦, and their troupes kunban 坤班 (female troupes). In fact, male dan actors were so influential during this period that they were able to establish a set of aesthetic criteria for the theatre that would last down until today.

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76 Pan Zhiheng, *Pan Zhiheng quhua*, 118.
While a majority of the Ming theatrical troupes were based in the households of well-off scholar-officials, during the course of the Qing theatre developed into a public phenomenon, as it became affordable entertainment for common people. This resulted in the rise of various folk theatrical forms “of the masses” through what became known as the “Huabu-Yabu Conflict” (hua ya zhi zheng 花雅之爭). The term yabu 雅部 (refined musical style) referred to kunqiang, which was popular with the scholar-élite, and was considered as the “orthodox style” at the Ming and early Qing courts; while huabu 花部 (folk musical style) was once a pejorative synonym for all kinds of folk musical forms, which connoted non-kunqiang, and was not considered aesthetically refined. As theatrical audiences began to include more members of the wider urban population, folk huabu styles became increasingly popular, although the decline of the yabu style of theatre was a gradual process. It was until 1774 that qinqiang 秦腔 (Gansu folk musical form) came into vogue, and then 1785 that huidiao 徽調 (Anhui folk musical form) became more popular than the refined musical styles of former years.

In 1774 and 1779, Wei Changsheng 魏長生 (or Wei Wanqing 魏婉卿, 

77 Mackerras, “Drama of the Qing Dynasty,” 92.
78 As the status of actors was humble, the biographical record relating to Wei Changsheng before his rise to stardom was unclear. Colin Mackerras is convinced Wei “first arrived in Peking in 1779.” See Colin Mackerras, The Rise of the Peking Opera 1770–1880 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972), 92. Whereas, in the various accounts of late-Qing huapu by literati, Wei arrived in Beijing in either 1770, 1774 or 1779. Other scholars think Wei Changsheng first came to Beijing in 1770 but failed to become famous and left. He then returned in 1774, and finally became famous in 1779. See, for instance, Lin Xiang'e 林香娥, “Wei Changsheng yu hua ya zhi zheng,” 魏長生與花雅之爭 [Wei Changsheng and the Huabu-Yabu Conflict] Zhongguo xiqi xueyuan xuebao 1 (2004): 53.
Wei San 魏三, Wei San’er 魏三兒, Wei San Guan 魏三官, 1744–1802\(^79\), a dan actor of West qinqiang (xi qinqiang 西秦腔, folk music of Gansu) went from Sichuan to Beijing to celebrate the birthday of the Qianlong emperor (Aisin Gioro Hongli 愛新覺羅·弘曆, r.1735–1795). He became famous in the period between 1779 and 1785.\(^80\) Unlike the sonorous gaoqiang 高腔 (or jingqiang, a localised Beijing yiyang qiang style), Wei’s West qinqiang was fascinating because of its softness, “which was like a murmur.”\(^81\) Although rigid Confucian scholars fretfully declared West qinqiang a kind of “mimi zhi yin” 靡靡之音 (degenerate voice) which was very likely to ruin their highly valued social morality, this did not stop its increasing popularity in Beijing.

Aside from the artistic excellence of Wei Changsheng, the lewdness of some West qinqiang performances was a reason for its increased popularity. Wei’s Gunlou 滾樓 (Rolling from a Tower), for instance, was full of erotic connotations.\(^82\) While a lot of officials felt frustrated about the decline of kunqiang, which, as the Japanese scholar Aoki Masuru (1887–1964) said, was a decay of the “orthodox” art, the increased popularity of rustic, coarse huabu

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\(^79\) Also because of actor’s lower status, late-Qing literati recollected Wei’s birth/death differently. Mackerras suggests that Wei was born in 1744 and died in 1802. See Mackerras, *The Rise of the Peking Opera 1770–1880*, 91.

\(^80\) Mackerras, *The Rise of the Peking Opera 1770–1880*, 81. Wei Changsheng’s West qinqiang (xi qinqiang) was different from qinqiang, a kind of folk music in Shaanxi (Qin), which is known for its sonorousness. According to the Qing literati notation books, it was soft and melodic. See Anle shanqiao 安樂山樵 (Wu Changyuan 吳長元), “Yanlan xiaopu,” 燕蘭小譜 [A Small Book of the Orchids in Beijing] in *Qingdai yandu liyuan shiliao congkan*, 46. Xu Ke, *Qingbai leichao*, vol. 11, 5019. Siu Wang-Ngai and Peter Lovrick mistakenly take it as “the regional drama of Shaanxi province” in *Chinese Opera: Images and Stories* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia, 1997), 17.

\(^81\) Wu Changyuan, “Yanlan xiaopu,” 46.

was a reflection of the greater role of urban audiences in theatrical activities. In comparison, kunqiang was too refined, on account of the literati’s aesthetic canons, to generate widespread interest amongst the wider urban population. Not as educated as the scholar-officials, these people favoured huabu, which offered a more bawdy form of entertainment than the obscure literary beauty provided by yabu.

Due to the lewdness of Wei Changsheng’s performance, some Confucian scholar condemned him as “Yehu jiaozhu (lit. Lord of Foxy Charm),”83 or as “the source of evil,”84 for being the initiator of a new type of erotic performance. After Wei Changsheng became the foremost dan actor in Beijing, a lot of his protégés—especially those known as “the Four Beauties”—followed the flirtatious orientation of Wei.85 The best of “the Four Beauties,” Chen Yin Guan 陳銀官, who “overshadowed by far all his fellow-students and achieved a reputation equal to that of his grand master [Wei Changsheng],”86 further developed his lewd performance in order to fulfil urban audiences’ demands to be flirtatious. In Shuang Qilin 雙麒麟 (Two Kylins), Chen was “Naked, and unveiled himself from the curtain. Audiences were as like onlookers during intercourse.”87 The Qianlong emperor, in order

83 Referring to “not orthodox” in Chinese.
84 Wu Changyuan, “Yanlan xiaopu,” 32.
85 The four protégés of Wei Changsheng were Chen Yin Guan 陳銀官, Liu Er Guan 劉二官, Liu Feng Guan 劉鳳官, and Wang Kui Guan 王奎官.
86 Mackerras, The Rise of the Peking Opera 1770–1870, 98. “Guan” is a suffix frequently added to the names of actors in traditional China. For example, in The Story of the Stone, the Jia family buy a group of young actors from Suzhou. They are all called “so-and-so guan” so are referred to as “Shi’er guan” 十二官 (The Twelve Actors). Also, Jia Baoyu’s friend, Jiang Yuhan, is also known as Qi Guan 琪官.
87 Wu Changyuan, “Yanlan xiaopu,” 47.
to defend Confucian ethics from Wei Changsheng’s “harmful influence,” prohibited Wei from performing in 1782 and finally evicted him from Beijing in 1785. Following Wei’s departure, “an edict was issued forbidding the performance of Ch’in-ch’iang [West qinqiang] in Peking: the Ch’in-ch’iang actors were henceforward to perform only Ch’ing-ch’iang (jingqiang/gaoqiang) or K’un-ch’ü (kunqiang).” This dealt a heavy blow to West qinqiang, but the “flirtatious and rustic (yinwa bixue 淫哇鄙謔)” trend in performance set forth by Wei Changsheng and his protégés “infected…a generation of actors” and continued on until the fall of Qing.

Male dan actors exemplified by Wei Changsheng were involved in the resurgence of nanfeng amongst Qing scholars. As Li Yu 李漁 (1611–1680) remarks, “Now, 99 out of 100 men have the defect [of indulging in nanfeng].” Li possibly overestimates the vogue for homoerotic attachment in Qing society, but as Zhang Jiliang 張際亮 (pseudonym Huaxu dafu 華胥大夫, 1799–1843) notes, “Wei Changsheng enjoyed from Heshen 和珅 [1750–1799] the favour of the cut sleeve (duanxiu zhichong 斷袖之寵).” After Wei rose to

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88 Mackerras, The Rise of the Peking Opera 1770–1880, 93.
89 Mackerras, The Rise of the Peking Opera 1770–1880, 94.
90 Jiao Xun 焦循, “Huabu nongtan,” 花部農譚 [Peasantly Talks on Folk Dramas], in Lidai quhua huibian Qin·Qing dai bian [A Collection of Comments on the Drama of Successive Dynasties, the Volume of Qing], eds. Yu Weimin and Sun Rongrong (Hefei: Huangshan Shushe, 2009), vol.3, 472.
92 “Cut sleeve” is a Chinese trope of homoeroticism which had its origin in the love that the Aidi emperor (Liu Xin 劉欣, 25–1 BCE), the last emperor of the Han, had for his favourite courtier Dong Xian 董賢 (22–1 BCE). Once “Emperor Ai was sleeping in the daytime with Dong Xian stretched out across his sleeve. When the emperor wanted to get up, Dong Xian was still asleep. Because he did not want to disturb him, the emperor cut
fame, he became the favourite of Heshen, and “went in and out of Heshen’s mansion taking a senior official’s carriage.” 93 This was a reflection of the lives of many male dan actors, who served as escorts for people of means and privilege. As Wu Cuncun notes, “officials...considered being escorted by a dan actor as a kind of symbol of their prestigious status.” 94

**Huidiao and Dan Actor as Escort**

Even though the Qianlong emperor forbade West qinqiang and evicted Wei Changsheng from Beijing in 1785, the so-called “degenerate voice” was rooted in Beijing thereafter. Even the court, as well as its officials, were in fact in favour of huabu instead of kunqiang. After Wei had been gone from Beijing for half a decade, the Sixi 四喜 Company of Gao Langting 高朗亭 (or Gao Yue Guan 高月官 c. 1774–1827), a dan actor of huidiao 徽調 (Anhui folk

of his own sleeve and got up.” Cut sleeve was thus employed as an implicit term suggesting homoeroticism. This story has been translated by Bret Hinsch in Passions of the Cut Sleeve, 53. With regard to Zhang Jiliang’s 張際亮 account of “duanxiu zhichong,” Colin Mackerras firmly, while possibly erroneously, asserted that “The minister [Heshen] and actor were homosexual lovers;” Wei Changsheng “Certainly had a family despite his homosexuality.” See Mackerras, The Rise of the Peking Opera 1770–1880, 93 & 97. In his later book, Mackerras confirmed Wei as “homosexual lover” and furthermore, to “several” eminent officials. See Mackerras, “Drama of the Qing Dynasty,” 104. However, a dan actors’ commitment to escorting was largely enforced, and did not necessarily have its origins in an “inherent homosexuality,” nor would it necessarily lead to future homoerotic attachment. Similar associations included the West qinqiang actor Chen Yin Guan and the scholar Li Fuqing 李符清 (Li Zaiyuan/Li Tsai-yüan 李載圞), the huidiao actors Zhou Xiaofeng 周小鳳 (or Chou Hsiao-feng), Chen Changchun 陳長春 (or Ch'en Ch'ang-ch'un) and the scholar Zhu Changyi 朱昌頤 (Zhu Duoshan/Chu To-shan 朱朶山, 1784–1855), 141. See Mackerras, The Rise of the Peking Opera 1770–1880, 100 & 141. We cannot be sure that dan actors were not forced into homoerotic relationships.


94 Wu Cuncun, Mingqing shehui xing'ai fengqi, 160.
musical form), became popular.\textsuperscript{95} Audiences soon became enthusiastic about 
\textit{huidiao}, as there had been a lack of \textit{huabu} entertainment since the Qianlong 
emperor evicted Wei and forbade \textit{West qinqiang}. Male \textit{dan} actors still reigned 
supreme during the dominance of Anhui companies. “With only a few 
exceptions, every other actor known to us from this period was a \textit{tan [dan]}.\textsuperscript{96}

Ironically, the Qianlong emperor’s ban on \textit{West qinqiang} resulted in 
increased social immorality. Due to the economic recession in southern China 
from the late Qianlong reign onwards, many young actors from Anhui 
families came to Beijing.\textsuperscript{97} This influx of Anhui actors led to disorder in the 
Beijing market. As “all [the best-known four Anhui companies] had over 100 
\textit{hsiao-tan} [or \textit{xiaodan, 小旦}, young women] actors,” many failed to find 
theatrical roles as heroines.\textsuperscript{98} Relying on being \textit{xianggong}, or boy courtesans, 
the Anhui \textit{dan} actors even revived the long lost convention of \textit{zhantai} (lit. 
“to stand in front of the counter,” or exhibit oneself for patronage), which 
undermined the court’s efforts to enforce a more ethical social order.

The period from the late Qianlong reign and on through the Jiaqing reign 
(\textit{Aisin Gioro Yongyan 愛新覺羅·顓琰}, r. 1796–1820) was like an Indian 
summer for the Qing empire. As the Qianlong emperor’s extravagant lifestyle

\textsuperscript{95} As is the case with Wei Changsheng, we do not have an accurate record of Gao 
Langting’s birth and death. According to Colin Mackerras, his birth was either in 1774 or 
1766. Gao was a senior leader of \textit{Jingzhong Miao 精忠廟} (or \textit{Ching-Chung Monastery}, the 
Theatre Society), but “we hear no more of Gao after 1827.” Maybe Gao has already died 
\textsuperscript{96} Mackerras, \textit{The Rise of the Peking Opera 1770–1880}, 141.
\textsuperscript{97} Mackerras, \textit{The Rise of the Peking Opera 1770–1880}, 152. Wu Cuncun, \textit{Homoerotic 
Sensibilities in Late Imperial China}, 123.
\textsuperscript{98} Mackerras, \textit{The Rise of the Peking Opera 1770–1880}, 128.
directly influenced the élite class, wealthier scholar-officials and merchants were addicted to sensual entertainment and escorting xianggong. As a consequence, the business of xianggong flourished during the Jiaqing era. Furthermore, the commercial environment of the Qing enabled the haoke 豪客 (well-off patrons) to play a key role in theatrical activity, as they were the main source of revenue for dan actors.99 The well-off patrons’ primary concern was the actor himself, not his art. Therefore, these theatres established special boxes near the stage exit, enabling a dan actor to visit and flatter his patron before a performance.100 When the actor left the stage, he would easily make flirtatious eye contact with the patron from behind the curtain.101 After the performance finished, the dan actor would escort the patron for a banquet in one of the restaurants nearby.102 There were a lot of erotic activities at banquets, for example, “jing pi bei” 敬皮杯, which means feeding a patron wine in a mouth-to-mouth way.103 In some cases, they would retire to a special room to indulge in sexual activity.

Normally, no dan actor became a xianggong of his own accord. According to the well-known Qing scholar Ji Yun 紀昀 (or Ji Xiaolan 紀曉嵐, 1724–1805), “No escorts have the intention [to become an escort]. All become escorts due to fraud, force, or inducement.”104 The late-Ming literati Ling Mengchu 凌濛

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103 Chen Sen, Pinhua baojian, 22; 81–83; 137.
104 Ji Yun 紀昀, Yuewe caotang biji 閒微草堂筆記 [Jottings from the Thatched Abode of Close
初 (1580–1644) was convinced that sexual activity involved an unequal relationship, because “the male mode is rather forced, and being in the passive position is not much fun.” Therefore, sexual relationships in Confucian China were more analogous to the patriarchal structure than they were reflective of personal preference. An individual’s position in sexual activity was fluid, which was dynamically redefined by his power relationship with each partner. For example, as the Qianlong emperor’s favourite courtier, Heshen was rendered passive in his relationship with the Qianlong emperor, while in his corresponding relationship with the dan actor Wei Changsheng, he was undoubtledly active. As women were considered secondary in Chinese society, femininity was in fact analogous to inferiority. Thus, what well-off patrons expected and enjoyed from a dan actor was his effeminacy, which reflected the patrons’ status as the more dominant partner. To cater to the well-off patron’s demands, the master of dan actors often fostered effeminate behaviour in his dan, no matter whether this type of training violated their nature. To some extent, the humble dan actors were playthings that were commodified by the privileged powerful members of Chinese society.

The Predicament of Dan Actors as Seen through Notation Books

As a consequence of the commodification of Qing theatre, dan actors were

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Observations] (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1984), vol. 12, 275.

105 Ling Mengchu 凌濛初, Paian jingqi 拍案驚奇 [Pounding the Table in Amazement] (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1985), vol. 2, 20–21. Translation see Volpp, “Classifying Lust,” 91. This statement was deleted from certain versions. See Ling Mengchu, Paian jingqi, ed. Wang Gulu 王古魯 (Shanghai: Gudian wenxue chubanshe, 1957), 493.
forced to face a wider group of patrons than just the scholar-élite. Famous *dan* actors were—like prostitutes—evaluated in scholars’ notation books called *huapu* (花譜, lit. “manual of flowers”). As “hua,” which means “flowers” in Chinese, connotes, the basic concentration of *huapu* was on actors; few if any of the *huapu*, however, were focused on the actors’ artistry. Specifically, the *dan* actor as *xianggong* was central to the commentators’ concerns. Through the writing of *huapu*, the scholar both reflected and influenced fashions in the Beijing theatrical world. At first, such books were circulated amongst scholar friends who were theatrical aficionados, but soon they became more widely distributed as handbooks for those wanting reliable information about *dan* actors—for example, a well-off patron who was new to Beijing. In this way, *huapu* written by well-known theatrical aficionados soon became an important channel to fame for *dan* actors. The actors would therefore seek to become friends of these well-known scholars, even if they were not as affluent as their patrons. Thus, the *huapu* reflected what were considered the most admirable features of *dan* actors in mid- and late-Qing society.

*From Man to Boy*

In the 1930s, Zhang Cixi 張次溪 (1909–1968) collected and edited fifty-one kinds of Qing *huapu*, starting with *Yanlan xiaopu* 燕蘭小譜 (*A Small Book of the Orchids in Beijing, 1785*) through to *Xinglin xiexiu* 杏林擷秀 (*Selected Beauties of the Apricot Grove, 1902*). These books included brief introductions to, as well as comments on a lot of famous current *dan* actors. The first trend as reflected by *huapu* was that *dan* actors became increasingly younger over time, beginning in the reign of the Qianlong emperor. When the
West qinqiang actor Wei Changsheng (b.1744) first came to Beijing in 1774, he was still considered attractive as an adult, contributing profoundly to the popularity of West qinqiang. Despite his age (now being thirty), Wei still won Heshen’s heart, and was given free access to his mansion. By 1785, when Wu Changyuan 吳長元 (pseudonym Anle shanqiao 安樂山樵) compiled Yanlan xiaopu, a small number of young dan actors were mentioned (13 out of 64). This might suggest that age was being noticed, but may not yet have been a primary concern for patron’s of dan actors. These 13 young actors mentioned in Yanlan xiaopu can be grouped in the following way according to their age.

(1) “Just Twenty”: Yu Yongting 于永亭, Liu Hei’er 劉黑兒, Zhou Si Guan 周四官, Xu Xi Guan 徐喜官 and Li Qin Guan 李琴官;

(2) “In Late Teens”: Wang Wu’er 王五兒, Yan Fu’er 閻福兒 and Jia Si’er 賈四兒;

(3) “Just Fifteen”*: Luo Rong Guan 羅榮官, Zhang Xi’er 張喜兒, Yang Bao’er 楊寶兒, Wang Qing Guan 王慶官 and Zhou Si Guan Jr. 小周四官.

These young actors represent only one quarter of all the actors listed in the Yanlan xiaopu. The boost in the numbers of “the boy-actors is closely related to the success of the Anhui companies,” thus roughly from the

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opening of the nineteenth century, it seems that the average age of dan actors became lower. By 1803, when Rixia kanhua ji 日下看花記 (A Note of Watching Flowers in Beijing) was published, the average age of the 51 adult dan actors was 20, and over two fifths were between 15 and 19. There was another category of boy actors, whose average age was 13.\textsuperscript{111} In Pianyu ji 片羽集 (Treasured Relics, 1805), the average age of 23 actors was 19, and over a half were between 15 and 19.\textsuperscript{112} This shows the trend that dan actors became increasingly younger in the post-Qianglong era. Later in Tingchun xinyong 聽春新詠 (New Poems on Listening to the Spring, 1810), the average age of the 35 dan actors was 16. Notably, 71\% actors were between 15 and 19, and we cannot even find an actor who was over 24.\textsuperscript{113}

This love for young dan actors that prevailed in Beijing was because of the new way of recruiting and training actors. Whereas Wei Changsheng and Gao Langting arrived in Beijing as already skilled actors, as Zhang Jiliang indicated in Jintai canlei ji 金臺殘淚記 (Notes of Left Tears on the Golden Platform,

\textsuperscript{111} Xiao tiedi daoren 小鐵笛道人, “Rixia kanhua ji,” 日下看花記 [A Note of Watching Flowers in Beijing], in Qingdai yandu liyuan shiliao congkan, 53–116. The average age of adult dan actors in Rixia kanhua ji is calculated on the basis of Volume One, Two and Three; while in Volume Four, dan actors below fifteen were collected in an affiliated section, in which the 12 boy actors were even as young as 13. Age groups in Rixia kanhua ji: 10–14 (12); 15–19 (27); 20–24 (15); 25–29 (6); 30–34 (3); 35–39 (0). Oldest: Su Xiaosan 蘇小三 (33); youngest: Zhu Qilin 朱麒麟 (12).

\textsuperscript{112} Laiqingge zhuren 來青閣主人, “Pianyu ji,” 片羽集 [Treasured Relics], in Qingdai yandu liyuan shiliao congkan, 117–148. Age groups in Pianyu ji: 10–14 (2); 15–19 (13); 20–24 (5); 25–29 (1); 30–34 (1); 35–39 (1). Oldest: Feng Tianran 馮天然 (36); youngest: Zhang Changui 張蟾桂 (13).

\textsuperscript{113} Liuchun ge xiaoshi 留春閣小史, “Tingchun xinyong,” 聽春新詠 [New Poets of Listening to Spring], in Qingdai yandu liyuan shiliao congkan, 149–207. Age groups in Tingchun xinyong: 10–14 (5); 15–19 (25); 20–24 (5); 25–29 (0); 30–34 (0); 35–39 (0). Oldest: Feilai Feng 飛來鳳 (24); youngest: Zhang Delin 張德林 (12).
1828), boy actors were indentured and taken to Beijing from Suzhou, Yangzhou and Anqing at the age of seven or eight by their masters. They were trained in theatrical performance and enforced to indulge in escorting services for well-off patrons. As Zhang Jiliang noted, “a dan actor often lost a majority of patrons after twenty.” With the abnormal fascination of boy actors, the career of dan actors often ended once an individual actor was considered “old” (at the end of his teenage years). This is verified in Yang Zhangsheng’s 楊掌生 (pseudonym Ruizhu Jiushi’s 綠珠舊史, b. 1806) two books, Changan kanhua ji 長安看花記 (Notes of Watching Flowers in Chang’an, 1836) and Dingning yusun zhi 丁年玉筍志 (Notes of the Bamboo Shoots in 1837).

In the former text, Yang stated, “For an individual dan actor, the golden age is half a decade;” while in the latter, Yang amended his earlier view, stating, “I once claimed the golden years for a dan actor were half a decade, which was an overestimation. Now, I have to lower it to one fourth of a decade on the basis of the new situation in Beijing.”

Compared to Wei Changsheng “who started acting when young and was still on the stage just before his death at the age of fifty-eight,” individual actors indeed suffered a lot from the favouritism of young dan actor as escorts in the late Qing. Furthermore, the new fashion for younger boys was the reason that dan actors were no longer

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114 There were different accounts of the start of dan actors’ career, while Colin Mackerras thinks the 7–8 version of Zhang Jiliang was more reliable. See Colin Mackerras, The Rise of the Peking Opera 1770–1880, 146–147.


116 Yang Zhangsheng, “Chang’an kanhua ji,” 長安看花記 [Notes of Watching Flowers in Chang’an], in Qingdai yandu liyuan shiliao congkan, 303.


118 Mackerras, The Rise of the Peking Opera 1770–1880, 98.
The Deterioration of Skills

Because of their youth and inexperience, these young dan actors often had difficulty feeling empathy for the characters they played, but simply performed the made-to-order vaudevillian artistry that they learned from their masters. In the late Qing well-off patrons became the centre around which all theatrical activities evolved. In contrast to the scholar-élite, they focused less on theatrical artistry than physical beauty. As a result, Chinese theatre experienced a serious decline in artistry. There are many anecdotes about the mistakes of dan actors recorded in the huapu, as the very young dan actors were not well trained. For instance, Yang Zhangsheng noted the following:

Once a friend viewed a child dan actor perform a role in Cihu 刺虎 (Death of the Tiger General) in Beijing and noted: ‘Before [the heroine] kills herself, she shakes her false hair to unfasten her bun, but the fake bun fell off all at once. It is ludicrous to see the dan actor in a Court Robe [aristocratic women’s attire] while also wearing a queue [male hairstyle].’ Afterwards, in Chuangshan 闖山 (Battle in Front of the Mountain Bastion), a boy dan actor fell off one of his fake feet while running and to lean on the buffoon. The buffoon made fun of him, saying “I said we shall not use boy dan actors. Look, now I’ve become a babysitter.”

Subsequently, mistakes that had been tolerated by theatrical aficionados were no longer indulged in by the early twentieth century. Take, for instance, tiantou 拭頭, which refers to an actor’s false hair and/or head wear (e.g. crown)

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falling off by accident. In 1916, the famous jingju dan actor Yang Xiaoduo 楊小朵 (1881–1923) inadvertently dropped his coiffure, and decided to retire out of shame. However, such a serious fault by a boy dan actor was tolerated, which indicated the patrons were not really concerned about their acting skills. As a theatre aficionado, Yang Zhangsheng was shocked at the behaviour of the boy actors, stating, “what would Wei and Chen think of the current situation?”

Ironically, when Wei first became famous in the late 1770s, a lot of scholars criticised his flirtatious style of acting, whereas by the time Yang published his 1842 book, he looked back to the earlier period nostalgically, recognizing Wei’s superior acting skills.

Why were these patrons in favour of boy dan actors if they were artistically inferior? The answer, as Yi Lansheng 藝蘭生 indicates, was because of their beautiful faces. For instance, in his 1849 novel Pinhua baojian 品花寶鑒 (A Precious Mirror of Tasting Flowers), Chen Sen 陳森 (1797–1870) states that “what fascinates me is the [dan] actor, not his art.” Chen’s novel is a good indicator of the conversion of late Qing scholars to openly and publicly admire the beauty of younger dan actors. Initially, the scholar-élite attempted to construct a biased binary of beauty and artistic proficiency, arguing that the admiration of a beautiful face was confined to the uneducated but well-off patrons, who lacked understanding of the aesthetics of the theatre. However, the case of Chen Sen suggested that part of the scholar-élite now did not avoid admiring the dan actor’s beauty, rather than

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120 Yang Zhangsheng, “Menghua suobu,” 375.
121 Yi Lansheng 藝蘭生, “Cemao yutan,” 側帽余譚 [Remaining Talks of Leaning Hat], in Qingdai yandu liyuan shiliao congkan, 602.
122 Chen Sen, Pinhua baojian, 61 & 184.
his artistic ability. While Yang Zhangcheng still cherished the skills of dan actors during the reign of the Qianlong emperor, late Qing scholars reflected the patrons’ preference, i.e., a beautiful face. This is evident in the increased emphasis on beauty in the huapu; which, in turn, encouraged this trend as well, especially amongst the wider urban populace.

A beautiful face was a (if not the) central issue from the time of the earliest huapu, the Yanlan xiaopu (1785). While many of the dan actors in Yanlan xiaopu were not “young” in comparison to those in later huapu, the facial features of each dan actor were included in all the brief introductions. Those described as having a mediocre countenance included Zhang Liu’er 張六兒, Zhang Lan Guan 張蘭官, Zhang Rong Guan 張榮官, Yong Fu’er 永福兒, Yao Liu’er 姚六兒, Zhou Er Guan 周二官 and Ba Dazi 八達子 (7 out of the total of 51).123 By the time Rixia kanhu ji was published in 1803, the numbers of dan described as having a plain face were even less, with only 3 out of 82 described in this way (Zhu Baolin 朱寶林, He Shengming 何聲明 and Ge Yulin 葛玉林).124

Furthermore, in Yanlan xiaopu, the author was still afraid of the “flirtatious trend” derived from Wei’s West qinqiang, as it defied the Confucian moral codes.125 However, the ambivalent reviews in the book included a lot of erotic descriptions of beautiful dan actors, which in fact encouraged the “flirtatious trend” that they disapproved of. Thereafter, the influence of scholars over theatrical art faded. With the commercialisation of theatrical activities, and the increasing focus on making money, providing escorts to

124 Xiao tiedi daoren, “Rixia kanhua ji,” 76, 83 & 84.
125 Xiao tiedi daoren, “Rixia kanhua ji,” 19, 21, 31, 32 & 47.
well-off patrons became the main business for dan actors. As a result of this the new trend, dan actors were selected, educated or even cultivated in order to fulfil the market demand. Few if any late Qing dan actors were able to avoid this fate.

The Fate of Dan Actors and Nanfeng in the Late-Qing Period

What was considered to be a “beautiful face” for a dan actor? The discussions of this in the huapu of Qing scholars are rather abstract, making it difficult to determine what constituted beauty. For example, in Yanlan xiaopu it states that “Yin’er [Chen Yin Guan, a student of Wei Changsheng] looks like a peony.”¹²⁶ The terms used to describe dan actors were exactly the same as those used to describe female entertainers. That is, dan actors were classified under the same criteria as female beauties. The fair-skinned, effeminate teenage dan actors were the ones most likely to be favoured as boy courtesans.¹²⁷

Although the huapu do not give a clear indication of what was considered beautiful, it is clear that a common consensus emerged as to what constituted beauty, and those dan actors who met this criterion quickly became famous. The late Qing huapu also describe the artificial process that actors underwent in order to be transformed and meet this criterion, so that an actor who was not born fair and effeminate could be remade into the effeminate ideal. There was no scope for deviating from this ideal, so all dan actors were made to

¹²⁶ Here the reference is to a shaoyao 芍藥 (Chinese peony, or paeonia lactiflora). Wu Changyuan, “Yanlan xiaopu,” 18.
¹²⁷ Wu Cuncun, Homoerotic Sensibilities in Late Imperial China, 127.
conform to the same complexion, facial features, and behaviour in order to fulfil the requirements of the patrons. The process could be quite demanding on the actors. For instance:

The fair, beautiful face [of late Qing dan actor from the 1860s to the 1900s] could be artificial. At dawn the dan actor arose and had his face covered with a meat stock spread over his face...At night, the actor’s torso and limbs were coated a kind of balm, while his hands and feet were left free in order to let the “toxic heat” out. Months later, [the dan actors] became as fair and beautiful as lovely maidens.\textsuperscript{128}

Even though a young dan actor could be transformed into a “beauty” through this process, the future for these boys was limited. There were a few who escaped this fate, such as Zhang Lianfang 張蓮舫, who became famous when he was 13, then was able to free himself from his owner, and went on to cultivate his own students. Similarly, both Xiao Chan 小蟾 and Xiao Xiang 小香 were able to establish themselves independent of a master.\textsuperscript{129}

Unfortunately, the majority of dan actors were unable to achieve such independence. Mediocre actors were never able to become famous; while even those boy actors who were considered beautiful and became the centre of attention would find that their patrons would abandon them when they got a little older. The patrons were always looking out for younger and more beautiful boys, while those who were discarded often faced a future of poverty. As Yi Lansheng wrote, “There was a mendicant near Qianmen

\textsuperscript{128} Xu Ke, Qingbai leichao, 5012.
\textsuperscript{129} Yang Zhangsheng, “Xinren guijia lu,” 辛壬癸甲錄 [A Note of Setting My Heart to the Common Good], in Qingdai yandu liyuan shiliao congkan, 295.
Gate…who was once as famous as Shi Xiaofu 時小福 [1846–1900, the foremost qingyi actor].”

Therefore, the commodification of dan actors was facilitated by the social hierarchy. Even though the literati lost their influence over the theatrical world to well-off patrons after west qinqiang became more popular than kunqiang during the late 1770s, the status of dan actors did not change. They were still considered as being at the bottom of the social hierarchy. For example, although Wei Changsheng was the favourite of Heshen, once he was met “by a certain censor while on his way to Ho-shen’s [Heshen’s] house, and beaten like a criminal.” Obviously, rigid Confucian officials who held to a puritanical misogyny and/or homophobia still abounded in late-Qing China, so that even a senior bureaucrat like Heshen was compelled to perform a double-dealing masquerade. As Colin Mackerras indicates, “He wanted to appear as publicly hostile to the ‘obscene’ Wei, but privately was disposed very favourably towards him.” Although Wei Changsheng was enthusiastically favoured by scholar-officials and urban audiences, he was only a luxury plaything for senior officials such as Heshen.

With the rise of huidiao (Anhui folk musical form) in the 1780s, serving well-off patrons for social companionship or as a sexual partner became essential for a dan actor’s career, which reinforced the association of dan actors with nanfeng in late Qing China. Nanfeng was not identical with the

130 Yi Lansheng, “Cemao yutan,” 613.
132 Mackerras, The Rise of the Peking Opera 1770–1870, 93. See also Ibid., 138.
psychoanalytical conception of “homosexuality.” The most admired aspect of the dan actors was in fact their resemblance to “female beauties.” The desire of patrons for young, effeminate dan actors reflected this new development in nanfeng in the late Qing period. Unlike the scholars before the Ming-Qing transition, who were able to acquire troupes of actors or actresses, the Qing court’s ban on actresses meant that even those who might prefer a female actress/companion were forced to turn to dan actors instead. Some simply preferred dan actors on account of their interest in nanfeng, where more found that they had no choice but to shift to dan actors due to the lack of famous dan actress (and/or escorts).

The Qing aficionado’s “love” for effeminate boy actors was because of their resemblance to “female beauties,” while the ideal of female beauties was itself a kind of fabricated feature. Nevertheless, such features soon became the most desired attribute of the dan actors who performed the role of an escort for a well-off patron. In pre-modern China, the role one performed in any social interaction identified one’s fe/maleness. That is, fe/maleness in China embodies one’s social position. A humble dan actor was forced to provide sexual services to well-off patrons, and remained in the passive position even if he resisted the indulgence in homoerotic practice. The overriding preference of these patrons was for young and effeminate dan actors. Therefore, those actors who were escorts for well-off patrons were forced to follow the idealization of feminine beauty, even if this meant suppressing their true nature.
Nanfeng, or homoeroticism, derived from the archaic era of China, in which gender was in fact the reification of one’s social position \textit{per se}. This was similar to the ancient Greek convention, where, as Freud indicates, femininity was the essential feature of an ideal catamite.\footnote{Sigmund Freud, \textit{Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality}, trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1970), 10.} A \textit{dan} actor, born inferior, was feminized in order to cater to the demands of the well-off patrons and/or officials. As their “love” was a sort of flexible love for feminine beauties, a \textit{dan} actor was forsaken once his feminine beauties faded. For instance, the Duke of Wei, Ji Yuan’s \textit{姬元} (r. 534–493 BCE) love for his favourite courtier Mi Zixia \textit{彌子瑕}, an official of Wei, was fickle. Mi was the Duke’s favourite because of his beautiful face, but once that beauty was lost Mi was discarded.\footnote{Burton Watson, trans., \textit{Han Fei Zi: Basic Writings} (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964), 78–79. Bret Hinsch claims to have “corrected Watson’s error as to Mizi Xia’s surname.” See Bret Hinsch, \textit{Passions of the Cut Sleeve: The Male Homosexual Tradition in China}, 20–21, 181–182. In contrast to Hinsch’s view that the name should be read as “Mizi Xia,” I support the more common view that it should be read as “Mi Zixia.” Mi Zixia was formerly called Ji Mou, and Zixia was his courtesy name (i.e. Ji Zixia). Enfeoffed in Mi (a toponym), he took Mi as his new family name, and therefore was known commonly as Mi Zixia.}

Furthermore, the well-off patrons and/or officials were not held accountable for their behaviour, whereas the \textit{dan} actor was always seen as the source of any immoral behaviour—as was the case with the \textit{femme fatale} who was always blamed for the downfall of a court. Although \textit{dan} actors were favoured by people of means and privilege, they were considered as playthings or luxury commodities, not decent men.\footnote{Mackerras, \textit{The Rise of the Peking Opera 1770–1870}, 142 & 150–151. Furthermore, Colin Mackerras indicated \textit{xianggong} is often equated with prostitutes, specifically courtesans.} As a result of the
peripheral social status of male dan, nanfeng was conditionally tolerated in pre-modern China if it did not publicly violate Confucian morality, which remained central to patriarchal families. However, this does not mean that homoerotic attachment was admired. Nanfeng was seen as supplementary to family life, so it was tolerated only if it did not influence the functions of the family, such as, for example, procreation and filial piety.

Therefore, to think of ancient China as a Promised Land for “homosexuality” is inaccurate, and the term itself is problematic as it only appeared once Chinese scholars came under the influence of Western ideas. Following the fall of the Qing dynasty, Western ideas about homosexuality were increasingly adopted by Chinese scholars, which transformed Chinese understandings of nanfeng. Because of the historical association of male dan with nanfeng, this also transformed understandings of dan actors. Before Mei Lanfang first visited Japan, some Westernised scholars claimed that the dan actor, being a “stain” on China, should not represent China’s classical theatrical art overseas. Even following Mei’s two successful visits to Japan, these scholars still accused him of being “abnormal.” These issues will be explored in more detail in the next chapter.


CHAPTER TWO

Light from the West(?): The Recreation of Tradition

China’s defeat in the First Opium War (1840–1842) was a forceful demonstration to the rulers of the late Qing empire of “the existence of a wider world” that showed little or no respect for Chinese understandings of the world order.¹ The subsequent expansion of the Western presence during the course of the nineteenth century “contracted China from a tianxia 天下 [lit. “under Heaven,” the world] to a finite guojia 國家 [nation-state] in the world.”² It also began a process of Western learning, whereby some Chinese scholar-intellectuals slowly came to see the world through a different lens. This led to attempts to reform the imperial system, such as the Self-Strengthening Movement (Ziqiang yundong 自強運動) of the late nineteenth century, but these efforts failed to prevent China’s subsequent defeat in the Sino-Japanese War in 1894. Defeat to an unknown Western power was one thing, but to lose a war to Japan, which was seen as a vassal state of the Chinese empire, was something else altogether. In 1895, the Westernized Confucian scholar Kang Youwei 康有為 (1858–1927) and his younger colleague Liang Qichao 梁啟超 (1873–1929) coordinated 1,300 Civil Service examination candidates to present a ‘Ten Thousand word memorial’

(wanyan shu 萬言書) to the Censorate, an action which sparked the 1898 Reform Movement.³ This led to the drafting of a significant programme of institutional innovation. However, before any of these changes could be implemented, conservatives at the court regained power and reasserted the status quo ante.⁴

After the failure of the 1898 Reform Movement, Liang Qichao, “a brilliant scholar, journalist, and political figure” who was acclaimed by Joseph R. Levenson as “the mind of modern China,” began to argue the need for a much greater role for common people in public life if China was to have a future.⁵ Theatre, as the most popular form of public entertainment, was therefore seen as a crucial channel to introduce the wider populace to modern worldviews. The acclaimed qinqiang dan actor, Tian Jiyun 田際雲 (1864–1925), devoted himself to implementing “the Late Qing Theatre Reform” which Liang Qichao argued for.

However, after the New Culture Movement erupted in 1915, the “new” (or Westernized) scholars redefined jingju as an obstacle to China’s social and cultural change. The entrenchment of Social Darwinism amongst members of

⁴ Spence, The Search for Modern China, 223–227.
⁵ Joseph Levenson, Liang Ch’i-ch’ao and the Mind of Modern China (Cambridge: University of Harvard Press, 1959), vii. See also Tang, Global Space and the Nationalist Discourse of Modernity.
the New Culture Movement meant that they took a hostile stance towards jingju. It was seen to convey all the maladies of China’s past, and thus was an obstacle to the creation of a “new,” Westernized China. However, this ideological opposition to jingju was called into question by the success that the dan actor Mei Lanfang 梅兰芳 (1894–1961) enjoyed from his performances in Japan, the Soviet Union and the United States. Mei, the “Great King of Actors” and the best jingju dan actor of his time, was surrounded by a whole cohort of scholars who cherished the value of the Chinese tradition. This foreign fascination with what were seen as China’s “feudal” maladies undermined the self-confidence of the Westernizers, who saw themselves as the saviours of the nation. Meanwhile, Mei’s scholar-friends used this apparent Western endorsement of the value of jingju to redefine (or even reinvent) the art of its dan actors, who were portrayed as artists of what Stark Young called “ideal feminine attractiveness.”

Actually, Mei Lanfang, his scholar friends, and even the “new” leftist faction all shared in the sense of crisis that had emerged in the late Qing, which was related to their common concern about “the fall of Cultural China” (wang tianxia 亡天下). Thus, the tensions surrounding dan actors reflected

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7 The term of wang tianxia, or ‘the fall of cultural China,’ was first raised by the late Ming scholar Gu Yanwu 顧炎武 (1613–1682) in his Rizhi lu 日知錄 (Record of Daily Knowledge). According to Gu Yanwu, wang guo 亡國 literally means the fall of a court, while wang tianxia refers to a detrimental termination of China’s essence. Gu Yanwu’s fear of wang tianxia was related to the fact that the Qing, or Manchu “barbarians,” had overthrown the Ming, a Han Chinese dynasty, while in the twentieth century, the source of the “conservative” Chinese scholars’ fear was the West. See Gu Yanwu, Record of Daily Knowledge and Collected Poems and Essays: Selections, trans. Ian Johnston (New York:
the ambivalent condition of all Chinese born in early twentieth-century China. The power of the West was such that both the leftists who advocated Westernization and the conservatives who valued Chinese tradition now had to find their theoretical foundation in what was essentially a Western discourse. As Dipesh Chakrabarty argues, “The phenomenon of ‘political modernity’…is impossible to think of anywhere in the world without invoking certain categories and concepts, the genealogies of which go deep into the intellectual and even theological traditions of Europe.”

As the New Culture Movement developed, some scholars became more radical in their political views. The anxiety that these leftist scholars felt was an entirely understandable reaction to the unprecedented crisis that China confronted. Taking Chen Duxiu’s *On Literary Revolution* (1917) and Hu Shi’s *Tentative Proposals on Literary Reform* (1917) as its two manifestos, this movement was first projected within the literary world, but soon developed into a highly politicized programme concerning China’s social enlightenment and national (re)establishment. Despite having the term “literary” in both of its manifestos, the New Culture Movement’s ambiguous nature as much more than a literary campaign was obvious from the beginning. With their slogan “art for life,” the “new” scholars, as exemplified by Lu Xun (1881–1936), castigated Mei Lanfang as an example of its opposite, “art for art’s sake.” They labelled the latter “*Di san zhong ren* 第三種人 (the third kind of man),” a dismissive epithet given to artists who cherished art’s aesthetic aspects rather than life itself.

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than its realistic functions. This position is problematic for a number of reasons. Firstly, from 1913 onwards, Mei Lanfang actively composed a set of “New Plays in Modern Clothes” that revealed the dysfunctions of Chinese society. It was the leftist scholars who repudiated Mei’s attempt to assist their “enlightenment” agenda and who excluded the dan actors from their blueprint for the future of Chinese. Secondly, the New Culture scholars’ use of the “art for art/life” distinction was at times contradictory. For example, Fu Sinian (1896–1950) once criticized “art for art’s sake” as “formalism,” lacking “aesthetic value.” In his self-contradictory statement, Fu obviously equated the value of art with the extent to which it was focused on realistic affairs. As a result, what was called the “Problem Play,” based on a misinterpretation of Norwegian dramatist Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906), gained special appeal for the “new” scholars.

