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The Eroticism of Peking Opera *Kunsheng* from the 1880s to the 1980s

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in Theater and Performance Studies

by

Yun-Pu Yang

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

The Eroticism of Peking Opera *Kunsheng*

from the 1880s to the 1980s

by

Yun-Pu Yang

Doctor of Philosophy in Theater and Performance Studies

University of California, Los Angeles, 2024

Professor Suk-Young Kim, Co-Chair

Professor Andrea S. Goldman, Co-Chair

My project investigates Peking opera actresses playing male roles, or *kunsheng*, in Republican-era mainland China and in postwar Taiwan. I examine these gender performances through the lens of eroticism, which positions me to consider public affective experiences surrounding *kunsheng*. To date, Peking opera historiography has emphasized the practices of actors cross-dressing to play women or actresses' gender-straight acting but rarely pays attention to women cross-dressers. I make critical interventions into existing opera history literature by illuminating the uniqueness and the multiplicity of *kunsheng* from various aspects of opera performance and everyday life. In this project, I demonstrate how *kunsheng* actresses as

transgressive figures appropriated strategic performances that were inspired by male actors to win over audiences and obtain commercial and artistic achievements, while resisting oppression that patriarchal structures imposed. Through this analysis of *kunsheng*, I ultimately trace China's sociocultural and political transformation from an early modern empire to a modern nation-state.

I am trained in both Performance Studies and Chinese cultural and gender history. My project thus brings together Chinese opera history, gender history, Sinophone Studies, performance theory, Queer Studies, and Digital Humanities. This study scrutinizes the different approaches to *kunsheng* in Republican-era mainland China and in postwar Taiwan to analyze the political and cultural dynamics that resulted in the waning of the practice of cross-dressing in mainland China and its continuation in Taiwan. This comparative analysis fills a lacuna in the scholarship on Peking opera, further demonstrating how the practices of cultural and gender performances in Taiwan challenge the historiography of a hegemonic China and a marginalized Taiwan.

This project is organized into four chapters—all of which draw on an array of archival documents from libraries in Taipei, Shanghai, and Beijing to address a historical transformation or theoretical theme surrounding *kunsheng*'s gender performances. In Chapter One, I investigate the transformation in public perception of *kunsheng*'s virtues from 1880-1920. Chapter Two centers on well-known *kunsheng* Meng Xiaodong (1908–1977) and showcases how media sensation simultaneously challenged and strengthened conventional gender discourses in modern China from 1920-1950. In Chapter Three, I delve into Republican women cross-dressers' homoerotic desires, arguing that the same-sex love of *kunsheng* parodied elite men's same-sex love, and in doing so liberated female desire from the long-standing euphemistic trope of sisterhood. In Chapter Four, I analyze the way Taiwanese Peking opera *kunsheng* performers

have taken advantage of mainland China's male performers' artistic legacy to "legitimize" and "effeminize" Taiwan's Peking opera in postwar Taiwan. Together, these chapters illuminate the ways in which *kunsheng*, opera critics, and audiences perceived, consumed, and negotiated the public culture of erotica, fluid gender identities, and heterogenous gender roles.

The dissertation of Yun-Pu Yang is approved.

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Introduction

In 1931, the newspaper *Xin Tianjin* 新天津 (*Hsin Tientsin daily news*) reported a news item about a famous actress of Peking opera who cross-dressed to play the mature male role type on stage.[1] The headline, "Xiaolanfen Is the Most Popular Actress among Same-Sex Audiences 小蘭芬最得同性同情," details the close relationships between the actress Xiaolanfen 小蘭芬 and her female patrons, as well as other actresses:

> News from Beijing: Xiaolanfen, a cross-dressing woman, enjoys wearing male attire. [Although] her singing and performance are mediocre, she is still considered talented among actresses. She is close to the widow of a Manchu prince in Beijing. Consequently, every time she wishes to perform elsewhere, she must obtain approval from the widow before arranging her trip. As a result, few cities invite her to stage performances. Lanfen is not only close to the widow, but also to actresses Zhao Meiying, Meng Lijun, Xinyanqiu, and others. They are all deeply attached to Lanfen and reluctant to be separated from her. Many people say that Lanfen has a special affinity for her female companions, which is why she is particularly popular among those of the same sex. (*XTJ* 1931)
>
> 平訊。坤伶鬚生小蘭芬，喜男裝，唱作平平，在個中也算不可多得人才。在平與某公府之孀居福晉友善，故每出外演戲，須得福晉同意，方可成行，因之外碼頭少有邀聘者。蘭芬不但與福晉友善，如坤伶中趙美英、孟麗君、新艷秋等，皆與蘭芬結緣如膠膝，不願分離。一般論者，皆說蘭芬對於同性姐妹，有一種特殊好感，故得一般同性之特別同情云。

Xiaolanfen 小蘭芬 specialized in performing male roles and was active between 1931 to 1935 in Beijing and Tianjin. She was trained and performed at the Kuide Club (*Kuide she* 奎德社), an

[1] The origins of Peking opera date back to around 1770, and during its first century of evolution, all commercial performers were men. However, during the Ming and Qing dynasties, most kunqu performers were women. It was not until the late Qing dynasty that actresses began to appear on the Peking opera stage. For a detailed examination of the long history of Peking opera, see Ma Shaobo, ed., *Zhongguo jingju shi* 中國京劇史 [A history of Peking opera] (Beijing: Zhongguo xiju chubanshe, 1999). For an exploration of the subsequent history of Peking opera in Taiwan, see Nancy Guy, *Peking Opera and Politics in Taiwan* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005) and Daphne Pi-Wei Lei, *Alternative Chinese Opera in the Age of Globalization* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, 27–40).

all-female troupe in Beijing established by Qinqiang 秦腔 (a regional opera style originating in Shaanxi) actor Ding Jianyun 丁劍雲 around 1914 or 1915; the club closed in 1937.[2] The Kuide Club offered performances of both Peking opera and "women's new drama" (*nüzi xinjü* 女子新劇). Many renowned Peking opera actresses, such as Xian Lingzhi 鮮靈芝, Biyuhua 碧玉花, Wang Qingkui 王慶奎, and Li Guiyun 李桂雲 (1910–1988), worked for the club (Qiutan 1935). In the news report, although the journalist did not explicitly use words relevant to same-sex love to portray the encounters between Xiaolanfen and other women, the implication of homoerotic desire is evident throughout the article. This is manifested in the description of the infatuation of the widow with Xiaolanfen and the deep attachments between her and other actresses.

In 1931, Xiaolanfen was depicted as a *kunling xusheng* 坤伶鬚生, an actress playing male characters with a beard, who was also fond of male attire off the stage. However, three years later, the newspaper *Yishibao* 益世報 (Social welfare news) published a poem with the title, "Congratulations on the marriage of Shen Manhua and Xiaolanfen 賀沈鬘華小蘭芬結婚":

> The man embodies the essence of women (Shen specializes in portraying lead women's roles), while the woman takes on male roles, making illusion seem real (Lan specializes in lead male characters).
> What joy in marrying a partner who suits one's heart; in the end they have found true love.
> He possesses a slender waist to match that of Shen Yue, with a warmth like resilient jade. His body is purer than that of Lanfen, as though washed of the dust of this world.
> Day after day, on the stage they seek their ideal matches; but tonight, they may revel in the joys of the wedding chamber. (Xu Yida 1934)
>
> 男兒可現女兒身（沈演青衣），巾幗鬚眉幻若真（蘭演正生），
> 結髮喜逢如意侶，折花終屬有情人。
> 腰殊沈瘦溫凝玉，體比蘭芬淨滌塵，

[2] The founder of the Kuide Club, Ding Jianyun, also known as Ding Lingzhi 丁靈芝, was the husband of Peking opera actress Xian Lingzhi. See Qiutan 秋潭, "Kuide She de shilue 奎德社的史略 [The history of the Kuide club]." *DGB*, April 30, 1935.

日日氍毹球擲彩，今宵允醉洞房春。

In this poem, the author, Xu Yida, parallels the opera specialties of Xiaolanfen and her husband, Shen Manhua, praising the compatibility between the gender reversal of this couple.[3] Their doubled cross-dressing performances play a decisive factor, proving they are a perfect match for each other. In the same year, the *Xin Tianjin huabao* (新天津畫報 New Tianjin pictorial) also published the wedding photo of Xiaolanfen and Shen Manhua, further attesting to their marriage.

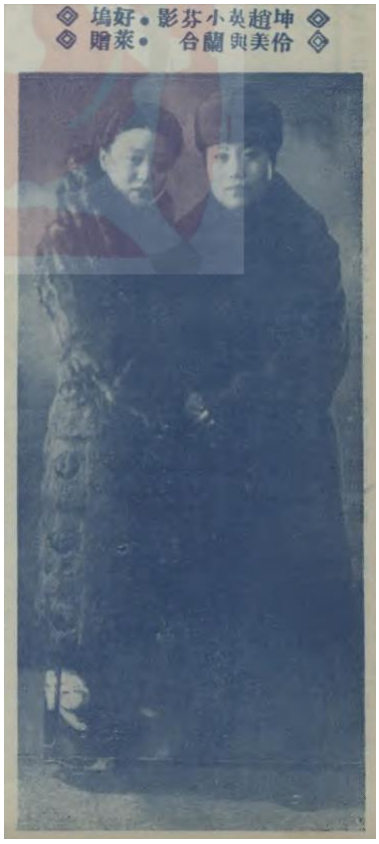

Figure 1: Unknown. 1934a. "Kunling Zhao Meiying yu Xiaolanfen heying 坤伶趙美英與小蘭芬合影 *[The photo of actresses Zhao Meiying and Little Lanfen]." Fengyue huabao* 風月畫報 *[Romantic pictorial] 3 (20).*

[3] The author Xu Yida may have been the nephew of the second president (1918–1922) of the Republic of China, Xu Shichang 徐世昌 (1855–1939), but more evidence is needed to verify the author's identity.

Figure 2: 1934b. "Ming kunling Xiaolanfen yu Shen Manhua zai Ping jiehun heying 名坤伶小蘭芬與沈鬘華在平結婚合影 *[The wedding photo of well-known actress Little Lanfen and Shen Manhua in Beijing]." XTJHB 64: 3.*

The 1930s gossipy news regarding Peking opera performers illustrates that sexual orientation in real life did not align with the discourse of Western-imported sexology theory. Xiaolanfen, an actress regularly playing men on stage, further exemplifies the complexity of sexual expression and sexual identity among citizens of the Republican era. Her affective experiences with women, juxtaposed with her heteronormative marriage, reveal to us the tip of the iceberg regarding the intricacies faced by women cross-dressers during the Republican era. Xiaolanfen's story points to the fraught sexuality surrounding women cross-dressers, including their gender performances both on and off the stage.

This dissertation analyzes the gender performances of Peking opera *kunsheng* 坤生, or actresses who portray male roles on stage.[4] Women playing men is not an uncommon practice in

[4] Lydia H. Liu has pointed out in her research on translingual practice that translatability "refers to the historical making of hypothetical equivalences between languages." Conducting research in English on Chinese topics

the field of Chinese theater. It dates back to the Tang dynasty, in which actresses performed *canjun xi* 參軍戲 (*canjun* skits). *Canjun xi* featured comic conversations between two players at court (Zeng Yongyi 1976, 41).[5] My interdisciplinary project centers on opera history, erotic culture, and gender performance, synthesizing recent scholarship on Chinese opera history, gender history, Sinophone Studies, Queer Studies, and performance theory. It portrays the trajectory of *kunsheng* from the 1880s to the 1980s, which can be roughly divided into three phases, starting from their close identification with courtesans and prostitutes to press coverage of their artistic talents and remarkable achievements and then to their potential for mastering and narrating their own gendered identity. Ultimately, it aims to illustrate how *kunsheng* summoned

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inevitably raises questions regarding translatability and the validity of language translation between cultures." See Lydia H. Liu, ed. *Tokens of Exchange: The Problem of Translation in Global Circulations* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 137. The lexicon of Peking opera does not always have equivalent terms in English, thus any terms originating from English can only accomplish hypothetical equivalence. Rather than attempting to translate the term, *kunsheng*, to bridge the gap between Chinese and English, I directly denote its pinyin to indicate the role and elucidate the cultural phenomenon it represents. However, it is worth nothing that "*kunsheng*" conveys multiple meanings in Chinese. It is a generic term encompassing women cross-dressers who portray both *laosheng* 老生 (mature men) and *xiaosheng* 小生 (young men) roles, although my research particularly focuses on actresses who specialize in *laosheng*. Additionally, it emphasizes actresses' gender reversal on stage, also known as female *laosheng* 女老生 (*nu laosheng*, women playing mature men). As a result, the juxtaposition of *kunsheng* and *qiandan* 乾旦 (male *dan*), or actors playing female roles on stage, signifies the performing complexity of the opera.