The image of Ibsen that was portrayed in twentieth-century China was based on a partial acquaintance with and fragmental knowledge of Ibsen’s oeuvre. Oscar G. Brockett (1923–2010) reminds us of a later Ibsen, whose “final plays…influence[d] non-realistic drama as extensively as the prose plays did realistic works,” yet the New Culture scholars, turning a deaf ear to these symbolic implications, remained focused on his earlier repertoire of realist “Problem Plays” with a strong motivation of social enlightenment. A

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Doll’s House (1879) and An Enemy of the People (1882) were considered the most significant pieces of Ibsen from this early Republican period, which had a far-reaching impact on modern China, rendering the theatre a politicised venue for conflicting discourses.12

A Theatre without “Feudal” Maladies

Radical scholars during the late Qing years saw theatrical revolution as a constituent of the broader social and political transformation they desired. This movement, which was later ratified in the official discourse of the Chinese Communist Party as Wan-Qing xiju gailiang yundong 晚清戲劇改良運動 (The Late Qing Theatre Reform Movement), was derived from and focused on societal (not just “theatrical”) transformation. After the failure of the 1898 Reform Movement, Liang Qichao shifted the focus of his mission to the nurturing of “new citizens” as the self-conscious foundation of a modern Chinese nation.13 Theatre, as a form of popular entertainment, was therefore selected as a vehicle to convey this new Western learning. The “old” repertory, which enshrined Confucian moralistic tenets, was to be replaced with a set of “new” dramas that would convey the modern virtues desired by the reformers. Famous dan actors like Tian Jiyun offered active assistance in this process.

Liang Qichao, “New Citizen” and “the Late Qing Theatre Reform”

and Winston, 1979), 336.
13 Tang, Global Space and the Nationalist Discourse of Modernity, 21–23.
The late Qing scholars who launched the theatre reform saw the theatre as a useful medium in order to address the social and political realities of the time. In the wake of the overthrow of the 1898 Reform Movement, Liang Qichao fled China and sought exile in Japan. Infuriated by the Qing court’s brutal treatment of his fellow reformers, Liang Qichao refuted the long-held notion that a “wise emperor and ministers” should be the saviours of the nation.\(^\text{14}\) Turning his focus instead to the common people, Liang argued that transforming these people into modern citizens (xinmin 新民) was essential for the creation of a modern Chinese nation. As he stated in his Xinmin shuo 新民說 (Discourse on the New Citizen, 1902): “In order to renew our nation, [we] have first to renew our people.”\(^\text{15}\) Liang believed that literature had an important role to play in facilitating this renewal. He envisioned three literary revolutions, or san jie geming 三界革命 (lit. “Revolution of Three Fields”: in poetry, essays and fiction). Theatre, which in late Qing China was classified as a form of “fiction,” fell within Liang Qichao’s pragmatic programme to reform the Chinese people. Whereas Confucian scholars had looked down on

\(^{14}\) Liang Qichao 梁啟超, “Xinmin shuo,” 新民說 [Discourse on the New Citizen], in Liang Qichao, Yinbingshi heiji-zhuanji zhi si [Collected Essays from the Ice-Drinker’s Studio] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1989), vol. 6, 2.

\(^{15}\) Liang Qichao’s term of xinmin 新民 did not imply wholesale Westernization. His intention was to absorb the useful and discard the useless aspects of Western learning. Liang attributed the flourishing of Europe to its awareness of nationalism, and an ambivalent sense of racism and social Darwinism overshadow his understanding this notion. Equating Euro-American nations’ hegemony to the inherent superiority of Anglo-Saxons, Liang argued that “Whites [Latins, Slavonians and Teutons] are the best amongst all the five ethnic groups; Teutons are the best amongst Whites; Anglo-Saxons are the best amongst Teutons.” Furthermore, Liang never wholly discarded his hope for “wise ministers” who might save the nation, such as Zeng Wenzheng 曾文正 (or Zeng Guofan 曾國藩, 1811–72). See Liang Qichao, “Xinmin shuo,” in Liang Qichao, Yinbingshi heiji-zhuanji zhi si, vol. 6; 5–11; 134; 178–179.
the theatre as a humble form of entertainment, and would seldom attach their real names to their theatrical creations, Liang Qichao and other “new” scholars started to employ this “humble” mass entertainment in order to transform the minds of common people.

The “new” reformists re-examined fiction’s social function and conferred on it a loftier, more respectable status. In his journal Xin xiaoshuo 新小說 (New Fiction), Liang Qichao published an article entitled “Lun xiaoshuo yu qunzhi zhi guanxi,” 論小說與群治之關係 (“On the Relation between Fiction and the Treatment of the Social Problem,” 1902), which announced the beginning of reform in the fictional and theatrical fields. In this he stated: “[If we] want to renew the citizens of the nation, [we] must first renew its literature,”16 repeating what he had already argued in his Discourse on the New Citizens about the consequential relation between literature, citizenship and the renewal of the nation. Soon afterwards, in 1904, Liu Yazi 柳亞子 (1887–1958) and Chen Qubing 陳去病 (1874–1933), two founders and crucial leaders of the Southern Society (Nanshe 南社), created the journal Ershi shiji dawutai 二十世紀大舞臺 (The Twentieth-Century Big Arena). In an article published in this journal that echoed Liang’s earlier arguments about the theatrical world, Ou Jujia 歐榘甲 (1870–1911), a senior member of the Southern Society, claimed that:

In order to reform the nation, we'd best first reform its customs; in order to reform its customs, we'd best first reform the plays. Hence plays...are the source of a nation’s waxing and waning...If we want to restore China, we must be focused on plays?  

Both reformers and revolutionaries in the late Qing period supported Liang Qichao’s call for fictional and theatrical reform. While all agreed about the social function of theatre and its important role in national renewal, they felt that the scripts of the extant repertoire inhibited the ability of theatre to fulfil this important role. This was because the plays, as vehicles of “feudal” maladies, could mislead the potential modern citizens who were the target audience for theatrical reform. Intent on eradicating these “feudal” maladies, the reformers criticized the “old” or traditional plays as corrupt vehicles for the new ideas they wished to convey. Liang Qichao identified four problems with the extant repertoire. These included a focus on the pursuit of fame and fortune (zhuangyuan zaixiang 状元宰相, lit. “Number-One scholar and Prime Minister”), an indulgence in love affairs (caizi jiaren 才子佳人, lit. “gifted scholar and beauty”), the admiration for forest outlaws (jianghu daozei 江湖盗贼, lit. “thieves in the river and lakes”) and the belief in superstition (yao wu hu gui 妖巫狐鬼, lit. “monster, sorcery, fox and spirit”). Other scholars such as

17 Ou Jujia 歐榘甲, “Guanxi ji,” 觀戲記 [A Visit to the Theatre], in Wanqing wenxue congchao xiaoshuo xiqu yanjiu juan, 72.
18 The functional role of literature was endorsed by other scholars, such as Jiang Guanyun 蔣觀雲 (or Jiang Zhiyou 蔣智由, 1865–1929) and Chen Duxiu 陳獨秀 (1879–1942, founder and first secretary of the CCP). See Jiang Guanyun, “Zhongguo zhi yanju jie,” 中國之演劇界 [China’s Theatre Field], and San Ai 三愛 (Chen Duxiu), “Lun xiqu,” 論戲曲 [On Traditional Theatre], in Wanqing wenxue congchao xiaoshuo xiqu yanjiu juan, 50–51 and 52–54.
Chen Duxiu and Wang Zhongqi echoed Liang’s concerns about the negative connotations in the current repertoire.  

To overcome these leftover “feudal” maladies, in 1905 Chen Qubing suggested playwrights consider topics such as the “unofficial stories of the Ming-Qing transition period,” in order to foster a sense of national identity amongst Han Chinese, or borrow recent stories from Euro-America in order to dramatize current issues.  

Chen Duxiu’s assertion also indicated the need for new scripts in order to provide educational momentum to the social movement for reformation and/or revolution. For instance, he promoted the “heroic” behaviour of Jing Ke 荊軻 (d. 227 BCE), who tried (but failed) to assassinate Ying Zheng 嬴政, the First Ruler of China (r. 246–210 BCE), as an example of someone who sacrificed himself for the country. Furthermore, Chen admired the use of the “Western means of oration” in the newly composed plays, as “it was informative for audiences.” These “orations”

Cited from Wanqing wenxue congchao xiaoshuo xiqu yanjiu juan, 18.


were long monologues delivered by the leading actor or actress in order to convey the social and political concerns of the author. They were designed to enlighten the audiences, and sometimes disrupted the flow of the plays. Whether or not such orations were a “Western means,” and whether they were “informative for audiences,” they soon became a fundamental tactic employed in a majority of new theatrical creations. While they fostered functionality they undermined theatricality.

Over-Estimation of Theatre’s Function

Chen Duxiu’s promotion of oration influenced a whole cohort of scholars. For instance, Liang Qichao himself began to write of a few plays, such as *Jiehui meng* 劫灰夢 (*The Ravages of War, Feb 1902*), *Xin luoma* 新羅馬 (*New Rome, June 1902–Nov 1904*), and *Xia qing ji* 俠情記 (*Romance of the Knight Errant, additional stories of New Rome, Nov 1902*), yet failed to finish any of them. In the Prelude to *Jiehui meng*, Liang included this oration:

Behold, were French customs during the reign of Louis the XIV [1638–1715] not like those of present day China? Fortunately, a scholar called Voltaire [1694–1778] wrote many stories and plays which awoke the citizens of the whole [French] nation from slumber. I, a paltry scholar, have neither the power nor the bravery [to save my country], nor am I profound enough to pass my thinking on to posterity. I’d better compose a small tale to entertain adults and children, the gentry and the common people, which is a little better than *Xixiang Ji* 西廂記 (*Dream of the Western Chamber*) and *Mudan Ting* 牡丹亭 (*The Peony Pavilion*).
Then I will have fulfilled my obligation to the nation.²³

Later in *New Rome*, Liang Qichao wrote about “the Italian Great Three,” Mazzini (1805–1872), Garibaldi (1807–1882), and Camillo Benso, conte di Cavour (1810–1861), as if he was the great poet Dante (1265–1321).²⁴ As with *The Ravages of War*, this also begins with a similarly styled oration. It is perhaps not a surprise that Liang never completed these plays as he had conveyed what he wanted in the orations delivered by Dante in the Prelude. The primary function of these plays was as vehicles of societal reform and/or revolution. Things such as plots, conflict, and individualised characterisation, which are normally at the forefront of theatrical works, became trivial matters, subservient to the didactic function of the orations of heroes (or narrators). When his narrator Dante claimed, “Today my Italy has already become a fully independent, first-rate, strong country,” Liang was in fact alluding to his hopes for a future China.²⁵

Therefore, none of the heroes in *New Rome*, Mazzini, Garibaldi or Cavour, and even the narrator Dante, were random choices. Dante is now venerated as the forerunner of the Italian Renaissance, while Mazzini, Caribaldi and Benso are considered fathers of the Italian nation. In this way, Euro-American stories became one of the foremost motifs of the late Qing Theatre Reform. Liu Yazi admired “the French and American revolutions, and the Italian and Greek

²⁵ Liang Qichao, “Xin luoma,” in *Wanqing wenxue congchao chuanqi zaju juan*, 518.
restorations,” yet lamented “the downfall of India and Poland,” and finally called on “the bell of freedom” in order to lift China out of its “feudal” maladies.26

Zhufu further considered the stories of several Western countries as ideal lessons for late Qing China: for example, the dissolution of Poland, the Jewish diaspora, American independence and the French revolution. He also admired stories about Western leaders such as Peter the Great (1672–1725), Metternich (1773–1859), the Great Three Italians, and Bismarck (1815–1989).27 However, as a representative of the generation of “new” scholars who occupied the transition between imperial and modern China, Zhufu’s formula embodies an intricate and contradictory blueprint of what this modern China would be like. He vacillated between liberalism and illiberalism, calling for an independent Chinese nation to emerge out of “the Heavenly Dynasty” and all its sufferings at the hands of the Western powers, yet still dreamed of restoring the China-centred world that was gone. These idealised histories of Western countries became a means to reimagine China as a modern nation, with the French Revolution, in particular, seen as a successful model that might be used to inspire Chinese readers.

Guo Songtao 郭嵩燾 (1818–1891), the Qing court’s first Ambassador to France, provided the most objective contemporary information about the place of theatre in the revival of the French nation after defeat in the

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Franco-Prussian War of 1870–1871: “As soon as the commotion ended, the state allocated 50,000,000 francs for operatic venues, and allowed an annual fund of 800,000 francs [to run these theatres].”28 Soon, however, the role of theatre in the revival of France was reimagined and magnified beyond Guo’s account. According to Zeng Jize 曾紀澤 (1839–1890), “As soon as the German forces withdrew, the French built grand theatres…the intention being to foster citizens’ courage to take revenge [for the losses for the war].”29 These accounts were re-constructed into an idealized instance of the important role theatre could play in social reconstruction:

After defeat in the Franco-Prussian War, the French financed theatrical venues in Paris, and portrayed [through these] the miserable conditions when German troops entered Paris. Audiences were deeply affected and thus France revived.30

Here, Wang Zhongqi attributes the main reason for the future resurgence of France to the role that theatre played in social renewal. Theatre’s social function was obviously inflated and even glorified in such accounts, which based themselves on a set of largely fabricated cause and effect relations. These zealous “new” scholars involved in the Theatre Reform had great confidence in the role that theatre could play in social transformation. They wrote 150 “new scripts” in the decade leading up to the 1911 Revolution, but

the majority of these lacked aesthetic value and were never performed, only circulating as texts within a small group of scholars. These scholars even wrote in the nanxi 南戲 (Southern Drama) format, a refined form which lost favour after the rise of folk theatrical forms around the mid-1770s. Before famous actors came to their assistance, the influence of the Theatre Reform movement remained confined to a small circle of late Qing scholars.

The Loyalty of Actors: From the Court to the Society

The late Qing scholars’ appeal for a new socially engaged theatre influenced only a small group of actors sympathetic to the goals of the reformers. By the end of the Qing, southern China had become the centre of the Theatre Reform movement. In October 1908, Wang Xiaonong 汪笑儂 (1858–1918), Pan Yueqiao 潘月樵 (1868–1928), and the Xia brothers (Xia Yueheng 夏月笙, 1865–1934; Xia Yuerun 夏月潤, 1878–1932; and Xia Yueshan 夏月珊, 1868–1924) established the first Western-style theatre, Xin wutai 新舞台 (New Stage), in Shanghai. In northern China, the movement was not as influential because of the dominance of the conservative Qing court. There were only a few who supported the movement, such as the famous dan actor Tian Jiyun, who was the trendsetter in Beijing.

31 These new scripts are collected in Wanqing wenxue congchao chuanqi zaju juan.
Tian Jiyun succeeded Shi Xiaofu 時小福 (1846–1900) as the Head of the Theatre Society (Jingzhong miao 精忠廟, lit. “the Monastery of Loyalty”) during the last decade of the Qing dynasty. Tian served as a Neiting gongfeng 内廷供奉 (Servant of the Inner Court) of the Court Theatrical Office (Shengping shu 昇平署, lit. “Office of Ascendant Peace”). During the 1898 Reform Movement, with the convenient access to the Forbidden City that this position gave him, Tian was able to deliver the radical material produced by the reformers to the Guangxu emperor (Aisin Gioro Zaitian 愛新覺羅·載湉, r. 1875–1908). After the failure of the Reform Movement Tian became a wanted man due to his alliance with the reformers, so he fled Beijing and lived in exile in the south of China until 1901. Later, after the fall of the Qing in 1911, the eminent laosheng 老生 (senior male) actor Tan Xinpei 譚鑫培 (1847–1917) restructured the Monastery of Loyalty into a new institution, renamed Zhengyue yuhua hui 正樂育化會 (lit. “Association for Orthodox Music and Moral Cultivation”), and Tian Jiyun served as its Vice-Chairman. The founders of the Zhengyue yuhua hui, which was still referred to as the Theatre Society, tried to shift the loyalty of actors away from the old Manchu court and toward the new Republican government, although many actors remained uninterested in this.

In 1912, Tian Jiyun proposed that dan actors be forbidden from acting as

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33 The Monastery of Loyalty (Jingzhong or Ching-Chung Monastery), at first commemorated Yue Fei 岳飛 (1103–1142), the Han “hero of the nation” who defended China from invasion by the Northern Jin. The Theatre Society selected the Monastery of Loyalty (in what is now Jingzhong Street) as an official site, and was therefore called jingzhong miao. The Qing court nominated the head of the Monastery, who thus had a kind of semi-official position.
xianggong, or boy courtiers. The newly founded Nanjing government accepted his proposal for the sake of social morality, calling an end to this practice. Tian argued that xianggong behaviour was immoral and that it “blemished our nation in front of the world.” A lot of young xianggong, including Mei Lanfang 梅兰芳 (1894–1961), were therefore released from their servitude to well-off patrons. The ban on xianggong re-emphasized the importance of the dan actors’ theatrical skills, since a beautiful face was no longer the sole criterion of a successful dan actor. The mastery of acting skills became increasingly significant once more, although the incentive for this change came from the role that theatre could play in improving social customs.

Aside from his attempts to improve the social status of actors, Tian Jiyun also performed in a play, Huixing nüshi 惠興女士 (Madam Huixing), that echoed the Theatre Reform movement’s goal of mass enlightenment. Madam Huixing (1870–1905) was a Manchu educationalist from Jilin Province, who in 1904 founded a modern educational institute for girls in Zhejiang, the Zhenwen nüzi xuexiao 貞文女子學校 (Zhenwen Women’s School). At the opening ceremony, she swore in front of crowd that “If I fail to sustain Zhenwen Women’s School, I shall die for it,” and then cut a bit of flesh from her arm. Unfortunately, the school soon ran out of funding. Madam Huixing

34 Zhang Cixi 張次溪, “Yan guilai yi suibi,” 燕歸來簃隨筆 [Essay of the Room of Swallow Returns], in Qingdai yandu liyuan shiliao congkan 清代燕都梨園史料叢刊 [Historical Records of Beijing Theatre during the Qing Dynasty], ed. Zhang Cixi (Beijing: Zhongguo xiju chubanshe, 1988), 1243.
sent a letter to the Manchu General Ruicheng 瑞澂 (1864–1912) requesting financial assistance but was refused. As a consequence, and true to her word, she committed suicide in December 1905. Affected by Madam Huixing’s heroic deeds, Liu Yizhou 劉藝舟 (1875–1936) and Wang Zhongsheng 王鐘聲 (1880–1911) dramatized her story and Tian Jiyun performed the play on 29 March 1906, both in order to memorialize her and also raise funds for her school. Hatano Kenichi notes that “Tian Jiyun dramatized the stories of Madam Huixing and played the heroine. Audiences admired [the charitable deeds of Tian], and therefore donated 3,600 silver dollars…to sustain the Zhenwen Women’s School.”36 Later, Tan Xinpei, who was known as the “Great King of Actors” (lingjie dawang 伶界大王) and who had at first turned a deaf ear to the Theatre Reform movement, offered assistance to Tian. This drew attention to the play and aroused greater social awareness of the movement, a goal that previously scholars had attempted but had failed to achieve.

In developing this story of the Manchu heroine Madam Huixing into a play, the Han Chinese scholars rewrote it to accord with their ideal of creating a unified modern nation-state. The actual beneficiaries of Madam Huixing benevolence were Manchu women. The reason she sought education for Manchu women was obviously to maintain Manchu supremacy over Han Chinese. The Han scholars understated the racial connotations of Madam Huixing’s behaviour, reinterpreting it in order to enlighten all women, not

36 Hatano Kenichi, jingju erbai nian zhi lishi, 258. It was reported in Dagong bao 大公报 (Ta Kung Pao) that the figure was 5,000 silver dollars. See “Xiju wenming,” 戲劇文明 [Theatre Civilization] Dagong bao, 16 May 1905.
just Manchu women. In so doing, the theatre was depicted as a carnival for all, in which the actor-audience boundary became blurred. As a report in the newspaper *Dagong bao* stated, “Amidst the warm ovation of the audience, someone in the southern auditorium started to wail. At that moment, everyone looked around, and some even climbed onto their tables.” In this wholly theatricalized scene, the actor affected a member of the audience with his performance; while, through his response, this person in turn became involved as an “actor” in the “performance.” This response was infectious, influencing first his immediate neighbours and then the whole theatre with his reactions to the performance. In this way, the theatre became a venue for the collective expression of the nationalist sentiments that had gradually accumulated following the failure of the 1898 Reform Movement.

The pragmatic aims of the scholar-reformers overshadowed Tian Jiyun’s career, although by collaborating with them he gained some recognition in official histories. Scholarly narratives drew a veil over Tian’s identity as a dan actor, a type of person who had been accused by the scholar-élite of undermining social morality, and portrayed him as a loyal friend of the late Qing scholar-reformers. However, Tian was first and foremost a dan actor, considered to be both beautiful (“as beautiful as a Celestial”) and skilful (“the holder of the ox ear”). Once Tian played the character Jiutian xiannü 九天仙女 (Celestial of the Ninth Heaven), and because of his beautiful face was called by the laudatory name Xiang Jiuxiao 想九霄 (lit. “Reverie of the Ninth

Heaven”), a term of endearment which meant he was considered even more beautiful than what they imagined a celestial being to be.\(^{39}\) These details, however, were absent in the scholars’ descriptions where Tian was portrayed simply as a flawless reformer. Obviously, in the minds of the “new” scholars, the erotic aspects of Tian’s identity as a dan actor were seen as contaminating his reputation as a reformer.

Not only did Tian Jiyun’s commitment to the Theatre Reform win for him long-lasting fame in Chinese history, all actors experienced a dramatic rise in their social status as a result of the movement. Yet, the Late Qing Theatre Reform Movement facilitated by the “new” scholars was in fact a social movement operating under the façade of “Theatre Reform.” With an idealized intent to build a Chinese nation out of all the dysfunctions of its “feudal” past, the leftist scholars tore the aesthetic and educational (ideological or teleological) aspects of theatre apart. This had a far-reaching impact on theatre and literature. From the onset of the New Culture Movement (mid-1910s), the notion “wei rensheng er yishu 為人生而藝術 (art for life)” was enshrined as an official rule of Chinese art.\(^{40}\) This meant that theatre became a forum for people to articulate their competing views about China’s future. The “new” scholars claimed themselves to be the more progressive, and distinguished

\(^{39}\) Ibid.

\(^{40}\) This was the manifesto of Wenxue yanjiu hui 文學研究會 (The Literary Research Society). Its antithesis was Chuangzao she 創造社 (The Creation Society), the banner of which was “Wei yishu er yishu 為藝術而藝術 (Art for Art’s Sake).” See Huang Sung-K’ang, Lu Hsüin and the New Culture Movement of Modern China (Westport, Conn.: Hyperion, 1975), 94–97. However, “art for art’s sake” has never been mainstream in China because of the deified status of the New Culture Movement and its realistic orientation.
themselves from practices they considered to be “feudal” remnants of a moribund culture, yet their “art for life” criterion was simply a modern version of Gao Ming’s 高明 (b. 1305) statement in *Pipa ji 琵琶記 (The Lute)* that “Drama without any concern for ethics is futile, even if it is well-structured.”

**The Paradoxical Prevalence of Male Dan in a Time of Turbulence**

Despite the confidence they had in their grasp of truth, the advocates of the Theatre Reform failed to create the new citizens that they desired in order to move China beyond the dysfunction of the present. Theatre was still saturated with the “old” repertoire which exemplified the so-called “feudal” virtues of loyalty, fidelity, and filial piety. After the 1911 Revolution, this movement quietly disappeared. Then, in the New Culture Movement, scholars imported Western-styled “spoken drama” (*huaju 話劇*) in order to replace classical operatic Chinese theatre. Although eminent *jingju dan* actors identified with this aspiration, they were still seen as a remnant of China’s imperial past and excluded from the New Culture scholars’ vision for the future.

*New Culture vs. Old Theatre*

The founding of *Xin qingnian 新青年 (New Youth/La Jeunesse)* in 1915 signified the beginning of the New Culture Movement. Using the journal *New Youth* as their forum, a coterie of self-styled “modern” scholars initiated a

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prolonged series of radical criticisms of China’s “feudal” past. These scholars were influenced by Social Darwinism (and later by Marxism), and advocated a linear worldview known as wenxue jinhua lun 文學進化論 (Literary Evolutionism), which assumed the “new” always had indisputable advantages over the “old.” Not only jingju, but the entirety of Chinese theatre, was dismissed as representative of the “old” culture, and therefore was allowed no space in their blueprint for the future Chinese nation.

Chen Duxiu, the Editor-in-Chief, launched two special issues in New Youth, one devoted to Ibsen and the other to “drama reform.”42 The former was an introduction to the “new” ideal of what was called the “Ibsenian Problem Play” (shehui wenti ju 社會問題劇), while the latter signalled a farewell to the inherited practices of imperial China. In the special issue on “drama reform,” Hu Shi 胡適 (1891–1962) and Fu Sinian 傅斯年 (1896–1950) used the New Youth platform to declare war on the followers of jingju, in which the “diehard” defender of jingju, Zhang Houzai 張厚載 (1895–1955), was presented as an imaginary enemy.43 Their criticisms were soon endorsed by others, such as the famous Zhou brothers, Zhou Shuren 周樹人 (or Lu Xun) and Zhou Zuoren 周作人 (1885–1967), Qian Xuantong 錢玄同 (1887–1939) and Liu Bannong 劉半農 (1891–1934), all of whom were major figures in the New Culture Movement. It appeared from the pages of New Youth that

42 The “Yibusheng zhuanhao,”易卜生專號 [Special Issue on Ibsen] Xin qingnian 4/6 (1918); and the “Xiju gailiang zhuanhao,” 戲劇改良專號 [Special Issue on Drama Reform] Xin qingnian 5/4 (1918).
43 Zhang Houzai was a famous jingju critic and also a final-year student at Peking University in 1919. As many of the New Culture scholars were on the staff at Peking University, Zhang was dismissed by the Vice Chancellor Cai Yuanpei 蔡元培 (1868–1940) for causing “offence.”
they had won the debate, although the reality was somewhat different. Despite their efforts to eradicate the “old,” jingju was to enjoy its apogee from the 1910s through until the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–45), and this was primarily because of the artistry of dan actors.

Hu Shi, the self-proclaimed “Father of the Chinese Renaissance,” developed the theory of “Literary Evolutionism,” which became the manifesto of the New Culture scholars. In this he argued that “Each era has its own [form of] literature.” From his Social Darwinist linear worldview, he suggested that a certain literary form “often has useless souvenirs from the past (yi xing wu 遺形物).” For instance, “Painted faces, falsetto voice, acrobatic skills, and stage movement”…are like “male breasts, where the form is maintained while the function has been lost.” Hu Shi argued that all such remnants of China’s past should be replaced with more “developed” resources from the West in order to save Chinese art from its “arrested” development.

This kind of thinking was widely accepted by the New Culture scholars, even if they knew little about theatre. For instance, Fu Sinian openly


confessed his lack of knowledge about both Chinese and Western theatre. Indeed, the majority of the New Culture scholars knew very little about jingju. Their hostility to it related both to its popularity and its role in preserving the so-called “old” culture. These “new” scholars portrayed jingju as a formidable leviathan that purveyed all the inveterate maladies of China’s past, and therefore renounced the late Qing scholars’ endeavour to re-functionalise jingju as a vehicle of new learning. Because of their fear that jingju entrenched Confucian moralistic codes amongst the wider populace and thus would set back their ultimate goal of Enlightenment, they determined to eradicate it once and for all. Their confidence was derived from a firm belief that Literary Evolutionism was a universal truth. The “new” or yang (lit. “ocean,” the Occidental) was believed to have an a priori superiority over the “old” or tu (lit. “soil,” the Oriental). Redefined in this way, as an “old” form of art, jingju became an obstacle to the future of China. With the West defined as “advanced” while the East (or China) was considered “old-fashioned,” the New Culture scholars redefined the dan actor as an emblem of China’s “backward” history, particularly as in twentieth-century Western drama men did not normally perform female roles. Thus in comparison with their late Qing precursors Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao, who befriended actors as fellow reformers, the New Culture scholars were more radical and iconoclastic.

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46 Fu Sinian, “Xiju gailiang gemian guan,” 322.
47 Whereas Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao still strove to find a new foothold for the Confucian saints in the new era, the New Culture scholar Chen Duxiu refuted the late Qing forerunners under a zealous manifesto of “Breaking the Confucian Store.” The whole of Chinese history therefore became a medium of “feudalism,” which was to be
A Celestial or a Devil?: the “Great King of Actors”

After the death of Tan Xinpei in 1917, *Shuntian shibao* (Shuntian Times) invited readers to vote for a new “Great King of Actors.” Mei Lanfang received 232,000 votes and thus became the third actor to be bestowed with this title. Mei’s success was allegedly due to the extensive bribery conducted by his wealthy friend Feng Youwei’s 馮幼偉 (1882–1966, Chairman of Bank of China 1918–1922). Whether or not that was the case, once Mei became the first *dan* actor to be conferred with this honorific title his career developed by leaps and bounds. In other words, Mei Lanfang’s increasing popularity as the new Great King of Actors showed how hollow were the claims by New Culture scholars about their “triumph” over the “diehard defenders” of *jingju*. Just as was the case with their late Qing precursors, the New Culture scholars failed to undermine the popularity of the “old/Oriental” forms of Chinese theatre.

From 1913 to 1918, Mei Lanfang was focused on rehearsing a series of plays called *Shizhuang xinxi* (New Plays in Modern Clothes), with the aim of enlightening the Chinese populace by disclosing the dark realities eradicated. Huang Sung-K’ang, *Lu Hsüī and the New Culture Movement of Modern China*, 8–12.

48 For details of the *Shuntian shibao* poll, see Chapters Thirteen and Fourteen of Mu Rugai 穆儒丐 (or Ning Yuzhi 寧裕之), *Mei Lanfang 梅蘭芳 [Mei Lanfang],* ed. Chen Jun 陳均 (Taipei: Niang chuban, 2012). While this biography of Mei Lanfang is not a serious work of scholarship, it does convey a great deal of personal information not available elsewhere. Mu first serialised this in *Guohua bao* 國華報 in 1915, but was forced to leave Beijing for Shenyang in 1916. After the book was finished in 1919, however, it was destroyed by Mei’s patron, Feng Youwei. But in 2012 a copy was found, which was then edited and published in Taiwan.
of their society. In all these plays, from *Niehai bolan* 邪海波瀾 (*Waves in a Sea of Sin*) to *Laoyu yuanyang* 牢獄鴛鴦 (*Love Birds in Prison*), *Huanhai chao* 宦海潮 (*Waves in the Sea of Officialdom*), *Deng Xia Gu* 鄧霞姑 (*Lady Deng Xia*), *Yilü ma* 一縷麻 (*A Thread of Hemp*), and finally *Tongnü zhanshe* 童女斬蛇 (*A Maiden Kills the Snake*), Mei Lanfang criticized dysfunctional aspects of contemporary Chinese society. The plays engaged with themes such as the illegal trafficking in and forced prostitution of women, the intrigues of officials, arranged marriages, and fatalism. These contributions to the enlightenment goals of the “new” scholars were initially well received. For instance, Fu Sinian defined Mei Lanfang’s new creations as “dramas in transition” (*guodu xi* 過渡戲), seeing them as a substitute for the “new” drama which was still far from mature.49 But by the mid-1920s, Fu Sinian’s moderate position was overtaken by Lu Xun’s fierce sarcasm.

Lu Xun, one of the *de facto* leaders of the New Culture movement, condemned Mei Lanfang and the entire Chinese tradition in which *dan* actors played female roles. In his typically vitriolic language, Lu Xun ridiculed Mei’s appearance in *Daiyu zanghua* 黛玉葬花 (*Daiyu Buries Flowers*), stating that “[Lin Daiyu’s] slender face should look like a TB sufferer,” while Mei’s face is “full and round.”50 Later in the same essay, Lu Xun satirized the Chinese tradition of using *dan* actors to perform female roles, ending with an ironical comment on what this says about China’s position in global culture:

> Men and women are meant to attract each other. Eunuchs are not our

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concern in this regard because nobody would fall in love with them; they are desexed...Female impersonators, however, come across as being most extraordinary because they don’t let us feel at ease. They appear to be the opposite sex from the perspective of either men or women. Men see in them an impersonated woman, while women see in them men who impersonate...This kind of complete artist cannot be found overseas...Our most enduring and most wonderful art is female impersonation.51

As David Der-wei Wang argues, Lu Xun sees the popularity of female impersonation as “an example of decadence,” or a threat to “the representational system of modernity.”52 But while Lu Xun’s antipathy to dan actors was indeed based on his frustrations about the nature of Chinese society, the primary reason for his critique was not, as Wang asserts, due to “a yearning for a strong, virile Chinese figure.” Equating dan actors with European castrati, Wang argues that Lu Xun saw “female impersonation as spiritual castration,” and thus attributes his sarcasm to the dan actors’ loss of masculinity.53 However, if we read the essay closely, we find Lu Xun’s hostility to Mei Lanfang (and to dan actors in general) was derived from a grievance over their “undeserved” stature in China. What infuriated Lu Xun was the insufficient attention given in China to the “enlightenment” saints, such as Tolstoy (1828–1910), Ibsen (1828–1906), Rodin (1840–1917), and

51 Lu Xun, “Lun zhaoxiang zhilei,” 196. My translation is based on that of David Der-wei Wang, “Impersonating China,” Chinese Literature 25 (2003): 133. Note, however, that Lu Xun’s essay was published in 1925, not 1928. Note also that whereas Wang translates 男人看见“扮女人,” 女人看见“男人扮” (nanren kanjian “ban nüren,” nüren kanjian “nanren ban”) as “Men see in them women and women see in them men,” I prefer “Men see in them an impersonated women, while women see in them men who impersonate.”
52 David Der-wei Wang, “Impersonating China,” 133.
Nietzsche (1844–1900). The New Culture scholars’ anxiety, as exemplified in this essay by Lu Xun, was because of jingju’s structural (or institutional) function. Despite the allegiance given by famous dan actors to the enlightenment project of the leftist scholars, and their attempts to renew the jingju repertoire in terms of Westernised virtues, they were continually spurned by those who saw themselves as defining the cultural parameters of modern China. In terms of these self-anointed “new” scholars, the dan actors were simply a cluster of ghosts that survived from China’s decadent past, and thus they were not entitled to a place in the cultural edifice of a “new” China.

Ironically, popular appreciation for the dan actors’ art was not affected by the “new” scholars’ criticism. In 1921, Mei Lanfang was elected the first of “the Four Great Dan Actors” (Sida mingdan 四大名旦) in a poll launched by Sha Dafeng 沙大風 in Dafeng Bao 大風報 (Strong Wind). This term had its origins with a phrase used to describe the four cabinet ministers of the Zhili Warlord Cao Kun 曹錕 (1862–1938), “the Four Guardians (Sida jingang 四大金剛).” Along with Mei Lanfang, the others elected were Cheng Yanqiu 程硯秋 (1904–1958), Shang Xiaoyun 尚小雲 (1900–1976) and Xun Huisheng 荀慧生 (1900–1968). These four dan actors were so popular that they overshadowed all other acting roles at the time. Not only were ordinary

55 Many current scholars mistakenly think of Shuntian shibao’s 1927 poll for “the Best New Drama of Five Famous Dan Actors” (Wuda mingling xinju duokui 五大名伶新劇奪魁) as the initiation of the term “the Great Four Dan Actors.” For example, Zhang Yihe 章詒和, Lingren wangshi 伶人往事 [Past Events of Performers] (Hong Kong: Mingbao chubanshe, 2007), 320.
theatre-goers swept off their feet, even some of the New Culture scholars began to reassess their previously critical judgements about jingju’s value. This infuriated the likes of Lu Xun, who launched a new wave of irrational censure of dan actors, who, he argued, had been befriended by “aristocratic” scholars and this type of public adulation threatened China’s future as a Westernized nation-state.

_Mutual Admiration: Discourses on Eastern/Western Values in Mei Lanfang’s Visit to Japan_

In 1919, at the age of 26, Mei Lanfang visited Japan at the invitation of Ōkura Kihachirō (大倉喜八郎 1837–1928). After the Meiji Restoration, Japan provided a new window for Chinese scholars to look into the West. Therefore, Mei’s success in Japan created a kind of tension back in China. Mei’s scholar friends saw his success as confirmation of the value of jingju, while their New Culture opponents were driven to even more radicalized criticism. This criticism forced Mei’s scholar friends to find new ways to assert jingju’s value. What we now think of as “the essence of jingju” (京劇本體 jingju benti) was in fact a result of this prolonged debate within Chinese scholarly circles from the late-1910s to the 1930s.56

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56 The Chinese term _jingju benti_ has been widely discussed in both Chinese and English scholarship. In China, the discourse about _jingju benti_ often reflects Chinese nationalism. Unfortunately, many scholars are not aware that _jingju benti_ is a social construction. For details see Zou Yuanjiang 鄔元江, “Guanyu xiqu benti lun wenti yu Ye Lang, Shi Xusheng he Li Wei deng xiansheng duihua,” 開論《戲曲本體論問題與葉朗、施旭升和李偉等先生對話》 [A Discussion with Ye Lang, Shi Xusheng and Li Wei about the Essence of Classical Theatre] _Yishu baijia_ 1 (2016): 199–203 and related treatises. Notably, in 2017, Fu Jin’s 傅瑾 project Zhongguo xiqu biaoyan meixue tixi yanjiu 中國戲曲表演美學體系研究 (A
In 1918, Ōkura Kihachirō visited Mei Lanfang in his Beijing residence and invited him to Japan. After Mei played in Ōsaka in 1919, fourteen Japanese scholars co-authored a book of essays devoted to Mei’s art, called Pinmei ji 品梅記 (Taste of Plum). All of the fourteen authors, including the famous China scholars Naitō Konan (內藤湖南, 1866–1934) and Kano Naoki (狩野直喜, 1868–1947), admired and defended the value of traditional culture. Naitō Konan remarked on how even the harshest critics would become devotees of Mei after just one look at him. Fuji Oto (藤井乙男, 1868–1946) and Okazaki Fumio (岡崎文夫, 1888–1950) both felt jingju’s stories to be naïve, but both praised Mei’s beauty.

Whereas Japanese scholars admired Mei’s art and jingju’s virtue, Mei acclaimed the Westernised Japanese theatrical art and announced that he would like to reform jingju artistry by learning from Japanese and Western theatre. Before he left Japan, he was reported in Osaki Asahi Shimbun as saying, “I think jingju lacks a connection to the present, as well as a consideration of

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57 “Plum” is the English translation of “Mei,” Mei Lanfang’s surname. So Pinmei ji, or A Taste of Plum indicates a critique of Mei Lanfang’s artistry.


59 Fuji Oto, “Zhongguo ju yipie yilun,” 中國劇一瞥一論 [A Glance at and Comment on Chinese Theatre], in Pinmei ji, 36.
Mei was obviously influenced by—if not anxious about—the New Culture scholars’ attention to Western realism. As he clearly indicated in the interview reported by the newspaper, his aim in visiting was to learn from Japan. However, the Japanese scholars who contributed to Pinmei ji found a great deal to value in jingju and advised Mei Lanfang to maintain its convention. As Kanda Kiichirō (神田喜一郎, 1897–1984) claimed, “Jingju] is an emblem of non-realistic art.” Naba Toshisada (那波利貞, 1890–1970) expanded on this point, declaring “The omission of realistic qiemo [砌末/切末, stage props] is the hallmark, as well as the life of classical Chinese theatrical art.” The need for realistic qiemo, in Kanda’s view, is a reflection of the ignorance of the audience. Suzuki Torao (鈴木虎雄 1878–1963) reinforced this point, stating that “qiemo and the use of contemporary costume, as Mei Lanfang mentioned in the interview, is not the core of classical Chinese theatrical art.”

Chinese scholars believed that the need for theatre to connect with its era was an “Ibsenian” demand, the central canon of which is “art for life.” Similarly, an actor’s “realistic décor and costume” was seen as a feature of “Western” realism. Thus, Mei Lanfang’s determination to learn from Western realism (via Japan) was partly a result of his desire to overcome the New

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62 Naba Toshisada, “Lingju manzhi,” 聆劇漫志 [Jottings of Listening to Mei Lanfang’s Dramas], in Pinmei ji, 98.
64 Suzuki Torao, “Guanmei zaji,” 觀梅雜記 [Jottings of Watching Mei Lanfang], in Pinmei ji, 50. Also see Pinmei ji, 68.
Culture scholars’ criticism of his breach of these canons of “Western realism” and thereby reinforce his standing in “modern” China. Therefore, Mei’s scholar friend Qi Rushan 齊如山 (1875–1962) fabricated accounts of Mei’s use of Western skills in Japan. According to Qi, Mei’s best performance was his role in the recently composed Tiannü sanhua 天女散花 (Heavenly Maiden Scattering Flowers), which he believed was a combination of the best of the Chinese and Western traditions. In contrast, most Japanese scholars disagreed with this position, believing the Qing play Yubei ting 御碑亭 (The Imperial Stele Pavilion) was the best among Mei’s repertory. The jingju aficionado Aoki Masaru argued that the new plays were superficial, not suitable for a sophisticated audience.65

This debate over the relative merits of the different plays in Mei Lanfang’s repertoire was an expression of the wider ambivalence over Chinese traditions and Western influences. It is difficult to determine whether the narrative of “combination” espoused by Mei’s supporters reflected a genuine commitment to integrating the two traditions or whether it was simply a result of the anxiety they felt over the powerful endorsement of Western criteria by the “new” scholars. Ironically, while these “new” Chinese scholars endorsed the Westernization of Japan, by the Taisho era (1912–1926) many Japanese scholars were deeply troubled by the effects of this Westernization. In his fierce satirizing of those Japanese who “think of Japanese and Chinese creations as inherently inferior to Western ones,”66

Kanda Kiichirō expressed a deep-seated fear about the extinction of the “national essence” (國粹 kokusui, ch. guocui). Mei Lanfang was probably well aware that his appeal was based on the tradition of jingju, but the trend of wholesale Westernization that had become mainstream in China by the late-1910s meant that neither he nor his scholar friends dared to resist this, even if their commitment to it was somewhat superficial.

The Japanese scholars who contributed to Pinmei ji confirmed the value of Mei’s artistry of jingju from their position in (semi-) Westernized Japan, but this failed to create a better environment for jingju in the midst of the fervour that consumed Chinese scholars during the early stages of the New Culture Movement. In 1920, Aoki Masaru sent Hu Shi a copy of the book Pinmei ji, and we know other prominent intellectuals such as the Zhou brothers came to know of it when they visited Hu, but the ardent leftists like Lu Xun remained impervious to its influence. During the 1920s and 1930s Mei Lanfang continued to travel and perform overseas, while back in China the “new” scholars reinforced their attacks on his art. Frustrated by Mei’s success in Japan, they initiated a new wave of fiercer condemnation. In response to

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67 After the Meiji Restoration in 1868, the manifesto of “Throwing off Asia” (datsu-A 脱亜) was in vogue in Japan. This trend worried a few Japanese scholars, who founded Seikyōsha (政教社) in 1888, facilitating kokusui hozon (國粹保存 “preservation of the national essence”) in order to defend Japanese tradition from wholesale Westernisation. The authors of Pinmei ji, a majority of whom belonging to “the Tokyo School,” considered Mei Lanfang’s jingju artistry as an expression of the national essence of China. As Kanda Kiichirō indicated, “Eastern art’s value is different from that of Western art. There is no need for it to [verify itself from] Westerner’s comments.” See Kanda Kiichirō, “Guanshang Mei Lanfang,” in Pinmei ji, 63.

this, Mei’s supporters were forced to develop new strategies to confirm (or reinvent) the value of jingju.

**Mei Lanfang’s Visit to the United States and the Reinvention of Jingju’s “Essence”**

In 1930, Mei Lanfang visited the United States of America at the invitation of the American ambassador Paul S. Reinsch (1869–1923). Whereas Reinsch’s intention was to enhance friendly relations between the two countries, the defenders of Chinese tradition saw Mei’s visit as an opportunity to reaffirm jingju’s value, which they had failed to achieve during his visits to Japan because of the intensity of the negative response that came from the “new” scholars. In *Drama Kings*, Joshua Goldstein argues that these traditionalists were pursuing a form of “justification and validation” of the belittled tradition through the equation of “National Culture=National Drama=Peking Opera=Mei Lanfang.”

**New Culture Scholars’ Radicalised Attack on Mei Lanfang**

In 1929, just one year before his American tour, a few hostile New Culture scholars censured Mei Lanfang in a radical and irrational way. Constrained by their Social Darwinist linear worldview, these leftist scholars predicted Mei’s failure. That is, his dan artistry, which they saw as a kind of “historically arrested” residual of China’s past, was sure to humiliate Chinese culture in front of Western audiences.