In the English context, *kunsheng* might be immediately misunderstood as conventional women cross-dressers, equivalent to the reversal of drag queens. However, in Chinese, "cross-dressing", or *fanchuan* 反串, has distinct meanings in daily conversations and within the lexicon of Peking opera. In most daily experiences, *fanchuan* might be used loosely. Any scenario referring to performers portraying characters not aligned to their biological sex can be described as *fanchuan*. However, in Peking opera, the concept of *fanchuan* is irrelevant to actors' or actresses' biological sex (Wang 2002, 531–32). The term refers to actors or actresses performing roles for which they are not primarily trained, insinuating the versatility of the performer. When actors or actresses perform roles for which they have been professionally trained, it is termed as *bengong* 本工. Therefore, Xiaolanfen's *kunsheng* performances cannot be regarded as *fanchuan*. Instead, they are considered *bengong*. If Xiaolanfen were to portray a woman on stage, that would be *fanchuan*, since she was not proficient in female roles despite being a biological woman. I am aware of the complexity and confusion surrounding the lexicon and translation between different languages and contexts. In this dissertation, I use *kunsheng* and cross-dressers interchangeably, which encompasses the denotation of *nu ban nan zhuang* 女扮男裝 (women portraying men) or *nan ban nu zhuang* 男扮女裝 (men portraying women), depending on the requirements of my analyses. However, these usages are never equivalent to the professional significance of *fanchuan* in Peking opera.

[5] On the origin and the development of *canjun xi*, see Zeng Yongyi, *Canjun xi yu Yuan zaju* 參軍戲與元雜劇 [Canjun drama and Yuan zaju] (Taipei: Lianjing chubanshe, 1992). Additionally, around 1355, Xia Tingzhi 夏庭芝 (?–1375) published the book, *Qinglou Ji* 青樓集 (The Green Bower Collection), documenting the performances of actresses, many of whom were also courtesans. Notably, a significant number of these actresses specialized in portraying male roles, highlighting a historical precedent for women cross-dressing in performance.

enough confidence to exercise their agency and speak for themselves. By utilizing eroticism as a lens, I theorize *kunsheng* actresses' affective experiences—their desires, sensations, sentimentalism, oppression, depression, and self-perceptions—as strategic performances, practices adopted to negotiate with heteronormative gender regimes. This erotic encounter was not restricted to the manifestation of heterosexual desire but also encompassed homoeroticism; it applied to interactions between *kunsheng* as well as with their fans. I suggest that these encounters, influenced by gender discourses both rooted in China and imported from Western countries, shaped the public culture of erotica in the twentieth century and impacted actresses' courtship, marriages, sexual practices, social class, gender relations, and performances.

Literature Review

My research primarily builds upon the scholarship investigating gender performance in Chinese opera and the public performance of erotica. The intertwined history of opera and erotic culture is evident in the performing art now known as Peking opera, which has its origin as early as 1790 (Yao Shuyi 2006, 114–240). However, the introduction of actresses to the opera genre occurred much later, as the acting trade was considered degraded and immoral, especially for women. To uphold Confucian morality, for most of the Qing dynasty, the court prohibited women from performing on commercial stages.[6] This prohibition stemmed from the belief that the decadence witnessed during the Ming dynasty was partly due to officials indulging in lascivious lifestyles, such as the patronage of and companionship with courtesans. Consequently,

[6] Actresses were prohibited in public theaters, but courtesans who were good at performing songs and plays still performed when they were attending private gatherings (*tanghui*). See Weikun Cheng, "Women in Public Spaces: Theater, Modernity, and Actresses in Early Twentieth-Century Beijing," and Li Jing 李静, *Ming Qing tanghui yanju shi* 明清堂会演剧史 [The theater history of tanghui in the Ming and Qing] (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2011). See also Zhang Yuan, *Jindai Ping Jin Hu de chengshi jingju nü yanyuan* and Ma Shaobo 馬少波, ed., *Zhongguo jingju shi* 中國京劇史 (The history of Chinese Beijing opera, 1999), 282–93.

male performers dominated the opera scene for a considerable period. To address the absence of actresses and meet the demand for female characters, male actors known as "*dan* 旦" became an indispensable supporting group, ensuring the continuity of the opera business. While not every male *dan* provided companionship and sexual services, the prevalence and wide circulation of *huapu* 花譜, a genre dedicated to the ranking of male *dan*, equated them with courtesans. Andrea S. Goldman's research on *huapu* has noted that this genre provided solace to literati who failed civil exams, revealing the prevalence of companionship from male *dan*. Like courtesans, the male *dan*, what Goldman has called "boy actresses," were available for a range of pleasurable services, from entertainment to sex for an elite male clientele. Cuncun Wu's research on homoerotic sensibilities has clarified that there was no discourse of pathologized homosexuality in late imperial China. Rather, the male-male homoerotic culture, or homoeroticism, of the Qing theater world is best denoted as same-sex love (Wu 2004). Matthew H. Sommer's *Sex, Law, and Society in Late Imperial China* (Sommer 2000) has highlighted that sodomy appeared in formal legal codes in China only during the late imperial period. The stigmatization of homosexuality as a representation of pathology was imported from Western culture in the twentieth century. In other words, prior to the late imperial era, homosexual eroticism was not considered a sin, and same-sex penetration was widely practiced, if not universally condoned. Despite not being considered honorable, the association between male *dan* and sexual services was accepted during the Qing.

Not until 1899 did Peking opera actresses make their debut in commercial troupes in Shanghai, the most prosperous city at the turn of the twentieth century, due to its protection from Qing customary law by its treaty-port status (Zhang Yuan 2011; Cheng 2019, 5–6, 32). The first two all-female troupes were established at Shanghai's Meixian Teahouse 美仙茶園 and Qunxian

Teahouse 群仙茶園 (Cheng 2019, 32, 105). However, the emergence of all-female troupes did not guarantee improvements in gender equality in the realm of commercial opera performance. Starting in the second half of the nineteenth century, unprecedented military and cultural threats from Western imperialist powers and the Japanese empire repeatedly exacerbated officials' and reformists' anxiety over national weakness. The association between licentious performances and all-female troupes came to be perceived as one of the factors worsening the predicament of China. Republican intellectuals believed that national weakness resulted from the proliferation of erotic entertainment, which symbolized moral decay. Operas involving cross-dressing performances became their targets. However, as the work of Joshua L. Goldstein has shown, male *dan* quickly distanced themselves from eroticism and elevated their status to that of artists by touring overseas to glorify Chinese culture (Goldstein 2007, 237–63). In contrast, *kunsheng*, similar to other actresses, did not experience the same success as their male counterparts, often remaining relegated to the social status of entertainers. Goldstein has credited the male *dan*'s disassociation from erotic entertainment to their performing strategies. Male *dan* performers of the Republican era (1911-1949), such as Mei Lanfang, successfully raised performance to an art by removing obscene elements from scripts, cooperating with literati to portray respectable figures drawn from the vast repertory of past literature, and promoting themselves as international stars. As a result, they came to be no longer viewed primarily as sexual objects. Through successful tours in Japan, America, and Russia, the male *dan* gradually transformed into an iconic national figure, embodying the identity of artist.[7] While the scholarship on male *dan* has charted their evolution from quasi-courtesans to esteemed artists, little attention has focused