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In 1929, on the eve of Mei’s American tour, the journal Wenxue zhoubao 文學週報 (Literature Weekly) launched The Special Issue of Mei Lanfang in the hope that this would lead him to abandon what they believed would be a “humiliation.” Unlike the quasi-academic critiques of jingju’s value published in New Youth in 1918, the leftist scholars who contributed to this Special Issue of Mei Lanfang in 1929 displayed a more radicalised stance which reflected the increased anxieties of the “new” scholars. This was due in part to the “hail-fellow-well-met” panegyric that Mei Lanfang had won in Japan. After the Meiji Restoration, “new” Chinese scholars considered Japan as a window to the West. They were convinced that due to Japan’s acceptance of Western theories, Mei’s jingju artistry, which was an outdated, Oriental art form, would be criticised by Japanese scholars. Therefore, the admiration that Mei received in Japan had undermined the “new” scholars’ belief that jingju was valueless and would be shameful if performed in modern countries. In addition, despite its success in Westernisation, Japan was after all an Asian country. The “new” scholars considered the success of Mei to be due to the cultural similarities between Japan and China. However, the United States was a Western country with a distinct culture. The “new” scholars were afraid that despite Mei’s success in Japan, his performance in the US would definitely blemish China’s international reputation.

The Chief Editor of Literature Weekly, Zhao Jingshen 趙景深 (1902–1985), insisted that foremost criterion for all artistic forms was naturalism. Mei’s jingju artistry, which was “artificial,” failed when assessed against that criterion. According to Zhao, “Mei’s artificial, enforced and fabricated falsetto voice is not melodic in the least, but offensive. His tall torso and stiff
countenance are not attractive in terms of female roles.” Although their criticisms of jingju artistry were phrased in terms of the way it contravened naturalism, this issue became a collection of essays that did little more than abuse Mei Lanfang and all dan actors. The majority of the contributions were anonymous, and some were disguised under vitriolic pseudonyms, such as “Dao Mei 倒霉 (Bad Luck)” and “Jue Gen 掘根 (Root Out the Stump),” in order to curse Mei. For instance, writing under the pseudonym Xi Yuan 西源 (lit. “Western Source”), the New Culture activist Zheng Zhenduo 鄭振鐸 (1898–1958) was critical of Mei’s undue focus on guzhaung xi 古裝戏 (Ancient Costume Drama). But instead of commenting on Mei’s performance in an academic way, Zheng Zhenduo cursed Mei Lanfang using offensive terminology — “biantai ren 變態人 (pervert),” “renyao 人妖 (freak)” etc. Zheng and other fellow contributors to Literature Weekly relocated dan actors within a Western hetero-erotic axis, thereby censuring Mei Lanfang as a sinner who fostered the “abnormal” eroticism of Sodom. As “outlets of abnormal eroticism,” dan actors disclosed the “humblest lust of

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71 Of all the authors, “Xi Yuan” is Zheng Zhenduo, one of the chiefs of New Culture Movement, the Vice Minister of Culture in PRC after 1949; Qi Fan 豈凡 refers to Zhang Kebiao 章克標 (1900–2007), one of the founders of Shidai 時代 (Times) Book Company. Others are casual, for instance, “Bai Yun 白雲 (White Cloud),” “Yu Gu 雨谷 (Rain and Grain),” or insolent, “Dao Mei 倒霉 (Bad Luck)” and “Jue Gen 掘根 (Root Out the Stump)” et cetera.
Despite his hostility to the “perverted” dan actors, Zheng Zhenduo was also infuriated by his former colleagues in the New Culture Movement, including Hu Shi, Zhou Zuoren, and Qian Xuantong, who had reassessed jingju’s value and expressed admiration for Mei Lanfang. Considering himself to be the saviour of China, Zheng Zhenduo advocated discarding Mei Lanfang as the way “to save our nation’s artistry, and to save our posterity,” which echoed views Lu Xun had expressed in his *Dairy of a Madman* (1918). Haunted by a Social Darwinist belief in linear development, Zheng insisted China must follow the Western path and turned a deaf ear to other ways of establishing China’s presence in the world. The “new” scholars attempted to explain away Mei Lanfang’s victory in Japan through its cultural resemblance to (a backward) China. But if Mei performed in the United States, a fully Western rather than partially Westernised country (Japan), it was sure to lose China’s face in the world. But on the contrary, Mei Lanfang’s trip to the United States proved enormously successful.

*A Journey to the West*

On 16 Feb 1930, after a long journey on the Canadian Empress, Mei Lanfang gave his first public performance in the United States at the Forty-Ninth Street Theatre (on Broadway). His performances were

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73 In the comments of Xi Yuan 西源, Yu Gu 雨谷, Pu Shui 浦水 and Dao Mei 倒霉.
75 Mei performed a selected scene from *Qingwen si shan* 晴雯撕扇 (*Qingwen Tears the Fan*) for the Chinese ambassador at the welcome dinner he hosted after Mei arrived in
extremely popular, with $6 tickets being easily resold for $15 or $16 by touts.\textsuperscript{76} Despite the recession, New York was gripped by jingju fever. Mei quickly became a star because of his artistry. Before returning to China, he received two honorary doctorates, from Pomona College and the University of Southern California, in recognition of his artistry and as a contribution to Sino-American relations.

Aside from his mastery of jingju artistry, Mei Lanfang’s triumphant presentation in the United States was assisted by the efforts of a few scholars, especially Zhang Pengchun 張彭春 (1892–1957). Before Mei set out for America, Zhang and his colleagues carefully selected a repertoire, ensuring Mei’s performance would suit the tastes of a Western audience. They also produced several kinds of brochures introducing jingju in all its facets. The most important of them, Mei Lan-fang: Foremost Actor of China (1928), presented Mei’s history and artistry, and provided guidance on a set of aesthetic criteria that identified the right way of appreciating jingju.”\textsuperscript{77}

\textsuperscript{76} Qi Rushan, “Mei Lanfang youmei ji,” in Qi Rushan wenji 齊如山文集 [Selected Works of Qi Rushan], vol. 2, 46. While in a later section, Qi said it raised from $5 to $12 (See Ibid., 115). According to Zhang Pengchun’s recollection, it raised from $3.85 to $18. See Liang Yan, ed., Mei Lanfang yu Jingju zai haiwai 梅蘭芳與京劇在海外 [Mei Lanfang and Jingju Overseas] (Beijing: Daxiang chubanshe, 2016), 402. Whichever was correct, however, the ticket price for Mei’s Forty-Ninth Street première swelled dramatically.

\textsuperscript{77} As Qi Rushan recollected, the team curtailed the time, while acted several (often four) selected scenes of highlights in order to entertain American audience in a familiar
This brochure mentions “convention” four times as the aesthetic criterion, or “essence” of jingju, echoing a mid-1920s movement in defiance of the New Culture scholars focus on realism. In 1926, Yu Shangyuan 余上沅 (1897–1970), Zhao Taimou 赵太侔 (1889–1968), Xiong Foxi 熊佛西 (1900–1965) and Wen Yiduo 闻一多 (1899–1946) launched the National Theatre Movement (Guoju yundong 國劇運動) as a counter to the New Culture scholars’ favourite format of “Ibsenian Social Problem Drama” or what they also called “problem play” (shehui wenti ju 社會問題劇). They admired “fine art” and endeavoured to correct what they believed was the erroneous trend encouraged by the Westernised New Culture scholars. Zhao Taimou, for instance, found a kind of value from “jiuju 舊劇,” which, in the narrative of the “new” scholars, was a pejorative synonym for classical theatrical art:

There is a feature of jiuju: conventionalisation (chengshi hua 程式化)…Any art form, from its source, is formed by conventions.78

Scholars who valued jingju saw this as a useful formulation. In his Zhongguo ju zhi zuzhi 中國劇之組織 (The Structure of Chinese Theatre, 1928), Qi Rushan defined jingju “in defiance of realism,” stating that “any use of real

manner of the latter. Qi Rushan, “Mei Lanfang youmei ji,” in Qi Rushan wenji, vol. 2, 18–19. Whereas Qi Rushan declared himself in Mei Lanfang youmei ji as “the Chief Director of Mei Lanfang’s American tour,” the Chief Director of the Mei team was Professor Zhang Pengchun. Furthermore, Qi claimed himself as the author of the brochure. Actually, the first writer on the cover of the book, Mei Lan-fang: Foremost Actor of China (Shanghai: The Commercial Press, 1929), was known as G. K. Leung, an American-born Chinese. Qi was just one of its co-authors. See Ibid., 2.

78 Zhao Taimou 赵太侔, “Guoju,” 國劇 [The National Theatre], in Guoju yundong 國劇運動 [The National Theatre Movement], ed. Yu Shangyuan 余上沅 (Shanghai: Xinyue shudian, 1927), 15.
items is disallowed.” This was clearly influenced by the ideal of the National Theatre Movement. However, Qi Rushan obviously misunderstood the ideal of “convention” as set forth by Zhao Taimou. This undue focus on skill confined jingju to a kind of formalistic, or acrobatic art, devoid of dramatic elements. With his reductive understanding of the remedial intention of National Theatre scholars, Qi classified the essence of jingju as composed of two elements, voice and action, both of which had their origins in ancient singing and dancing. The problematic nature of this enterprise became evident before Mei Lanfang reached America. After reading the brochure, but before actually seeing Mei perform, critics like Robert Littell (b. 1935) and Gilbert Seldes (1893–1970) depicted the “conventionalised” jingju art as a kind of froth, or beauteous shells without any meaningful connotation.

In Mei Lanfang youmei ji, Qi Rushan boastfully listed his own work, The Structure of Chinese Theatre, as the main source material for advance publicity about Mei Lanfang’s American performances. In fact, however, it was not even completely translated. Whereas Qi claimed to have paid “someone for translating it,” the “someone” was G. K. Leung, the author of the brochure Mei Lan-fang: Foremost Actor of China, which was the main vehicle for advance publicity about Mei’s tour. Leung acknowledged Qi Rushan’s contribution to

the work, but listed himself as the main contributor to the brochure. This is credible, as his understanding of “convention” differed from that of Qi Rushan. The brochure reproduced some of the ideas that had emerged out of the National Theatre Movement, and repeatedly underlined Mei Lanfang’s jingju as a “conventionalized” art form. Different from Qi Rushan’s formalistic understanding of jingju’s convention, the American-born activist Leung denied that Mei Lanfang’s dan artistry portrays “a true picture of life,” which was “a realistic impersonation of the opposite sex.” In contrast, Mei’s performance creates an idealised femininity and shows “the very essence of realism;” namely, his performance portrays the essence (shen 神) but not simply the form (xing 形) of women. This description of Mei’s artistry was obviously more plausible, foreshadowing the American critics’ redefining jingju art and the wider Chinese tradition through Mei’s trip.

Repudiating any conception of Mei Lanfang (or the wider dan actors of jingju) as attempting to convey a realistic imitation of women, Mei’s scholar friends exemplified by Qi Rushan in fact assumed “realism” was a uniform canon in the West so as to redefine jingju as an alien form of artistry. Joshua Goldstein has described this as a form of “Tactical Orientalism,” or a practice of “Self-Orientalising.” In fact, Mei’s scholar friends’ articulation of the essence of jingju was a reaction to the New Culture scholars’ insistence on the need to adhere only to the criteria of “Western realism.” In Mei’s earlier visit

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82 G. K. Leung, Mei Lan-fang, note.
84 G. K. Leung, Mei Lan-fang, 16, 23, 27 & 42.
85 Goldstein, Drama Kings, 270; 276–277.
to Japan, his supporters defined the play *Heavenly Maiden Scattering Flowers* as a combination of “the best of the Chinese and Western traditions.” In contrast, by the time of his visit to the United States in 1930, they underlined the value of the *jingju* tradition, free from any influence of Western artistry. Foregrounding *jingju* as an “historically arrested” living antiquity, the self-anointed “Father of the Chinese Renaissance” Hu Shi considered “the newer plays of Mr. Mei Lan-fang”—for example, *Heavenly Maiden Scattering Flowers*—“reservoirs into which many of the older dramatic techniques and motifs are adapted and preserved.”

This Self-Orientalising was a reaction to the New Culture scholars, who refused to accept the earlier attempt to integrate Chinese and Western aesthetics. Despite Goldstein’s claim that Mei Lanfang’s American tour was, in essence, an “essentialising flip” through a “Western Orientalist gaze,” Mei’s scholar friends would obviously have had no need to “orientalise” *jingju* without the impact of the West. *Jingju* was just *jingju* for centuries before Western learning flooded into late Qing China, rendering the Chinese

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86 For more details see *Pinmei ji*.
88 Jiang Ji 江棘 (b. 1983) thinks that this “self-Orientalisation” by Mei’s intellectual supporters embodies “the confidence in tradition accumulated within the decade [1919–1930].” See Jiang Ji, “Minzu yishu huayu de yuejing zhi lu: Chongshen Mei Lanfang haiwai gongyan zhong de chengshi yulun,” *民族藝術話語的越境之旅——重審梅蘭芳海外公演中的程式輿論* [Chinese Traditional Theatre Arts in the Cross-Cultural Context] *Qinghua daxue xuebao* 1 (2015): 138–139. The English language title for this article is the one used by the journal. However, I belive it would have been difficult for Mei’s colleagues to have developed such confidence within a decade. Their “self-Orientalisation” was probably more a reflection of their anxieties.
89 Goldstein, *Drama Kings*, 277.
heritage out-of-date. That is, without a set of (factual or fantasised) “Western”
canons as a set of transcendental criteria, Mei’s supporters would not have
had to flounder about trying to confirm “what jingju is” and “what jingju’s
value is”, which now became “a concept and object requiring construction.”

All the suspicions of jingju’s acceptability for a Western audience
dissipated once Americans saw Mei perform. Mei performed seventy times in
his travels across the United States, nearly always to a full house. The
falsetto voice of dan actors was exotic for American audiences, yet they always
commented favourably about Mei’s artistry. While many admired Mei’s
feminine attractiveness, the leading American critic Stark Young (1881–1963)
saw beyond this surface level appeal to gain a deeper appreciation of the core
of Mei’s art, admiring Mei’s “ideal feminine attractiveness” as was conveyed
through his virtuosic actions. Insightfully, Young claimed that Mei created a
distinct “tradition,” which included all the constituents of theatrical art and
based itself on its music. He admitted that it had certain “conventions”—as
Mei’s scholar friends argued—yet denied Mei’s art was “without realism.” In
fact, the foundation of Mei’s art is life, or the actual world around oneself, as
well as the ideal world within one’s soul. Therefore, Mei never mimics an
actual woman, but rather creates or recreates one from an ideal world. Mei
displayed life via a set of skills (the “conventions”), yet developed these
through a form of “idealistic flexibility.” That is, he was free from the slavish
imitation of the actual world. Mei Lanfang, as Young indicated, attained an

90 Goldstein, Drama Kings, 271.
92 Stark Young, “Mei Lan-fang,” in Theatre Arts on Acting, ed. Laurence Senelick, 175 &
178–179.
access to “inner reality,” through the renunciation of simple imitation. In contrast to Qi Rushan, who differentiated Chinese theatre from modern Western forms, the idea of Stark Young was similar to G. K. Leung’s theory that jingju artistry displayed “the very essence of realism.” Young’s idea that Mei’s jingju performance extracted a type of highly idealised feminine personality from real life has largely influenced the way Chinese scholars came to think about the value of jingju.

However, the fact that Mei Lanfang was widely acclaimed by American audiences did not dispel the hostile attitude of “new” scholars towards male dan. In 1933, under the title of “Zui yishu de guojia” (The Most Artistic Nation”), we find Lu Xun reiterating the ironic critique of male dan that he made in On Photography and the Like (1924), which displayed the “new” scholar’s persistent hostility to jingju dan actors such Mei Lanfang:

Our enduring and most wonderful “art” is female impersonation. The value of this art lies in its attraction to both sides, or what can be called zhongyong 中庸 (Moderation)—Men see in them an impersonated woman, while women see in them a man who impersonates.94

In this essay, Lu Xun vitriolically satirised male dan, who attempted to please both sides by means of their ambiguity. In fact, this essay was a critique of the Guomindang’s Election Act, which, in essence, was a reformulation of the Civil Service Examination. However, Lu Xun used male dan as a metaphor for the deceitful Act, in order

to show that it was not real, as with a male dan who was not a real woman:

However, the Republic has fallen into a state of disrepair. The plaque of it has flaked off, as with the blusher on the cheeks of a senescent male dan actor.\textsuperscript{95}

Indeed, Lu Xun was criticising the Election Act, but when he figuratively constructed a parallelism of the fraudulent Act with male dan he displayed his preconceived prejudice against male dan, who he saw as little more than fake women. They imitated women by means of affectedly histrionic behaviour, but lacked real feminine beauty.

Lu Xun also accused Mei Lanfang of killing jingju through his excessive focus on Ancient Costume Drama, or guzhuang xi, which, he argued, was “a nail in jingju’s coffin.” According to Lu Xun, “the élite class often seize folk things…once seized, these things will wither.” Mei Lanfang, for example, “performed [extant] scripts, while now new scripts are written for him, reinventing Mei for the officials’ taste. [His guzhaung xi are] indeed fairly refined. However, ordinary people fail to understand, or even feel ‘ineligible’ to enjoy Mei’s new repertory.”\textsuperscript{96} Lu Xun’s is guilty here of a double standard. During the Qing dynasty, jingju was folk theatre and only became more refined as a result of scholars’ participation from the late 1920s onwards. However, during the New Culture Movement in the mid-1910s, Lu Xun’s New Culture coterie criticised jingju as an example of “aristocratic” literature. By the time he wrote “The Most Artistic Nation” in the 1930s, Lu Xun declared jingju to be overly refined, having lost its roots in “folk literature”

\textsuperscript{95} Lu Xun, “Zui yishu de guojia,” in \textit{Lu Xun quanji}, vol. 5, 91.
\textsuperscript{96} Lu Xun, “Lüelun Mei Lanfang ji qita,” in \textit{Lu Xun quanji}, vol. 5, 609.
and also its vitality. If Lu admitted that jingju had its roots in folk literature, then it was contradictory for his New Culture coterie to claim that jingju reflected aristocratic tastes and should be eradicated for the sake of the Chinese nation-state. This discrepancy made Lu Xun’s and the New Culture scholars’ criticism of jingju and male dan somewhat contradictory, revealing an underlying cultural strategy to reform Chinese culture. Ironically, in contrast to Lu Xun’s satire, ordinary Chinese people hardly felt Mei’s new creations of guzhuang xi to be “aristocratic,” or confusing. Tiannü sanhua, the most tailor-made play by Mei Lanfang, was welcomed by all audiences.

The experience of dan actors from the last decade of the nineteenth century through into the first half of the twentieth century reflected the cultural anxieties of all scholars—“new” and “old.” With an intention to “enlighten” Chinese people and thereby to reconstruct a modern, Western-style nation-state, “new” scholars attempted to turn the theatre, in a reductive way, into a politicised forum for successive reformist/revolutionary doctrines.97 After the 1898 Reform Movement, Liang Qichao focused on the social function of theatre when he launched the late Qing theatre reform movement in order to rid China from its long entrenched Neo-Confucian morality and spread Western learning. In 1915, a group of more radical scholars launched the New Culture Movement. Although the New Culture scholars also endorsed the function of vernacular literature, including theatre,

in enlightening Chinese society, they based their theatrical activity on a type of Ibsenian “problem play.” In contrast, Chinese theatre was redefined as a vehicle for the “feudal” heritage of China’s past, something to be eradicated from the newly founded nation-state. The New Culture scholars shared with their opponents, the defenders of Chinese tradition, an anxiety over “the fall of Cultural China” (wang tianxia). Where they differed was in their views about whether the heritage from China’s imperial past as to be integrated into its future as a Western-style nation-state.

This conflict over the place of the past in a future China initiated a prolonged struggle during the Republican period over jingju’s value. In response to the dissenting discourse that emerged from Mei Lanfang’s performances overseas, his supporters reinvented a narrative of “the essence of jingju,” largely by means of self-Orientalising its artistry into a heterogenetic form of Eastern art. In the light of Stark Young’s perceptive comments, the Chinese jingju connoisseurs finalised their description of Mei Lanfang’s jingju artistry as an embodiment of “ideal femininity,” to which “Western realistic” criteria were not applicable. In 1935, when Russian scholars attempted to submerge jingju within the structures of “formalism,” Zhang Pengchun, the director of the Mei’s entourage during his tour of the Soviet Union, dismissed this as a misinterpretation of “the essence of jingju.” Taking Chinese painting as an example, Zhang defended Mei’s artistry as conveying the spirit of classical Chinese art. Rather than an ostentatious display of his prowess, Mei Lanfang applied these stylised skills to break through the limits of realism, thereby creating an ideal femininity. While he might employ a set of formalised skills, as an outstanding jingju artist, Mei
was obviously able to produce individualised features.98

This articulation of the nature of jingju was a significant correction to Qi Rushan’s vulgarised understanding of it as a superficial artistic form, and also defined itself against the “socialist realism” that prevailed in the Soviet Union by the time of Mei Lanfang’s visit there.99 While guaranteeing jingju’s survival during the first half of the turbulent twentieth century, the self-reinventing of jingju was primarily a response to the influx of new theatrical forms and the criticisms of those who supported these new forms. Once Stark Young proposed the essence of dan artistry as the portrayal of “ideal femininity,” interpreting just what this “ideal” femininity was became a focus of attention for both scholars and dan actors. After all, if it is agreed that “masculinity” and “femininity” are to a large extent social constructions, all that Mei and his supporters did to develop the performance and to enrich the repertoire of jingju throughout the 1910–30s was a continuous attempt to reinvent the criteria of “ideal femininity.”

CHAPTER THREE

Reinventing Disciplinary Femininity: Traditions and Innovations of Male Dan Actors

Male dan actors had returned to the limelight and attained their pinnacle of success on the Chinese stage during the period from the 1910s to the late 1930s. That they were able to do this, despite censure from leftist scholars, was due primarily to the efforts of a cluster of eminent dan actors, exemplified by Mei Lanfang 梅蘭芳 (1894–1961), who developed their performance skills and enriched the repertoire of the dan role-category in order to meet the demands of a growing audience amongst the urban populace. As a result, laosheng 老生 (elderly male role) performers lost favour with audiences.

Arguably the best laosheng performer of his time, Tan Xinpei 譚鑫培 (1847–1917) was known as “the Great King of Actors” (lingjie dawang 伶界大王) for his mastery of jingju artistry. However, by the end of the 1910s, he felt that he was “no longer as celebrated a male actor as Mei Lanfang, nor as admired as the female actress Liu Xikui 劉喜奎 (1894–1964).”

The first section of Chapter Three examines the process whereby dan actors drew upon elements from Ming and Qing élite theatre in order to enhance “theatrical reality” (xiju zhenshi 戲劇真實), thereby heightening the

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artistic value of jingju.\(^2\) With the assistance of scholarly theatrical connoisseurs, the dan actors created a new tradition within jingju during the Republican period. In contrast to kunju 崑劇 (or Kunqu Opera), an artistic form polished by and popular amongst the scholar élite class, jingju arose from folk society and its dramatic texts were in some respects less refined. Despite its increasing appeal amongst the urban populace, an excessive focus on skills had vulgarised jingju so that it was little more than an ostentatious vaudevillian performance that lacked emotional truth and psychological depth. Working with their supporters amongst the educated élite, dan actors, exemplified by the so-called “Great Four,” revived the lost theatricality of jingju by absorbing the aesthetics of character development from Ming and Qing playwrights. In this way, dan actors raised the aesthetic level of jingju, thereby making a lasting contribution to its artistry.

As is discussed in Sections Two and Three, developing notions of modern femininity influenced the nature of dan artistry. The second section analyses new plays written by scholars for dan actors from the 1910s onwards. Many martial female characters were created in order to embody the cultural construction of the self-contained, rebellious “new woman.” However, these heroines were conceived in fairly conventional terms, notwithstanding this veneer of the “new” woman. These female characters were still confined by a Confucian order that relegated women to domestic duties and familial service. The third section analyses the development of vocal performance and

\(^2\) This term “theatrical reality” (xiju zhenshi 戲劇真實) is often used to refer to Ming-Qing theatre. See, for instance, Du Shuying 杜書瀛 “Li Yu lun xiju zhenshi,” 李漁論戲劇真實 [Li Yu’s Discussion of Theatrical Reality] Wenxue yichan 1 (1980): 79–92.
make-up techniques in the dan category. These interwove a delicate and
demure femininity into the new characters, which still adhered in some
respects to Confucian patriarchy.

As “the Great King of Actors,” Mei Lanfang’s performances during his
overseas visits impressed many foreign commentators, thereby gaining a
world-wide reputation for himself and for jingju. For his supporters amongst
the educated élite, Mei’s overseas tours functioned both as a validation of
jingju’s value and as a means to construct a narrative about “the essence of
jingju” (jingju benti 京劇本體) that was based on Western responses to the
leading dan actors.3 The American critic Stark Young contributed
fundamentally to this by considering Mei Lanfang’s performances as not
simply an “attempt to represent a woman” but to portray a type of “ideal
femininity” through discovering and recreating “certain essential
qualities...to present a figure, secure in its feminine attributes and
persuasion.”4 How shall we define this “ideal femininity?” Is it fixed or fluid,
closely following developments taking place in the society? If we accept the
more contemporary notion that “femininity” is not an a priori entity but a
social construct, the dan actors’ attempts to reform jingju were in fact
conveying their élite supporters’ understanding of an “ideal femininity,”
beneath which a set of sociocultural and/or sociopolitical criteria was lurking.

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3 Traditionalists in the Republican era were pursuing a form of “justification and
validation” of Chinese tradition through an imaginary equation of “National
Culture=National Drama=Peking Opera=Mei Lanfang.” Joshua Goldstein, Drama Kings:
Players and Publics in the Re-Creation of Peking Opera 1870–1937 (Berkeley: University of
4 Stark Young, “Mei Lan-fang,” in Theatre Arts on Acting, ed. Laurence Senelick (London:
Whether they were aware of this or not, the leading Republican *dan* actors interwove an image of the “ideal Republican woman” through parodic refraction.

**The Reinvention of Tradition: Male *Dan* Actors, Scholars and the Refinement of Folk Theatre**

Today it is widely accepted in China that Chinese theatre and modern Western theatre are completely different artistic forms because they derived from two distinct cultures. As a result, theoretical interpretations of Western theatre, especially those of Konstantin Stanislavski, are seen as threats to the purity of Chinese theatre, and therefore inapplicable in the Chinese context. However, the “Stanislavskian” artistic criterion of emotional truth was integral to élite theatre in pre-modern China. It was lost in the early stages of *jingju* performance due to an excessive focus on vaudevillian and acrobatic skills. In the early twentieth-century, however, in conjunction with their intellectual supporters, male *dan* actors developed a better way to portray people’s emotions and in so doing raised the artistic value of *jingju*.

**The Scholarly Influence on Folk Theatre**

Early in the 1950s, when describing peasant society, Robert Redfield conceived a dualistic framework of two traditions, the “Great Tradition” and “Little Tradition.” Profoundly influenced by Redfield, Li Yiyuan 李亦園 (b. 1931) believes that this framework can be transplanted equally well to

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premodern China. “There were two kinds of cultural forms in traditional China,” Li argues, “the ‘Refined Culture’ of the gentry, which can be classified as the ‘Great Tradition’; and the ‘Folk Culture’ of peasant society, which can be considered as the ‘Little Tradition’.” These two traditions intersected. According to Wang Yuanhua 王元化 (1920–2008), “Ordinary people received the Great Tradition via the Little Tradition.” Wang argues that jingju, a representative of the Little Tradition, was the carrier of the Great Tradition for over a century. Chinese peasants, he argues, did not absorb Neo-Confucian orthodoxy from the reading classical texts, but rather learnt these ideas by osmosis through forms of mass entertainment, as exemplified by jingju.

The Great Tradition’s influence on the Little Tradition is not confined to the sociopolitical level as the carrier of Neo-Confucian orthodoxy. In the artistic field, it fostered the refinement of jingju as well. In the theatrical world, the clearest articulation of the Great Tradition was kunju. While this dramatic form had lost its popularity by the end of High Qing, the Great Tradition was never eliminated from the theatrical domain. From the late Qing onwards, dan actors began to reform jingju by absorbing the tastes of scholar playwrights when composing new plays and revising old ones. This increasing influence from scholars shifted jingju away from its perceived rustic orientation toward

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6 Li Yiyuan 李亦園, “Cong minjian wenhua kan wenhua Zhongguo,” 從民間文化看文化中國 [Cultural China from the Perspective of Popular Culture], in Li Yiyuan zixuan ji 李亦園自選集 [Self-Selected Works of Li Yiyuan] (Shanghai: Shanghai jiaoyu chubanshe, 2002), 227.
8 On this see also Tanaka Isssei, “Ming-Qing Local Drama,” in David Johnson, Andrew Nathan, and Evelyn Rawski, eds. Popular Culture in Late Imperial China (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 143–160.
a more refined artistic level by transplanting the traditional Chinese aesthetic rooted in *kunju* into *jingju* practice. The group of scholars known as “the Mei Clique” offered financial, clerical and especially artistic/aesthetic assistance to Mei Lanfang.⁹ Mainly raised in traditional intellectual families and educated overseas, the Mei Clique had refined aesthetic sensibilities. They soon modified the existed repertoire and created a new corpus for Mei.

Lu Xun 魯迅 (1881–1936), the most prominent of the leftist scholars in Republican China, satirised Mei Lanfang’s refinement of *jingju* artistry and enrichment of its repertoire, classifying the Mei Clique in his caustic manner as old-fashioned scholar-officials (*shi dafu* 士大夫).¹⁰ While Lu Xun felt that it was improper for *jingju*, a Little Tradition, to absorb the refined tastes of the élite class, few artistic forms develop by staying rustic forever. Historically, *jingju* had been a form of folk theatre before it was refined by the scholar-élite from the 1910–1920s onwards. To begin with, *jingju* practitioners had focused not on entertaining the scholar-élite but rather on building a broad urban audience through the use of vaudevillian skills and melo-dramatic stories. The success of this strategy resulted in an excessive focus on vaudevillian and acrobatic skills, and a concomitant lack of capacity for effectively conveying emotion. Despite Lu Xun’s objection to the refinement of *jingju*, the new development in fact raised the aesthetic value of *jingju* by laying more

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⁹ Formed in the late 1910s, the Mei Clique was a group of scholars, including but not limited to Feng Gengguang 馮耿光 (1882–1966), Li Shikan 李釋戡 (1888–1961), Wu Zhenxiu 吳震修 (1883–1966), Qi Rushan 齊如山 (1875–1962).

emphasis on conveying the emotional and psychological depth of characters, as was the case in élite theatre.

Revitalising Emotional and Psychological Depth in Jingju

A few contemporary Chinese scholars and jingju practitioners, for example Zou Yuanjiang 鄒元江, see realism as a Western import that has the potential to undermine “the essence of jingju.” However, despite Chinese theatre’s stylised features, the pursuit of “theatrical reality” was a legacy of élite theatre, as exemplified by nanxi, chuanqi and kunju. Although this was absent from jingju in its earlier days due to its excessive focus on vaudevillian and acrobatic skills, the reforms initiated by the Republican-era dan actors and their supporters amongst the educated élite raised the artistic value of jingju to a new level.

The focus on “theatrical reality” has some similarities to the Stanislavskian notion of emotional truth. However, it is not simply an artistic import, but has long been part of Chinese aesthetics. The Ming playwright Tang Xianzu 湯顯祖 (1550–1616) emphasised that “true emotion” (zhengqing 真情) is the primary principle in the dramaturgy of chuanqi plays. For example, due to her true love for Liu Mengmei 柳夢梅, Du Liniang 杜麗娘, the heroine of the play The Peony Pavilion, has the ability to cross the divide between this world and the world beyond, and she is finally allowed to return from the

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afterworld in order to marry Liu. That someone is able to travel freely between the worlds of life and death does not accord with our common understanding, however it makes sense in its own fictional context, in which true emotion outweighs the laws of nature. Qing playwrights such as Li Yu 李漁 (1611–80) endorsed this emphasis on “true emotion.” “The emotions of people and the rationality of things” (renqing wuli 人情物理) is a fundamental concept for Li Yu and is central to his theatrical philosophy. Li argued that good scripts should “Transcend the situations of ordinary life, yet remain within the emotional landscape of people and the rationality of things.”¹² A story would not be interesting if it is just commonplace, yet it also cannot be so fantastic as to be unbelievable. It should still concentrate, as Li Yu suggested, on “isolation and reunion, joy and sorrow, which are fundamental emotions of humankind.”¹³

The greater concentration on “theatrical reality” began during the late Qing, as a result of the efforts of Wang Yaoqing 王瑤卿 (1881–1954) and his disciples. In the traditional jingju play Ernü yingxiong zhuan 女子英雄傳 (The Story of Heroines), the chivalric heroine He Yufeng 何玉鳳 lifts a big stone in order to flaunt her mastery in martial arts. As the stone is just a paper prop, the dan actors in the past lifted it effortlessly. In contrast, Wang pulled it slowly up from the floor, carried it in his arms, and finally lifted it over his head. Wang argued that while the stone was just a paper prop, “we should

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¹² Li Yu 李漁, “Xiangcao ting chuanqi xu,” 香草亭傳奇序 [Preface to the Chuanqi of the Fragrant Grass Pavilion], in Li Yu quanji 李漁全集 [The Complete Works of Li Yu], vol. 1, 47. The original Chinese text is “既出尋常視聽之外，又在人情物理之中.”

convince ourselves that it is fifty kilos.” In terms of the Ming and Qing scholar élites’ doctrine of “emotion,” the innovations initiated by Wang Yaoqiang and followed by his disciples were not a violation of so-called “traditional beliefs,” but indicated their return after a long absence during the earlier days of jingju. Through revitalising the long-lost criterion of “theatrical reality,” Republican dan actors did better in conveying the emotion of the heroines, thereby heightening the theatricality of the jingju plays.

During the period of the “Great Four,” actor-scholar interactions become more common, thereby illuminating new refinements in the dan category, as, for instance, with Mei Lanfang and “the Mei Clique” led by Feng Gengguang (1882–1966), Cheng Yanqiu 程硯秋 (1904–58) and his scholar-supporter Luo Yinggong 羅癭公 (1872–1924), Shang Xiaoyun 尚小雲 (1900–76) and his supporter Zhuang Qingyi 莊清逸 (d. 1931), as well as Xun Huisheng 荀慧生 (1900–1968) and Chen Moxiang 陳墨香 (1884–1942).

Through their relationships with actors, the scholars influenced the development of jingju according to their aesthetic orientation, which finally and fundamentally transformed it away from its folk origins and into a refined art form. During the heyday of jingju, the scholars effectively advocated the developing of jingju performance by exerting influence on their friends—skillful and influential dan actors in Beijing.

As the most successful protégé of Wang Yaoqing, Mei Lanfang carried forward his teacher’s efforts to convey the emotions of the heroines, as, for

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example, in his reform of the traditional play Fenhe wan 汾河湾 (lit. “Bay of the Fen River,” aka. The Story of a Shoe). This play delivers a story about a new couple, Xue Rengui 薛仁貴 and Liu Yingchun 柳迎春, who live in a hovel because of extreme poverty. Xue has to join the army and Liu waits for two decades while Xue is away, maintaining her chastity for him. Finally, Xue returns but having changed so much that Liu does not recognise him. He tests Liu’s chastity by flirting with her. Infuriated by this “flirtatious visitor,” Liu runs into the hovel and closes the door. Xue then sings to prove that it is her husband that has returned. In the traditional way of performing this play, the dan actor playing Liu remained seated, facing away from Xue during the entire song, being emotionally inexpressive. In 1913, when Mei Lanfang performed the role of Liu Yingchun in this old-fashioned way, Qi Rushan was in the audience listening to him. Afterwards, Qi wrote to Mei about his performance, suggesting that Liu would not remain unmoved as Xue recalled their past together. Mei Lanfang therefore designed a series of actions on the basis of Xue’s aria, conveying the emotion of the heroine in a better way.\(^{15}\)

The following descriptions in brackets demonstrate Mei’s new actions in

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\(^{15}\) Qi Rushan, “Qi Rushan huiyi lu,” 齊如山回憶錄 [A Memoir of Qi Rushan] in Qi Rushan wenji 齊如山文集 [Selected Works of Qi Rushan], ed. Liang Yan 梁燕 (Shijiazhuang: Hebei jiaoyu chubanshe, 2010), vol. 11, 94–97. We cannot find Qi’s letter in Mei’s memoir which he dictated to his secretary Xu Jichuan 許姬傳 (1900–1990) after the establishment of the PRC. Although Qi Rushan was once an activist in the Mei Party, the disruption and turmoil of war after 1932 ended their friendship. After 1949, Qi fled to Taiwan while Mei became a leading cultural official of the CCP. These political circumstances may have forced Mei to erase the story from his memoir. Alternately, the 1913 letter to Mei may be a story fabricated by Qi in order to highlight his contribution to jingju history. Whatever the case, the younger generation of Mei’s disciples still perform The Story of a Shoe according to his new version.
reaction to Xue’s narrative:

Xue: (Free-Tempo Prelude) I’m from Longmen County, Jiangzhou State and my name is Xue Rengui. I’m an unlucky man who had no family or friends.
(Liu: Seated. Turned her face away from him out of fury.)
Xue: (Standard Tempo) In my childhood, Father died and Mother followed him soon afterwards, leaving me nowhere to stay.
(Liu: Attracted by his story. Turned slightly outward.)
Xue: As the saying goes, “A match is drawn by the thread of fate.” I married you in Liuji Hamlet.
(Liu: More attracted and nodding. Turned slightly outward.)
Xue: However, your father disliked me because of my poverty, heartlessly kicking us out of his house.
(Liu: Sadly shaking head. Turned slightly outward, put an arm on chair and sniffled.)
Xue: Without any friend who can help, we lived in the shabby cave. As we suffered from all kinds of ordeal, I had to join the army for our livelihood.
(Liu: Felt her lower jaw. Pondered.)
Xue: Getting to know my sworn brother Zhou Qing in the army, I crossed the sea eastward and defeated the outlaws. After all wars were fortunately terminated, I protected His Majesty on his way back to Xi’an. Lately, I was permitted by His Majesty to come back to visit you.
(Liu: Nodded.)
Xue: My wife, if you still can’t trust me, come and count—it has been 18 years since I left.
(Liu: Stood up looking at him. Nodded and smiled.)

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16 Based on a 1958 video recording of a performance of The Story of a Shoe (or Fenhe wan) by Mei Lanfang and Ma Lianliang, and also a more recent video recording of a performance of the play by Mei Baolju 梅葆玖 (1934–2016) and Zhang Xuejin’s 張學津 (1941–2012). The Chinese text is: “家住绛州縣龍門，薛平貴好命苦無親無鄰。幼年間父早亡，”
Mei Lanfang’s new version effectively demonstrated the emotions of the heroine through his reaction to Xue’s song, developing an emotional depth within his performance. These new actions were both successful and influential, and can be seen clearly in the performance of this part by Mei Lanfang’s son, Mei Baojiu 梅葆玖 (1934–2016). Nowadays, no actor follows the old-fashioned, unemotional way of performing the role of Liu Yingchun. This reform of *The Story of a Shoe* profoundly influenced the development of *dan* artistry by shifting it away from a focus on mere skills.

*From Prettiness-Eroticism to Artistry*

The traditional way of theatrical patronage privileges a binary pair of notions to evaluate *dan* actors: *se* 色 (prettiness-eroticism) *vis-à-vis yi* 藝 (artistry). In his notation book *Qingbai leichao* 清稗類鈔 (*Classified Jottings on Qing Unofficial History*), the late Qing scholar Xu Ke 徐珂 (1869–1928) discusses the dichotomised criteria of *se* and *yi* on the basis of the geographical divide of north and south China:

> When people praised an actor, a northerner may say his performance is...
perfect. Hence, Chen Delin 陈德霖 (1862–1930) was still valued in the north despite his age. In contrast, a southerner would often commend an actor’s physical beauty, without paying any attention to the issue of artistry. In conclusion, northerners preferred artistry, while southerners preferred prettiness-eroticism. As a consequence, northerners say “listening to jingju,” while southerners say “watching jingju.”

As is discussed in Chapter One, the huapu 花譜 (lit. “manual of flowers,” commentary corpus on dan actors) collected by Zhang Cixi 張次溪 (1909–1968) in his Qingdai yandu liyuan shiliao congkan 清代燕都梨園史料叢刊 (Historical Records of Beijing Theatre during the Qing Dynasty, 1934) are full of Beijing scholars’ descriptions of the prettiness-eroticism of dan actors. These comments from Beijing theatrical aficionados disclose a historical fact: the commodification of dan actors’ physical beauty was not confined to southerners, but was also widespread in North China. In this respect, Xu Ke was obviously biased in attributing the distinction of se and yi to a geographical divide of north and south China. But the preference for prettiness-eroticism in traditional theatrical patronage did indeed influence the development of the artistry of the dan category, as the dan actors did not have to be proficient in performance to be successful. As a result, while the dan actors remained bound within these time-honoured courtesan conventions, making a livelihood by providing escort services for well-off

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19 Xu Ke 徐珂, Qingbai leichao 清稗類鈔 [Classified Jottings on Qing Unofficial History] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1984), vol. 11, 5061. Xu’s reference of the northerner and the southerner was primarily to people in Beijing and Shanghai.
20 See Zhang Cixi 張次溪 ed., Qingdai yandu Liyuan shiliao congkan 清代燕都梨園史料叢刊 [Historical Records of Beijing Theatre during the Qing Dynasty] (Beijing: Zhongguo xiju chubanshe, 1988).
patrons, in the theatrical world *laosheng* actors rose to greater prominence because of their artistic proficiency. With the maturing of “the *Laosheng* Later Grand Three” (*laosheng hou san jie* 老生後三傑), Tan Xinpei, Wang Guifen 汪桂芬 (1860–1906) and Sun Juxian 孫菊仙 (1841–1931), *laosheng* became dominant by the end of the Qing period. When Qi Rushan 齊如山 (1785–1962) came to Beijing in the late 1880s, an overwhelming majority of the melodies he heard hummed in the streets came from the *laosheng* roles.21

Whereas the traditional “well-off patron/boy courtesan” relationship was focused primarily on the prettiness-eroticism of the *dan* actors, the development of *jingju*’s emotional and psychological depth by Wang Yaoqing and his disciples objectively shifted the focus to more artistic criteria. Despite the preference of patrons for physical beauty, artistry was still considered one of the ways in which an individual *dan* actor could become successful. While patronage continued to constitute part of a *dan* actor’s livelihood, this activity was confined to the small crowd of well-off and privileged patrons. For an overwhelming majority of Beijing dwellers, “watching *jingju*” literally meant watching the artistry of *jingju* actors. This promoted a coterie of *dan* actors who were focused on the development of their theatrical art. For example, the eminent *huadan* actor Tian Guifeng 田桂鳳 (1866–1931) remained attractive to his fans into his fifties because of his dedication to *dan* artistry. During his prime, his box-office even sometimes outdid “the Great King of Actors” Tan Xinpei. Therefore, *jingju*’s position as a form of mass entertainment facilitated the development of its artistry, and the development of artistry, specifically in

21 Qi Rushan 齊如山, “*Jingju zhi bianqian,*” 《京劇之變遷》 [The Transition of *Jingju*], in *Qi Rushan wenji*, vol. 2, 277 & 278.
the dan category, led to the heyday of jingju which lasted through until the disruption of the Second Sino-Japanese War.

**Huashan and the Reconstruction of “New Woman”**

The two subclassifications of the dan category, qingyi 青衣 (lit. “black clothes”) and huadan 花旦 (lit. “flower dan”), had been clearly demarcated in terms of their different emphases on artistry. Late Qing male dan actors created a new category of huashan 花衫 (lit. “flower clothes”), enabling the dan to be all-round performers by combining the vocal arts of qingyi and the physical performance of huadan. This raised the overall artistic proficiency of the dan category, rendering the dan a key role in jingju performance. Furthermore, the creation of huashan was not simply a matter of artistry; it also reflected the intention of the scholars to promulgate modern values through the theatre as a venue of social education. When they composed new huashan plays for leading dan actors, these scholars (re)constructed a group of new women, who, despite their ancient clothes, were in fact incarnations of the idealised new women in the Chinese nation-state.

**Transformation into All-Round Actors: The Creation of Huashan**

Huashan is a combination of two main sub-categories within the dan category, qingyi and huadan. The term huashan is formed by fusing hua from

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22 Huadan, lit. “flower dan”; flirtatious, roguish, and lively young women in comic and light-hearted roles. Qingyi, lit. “black clothing”; here it refers to a role type for women, young to middle aged, who have or have had high social status and dignity. The name comes from the garments worn by these characters when in destitute circumstances. See Alexandra Bonds, *Beijing Opera Costumes: The Visual Communication of Character and Culture* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2008), 327 & 331.
huadan and shan from qingyi (qingyi is known as qingshan as well), which suggests there is a mingling of the artistic merits of both categories. Before the creation of huashan, the first and foremost criterion of the qingyi role was considered their vocal performance, while for the huadan roles the priority was physical performance. As a consequence of their lack of training in all facets of acting, the qingyi actors had few physical or facial movements, while the huadan actors were often not able to deliver a complicated aria. Such a division was not beneficial to the all-round development of the dan category, finally resulting in the decline of dan as compared with laosheng after the formation of jingju in the late Qing period.

Whereas Wang Yaoqing initiated huashan within the dan category, it was Mei Lanfang who perfected it by innovating on the basis of Wang’s creation. As Mei notes in his memoir, “I was to follow the route pioneered by Wang Yaoqing and to bring to fruition his creation [of huashan].”23 After Wang Yaoqing and his protégés, as exemplified by Mei Lanfang, huashan became the new pearl on the crown of jingju, which led jingju to its heyday in the Republic. The efforts of Wang Yaoqing basically transformed the dan into a more all-round category by absorbing the whole of jingju’s corpus of artistry. Thereafter, even if a student’s drill still starts with qingyi, he has to learn the skills of the entire dan category, including huadan, wudan and daomadan in order to perform in the huashan plays. With a new name of “qingyi-huashan,” the actor in fact connotes his ability as an all-round actor, who is able, as well

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as willing to follow the fashion.

_The Ideal Femininity: “New Woman,” or Still Old?_

As the frequent interaction of actors and scholars was of paramount importance in _jingju_’s development, the creation of the _huashan_ category was not confined simply to artistry. As the actors during the early Republican period were profoundly influenced by scholars, their portrayal of an “ideal femininity” through the _huashan_ roles they performed demonstrated the cumulative sociocultural and sociopolitical demands of the modern Chinese scholars. In this way, the scholars sought to create a new image for the “Republican woman,” albeit through traditional roles and ancient costumes.

Huang Yufu (b. 1945) argues that the new _huashan_ roles created by the Republican _jingju_ playwrights and practitioners “are physically healthy and philosophically strong.”24 Her point of view reflects the aims of Republican scholars, who wanted the _huashan_ repertoire to portray the image of the new “Republican women,” distinct from women in the imperial period who were suppressed by the Neo-Confucian order. According to Huang, the female protagonists in the new _huashan_ plays “have a lot of virile actions. Some women even wore men’s clothes, heading for the frontline to fight for the country.” “They convey more of the individual desire of women.”25

However, this individual desire did not lead to individuality. For example, in Mei Lanfang’s _Hongxian daohe_ (Hongxian Steals the Box, 24 Huang Yufu, _Jingju, qiao he Zhongguo de xingbie guanxi: 1902–1937_, 111.
25 Ibid.
1918), the heroine Hongxian nü 紅線女 (Lady of Red Thread) is a maidservant of the Luzhou Military Commissioner Xue Song 薛嵩. The Weibo Military Commissioner, Tian Chengsi 田承嗣, wants to seize land from Xue. As Xue feels it difficult to defend his fief from Tian’s strong army, Red Thread voluntarily infiltrates Tian’s heavily fortified barracks and steals a box from beside Tian’s pillow. Seeing the note left by Red Thread the following morning, Tian knows that it is easy for Red Thread to kill him, and finally cancels the plan to raid Xue’s territory.

As Huang Yufu declares, “Red Thread is low born…yet she far outdoes a senior official [i.e., her master, Xue] at both the intellectual and martial level. Such a heroine called into question the outdated notion that ‘women are born inferior and feeble (nanzun nübei, nanqiang nüruo 男尊女卑, 男強女弱).’” Nevertheless, her heroic deed of stealing the box was to help her master; afterwards she was happy to resume the position of a servant. Although she was able to kill an enemy commander within his heavily fortified barracks, she never thought of displacing her master. Instead of creating a “new woman,” this seems to echo the Confucian structure of women’s domesticity—women, even martial women, are still the second sex. Their destination is family service. In this sense, the huashan category never really constructed the image of a “new” Republican woman. These women were physically strong, but their deeds reinforced the Confucian social structure. Perhaps rather than creating an image of the new Republican woman, these huashan roles simply interweave an illusion of newness into inherited gender

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26 Ibid.
relations. The *huashan* repertoire displayed how Republican (men) scholars’ thought of and thereby reconstructed their new social ideals through new plays and roles. Although these Republican scholars thought women were able to contribute their power to the establishment of the Chinese nation, women were still defined as secondary to men, peripheral to the blueprint of this new national edifice.  

*Ambivalence between Chivalry and Domesticity*

The story of Hua Mulan 花木蘭 had its prototype far back in the Northern Wei (386–534) ballad *Mulan Ci* 木蘭辭 (*Ballad of Mulan*). As one of the most well-known heroines of ancient China, Hua Mulan’s story is widely known and it has been narrated and renarrated by the scholar-élite over the centuries. Each retelling—from the earliest *Poem of Mulan* to the modern versions—has its own version of Hua Mulan. As Zhao Tong 趙彤 notes, “The flourishing of [Hua Mulan stories] has led to continuous reconstructions of the heroine.” That is, the various versions of the Hua Mulan stories are based on the changing social, cultural and political demands imposed on women.

Hua Mulan was the first-born daughter of the Hua family in North China. One day the Khan was recruiting soldiers for a forthcoming campaign.
Mulan’s father was on the list, but he was old and in bad health. As the first-born of the family, Mulan went voluntarily to the frontline instead of her father, dressing as a man. Mulan survived the decade-long war, and was nominated by the Khan to be a senior official, but refused to accept the position. As soon as she was back home, Mulan returned to wearing her female clothes and resumed the life of a woman. From the original Poem of Mulan through to Mei Lanfang’s Mulan congjun 木蘭從軍 (Mulan Joins the Army, 1912), her heroic behaviour is always framed within the narrative of state/nation. However, woman’s heroic deeds are just half of the patriotic story. Women’s domesticity and familial duty, which was considered as a dusty remnant of China’s past, still dominated the construction of the “new woman.”

In this play (Mulan Joins the Army), Mulan’s comrade-in-arms pokes fun at women, so Mulan defends the value of women in front of a whole group of men. Nevertheless, her narrative reinforces women’s subsidiary position from a man’s perspective, consolidating the Confucian order, which confined women to domesticity. In 1952, Chang Xiangyu 常香玉 (1923–2004) refined Mei Lanfang’s Mulan Joins the Army and wrote a new recitative, called Who Said Woman is Inferior to Man. However, even though this version was turned into a film after the establishment of the People’s Republic of China, it still clearly conveyed women’s ambivalent fate within the Confucian structure:

Brother Liu, your comment is biased.
Who said women enjoy a leisurely life?
Men fight on the frontline,
While women weave at home.

\[\text{Liu dage jianghua li taipian} \quad \text{劉大哥講話理太偏},\]
\[\text{Sheishuo nüzi xiang qingxian} \quad \text{誰說女子享清閒?}\]
\[\text{Nanzi dazhang zai bianguan} \quad \text{男子打仗在邊關},\]
\[\text{Nüzi fangzhi zai jiayuan} \quad \text{女子紡織在家園}.\]

This has not changed significantly in recent times. Deng Min 鄧敏, an actress of the Mei School at National Peking Opera Company (\textit{Guojia jingju yuan} 國家京劇院) performed \textit{Mulan Joins the Army} in 2010. In her version, Mulan had a recitative defending the value of women to her army friends:

\begin{quote}
General, your comment is biased.
Who said women enjoy a leisurely life?
[They] farm in the fields in the day,
While weaving cotton cloth in the evening.
\end{quote}

\[\text{Jiangjun shuocihua qian zhouquan} \quad \text{將軍說此話欠周全},\]
\[\text{Sheishuo nüzi xiang qingxian} \quad \text{誰說女子享清閒?}\]
\[\text{Bairi zhongdi zai tianyuan} \quad \text{白日種地在田園},\]
\[\text{Wanlai zhibu you fangmian} \quad \text{晚來織布又紡棉}.\]

As these examples show, in order to defend the value of women, Mulan has to confine their roles to home service during warfare. In her discourse, men were primary to the war through their roles on the frontline, while women offered assistance as labour force behind the lines. Therefore, it is difficult to accept the view propounded by many scholars that “Who Said

\[\text{29} \quad \text{This follows Chang Xiangyu’s 1952 performance of} \textit{Hua Mulan}.\]
\[\text{30} \quad \text{From Deng Min’s 2010 performance of} \textit{Hua Mulan}.\]
Woman is Inferior to Man…embodies a rise of women’s value as never before.”31 Mulan’s declarations reinforce the Confucian division for the social roles of men and women. If this is the “women’s value” constructed through the Hua Mulan story, it was obviously counter to the Republican ideal of “new” women.

Inspired by the French scholar Julia Kristeva’s About Chinese Women (Fr. 1974, En. 1977), Zhang Jiefeng 張結鳳 put forward a “Hua Mulan Model” to describe the life trajectory of Chinese women, who start from home, and end up back at home. Although the Khan confers the position of Secretarial Court Gentleman (Shangshu lang 尚書郎) on Mulan for her contribution to the state, she declined his kind offer and resumed her life as a woman:32

“What do you want as a reward,” asked the Khan?
Mulan did not want a position of Secretarial Court Gentleman.
“I want a swift horse,
to send me back to hometown.”

Kehan wen suoyu 可汗問所欲,
Mulan buyong Shangshu lang 木蘭不用尚書郎.
Yuan chi qianli zu 願馳千里足,
Song er huan guxiang 送兒還故鄉.33

“Secretarial Court Gentleman” was a title bestowed by the court, a rare

31 Zhao Tong, “Gaizao ‘Hua Mulan’,” 12.
franchise at the Wei-Jin courts. As Mulan was able to live as a man in the army for ten years, it would have been easy for her to hold this position at the court if she wanted to. But she renounced the position in order to return home, taking up her filial duties. According to Zhang Jiefeng, Mulan’s refusal was because of her femaleness. Status, fame, fortune and/or honour were for men to pursue within the Confucian social structure. Since she was a woman, these were not obtainable for Mulan, despite her contribution to the empire. This in fact hints at women’s fate of domestic service — even for the new Republican women.

Thus, it is naïve for scholars to believe that the Hua Mulan story represents a “castration” of men. Even though Mulan was better than a lot of men, including her father, in martial arts, she was still a vehicle of men’s war. She enjoyed some relief from her domesticity when serving as a soldier, but the Confucian order remained firmly in place, reinforcing her inferior status. Furthermore, in both Deng and Chang’s versions of the story, Commander He married his daughter Miss He to Mulan as a “reward” of her contribution. Mulan confirmed her value in the war by acting as a brave soldier, whereas the majority of women were like Miss He, subject to the will and desires of men. Miss He is a mirror of the fate of ordinary women in Confucian China. As a daughter, she was given by her own father to a friend as a present.

34 Charles O. Hucker, A Dictionary of Official Titles in Imperial China (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1985), 411, Entry 5047.
36 Zhao Tong, “Gaizao ‘Hua Mulan’,” 12.
The ideal of “Republican women” espoused by scholars and conveyed through these new huashan heroines was more aspirational than realistic. Lu Xun was fiercely critical of Henrik Ibsen’s famous play *A Doll’s House*, asking, “What happens after Nora leaves home?” According to Lu, Nora would be forced to degrade herself by resorting to a life of prostitution or have no choice but return home, otherwise she would starve to death.⁷ Lu Xun’s criticism reflected his dark view of Chinese society, in which it was still difficult for women to achieve economic and personal independence, despite the claims made about the emergence of new “Republican women.” Similarly, for huashan heroines like Red Thread and Hua Mulan, returning to the duties of domesticity overshadowed any “new” independent qualities in their personalities.

**Music and Make-up: Towards the Ideal “Feminine Beauty”**

Besides creating a set of exemplars of the “new women,” twentieth-century male dan actors also reformed jingju performance at the artistic level, such as the the vocal and make-up techniques of the category. These innovations created for the dan performers an aesthetic ideal for femininity, which was both demure and delicate. This focus on femininity in dan performances underscored the fact that women remained conceived of in very conventional terms, notwithstanding the veneer of the “new woman.” This reveals a discrepancy between the functions of enlightenment and entertainment that educators and audiences sought from theatre. While

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⁷ Lu Xun, “Nala zouhou zenyang,” 娜拉走後怎樣 [What Happens After Nora Leaves Home?], in *Lu Xun quanjí*, vol. 1, 166.
scholars created many female protagonists as “new women,” what the audience admired most was the artistry and performance of an actor.

How Did Mei Lanfang Find the “Groove”?

Vocal art is considered to be one of the key elements of jingju. In his book Gu Zhongguo de ge 古中國的歌 (The Songs of Ancient China), Ye Xiushan 葉秀山 (1935–2016) portrays a trajectory of jingju’s development “from a concentration on ‘qi 氣’ to a concentration on ‘yun 韻’.” According to Ye, “‘qishi 氣勢’, or ‘qi’”, indicated the dominant soaring vocal technique in the jingju domain during its earlier history in the late Qing period; while ‘yun’ means ‘yunwei 韻味’, which refers to the refined vocal technique in the Republican period, which is sweet, soft and melodious.” Ye concludes, “This seems to be a set of universal rules of any artistic form: from stiffness to smoothness, as well as from simplicity to complexity.”

According to Elizabeth Wichmann, “high pitch is a positive aesthetic value for all role types [of jingju].” This was more so in the earlier period of jingju, when a prevalence of soaring vocal performance was standard.

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39 Yun, or yunwei is a classical term used in Chinese aesthetics, which has no direct equivalent in English. With regard to Mei Lanfang, I translate it as “groove.” See the section below.

40 Ye Xiushan, Gu Zhongguo de ge, 23.

41 Elizabeth Wichmann, Listening to Theatre: The Aural Dimension of Beijing Opera (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1991), 201.
Furthermore, Wichmann notes that “As a result of this value placed on high pitch, key in its Western conception functions solely as a technical tool of the performer.”42 If a performer was able to produce the notes in a higher key, he or she would not use lower keys. In the past, it was necessary for a professional dan actor to be able to sing in the key of G major or at least F major.43 This is because a whole group of actors in one play were accompanied by a single huqin musician (guanzhong huqin 官中胡琴, for a picture of huqin see Figure 1). Generally, the huqin cannot be re-tuned in the midst of a scene, so all the actors had to abide by the key of the leading actor, usually a laosheng. If a dan actor was not able to sing in the key of G major or at least F, no company was likely to hire him. Successful artists were accomplished at reaching these difficult, high notes. For example, Chen Delin was still able to sing in the key of G major even in his fifties; Cheng Yanqiu, one of “Great Four Dan Actors,” was famous for his amazing ability to sing in the key of A major in his teens.

The soaring vocal performance of the qingyi actors in the early period of jingju was an embodiment of Ye Xiushan’s formula of “qi.” However, although both laosheng and dan actors sang in the same key of F or G major, it was more difficult for the dan to do this. The laosheng arias primarily consist of the notes of do, re and me, while the dan arias me, so, la and do, so the dan’s

42 Ibid.
43 Chinese theatre (or classical Chinese music) does not adhere to the Fixed-Do sol-fa scale, but a Movable-Do sol-fa scale in which Do refers to the tonic of the prevailing key. In this sense, the key of the vocal performance in jingju is flexible, and can be adjusted to different performers. The keys of F and G here refer to the xipi 西皮 (western melodies) type of music. Xipi is one of the two types of jingju music. For more detail see the Appendix.
falsetto voice is half an octave higher, albeit in the same key. This makes it more difficult for dan actors to decorate their falsetto voice, rendering “the tunes of the music [of old-fashioned qingyi] too unadorned…and stiff.”

In the late Qing jingju domain, the famous dan (qingyi) actor Shi Xiaofu 時小福 (1846–1900) and his protégé Sun Yiyun 孫怡雲 (1880–1944) were heirs of the old-fashioned vocal performance, while Yu Ziyun 余紫雲 (1855–1910) and his student Wang Yaoqing shifted away from the stiff melodies to softer ones by enabling qingyi to sing in a lower key. Later, Mei Lanfang, one of Wang Yaoqing’s best disciples, carried this further, raising the artistic level of the entire dan category to new heights. A majority of dan actors who came afterwards were influenced by this new fashion, which, in Ye Xiushan’s narrative, was a transformation from “qi” to “yun.”

It is, however, difficult to define yun or yunwei in a scientific way. Just like “groove,” yunwei is a kind of intuitive feel. In most cases, a person may not be able to describe why a piece of music is well-played, but this does not prevent them from deriving satisfaction from listening to it. When they cannot help nodding their head in time to the pace of music, it is by virtue of the power of groove. As is illustrated in the framework of Ye Xiushan, the shift from qi to yun indicated the initiation of a new era, after which yun became the primary concern for aficionados to evaluate the vocal artistry of jingju practitioners.

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What Mei Lanfang did to modulate the *dan* performers’ excessive focus on soaring falsetto performance was based on jingju’s oral tradition, which allows its notations a certain extent of flexibility. Because of the actors’ central position in jingju, the *huqin* musician, who provided the main melodic accompaniment, has to follow the actors by reacting to their impromptu melodic shifts—the actors do not follow the musicians. Since the prestigious *laosheng* actor Tan Xinpei employed private *huqin* musicians 私房胡琴 (*sifang huqin*) as personal assistants, hiring a *huqin* musician or even a whole group of musicians has become a common practice among jingju stars. The use of private *huqin* musicians allowed an individual actor to develop his personality in vocal performance, enabling innovative actors to depart from the “common way” of performance (*dalu* 大路) and create their own style, which would be followed by their students (*liupai* 流派).

Mei Lanfang was educated as an old-fashioned *qingyi* actor in the “common way.” In his twenties, Mei still sang in the key of F major, but in his artistic maturity he lowered his key to E major. Aside from this lowering of key, the groove of his vocal artistry was accomplished by his reform of “grace notes.” Previously, as Zhong Libin 仲立彬 (b. 1972) notes with regard to Chen Delin’s vocal performance, there were “one or two notes per beat (*banyan* 板眼)*46*. There were sudden jumps—a six or seven-interval jump between skeletal and grace notes is often present, making these [*qingyi*] melodies sound stiff.”*47* In contrast, Mei Lanfang avoided the sudden jumps

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*46* *Ban* refers to the accented notes and *yan* the unaccented. For more details see Appendix.

in his arias, and created sleek curves for the “cadential notes,” which slide downwards from the “skeletal notes,” avoiding a sudden break at the end of musical sections. Additionally, Mei deftly used trills and variations of metres in long drawls, preventing dullness and flatness from the aria of the dan category.48

Furthermore, Mei Lanfang slowed the pace of his performance. Whereas in the 1923 version of Luo Shen 洛神 (The Goddess of River Luo), Mei finished the liushui49 (Fast Tempo) part of the entire aria within 17 seconds, in 1955 it was given a 5-second extension (to a total of 22 seconds). Slowing down the pace or changing the rhythm of his vocal performance, Mei Lanfang interweaved a sense of leisure, which connotes the Daoist lifestyle and aesthetic ideal—the pursuit of inner peace. Finally, Mei Lanfang shifted the core of the vocal performance of the dan category away from the focus on “qi” to “yun,” which is still adhered to till today in the jingju domain. At the acoustic level, Mei and other dan performers’ ideal classical femininity came primarily from the softer styles of their vocal performance, which is demure and delicate.

Facial Make-up and Classical Chinese Femininity

Besides the music, dan actors also reformed the make-up techniques of

48 Mei Lanfang’s Luo Shen 洛神 (The Goddess of River Luo, 1923 LP and 1955 film). Skeletal notes are the principal notes which constitute the foundation of the aria. Grace notes are the extra notes added to a piece of music as embellishments, either before or after principal notes, which are written in small font in the music score. Cadential notes are placed at the end of a music-phrase or music-passage.

49 Liushui is one of the tempos in xipi music. For more detail see the Appendix.
the category, creating an ideal of classical Chinese femininity at the visual level. Male *dan* actors have to apply intricate make-up in order to imitate the feminine features of the roles. This includes facial make-up, false hair and head ornaments. Commonly, the cosmetician has to tease the false hair for the actor two hours ahead of the performance and it usually takes a professional *dan* actor a minimum of forty minutes to apply the full range of make-up. Nevertheless, the make-up technique of the *dan* category in *jingju* was not a legacy from the remote past, but a recent creation which had its early development during the High Qing and was finalised during the Republic by innovative *dan* actors, as exemplified by Mei Lanfang, who absorbed from southern actors a more realistic pattern of facial make-up. This artificial feminine beauty attracted a lot of new (or unseasoned) fans to *jingju*, thereby enabling the *dan* performers to return to the centre of *jingju*, after having lost their leading position to *laosheng* performers in the early period of *jingju*.

Previously, most northern *dan* actors, as exemplified by the *qingyi* paragon Chen Delin, used a light make-up which had little effect in covering the actor’s facial traits. Audiences knew that a *dan* actor in his fifties was by no means able to turn himself into a pretty young woman, so they were not focused on his face. While the older *dan* actors remained commited to this late Qing tradition, following his first performance in Shanghai in December 1914 Mei Lanfang initiated a reform in the make-up techniques of the *dan* category by absorbing the techniques of the prestigious Shanghai *dan* actors Feng Zihe 馮子和 (1888–1942) and Mao Yunke 毛韻珂.\(^\text{50}\) This new style of make-up

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\(^{50}\) Mei Lanfang, *Mei Lanfang huiyi lu* 梅蘭芳回憶錄 [A Memoir of Mei Lanfang] (Beijing:
enabled the face of a dan actor to become more feminine and it remains dominant in the jingju domain till today.

Before Mei Lanfang, few dan actors in Beijing used blusher. They just used a little fine powder on their faces. After his performance in Shanghai, Mei learnt from the southern dan actors how to develop facial make-up, making it easier to conceal an actor’s facial traits. In the first place, a kind of skin-coloured greasepaint is utilised as a foundation to cover the actor’s facial blemishes. Then, red greasepaint is smeared from the brow bones to the cheek bones, fading into the cheeks. The greasepaint creates a fair-skinned, florid “new” face for dan actors. Finally, hybrid blusher (70% carmine and 30% lotus flower colour) is worn on the cheeks, as many women do in daily life.

Secondly, Mei Lanfang’s southern-type eye make-up marked a step forward for dan actors. The older dan actors in Beijing used very little eye make-up. Absorbing the practice of Shanghai actors, Mei collected soot from the bottom of a pan (guo yan zi 鍋煙子), a kind of natural fine black pigment, to apply to the rims of his eyes, which had the effect of enlarging them. In the traditional aesthetic of China, the ideal type of eye is called feng yan 鳳眼 (lit. “Phoenix eye”), the inner corner of which is pointy while the outer corner lifts slightly. But because the eye-corners are often sag, few achieve the criteria of feng yan naturally. Thus, Republican dan actors created a new set of techniques called lei tou 勒頭 (lit. “head-binding”) and diao mei 吊眉 (lit. “brow lifting”). Sticking a piece of 3-metre black cloth (lei tou dai 勒頭帶) on the end of both brow bones, which is lifted and finally fastened tightly at the back of head, the

Dongfang chubanshe, 2013), 198.
The ideal feng yan is fabricated. This had the effect of covering the facial features of an actor, making his face more feminine and attractive.

Thirdly, Mei Lanfang’s innovative way of using false hair fabricated a lifelike feminine look. The use of realistic false hair was initiated in Beijing theatre by the mid-Qing dan actor Wei Changsheng 魏長生 (1744–1802), who brilliantly invented a new type of false hair called shui tou 水頭 (long-haired coiffure, lit. “water head”). According to the Qing theatrical aficionado Yang Zhangsheng 楊掌生 (pseudonym Ruizhu Jiushi 花珠舊史, b. 1806), “The dan category was previously known as ‘bao tou’ 包頭 (lit. bound-head), because formerly all dan actors wore a hairnet. Today, all [dan actors] use shui tou. They were no different from real women.” The bao tou hairstyle was to bind a blue scarf on the dan actor’s head, which directly identified that the dan actor performed female roles, but was not a realistic way of imitating women. As shui tou, or the long-haired coiffure brought to Beijing by Wei Changsheng was more beautiful than bao tou, it soon became fashionable while the old-fashioned bao tou fell into disuse. Only during the mourning period following the death of Emperor Guangxu and Empress Dowager Cixi (1908–

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51 The false hair was manufactured out of real hair. Before applying makeup, the cosmetician saturates it in a kind of mucilage produced by rubbing elm bark in hot water, ensuring that it can stay on the actor’s face during the entire performance. As elm bark is difficult to find today, wood shaving has largely replaced elm bark.

52 Ruizhu jiushi 花珠舊史 (Yang Zhangsheng 楊掌生), “Menghua suobu,” 夢華瑣簿 [Trifles of Beautiful Dreams], in Qingdai yandu liyuan shiliao congkan, 356. “During the Ch’ing [Qing] times it was the rule for all actors to cease appearing in public for one hundred days after the death of an Emperor, a period called kuo sang [guo sang], or national mourning. Even at the end of that time they were only allowed to play in ordinary dress for another one hundred days, the ch’ing i [qingyi] with only a blue silk scarf round the head.” A. C. Scott, The Classical Theatre of China, 224.
1909) were dan actors required to resume the practice of binding blue scarfs on their heads in order to identify themselves as women, because the Qing court banned the use of full costumes in all formal theatrical activities.

Although the long-haired coiffure brought to Beijing by Wei Changsheng laid a foundation for all the later developments in the hairstyles in the dan category, Yang Zhangsheng overstates the case in claiming that Wei was “no different from real women.” In the late Qing jingju domain, the common hairstyle of qingyi actors was referred to as da kai lian 大開臉 (lit. “carved face,” broad forehead). Originally, kai lian was a ceremonial practice for young women before a traditional Chinese marriage ceremony. The bride’s family invited a senior woman, who skilfully used a red thread to remove the young woman’s fine facial hair. Then, she loosened the young woman’s hair, fastened it into a bun at the back of her head, and trimmed the other hair on her forehead. The late Qing dan actors adopted this kind of hairstyle, which looks like a doorframe. (See Figure 2)

Another fashionable hairstyle among dan actors later on was ren zi e 人字額 (inverted-v forehead), which is done by wearing two pieces of false hair that descend from the forehead via the cheekbones to the lower cheeks. Unlike the doorframe-like broad forehead of the da kai lian hairstyle, this new fashion of ren zi e trims the actor’s forehead into an inverted “v,” making a type of quasi-oval face, which is nearer to the traditional Chinese aesthetic of feminine beauty. According to Zhang Yuehua 張月華, ren zi e was devised to
imitate the hairstyle of unmarried women,\textsuperscript{53} who were performed by the sub-category of guimen dan 閨門旦.\textsuperscript{54} However, as evidenced by the photographs of the Great Four, a lot of dan actors who performed the roles of married women also adopted the hairstyle of ren zi e, primarily for its beauty. (See Figure 3) In the earlier photographs of Mei Lanfang, we seldom see the use of the da kai lian hairstyle in his qingyi roles. Suffice to say, Mei Lanfang and a majority of dan actors’ choice of coiffure was more focused on feminine beauty than on replicating exactly the hairstyles of women.

Even though the inverted-v forehead hairstyle of ren zi e ameliorated the old-fashioned broad forehead of da kai lian and subsequently turned into a new fashion in the dan category, it had its drawbacks—sometimes it made the actor’s face look too narrow. Hence, after Mei Lanfang returned from Shanghai in 1914 he created a new hairstyle by incorporating techniques from southern actors, which has since become the convention within the dan category. This uses two kinds of ornamental false hair: under a joint name of pianzi 片子 (piece), the big pieces are called da liu 大柳 (lit. “big willow leaf”) and are used on the cheeks, while the small pieces are called xiao wan 小彎 (lit. “small curl”) which are used on the forehead. (See Figure 4)

When a dan actor used the da kai lian hairstyle, all his small facial defects were clearly displayed, whereas, after the innovations of ren zi e and the da liu/xiao wan hairstyle in the Republican period, the face of the actor conformed


\textsuperscript{54} Mei Lanfang, Mei Lanfang huixi lu, 198.
to the traditional Chinese aesthetic of feminine beauty—an oval face. As shown in the illustrations, Mei employed two *da liu* and seven *xiao wan*. The location of one of the seven *xiao wan* is on the centre of hairline; the other six, two in a group, are on both sides in symmetrical arcs—one group over brows, one group on the extension of brows, and the third group on the imaginary extension of eye-corners. Therefore, the two *da liu* cover the flanks of cheekbones and cheeks, while the seven *xiao wan* contour the forehead, creating an ideal oval face. Mei’s invention was a major development in the hairstyle of the *dan* actors of *jingju*, which soon became widespread in a majority of theatrical forms. This new hairstyle serves to beautify the face of the actor, covering any of their facial defects. For example, actors who have a or round face can move the *da liu* forward to shrink the size of face, and *vice versa*. Cheng Yanqiu, who was 5.9 foot tall and who became fatter as he got older, even used four *da liu*—two on both sides—to narrow his well-rounded face into an ideal Chinese oval.

The new development in the *dan* category during the period from the 1910s to the late 1930s resulted from a prolonged reform which was initiated by Wang Yaoqing after the collapse of the Qing empire, and was carried forward by his protégés, the Great Four. It still followed by all their disciples in the *jingju* domain today. With the help of scholars, the eminent *dan* actors were able to shift *jingju* away from rusticity, reviving the scholars’ artistic taste which had been lost in the earlier development of *jingju*. This fundamentally shifted *jingju* away from its earliest form in the late Qing as a
vaudevillian performance by enriching its dramatic elements.

Meanwhile, the social, cultural, and political ideals of scholars exerted a far-reaching influence on dan actors. Through the new huashan repertoire, the scholars developed a new ideal conception of Chinese women. However, the portrait of “new women,” as exemplified by the heroine Hua Mulan, was still confined within traditional values. Mulan was admired for her “female masculinity,” but after the war she voluntarily resumed her life as a woman, taking up her domestic duties.

With their continuous efforts to reform the vocal and physical performance of jingju, the eminent dan actors objectively reinforced the classical Chinese criterion of ideal femininity. By lowering the key of their vocal performance, Wang Yaoqing and his protégé Mei Lanfang reformed the old-fashioned vocal performance of the late Qing period, creating a demure, delicate acoustic art for the jingju dan category. Following his premiere in Shanghai in December 1914, Mei Lanfang adopted make-up techniques from southern dan actors, which enabled the Beijing-based dan actors to cover their facial traits and create an unblemished, beautiful face. These huashan developments raised the artistry of the dan category and the whole of jingju onto a new level, and are still adhered to today.
Figure 1 Jinghu 京胡, also called huqin 胡琴. It is the principal instrument in the accompaniment to jingju, which produces the main melody.

Source: http://www.58pic.com/zhuangshi/18065754.html
Figure 2 This is a painting collected by Mei Lanfang. The woman, Meng Jinbang 孟金榜, is one of the heroines in Yanmen guan 雁門關 (Yanmen Pass). Her hairstyle is *da kai lian*, a hairstyle for married women in traditional China.  

**Source:** Mei Lanfang, *Mei Lanfang huiyi lu*, iii.
Figure 3 Young Shang Xiaoyun performs the heroine 金氏 in Sangyuan jizi 桑園寄子 (Shelter in a Melburry Garden). Here he uses two da liu and trims his face into an inverted “v.”

Figure 4 Mei Lanfang performs the heroine Han Yuniang 韓玉娘 in Shengsi 
hen 生死恨 (The Regrets of Life and Death). Here he uses two da liu and seven 
xiao wan, which trims his face into the ideal of an oval face. 

Source: Mei Lanfang, Mei Lanfang huiyi lu, vi.
CHAPTER FOUR

Virtuoso Artistry or “Feudal Remnants”? The Use and Prohibition of Stilts in Chinese Theatre

Qiao 蹣 were a type of stilted footwear which were invented and utilised by male dan in order to imitate the bound feet of women, and were particularly enjoyed by the habitués of Chinese theatre. However, after the establishment of the PRC, qiao were conflated with footbinding and prohibited. I argue that despite their historical connections to bound feet, qiao should not be reduced to a synonym for footbinding. They also had artistic and technical value. The skilful and artistic use of qiao was admired by audiences in China in much the same way as the technical artistry of ballerinas was admired in the West.

By late imperial time the practice of footbinding was widespread amongst Chinese women. With its gradual adoption from the eleventh century onwards, footbinding meant that a woman’s feet came to be considered central to her femininity and attractiveness. It was not surprising then, with the dramatic development of Chinese theatre’s artistry during the Qing dynasty, that eminent dan actors began to imitate a woman’s bound feet by making use of new props—qiao (lit. “stilts,” false feet), or cunzi 寸子 (lit. “three-inchers”) as they were called in the jargon of jingju practitioners.1 The

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1 “Three-inch golden lotus” 三寸金蓮 (sancun jinlian) is a trope for bound feet, as for example in Feng Jicai’s novel The Three-Inch Golden Lotus. See Feng Jicai 馮驥才, The Three-Inch Golden Lotus, trans. David Wakefield (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press,
character qiao “蹺” is formed from a combination of zu “⻚” (feet) and qiao “喬” (in imitation of), indicating it meant “in imitation of [bound] feet.” In Taiwan it is still written as 蹺; however, in Mainland China it is now habitually written as “蹺.” The reason for this variation remains unknown, yet a plausible explanation might be that it occurred during the Chinese Character Simplification Movement 漢字簡化運動 (Hanzi jianhua yundong) which was launched after the establishment of the PRC, and probably removed the original written form permanently from the corpus of simplified Chinese characters.

No one knows of the precise origins of qiao, but their first use in Beijing is commonly ascribed to Wei Changsheng 魏長生 (1744–1802). As Yang Zhangsheng 楊掌生 (1808–1856) noted, “qiao were not seen in Beijing before Wei Changsheng [came].” After Wei’s introduction of qiao to Beijing, the term “false feet” was frequently mentioned in notation books. Qiao flourished

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2 Xun Huisheng 荀慧生, Xun Huisheng yanju sanlun 荀慧生演劇散論 [Scattered Comments on the Dramatic Performances of Xun Huisheng] (Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1963), 321. Qi Rushan 齊如山, Guoju shenduan pu 國劇身段譜 [The Performance of Jingju] (Mimeograph, 1956), 62. Notably, in Shuowen jiezi 說文解字 (Analytical Dictionary of Chinese Characters), qiao means “to step out and ascend a small height” (qiao, juzu xiaogao ye 蹺, 舉足小高也). See Xu Shen 許慎, Shuowen jiezi, ed. Duan Yucai 段玉裁 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1981), 82–83. In contrast to this dictionary, I prefer the argument of jingju actors, as Shuowen jiezi was written far back in the Han dynasty, and the actors were not likely to consult this dictionary for the meaning of qiao. The statement of the actors is a reductive, however direct way to define qiao.

from the High Qing onwards, with their legitimacy never fundamentally challenged until the CCP outlawed their use during the Drama Reform (Xigai) movement of the early years of the PRC. Equating qiao with the practice of footbinding in a reductive way, CCP cadres considered their use as a reflection of the humiliation of Chinese women during pre-modern times, whereas women were now considered to hold up “half of the sky” (banbian tian 半邊天).

The first section of Chapter Four provides an overall introduction to qiao and the training for a dan actor to use them. As the skills of qiao were one of the sine qua non for a successful huadan, wudan or daomadan, the prolonged training commonly commenced once a protégé was approximately ten years of age and lasted for the next decade. The training for a dan actor to master the skills of qiao was harsh, but it resulted in qiao-users’ deft gait and soft gesture, which were attractive to the jingju aficionados. Additionally, qiao were able to “lengthen” the actors’ legs by 10cm or more, making him look more slender.

Besides the dimension of artistry, Section Two moves onto discuss the flirtatious connotation of qiao, which were in the first place an imitation of women’s bound feet. The use of qiao was connected to a few salacious plays. These plays, designated as “I, Sister-in-Law” (saozi wo 嫂子我) by Andrea S. Goldman, feature huadan roles, in which the use of qiao is a must.4 In this constellation of plays (e.g. Zhan wancheng 戰宛城, The Battle of Wanheng), the

4 Andrea S. Goldman does not analyse the use of qiao in “I, sister-in-law” plays, but mentions them briefly when discussing the jingju play Cuiping shan 翠屏山 (Cuiping Mountain). See Andrea S. Goldman, Opera and the City: The Politics of Culture in Beijing, 1770–1900 (California: Stanford University Press, 2012), 175–235.
use of qiao, as imitation bound feet, was integral to the flirtatious behaviour of the actors performing the huadan roles.

The third section examines how the use of qiao was prohibited following the Drama Reform (Xigai 戲改) movement launched by the CCP in the wake of the founding of the PRC. During the Drama Reform, the prevalent “progressive” discourse infiltrated the theatrical domain, turning it into a vehicle for the Party’s social, cultural, and political agenda. Due to the politicised social environment in the 1950s, qiao were oversimplified as being synonymous with footbinding, representative of the “feudal” repression of women and were therefore to be eliminated. Due to the relaxed political control after the Reform and Opening in the late 1970s the use of qiao was revived. Modern audiences were curious about the technical virtuosity that the use of qiao requires, and companies thus recovered the use of them, primarily in pursuit of financial benefits. However, the legacy of the reductive discourse of the 1950s remains. For example, in 2004, when the Wuhan jingju Company presented a new play, Sancun jinlian 三寸金蓮 (The Three-Inch Golden Lotus) a few critics still associated qiao simply with footbinding, reviving the 1950s arguments that they should no longer be used.

Despite the CCP’s oversimplification that qiao are synonymous with bound feet, and thus represent the “feudal” repression of women, the skills of qiao (qiao gong 躤功) are in the first place theatrical. The virtuosic skills required to use qiao effectively were greatly admired by theatrical aficionados, in a manner similar to the enjoyment audiences feel for the artistry of a ballerina. Nevertheless, the practice of footbinding kept being renarrated in
the service of changing sociocultural and sociopolitical demands, which inevitably influenced attitudes towards the use of qiao.

There have been a range of reinterpretations of footbinding, each of which seeks to rationalise the practice. For example, at the beginning of the Qing dynasty, Han Chinese scholars insisted on the practice of footbinding amongst Han women in order to maintain their difference from the “barbarian” Manchu subjugators. Centuries later, on the eve of the fall of the Qing empire, Han scholars claimed that footbinding was a humiliation forced on Han Chinese women by their Manchu overlords, and was to be terminated for the benefit of the Chinese nation. In the 1950s, the CCP attempted to eradicate qiao from the theatre by declaring that footbinding was a “feudal” remnant of China’s imperial past. These changing attitudes towards footbinding influenced the way people perceived the place of the theatrical techniques required for the use of qiao in modern theatre.

**A Virtuosic Artistry of the Dan Role-Category**

According to Huang Yufu’s 黃毓馥 definition, qiao were “a kind of prop used in traditional jingju by the actors who perform female roles, in order to imitate women’s bound feet.” This section examines the structures of different types of qiao, how performers of the dan category are trained to master the skills in the use of qiao, and how the virtuosic skills create visual enjoyment for audiences in the same way as ballet does in the West.

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What are Qiao Like?

In the narrow sense, qiao refer to ying qiao 硬蹻 (lit. “hard qiao”). Made from a pair of stiff boards of date palm wood, qiao are around 30cm long, 6cm wide and 1cm deep (depending on the user’s foot size). Each board is bent one-third of the way along, dividing it into a 10cm-long horizontal slab and a 20cm-long slanted section (70° to 75° to the level). The slab is shaped so it resembles the three-inch, bowed bound feet of women. Only the wearer’s big toe is put on the slab, while the rest of his foot is tied up on the slanted section, which remains unseen, under the trousers of the qiao-user. As all the user’s weight falls on the two big toes, balancing and moving on qiao requires considerable skill. All dan actors excluding qingyi 青衣 (lit. “black clothes”) were drilled in the use of qiao from the age of nine.

Ying qiao are divided into two categories, wen qiao 文蹻 (lit. “cultural qiao”) and wu qiao 武蹻 (lit. “martial qiao”). Commonly, wen qiao were 75° to the ground, and used by huadan 花旦 (lit. “flower woman,” lively and/or flirtatious young woman), while wu qiao were 70° to the ground and used by wudan 武旦 (lit. “martial woman,” female warrior) and daomadan 刀馬旦 (lit. “knife-horse woman,” high-ranking woman generals). The angles of wu qiao were slightly less extreme because of the acrobatic fighting required. (See Figures 5 and 6)

Two more sorts of qiao were invented during the Republican period. Ruan qiao 軟蹻 (lit. “soft qiao”) looked like a pair of wedges, the heels of which were produced out of cloth, hence the name. They were allegedly an
invention of an amateur jingju actor in Beijing during the 1930–40s, who admired the use of qiao but lacked the childhood training. Meanwhile, Xun Huisheng (荀慧生 1900–68) invented gailiang qiao (改良蹻, lit. “modified qiao”) when he put on weight in his forties and found it difficult to control the ying qiao. The slanted section of gailiang qiao were only 50–60° to the ground and were shorter than ying qiao. They did not restrict the heels and ankles in the same way that ying qiao did, making it easier for performers to use them. Both ruan qiao and gailiang qiao were devised as substitutes for those who for some reason could not use traditional ying qiao. When we mention qiao, we are primarily examining the traditional ying qiao.

The Training of Qiao

In jingju (and other folk theatrical forms), the skills of qiao were once a necessity for huadan, wudan and daomadan. At the beginning of a performer’s career, he had to be trained in a set of fundamental skills required by all the role-categories, such as handstands, backbends, etc. Observing the trainee in terms of both physical build and personality, the instructor would decide a particular role-category for him to pursue, enabling him to best fulfil his potential. If a novice had a resemblance to a woman, he might be designated to the dan category, and the harsh drills required of qiao would then become routine. This training commonly began an early age (approximately nine or ten), when his body had good plasticity, ensuring that he would be able to gain proficiency in these skills. Xiao Cuihua, 小翠花 (or Yu Lianquan 于連泉, 1900–1967), who learnt jingju at a conventional theatrical school (keban 科班) called Mingshenghe 鳴盛和 from the age of seven, stated in his memoir that
“No training is more painful than that of qiao.”\(^6\) Xiao Cuihua’s efforts, however, paid off. With the best mastery of the skills of the qiao amongst his contemporaries, Xiao Cuihua was admired as one of the best huadan actors during the Republican period.\(^7\)

The training of qiao is divided into five levels, and it could take as long as a decade to progress through the various levels to gain proficiency. To begin with, the novice would accustom himself gradually to standing on qiao. As the body’s weight falls fully on the toe, a novice was likely to have difficulty even in walking slowly because of the pain, hence the novice would rely on other objects—a wall or a stick—to keep balance and move around.

Once he was able to move around independently, he would then move to the next level, which is called hao qiao 耗蹺. Hao qiao, which literally means “to spend time on qiao,” was intended to improve balancing skills. Commonly, the time of training kept lengthening until the trainee was able to stand on qiao and not move for about half an hour. As Xun Huisheng recalled, “my master put a black brick, which was 26–30 centimetres’ long, 13–17 centimetres’ wide and 5–7 centimetres’ deep, on the ground, asking me to stand on it. Several days later, he put the smaller surface on the ground, asking me to stand on it. After I was able to stand still, I finally moved onto the smallest surface.”\(^8\) Sometimes, the master would even sharpen a piece of bamboo and put it in the hollows at the back of Xun’s knees. Once he bent his

\(^6\) Xiao, Jingju huadan biaoyan yishu, 145.
\(^7\) Xiao, Jingju huadan biaoyan yishu, 143–144.
\(^8\) Xun, 323.
knees, the bamboo would hurt his legs and remind him to stand tall. Then, the brick was laid (on the smallest surface) on a bench, and the bench was put on two desks. Zhou Jinlian 周金蓮 (1923–2012) recalled in an interview that her instructor had a trio of *qiao*-users balance standing on a single bench. If one fell off, all would fall.