[7] For more on Mei Lanfang's international tours, see Joshua Goldstein, *Drama Kings: Players and Publics in the Re-Creation of Peking Opera, 1870-1937* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

on actresses, including *kunsheng*, who had a distinct fate from male *dan* due to the persistence of gender hierarchies and attitudes that circumscribed roles for women in society, even as urban women increasingly entered public space over the course of Republican China. My work aims to reveal how these dynamics played out on the actresses who cross-dressed to play men in commercial opera from the late nineteenth through the mid twentieth centuries.

My scholarship on the public perception of actresses begins with an examination of the social structure during the Qing dynasty. Aside from associating actresses with licentiousness, the Qing court's prohibition on them stemmed from the prevailing concern for women's chastity. Susan Mann has shown that in late imperial China, there were "two complementary, but discrete, structures of female sexuality" produced by the patriarchal system: the first structure relied on marriage and reproduction, belonging to domesticity, while the second one was tied to prostitution and procurement, associated with public life (Mann 1993, 247). Although Mann's research only covers the late imperial period, the ideology behind female sexuality articulated by Mann continued to influence attitudes toward actresses in the twentieth century, as the work engaged in by actresses and courtesans overlapped to some extent throughout Chinese history (*changyou bufen* 娼優不分).[8]

After Meixian Teahouse and Qunxian Teahouse were established at the end of the nineteenth century, the commercial success of these two female troupes resulted in a significant rise in the number of actresses and female troupes. Actresses' participation in commercial opera not only enriched the performances of the *dan* role type, but also those of male, or *sheng* 生 role types, leading to an increased prevalence of and demand for *kunsheng*. The trend of using

[8] For account on the history of actresses prior to the Qing dynasty, see Weikun Cheng, "The Challenge of the Actresses" *Modern China* 22, no. 2 (1996): 198–199, 204–205; William Dolby, *A History of Chinese Drama* (London: Paul Elek, 1976).

actresses to garner audiences also spread northward to the bustling city of Tianjin and, after the fall of the dynasty in 1911, the capital city of Beijing.

As an emerging career option in the late Qing and early Republican eras, actresses did not fit neatly into existing paradigm of gender roles. They revealed themselves in public but did not necessarily engage in selling sex. Catherine Yeh's taxonomy of public women of the era provides an apt characterization: courtesans were semi-public figures who operated in private residences accessible primarily to high-ranking officials, nobles (*daguan guizu* 達官貴族), and successful businessmen, while actresses were entirely public figures accessible to commoners in public theaters. In 1918, New Culture intellectual Hu Shi 胡適 (1891–1962) called for the emergence of the new woman (*xin nuxing* 新女性), who would leave domesticity and enter the work force; actresses, despite being qualified by virtue of being women who made a living through their profession, were excluded from this category.[9] Inspired by the independent spirit of women in the United States, Hu contended that a new woman should transcend the old ideology of the "good wife and good mother" (*xianqi liangmu* 賢妻良母). A new woman must break free from dependence and become independent (*zili* 自立), a quality regarded as a prerequisite for a humane society (*liangshan de shehui* 良善的社會) (Hu Shi 1918, 223). In this regard, actresses, a new profession that required professional training and provided women with economic independence, might also be considered new women. However, anxiety over women's chastity and continued disdain for public female figures made that path difficult for actresses. In pursuing their career aspirations and seeking economic autonomy, actresses encountered societal antagonism and suffered from sexual prejudice and occupational discrimination, both in the

[9] Hu Shi first mentioned this term when he gave a lecture titled, "American Ladies" (*Meiguo de furen* 美國的婦人), at the Beijing Girl's Normal School in 1918.

workplace and in their personal lives. As Weikun Cheng has shown, “contemporaries more or less understood stage performance by women in the early twentieth century as a form of urban amusement associated with erotic indulgence and immoral lifestyles and believed acting to be a profession full of abuse, exploitation, and social control,” shedding light on the ways in which gender norms and occupational stereotypes impacted actresses’ social positions and gender roles (Cheng 1996, 197). The research on actresses’ gender-straight acting by Jiacheng Liu further illustrates how actresses attracted audiences and boosted box-office sales. They did so not only by demonstrating sophisticated artistic training, but also by incorporating flirtation and suggestive content into their performances, such as displaying bound-feet, to enhance their commercial appeal (Liu 2016, 45–51).

Moreover, actresses’ struggles were influenced by the legacy of the cult of chastity (particularly virulent from the 16th through 18th centuries) and the emergence of a new public culture of eroticism in the first half of the twentieth century. Janet Theiss’s research on women’s chastity in eighteenth-century China highlights that the Qing court, aiming to mediate ethnic conflicts between the Manchu and Han peoples, employed the cult of female chastity to regulate Chinese womanhood, as this gender value originated from Confucian gender ethics (Theiss 2004). The ideology emphasizing women’s chastity permeated all levels of society and continued to impact Chinese society into the twentieth century. Jin Jiang, in her book on Yue opera in twentieth-century Shanghai, has shown that actresses “occupied a particularly ambivalent position between vocational actors, who were striving to achieve higher social status as professional artists, and prostitutes, whose livelihood still depended on selling sexual services” (Jiang 2009, 65). For actresses, suicide became a desperate means to manifest their chastity, effectively protesting against slanderous claims of promiscuity and aligning themselves

with the virtues of good women (*liangjia funü* 良家婦女) rather than with prostitutes (Jiang 2009, 60–105). This action could be interpreted as an accusatory response to being rejected by the project of modern state building. Nevertheless, female suicide, in fact, was not only appropriated by actresses remonstrating against the injustices they encountered, but also was used as a tactic by women in general. As Margery Wolf has noted, in China's long history, female suicide was frequently a weapon of the weak (Wolf, Witke, and Martin 1975). Furthermore, the emergence of a new public culture of eroticism, intertwining the two contradictory gender discourses, exacerbated actresses' struggles. It represented "the cultural conflict between traditional popular eroticism focused on the sexuality of public women and a reformist ideology that considered the cleansing of this popular eroticism to be part of the task of building a modern nation," shaping perceptions of actresses throughout the imperial to the Republican period (Jiang 2009, 62).