While brutal, this practice was common for most *dan* actors. Subsequent levels of training included walking (*zou qiao* 走蹺) and running (*pao qiao* 跑蹺). In training, Xun had to bind a pair of 187.5g sand bags to his lower legs in order that he was able to run more deftly, although these would be removed in formal performances. Both Mei Lanfang and Xun Huisheng underwent drills that required them to run on ice; and Xun was even required to move slowly on the edge of a water vat. Being able to run deftly on *qiao*, the actor was finally required to combine all the various skills of the *dan* category, for example, the skills of the handkerchief, the skills of the fan, and the skills of *qiao* as an integrated whole, in order to portray the personae of the heroine in a better way. By the time *qiao*-users had reached this final level, the *qiao* had already become part of their bodies.

Training in the use of *qiao* started from a very young age for the aspiring *dan* actors. They were required to look on the *qiao* as an extension of their own feet. For instance, Cheng Yanqiu was required by his master, Rong Diexian 楊

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9 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
11 Huang, *Jingju, qiao he Zhongguo de xingbie guanxi*, 173.
12 Xun, *Xun Huisheng yanju sanlun*, 324.
13 Ibid.
14 Huang, *Jingju, qiao he Zhongguo de xingbie guanxi*, 185.
蝶仙 (b. 1893), to wear the stilts for the whole day, even doing his master’s housework while wearing them. Once, Xun Huisheng followed his master on a circuit performance through a few different hamlets. Although Xun was just nine, his master required him to run on qiao after the wagon of their troupe as they went from hamlet to hamlet—in order to improve his proficiency in the skills of qiao.15 A journey of a few li 里 (1 Chinese li is 0.5 kilometre) is fatiguing even to an adult, so this must have been excruciating for the young Xun. However, this harsh training led directly to the Republican dan actors’ extraordinary skills of qiao.

The Technical Function of Qiao

Because of the harsh training, qiao-users were often able to develop virtuosic artistry in the skills of the stilts, thereby enhancing the visual enjoyment of their performance for the audience. Virtually the whole of the huadan repertoire required actors to use qiao. For some of the shorter plays (xiao xi 小戲) for huadan actors, the primary concern is not the story itself, but how the actor performs the story by means of his virtuosity. This is the case, for example, in Xiao shangfen 小上墳 (Visiting the Grave), Xiao fangniu 小放牛 (The Girl and the Cowboy), Shi yuzhuo 拾玉鐲 (Picking up the Jade Bracelet), and Meilong zhen 梅隴鎮 (Meilong Town), in which the performer has to run for most of the time of the performance. For this reason Xiao Shangfen is also referred to as Feifeifei 飛飛飛 (Fly, Fly, Fly) because the heroine runs quickly and deftly, as if flying. At the end of the play, the heroine must pretend to ride a donkey for a period of around fifteen minutes, and needs to control the

15 Xun, Xun Huisheng yanju sanlun, 327.
donkey when it takes fright. This requires a very sound mastery of the skills of *qiao* in order to perform the dance-like movements skilfully. (See Figure 7)

The skills of *qiao* are also essential to the categories of *wudan* and *daomadan*, which portray a group of women warriors or knights-errant whose roles focus on combat through the deft footwork developed from the use of *qiao*. Li Jinhong 李金鸿 (1923–2010) relates a story about his instructor Song Dezhu 宋德珠 (1918–84), one of “the Later Great Four *Dan* Actors” (*Si xiao ming dan* 四小名旦), when he performed the heroine in *Qingshi shan* 青石山 (*Mountain Blackstone*). When he ran in from the entrance curtain, as fast as a whirlwind, striking a pose in the centre of the stage, the audience would burst into a din of “*hao*” 好 (good/bravo).

Although the foregoing discussion about *qiao* is based on materials in the *jingju* domain, *qiao* are not unique to *jingju*, but are considered essential for a lot of other theatrical genres, for example, *jinju* 晉劇 (folk drama of Central Shanxi), *puju* 蒲劇 (folk drama of South Shanxi) and *liuzi xi* 柳子戲 (folk drama of Shandong), in such plays as *Lishi Siniang* 劉氏四娘 (*Mrs Liu the Fourth, or Mulian Saves Mother, jinju*), *Gua hua* 掛畫 (*Hanging the Painting, puju*), *Da shuguan* 大書館 (*The Story in the Study, liuzixi*). One of the appealing aspects of *Hanging the Painting* is the performance of virtuosic “armchair skills” (*yizi gong* 椅子功). This involves a series of acrobatic movements on the back and arms of a chair. Wang Cuncai 王存才 (1893–1957), a *huadan* artist of *puju*, could even jump onto the chair-back without causing it to shake.

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16 Huang, *Jingju, qiao he Zhongguo de xingbie guanxi*, 176.
17 Huang, *Jingju, qiao he Zhongguo de xingbie guanxi*, 169.
While audiences most enjoyed the visual aspects of a qiao-user’s virtuosic artistry, there were other features involved in the use of qiao that they appreciated, such as the way this could change the contour of the actor’s body. Very few actors were born with an ideal body proportion. With the use of 10-centimetre long qiao, an actor is able to extend his legs and better fulfil the demand to come close to the so-called “Golden Ratio,” whereby the legs are in an ideal relationship to the rest of the body. The huadan actor Mao Shilai 毛世來 (1921–1994) used qiao all the time because he was short, even in a play like The Story of Su San (Yutang chun 玉堂春), in which the heroine Su San kneels for most of the time. Additionally, the use of qiao in a series of dancelike actions can enhance the animation and/or flirtatiousness of the heroine. With his waist swaying like soft willow branches, the actor’s mincing on qiao looks more attractive.

Training in the use of qiao in childhood was also a form of physical training that laid solid foundation for the career a performer. It could develop the plasticity of an actor’s body and help him avoid defects in movement, for example, a hunched back or a bent waist. Although Mei Lanfang 梅蘭芳 (1894–1961) was a qingyi actor and thus did not have to learn the skills of qiao, his instructor had him undergo the training for two years as a basic dan skill. Mei was thankful for this training in the use of qiao because the drills helped develop the flexibility of his waist, which meant he was able to carry out a

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backbend in *Guifei zuijiu* 貴妃醉酒 (*The Drunken Concubine*) well into his fifties.\(^{19}\)

**The Twofold Nature of Qiao: From Virtuosity to Femininity**

Although *qiao* were closely connected to a set of virtuosic skills that created visual enjoyment for audiences, their use was also common in salacious plays. Many lewd performances of wanton women involved the use of *qiao*. This was because bound feet were considered to be central to the femininity and sexual attraction of Chinese women, and *qiao* were precisely devised in order to imitate them.

**Qiao as Bound Feet: An Object of Passions**

In *Sexual Life in Ancient China*, Robert van Gulik (1910–1967) argues that touching a woman’s breast or buttock was considered fine, however, her feet forbidden territory for others.\(^{20}\) Thus, revealing an actor’s feet (represented by *qiao*) was central to erotic scenes in pre-modern Chinese plays. Chen Moxiang 陳墨香 (1884–1942) refers to actors who perform flirtatious roles in *jingju* in 1930s Beijing as “I, sister-in-law” 嫂子我 (*saozi wo*).\(^{21}\) “I, sister-in-law” plays were, according to Goldman, so designated because these were the first words uttered by the protagonist as she emerged from the entrance-door.\(^{22}\) They were wanton women who seduce their husband’s brothers and suffer karmic

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\(^{19}\) Mei, *Mei Lanfang huiyi lu*, 31.


\(^{21}\) This translation comes from Andrea Goldman, *Opera and the City: The Politics and Culture in Beijing, 1770–1900* (California: Stanford University Press, 2012), 175.

\(^{22}\) Ibid.
retribution for their licentiousness. These plays were written primarily to convey the norms of Neo-Confucian morality, but were often enjoyed by the audience for their salacious content. As Andrea S. Goldman notes, plenty of “sister-in-law” roles were adapted into jingju from Water Margin stories that were first rewritten into chuanqi plays during the Ming dynasty: examples include Yan Poxi 閻婆惜 in Shuihu ji 水滸記 (The Record of the Water Margin), Pan Jinlian 潘金蓮 in Yixia ji 義俠記 (The Righteous Hero), and Pan Qiaoyun 潘巧雲 in Cuiping shan 翠屏山 (Cuiping Mountain).23 These wanton women were performed by the tiedan 貼旦 (secondary young female roles) or “floozy dan,” whose role was to play “characters of more dubious pedigree and moral stature.”24

After the emergence of jingju during the late Qing, the roles of Yan Poxi, Pan Jinlian and Pan Qiaoyun were carried over into the jingju repertoire. In addition, two more flirtatious women, Zou Shi 鄒氏 in Zhan Wancheng 戰宛城 (The Battle of Wancheng) and Jia Shi 賈氏 in Daming Fu 大名府 (Daming Prefecture) joined the group of “sisters-in-law,” and in doing so the lover became not just the husband’s brother but any man, whether he be related or not. In the “I, sister-in-law” plays of jingju, from that late Qing period onwards, huadan actors began to use qiao for these roles. Actually, as footbinding was not invented until the Song dynasty (10–11th centuries), the use of qiao in these roles was anachronistic. But it at least demonstrated how the late Qing playwrights reconsidered or reinvented the fetish of bound feet,

23 Andrea Goldman, Opera and the City, 176.
which reinforced women’s feet as an outlet for men’s desire. Revealing them was often considered flirtatious and morally debased.

The Battle of Wancheng is an example of a play that included such an “I, sister-in-law” role. This play was extracted from Luo Guanzhong’s 羅貫中 (c. 1330–1400) famous novel The Romance of The Three Kingdoms (Sanguo yanyi 三國演義), and was rewritten into a jingju play by the Shanghai actor Xia Yueheng 夏月恆 (1865–1934) during the late Qing period. This play was devoted to a portrayal of Cao Cao’s 曹操 (155–220) military incursion into Wancheng, which was formerly the fiefdom of the Han official and warlord Zhang Ji 張濟 (d. 196). After Zhang Ji’s death, Zhang Xiu 張繡 (d. 207) seized control over the fief. When Cao Cao entered Wancheng, Zou Shi — the widow of Zhang Ji and aunt of Zhang Xiu — became his mistress. Their relationship was initially a secret but was eventually discovered. After he learnt of this, Zhang Xiu furiously attacked Cao’s base in Wancheng, evicting Cao and killing Zou.

In the play, Cao Cao and Zou Shi’s relationship serves as an interlude to the main battle scenes. Zou’s flirtatious behaviour is complicated because of her previous marriage to Zhang Ji. As she declares in her brief self-introduction:

I, Zou Shi, am the wife of Zhang Ji, the General of the Flying Calvary (piaoji jiangjun 騎騎將軍), who is unfortunately deceased. Without a son, I have to lean

25 The Battle of Wancheng was a kunju play. It was transplanted to jingju by Xia Yueheng and first played by the Songzhu 嵩祝 Troupe. Notably, the use of qiao in The Battle of Wancheng was an invention in this play, as none of the dan actors of kunju used qiao.
on Zhang Xiu, who defends Wancheng now… (Weeps) While I am well-clothed and well-fed, I am dissatisfied. What a bore! (Weeps).26

The reason why Zou Shi, or “Lady Zhang,” felt dissatisfied was her lovesickness. Actually, the name of the scene—Sichun 思春 (lit. “Thinking of Spring”)—already connotes Zou’s lovesickness because the term sichun is used in classical Chinese literature to indicate a woman’s romantic admiration for a man. When Zou says “Poor me! Within the vacant chamber I cannot bear the loneliness; the war, as well, frightens me to death,”27 the war is obviously not the main reason for her lament, but her lovesickness is. Due to her aristocratic status, which means she cannot remarry, Zou remains a widow following Zhang Ji’s death. The vibrant scenery of spring contrasts with the bleak future life in front of her. Painfully she sighs in the arias:

[I] lament loneliness in the austere curtain,
[My] waist emaciated;
[I] failed to seize the brilliant moments,
[My] life is wholly ruined.

Su luowei tan jimo 素羅帷嘆寂寞,
Yaowei shousun 腰圍瘦損;
Gufu le hao nianhua 辜負了好年華,

26 Based on a 1981 video recording of the performance of Zhan wancheng (The Battle of Wancheng) by Chen Yongling 陳永玲 (1929–2006). Chen was the best protégé of Xiao Cuihua. They were both famous for their performances of wanton women.
27 Chen Yongling, 1981 video. The Chinese text is “可憐我獨守孤燈夜難寢，又遇上兵荒亂晝夜心驚.” In the 1950s, Xun Huisheng wanted to purify the sexual connotations in the performance of Zhan Wancheng, see Xun, “Lüetan Zhan Wancheng,” 略談《戰宛城》[A Brief Discussion on The Battle of Wancheng], in Xun Huisheng yanju sanlun, 168–177.
With a handkerchief, the protagonist Zou Shi slightly brushes her shoes/
qiáo, lifting, swaying, and flaunting them. These movements can be
understood in two dimensions. For the actor, he is able to display his virtuosic
artistry in using qiáo, while for the heroine Zou Shi (the actor’s second self),
the behaviour functions as an unconscious manifestation of her latent
lovesickness. As a woman’s erotic attractiveness was primarily related to her
bound feet, Zou hints at her flirtatious nature and feminine attractiveness by
brushing her shoes/qiáo. The audience, an overwhelming majority of whom
were men, were in fact watching an erotic performance. Many unfaithful
women in jìngjù, for example, the huádàn heroine Pan Qiaoyun in the
aforementioned Cuiping Mountain, display the same set of actions of flaunting
their qiáo/feet as Zou does here.

Therefore, as a qiáo-user, the dan actor in The Battle of Wancheng reinforces
the way in which bound feet became a fetishized sexual object of invented or
reinvented femininity through the course of Chinese history. In the case of
characters such as Zou Shi and Pan Qiaoyun, who demonstrate their
lovesickness by flaunting their feet, the connotations of this display are at
least twofold. On the one hand, the audience can see a dan actor flaunting his
mastery of the skills required to use qiáo. On the other hand, members of the
audience are also watching an erotic display in which a woman exhibits her
feet as sexual objects. While she (the dan actor) is entertaining her male
counterparts within the play, her erotic behaviour also stimulates amongst

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members of the audience the manifold desires associated with bound feet.

Politicised Theatre and the Final Abolition of Qiao

Since the beginning of the twentieth century there have been sustained efforts to terminate the use of qiao in Chinese theatre. This began with the action of individual performers but was not followed across the whole jingju domain. In the 1950s, the CCP brought the authority of the Party-State to bear on this issue when it launched the Drama Reform (Xigai 戏改) movement, which led to the abolition of the use of qiao. In a reductive way, the CCP cadres claimed that qiao represented the humiliation experienced by Chinese women in “feudal” society. By the late 1970s, the Party-State began to relax its earlier attacks on pre-modern Chinese culture, but despite this the association of qiao with footbinding continued to concern many people. As a result, there is still much debate about whether the use of qiao should be revived as part of the cultural legacy of jingju.

Wang Yaoqing Abandons Qiao

Wang Yaoqing was the first dan actor to abandon the use of qiao. Wang was the instructor of “the Great Four Dan Actors” and the first Chancellor of the National Academy of Chinese Theatre Arts (1949–1954). He was widely considered the best ever innovator in the dan art of jingju, being the first actor to transcend the boundary between huadan and qingyi roles, finally creating a new dan category, huashan, that did not involve the use of qiao. Subsequently, the CCP, and also many scholars described Wang’s action as “honourable,” an example of “anti-feudalism.” This is a reductionist argument, however, seeing
Wang’s abandonment of the use of qiao simply in terms of the “progressive” narrative of Marxist historiography promulgated by the CCP. Actually, it was just a result of the fact that he lacked the necessary skills to use stilts, not undergoing training in their use as he was a qingyi protégé. When Wang abandoned qiao in the 1900s, the skills of qiao were still essential, if not central, to an individual huadan actor. Wang Yaoqing had to look for his own way to “borrow” the huadan repertoire without using qiao.

In 1909, Wang Yaoqing first played without qiao in Ernü yingxiong zhuan 女女英雄傳 (The Story of Heroines). Performing the role of He Yufeng 何玉鳳 had called for virtuoso skills in qiao. Unable to carry out the same level of acrobatic performance as the huadan and wudan actor Yu Yuqin 余玉琴 (1868–1939), Wang Yaoqing built a few realistic actions into his performance.29 Huang Yufu considers this decision by Wang to abandon the use of qiao as constituting “a revolution” in Chinese theatre.”30 She argues that the virtue of Wang Yaoqing’s version of The Story of Heroines was based on what she called its “Declined Difficulty [and] Advanced Authenticity.”31 Wang’s actions could be considered a development for jingju performance, but his inability to use qiao should not be interpreted as the foundation for this so-called “revolution.”

Although in the official interpretation of the CCP Wang Yaoqing’s decision to abandon the use of qiao was revolutionary and thus progressive,

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29 For more details, refer Huang Yufu’s Figure in Jingju, qiao he Zhongguo de xingbie guanxi, 83.
30 Huang, Jingju, qiao he Zhongguo de xingbie guanxi, 79.
31 Huang, Jingju, qiao he Zhongguo de xingbie guanxi, 85.
Wang was the subject of considerable criticism at the time, and many others continued to train and use stilts in their performances. For instance, in the 1930s Shang Xiaoyun 尚小雲 (1900–1976), one of the “Great Four” and one of Wang’s disciples, still forced his son, Shang Changlin 尚長麟 (1931–1983) to learn the skills of qiao. Zhu Qinxin 朱琴心 (1901–61), a jingju aficionado who “plunged into the sea” (xia hai 下海) to be a professional dan actor, drilled himself in the skills of qiao. Similarly, Xiao Cuihua (Yu Lianquan) kept on using qiao before the ban was introduced during the early years of the PRC.

Drama Reform: The Politicisation of the Theatre and the Abolition of Qiao

While Wang Yaoqing’s decision to abandon the use of qiao was confined to himself and a small group of his protégés, the 1950s Drama Reform (Xigai) movement dealt a fatal blow to the practice. As a constituent of the CCP’s political movement, the Drama Reform reined in theatrical activities to “enlighten” the wider Chinese society and to ensure “correct” behaviour. On 2 February 1949, the State Council formed a Drama Reform Committee (Xiqu gaijin weiyuanhui 戲曲改進委員會) and afterwards, on 1 November 1949, formalised it as a permanent structure, the Bureau of Drama Reform (Xiqu gaijin ju 戲曲改進局). A few CCP cadres assumed senior positions in the bureau: Tian Han 田漢 (1898–1968) was nominated as Chief Commissioner, and Ma Shaobo 马少波 (1918–2009) General Secretary. These Party cultural officials controlled the theatrical domain, making it a politicised venue for the social, cultural and political concerns of the Party-State.

32 Huang, Jingju, qiao he Zhongguo de xingbie guanxi, 156.
In 1951, the Bureau’s General Secretary Ma Shaobo wrote an editorial for *Renmin Ribao* 人民日報 (*The People’s Daily*) and raised seventeen “unhealthy” customs that needed to be eliminated. The first customs in the list was “bound feet” (*xiaojiao* 小腳). As Ma declared,

> Qiao are used to represent bound feet. They are an expression of women’s pathological condition, resulting from their repression in Chinese history. The *feudal ruling class* tortured women brutally for its own enjoyment. This is a blemish on Chinese history, which should not be demonstrated or admired as an art…This is an embodiment of the mindset of the *feudal ruling class*.

In Ma’s statement, *qiao* were deliberately equated with footbinding. However, traditional *jingju* plays (*chuantong xi* 傳統戲) are historical plays *per se*. It is obviously anti-historical if the customs (e.g. polygamy, hierarchy, etc.) from the past are removed from such plays. Furthermore, by declaring that footbinding was initiated by the “*feudal ruling class*,” Ma raised the issue of *qiao* from the theatrical level to the “higher” level of politics. For the Party-State, which was intent on eliminating all classes, designating something as belonging to the “*feudal*” ruling class was a serious criticism.

Ma Shaobo elaborated on this in another article called “*Guanyu chengqing wutai xingxiang*” 關於澄清舞台形象 (*About the Purification of Theatrical Roles*). Ma begins the article by declaring that “the purification of

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33 *Ma Shaobo 馬少波*, “*Qingchu bingtai, choue, waiqu de wutai xingxiang,*” 清除病態、醜惡、歪曲的舞台形象 [*Eliminate Unhealthy, Ugly and Distorted Stage Images*], in *Ma Shaobo, Xiqu gaige lunji 戲曲改革論集* [*A Collection of Articles on Drama Reform*] (Shanghai: Huadong renmin chubanshe, 1952), 91. Originally published in *Renmin ribao* in 27/9/1951. The Italics are mine.
theatrical roles...is understood at the level of the highest principle of patriotism as required by the Central Committee [of the CCP].”

Through a firm commitment to the Party’s notion that art was also (or in the first place) politics, Ma denied any artistic value for qiao, but focused on “the sin of the nation” that they reflected. Furthermore, he argued that the posture of a dan actor on qiao is definitely not attractive, but rather affectedly histrionic.

The criterion of “correctness” is determined by the Party. The CCP launched the Drama Reform movement on the behalf and in the name of the renmin 人民 (lit. “the people”). Renmin is not simply a synonym for all the dwellers in the state, but is used primarily to signify the friends and/or followers of the Party. Even if one is Chinese, they can be considered non-renmin if they violate the dictates of the Party. The removal of qiao from Chinese theatre during the Drama Reform movement was forcibly performed “for the benefit of renmin,” assuming that renmin themselves had no ability to discriminate between what was beneficial and what was harmful to them. The Party’s intention was ultimately to manufacture a group of “new” renmin as “screws” in the communist machine. Once the issue of qiao had been elevated
to the height of the Party-State, no individual actor or scholar would dare to
defy the CCP’s ban on the use of qiao, as they would be afraid of being
accused of being revisionist or counter-revolutionary. For example, Xiao
Cuihua, an eminent huadan who was famous for his skilful use of qiao and
who was already in his fifties by this time, had to create a new series of foot
movements without qiao in order to continue his artistic life.38

*The Three-Inch Golden Lotus*

The resurgence of qiao was one of the many novelties experienced by
Chinese people following the launching of the Reform era. In December 2004,
*The Three-Inch Golden Lotus* (*Sancun Jinlian* 三寸金蓮) was dramatized from
Feng Jicai’s 馮驥才 (b. 1942) 1987 novel and first performed at the fourth
jingju Art Festival (*Jingju Yishu* 京劇藝術節).39 Liu Ziwei 劉子微 (formerly
known as Liu Wei 劉薇), Dean of Wuhan jingjuyuan 武漢京劇院 (Wuhan
jingju Company) starred in it and won the 22nd *Meihua jiang* 梅花奬 (Plum
Blossom Prize)—the highest honour for an individual actor/actress of classical
theatrical art in China—for her artistic excellence. Soon afterwards, in 2015, Qi
Shufang 齊淑芳 (b. 1942) invited Liu Ziwei to New York, where the play was
well received.40

The success of *Three-Inch Golden Lotus* was primarily due to the fact that
all the performers who played the female roles used qiao. Although none of

38 Xiao, *Jingju huadan bianyan yishu*, 141.
40 Qi Shufang is a jingju actress who visited the United States in 1988 and remained there, founding the Qi Shufang Jingju Company.
the performers in the company, including the leading actress Liu Ziwei, had undergone the decade-long training necessary to master the skills required to perform in qiao as effectively as their dan predecessors, their very use of qiao was sufficient to satisfy the curiosity of audiences. However, the Wuhan Jingju Company's rendition of The Three-Inch Golden Lotus simplified Feng Jicai's nuanced novel, and served to reinforce qiao's connection to footbinding in a reductive way.

The play is set in the early decades of the twentieth century, when the custom of footbinding was being called into question. The heroine's name—Ge Xianglian 戈香蓮—foreshadows her ironic fate, which is firmly connected to her feet.41 Because of poverty, her grandmother binds her feet, enabling her to marry Tong Shaorong 佟紹榮, the firstborn son of a well-off family. After she is married, however, her husband beats her, her sisters-in-law humiliate her, and her father-in-law lusts after her because of her bound feet. Carefully maintaining balance between these forces, Ge Xianglian finally becomes the “female patriarch” after Tong Shaorong’s death. Although she owes her position to her bound feet, she sends her own daughter Lianxin 蓮心 off to the south of China in order to save her from footbinding. Years later, Ge Xianglian is brought into a “foot contest,” in which Ge and Niu display their feet in public and let passers-by judge which are better. Her rival, Niu Junying 牛俊英, is the leader of the Tianzu Hui 天足會 (Natural Feet Community). Ge loses the contest and soon after she dies. In a melodramatic scene, Ge sees Niu Junying’s bracelet on her deathbed, and

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41 Feng, The Three-Inch Golden Lotus, 12. David Wakefield translated the name of Ge Xianglian as “Fragrant Lotus,” which is a synonym for bound feet.
realises that she is her daughter Lianxin, who she had presented the bracelet to before sending her away. It is her own daughter, whom she would not allow to have bound feet, that finally fights to terminate this practice.

Many Chinese critics think the jingju version of The Three-Inch Golden Lotus allegorically “disclosed the progressive trajectory of late Qing China.” This kind of cliché reflects the mainstream ideology of revolutionary transformation, but fails to capture the nuance of the heroine Ge Xianglian. Was she victimising other women in the Tong family by promulgating footbinding, or herself an ordinary woman victimised by the fetishized convention? The novel captures this ambivalence, especially through Ge’s interior reflections, but these are completely absent in the play, which is reduced to an account of how the new, natural feet custom overcomes the footbinding tradition of the past.

In this sense, if we were to simply accept the narrative of the play The Three-Inch Golden Lotus as reflecting reality, we would oversimplify the complexity lurking in qiao, accepting the problematic equation that “qiao=footbinding=feudalism” and thus consider the prohibition against the use of qiao in the theatre as simply a reflection of a “progressive” process. This discourse developed by the CCP in the wake of the founding of the PRC still remains influential in the twenty-first century.

A Modern Debate: The Fate of Qiao in the New Millennium

The CCP’s progressive narrative on the issue of qiao was reductive, as qiao were not simply a synonym for footbinding, nor could the issue of footbinding be reduced to simply “a humiliation of Chinese women,” which confined them within the family. If we analyse statement discussed earlier by Ma Shaobo, the General Secretary of the Bureau of Drama Reform, we can see how his logic was flawed:

Major premise: footbinding was a humiliation for Chinese women;
Minor premise: qiao were an imitation of women’s bound feet;
Conclusion: qiao represent the humiliation of Chinese women.

This inference is obviously problematic as Ma considered qiao as a synonym for bound feet. After the launching of the Reform era in the late 1970s, the “progressive” Maoist-Marxist historiography promulgated by the CCP was reconceived. However, the 1950s formula remained influential. In her 1998 book Jingju, qiao he Zhongguo de xingbie guanxi (1902–1937), Huang Yufu 黃毓馥 (b. 1945), still considered qiao as an embodiment of China’s “feudal” hierarchy, which represented the Confucian patriarchy’s repression of women.43

A decade later, a few scholars began to doubt the straightforward

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juxtaposition of *qiao* and footbinding, and reconceived the skills of *qiao* as a precious legacy from *jingju*’s past.

In 2007, a debate emerged amongst a few scholars over the appropriateness of the restoration of *qiao*. In this debate, the relationship between *qiao* and footbinding still needed to be addressed. In his treatise *Qiaogong xiaoyi* 蹺功小議 (*Brief Discussion on the Skills of Qiao*), Shi Zhenji 史震己 (b. 1935) argued against what he saw as the oversimplified juxtaposition of *qiao* and footbinding. According to Shi, what the traditional plays (*chuantong xi*) depict is ancient Chinese life, of which footbinding was just one part. If the reason for us to abolish the use of *qiao* is that footbinding is now terminated, the whole traditional repertoire should be eliminated as it represented life in “feudal” China, which is now well and truly over. Instead, Shi Zhenji focused primarily on the artistic function of *qiao*, which are a pair of props for the *dan* performers to recreate the soft gait and gesture of women. Therefore, if we discard *qiao*, we are likely to discard the artistry that was closely connected to the use of them.

Soon afterwards, however, Chang Qingshan 常青山 argued that a performance in which *qiao* were used was not beautiful, but had an affectedly histrionic manner. Furthermore, he suggested that considering bound feet to be attractive reflected a type of abnormal aesthetic. It was also shameful as it nullifies the efforts of late-Qing revolutionary pioneers as exemplified by Sun Yat-sen (1866–1925), who fought for the prohibition of footbinding in order to

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liberate Chinese women.\textsuperscript{45} Chang’s statement, which was representative of most who objected to the restoration of \textit{qiao}, was basically a repetition of Ma Shaobo’s 1950s reductionism which still equated \textit{qiao} with footbinding.

As an epilogue to this debate, Qian Jinfan 錢今凡 (b. 1928) defended Shi’s position by criticising Chang’s oversimplification. On the basis of Shi’s statement, Qian indicated the difference of \textit{jingju} performance from real life. Ghastly scenes in real life are often performed in an artistic way in \textit{jingju} plays. For example, in \textit{Zhan taiping} 戰太平 (The War of Taiping), the protagonist Hua Yun 華雲 was shot to death by a volley of arrows. This scene—a soldier rolling in pain—was obviously ghastly. But in \textit{jingju} performance, it is just demonstrated by an acrobatic dance. In the same vein, footbinding is repugnant from a modern perspective, but the performance of bound feet through the use of \textit{qiao} had been developed into a virtuosic artistry in \textit{jingju}. The audience’s admiration for the artistry of \textit{qiao} is the same as that for the dance in \textit{The War of Taiping}.\textsuperscript{46}

Another aspect to this debate was the issue of whether or not \textit{qiao} could be conceived of as “Eastern ballet.” That is, if the formula “\textit{qiao}=Eastern ballet” holds, as Shi argues, “it is foolish to abolish \textit{qiao} while at the same time learning ballet,” and \textit{vice versa}.\textsuperscript{47} This contradiction, and the associated debate, indicate that the Maoist-Marxist “progressive” teleology remains influential.

\textsuperscript{47} Shi, “Qiaogong xiaoyi,” 29.
today. Although qiao have been revived for almost four decades many cadres, academics, and We-Media users continue to conceive of qiao from a clichéd point of view, considering them simply to be emblematic of the humiliation of women.

We can find at least three dimensions in the discourses concerning the issue of qiao. First, at the time Wei Changsheng first introduced qiao to Beijing, his aim was to imitate the gait and gesture of a woman with bound feet in a more realistic way. Gradually, during the late Qing, huadan actors developed a series of skills on the basis of qiao. The virtuosity required for the use of them was admired by audiences in a similar manner to the admiration for ballet in the West. Third, in jingju plays, qiao were often used by the licentious “I, sister-in-law.” When the protagonist flirtatiously reveals her feet (qiao), she was catering for the taste of the audience, an overwhelming majority of whom were men.

In the wake of the founding of the PRC in 1949, the CCP cadres denied the historical context that lay behind the use of qiao. They juxtaposed the issue of qiao and footbinding, and claimed this was representative of the “feudal” society’s repression of women. This oversimplified juxtaposition of qiao and footbinding, however, is problematic. The dates of almost all the salacious “I, sister-in-law” plays were before footbinding was promulgated. Therefore, the flirtatious performance by qiao was just an artificial connection produced by the late Qing playwrights, and was not a reflection of real life. As footbinding
was primarily confined to elite women, the qingyi roles were the ones who should have used qiao. In fact, the use of qiao in qingyi roles is forbidden. This is because the protagonists performed by the qingyi roles adhered to the Confucian moral code. In contrast, it is the huadan roles, which portray gregarious and/or wanton women of lower status, that are the main users of qiao. Rather, the virtuosic artistry of qiao should be revived primarily to preserve the cultural legacy of jingju.
Figure 5 *Ying qiao* 硬蹷. The cloth is used to bind the users’ feet on them.

Figure 6 A performer puts on *qiao*.
Source: Ibid., 24.
Figure 7 Male dan actor Bi Guyun 畢谷雲 (b. 1930) performed the skills of qiao in Xiao shangfen, or Visiting the Grave in circa. 1950.

CHAPTER FIVE

Reconstruction Chinese Masculinity: The Prohibition of Male Dan Actors

In a “struggle session” an old dan actor who was skilled in erotica stared at me. Fear and pity arose in his once flirtatious eyes. He was gay, and had been convicted by the Public Security Bureau as a huai fenzi. At the same time, a Vice Minister of the Propaganda Department of the CCP’s Sichuan Committee who was known for his indulgence in sodomy was excused his behaviour? How could this be?

After the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, all actors were redefined as “practitioners of literature and arts” (wenyi gongzuozhe 文藝工作者), and the best ones as “people’s artists” (renmin yishu jia 人民藝術家). Mei Lanfang and Cheng Yanqiu 程硯秋 (1904–1958), who refused to perform for the Japanese army during the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945), were even invited by the new Party-State to serve as senior cultural officials. As compared with the late Qing period, when male dan actors were dependent on well-off patrons for their livelihood, this seemed to signal a

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1 A struggle session was a form of verbal humiliation and physical torture used by the CCP, primarily during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), in order to persecute political enemies. It was often held at the individual’s work unit (danwei 单位) and in front of a crowd of people, until the victim “confessed” his/her culpability. Huai fenzi 壞分子, or ‘evildoer’ was one of the five groups of political enemies, known as “hei wu lei” 黑五類 (lit. “the five black categories”), during the Cultural Revolution.

2 Zhang Yihe 章詒和, Lingren wangshi 伶人往事 [Past Events of Performers] (Hong Kong: Mingbao chubanshe, 2006), iii.
significant shift in status for actors.3

Soon, however, the beginnings of the xigai 戲改 (Theatre Reform) movement indicated that the Party-State was intent on exerting greater control over the theatre, just as with every other aspect of Chinese social life. Dan actors now became cadres of the CCP, and as such were both enfranchised and controlled by the Party-State. Their days as freelance entertainers were over. Their activities had to be disciplined in order to fit into the Party’s social, cultural and political ideals. The first section of this chapter describes the predicament of dan actors in the wake of the founding of the PRC. Under the Party-State, dan actors were called “national treasures,” but in reality they were considered as “living antiques” that embodied nothing but China’s mysterious past.4 In order that their influence over the wider Chinese society could be eclipsed with the passage of time, the nurturing of a younger generation of dan actors was now prohibited. A decade later, on the eve of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), the use of dan actors to perform the roles of female cadres was finally terminated in modern plays (xiandai xi 現代戲). As traditional plays were prohibited during the Cultural Revolution, dan actors were thus absent for a whole decade.

Section two analyses the case of Chen Kaige’s 陳凱歌 (b. 1952) 2008 film Mei Lanfang, focusing on how the image of dan actors was reconstructed after

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3 For details of dan actors as boy courtesans see Yao Shuyi 么書儀, Waning xiqu de biange 晚清戲曲的變革 [The Revolution of Chinese Theatre in the Late Qing Period] (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2006), 148–240.
4 They were called “national treasures” in name, but were considered as “living antiques” in reality. David Der-wei Wang, “Impersonating China,” Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews 25 (2003): 162.
the Cultural Revolution. Mei was portrayed as a “pure” artist, and his early life as a xianggong 相公 (boy courtesan) was intentionally omitted from the film. While Mei’s family and other dan actors appreciated the way the film glorified Mei’s life, others were critical of it, especially when compared with Chen’s 1993 film Farewell My Concubine. This principal reconstruction of Mei’s life in the film suggests conflicting views about how dan actors were refashioned following the end of the Cultural Revolution, and thus reveals the wider concern of the new dan actors to differentiate themselves from their predecessors who were obliged to be both actors and boy courtesans.

The third section analyses the changing status of dan actors by comparing them with their counterparts, female laosheng 老生 (elderly male role) actresses. While Wang Peiyu 王珮瑜 (b. 1978), a female laosheng actress of Shanghai Jingju Theatre, is often invited to attend TV entertainment programmes and attracts plenty of fans who are not habitués to jingju plays, few dan actors are as influential as her. This reflects a double standard concerning male-to-female and female-to-male cross-dressing because of the biases of the femmephobic and homophobic Chinese society. Whereas, for example, the prestigious dan actor Cheng Yanqiu attempted to distinguish his roles in real life (as a man) and in his performances (as a woman) by means of drinking and smoking, Wang deemphasised her femininity by wearing men’s clothes and seemed to enjoy the higher status of masculinity which she deliberately “appropriated.”

This double standard vis-à-vis male femininity (performed by dan) and

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5 Its official English name is Forever Enthralled.
female masculinity (performed by laosheng) has its origins in China’s patriarchal order, in which women are considered, as Simone de Beauvoir (1908–1986) argues, “the second sex.”

Metaphorically, an effeminate man is rendered inferior due to this hierarchical bifurcation, as he is conceived to lack “masculinity.” This femmephobia of contemporary Chinese society resulted in a crisis for dan actors that extended across social, cultural, and political levels. In the light of Judith Butler’s (b. 1956) performativity theories, “sex” is an ideal construct, which is not a fact or static condition of a body but a process of materialisation through a forcible reiteration of regulatory norms.

According to Butler, “gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original.” According to Butler, “gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original.”

The recasting of the matter of bodies, therefore, is simply the effect of Foucauldian power, where there is no a priori “essence.” While it is widely accepted today that gender is in all likelihood a social and cultural construct, the essentialist way of defining “masculinity” and “femininity” remains prevalent in China, even after forty years of Reform and Opening.

The Politicisation of Theatre and the Eclipse of Dan Actors

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10 “Reform and Opening” (gaige kaifang 改革开放) was initiated in December 1978 by a group of reformists led by Deng Xiaoping 邓小平 (1904–1997). It introduced market principles and gradually opened the Chinese economy, initiating the dramatic economic development that has transformed China in recent years. It also had social and cultural manifestations, although these were secondary to economic transformation.
With the establishment of the PRC, the CCP initiated a fundamental break with China’s past. As part of this process, in 1949 the CCP launched the Drama Reform (Xigai) movement in order to take control of theatrical affairs in accordance with the Party’s “anti-feudal” (fan fengjian 反封建) promulgations. Whereas the government raised the social position of dan actors to the level of cultural cadres, during the Cultural Revolution it finally terminated the practice of female impersonation, which was defined as a representative of the “feudal” remnants that would undermine the great communist cause. Despite the veneer of the Party’s “progressive” teleology, the successive movements seeking to forbid dan roles were in fact a manifestation of a desire by the Party’s senior leadership to reconstruct gender norms in order that they accorded with communist ideology.

Drama Reform: A Wholesale Politicisation of the Theatre

As a constituent of the CCP’s political movement, the Drama Reform reined in theatrical activities to ensure “correct” behaviour and to “enlighten” wider society. On 2 February 1949, the State Council formed a Drama Reform Committee (戲曲改進委員會 Xiqu ganjin weiyuan hui). Afterwards on 1 November 1949, the State Council formalised the committee as a permanent structure, the Bureau of Drama Reform (戲曲改進局 Xiqu gaijin ju), nominating Tian Han 田漢 (1898–1968) as the Chief Commissioner. Tian was an eminent theatrical scholar, who claimed to be “the Ibsen of China.”

With the CCP’s restructuring of Chinese society, actors, who had

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previously occupied what was considered to be one of the nine humblest careers, became CCP cadres. In 1951, the State Council formed the National Institute of Chinese Theatre (中國戲曲研究院 Zhongguo xiqu yanjiu yuan) as an affiliated section of the Bureau of Drama Reform, on the basis of the Yan’an Institute of Jingju (延安平劇研究院 Yan’an pingju yuanjiu yuan). Mei Lanfang, who was now considered the foremost dan actor in China, became the Dean of the Institute. He successively served as the Vice President of the Chinese Dramatists Association (中國戲劇家協會 Zhongguo xijujia xiehui, 1949), Dean of the China National Jingju Company (國家京劇院 Guojia jingju yuan, 1955), as well as Chancellor of the National Academy of Chinese Theatre Arts (中國戲曲學院 Zhongguo xiqu xueyuan, 1957).

Soon, however, Mei Lanfang (and a lot of other actors) found himself frustrated by the Drama Reform movement. On 3 November 1949, Mei expressed his views on the Drama Reform in Jinbu Ribao 進步日報 (Progress Daily). As an actor, Mei obviously cherished the value of jingju’s artistry. For Mei, the Drama Reform had to preserve the kernel of jingju—its “form”—even if its intention was to change the content in order to serve for the CCP’s “new” social ideal. However, the Party’s order had be absolutely conformed to. Fu Lüheng 符律衡 (or A Ji 阿甲, 1907–1994), Deputy Director of the Artistic Section (藝術處 Yishu chu) of the Bureau of Theatre Reform, and also Director of the Research Office (研究室 Yanjiu shi) of the National Institute of Chinese Theatre, fiercely criticised (his leader) Mei’s “orientation of formalism.” In Fu

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Lüheng’s Marxist criticism, “Mr. Mei’s error is to detach the form from its content.” He declared that “Mr. Mei runs counter to our intentions [in the Drama Reform]—art caters for the majority of Chinese people.” While Mei Lanfang was Fu Lüheng’s superior, it was Fu, as a leftist scholar and CCP cadre, who determined the path of the Drama Reform. Despite his lofty status, Mei was like an idol in a feretory—he was just given a position to promulgate the Party’s United Front policy in order to unite all sectors of the society, but had no practical power. On 27 November, Mei humbly withdrew his “formalistic” comments:

> With Tian Han, A Ying (or Qian Defu) 钱德富/錢德賦, 1900–1977, A Jia, and Ma Shaobo 马少波 (1918–2009) I discussed [my 3 November comments]. [Who?] thinks my former comment was wrong. Now I believe in the consistency of content and form. As content decides form, the revolution of jingju’s content will obviously arouse a concomitant revolution of its form.”

There is an omission in Mei’s statement. In Chinese the sentence beginning “Who think(s)” doesn’t have a subject, so it is unclear who he is referring to. Was he referring to himself, or the CCP cadres (A Ying, A Jia and Ma Shaobo), or both? We cannot decide from the sentence. Shrewd as Mei was, he knew not to offend the will of CCP cadres in the Party-State. Maybe this was an example of Mei’s astuteness, appearing to “admit” to the CCP cadres’ criticism on the façade but leaving it unclear if this was his real intention: he did not confess that “I knew I was wrong.”

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Afterwards on 5 May 1951, the State Council decreed the *Guanyu xiqu gaige gongzuo de zhishi* (關於戲曲改革工作的指示; *Instructions on Drama Reform,* or *the May Fifth Instructions*), which clearly elucidated the guidelines of the Drama Reform:

1. The reform of the repertory (*gaixi* 改戲);
2. The reform of actors (*gairen* 改人);
3. The reform of institutions (*gaizhi* 改制).

Theatre had become a medium of, or forum for, the official ideology.\(^\text{14}\) The guidelines of the Drama Reform movement disclosed the CCP’s intention to shift *jingju* away from its audience to a Party-centric sphere so as to edify/enlighten the society. As the late Qing scholars exemplified by Liang Qichao 梁啟超 (1873–1929) claimed, actors are the instructors of the society. This dualistic career of both actor/instructor was reinforced by the 5 May Instructions, while the function of “instructors” soon undermined their basic career as “actors.”\(^\text{15}\)

**The Stigmatising and Marginalising of Dan Actors**

In 1906, a group of overseas Chinese students formed *Chunliu she* 春柳社 (The Spring Willow Society) in Japan, and initiated the “Civilised Drama


\(^{15}\) In the CCP’s criterion that “the redder the better,” the actors’ experience was a microcosm of the wider Chinese society. Joseph Levenson analyses the tension between “red” and “expert” during the early years of the PRC in *Confucian China and Its Modern Fate III: The Problem of Historical Significance* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1965), 81.
Movement” (wenming xi yundong 文明戲運動). Their début on 11 February 1907, La Traviata, continued the male-to-female cross-dressing custom of jingju. Li Shutong 李叔同 (1880–1942), one of the founders of the Spring Willow Society, performed the female protagonist Camille. In June 1907, the co-founder of the society Zeng Xiaogu 曾孝谷 (1873–1937) performed the role of Eliza (Uncle Tom’s Cabin), then in 1909 Ouyang Yuqian 歐陽予倩 (1889–1962) performed Tosca (Tosca). At this time, many actors were known for cross-dressing. Even Premier Zhou Enlai 周恩來 (1898–1976), who was an activist in Nankai xinju tuan 南開新劇團 (The New Troupe of Nankai School), voluntarily performed female roles. He was famous for his artistic excellence in cross-dressing, as exemplified by his performance as the heroine Sun Huijuan 孫慧娟 in Yiyuan qian 一元錢 (One Yuan).

As Hu Zhiyi 胡志毅 argues, the reason that cross-dressing roles were included as part of the Civilised Drama Movement productions was not because of a desire to preserve this part of China’s theatrical tradition, but rather a reflection of the influence of the onnagata roles of shinpa 新派 (a form of modern Japanese theatre primarily featuring melodramatic stories), as exemplified by Kawai Takeo 河合武雄 (1877–1942) and Kitamura Rokurō 喜多村綠郎 (1871–1961). However, soon afterwards, Hong Shen 洪深 (1894–

17 Hu, “Xingbie biaoyan: Xinchao yanju zhong de nanban nüzhuang,” 133.
1955) conceived of cross-dressing as “sexual abnormality” (xing biantai 性變態):

Male-to-female cross-dressing performance is 120% repugnant to me.
Maybe I read too many books concerning sexual abnormality by Professor Freud.\(^\text{18}\)

The Freudian psychology of sex has fundamentally reframed Chinese ideals of masculinity and femininity. Therefore, a dan actor who performs as a female protagonist was conceived to have “renounced” his masculinity and for doing so invited increasing public censure. For example, in 1928, a year before Mei Lanfang’s tour of the United States, leftist scholars like Zheng Zhenduo 鄭振鐸 (1898–1958) labelled dan actors “perverts” (biantai ren 變態人).\(^\text{19}\) Such views, however, were not influential until 1949, but were prototypes of the official narrative that would emerge under the CCP. Male dan actors, conceived of as “effeminate,” were defined and defamed as “monsters” (yaomo guiguai 妖魔鬼怪), a synonym for “pervert” and a type of sexual abnormality that deviated from the accepted norm.

The CCP shifted jingju away from a form of popular art and entertainment and transformed it into a politicised vehicle that could be used

\(^{18}\) Hong Shen 洪深, “Xiju xieshe pianduan,” 戲劇協社片段 [Fragmented Experience in the Drama Association], in Zhongguo huaju yundong wushinian shiliao ji 中國話劇運動五十年史料集 [Collected Historical Materials about Fifty Years of Dramatic Movements in China], Tian Han 田漢, Ouyang Yuqian 歐陽予倩 et. al. (Beijing: Zhongguo xiju chubanshe, 1985), vol. 1, 108–109.

\(^{19}\) Zheng Zhenduo, “Dadao nanban nüzhuang de danjue, dadao danjue de daibiao renwu Mei Lanfang,” 打倒男扮女裝的旦角, 打倒旦角的代表人物梅蘭芳 [Down With the Dan Actors, Down With the Standout Dan Actor Mei Lanfang] Wenzue Zhoubao, vol. 8, July 1928. For a fuller discussion see Chapter Two.
to enlighten people. As theatrical transvestism was conceived of as problematic, *dan* actors were soon considered peripheral. Aesthetically, the arts of modern China have been fundamentally influenced by realism, ever since the New Cultural Movement in the mid-1910s. After the CCP came to power, Soviet “Socialist Realism” was accepted as the foremost criterion of artistic creation. The cardinal principle of this was that “men play the male roles, and women play the female roles” (*nan yan nan, nü yan nü* 男演男, 女演女). 20

After the CCP came to power, it promoted a few eminent *jingju* actors into the its cadre group. Besides Mei Lanfang and Cheng Yanqiu, many other actors served in the Political Consultative Conference (PCC). Entering the “United Front” (*tongyi zhanxian* 統一戰線) was, however, to prove to be an Indian summer for the *dan* actors. 21 Soon afterwards, the CCP was determined to terminate the “feudal” practice of cross-dressing performance once and for all—the nurturing of new *dan* actors was forbidden in state-owned theatrical institutions while established actors were confined to traditional *jingju* plays (*chuantong xi* 傳統戲). Premier Zhou Enlai, ignoring his own past as a cross-dressing actor, announced the Party’s new ideas about theatrical transvestism.

20 This was raised in the statement by He Jingzhi 賀敬之 (b. 1924), Deputy Cultural Minister of the PRC. For an English translation see Colin Mackerras, *Performing Arts in Contemporary China*, 184.

21 Convened on 15 June 1949, the PCC was once the parliamentary body of the PRC. But after the NPC (National People’s Congress) was founded in 1954 as the new parliamentary body, the PCC became a political advisory body, drawing its members from the CCP and its United Front “democratic parties.” For a description of the United Front see Gerry Groot, *Managing Transitions: The Chinese Communist Party, United Front Work, Corporatism and Hegemony* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2004).
Premier Zhou allegedly had a secret conversation in 1951 with Zhang Junqiu 张君秋 (1920–1997), one of the “Later Grand Four Dan Actors” (si xiao ming dan 四小名旦), on the future of dan actors. Premier Zhou ordered that “Male dan actors will come to an end with Zhang Junqiu.” This informal conversation cannot be found in Zhou Enlai xuanji 周恩來選集 (Selected Works of Zhou Enlai), but is recorded by Colin Mackerras in his The Performing Arts in Contemporary China. Zhang Junqiu confirmed the authenticity of this conversation in an interview in January 1980. Zhang Junqiu complied with Premier Zhou’s order and did not nurture new dan actors. When Li Ruhuan 李瑞環 (b. 1934), Chair of the PCC, advised Zhang Junqiu to announce that Wen Ruhua 溫如華 (b. 1947) would be taken on as his official protégé, the appointment was vetoed by Zhang’s wife, who stated “if we nurture Wen Ruhua we will be the worst criminals (zuikui houshou 罪魁禍首) in history.” She was concerned that if Zhang took Wen Ruhua as his protégé he would be violating Premier Zhou’s directive, and that of the Party. (For a photograph of Zhang Junqiu and Wen Ruhua see Figure 8)

On the eve of the Cultural Revolution, a modern jingju movement

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24 Mi La, Wen Ruhua, 41.
25 Mi La, Wen Ruhua, 41.
emerged in the cultural world. From 5 June to 31 July, 1964, the CCP convened the *Jingju xiandai xi guanmo yanchu dahui* (The Festival of Modern Themes in Jingju). Thirty-five modern *jingju* plays that focused on the CCP’s communist revolution and socialist construction were performed at the Festival. Senior CCP officials Zhou Enlai, Lu Dingyi 陸定一 (1906–1996, Deputy Premier), Shen Yanbing 沈雁冰 (1896–1981, Cultural Minister), Zhou Yang 周揚 (1908–1989, Deputy Cultural Minister), and Peng Zhen 彭真 (1902–1997, Mayor of Beijing) were present at the Festival, indicating its importance for the future development of *jingju*. With its 244 performances, the festival finally attracted a total audience of 200,000 and a further 4,600,000 TV viewers.\(^{27}\)

As a weapon in Chairman Mao Zedong’s 毛澤東 (1893–1976) battle for supremacy of the Party, the target of the modern *jingju* movement was not *dan* actors.\(^{28}\) Nevertheless, the practice of theatrical transvestism, which was already considered a dusty remnant of “feudal” society, was officially prohibited by Premier Zhou Enlai as a result of this festival. In the *Talk* he delivered at the seminar in the Festival, Zhou ordered that:

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Comrade Zhang Junqiu’s...art was formed in the old society. He can pass on his art of singing to students. He can also perform some traditional plays...But a man playing a woman will have to be gradually terminated. It is the same in the case of yueju theatre [Shaoxing theatre], where women playing men will have to be terminated.29

The CCP now drew a clear line between “modern jingju plays” (xiandai xi 現代戲) and its traditional oeuvre. The traditional jingju plays, despite their artistic value, were not so progressive politically, while the modern-theme ones were to be focused on portraying a bright communist future. This was bad news for dan actors. Zhang Junqiu, striving to follow the Party’s direction, played the heroine Sister Aqing (Aqing Sao 阿慶嫂) in Ludang huozhong 蘆蕩火種 (Spark Amid the Reeds), but Party leaders demanded that he confine his activities to jingju’s traditional oeuvre. In the politicised dimorphism of “progressive” or not, this order from Party leaders cut off the only channel for dan actors to find a space within the new progressive environment.

Although Tian Han 田漢 (1898–1968) proposed that equal emphasis be given to “modern plays (xiandai xi 現代戲), traditional plays (chuantong xi 傳統戲), and new historical plays (xinbian lishi ju 新編歷史劇),” the CCP leadership emphasised the overriding importance of the “progressive” modern jingju plays. An editorial in Renmin ribao 人民日報 [People’s Daily] proclaimed, “modern plays...should occupy the principal position on the

jingju stage, and also on the stages of other theatrical forms.”30 As the CCP cultural agency deployed its full resources to promulgate Model Plays (yangban xi 樣板戲), during the first half of 1965, performing troupes under the leadership of the Cultural Bureau performed 95 plays, of which 86 were modern.31 During the decade-long Cultural Revolution, “800,000,000 people were watching 8 [model] plays.”32 This meant that male dan actors disappeared from the stage until the traditional repertoire was restored after Deng Xiaoping came to power in 1979. For the majority of dan actors, the lost decade would have been the prime of their artistic life. The youngest, Shen Fucun 沈福存 (b. 1935) and Song Changrong 宋長榮 (b. 1935) were forty-one by 1976. The oldest of the previous generation, Zhao Rongchen 趙榮琛 (1916–1996), was sixty.

The CCP’s exclusive promotion of the Model Plays during the Cultural Revolution was a continuation of the Party leaders’ desire to control jingju

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32 Clark, The Chinese Cultural Revolution, 26. The 1967 Model Plays included five jingju plays, Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy 智取威虎山 (Zhiqu Weihushan), The Red Lantern 紅燈記 (Hongdeng ji), On the Docks 海港 (Haigang), Shajiabang 沙家浜 (previously known as Ludang Huozhong), and Raid on the White-Tiger Regiment 奇襲白虎團 (Qixi Baihutuan), two ballet dance-dramas, The Red Detachment of Women 紅色娘子軍 (Hongse niangzijun) and The White-Haired Girl 白毛女 (Baimao nü), and the symphony Shajiabang. Actually, in 1974 and 1976, more plays were identified as Model Plays and the constellation of Model Plays increased to 18 in total. For more details see Fan, Staging Revolution, 72–73.
through the Drama Reform movement.\(^{33}\) The CCP’s termination of the \textit{dan}\footnote{33} actors’ place in Chinese theatre was not simply due to artistic criteria, however, but had its basis in the Party’s redefinition of Chinese “masculinity” and “femininity.” He Jingzhi 賀敬之 (b. 1924), Deputy Minister of Culture, believed that "people act better if portraying their own sex," and transvestites were therefore criticised as “unnatural.” By deploiring the practice of female impersonation as a relic of the earlier “feudal” society, and thus something that was considered incapable of reflecting the new condition of communist China.\(^{34}\) As female impersonation was considered a form of spiritual castration, its continuation would mean “postponing China’s serious commitment to modernity,” which was exemplified by the qualities of heroism and machismo inherited from the May Fourth Movement.\(^{35}\)

\textit{Redefining Masculinity and Femininity}

Although the CCP claimed that theatrical performances should serve the proletarian (i.e., workers, peasants, and soldiers), what they created was more

\(^{33}\) Jiang Qing 江青 (1915–1991) was the fourth wife of Mao Zedong. At the onset of the Cultural Revolution she assumed the position of Deputy Director of the Central Cultural Revolution Group (\textit{Zhongyang wenge xiaozu} 中央文革小組), for which she was later known as one of the Gang of Four (\textit{Siren bang} 四人幫). As a former actress of both stage and screen, Jiang Qing had the privilege of controlling the production of the Model Plays. Many contemporary \textit{jingju} practitioners accused her of humiliating \textit{dan} actors as she directed the model play campaign. However, the model play campaign was a continuation of the Party’s policy towards theatre that began with the Drama Reform and the Festival of Modern Themes in \textit{jingju}. Jiang simply continued implementing this policy.

\(^{34}\) Colin Mackerras, \textit{Performing Arts in Contemporary China}, 184.

the Party’s theatre than that of the people.36 Through the reconstruction of China’s theatrical world, the CCP demonstrated to the wider society its ideals regarding “masculinity” and “femininity.” The Party claimed to have raised the social status of Chinese women by liberating them from the Confucian family, but this emancipation of women was in the first place a male oriented, directed, and advocated movement, intended to build a strong Party-State by creating strong women. This was finally achieved by de-feminising women, turning them into “lesser” men. Although Mao Zedong claimed women held up “half of the sky” (*ban bian tian 半邊天*), in the context of communist construction the sky was the men’s sky. Women were only able to aspire to be more like to men—physically and mentally. As Mao wrote in his poem *Wei nü minbing tizhao* 為女兵題照 (*Epigraph on Female Soldiers’ Photograph*), Chinese women should devote themselves to establishing the Party-State, “loving an army uniform but not feminine clothes” (*buai hongzhuang ai wuzhuang* 不愛紅裝愛武裝). Anyone who had an excessive indulgence in beauty and femininity would be defamed as bourgeois or reactionary.

During the Cultural Revolution, many female cadres became heroines in the Model Plays, leading others in communist revolution and socialist construction. But in these Model Plays all the protagonists were portrayed under the same criteria of revolutionary virtue, so the gender boundaries were blurred. According to Paul Clark, none of the God-like main heroes/heroines “have a family” or “a love interest.”37 They are communist

37 In *Panshi wan* 磐石灣 (*Boulder Bay*), the hero Lu Changhai 陸長海 has a family,
idols created under the principle of “Three-Prominences” (*san tuchu* 三突出), and reveal the “*mythology*” of the Chinese Communist revolution.\(^{38}\)

Furthermore, many female protagonists in the Model Plays were performed in a defeminised way, by taking on male attributes. These *dan* roles as exemplified by the CCP cadres Fang Haizhen  方海珍 in *Haigang* 海港 (On the Dock), Jiang Shuiying  江水英 in *Longjiang song* 龍江頌 (Song of the Dragon River), and Ke Xiang  柯湘 in *Dujuan shan* 杜鵑山 (Azalea Mountain), all incorporated the use of the actor’s natural voice, which was used by the *laosheng* roles and was distinct from the *dan*’s delicate falsetto voice. (For a photograph of Ke Xiang see Figure 9) Li Bingshu 李炳淑 (b. 1942), the actress who performed Jiang Shuiying in the film of *Song of the Dragon River*, had to produce a powerful deep voice, differentiating the communist heroine Jiang from the virtuous women in the traditional *jingju* plays.\(^{39}\) These attributes were emphasised in order to portray the female Party delegate as an iron-willed communist fighter who is not afraid to sacrifice her life for the

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\(^{38}\) Clark, *The Chinese Cultural Revolution*, 50–54. The word “*mythology*” is italicised by Clark. *San tuchu* means to highlight the positive characters from all the characters, to highlight the main, heroic characters from the positive characters, and to highlight the principal character from the main, heroic characters. The principal character is called “model,” hence the name “model play.”

cause of revolution and die a martyr’s death.\textsuperscript{40}

The stories of the aforementioned heroines conform to the same formula: a woman CCP cadre fights for a better future for China. This formula deemphasises the femininity of the heroines, so in many cases it is definitely feasible to use a \textit{laosheng} hero instead of a \textit{dan}. Notably, in \textit{Song of the Dragon River}, the protagonist Jiang Shuiying, a Party secretary, had been a male (\textit{laosheng}) in earlier versions, but was made a female under the instruction of Jiang Qing.\textsuperscript{41} In contrast to the female protagonists’ pursuit of masculinity, the \textit{dan} actors were considered effeminate and hence disturbing under the misogynist puritanism that was prevalent during the early years of the PRC.

\textbf{The Reconstruction of Mei Lanfang’s Image}

Despite the claim that women held up “half of the sky,” the CCP in fact failed to liberate women from their secondary status. Gender hierarchy was deeply rooted in Chinese society even if Confucian patriarchy was gone. In the PRC, women, or specifically feminine women, were still considered peripheral as a result of the atmosphere of communist revolution. Metaphorically, as \textit{dan} actors performed female roles and were considered effeminate, their privileged identity as men was therefore in doubt. Hence, the image of the most outstanding \textit{dan} actor Mei Lanfang was transformed. He had been described as an icon of femininity, but now was portrayed as a masculine people’s artist. Such a person had to be flawless—how could the communist Party-State set up a previous boy courtesan of a bourgeois roué, or

\textsuperscript{40} Clark, \textit{The Chinese Cultural Revolution}, 67.

\textsuperscript{41} Clark, \textit{The Chinese Cultural Revolution}, 63.
a fancy wo/man, as an infallible symbol of the Chinese legacy?

Forever Enthralled: Fabrication of the Saint

In December 2008, the life story of “the Great King of Actors” Mei Lanfang, primarily focusing on the period from the mid-1910s to 1945, was produced as a film titled Mei Lanfang 梅蘭芳 (Official English title Forever Enthralled). The film failed to receive a favourable response from any sector of Chinese society. As a quasi-documentary, it did not portray Mei Lanfang as a human being; it reconstructed Mei as a “pure” paragon who devoted himself whole-heartedly to his career and the establishing of the Chinese nation-state. This film in fact idealises Mei as a flawless saint by covering up the fact that he had been a xianggong 相公 (boy courtesan) who catered for well-off patrons’ homoerotic passions. His history was thus refashioned in order that it adhered to the official requirements of the CCP to portray a “perfect” people’s artist.

This film was admired by Mei Baojiu 梅葆玖 (1934–2016), the successor of the Mei family’s dan artistry. Mei Baojiu sang his father’s jingju arias in the film. For the filmmaker, the film became an “official” version of Mei Lanfang’s life story since it was recognised by Mei Baojiu, the representative of the Mei family. However, this did not mean that the film faithfully reflected the life of Mei Lanfang. Turning a blind eye to the numerous fictitious details in the film, Mei Baojiu declared in an interview:

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42 For example, on movie.douban.com, it is rated 6.9 (full score 10), while Farewell My Concubine is rated 9.5/10.
This film best describes my father. It grasps the key points of my father’s life without any didactic meaning. Other films on the subject of my father won’t be affirmed during the rest of my life. The posterity of the Mei family should abide by my decision [not to authorise any film about my father] for at least five decades.\(^43\)

In contrast to Mei Baojiu declaration, we can find a few differences between Mei’s life and its portrayal in the film. At the very beginning of the film, Uncle Mei Yutian 梅雨田(1869–1914) is beaten to death because he wears mourning clothes for his mother on the Empress Dowager Cixi’s 慈禧 (1835–1908) birthday. On his deathbed, he leaves a letter for Mei Lanfang, expressing his hope that Mei can raise the social status of actors. His uncle’s dream haunts Mei for the rest of his life, making the whole film a story about his life-long efforts to raise the status of actors. All Mei’s deeds in the future, including his patriotic resistance to the Japanese during the Second Sino-Japanese War, are interpreted in terms of this overriding desire to raise the social status of actors.

Both Mei Yutian’s early demise and his deathbed letter to Mei Lanfang, however, are all fabricated by the director in order to set the tone for the film. In fact, Mei Yutian survived Cixi and the fall of the Qing empire, finally dying in 1914. He played the *huqin* for the “Great King of Actors” Tan Xinpei 譚鑫培 (1847–1917) and was admired as “the divine *huqin* musician” (*huqin shengshou* 胡琴聖手). Additionally, Mei Lanfang was already a famous *dan* actor by the time of Mei Yutian’s death.

\(^43\) [http://ent.sina.com.cn/m/c/2008-09-26/09552184446.shtml]
Following Mei Yutian’s death, the film portrays Mei Lanfang having a box-office contest (da duitai 打對台) with the “King of Actors” Yan the Thirteenth (Shisan Yan 十三燕. Yan is a fictional representation of Tan Xinpei). On the first day Mei Lanfang fails to attract as large an audience as Yan. But on the following day he performs Yilū ma 一縷麻 (A Strand of Hemp) and draws a huge crowd. Yan dies soon after performance, expressing the same hope as that of Mei’s uncle that Mei Lanfang would raise the social status of actors. This is also fictitious. Mei Lanfang and Tan Xinpei never had such a contest, as Tan Xinpei had died in 1917.

Most importantly, Mei Lanfang’s victory in the fictitious box-office contest is seen as a victory for a new and progressive modernity. After his failure on the first day of the contest, following advice from his friend Qiu Rubai (Qi Rushan 齊如山, 1875–1962), Mei performs the “problem play” (wenti ju 問題劇) A Strand of Hemp. This play attracts many university students because of its fashionable focus on free love. What makes Mei Lanfang a dan actor par excellence, however, was his mastery of traditional jingju artistry not his concern about social change. As jingju is an actor-centred art form, in which the performance of an actor is the audience’s primary concern, the concentration on current events in “problem plays” can be appealing for a short time but will not bring long-term prestige for an individual actor. Furthermore, the creation of the “problem play” did not start until Mei returned from Shanghai and was influenced by the fashion in the South. After 1918, Mei Lanfang never performed in “problem plays” again.

Mei Lanfang 梅蘭芳, Mei Lanfang huìyì lù 梅蘭芳回憶錄 [A Memoir of Mei Lanfang]
As he confessed in his memoir, *A Strand of Hemp* was in fact a failure as it deviated from the aesthetic disciplines of *jingju* artistry.\(^45\)

Actually, the film’s English name, *Forever Enthralled*, hints at the fate of Mei Lanfang. Even for half a century after his death, his life was still being re-narrated by his family and friends. In the film, his wife Fu Zhifang 福芝芳 (1905–1980) warns Mei’s confidant Meng Xiaodong 孟小冬 (1907–1977) that “He’s not born for me. He’s born for his fans (*zuoer* 座兒).” Mei’s scholar friend Qiu Rubai declares that “The one who ruins Mei’s loneliness is the one who ruins Mei himself.” Even Second Lieutenant Tanaka 田中, a fictitious Japanese officer, believes that “Mei Lanfang would remain eternal no matter who wins the war in the end.” These narratives show that Mei Lanfang had become an idealised vehicle for others.

*The “Purity” of Mei Lanfang*

By reconstructing Mei Lanfang as an artist who devoted his entire life to art, the Chinese nation, and the social status of actors, the film skilfully overshadows Mei Lanfang’s past as a boy courtesan, while frequently highlighting his “purity” (*ganjing* 乾淨). This piece of Mei’s history was erased from the official chronicle, as homoerotic sensibilities were conceived of as “abnormal” following the influx of Western learning in the late Qing, and were forbidden following the establishment of the PRC.

There is a scene in the film in which Mei’s cousin Zhu Huifang 朱蕙芳

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\(^45\) Mei Lanfang, *Mei Lanfang huiyi lu*, 245.
forces him to serve the well-off patron, Mr. Lu the Second (Lu Erye 魯二爺). When Zhu sits on the Lu’s knee and suggests that Mei do the same, Mei hits his cousin and runs out. This fabricated scene is not plausible. As male dan actors were indentured protégés in private playhouses, this scene elides the standard practice in such playhouses where male dan actors were required to show affection to their patrons. When the contract remained in force, the dan actors had no legal freedom. A dan student was expected to follow his master’s instruction to satisfy wealthy patrons, not just focus on learning jingju artistry.

In reality, from the time of Mei Lanfang’s grandfather, Mei Qiaoling 梅巧玲 (1842–1882), the family themselves operated a private playhouse and indentured dan actors to be boy courtesans. Aside from running the Sixi 四喜 Troupe, Mei Qiaoling was the master of Jinghe tang 景和堂, a residence for dan actors who also were boy courtesans. After Mei Qiaoling’s death, his son Mei Zhufen 梅竹芬 (1872–1898) became the master. Unfortunately, Mei Zhufen died when he was very young, so his son, Mei Lanfang was brought up by Mei Zhufen’s elder brother Mei Yutian 梅雨田 (1869–1914). Mei Yutian later (in 1901) sent the seven-year-old Mei Lanfang to his uncle Zhu Xiaofen’s 朱小芬 playhouse (Yunhe tang 雲和堂) to learn jingju performance. As an indentured protégé at an actor’s playhouse, Mei would not dare to defy his master by hitting his son (Mei’s cousin) in such a way.

The film also elides the real nature of the relationship between Mei Lanfang and Feng Gengguang (馮耿光 (1882–1966: Feng Ziguang 馮子光 in the film). In the film, Feng is portrayed as one of Mei Lanfang’s friends, when
in fact he was Mei’s patron. Feng Gengguang came back from the Japanese Army Academy in 1905, and became the Director of the Bank of China in 1918. According to Mei Lanfang’s memoir, he first knew Feng in 1907.46 Feng earned 400 tael each month and used half of it to help Mei Lanfang in his life and career.47 In 1907, Mei’s future fame was not evident, as he was still a frustrated protégé at Yunhe tang. In the 1907 Ju bang (lists of best dan actors) published in Shuntian Shibao 順天時報 (Shuntian Times), Mei was not within the first ten in any of the four lists.48 In 1916, Feng bought Mei a luxurious house in Lucao yuan 蘆草園, near Zhushikou 珠市口, Beijing. Then in 1917, after Tan Xinpei’s death, Feng won for Mei the honorific “the Great King of Actors” through bribery.49 According to Mu Chengong’s 穆辰公 (1884–1961) documentary novel Mei Lanfang, Feng and Mei were physically intimate.50

As is the case with the film, most modern accounts of Mei’s life fail to mention his early years as a boy courtesan. These stories are erased in order to enhance the fictitious “purity” of Mei Lanfang. As Bao Tianxiao 包天笑 (1876–1973) notes in his memoir, when in 1917–1918 he planned to write a

46 Mei Lanfang, Mei Lanfang huiyi lu, 123.
47 Cao Rulin 曹汝霖, Yisheng zhi huiyi 一生之回憶 [A Memoir of My Lifetime] (Hong Kong: Chunqiu chubanshe, 1966), 52.
49 Hatano Kenichi 波多野乾一, Jingju erbai nian zhi lishi 京劇二百年之歷史 [A Two Hundred Year History of Jingju], trans. Luyuan Xueren 鹿原學人 (Beijing: Qizhi, 1926), 214–215. This is confirmed by Liu Huogong 劉豁公, Mei Lang xiaoshi 梅郎小史 [A Brief History of Mei Lanfang] (Shanghai: Zhonghua, 1920) and many other accounts of Mei’s life. As Mei Lanfang himself writes in his memoir, however, he bought this house himself in 1916. See Mei Lanfang huiyi lu, 273.
50 For more details see Mu Chengong 穆辰公, Mei Lanfang 梅蘭芳 [Mei Lanfang], ed. Chen Jun 陳均 (Taipei: Xiuwei, 2012).
book about Mei his friend Zhao Shuyong 趙叔雍 (1898–1965) advised him that “We’d better not mention Mei’s history in Yunhe tang, lest it blemish his fame.”51 Similarly, in Mei’s official nianbiao 年表 (chronological account) we find the following vague sentence: “In 1902, [he] followed Wu Lingxian 吳菱仙 to learn the qingyi artistry.”52 There is no mention of the fact that Mei had been in Zhu Xiaofen’s private playhouse. Also, in his 1950 memoir, Mei’s account of his childhood is just as brief: “I went to Zhu Xiaofen, my cousin’s home, to learn jingju.”53 Occupying just one sentence in the 500,000-character book, this period in Mei’s life is dismissed. In this way, both Mei himself and others had already begun the reconstruction of his past, erasing any memory which may blemish his fame.

Under the censoring of the CCP, the history of dan actors such as Mei Lanfang has been rewritten. The critic Xu Lingxiao 徐凌霄 wrote a novel which documented the social life in late Qing Beijing. It was first serialised in Shibao 時報 (Daily Times) in 1928. When it was re-published in book form in 2002, however, the editor removed a 20,000-character section about the lives of boy courtesans.54 Similarly, a number of modern books used a photograph titled Yunhe tang shi’er jinchai 雲和堂十二金釵 (lit. Twelve Golden Hairpins of Yunhe Tang), which was first issued on 7 March 1928.55 As “hairpin” was often

51 Bao Tianxiao 包天笑, Chuanying lou huiyi lu xubian 鈕影樓回憶錄續編 [A Continuation of the Memoir of Hairpin Shadow Studio] (Hong Kong: Dahua chubanshe, 1973), 3.
52 “Mei Lanfang shengping dashi nianbiao,” 梅蘭芳生平大事年表 [A Chronological Account of the Major Events in Mei Lanfang’s Life], in Mei Lanfang huiyi lu, 683.
53 Mei Lanfang, Mei Lanfang huiyi lu, 22.
54 Xu Lingxiao 徐凌霄, Gucheng fanzhao ji 古城返照記 [Indian Summer of the Ancient City] (Beijing: Tongxin chubanshe, 2002).
used to allude to beautiful women, this photograph hints at their status as boy courtesans. Yao Shuyi 么書儀 discusses the different reinterpretations of this photograph, noting that almost all Chinese scholars downplay Yunhe tang’s function as a private playhouse.56 In this way, the history of dan actors as boy courtesans has been buried.

A Female Counterpart: The Self-Construction of Laosheng Actresses

In the twenty-first century, the femmephobic and homophobic fear of effeminacy remains dominant in Chinese society, calling into question the dan actors’ identity and resulting in their crisis of self-legitimacy. In contrast, the female laosheng 老生 (elderly male role) actress faces less resistance from the wider society, the best of whom attract a large fan base.

A Double Standard in Cross-Gender Performance

There has long been a double standard in Chinese society towards male and female cross-dressing practices—both in theatrical performances and in daily life. In the late 1990s, Liu Liren 劉立仁, a jingju critic, queried this double standard after watching Wen Ruhua’s Baimian langjun 白面郎君 (A Fair-Faced Gentleman), in which Wen performed the Water Margin hero Zheng Tianshou 鄭天壽, shifting back and forth between the roles of xiaosheng 小生 (young males) and qingyi:

There are female sheng as well as female painted-face performers in jingju.

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When a man performs the roles of women why is it considered not honourable?57

When in the early 1930s Lu Xun published Zui yishu de guojia (The Most Artistic Country) to criticise Mei Lanfang, his focus was confined to male-to-female cross-dressing.58 Coming from Shaoxing, Lu Xun might have felt closer to yueju, in which female-to-male cross-dressing performance was prevalent. However, throughout the 1920–30s, the case of female-to-male cross-dressing in yueju was absent from Lu’s writing. His focus was just on Mei Lanfang, the most famous dan actor. Therefore, one plausible reason for Lu Xun’s double standard is that female-to-male cross-dressing in yueju was never considered as disturbing as male-to-female cross-dressing in jingju.59

At the aesthetic level, yueju appeared to be a “yin” culture as opposed to the “yang” culture of jingju, so its sheng roles were therefore more or less effeminate.60 As the yueju practitioner Lin Ruikang indicates, while audiences “cannot accept the effeminacy of male performers who play male roles,” it is easier for them to accept the “male characters played by female performers.”61 The reason for this double standard is that “people may feel

58 Siu-leung Li, Cross-Dressing in Chinese Opera (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2003), 24.
59 Siu-leung Li, Cross-Dressing in Chinese Opera, 195.
60 Ma, Urban Politics and Cultural Capital, 96.
61 Huai Bao, “Sexual Artifice Through ‘Transgression’: The Revival of Cross-Gender Performance in Jingju,” (Ph.D. disser., Simon Fraser University, 2015), 74. Because the genre of yueju is soft, its men’s roles are relatively “effeminate.”
that men playing men in yueju are sissies (niang niang qiang 娘娘腔).”

It can be inferred from Lin’s statement that if a man performs an effeminate male character, as for example in yueju, he is often considered deviant by demeaning himself to a lower status of “male femininity.” In contrast, it is less problematic if a woman does the same, as she does not have “masculinity” to lose. A similar statement can be seen in Cross-Dressing in Chinese Opera by Siu-leung Li, who argues that “while the Jing [jingju]-Kun [kunju] transvestite actor veils his masculine body, the yueju transvestite actress unveils her corporeal femininity.”

Men’s fear of losing masculinity hints at the fact that women are still considered secondary in modern China. Ultimately, most narratives and social movements concerning cross-dressing derive from men’s fear of being conceived of as lacking masculinity. As Ma Haili argues, it is “a matter of male honour.”

When all-male jingju was most popular in Beijing during the 1920s and 1930s, all female yueju prevailed in Shanghai. In 1964, Premier Zhou Enlai prohibited both male-to-female (primarily in jingju) and female-to-male (primarily in yueju) cross-dressing performances. After the relaxation of this prohibition during the Reform era, all-female yueju was quickly restored yet all-male jingju has never revived. This reflected the continuing prevalence of

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62 Ibid.
63 Ibid.
64 Siu-leung Li, Cross-Dressing in Chinese Opera, 196.
65 When yueju was introduced to Shanghai from Zhejiang province for the first time in 1917, it involved all-male performances. But by the 1930s, all-female performances of yueju prevailed in Shanghai, overshadowing the all-male and mixed troupes. For more details, see Jin Jiang, “Women and Public Culture: Poetics and Politics of Women’s Yue Opera in Republican Shanghai, 1930–1940s,” (Ph.D. disser., Stanford University, 1998).
66 Ma, Urban Politics and Cultural Capital, 110.
the double standard towards the different forms of cross-dressing.

**Constructing Different Offstage Images**

In a manner similar to the problem that male *sheng* confront in the *yin* culture of *yueju*, the double standard about masculinity also leads to a predicament for male *dan* in *jingju*. As it is shameful for a man to be considered effeminate, Joshua Goldstein notes that a successful *dan* actor has to be able to differentiate his real life as a modern male citizen from his theatrical performances in which he performs female roles that are considered to represent “icons of femininity.”67 For this reason, *dan* claim that their performance of female roles does not influence their masculinity.

There has been a resistance to effeminate men in Chinese culture, and this is reflected in modern Chinese language. In daily life, if a boy behaves like a girl, he is often likely to called by the pejorative term *niang niang qiang* (sissy), while if a girl acts like a boy, she is called a “*jia xiaozi*” (lit. “false boy,” or tomboy), which literally hints at her liveliness, which is considered admirable. Men are dominant in the social hierarchy, so it is dishonourable for them to behave like women, whereas a woman is admired for assuming the manifestations of masculinity. In 2018, the Xinhua News Agency (*Xinhua she* 新華社) and the *People’s Daily* (*Renmin ribao* 人民法院), both published criticisms of the influence of effeminate entertainment stars.68

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68 See Xin Shiping 辛識平, “*Niang pao’ zhi feng dang xiuyi,*” “娘砲”之風當休矣 [The Fashion for ‘*niang pao*’ should Stop]
Both Mei Lanfang and Cheng Yanqiu had delicate faces, but they were considered masculine because of their bravery in resisting the Japanese. This was emphasised in *Forever Enthralled*, where a Japanese military officer forces Mei Lanfang to perform. The Japanese officer humiliates Mei, stating “You are just a girl (*niangmen'er* 娘們兒).” In response, Mei answers: “I perform the roles of women in plays, but I am a real man (*yemen'er* 爺們兒).” Similarly, most biographies of Cheng have detailed descriptions of his bravery in battle during the Second Sino-Japanese War, after which he voluntarily lived a secluded life as a peasant in order not to perform for Japanese.

Cheng Yanqiu also deliberately constructed his identity as a man. With his addiction to alcohol and cigars, Cheng Yanqiu “assumed the manliest manner” amongst all *dan* actors of his time.⁶⁹ According to Ruru Li, drinking and smoking in public was part of Cheng Yanqiu’s personal manifesto, in which he declared himself a male citizen of the Chinese nation-state.⁷⁰ Similarly, in a photograph that Zhou Hai 周海 took of Wen Ruhua, Wen is smoking while in full *dan* costume. (See Figure 10) With this photograph as the cover page of his essay, Zhou indicates that Wen has a dual identity: he performs female roles but claims masculinity in real life. Here, the smoking is

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⁶⁹ Ruru Li, *Soul of Beijing Opera: The Theatrical Creativity and Continuity in the Changing World* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010), 97.

as much a performance as the various roles he performs as a dan actor.\textsuperscript{71}

In contrast to male dan actors who display a macho personality in their daily lives, female laosheng actresses do not have to be afraid of taking their onstage masculinity into their offstage lives. For example, the famous female laosheng actress Wang Peiyu 王珮瑜 (b. 1978) never behaved in an effeminate way in real life, and she was never criticised for this. Wang entered Shanghai jingju yuan 上海京劇院 (Shanghai Jingju Theatre Company) in 2003 and assumed the office as Deputy Head of the First Performing Group (yituan 一团). In 2017, she became famous through a series of TV programmes, including Qipa dahui 奇葩大會 (A “Weird” Talent Show, Hunan TV), Kuajie gewang 跨界歌王 (Crossover King of Song, Beijing TV), Langdu zhe 朗讀者 (The Reader, CCTV), and a variety of others.\textsuperscript{72} Wang attracted many fans who were not jingju aficionados. Meng Xiaodong 孟小冬 (1907–77), widely recognised as the best female laosheng actress, was referred to as “Donghuang” 冬皇, literally “Emperor Dong;” Wang Peiyu’s fans call her “Xiao Donghuang” 小冬皇, or “Little Emperor Dong,” suggesting Wang’s connection to Meng. Wang herself seemed to enjoy the association and even accepted the flattering comments that suggested she was the reincarnation of Meng (Meng died in 1977 and Wang was born in 1978). Yet despite this flattery, Wang Peiyu has not achieved the same mastery of jingju artistry as Meng did, and this disparity has become more pronounced since she became a regular performer in “reality” TV programmes.

\textsuperscript{72} The official English name of Qipa dahui is “Who Can Who Up.”
Wang Peiyu’s sudden rise to stardom is only partly due to her theatrical performances. Her fame is also due to her bravery in deviating from the traditional virtues enforced on Chinese women. Only once, when she was a participant in the *Quanguo jingju qingnian yanyuan dianshi dasai* 全國京劇青年演員電視大賽 (The National TV Competition of Young *Jingju* Performers, in 2001), did Wang wear evening dress. At other times she wears men’s clothes. (See Figure 11) Almost all other female *laosheng* or *hualian* 花臉 (painted-face role) actresses, such as Qiu Yun 裘蕊 (b. 1956), Cui Yue 崔玥 (b. 1983), Li Xiaopei 李小培 (b. 1985) and You Qi 由奇, wear women’s gowns in formal concerts. As dress embodies how an individual identifies himself/herself, Wang Peiyu deliberately dresses as a man and seems to enjoy the attributes of “masculinity” produced by this performativity.\(^7^3\) Wang became a star of mass entertainment because she was considered “handsome,” and in doing so attracted many fans who are not habitués of Chinese theatre. In contrast, few male *dan* actors are admired by virtue of their beauty or delicacy in real life, let alone for wearing women’s clothes.

The different fate of *dan* actors and *laosheng* actresses demonstrates the way that Chinese understandings of gender and sexuality remained framed within a binary hierarchy of masculinity and femininity. Although in 1978 the launching of “Reform and Opening” marked the official end of the Maoist era, Chinese society remains in the grip of the femmephobia and hommophobia of the 1950–60s, which led the CCP to prohibit men from the performance of

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\(^7^3\) Although Judith Butler does not think that “clothes make the women” on the social or cultural levels, for an individual clothes are the most direct way for him/her to identify himself/herself by conforming to existed social norms. Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 231.
female roles. This dimorphic hierarchy in which women are considered to be born inferior (nanzun nübei 男尊女卑) has led to men’s fear of effeminacy, hence the double standard on male-to-female and female-to-male cross-dressing in contemporary Chinese society. In terms of the jingju domain, while a male dan actor is considered to “demean” himself because the performance of female roles may influence his masculinity, female laosheng actresses “rise” to a more privileged status as they assume masculinity through their performances.

In the 1950s, Simone de Beauvoir found women alienated as “the second sex” in an order established by men.74 Gender hierarchy is a social, cultural and political construction. As de Beauvoir informs us, “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.”75 Due to the insight provided by the development of modern feminist theories in the West, no a priori identities of “masculinity” or “femininity” are conceived to exist. However, the dimorphic essentialising of “masculinity” and “femininity” remains dominant in Chinese society. A male dan actor’s performances of female roles is believed to influence his masculinity. Therefore, his artistry renders him inferior. After the formation of the PRC, the CCP raised women’s social status by considering women as holding up “half of the sky.” Their rise in status, however, came at the cost of forsaking their “femininity.” The “sky” of China remained a man’s sky.

75 de Beauvoir, The Second Sex, 281.
This valorisation of “masculinity” by the CCP led it to remove dan actors from Chinese theatre. This has had a far-reaching legacy, which remains influential—if not dominant—in contemporary China. Dan actors remain misunderstood and marginalised. Whereas all-female yueju performances have revived and the female laosheng actress Wang Peiyu became a TV star, the future for dan actors is constrained by the femmephobia and homophobia that operates at both official and public levels. This makes the nurturing of new dan actors difficult, and casts a shadow over the future of jingju dan artistry.
**Figure 8** Wen Ruhua (left) and his mentor Zhang Junqiu 張君秋 in West Mountain, Beijing, in 1980.

**Source:** Wen Ruhua, *Huaying fangzi: Wen Ruhua juzhao ji* 花影芳姿——溫如華劇照集 [*Flowery Shadow and Fragrant Posture: A Collection of Wen Ruhua’s Stills*] (Publisher unidentified).
**Figure 9** Yang Chunxia 楊春霞 (b. 1943) performs the heroine Ke Xiang 柯湘 in *Dujuan shan* 杜鵑山 (*Azalea Mountain*). The CCP cadre Ke Xiang is sent to *Azalea Mountain* to be the Party Secretary, but is arrested by GMD army halfway. On her way to the execution place, she comes down stairs in the music of *The Internationale*. The GMD soldiers, despite rifles in hands, all feel afraid of her sublime heroism.

**Source:** Yang Chunxia’s 1974 film *Azalea Mountain.*
**Figure 10** Wen Ruhua is smoking while in full *dan* costume.

**Source:** Zhou Hai, “The Last Male *Dan* in the Peking Opera,” 41.
Figure 11 Wang Peiyu 王珮瑜 (left) participated in the TV show Qipa dahui 奇葩大會 (A “Weird” Talent Show). She was wearing a men’s robe.

CHAPTER SIX

A Millennial Predicament: Male Dan Actors in a Homophobic Country

As professional actors, we are not hostile to amateurs. Over time, however, a few amateurs have claimed to be dan actors, or even jingju artists, yet none of them understood even the basics of jingju artistry.¹

In the wake of the founding of the PRC in 1949, the CCP leadership prohibited men from training to perform female theatrical roles. During the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), through direct political intervention, all mature dan actors were forbidden from performing and were absent from the theatre for the entire decade. When dan actors returned to the limelight at the end of the 1970s, following the launching of the Reform and Opening era, the social environment was very different, with market-led consumerism gradually replacing the earlier commitment to a planned economy. While the entertainment sector was not as constrained politically as it had been in the Maoist period, the box-office became the primary concern for private sponsors of theatrical performances. As a result, some producers of popular entertainment sought to use male dan as a drawcard, highlighting their supposed association with homosexuality to appeal to the prurient interests of an audience for commercial gain.

Modern China has a long history of hostility to homosexuality, in part

¹ Interview with Mou Yuandi, 5 June 2017.
due to the influence of major Western scholarship as exemplified by Havelock Ellis’s (1859–1939) psychology of sex, in which sexuality was dichotomised into what Judith Butler calls “the [heteronormative] norm and its failure.”