Building on these analyses, my work investigates the fluid sexuality (encompassing both heteronormativity and homoeroticism) of *kunsheng*; I argue that their sexuality both was subjected to and challenged the ideology of patriarchy. By considering the subtle power dynamics between hetero- and homoerotic desires, my project aims to complicate the notion of Chinese eroticism and its paradox—the coexistence of diversity and uniformity.

My project further contributes to the conceptualization of an alternative gender role, *kunsheng*, distinct from conventional straight-dressed actresses and courtesans, whose characteristics were tagged as feminine. This study traces the historical development of *kunsheng* in modern China through a series of case studies that illustrate actresses' eventual divergence from the roles traditionally associated with courtesans. It aims to investigate how the public perceived *kunsheng* and how these female cross-dressers questioned the gender binary paradigm,

expanded the spectrum of gender expression, and further challenged the deeply entrenched patriarchal system. While the virtue of actresses, such as female chastity, was established within a firmly patriarchal system, the heteronormative structure was somewhat porous during the late imperial period. Despite adherence to patriarchal principles, this permeability allowed for fluid sexual desires and practices to exist. By exploring the multiplicity of homo- and heteroerotic experiences, this dissertation addresses the ways in which heteronormativity and homoeroticism impacted *kunsheng*'s stage performances and everyday lives.

Unlike their male counterparts, who disassociated themselves from erotic attention by collaborating with intellectuals and strengthening cultural diplomacy, *kunsheng* encountered more difficulties in distancing themselves from associations with courtesans or prostitutes during the process of pursuing their acting careers. Gail Hershatter's research has revealed that prostitutes were seen as frightening figures who not only symbolized the excessive indulgence of sexual desires, but also embodied the widespread prevalence of sexually transmitted diseases (Hershatter 1997, 18). Although *kunsheng* were not frequently associated with disease, the enduring connection between prostitutes and actresses consistently haunted the public perception of actresses throughout much of the Republican era. My dissertation aims to provide a comprehensive picture of how actresses—especially cross-dressing actresses—struggled against their association with prostitution.

My work also engages scholarship on the new sexological discourses that circulated within Republican China. These Western-imported discourses added new dimensions to the understanding of the fluidity of hetero- and homoeroticism. Howard Chiang's work, *After Eunuchs* (Chiang 2018), examines the historical process of importing Western medical discourse to develop Chinese sexology. Chiang's research has revealed that the discourse on

homosexuality was a product of colonial modernity, showing the conflicts between traditional perspectives on same-sex love and the new pathologization of the practice. I further build upon the scholarship on *kunsheng* by Chou Huiling 周慧玲 (Hui-ling Catherine Chou) and Wang An-chi 王安祈 to complicate actresses' gender expressions and sexual identities. By showcasing the multiplicity of *kunsheng*'s hetero- and homosexual encounters, I aim to elucidate the ways in which both male and female patrons perceived women cross-dressers.

Chinese eroticism, I further show, came to be wrapped up in gigantic projects in the twentieth century, namely, the transformation from an early modern empire to a modern nation-state. I show that the struggle of *kunsheng* for recognition as artists was played out against the backdrop of what Tani Barlow and others have called colonial modernity.[10] Ultimately, I will suggest, *kunsheng*'s strategic performances carved out spaces in which a greater multiplicity of gender performances could be exhibited within Chinese society.

Finally, my work speaks to Sinophone Studies by incorporating an analysis of a *kunsheng*'s memoir published in Taiwan. Shu-mei Shih introduced the concept of Sinophone Studies as a field focusing on Sinitic-language cultures on the margins of geopolitical nation-states and their hegemonic productions (Shih 2011, 125). Sinophone communities refers to those "Sinitic-language communities and cultures situated outside of China or on the margins of China and Chineseness" (Chiang 2018, 238). Taiwan, as a Sinophone community, has inherited and transplanted a significant amount of Chinese culture to validate its political legitimacy. Due to its

[10] As Tani Barlow has suggested, colonial modernity should be a fundamental analytical category when researchers review twentieth century East Asia. See Tani E. Barlow, "Theorizing Woman: *Funu, Guojia, Jiating* [Chinese Women, Chinese State, Chinese Family]," in *Body, Subject and Power in China*, eds. Angela Zito and Tani E. Barlow (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 1–20. While Peking opera did not originate within a colonial context, its development can be seen as influenced by colonial modernity. Its development into a national opera genre was intertwined with treaty ports protections, cultural exchanges with Western nations, and advancements in transportation and printing press technology; See, Goldstein, *Drama Kings*, 3.

political tension with the People's Republic of China (PRC), the ROC government on Taiwan (ca. 1949-1980s) mobilized Peking opera as a cultural strategy to represent authentic Chineseness. During the second half of the twentieth century, this genre was remolded from a form of entertainment heavily invested in public eroticism to national drama (*guoju* 國劇) expunged of lascivious elements.[11] My project traces the development of *kunsheng* from mainland China to Taiwan. This trajectory reflects how Sinophone opera on Taiwan came to accommodate the ambivalence of *kunsheng*'s stories, simultaneously hosting narratives of political authority and personal erotic desires.

Through the prism of Sinophone studies, I engage in scholarship centering on the intersection of queer Sinophone cultures. Howard Chiang, in his research on queer historicism, argues that "situated at the double margins of East Asian and queer scholarly inquiries, the notion of queer Sinophonicity suggests that both Chineseness and queerness find their most meaningful articulations *in and through* one another" (Chiang and Heinrich 2013, 20). Lily Wong further engages with queer Sinophonicity through the lens of affective experiences, analyzing how Chineseness and queerness "emerge as cultural constructions that mutually intervene and continually coproduce" (Wong 2018, 90). While I refrain from using the term, "queer," to describe instances of same-sex love and cross-dressing to avoid the confusion of conceptual imposition, I draw upon these scholars' insights to examine how *kunsheng* remembered their Republican affective encounters in postwar Taiwan, revealing the ways in

[11] The term "national drama" first appeared in the 1920s; see Goldstein, *Drama Kings*, 134–171. Nancy Guy's "Peking Opera as 'National Opera' in Taiwan: What's in a Name?" also offers a detailed explanation of the process by which Peking opera was honored as national drama in Taiwan during the Cold War. See Nancy Guy, "Peking Opera as 'National Opera' in Taiwan: What's in a Name?" *Asian Theatre Journal* 12, no. 1 (1995): 85–103.

which *kunsheng* exercised their agency to simultaneously align with and challenge Peking opera as a symbol of Chineseness.