This first emerged during the 1920s, and still remains the dominant way of understanding homosexuality in China today. After 1949, under the Party-State’s disciplinary power, China underwent an intense period of Communist puritanism which left little room for sexuality outside of procreation. Homosexuals were considered abnormal and treated as outcasts. Technically, homosexuality was not outlawed in the PRC, but homosexual men were often accused of the crime of “hooliganism” (liumang zui 流氓罪) under Article 106 of the 1979 Criminal Law.

It was only in 2001 that the Chinese Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from the list of mental illnesses, officially ending its history as a “pathology.” Nevertheless, social intolerance towards homosexuality remained prevalent. On 30 June 2017 the Guojia guangbo dianying dianshi zongju 國家廣播電影電視總局 (State Administration of Radio, Film and Television) redefined homosexuality as a sexual abnormality. While this throwback to the last century reflects, in part, the wider society’s phobia about homosexuality, it is also a product of the Party-State’s return to Maoist-style social control. This environment, in which being effeminate is considered as evidence of homosexuality, overshadows the careers of dan actors, who have to “renounce masculinity” in order to pursue their artistic

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The first section of this chapter examines understandings of gender and sexuality as these are reflected in attitudes towards the place of male dan in popular entertainment. The discussion focuses on David H. Hwang’s 1988 play *M. Butterfly*, which he wrote in order to counter what he felt was the Orientalism lurking within Giacomo Puccini’s *Madame Butterfly*. Hwang’s concerns about Puccini’s opera are contrasted with those of Laurence Senelick, whose focus is the homosexual story lurking beneath the veneer of the opera’s political concerns. While Hwang’s play was not widely discussed in China, the association of male dan with homosexuality did come to prominence in 1979 with the publication of Li Bihua’s 李碧華 (*b.* 1959) novel *Bawang bieji* 霸王別姬 (*The King’s Parting from His Concubine*) and its subsequent transformation into the 1993 film *Farewell, My Concubine*. The novel focused on the life of Cheng Dieyi 程蝶衣, a male dan who develops a homoerotic attachment to his childhood friend Duan Xiaolou 段小樓. This raised the possibility that the training required to become a male dan could lead to an acquired homosexuality. The discussion will then shift to the early twenty-first century, when male dan were increasingly presented in a commodified way in popular entertainment. For instance, in 2010, Li Yu’s 李漁 (1611–1680) drama *Lianxiang ban* 憐香伴 (lit. *My Fragrant Companion*) was transformed into a “lesbian” play, with the English-language title *A Romance: Two Belles in Love*. In order to generate a greater box-office return, the producer of the play deliberately used male dan to perform the “lesbian” roles, reinforcing male dan’s connection to homosexuality.
The less doctrinaire social policies that emerged with the Reform era have encouraged the revival of male dan in the jingju domain, as well as the emergence of cross-dressing singers in other popular forms of entertainment. Section Two therefore focuses on the different predicament for these two groups. Firstly, as Chinese society remains in the grip of homophobia and femmephobia, the training of male dan is limited at state-owned educational institutions of Chinese theatre. Even so, professional male dan are still conceived of as less socially disturbing than cross-dressing singers because of jingju’s connection to the cultural legacy of China. As a result, cross-dressing vocalists justify their performance by associating themselves with jingju. For instance, Li Yugang 李玉剛 (b. 1978) was officially recognised as an “treasured national artist” and performed several times overseas. However, he strove to justify his performance by tracing it back to male dan in jingju and onnagata (女形) in kabuki. Another cross-dressing vocalist Hu Wenge 胡文閣 (b. 1967) was famous in Shenzhen and Hong Kong in the 1990s. But in 2001 he voluntarily withdrew and went to Beijing in order to learn jingju artistry under Mei Baojiu, the son of Mei Lanfang. Today, Hu is already recognised as a professional male dan and accepted as a member of the Peking Opera Theatre of Beijing (Beijing jingju yuan 北京京劇院).

The third section examines the contemporary predicament for professional male dan. Due to the widespread understanding that male dan are effeminate, professional male dan often display their masculinity in public and/or for their families—whether this “macho” quality is real or fabricated. They declare that a professional male dan is able to distinguish his onstage
female roles from his offstage identity as a man. For example, Mou Yuandi (b. 1983) highlighted the male dan’s professional proficiency, considering the stylised and conventionalised artistry of jingju performance as the primary concern of a successful male dan. By declaring that performing female roles is his job, Mou sought to differentiate himself and other professional male dan from amateur performers and from non-theatrical cross-dressing actors, some of whom looked to jingju as a safe place in order to engage in cross-dressing.

From Heteroerotic to Homoerotic: Male Dan Actors in a Modern Scale

After their absence from public life during the Cultural Revolution, male dan actors re-emerged, often in films and plays. As we have seen, during the Qing period when female entertainers were prohibited from theatrical performances, male dan took their place and were usually framed within a heteroerotic formulation, while today, cross-dressing is frequently understood in a homoerotic way. Whether or not this modern reinterpretation is a misunderstanding of the earlier practice, it fundamentally influences the way people think about the role of male dan in new forms of popular entertainment.

M. Butterfly: Homoerotic or Heteroerotic?

M. Butterfly, written by the Chinese American author David H. Hwang, tells the story of René Gallimard and Song Liling. Gallimard is a French diplomat in China. When watching the opera Madame Butterfly he becomes fascinated by the “actress” (dan actor) Song Liling, who plays the
part of the heroine Butterfly. They are soon in a relationship, but later Gallimard is accused of espionage. In court, Gallimard finds that Song Liling has cheated him by pretending to be a woman for years. He feels disillusioned and finally commits suicide, murmuring “Butterfly? Butterfly?” before his death.

This play is a response of the Italian playwright Giacomo Puccini’s opera *Madame Butterfly*. Gallimard’s murmur “Butterfly? Butterfly?” reminds us of the Japanese heroine Cho-Cho-San in *Madame Butterfly*, in which she murmurs “Pinkerton? Pinkerton?” and commits suicide after her lover Lt. Pinkerton leaves her and takes a new wife back in the United States. This play, as Hwang argues, is a deconstructive attempt to counter the Orientalism of *Madame Butterfly*—a “stereotyped view of Asians as bowing, blushing flowers.”5 By making Gallimard die for Song Liling, Hwang presents Gallimard as an example of Westerners who are addicted to this Orientalist fantasy, suggesting that whoever seeks a “docile” Butterfly in the East will end up becoming the Butterfly.

David H. Hwang considers Gallimard’s fantasy as a microcosm of Western civilisation’s indulgence in this kind of Orientalist fantasy. Besides the bashfulness of Eastern women, embodied through the image of Butterfly, this fantasy also infers the imaginary relationship that the West is masculine and the East is feminine, rendering the East vulnerable in front of the West. As Gallimard’s friend Marc believes, “They fear us, René. Their women fear us.

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And their men—their men hate us.”⁶ This thought has its origins in the supremacy that the West established throughout the world with its economic, industrial, and military power. Within this rhetorical dimorphism of masculinity and femininity, the whole of the East is considered effeminate, because “the West thinks of itself as masculine...so the East is feminine.” As Song Liling complains to the Judge, “I am an Oriental. And being an Oriental, I could never be completely a man.”⁷

Despite Hwang’s Saidian argument against the Orientalism embodied in Puccini’s opera Madame Butterfly, some Western critics such as Laurence Senelick (b. 1942) considered this an overreaction. Senelick titles his analysis of the play, “To Break a Butterfly on a Wheel.” In contrast to Hwang’s realpolitik concerns, Senelick’s analysis is focused on the feminine mystique lurking beneath Chinese transvestitism. Senelick argues that M. Butterfly is a badly-written story which fails to delve into the “homoerotic interactions” between Gallimard and Song Liling, and he conjectures about what he believes to be the hidden part of the story. He suggests that through their two decades’ intimacy Gallimard could not have failed to notice that Song Liling was a man. Hence, Gallimard is a closeted homosexual; he knows that Song Liling is a man but never discloses the secret.⁸ With regard to their sexual life, Senelick assumes that what this couple have is a sort of “intercrural

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⁶ Hwang, M. Butterfly, 25.
⁷ Hwang, M. Butterfly, 83. Italics are mine.
intercourse.”

Senelick’s discursive deduction of Gallimard and Song Liling’s sexual life echoes the cumulative focus on theatrical transvestitism of current scholars. Actually, the play *M. Butterfly* has its prototype from a true story of a French diplomat Bernard Boursicot (b. 1944) and his “girlfriend” Shi Peipu (時佩璞, 1938–2009), a Chinese actor and spy. Within their two decades’ relationship, Boursicot failed to notice that Shi Peipu was a man. Turning a deaf ear to this possibility, Senelick enquires into Gallimard and Song Liling’s sexual life by assuming that the Frenchman is aware that his partner is a man. In so doing, Senelick shifts *M. Butterfly* away from a possible heteroerotic story to a homoerotic one. In modern narratives such as this, male *dan* are often associated with an underlying homoerotic sensibility.

In 1988, *M. Butterfly* was performed at Washington State Theatre and on Broadway. In 1993 it was produced as a film by David Cronenberg, with the Chinese-American film star John Lone playing the part of Song Liling. However, neither the play nor the film received much attention in Mainland China. For the Chinese public, who seldom see *jingju* plays, the primary source of their understanding of *dan* actors is Li Bihua’s *Bawang bieji* (*The King’s Parting from His Concubine*).

*Farewell, My Concubine: Homoerotic Sensibility as Acquired Quality?*

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10 As *The New York Times* reported, Bernard Boursicot argued that he “had never seen his ‘girlfriend’ naked,” declaring that “I thought she was very modest. I thought it was a Chinese custom.” See Huang, *M. Butterfly*, 94.
When David H. Hwang wrote *M. Butterfly* to counter the Orientalism in Puccini’s *Madam Butterfly*, he did not describe René Gallimard and Song Liling’s relationship as homoerotic. However, scholars such as Laurence Senelick have shifted their focus away from realpolitik concerns to concentrate on the “closeted” homoerotic dimension of the relationship between the two protagonists. This development demonstrates a more recent way of understanding *dan* actors. In modern China, the most influential work of this kind is Chen Kaige’s 陈凯歌 (b. 1952) film *Farewell, My Concubine*, which was based on Li Bihua’s novel and won the Golden Palm at Cannes in the same year it was released (1993). Still frequently screened, this film brought *dan* actors back into the limelight, thus reframing contemporary Chinese society’s understanding of the theatrical transvestite practice within a new axis of homoerotic sensibility.

*Farewell, My Concubine* is a story about Cheng Dieyi 程蝶衣 and Duan Xiaolou 段小樓, who are childhood friends and learn *jingju* performance from the same master. They often collaborate in the traditional *jingju* play *Bawang bieji*, which is commonly translated as *The King’s Parting from His Concubine*. Duan is a *jing* and performs the role of the king, Xiang Yu 项羽 (232–202 BCE), while Cheng performs as a male *dan* in the role of his concubine Yu Ji 虞姬 (d. 202 BCE). As a result, Cheng develops a homoerotic attachment to Duan.11 The novelist and playwright Li Bihua thus suggests that the routine

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11 The Chinese name of the film *Bawang bieji* is the same as the *jingju* play *Bawang bieji*, or *The King’s Parting from His Concubine*, in which Cheng Dieyi and Duan Xiaolou often collaborate. Li Bihua named the novel and film after the *jingju* play because it connotes the fate of Cheng Dieyi. Cheng considers himself as Yu Ji, and finally committed suicide for Duan Xiaolou as Yu Ji does for Xiang Yu in *jingju*. 
training required for a dan actor to play female roles leads to a blurring in Cheng’s identity, engendering his homoerotic sensibility. When Cheng is rehearsing the play Sifan 思凡 (A Nun Seeks Love), he keeps confusing the heroine’s original soliloquy “I’m a delicate woman, not a man,” saying instead “I’m a man, not a delicate woman.” In order to correct him, Duan pokes the pole of a water pipe into Cheng’s mouth, which, according to modern critics, symbolises sexual intercourse, thus feminising Cheng.12

Losing himself in the role of Yu Ji, Cheng Dieyi considers Duan Xiaolou as his/her beloved husband Xiang Yu.13 Turning a blind eye to Cheng’s feeling for him, Duan visits the Wanhualou Brothel 萬花樓, where he meets the prostitute Ju Xian 菊仙, whom he marries soon afterwards. At the end of the film, Cheng performs again with Duan in the play The King’s Parting from His Concubine, but this time he commits suicide in Duan’s arms—just as the Yu Ji does in the jingju play.

As Huang Li 黃鸝 suggests, the film is a paean to the 200-year history of jingju, particularly since the arrival of the Anhui troupes in Beijing in 1790.14


13 While the name of this jingju play was translated as The King’s Parting from his Favourite in the pamphlet compiled by Mei Lanfang’s troupe for the American tour in 1930, the 1993 film re-translated it as Farewell, My Concubine. In fact, the Chinese names of the film and the jingju play are the same.

14 Huang Li 黃鸝, “Yinyu rensheng de xi: lun dianying bawang bieji de zhuti neiian,” 隱喻人生的戲——論電影霸王別姬的主題內涵 [The Dream is a Metaphor of Life: The Meaning of the Subject of the Film Farewell, My Concubine] Henan jiaoyu xueyuan xueba 2 (2004): 46–47. The four great Anhui troupe’s entering Beijing is officially considered as
On a broader level, *Farewell, My Concubine* is not just Cheng Dieyi’s individual story, but also a picture of the developing trajectory of modern China. The film is divided into several scenes—the Northern Warlord period, the Sino-Japanese War, the failure of the GMD (*Guomindang*, or Nationalist Party), and finally the Cultural Revolution. Therefore, although Li Bihua argues that the topic of the novel *Bawang bieji* is “the infatuated love between two men,” the story is not as straightforward as Li asserts. Similarly, it makes little sense to attribute the homoerotic sensibility of Cheng Dieyi to his *anima*, within the formula of Jungian psychology. It is generally accepted that the hero(ine) Cheng Dieyi’s declaration that “I have dreamt of being Yu Ji for my entire life” is the essence of his life. However, his desire “to be Yu Ji” can be understood in two ways—realistically and artistically. On the realistic level, the Yu Ji that Cheng dreams of being is Xiang Yu’s lover. However, “his love is just an imitation of an ancient love story, his lover just a fictitious hero, so his dream is just a *jingju* play called *Farewell, My Concubine*.” Hence for Cheng

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15 Li Bihua 李碧華, *Bawang bieji 霸王別姬 [The King’s Parting from His Concubine]* (Hong Kong: Tiandi tushu, 1992), back cover. Additionally, the finale of the novel is different from the film. In the film, Cheng Dieyi commits suicide in the arms of Duan Xiaolou. In the novel, Cheng becomes a *jingju* artist after the end of the Cultural Revolution, while Duan flees to Hong Kong, making a livelihood as a masseur. Cheng thinks that after Ju Xian’s death, he can keep Duan Xiaolou to himself for the rest of their lives, but Duan just pleads with him to bring Ju Xian’s ashes back for him. “The finale of the novel is very realistic, but it brutally tears up Cheng Dieyi’s dream.” See Peng Xiaohong 彭曉紅 and Tang Yonghong 唐永紅, “Bawang bieji: Xiru rensheng,” 霸王別姬: 戲如人生 [*Farewell, My Concubine: Drama is Like Life*] Guizhou gongye daxue xuebao 4 (2008): 134 & 136.


17 For more details, refer to the film *Farewell My Concubine* (1993).
Dieyi, “drama is dream.” In the dream, it is Yu Ji, not Cheng Dieyi; who dreams of Xiang Yu, not Duan Xiaolou. Cheng’s attachment to Duan is just an extension of Yu Ji’s love for Xiang Yu—Duan happens to be the person who performs Xiang Yu. After all, Cheng Dieyi’s devotion to his lover is due to his understanding of and admiration for Yu Ji’s faithfulness. He is theatrically infatuated, so blurs the boundary of the real world and the phantasmatic world of play. Thus, “he [Cheng] is fundamentally different from real-life homosexuals.” For these reasons, the argument advanced by Peng Xiaohong and Tang Yonghong that Cheng Dieyi has a homoerotic sensibility and is subject to a “loss of human nature” is problematic.

Besides, the leading Hong Kong actor Zhang Guorong’s unusual life trajectory contributes to the homoerotic connotations of the film. The directing team selected Zhang for the role of Cheng Dieyi although John Lone (b. 1952), the actor who played Song Liling in David H. Hwang’s M. Butterfly, also wanted the role. Undeniably, the popularity that Farewell, My Concubine enjoyed in Mainland China is attributable to the personal appeal of Zhang Guorong. This was enhanced after Zhang, who was gay, jumped from a building in 2003, echoing the death of Cheng Dieyi in the film. Many fans chose to believe that Zhang was the incarnation of Cheng—partially because of Zhang’s artistic excellence.

18 Huang Li, “Yinyu rensheng de xi,” 46–47.
and partially because his life resembles that of Cheng (both commit suicide). Despite all of Zhang Guorong’s differences from Cheng Dieyi, this superficial resemblance created confusion, blurring Cheng in the film and Zhang in real life.

*Farewell, My Concubine* has had a profound influence on many audiences in contemporary China.\(^{21}\) The audiences’ love for the actor Zhang and curiosity about his private life served to reinforce Li Bihua’s suggestion that homoerotic sensibilities can be acquired during the course of the routine training required for a *dan* actor to play female roles. *Farewell, My Concubine* supports the idea that homoerotism can be acquired through training, and it makes sense of Cheng Dieyi’s story. However, the relevance of sexual preference to performance in *jingju* may not be as straightforward as Li Bihua suggests. Especially for the younger generation, who have insufficient knowledge of the traditions of *jingju*, the film leads to a misunderstanding that *dan* actors are subject to an acquired tendency to homosexuality.

Furthermore, this film was criticised in *Qiushi* 求是 (*Seeking Truth*), the organ of the CCP’s Central Committee, for being “spiritual pollution” due to its excessive indulgence in homosexuality:

> If a man who plays the part of a woman has to become a woman [in real life], then an actor who plays the part of a bandit has to become a bandit, an actor who plays the part of a prostitute has to become a prostitute, and an actor who plays the part of a class enemy has to become an enemy. Is this not absurd?

\(^{21}\) In 1993, the box-office of *Farewell, My Concubine* in China was over ¥40,000,000. That means around 10,000,000 people watched the film, as the price of a ticket was around ¥4. Taking the economic development of China in the 1990s into consideration, this was a big box-office hit. For more details see [http://ent.sina.com.cn/m/c/2005-12-08/1145921733.html](http://ent.sina.com.cn/m/c/2005-12-08/1145921733.html)
In Western countries, homosexuality is similar to drug addiction, prostitution, and gambling. Those are reflections of the social and spiritual crisis of capitalism.22

As homosexuality is considered deviant in contemporary China or even representative of a decadent lifestyle of the West, *dan* actors have to distinguish themselves from the Cheng Dieyi of *Farewell, My Concubine*. When Mei Baojiu 梅葆玖 (1934–2016) was interviewed about Cheng Dieyi he said that “We are able to perform female roles on the stage, but in real life we are definitely men—macho men! I think it is more proper to have Zhang Guorong [the actor who performed the role of Cheng Dieyi] answer your question.”23 Strategically, Mei separated *dan* actors from the curiosity about homosexuality created by *Farewell, My Concubine*, foregrounding the actor’s ability to confine the fabricated femininity to the artistic level. However, the homoerotic connotations of *Farewell, My Concubine* remain influential with the Chinese public. Despite the protestations of Mei Baojiu and other *dan* actors, the popularity of the film has encouraged people to accept the connection between theatrical transvestitism and homoerotic sensibilities.

*Two Belles in Love: Male Dan Actors Perform “Lesbian” Roles*

In the recent performance of *Lianxiang ban* 憐香伴 (lit. *My Fragrant Companion*) produced by the Polo Arts company (*Puluo yishu* 普羅藝術), the

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connection between *dan* actors and homoerotic sensibilities was reinforced, as the director adapted the original plot to make it a “lesbian story” and invited two *dan* actors to play the roles of the two heroines.

*Lianxiang ban* was one of the ten plays of the Qing playwright Li Yu 李漁 (1611–1680). This is a simple story focused on two beauties, Cui Jianyun 崔箋雲 and Cao Yuhua 曹語花. Cui is Fan Jiefu’s 范介夫 wife. Once she visits The Rain-Flower Convent (Yuhua an 雨花庵) and suddenly smells a pleasant perfume. She looks for the source and finds it to be Cao’s body fragrance. Cui becomes Cao’s friend and persuades Fan to take Cao as his second wife. This story was first produced as a *jingju* play in 1957 by the *dan* actor Zhang Junqiu 張君秋 (1920–1997). Due to the 1950 Marriage Law that required strict monogamy, in the *jingju* version the story remains basically the same, but Fan Jiefu was renamed as Cui Jiefu 崔介夫 and Cui Jianyun, who had been Jiefu’s wife, became his sister. What Cui Jianyun does therefore is perform the matchmaking duties of a sister, not those of a wife looking for a concubine for her husband.

According to scholarly convention, *Lianxiang ban* was written to help persuade wives not to be jealous if their husbands took a concubine. For instance, Yuan Rui 袁睿 argues that Li Yu’s aim in writing this play was to “dissuade [women] from being jealous.”

Li Yu commented after the last act of the play that “A beauty’s body fragrance is admirable, while an envious

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wife is not able to feel it. Hence, Yuan argues that Li Yu admired Cui Jianyun as “an ideal wife for feudal men,” but not as a lesbian lover. Li Yu himself had a wife (Xu Shi) as well as five concubines.

In 2010, in the Polo Arts company’s production of Lianxiang ban, Cui Jianyun’s motive in bringing Cao Yuha into her family is to find a lesbian partner for herself. In order to indicate the different focus of the play, Wang gave it the English-language title A Romance: Two Belles in Love, which foregrounded its topic as the “love” between the two female protagonists. Wang also appointed Guan Jinpeng (b. 1957) as the director, partially because Guan had “come out” in 1996. Furthermore, Wang invited Li Yinhe 李銀河 (b. 1952) to be Culture Consultant for the play and Du Shuying 杜書瀛 (b. 1938) to be Literature Consultant. Both Li and Du are from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. Li is a liberal feminist scholar and the author of Tongxinglian ya wenhua 同性戀亞文化 (The Subculture of Homosexuality). Du is a professional in Li Yu studies, and even published an article declaring that “this play is about a very particular topic—lesbianism. Previously I did not

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25 There is a short “playwright’s note” after the play.
26 Ibid., 119.
27 Ibid., 120.
This homoerotic/lesbian formula that Wang Xiang puts forward invited much criticism from serious scholars such as Yuan Rui, as it interpreted Li Yu’s original story in what they felt was a “misleading” way.

This play also used dan actors as a drawcard in order to generate box-office profits. Polo Arts produced an all-male version, arousing curiosity by suggesting the dan actors’ potential psychological resemblance to lesbians. If we consider the original context of Lianxiang ban, the modern lesbian reinterpretation of the play seems implausible. Despite this, the new version has influenced the understanding of modern play-goers, who go to see this play out of curiosity about homosexuality. In fact, the training required for a dan actor may, or may not, lead to an acquired tendency for homosexuality, and similarly, the decision to become a dan actor may, or may not, have its basis in an unconscious anima. But this modern version of the play reinforces the perception that there is an intimate connection between dan actors and homoerotic sensibility.

Rejuvenation?: Male Dan Actors after the Reform and Opening Policy

The first section portrayed a picture of how male dan are in some cases

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used as a drawcard for commercial gain by producers of popular entertainment, primarily through the possible association of male dan with homosexuality. Following the success of *Farewell, My Concubine*, Cheng Dieyi’s homoerotic attachment to Duan Xiaolou has influenced many audiences, thus reinforcing the idea that homosexuality could be acquired through the training required to become a dan actor. In China, homosexuality was removed from the official “illness” list in 2001, yet many people still consider it to be “abnormal.” For instance, Yan Geling 嚴歌苓 (b. 1958), the screenwriter for the film *Mei Lanfang* (*Forever Enthralled*), wrote an article titled “Male Dan Actors Have a Morbid Beauty” in which the “morbidity” refers to homosexuality.  

*Male Dan Actors: Never the Last*

While the association of cross-dressing with homosexuality overshadows the career of all male dan, new actors are still attracted to the art and undergo the rigorous training required. In his book *Cross-Dressing in Chinese Opera*, Siu-leung Li refers to Wen Ruhua 溫如華 (b. 1958), an unofficial protégé of Zhang Junqiu, as “The Last Male Dan.” According to Li, “In 1982 he [Wen] was transferred to the Beijing Opera Company of the City of Beijing. In the meantime, the renowned and revered playwright Weng Ouhong 翁偶虹 (1904–1994) tailor-made a play for him.”

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32 Siu-leung Li, *Cross-Dressing in Chinese Opera* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2003), 200. The official name of this company is Peking Opera Theatre of Beijing (*Beijing
The Fair-Faced Gentleman, was distilled from the Water Margin story. The protagonist, Zheng Tianshou 鄭天壽, is a fair-skinned and handsome Water Margin hero. He cross-dresses as a pretty woman, sneaking into the enemy's mansion in order to save his wife. For the majority of the time in this play, Wen Ruhua played in the dan category, but he called himself “a sheng cum [jian 兼, or doubling] dan” in order to not draw attention to the fact that he was performing a dan role.33 Li argues that this jargon of doubling “was a necessity as a semiotic protection shield” that gave Wen legitimacy in the post Cultural Revolution “heterosexual-homophobic matrix.”34

By the 1990s, some scholars began to discuss the necessity of reviving the use of male dan in jingju plays. For instance, in 1994, on the centenary of Mei Lanfang’s birth, Zhou Chuanjia 周傳家 (b. 1944) wrote Nandan cihuang 男旦雌黃 [Some Free Thoughts on the Male Dan] in memory of Mei and in order to rehabilitate the use of dan actors. Zhou highlights the artistic merits of dan actors over dan actresses, calling for a revival of this lost tradition.35 Furthermore, he downplayed the association between the dan actor and homosexuality, arguing that “Mei performed dan for his entire life, without a trace of effeminacy (zhifen qi 脂粉氣).”36 For dan actors, Zhou’s discourse of

33 Ibid.
34 Siu-leung Li, Cross-Dressing in Chinese Opera, 203.
highlighting artistry and downplaying the possibility of effeminacy “serves as a theoretical reflection and a tactic for survival.”\textsuperscript{37}

Although in 2003 Siu-leung Li still argued that Wen Ruhua was probably the last male \textit{dan}, from the 1990s onwards, a few institutions recruited and trained a constellation of younger male \textit{dan}. They, in the late 2010s, have already performed in professional \textit{jingju} troupes in major cities, including but not limited to, Beijing, Lanzhou (Gansu province) and Huai’an (Jiangsu province).

However, at Zhongguo xiqu xueyuan 中國戲曲學院 (National Academy of Chinese Theatre Arts, NACTA hereafter), the leading state-owned theatrical educational institution for \textit{xiqu}, the training of \textit{dan} actors remains forbidden on principle. In contrast, an overwhelming majority of professional \textit{dan} actors today are trained at Beijing xixiao 北京戲校 (Beijing Opera Art’s College, BOAC hereafter), where male students are still allowed to become \textit{dan} disciples due to the policy of the previous Chancellor, the eminent female \textit{dan} actress Sun Yumin 孫毓敏 (b. 1940). Almost all the renowned professional \textit{dan} actors who were trained after the Cultural Revolution, for example, Mou Yuandi 牟元笛 (b. 1983), Yin Jun 尹俊 (b. 1988), and Ye Aochang 葉翱暢 (aka. Ye Jincai 葉晉材, b. 1990) were students of BOAC.

However, even in BOAC, the last refuge for potential professional \textit{dan} actors, the admission officers still try to persuade boys not to follow this path, and only allow it if the student insists. Otherwise, the staff tend to convert

\textsuperscript{37} Siu-leung Li, \textit{Cross-Dressing in Chinese Opera}, 213.
aspiring *dan* actors into the *xiaosheng* 小生 (young male role) category. The story of Wang Chao 王超 (b. 1997) and Guo Yu’ang 郭宇昂 (b. 1998), both of whom I interviewed in 2017, embodies the strategy of the BOAC committee. Wang and Guo both learned *dan* artistry from the time that they were in primary school, but when they applied to BOAC both were advised to convert to the *xiaosheng* category. Wang insisted on learning *dan* artistry and was officially allowed, while Guo converted to *xiaosheng* instead. Nevertheless, during his holidays Guo flew to Shanghai frequently to learn *dan* artistry from his master, the famous *dan* actress Zhang Nanyun 張南雲 (b. 1935).

There has been one exception to the ban on the learning of *dan* artistry at NACTA, which was done to accommodate the Taiwanese student Yang Ruiyu 楊瑞宇 (b. 1991). Shu Tong 舒桐 (b. 1972), the Head of the *Jingju* Department, allowed him to enrol in NACTA’s master course as a *dan* protégé because he is from Taiwan, and thus not considered subject to the ban on Mainland Chinese. When Yang studied at the *Taiwan xiqu xueyuan* 臺灣戲曲學院 (National Taiwan College of Performing Arts NTCPA), however, the NTCPA staff advised him to learn *xiaosheng* as well, even though Yang preferred to perform female roles. Taiwan has continued more of the traditions of *xiqu* and was not subject to the ban on *dan* actors imposed during the Cultural Revolution. Nevertheless, official Taiwanese institutions such as NTCPA still try to avoid the training of *dan* actors. This attests to the fact that the ambivalence towards male *dan* is not only a historical issue, but also reflects a current anxiety about effeminacy which still haunts the Greater Chinese region. This phobia has resulted in great pressure on *dan* actors to legitimate
their profession, which is conceived of as “renouncing” masculinity.

Li Yugang: Male Dan or Cross-Dressing Singer?

Extrapolating from the recent trend, at least in the foreseeable future it seems that the use of dan actors in jingju will not come to an end. However, even in the twenty-first century, professional dan actors still encounter the same plight of self-legitimacy as Wen Ruhua did in the 1980–90s. Both theatrical (male dan) and non-theatrical cross-dressing actors face great social pressure, although male dan are obviously conceived of as less problematic due to jingju’s cultural legacy. As a result, non-theatrical cross-dressing actors often legitimate themselves by establishing connections to jingju. In contrast, professional male dan are eager to distinguish themselves from the cross-dressing actors who have not undergone the long years of professional training that the jingju role requires.

Cross-dressing singers sprang up in the less doctrinaire social environment that emerged following the launching of the Reform and Opening era in the late 1970s. But unlike professional male dan they do not undergo the harsh training in the virtuosic skills which are a basic requirement for a professional jingju practitioner. They absorb some theatrical elements from the jingju corpus into their performance, declaring themselves to be “male dan” in order to gain fame and financial benefit. Some scholars use the term “male dan” to refer to all cross-dressing actors—both theatrical and non-theatrical.38 This blurs the boundary between male dan and

38 Huai Bao, “Sexual Artifice Through ‘Transgression’: The Revival of Cross-Gender
non-theatrical cross-dressing actors, and threatens to undermine the legitimacy of male dan in the jingju domain.

In contemporary China, the best-known non-theatrical cross-dressing actor is probably Li Yugang. Li was born into a poor family in Jilin province. In 1998, he was employed as part-time waiter in a discothèque in Changchun city. One day, due to the absence of a female vocalist, he voluntarily performed the popular song 为了谁 (For Whom), imitating the voice of a woman. Inspired by this experience, Li therefore discovered the potential of using his falsetto voice, embarking on his career as a transvestite performer.

In 2006, Li Yugang participated in the CCTV talent show 《星光大道》 (The Star Avenue Talent Show) winning third place as a “grass-roots” star. In February 2007, Li received a permanent appointment with Zhongguo geju wuju yuan 中国歌剧舞剧院 (China National Opera & Dance Drama Theatre, CNODDT). Soon afterwards, in 2009, he was promoted as a Guojia yiji yanyuan 国家一级演员 (National First-Class Performer), a senior professional, by the Cultural Ministry. On 28 July, Li was invited to perform at the Sydney Opera House and won the Southern Cross Golden Prize. As the hostess, Xu Gehui 许戈辉 (b. 1968) from Phoenix Satellite TV, claimed, Li’s concert was officially endorsed by the Chinese government, introducing China’s “national essence” to Australia.

From the programme for this performance it is clear that Li Yugang

Performance in Jingju,” (Ph.D. disser., Simon Fraser University, 2015), 81–85.
lacked his own distinctive repertoire. In the programme of his Sydney performances, just one aria, Xin Guifei zuijiu 新貴妃醉酒 (New Intoxicated Imperial Concubine), was original. His artistry was based on his flexibility, moving easily between masculinity and femininity.

Although Li Yugang is officially recognised by the Cultural Ministry as a cross-dressing actor, he remains anxious about his identity. When he was a contestant in the Star Avenue Talent Show, Li performed two jingju pieces, The King’s Parting from His Concubine and The Intoxicated Imperial Concubine, declaring himself to be a dan actor of the Mei School. As a result, Li invited an avalanche of public censure from the jingju domain. The most influential comment came from Mei Baojiu, the de facto leader of male dan:

a dan actor of the Mei School does not mean a man who makes use of false breasts, wears foundation cream to be fair-skinned, and performs The Intoxicated Imperial Concubine.

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39 Li Yugang’s nine programmes for his Sydney performance were (1) Wang ningmei 枉凝眉 (Love in Vain), (2) Zanghua yin 葬花吟 (Song of Burying Flower), (3) Bawang bieji 霸王别姬 (Farewell, My Concubine), (4) Xin Guifei zuijiu 新貴妃醉酒 (New Intoxicated Imperial Concubine), (5) Lihua song 梨花頌 (Ode of Pear Flower), (6) Fei 飛 (Fly), (7) Scarborough Fair, (8) Doraji, Xianqi nide gaitou lai掀起你的蓋頭來 (Lift Your Veil), Zai Beijing jinshan shang在北京金山上 (On Beijing’s Golden Mountain), and Aobao xianghui 敖包相會 (A Tent for Lovers), and (9) Jintian shi nide shengri, Zhongguo 今天是你的生日,中國 (Today is Your Birthday, China).


Mei Baojiu argued that Li lacked even the basic skills of a dan actor, suggesting that his performance was “a different artistic form... but not jingju.” This criticism persuaded Li to give up the claim that he was a jingju artist. During Li’s 2009 trip to Sydney, after he became a star and was recognised by the Party-State as a “treasured national artist,” he claimed to be an onnagata of the Japanese kabuki tradition.42

While many scholars praise Li’s performance as a rejuvenation of jingju in the new era of modern media, the majority of jingju practitioners do not recognise Li as a dan actor.43 This is the source of Li’s anxiety. Actually, Li Yugang’s anxiety represents a common concern of non-theatrical cross-dressing actors. Despite recognition as an “artist of national treasure,” Li still lacks artistic legitimacy and therefore seeks to align himself to established artistic forms—either jingju or kabuki. However, Li’s appeal to audiences comes from neither jingju nor kabuki, but from his flexibility in moving between natural and falsetto voices. In most of his videos, he exhibits his falsetto voice wearing traditional women’s costumes and then shifts back to his true voice wearing a formal male suit. This form of performance has few similarities to jingju, nor is it a rejuvenation of tradition.

Hu Wenge: Climbing up to the Jingju Domain

Not all cross-dressing singers are as fortunate as Li Yugang, who was officially recognised as a “treasured national artist.” For instance, Hu Wenge, who was previously a famous cross-dressing singer in Hong Kong and Shenzhen, struggled for over a decade to gain greater legitimacy. Failing to get any official recognition, Hu left Shenzhen for Beijing, where, from 2001 to 2016, he learned jingju performance from Mei Baojiu. He is currently the only man amongst all the recognised third generation of disciples of the Mei School, and was accepted as a male dan at the Peking Opera Theatre of Beijing.

When he was young, Hu Wenge learned qinqiang 秦腔 (Shaanxi theatre) performance at Xi’an shi yishu xuexiao 西安市藝術學校 (Xi’an Art School). Although he was designated to the xiaosheng role-category, he preferred female roles. In 1982, Hu was assigned to Xi’an qinqiang juyuan 西安秦腔劇院 (Xi’an Qinqiang Opera Company), but soon resigned because of excessive bureaucratic issues.44 Influenced by the common trend of the 1980s, Hu “plunged into the sea” (xiahai 下海, to quit a job in the state system) and joined an itinerant music troupe, Qiu haitang 秋海棠 (Begonia), performing in many southern provinces.45 Once, when in Sichuan, the leading actress of the troupe fell ill and Hu offered to fill her position because he could use his falsetto voice to imitate a woman. His transvestite performance proved to be unexpectedly successful, and he received several encores.46

44 Yuan Sheng 元生, Zuihou denandan 最后的男旦 [The Last Male Dan Actor] (Beijing: Zhongguo chengshi chubanshe, 2009), 14 & 34.
45 Qiu haitang is a famous fictional dan actor in Qin Shouou’s 秦瘦鷗 (1908–93) novel Qiu haitang.
46 Yuan Sheng, Zuihou denandan, 46–51.
Later Hu Wenge left the Qiu haitang troupe and settled in Shenzhen city.\(^{47}\) He soon became famous, and in 1992 was even called into Zhongnan hai 中南海 to perform for senior Party leaders.\(^{48}\) However, Hu was still not officially recognised. Compared to Li Yugang, who performed in CCTV’s New Year’s Gala (in 2012 and 2013), Hu was rejected by the programme team in 1994 because of the CCP censor’s veto.\(^{49}\) For an individual actor, the opportunity of appearing in the Gala is an important experience which means official accreditation from the Party-State. Hu’s failure to gain a spot in the Gala intensified his anxiety. He claims that “It seems that I am abnormal…few people think my performance is a form of art.”\(^{50}\) In order to escape this perception about his “abnormal” image, Hu Wenge determined to retreat to the safe place provided by jingju. As “the art of dan actors formed in the Ming-Qing transition,” it is a valued tradition that has a long history, and is thus a “highbrow” art form.\(^{51}\) With fifteen years’ training in jingju artistry, Hu’s transvestite performance shifted away from a problematic “lowbrow” art to a legitimate, “highbrow” one.

According to Yuan Sheng’s 元生 biography of Hu, his acquired effeminate disposition influenced his next career-move to become a cross-dressing vocalist. Yuan Sheng attributes Hu’s desire to cross-dress to his “adoration and admiration for women.”\(^{52}\) After his father’s death during the
Cultural Revolution, Hu was taken care of by his elder sisters. As most of Hu’s childhood playmates were girls, Yuan Sheng argues that they influenced his sense of self, making him a little effeminate (zhifen qi). In recounting Hu Wenge’s childhood story, Yuan Sheng suggests that the main reason for a man to want to become a male dan was his effeminate identity.

The Male Dan’s “Crisis of Masculinity”

The previous section discussed efforts by cross-dressers to use jingju as a safe place to indulge their desire to perform as women. These men have not received very extensive training in jingju artistry, so their claim to be male dan discredits the real jingju dan. Furthermore, scholars such as Huai Bao confuse male dan with drag queens, analysing them in terms of Western theoretical constructs. Employing Jungian psychology, Huai Bao attributes the motivation to become a male dan to anima, or a latent feminine self beneath the male façade. The applicability of Jungian psychoanalysis in analysing the case of male dan remains questionable. But as a result of perceptions such as this, male dan are very discreet concerning the issue of gender and sexuality, as they may invite an avalanche of public censure for “being effeminate.” Many professional dan actors, and even the amateurs who want to differentiate themselves from non-theatrical cross-dressing actors, seek to avoid any behaviour that might be considered effeminate.

Re-Establishing a Masculine Self

53 Ibid., 12–13 & 33.
As a result of an essentialist understanding of gender and sexuality, many people believe that male *dan* are “abnormal.” For instance, a journalist made up a story about the *dan* actor Ye Aochang. The journalist claimed that once Ye competed for a place in a *jingju* company that was recruiting actors for performances in Korea. Ye’s performance was considered to be of the highest quality, but the head of the company denied him simply because he is a male *dan*. The goal of the journalist in fabricating this story was to show the difficulty that Ye had due to his gender. However, the story instead reinforced the idea that the male *dan* was “abnormal.” This “presumption of guilt” was even internalised by some male *dan*, as is clear from Song Changrong’s 宋長榮 (b. 1935) memoir:

> I have to carry on my training; if I stop my daily training or reduce it, I can’t behave freely in the play, which may even cause accidents. But my children are already adults, having children of their own. I’m a *dan* actor, so all my postures have feminine features—soft and fascinating. I don’t want to make a fool of myself in front of my grandchildren. Thus, my training goes underground...When I’m at home, I have to behave like a grandfather. [Italics mine]

As a professional male *dan*, Song Changrong has to painstakingly defend his “masculinity” from the “femininity” he cultivates for the female roles he performs, something which is often misunderstood by the curious public. Song Changrong is one of the best protégés of Xun Huisheng and is praised as a living Hongniang (*huo Hongniang* 活紅娘) for his artistic excellence in portraying the protagonist Hongniang in *The Romance of the West Chamber*. As

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55 Interview with Ye Jincai, 3 June 2017.
56 Song Changrong, *Huo hongniang*, 142.
an old and renowned artist who has devoted all his life to dan artistry, why would Song Changrong deem that the feminine quality lurking within that artistry—which has gradually become part of his personality—would be a source of humiliation for his family?

The reason for Song Changrong’s predicament lies primarily in the patriarchy of Chinese society. As women are seen as inferior to men in the Confucian/Maoist hierarchy, it is seen as effeminate for men to perform female roles, which leads to a fall in status both in the world and within the family. Many professional dan actors therefore highlight their ability to differentiate their performances from real life, delimiting their effeminate behaviour within the artistic world of the theatre. As Mei Lanfang’s student Shu Changyu 舒昌玉 (b. 1927) declared in an interview:

To be a dan actor, the key point is to behave like a woman in the theatre but behave like a man in life. The worst case is, on the contrary, someone who behaves like a woman in his life but not in the theatre.57

This reminds us of Mei Baojiu’s declaration: “in real life we are definitely men—macho men.” Similarly, in an interview in 1999, Wen Ruhua indicated the likelihood for a dan actor to want to be a “macho man” [nanzi han 男子漢] in real life.58 For the dan actors, as exemplified by Shu Changyu, Mei Baojiu, and Wen Ruhua, the convention of playacting provides the theoretical

57 Feng Jie 封傑, Jingju mingsu fangtan 京劇名宿訪談 [Interview with Jingju Artists] (Beijing: Beijing chubanshe, 2010).
foundation to demarcate the two worlds—theatre and life. When, for example, a male dan who performs the heroine Yu Ji in The King’s Parting from His Concubine, s/he will not directly convey his/her own understanding of the heroine, but rather portray her via a transition zone—the dan role-category, which delineates a set of conventions used for conveying ideal femininity. Thus, the dan role-category is considered as a “dressing room,” which demarcates the male dan’s onstage and offstage images clearly. For a successful male dan, “femininity” is like clothing, which can be taken off at will.

From Female-Impersonating to Playacting

This concern of contemporary dan actors to distinguish between art and life is significantly different from the way their predecessors conceived of their artistry. For instance, for the prestigious Ming playwright Tang Xianzu 湯顯祖 (1550–1616), “a dan performer should think of himself/herself as a woman.”59 Similarly, the Qing scholar Ji Yun 纪昀 (1724–1805) argued that “We who take our body as female must at the same time transform our heart-mind into that of a woman.”60 Both Tang Xianzu and Ji Yun denied the

60 Ji Yun 纪昀, Yuewei caotang biji 閱微草堂筆記 [Notes from the Thatched Cottage of Careful Reading], ed. Wang Xiandu 汪賢度 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1998), 12: 10. These two statements by Tang Xianzu and Ji Yun are cited by Siu-leung Li, Cross-Dressing in Chinese Opera, 163–164, and Min Tian, “The Paradox of Sex, Acting, and Perception of Female Impersonation in Chinese Theatre,” Asian Theatre Journal 1 (2000): 84. Also see Tan Fan 譚帆 and Lu Wei 陸瑋, Zhongguo gudian xiju lilun shi 中國古典戲劇理論史
tendency toward “playacting,” raising “realness” as the best state for dan performers to pursue. This was carried forward and incorporated into jingju. Tian Guifeng 田桂鳳 (1866–1931), the best huadan actor of his time, was noted by the Japanese scholar Hanato Kenichi as behaving like a woman at home. Concerning the question “why not resume your nature [in your daily life]?” Tian answered:

I perform the roles of women, so femininity is my nature (bense 本色)... If I resume masculinity in my daily life, the women I perform are probably like women in form/appearance (xing 形) but not in essence/psyche (shen 神)... When I am alone in the room, I also behave like this [a woman]. I am not humiliating myself on purpose in front of you in order to seduce you, my guest of honour [Italic mine].

Tian Guifeng believed that his success as a dan actor required him to behave like a woman in his daily life.

Following the fall of the Qing empire, China was under the influence of prevalent Western ideas about gender and sexuality. These ideas, drawn from scholars such as Sigmund Freud and Havelock Ellis, reinforced a fear of effeminacy by associating it with a sense of Western homophobia, making it increasingly accepted that cross-dressing, or specifically male-to-female cross-dressing, was shameful or abnormal. Tian’s story reminds us of the necessity for a dan actor to absorb femininity into their very being, yet he still

[History of Theories about Chinese Theatre] (Shanghai: Huadong shifan daxue chubanshe, 2005), 256.

61 Hatano Kenichi 波多野乾一, Jingju erbai nian zhi lishi 京劇二百年之歷史 [A Two Hundred Years History of Jingju] (Beijing: Shuntian shibao guan, 1926), 255–256.
felt it to be a form of humiliation to behave like a woman in front of a visitor. After 1949, the CCP accused dan actors of “voluntarily” renouncing masculinity. Contemporary dan actors had to break away from the earlier ideal for a dan performer to “become” a real woman and turn instead to emphasize the “playacting” aspect of the roles they performed. This helps explain why Wen Ruhua, who spoke for the tradition of male dan on various occasions, shielded himself and his colleagues from public censure by demarcating theatrical transvestitism from the “perversion” (biantai 變態) of real-life transvestitism.\(^2\) His self-defence, however, reinforces the cliché that transvestitism (specifically non-theatrical transvestitism) is “perverted.” This leads to endless paradoxes for cross-dressers: non-theatrical cross-dressers have to vie for legitimacy by connecting their behaviour to a refined art such as jingju, while professional dan actors have to differentiate themselves from these non-theatrical cross-dressers. Actually, the phobias within Chinese society force both groups into an endless self-defence, from the fear that they will be seen to have lost their masculinity.

Mou Yuandi, one of the best contemporary male dan who was trained after the Reform era, has performed overseas frequently in recent years. Unlike Mei Lanfang, who performed selected scenes from full-scale jingju plays in full makeup and costume, Mou demonstrated the process of how he transforms himself into a woman. Mou visited the United States, Singapore, Malaysia, and Australia between 2014 and 2017 delivering seminars to

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introduce dan artistry of jingju. In 2014, Mou performed in front of curious American students at Hammer Museum, at the University of California in Los Angeles. Susan P. Jain, the Executive Director of the UCLA Confucius Institute, introduced Mou and explained the artistic criteria of jingju. Mou’s performance consisted of five sections:

(1) Water-sleeve skills.
(2) An excerpt from Guifei Zuijiu (The Intoxicated Imperial Concubine), a traditional jingju play.
(3) An excerpt from Zhan Wancheng (The Battle of Wancheng), a traditional jingju play involving the use of qiao (stilts).
(4) An excerpt from Mudan Ting (The Peony Pavilion), a traditional kunju play.
(5) An excerpt from Tiannü Sanhua (Heavenly Maiden Scatters Flowers), a fairy-tale jingju play by Mei Lanfang.

To begin with Mou Yuandi just had greasepaint and carmine on his face, without any coiffure, head ornament or full costume. Audiences were aware that he was a man who played female roles. After performing the excerpt from The Peony Pavilion, Mou put on coiffure, head ornaments and a costume for Heavenly Maiden Scatters Flowers, “becoming” the heroine Heavenly Maiden. Unlike Mei Lanfang, who felt it shameful to use the dan’s falsetto voice when he was not wearing full costume, Mou Yuandi wanted audiences to be aware of the fact that he was performing a female role by reinforcing the

63 These seminars were on the topic Woshi nandan 我是男旦 (I am a male dan). For the video of this performance, see (http://v.youku.com/v_show/id_XNzE1NTk0MzA4.html?spm=a2h0k.8191407.0.0&from=s1.8-1-1.2)
discrepancy between his corporeal masculinity and his performance.\textsuperscript{64}

In these seminars Mou Yuandi wanted to convey to the audience an understanding that male \textit{dan} is a profession that requires more strenuous training than cross-dressing singers, who just dress up as a woman and sing in a falsetto voice. When he was a primary school student, as a result of his ability to sing falsetto, he was chosen by two teachers from \textit{Jilin xixiao} 吉林戲校 (Jilin Opera School) to be a full-time protégé of \textit{jingju} artistry and designated to the \textit{dan} category. As he was the only boy in his class, the girls frequently laughed at him, as the skills he learned were considered “girlish.” Therefore, Mou developed a sense of himself as different, as “the other” in a class full of girls. Declaring that “I was born to be a male \textit{dan},” Mou is proud that he was better than any of his female school friends and finally became a professional \textit{dan} performer while all of them chose to quit.\textsuperscript{65} Mou believes that what he does is a profession rather than a manifestation of his real self. As he argued in the UCLA seminar, “This [to perform female roles as a male \textit{dan}] is my job.”\textsuperscript{66}

On 28 October 2016, Mou performed in a Shandong Television entertainment programme called \textit{Woshi xiansheng} 我是先生 (I’m a Teacher) and answered a few inquiries about his experience of becoming a \textit{dan} actor.


\textsuperscript{65} Interview with Mou Yuandi, 5 June 2017.

\textsuperscript{66} See the video of Mou Yuandi’s UCLA seminar.
According to Mou, it requires luck as well as a long period of difficult training.
The best period for a jingju performer to receive basic training (kaimeng 開蒙, lit. “enlightenment”) is before the age of ten, when a child’s body has more plasticity. Furthermore, when his voice breaks a boy is no longer able to perform the role of a protagonist. This is not an issue for female students. Mou indicated that 80 percent of all boys lose the ability to use a falsetto voice, which is the most important ability in order for a dan actor to impersonate a woman. Mou lost his falsetto voice when he was fifteen (in 1998). This prevented him from taking leading dan roles. For half a decade, he had to perform walk-on roles (long tao 龍套), and suffered from the scorn of his female friends, because they thought what Mou did was “girlish” and went against his true (male) “nature.” While his friends advised him to be a cosmetician or stage hand in a jingju company, Mou insisted on persevering with acting and finally recovered his voice in 2003.

It is possible that Mou Yuandi was eager to differentiate himself from amateur actors. When I was watching Mou’s training, a laodan 老旦 (old woman) actress, Guo Wenying 郭文英 said: “Mou Yuandi’s life has not been easy.” For his art, “he has suffered a lot of defamatory comments, right up to today.” He is whole-heartedly devoted to his profession. According to Guo, Mou frequently came to the training hall on holidays, and even had plastic surgery in order that his appearance would be more appealing to audiences.67

On 26 May 2017, I contacted Mou Yuandi to arrange an interview. However, after hearing that I had also contacted a few semi-professional and

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67 Interview with Guo Wenying, 5 June 2017.
amateur *dan* actors, Mou advised me to reconsider my list of informants, otherwise he might refuse my interview:

Several university students from overseas interviewed us previously.\(^68\) After interviewing us, they interviewed a few actors who are neither professionals nor amateurs (*piao you* 票友). We dislike this. As professional actors, we are not hostile to amateurs. With the development of time, however, a few amateurs claimed to be *dan* actors, or even artists of *jingju* performance for their own benefit, while hardly having any command of basic *jingju* artistry… I’ll reconsider whether I’ll cooperate with you in the interview if, after interviewing me, you will still interview those people, making us appear in one article.\(^69\)

This is similar to the complaint of Mei Baojiu, who criticised the cross-dressing actor Li Yugang for claiming to be a *Meipai nandan* 梅派男旦 (*dan* actor of the Mei School). Mou Yuandi also agreed that the artistic skills of a *dan* actor were of far greater importance than the superficial appearance achieved through the use of costume and make-up. A *dan* actor can let the audience know that he is a “false woman,” as he is not portraying a picture of a particular woman, but an ideal of women through his artistry. Mou Yuandi differentiated himself—a *jingju dan* actor—from cross-dressing singers. Mou considered being a *dan* actor as just a job, not a potential safe place to realise transgressive desires, as was the case with some amateurs.

Contemporary male *dan* confront a post-Maoist Chinese society which remains in the grip of homophobia and femmephobia. They are considered

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\(^68\) Hu Wenge 胡文閣 (b. 1967), Yang Lei 楊磊 (b. 1978), Mou Yuandi 牟元笛 (b. 1983), and Yin Jun 尹俊 (b. 1988).

\(^69\) WeChat discussion with Mou Yuandi, 26 May 2017.
either effeminate, homosexual, or probably both, since effeminacy is often conceived as one and the same with homosexuality. There is, however, no compelling evidence that an individual’s desire to perform female roles in Chinese theatre solely results from, or leads to effeminate behaviour. Some professional dan actors are effeminate but not all are. It is a sweeping generalization to attribute the career motivation of all male dan to an unconscious anima, or underlying female nature. An individual’s identity is a particular issue that cannot be generalised in this way.

Besides the prevalent dimorphic understanding of gender and sexuality in Chinese society, the current dilemma experienced by male dan is partly due to the fact that that the producers of films and plays often use them to attract audiences. Influential films like Farewell, My Concubine reinforce the notion that the training required to become a dan actor leads to an acquired homoerotic attachment. Similarly, the play Two Belles in Love used male dan to perform the roles of lesbians, which reinforced the connection between male dan and homosexuality. Such ideas about homoeroticism explains the homophobic anxieties of professional male dan.

In current scholarship, the term male dan, or nandan, has been widened to include not just professional dan actors in the jingju domain but to a broader group of non-theatrical cross-dressing actors. For instance, Huai Bao does not distinguish, either deliberately or through negligence, theatrical (male dan) and non-theatrical cross-dressing actors, and argues that the reason for cross-dressing is homosexuality, or at least a desire for transgression.\footnote{Ibid.} This is
misleading, especially as the majority of his informants were not professional male dan.71 Similarly, He Chengzhou 何成洲 considers the cross-dressing vocalist Li Yugang to be a male dan.72 Shen Lin 沈林 even refers to the Elizabethan and Jacobean boy actors as male dan.73

This conflation of professional male dan with different types of cross-dressing actors has resulted in an identity crisis for many of them and has encouraged them to shield themselves from possible public criticism. In response, many highlight their masculine personality, insisting that their dan artistry is simply a professional performance. In his analysis of Western studies of Elizabethan and Jacobean theatrical transvestitism, Min Tian finds an “aestheticizing” trend which separates the art of the performance from the nature of the performer.74 This seems to be true of the Chinese case as well. Nowadays, many male dan frequently announce that what they do is not imitate a particular woman in real life, but create an ideal femininity on the basis of a set of stylised artistic techniques. Metaphorically, a male dan often claims that the artistry of the dan category is a “dressing room,” clearly demarcating his onstage role and offstage life. The theoretical basis of this

demarcation is that jingju is a highly stylised and conventionalised performance unlike Westernised drama, which is considered to create a more realistic depiction of events. Following this logic, as the male dan’s performance is not a realistic imitation of a real-life woman, it does no harm to his masculinity. According to the fallacious formula that “male dan=cross-dressing actors=real-life homosexuals,” it is common for a male dan to be conceived of as gay. This results in the male dan’s plight, and reminds us of the need to break the essentialist dimorphism of gender and sexuality in twenty-first-century China.
CONCLUSION

Male Dan Actors and Chinese Society in Transition

In this thesis I have provided an analysis of the functioning of Chinese society from the late Ming dynasty (1368–1644) to the present through the lens of male dan actors. The development of male dan was closely connected to the transformation of social mores in late imperial China. They rose to prominence from the late Ming onwards as a result of admiration from the scholar-élite, then saw their status decline following the fall of the Qing dynasty due to the new social morality promulgated by the Chinese nation/Party-State. Their rise and fall reflect the interaction between theatre and society, and thus the fate of male dan reflects changes in the social zeitgeist in China, especially the politics of gender and sexuality.

Actors had a dual status in pre-modern China. They were considered one of the “nine humblest professions” bereft of many basic privileges, and the dan, those actors who performed female roles, were deemed to have the lowest pedigree of all. However, because of the courtesan tradition, male dan often enjoyed the company of members of the scholar-élite class. During the latter years of the Ming dynasty, some members of the scholar-élite developed romantic homoerotic relationships with the male dan in their family troupes. During the Qing dynasty, the court imposed a strict prohibition on the use of any female entertainers (who were often both performers and prostitutes). Throughout the Qing dynasty, male dan actors also played the role of boy courtesans, serving well-off patrons as social companions at banquets, and
sometimes also as sexual partners.

The social context of pre-modern China was different from that of the modern West, where, as a result of the influence of psychoanalysis and sexual psychology, homosexuality came to be defined in pathological terms. Homoerotic interactions were tolerated in pre-modern Chinese society so long as a man fulfilled his familial duties. Therefore, the patriarchy and the politics of gender and sexuality in pre-modern China were structured more homogeneously than in the modern West. Male *dan* were often encouraged to develop effeminate behaviour in order to cater to the tastes of well-off patrons, who were the more dominant partner in these homoerotic interactions. Social privilege was associated with masculinity, and thus the position of male *dan* in such relationships exemplified the male-centred norm of gender and sexuality.

From the late Qing onwards, China began its painstaking journey to modernity, and the influx of Western learning fundamentally remoulded the way that Chinese scholars considered issues of gender and sexuality. Increasingly influenced by the binary framework fundamental to psychoanalytical theories, many Chinese scholars accepted the idea that homosexuality was an abnormality, deviant from the heterosexual norm. As a result, male *dan* actors were considered subject to the pathology of homosexuality, and criticised as an incarnation of the evil of China’s decadent past.

This Westernising trend reached its apogee in the New Culture
Movement, launched by a group of ultra-Westernised scholars following the overthrow of the imperial system. Deeply influenced by the linear view of Social Darwinism, these scholars considered the “new/Occidental” as progressive and criticised the “old/Oriental” as reactionary, and thus advocated that Western-style drama should displace jingju, which they condemned as an “historically arrested development.” In addition to the criticism on the artistic level, these scholars also fiercely criticised Mei Lanfang, who, as a dan actor, reflected the shameful sexual abnormality (homosexuality) of China’s past. I argue that this crisis of legitimacy for male dan was the major impetus that prompted jingju professionals and aficionados to redefine the “tradition” or “essence” of jingju.

My study of the diachronic development of the Mei troupe’s descriptions of the “tradition” of jingju reveals that its “conventions” (chengshi hua), which are often assumed to be fundamental to the nature of jingju, were in fact a set of cultural constructs developed in response to the crisis of legitimacy that jingju experienced during China’s transformation to a modern nation-state. This discourse was constructed and adjusted by reflecting on jingju’s differences from Western drama, and developed into an essentialist discourse that sought to differentiate jingju from its “realistic” Western counterparts.

At the same time that this essentialist discourse about the nature of jingju was being constructed, prominent male dan began to focus more on portraying the emotions of the female characters they performed, thus shifting jingju away from a reductive emphasis on vaudevillian or even acrobatic performance. While this development has often been considered to
be the result of the influence of Western theories, especially those of the Stanislavskian school, I consider it to be primarily a result of the incorporation of some traditional values of Ming and Qing élite theatre into jingju.

In the Drama Reform movement that was launched following the establishment of the PRC, the political influence that the new Party-State came to exert over the theatrical world was demonstrated with the prohibition of qiao, the stilted footwear that had been developed in order that male dan could imitate the bound feet of Chinese women. The skilful use of qiao was greatly admired by theatrical aficionados, who did not see them simply as synonymous with bound feet. I argue that qiao were an artistic legacy of the dan category and not just a representation of bound feet, as was claimed in the reductive discourse of the CCP cultural cadres. The prohibition of qiao was in fact a “side effect” of the Drama Reform movement, which was a broader political movement launched in order to promulgate the social mores of the Party-State.

The Drama Reform movement also cast a shadow over the future of male dan. Despite their new status as people’s artists, male dan continued to be seen as a remnant of China’s decadent, “feudal” past. They were forbidden from performing in modern plays, and thus were absent from the stage during the Cultural Revolution, when the theatre was dominated by a small number of “model plays.”

In the post-Mao era, male dan remain within the shadow cast by the Cultural Revolution. This is due to the new politics of gender and sexuality
that was conveyed through the model plays during the 1960s. Most of the heroic female characters that were developed for these plays were in fact “manly” women, reflecting an ideal communist notion of the new woman. While at a superficial level these new ideal women may seem to have deconstructed inherited gender boundaries, by suggesting that the only way for a woman to be successful was to become more masculine, continued to be seen as secondary, subservient to the dominant masculine values. This led to a double standard for male-to-female and female-to-male cross-dressing actors/actresses. Male dan actors are seen to “demean” themselves when they perform female roles. As a result, many of them deliberately highlight their “real” offstage identity as men, to counter the fact that they perform demure, delicate female roles on the stage. In contrast, female laosheng actresses are able to “rise” to enjoy the privilege of a higher status when they assume masculinity, and they do not have to demarcate their first and second selves in the way that dan actors are required to.

Dan actors do not threaten to deconstruct the de facto social order in the same way that a drag queen does in the Western context. Drag embodies a desire to contest the belief that one’s assigned identity is identical with one’s sex at birth. They believe that sex is also a cultural construct, which is materialised by means of reiteration of social norms. In contrast, the majority of Chinese dan actors believe in “the fixity of body” and claim that their performance of female roles will not influence their identity as men. They attempt to defend their masculinity through the dominant binary framework rather than deconstruct it.
Today, there are no more than twenty professional dan actors actively performing in China. After the 1990s, many of those trained before the Cultural Revolution have died.¹ Due to the influence of the Drama Reform movement and the Cultural Revolution none of them have passed on their artistry to others who might continue the male dan tradition.² In 2016, Mei Lanfang’s son, Mei Baojiu 梅葆玖 (b. 1934) also died. Other older male dan such as Shu Changyu 舒昌玉 (b. 1927), Bi Guyun 毕谷雲 (b. 1930), Shen Fucun 沈福存 (b. 1935) and Song Changrong 宋長榮 (b. 1935), all of whom witnessed the rise and fall of male dan in modern Chinese history, are now over eighty. It will not be long before their artistry will disappear and their memories will be lost.

In the summer of 2017, I interviewed some male dan, both professionals and amateurs, in Beijing, Shanghai, Lanzhou (Gansu province) and Huai’an (Jiangsu province), in order to survey how younger male dan attempt to make their way through the challenges they face in contemporary Chinese society. While they have been accepted into state-owned jingju companies (either at the national or provincial level) and educational institutions, they lack public attention. A great deal of the difficulty that they face relates to the remnants of sexist patriarchy and the heteronormative values that continue to dominate Chinese society.

² Zhang Junqiu had an unofficial student, Wen Ruhua 溫如華 (b. 1947).
The modernisation of China from the May Fourth Movement onwards did not significantly challenge the existing Chinese politics of gender and sexuality. As Mizoguchi Yuzo argues, the legacy of Confucianism was one of the reasons for China to pursue a communist revolution. In the same vein, many elements of Confucian ideology retain all their validity in China today. The binary consideration of and hierarchy between “masculinity” and “femininity” continues to haunt contemporary China, probably in a more covert way than we realise. Chinese are too accustomed to this set of discourse, let alone the fact that the Party-state exerts its influence on social media in order to reinforce it. Therefore, the predicament for contemporary male dan also represents the same dilemma that the whole Chinese society has to confront. Although the insight provided by Western feminist and queer theories is increasingly influential amongst the younger generation of Chinese who are educated in a globalised world, opponents against sexual diversity are still powerful. In 2019, Taiwan becomes the first place in the Sinophone world where same-sex marriage is permitted and protected by law. However, under the triumphant surface of this prolonged campaign, it was also disturbing that Family Guardian Coalition (affiliated to Presbyterian Church in Taiwan), adamantly protested against this law before the final decision is announced. Concerning the nerve, anxiety and hostility in the society, it is obviously not the time for celebration. Perhaps I have to use a “nihilistic” sentence to end this thesis—We’ll have to see.
Glossary of Chinese Terms

banbian tian 半邊天: literally “half of the sky.” A Maoist parlance for ideal communist women, who can contribute to the cause of communist construction.

bense 本色: nature.

biantai 變態: perversion. Deviating from the norm of gender of sexuality.

biji 筆記: notation books by traditional Chinese scholars.

caiji jiaren 才子佳人: the romance of a gifted scholar and a belle, a common theme of classical Chinese literature.

chengshi hua 程式化: literally “conventionalization.” A term first raised by Zhao Taimou 趙太侔 (1889–1968) in the National Theatre Movement (guojuyundong 國劇運動) in 1926 and was adopted by the jingju domain soon afterwards in order to describe the feature of Chinese theatre.

chou 丑: Clown, including wenchou 文丑 and wuchou 武丑.

chuanqi 傳奇: literally “transmission of marvel.” A type of nanxi (southern drama) in the Ming dynasty that was primarily about romantic themes.

chuantong xi 傳統戲: traditional plays.

dan 旦: a category of actors/actresses who perform female roles in Chinese theatre. Except for laodan 老旦 (elder women) and caidan 彩旦 (female comedians), the dan category in jingju primarily includes:

qingyi 青衣: lit. “black clothes,” female roles of higher pedigrees, primarily faithful wives and filial daughters.

huadan 花旦: lit. “flower dan,” either unmarried young ladies, known as
**Guimen dan** (閨門旦) or flirtatious demi-monde, known as **tiedan** (貼旦, secondary dan).


**Huashan** 花衫: literally “flower clothes,” a new category which combines the vocal performance of **qingyi** and the physical performance of **huadan**, and also the acrobatic fighting of **wudan** and **daomadan**.

**Danwei** 單位: working units.

**Duanxiu zhichong** 斷袖之寵: literally “passion of cut sleeves.” Homoerotic attachments.

**Fengjian** 封建: literally “feudal.” In the linear worldview of Marxist historiography, the “feudal” period refers to a pre-modern period. In the accounts of many modern Chinese scholars, the term “feudal/feudalism” is often used as a derogatory term to describe traditional China, which is considered “less progressive” ideologically.

**Gaoqiang** 高腔: or “jingqiang” 京腔. A type of localised **yiyang qiang** in Beijing.

**Guanzuo** 官座: literally “official seats,” the box near the exit in traditional Chinese playhouses.

**Guojuyundong** 國劇運動: the National Theatre Movement. A movement launched by Yu Shangyuan 余上沅 (1897–1970) and some other scholars in 1926 in order to counter the ultra-Westernised criticism of Chinese theatre by the scholars in the New Culture Movement.

**Guomindang** 國民黨: or **Kuomintang**, the Chinese Nationalist Party.

**Guzhuangxi** 古裝戲: Ancient Costume Drama.
haoke 豪客: well-off patrons.

huabu 花部: literally “flowers.” Folk musical/theatrical forms, a derogatory term for all the non-kunqiang/kunshan qiang theatrical forms, which were considered less refined by the scholar-élites.

huapu 花譜: literally “manual of flowers.” A type of introductory and commentary notation books focused on the famous male dan actors.

huidiao 徽調: a theatrical form of Anhui.

huishi 會試: the Metropolitan Examination. The highest level of the civil service examination.

ji 妓: prostitute or courtesan.

ji 伎: performer who focused primarily on music.

jia xiaozı 假小子: literally “false boy.” Tomboy.

jia yue 家樂: family troupes. A group of indentured actors or actresses kept by scholar-élites at home primarily during the Ming dynasty.

jian 兼: cum, or doubling. One actor performing two (or more) roles in one play.

jing 净: Painted-face role in Chinese theatre, also known as hualian 花臉, including zhengjing 正净 (or tongchui hualian 銅錘花臉), fujing 副净 (or jiazi架子花臉) and wujing 武净 (or wu hualian 武花臉).

jingzhong miao 精忠廟: or Ching-Chung Monastery, literally “the Monastery of Loyalty.” The Theatre Society. The former site was in the Temple of Yue Fei 岳飛 (1103–1142), hence the name.

jiuju 舊劇: a derogatory term for Chinese theatre used by some Chinese scholars of the New Culture. It was also used by other scholars later.

kaimeng 開蒙: literally “enlightenment.” The basic training for jingju
performers.

*keban* 科班: old-type theatrical school. A majority of its students were indentured protégés who were “sold” to the master of the school for at least seven years.

*Kunqiang/Kunshan qiang* 崑腔/崑山腔: a ultra-refined vocal art allegedly developed by the Ming scholar Wei Liangfu 魏良輔 (1489–1966). It was used as the musical form for *chuanqi* dramas in the Ming dynasty. The *chuanqi* plays sung in *kunqiang* was referred to as *kunju* 崑劇 (aka. *Kunqu* Opera).

*lingjie dawang* 伶界大王: the king of actors.


*long tao* 龍套: walk-on roles.

*luantong* 孱童: handsome serving boys.

*mao'er ban* 髮兒班/貓兒班: all female troupes in the late Qing.

*mimi zhi yin* 麗靡之音: literally “degenerate voice.” A type of music which is excessively soft and was therefore considered to be harmful to social morality.


*nanfeng* 男風: literally “male mode.” Homoerotic attachments.

*nanse* 男色: male beauty.

*nanxi* 南戲: literally “southern drama.” A type of Chinese theatre formed in southern cities Wenzhou and Yongjia around 1120. The *nanxi* plays in the Ming dynasty were called *chuanqi*. 
nanzi han 男子漢: macho man. Often used in a male-centric context.

neiting gongfeng 内廷供奉: “Internal Court Servant.” A group of eminent actors who were often called into the forbidden city to perform for the Qing royal family.

niangniang qiang 娘娘腔: literally “sissy.” A derogatory term for effeminate boys.

onnagata 女形: the actors who perform female roles in Japanese kabuki.

qiao 蹬/蹺: literally “stilts,” a type of stilted shoes in order to imitate the bound feet of women in traditional China. Sometimes referred to by theatrical aficionados as “false feet.” There are three types of them:

ying qiao 硬蹺: literally “hard qiao.” A type of qiao made from wood, hence the name. Commonly used by professional actors. The huadan roles use wen qiao 文蹺, literally “cultural qiao,” while the daomadan and wudan roles use wu qiao 武蹺, literally “martial qiao.”

ruan qiao 軟蹺: literally “soft qiao.” A type of qiao made from cloth, hence the name. Commonly used by the amateur actors who lack an extensive training of the skills of qiao.

gailiang qiao 改良蹺: literally “modified qiao.” Similar to ruan qiao.

qiao gong 蹴功: the skills of qiao.

qiemo 切末/砌末: prop.

qingchi 情癡: literally “lovesickness.” An actor’s emotional attachment to his master.

qinqiang 秦腔: a local theatrical form of Shaanxi.

renmin 人民: literally “the people.” Renmin is not a synonym for all the dwellers in the state, but refers to the friends and followers of the Party, in
contrast to “enemy.”

renmin yishu jia 人民藝術家: people’s artists.

sanjie geming 三界革命: the Revolution of Three Fields. A set of movements initiated by Liang Qichao 梁啟超 (1873–1929) in order to reform the literature in late Qing China, including Shi jie geming 詩界革命 (the Poem Revolution), Sanwen jie geming 散文界革命 (the Essay Revolution), as well as Xiaoshuo jie geming 小說界革命 (the Fiction Revolution).

shehui wenti ju 社會問題劇: the problem plays. A type of plays developed during the New Culture Movement. These plays disclosed the social darkness by focusing on current social affairs, but a majority of them lacked artistic value.

shen-xing 神形: essence and form, a pair of ancient psychological terms which describe the internal and external of an entity.

sheng 生: male role in Chinese theatre, including laosheng 老生, xiaosheng 小生, wusheng 武生, hongsheng 紅生 and wawasheng 娃娃生.

shengping shu 昇平署: literally “the Office of Ascendant Peace.” Office of Court Entertainment of the Qing dynasty.

shi dafu 士大夫: scholars in traditional China. They were either officials at court or local élites back home.

shizhuang xi 時裝戲: modern costume drama. A type of jingju plays that reflected the current affairs in the society. Primarily developed by eminent actors around the 1910s

sichun 思春: literally “thinking of spring.” A term for women’s lovesickness in classical Chinese literature.

tianchao 天朝: literally “the Heavenly Dynasty.” The worldview of
traditional China that considered itself as the centre of the world.

tongyi zhanxian 統一戰線: literally “United Front” policy. The CCP’s strategy to absorb prominent people from different groups into the same faction. The best example for this policy is the PCC, or Political Consultative Conference.

tu-yang 土洋: literally “soil-ocean.” Soil refers to the old or Oriental, while ocean means the new or Occidental.

wang tianxia 亡天下: the fall of the cultural China.

wei renseng er yishu 為人生而藝術: literally “art for life.”

wei yishu er yishu 為藝術而藝術: literally “art for art’s sake.”

wen-wu 文武: literally “cultural and martial.” Two ideals of Chinese masculinity.

wenming xi 文明戲: literally “civilised play.” The earliest Westernised Chinese plays. In 1906, Li Shutong 李叔同 (1880–1942) and Ouyang Yuqian 歐陽予倩 (1889–1962) founded Chunliu she 春柳社 (The Society of Spring Willow) in Japan, embarking the civilised play movement. Their first play was The Lady of the Camellias, which was performed in Japan in 1907.

wenyi gongzuo zhe 文藝工作者: literally “practitioners of literature and arts.”

xi qinqiang 西秦腔: a theatrical form of Gansu.

xiahai 下海: literally “plunge into the sea.” Leaving one’s job, especially from a state-owned business. For instance, an amateur actor withdraws from his previous full-time job and choose to be a professional actor.

xiandai xi 現代戲: modern plays.

Xianggong/xianggu 相公/像姑: boy courtesans. The male dan actors who served well-off patrons for tête-à-tête at banquets and for sexual reasons.

xiaochang 小唱: freelance song boys in private playhouses in the Ming
dynasty. *Xiaochang* is a homophone for “xiaochang” 小倡, boy courtesans or prostitutes.

*xiaosi* 小厮: boy servants.

*xigai* 戲改: The Drama Reform movement. A political movement set forth by the CCP on 5 May 1951 in order to sanction the theatrical activities in China, primarily to purify the “unhealthy” elements from the theatre.

*xin wenhua yundong* 新文化運動: the New Culture Movement (1915).

*xinbian lishi ju* 新編歷史劇: newly composed historical plays.

*xinmin* 新民: literally “to renew the people.” To enlighten the people, primarily under the criteria of the Western model of citizens within a modern nation-state.

*xinxue* 心學: literally “the Study of Mind,” a type of late-Ming Neo-Confucianism initiated by Wang Yangming 王陽明 (1472–1529).

*yabu* 雅部: the refined musical/theatrical form, a synonym for kunqiang/kunshan qiang.

*yangban xi* 樣板戲: literally “model plays.” A series of standardised modern plays during the Cultural Revolution.

*yixing wu* 遺形物: literally “historically arrested development.” A term created by Hu Shi 胡適 (1891–1962) during the New Culture Movement in order to describe jingju.

*yimin* 遺民: literally “left-over scholar,” scholars and/or officials who still maintained loyalty to the previous court after its fall.

*yiyang qiang* 戥陽腔: a theatrical form of Yiyang.

*yuehu* 樂戶: a family of a low pedigree and was bound in the profession of entertainers.
zaju 雜劇: literally “miscellaneous/variety drama.” A type of northern drama which first formed in the 830s and flourished in the Mongolian Yuan (1271–1368).

zhantai 站檯: literally “stand in front of the counter.” A courtesan’s behaviour of exhibiting himself/herself for patronage.

zhendan 真旦: literally “real dan,” dan actresses.

zhengyue yuhua hui 正樂育化會: literally “the Association of Music Correction and Mores Cultivation.” The Theatre Society.

zhenqing 真情: literally “true emotion.” The highest artistic criterion in the Ming élite theatre.

zhifen qi 脂粉氣: literally “the smell of blusher and powder.” Used to describe a man who is effeminate.

zhiyin 知音: “Ideal listener.” One’s friend who clearly knows his inner heart.


zhuangdan 裝旦: literally “fake dan,” dan actors.
APPENDIX

The Musical Dimension of Jingju

In the late Qing period, jingju was once called pihuang 皮黄, which indicated its two musical sources. Originally, jingju was formed on the basis of xipi 西皮 (“pi”) and erhuang 二黃 (“huang”). As xi 西 means “west” and pi 皮 means “a piece of music” in Anhui dialect, xipi literally refers to “western music” from Gansu. For erhuang, er 二 means “two” and huang 黃 refers to two cities in Hubei, Huanggang 黃岡 and Huangpi 黃陂, the origins of the erhuang music.¹ There are some minor (or subsidiary) musical types in jingju,² but most of its music falls into the two major types, xipi and erhuang.

Traditional Chinese music adheres to a heptatonic scale called Gongche 工尺 notation,³ which is different from its Western fixed-pitch counterpart.⁴

¹ There is a debate about how to read the character huang. Hai Zhen 海震 argues that the character for huang should be “簧,” which means “string.” Thus, erhuang is an alternative name of huqin, the main instrument of accompaniment for the vocal performance of erhuang. See Hai Zhen, “‘Erhuang’ chuyi ji erhuang qiang xingcheng di bianxi,” “二簧”初義及二簧腔形成地辨析 [Analysis of the Original Meaning of Erhuang and Its Place of Origin], Zhongguo xiqu xueyuan xuebao 3 (2005): 6–10. In Contrast, Chen Zhiyong 陳志勇 argues that the huang for pihuang should be “黃,” as erhuang is an alternative name of xipi in Hubei dialect. According to him, “簧” is the reed of wind instruments, thus, “二簧” in fact refer to a type of chuiqiang 吹腔 in Anqing, Anhui. This type of music was the prototype of gao bozi 高撥子, which is an integral part of jingju today. See Chen Zhiyong, “‘Erhuang qiang’ ming shi kaobian: Jianlun ‘pihuang heliu’ de xiangguan wenti,” “二簧腔名實考辨－－兼論‘皮黃合流’的相關問題 [The Referent of Erhuang qiang and the Confluence of Xipi and Erhuang], Zhongshan daxue xuebao 2 (2018): 55–64.
² For more details see Elizabeth Wichmann, Listen to Theatre: The Aural Dimension of Beijing Opera (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1991), 110–130.
³ Whereas, Elizabeth Wichmann believes “Pihuang music is based on the ancient Chinese
(See Table 1) So, although all (the) jingju actors use the same score, individual actors can either raise or lower the pitch depending on his/her own physical qualities. By moving the tonic, or “the ’centring (wei zhongxin) of melodic-passages around a particular relative pitch,” keys known as diao men 調門 are differentiated (See Table 2). Today, because of the introduction of the Western musical theories to China, the keys of Chinese music are translated as Western sol-fa. The following Table 2 demonstrates how the Gongche keys are translated in Western terms. For example, 1=G refers to G major, which means the note G is now the tonic, or “centring” of the melodic passage; 1=C is C major, 1=D is D major, and so forth. Here, “1” refers to do in Cipher Notation, or jianpu 簡譜 (lit. “Simplified Notation”), which is widely used in transcribing Chinese music, in which Arabic numbers 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 are used in place of do, re, mi, fa, sol, la, ti.

**Table 1 The Gongche Notation**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chinese Names of Notes</th>
<th>合</th>
<th>四</th>
<th>乙</th>
<th>上</th>
<th>尺</th>
<th>工</th>
<th>凡</th>
<th>六</th>
<th>五</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Western Equivalents</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2 Keys of Jingju and Their Cipher Equivalents**

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*pentatonic scale.* Wichmann, *Listening to Theatre*, 83. Notably, the fa and ti in Chinese music are slightly different from the Western fa and ti in pitches.


5 For more details see Wichmann, *Listening to Theatre*, 275–276, Appendix 1. She gives a brief introduction to Cipher Notation.

6 Cf. Stephen Jones, *Folk Music of China*, 113, Fig. 7.1.

7 A. C. Scott notices the difference between the keys of xipi and erhuang. He writes, “The
Xipi 西皮

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Shangzi diao</th>
<th>Chezi diao</th>
<th>Xiaogong diao</th>
<th>Fanzi diao</th>
<th>Liuzi diao</th>
<th>Wuzi diao</th>
<th>Yizi diao</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1=♯B</td>
<td>1=C</td>
<td>1=D</td>
<td>1=♯E</td>
<td>1=F</td>
<td>1=G</td>
<td>1=A</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Erhuang 二黄

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Shangzi diao</th>
<th>Chezi diao</th>
<th>Xiaogong diao</th>
<th>Fanzi diao</th>
<th>Liuzi diao</th>
<th>Wuzi diao</th>
<th>Yizi diao</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1=♯B</td>
<td>1=C</td>
<td>1=D</td>
<td>1=♯E</td>
<td>1=F</td>
<td>1=G</td>
<td>1=A</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Xipi is perceived as 1-centred, or in the key of do, and erhuang is perceived as 2-centred, or in the key or re. When the huqin musician plays a piece of xipi music, the inner string is tuned at 6 and the outer string tuned at 3; while in terms of erhuang, the inner string is tuned at 5 and the outer string at 2. Xipi and erhuang are distinct in their musical features, and therefore convey different emotions. Generally, xipi embodies a lively feeling, while erhuang is used for more serious occasions. Each of xipi and erhuang has a fandiao 反調, or “key reversal,” called fan xipi 反西皮 and fan erhuang 反二黄. Fandiao are used for sad and tragic occasions.

Metrical types/tempos, or banshi 板式, are of paramount importance in jingju music. They discipline the metre and feature of a certain melodic-passage. Taking xipi as an example, yuan ban 原板 (Standard Tempo) keys of the pihuang styles are different, so if an actor’s singing voice was liuzidiao [in erhuang], he would sing zhenggong in xipi.” Scott, The Classical Theatre of China, 52. Cf. Wichmann, Listening to Theatre, 83–84, “Keys”; 201 & 294.

8 Or Xiaogong diao 小工調.
9 Or Pazidiao 趴字調.
10 Or Zhenggong diao 正工調.
11 Wichmann, Listening to Theatre, 84.
13 Wichmann, Listening to Theatre, 51 & 85.
is the basis of all other tempos, which has 72 beats per minute. Quadruple metre exists in jingju music, but duple metre is dominant. Jingju professionals use banyan 板眼 as a way of describing the accent of notes in a measure, in which ban means the main/accented beat and yan refers to the subsidiary/unaccented beat(s). Commonly, the xipi melodic-sections start from a yan and finish at a ban (yan qi ban luo 眼起板落), while the erhuang both start and finish at a ban (ban qi ban luo 板起板落). Each of xipi and erhuang has five kinds of common tempos, as listed in Tables 3 and 4 as followed:

Table 3 Sequence of Tempos in the Xipi Style

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tempos</th>
<th>Metre</th>
<th>Bar</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Man ban</td>
<td>Slow Tempo</td>
<td>4/4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yuan ban</td>
<td>Standard Tempo</td>
<td>2/4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Er liu</td>
<td>Two-Six Tempo</td>
<td>2/4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liu shui</td>
<td>Flowing-Water Tempo</td>
<td>1/4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kuai ban</td>
<td>Fast Tempo</td>
<td>1/4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

●=accented notes (ban); ○=unaccented notes (yan)

Table 4 Sequence of Tempos in the Erhuang Style

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tempos</th>
<th>Metre</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Man ban</td>
<td>Slow Tempo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hui long</td>
<td>Undulating-Dragon Tempo</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

14 Wichmann, Listening to Theatre, 59.
15 Not all types of tempos exist in minor/subsidiary modes. For more details see Wichmann, Listening to Theatre, 59–71; 129, Fig. 15.
16 Xiaosheng 小生 (young man) has a Wawa diao 娃娃調 (Children’s-Tune Tempo), which is not seen in other categories.
17 Er liu means “2-6.” There is a 12 measures’ fill-in (guomen 過門) by huqin before the vocal starts, so it is called “2-6” – 2 (times) 6 is 12.
18 “Liu shui” means “flowing water,” which connotes its fluent and fast metre.
19 Erhuang huilong is used after Leading-in Tempo, which is a long sentence containing paddling written couplets. Huilong exist in xipi as well, but the format and function are
Jingju also has a some kinds of free-tempos in its music, including dao ban (Leading-in Tempo, or Prelude), san ban (Ending-up Tempo, or Coda) and yao ban (Shaking Tempo). Whereas Shaking Tempo is often used to narrate, Leading-in and Ending-up Tempos, as their names hint, have more structural functions, being the first and last sentence of the whole aria. With the non-free tempos, jingju music has formed some common structures in both types of xipi and erhuang. For example:

(1) Xipi: Luo Shen (The Goddess of River Luo).
Leading-in → Slow → Standard → Two-six → Flowing-water → Ending-up

(2a) Erhuang: Chen Sanliang patang 陳三兩爬堂 (Chen Sanliang Stands Trail).
Slow → Standard → Piled-up → Ending-up

(2b) Erhuang: Taizhen waizhuan 太真外傳 (Apocrypha of Yang Yuhuan)
Leading-in → Undulating-dragon → Slow

The music of jingju leaves a lot of latitude for its actors, therefore enabling actors to keep their own features in vocal performance, which finally different.

Xipi huilong is often a brief sentence, following a kutou 哭頭 (crying). For Example, Su San’s aria in Yutang Chun 玉堂春 (The Story of Su San): (dao ban) I, Yutang Chun, knee in the Censorate. (kutou) Ah, (huilong) Your Excellency. (Yutang Chun gui zhi zai Ducha yuan. Ah, daren a. 玉堂春跪至在都察院，啊，大人啊。) Cf. Wichmann, Listening to Theatre, 68.

20 Er liu means “2-6.” There is a 12 measures’ fill-in (guomen 過門) by huqin before the vocal starts, so it is called “2-6” = 2 (times) 6 is 12.
facilitated the development of the liupai, or school of performance.
A. List of Interviewees

Chen Erqing 陈爾青 (Phoenix International Media Centre). Interviewed in Beijing on 14/06/2017.

Guo Yuang 郭雨昂 (Beijing Opera Art’s College). Interviewed in Beijing on 14/06/2017.


Li Jian 李健 (Tongji Hospital). WeChat conversation on 04/07/2017.

Li Qiang 李強 (Guocui Yuan). Interviewed in Beijing on 11/06/2017.

Liu Luyao 劉路遙 (Hainan University). Interviewed in Beijing on 10/06/2017.

Liu Weiguo 劉衛國 (Guocui Yuan). Interviewed in Beijing on 10/06/2017.

Liu Xinran 劉欣然 (Haihang Media). Interviewed in Beijing on 09/06/2017.

Ma Qiancheng 馬千成 (Beijing Normal University). WeChat conversation on 14/06/2017.

Mou Yuandi 牟元笛 (Shanghai Theatre Academy). Interviewed in Shanghai on 05/06/2017.

Shao Zhenkun 邵振坤 (Renmin University of China). WeChat conversation on 13/06/2017.

Wang Chao 王超 (Beijing Opera Art’s College). Interviewed in Beijing on 13/06/2017.

Xia Yifan 夏一凡 (Beijing Institute of Technology). Interviewed in Beijing on 07/06/2017.

Xie Luyang 謝璐陽 (Peking University). WeChat conversation on 11/06/2017.

Yang Lei 楊磊 (National Peking Opera Company). Interviewed in Beijing on
05/02/2018.


**Ye Aochang** 葉翱暢 (Shaanxi Peking Opera Company). Interviewed in Shanghai on 03/06/2017.

**Yin Jun** 尹俊 (The Beijing Association for the Revitalisation of Kunqu Opera). Interviewed in Shanghai on 05/06/2017.

**Yu Ziwei** 于子惟 (Guocui Yuan). Interviewed in Beijing on 11/06/2017.

**Zhu Junhao** 朱俊好 (Changrong Peking Opera Company). WeChat conversation on 14/01/2018.

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