Pivoting to performance theory scholarship, I envision my project as both an engagement with and a challenge to the mainstream Euro-American focus of gender performance. Implicitly, my dissertation aims to converse with Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity. In her book, *Gender Trouble*, Butler uses drag as an example to denaturalize the presumptive associations between anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance. I am fully aware that, despite sharing the feature of theatricality, drag and *kunsheng* aim to underscore distinct gender expressions. However, Butler's argument that "gender parody reveals that the original identity after which gender fashions itself is an imitation without an origin" equally applies to *kunsheng*'s cross-dressing performances, further complicating the layers of women imitating men (Butler 2006 [1990], 175). My work also engages with José Esteban Muñoz's research on the color of people's queer identities and their strategic resistance. As shown in his work on Cuban-American AIDS educator Pedro Zamora, Muñoz shows that Zamora "used the power of celebrity to make counterpublic interventions by way of using the mainstream media, a mode of publicity that is usually hostile to counterpublic politics" (Muñoz 1998, 151). Similarly, *kunsheng*, as a marginalized group, employed similar tactics by speaking for themselves in public media, such as newspapers and memoirs. By focusing on marginalized cross-dressing Asian women's narratives within the Sinophone context, my project not only enriches the diversity of this field, but also highlights the limitations of its profound reliance on the Euro-American experience.

Sources

This dissertation explores the gender performances of *kunsheng* via investigation of a diverse range of primary source materials, including newspapers and journals, pictorial records, fiction, as well as performers' biographies and memoirs. Through analyzing print media revealing affective encounters between Peking opera *kunsheng*, patrons, and audiences, I illustrate the unstable aspects of gendered subjectivity that were frequently assumed to be binary in Confucian ethics and assess how the public culture of erotica participated and influenced the development of *kunsheng* as an occupation.

This research utilizes tabloids and memoirs as key sources. While the theatrical nature of these media may not always offer a transparent understanding "objective" history, they are often the imagined recreations of social reality by journalists and writers. The very theatricality of tabloids and memoirs serves as a lens through which readers and researchers can explore the performative aspects embedded within gender paradigms. As a result, both the format (tabloids and memoirs) and the content (gender performativity) offer valuable insights into performance studies, providing a window onto how *kunsheng* performed various gender roles and how they were perceived.

Barbara Mittler has pointed out that the first Chinese-language newspaper, *Shenbao* 申報 (Shun pao; Shanghai news), was founded and produced by Western missionaries and merchants in Shanghai in 1872 (Mittler 2004, 3). As a product of colonial modernity, newspapers "intended not just to entertain but, more important, to edify and instruct its readers." But not every newspaper shared that same mission or fashioned itself as an educational medium. In 1897, *Youxibao* 遊戲報 (Entertainment daily), the earliest Chinese-language tabloid (*xiaobao* 小報), also known as the mosquito press, was founded by Li Boyuan 李伯元 (1867–1906) (Lien Lingling 2013, 2; Forges 2021, 541). In Lien Lingling's 連玲玲 research on Chinese tabloids,

she demonstrates that tabloids were characterized by their physical size, writing styles, and expressive vocabularies, which were often less serious compared to mainstream newspapers (Lien 2013, 4). Despite being criticized for their trivial content, which often included social gossip and entertainment news, tabloids still managed to achieve significant circulation, reaching diverse segments of society and transcending social class divisions. This widespread circulation makes tabloids important primary sources for studying urban readership during the Republican era (Lien Lingling 2013, 6–8). Through employing such sources, my work shows that gender and eroticism served as an entertaining escape from the unsettling politics of the Republican era, even as cultural critics condemned such media for thwarting the nation's move toward modernity in the twentieth century. It also reveals that the realities journalists constructed, or believed readers would be interested in, often reflected societal concerns, particularly in relation to the evolving dynamics of gender and modernity.

Memoirs, to some degree, share some similarity to tabloids; often they aim to satisfy readers' voyeuristic desires by narrating personal stories and revealing secrets hidden from the public. Autographical writing was not uncommon in imperial China. However, it was short, encompassing the genres of verse or prose, the preface or postface to a book, letters and diaries, and so on. Modern memoirs, instead, are typically book-length volumes, emphasizing the author as a person and purporting to divulge authentic accounts of their lives (Ebrey, Yao, and Zhang 2023, 1–19).

In my deployment of such sources, I pay attention to the distinction and the overlap between authenticity and objectivity. While the accounts in memoirs may be true to the authors' individual feelings, they may not necessarily provide a comprehensive view of their lives. Still, the very subjectivity of memoirs offers a window into personal emotions, enabling us to witness

firsthand testimony of individuals who were directly involved in the events. Therefore, this dissertation makes use of memoirs as a vital source for reconstructing *kunsheng*'s affective experiences.

Chapter Outline

Chapter One, "Redefining the Moralities of *Kunsheng*, 1880-1920," investigates the transformation in public perception of *kunsheng*'s morality and talent. By analyzing print media––newspaper and pictorial articles—published over four decades, I trace the ways in which attitudes about such women changed from regarding them as debased to acknowledging their complexity and multiplicity. My findings reveal a rich diversity of *kunsheng* actresses' stage performances and everyday practices, challenging the one-sided view of analyses that suggest early twentieth-century actresses primarily provided salacious performances on stage and engaged in sex work off stage. Moreover, I attribute *kunsheng*'s commercial and artistic successes to their exclusion from the theatrical milieu of male actors and its attendant fan culture in print media. In this way, I argue that this segregation, albeit discriminatory, in fact provided *kunsheng* room to develop their talents and create a distinctive appeal to their own audiences.

Chapter Two, "Performing Gender: Meng Xiaodong and Affective Encounters, 1920–1950," centers on well-known *kunsheng* Meng Xiaodong 孟小冬 (1908–1977), who performed the *laosheng* 老生 (older male) role type and was recognized as the most qualified successor of the Yu performance style (*Yu pai* 余派). Her art destabilized the longstanding dominant position of male actors in this Peking opera role type. Despite her artistic acclaim, media reportage surrounding her persistently points to the continued struggles that actresses faced in escaping gender expectations rooted in the late imperial era. While much work on Meng Xiaodong has

been published in Chinese scholarly literature, the entanglement between her on-stage and everyday performances and the specific historical dynamics—the forceful collision between long-standing local- and Western-imported gender ideologies and practices—has not been systematically analyzed. Through an analysis of numerous tabloid publications, I showcase how media sensation simultaneously challenged and strengthened conventional gender discourses in in the second and third decades of twentieth century in China.

Chapter Three, "Love between *Kunsheng* and their Women Patrons in the ROC," delves into *kunsheng*'s affective experiences of same-sex love, arguing that their same-sex intimacy showcased an alternative possibility that neither aligned with the late imperial idea of the cult of *qing* 情, nor conformed to the Western-imported sexology debated by Republican-era New Culture intellectuals. I home in on *kunsheng* Guan Wenyu's 關文蔚 (1914–2008) memoir as my key source to exhibit the diversity of women's gender performances in everyday life. While I am aware that Guan's story has its own uniqueness, which might not have applied to other actresses at the time, it nevertheless demonstrates the multiplicity of gender performances in the Republican era, illustrating how women could, to some extent, increasingly free themselves from heteronormative structures. Moreover, the female liaisons represented in this texts further reversed the positions of subject and object in terms of the concept of "*xia* 狎," which referred to the sexual dalliances that occurred between elite male patrons and *dan* boy actresses throughout the late Qing and into the early Republican era. The same-sex love of *kunsheng*, I show, parodied elite men's same-sex love, and in doing so liberated female desire from the long-standing euphemistic trope of sisterhood.

Together, these three chapters illuminate the dynamic and multifaceted nature of *kunsheng*'s development from the 1880s to the 1980s, revealing the transformation of their social

status and opera accomplishments, as well as the growing recognition of their individuality. From its inception in the late Qing through the first half of the twentieth century, Peking opera remained male-dominated. Even after women were allowed onto commercial stages at the turn of the twentieth century, actresses were relegating to secondary roles, emphasizing their reliance on physical allure and femininity to captivate audiences, especially those less familiar with opera intricacies. Despite these constraints, *kunsheng* challenged societal expectations of chastity and confronted fierce competition from *sheng* roles enacted by cis men. Nevertheless, the efforts and commitment of *kunsheng* to their craft ultimately paid off, earning them recognition from opera connoisseurs and critics. Some of them even took steps to document their experiences by writing memoirs, thereby sharing their narratives with a broader audience. Their journeys stand as a testament to the transformative potential of women transcending societal constraints in the pursuit of careers. They demonstrate women's abilities to perform genders and negotiate heteronormative norms against challenging odds.

Chapter 1 Redefining the Morals and Artistic Aesthetics of Peking Opera *Kunsheng*, 1880–1919

This chapter investigates the transformation in the public perception of Peking opera *kunsheng*, or women playing male roles, from 1880 to 1919. Around 1870, *kunsheng* first appeared in Shanghai's female troupes, or the pussycat troupes (*mao'er ban* a 貓兒戲), managed by Peking opera actor Li Mao'er 李毛兒 (Haishang shushisheng 海上漱石生 [1910] 2011).[1] It was not until the early twentieth century, with the emergence of mass print media as a new public space, that the staging and everyday performances of *kunsheng* were widely documented and shared with the tabloid-reading public.[2] My research covers a forty-year period beginning in 1880 and assesses early *kunsheng* actresses' artistic achievements, the moral implications of staging male roles, and the changing commentary on them. By analyzing newspapers and journal articles mostly published between the 1880s and 1910s, I trace the ways in which attitudes about

[1] There is no consensus as to the dating for the emergence of Peking opera actresses. Huang Yufu 黃育馥 points out that in 1874 Li Mao'er bought several Anhui girls from poor families. Li taught these girls opera arias, creating opportunities for them perform at Shanghai's private household events and in teahouses. See Huang Yufu, "Jingju—guancha Zhongguo nüxing diwei bianhua de chuangkou (1790—1937) 京剧——观察中国女性地位变化的窗口 (1790—1937) [Jingju: a window onto changes in Chinese women's social status (1790—1937)]," in *Yanggang yu yinrou de bianzou—liangxing guanxi he shehui moshi* 阳刚与阴柔的变奏: 两性关系和社会模式 [Variations between the masculine and the feminine: gender relations and social modes], ed. Min Jiayin (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 1995), 330–31. However, Huang does not provide sources to justify his claim of 1874 as the origin of this practice. In Joshua Goldstein's 2007 monograph, *Drama Kings*, he vaguely references "the 1870s" to discuss the emergence of Peking opera actresses; see Goldstein, *Drama Kings*, 110. Jiacheng Liu and Xing Fan, in contrast, push the date earlier to the late Tongzhi years (1862–74). See Jiacheng Liu, "Transgressive Female Roles and the Embodiment of Actresses in 1910s Beijing," *Twentieth-Century China* 41, no. 1 (2016): 29–51 and Xing Fan, "Stars on the Rise: Jingju Actresses in Republican China," in *Women in Asian Performance: Aesthetics and Politics*, ed. Arya Madhavan (New York: Routledge, 2017), 67–68.

[2] Newspapers and pictorials in China appeared in the third quarter of the nineteenth century. See Christian Henriot and Wen-Hsin Yeh, "Introduction," in *History in Images: Pictures and Public Space in Modern China*, eds. Christian Henriot and Wen-Hsin Yeh (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, Berkeley, 2012), 1–2. See also Barbara Mittler, *A Newspaper for China?: Power, Identity, and Change in Shanghai's News Media, 1872-1912* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2004).

kunsheng changed from regarding them as debased to acknowledging their moral integrity and artistic skills. In addition, I draw upon sources published in the 1930s to supplement my investigation of *kunsheng* in the public media from earlier periods.

Scholarship on Chinese opera actresses has been vigorous in recent years.[3] The work of Suwen Luo and Xing Fan examines gender dynamics between Peking opera actors and actresses, in particular the gendered aspects of opera training and innovations (Luo 2005; Fan 2017). In contrast, I focus on the gender dynamics between male *dan* and *kunsheng* and between actresses and *kunsheng*. My work further builds upon Jiacheng Liu's scholarship on Peking opera in the 1910s. Liu's work reveals how actresses innovated opera aesthetics by combining their biological sex—something male *dan* lacked—with traits of flirtatious femininity. She also examines actresses' performative interactions with male patrons in everyday life, thereby showcasing the complexity of the field of Peking opera in the early Republican era (Liu 2016; 2019; 2020). I am deeply indebted to this scholarship on actresses; however, most of the scholarship often lumps *kunsheng* into the broad category of actresses without further explication or only examines women performing in the *dan* role, in effect ignoring the uniqueness of *kunsheng*.[4] Instead, I consider the interactions between *kunsheng*, other actresses, critics, and

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[3] For scholarship investigating male actors in Peking opera, see Yao Shuyi 么書儀, *Wan Qing xiqu de biange* 晚清戲曲的變革 [The transformation of the late Qing theater] (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2006), Goldstein, *Drama Kings*, and Cuncun Wu and Mark Stevenson, "Speaking of Flowers: Theatre, Public Culture, and Homoerotic Writing in Nineteenth-Century Beijing," *Asian Theatre Journal* 27, no. 1 (2010): 100–129. See also Andrea S. Goldman, *Opera and the City: The Politics of Culture in Beijing, 1770–1900* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012); and Wu Xinmiao 吳新苗, *Liyuan siyu kaolun* 梨園私寓考論 [Research on the private residences of the pear garden] (Beijing: Xueyuan chubanshe, 2017).

[4] Weikun Cheng's research, in spite of not completely focusing on Peking opera actresses, emphasizes their simultaneous angelic and demonic representations as working women in the context of nation building. See Weikun Cheng, "The Challenge of the Actresses," 1996; "Women in Public Spaces: Theater, Modernity, and Actresses in Early Twentieth-Century Beijing," *Asian Journal of Women's Studies* 9, no. 3 (2003): 7–45; *City of Working Women: Life, Space, and Social Control in Early Twentieth-Century Beijing* (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, Berkeley, 2011), 134–164. He is also probably the first researcher in the Anglophone scholarship to have acknowledged the complexity of public perception regarding actresses. Hui-ling

audiences, based on writings about these performative exchanges. The resulting narratives are rife with varying interpretations based on readers' viewpoints. My findings on *kunsheng* enrich the current scholarship on Peking opera actresses, further complementing and challenging the assumptions—then and now—that early twentieth-century actresses were highly associated with sex workers and represented social backwardness. Alternatively, I interrogate the moral reputation of actresses in light of the ways their behavior adhered to normative moral values: chastity, filial piety, and patriotism. I further assess the transformation of how the public—male audiences, patrons, opera critics, and actors—perceived the artistic achievements of this marginalized group of performers, and how they took advantage of *kunsheng*'s gender ambiguity to simultaneously fulfill their male desires and create opera connoisseur personas.

Although primarily focusing on *kunsheng*—most of whom played the older male lead characters (or *laosheng*), my analysis also includes all varieties of women playing men, including the roles of young men (*xiaosheng* 小生), painted face (*hualian* 花臉), and clown (*chou* 丑), so as to demonstrate the wide range of cross-dressing women in Peking opera. I show that the commercial and artistic success of *kunsheng* can be attributed to, ironically, their exclusion from the theatrical milieu of male actors. I argue that this gender segregation, albeit discriminatory, in fact provided *kunsheng* room to develop their talents and charisma, whereby they could appeal to their own audiences.[5] Although customs varied in regions and time periods,

Chou was also one of the earliest scholars to study the topic of actresses. Unlike Weikun Cheng's comprehensive narratives, Chou narrows her focus to women cross-dressing to play men in Peking opera and *xinju* 新劇 (New Drama), historicizing the development of these transgressive figures. See Hui-ling Chou, "Striking Their Own Poses: The History of Cross-Dressing on the Chinese Stage," *TDR* 41, no. 2 (1997): 130–52.

[5] Joshua Goldstein argues that sex segregation hindered the rise of actresses in the long run; see Goldstein, *Drama Kings*, 111. Nevertheless, such segregation, especially in the early twentieth century, was not always negative.

single-sex troupes were very common.[6] Theaters featuring all-female performances often affiliated with entertainment emporiums.[7] Most of the time, actresses, including *kunsheng*, were not allowed to perform with actors.

The practice and ideology of gender segregation was not limited to physical space, but was also reproduced in symbolic space, such as the entertainment sections of tabloids. In print media, opera critics considered actresses a separate cohort that should not be mixed with actors. Articles by critics frequently adopted different standards when evaluating stage performances by actresses. Nevertheless, some of them show increasing awareness of the unequal dynamics between actresses and actors.

By analyzing representations of *kunsheng*'s moral characteristics—frequently eroticized on and off the stage—from the late Qing into the Republican era, I aim to shed light on the gender performance of *kunsheng*, with attention to its implications for changing social norms and even nation building. The Qing state had strictly regulated gender relations based on Confucian norms, resulting in the spread of the cult of chastity (Bailey 2012, 17–18; Theiss 2004). The state used the cult as a means to stabilize social order and obscure its alien origins. Although gender ideology and social climate underwent radical change starting in the late nineteenth century, women's virtues—including regulation of their sexuality—were still frequently associated with state agendas. Individual virtues became a standard by which to evaluate a regime's strength or weakness. *Kunsheng*, as non-normative figures—that is, cross-dressing entertainers—were also

[6] Huang Yufu in his essay, "Jingju," demonstrates the transitions of single-sex and mixed-sex troupes in Beijing from 1790–1937. Within this 147-year period, mixed-sex troupes were permitted for only ten years; see Huang Yufu, "Jingju," 330–36. Although the policy in Beijing cannot speak for the entirety of the Chinese urban centers, it shows that most of the time, the existence of mixed-sex troupes was not widely accepted.

[7] All-female troupes affiliated with entertainment emporiums were quite common in Shanghai, for instance, the Great Universe Theater (*Qiankun dajuchang* 乾坤大劇場), which belonged to the Great World Emporium (*Dashijie youyichang* 大世界遊戲場), and the all-female venue within the Sincere Emporium (*Xianshi leyuan* 先施樂園).

integrated into this shifting matrix of governmental and cultural transformations. In his study of the late Qing fiction, Keith McMahon points out that "male subjection to female will is a core feature of fiction about prostitutes and male patrons in Shanghai brothels of the late Qing" (McMahon 2008, 142). The late Qing fiction embodies and envisions the concern of male literati, elites, and politicians in the following decades, in which their power was seen as gradually sapped by women. Women's entrance onto the stage in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries exacerbated men's anxiety about maintaining conventional patriarchal order (as a result, some male elites strove to promote female characters played by the male *dan*, who became icons of Chinese womanhood, characters often out of reach for the female *dan*). Men lost the absolute power to define themselves and women. To some extent, *kunsheng* challenged this gender dynamic by enacting men in public space. Women impersonating men ran the risk of parodying patriarchal norms; upholders of those norms lashed out at *kunsheng* with condemnation.

In this chapter, I begin by showcasing the entanglement of *kunsheng* and courtesans. I also explicate how they were generalized within the broad category of actresses by contemporary journalists and opera critics, revealing the ways in which such narratives were framed to construct an imaginary ideal of gender relations and served to solidify the existing patriarchal order. Next, I examine the ways in which *kunsheng* diversified their gender performances and utilized the practice of sex segregation within performance venues as a means to thrive and win recognition from the public, while also resisting male-dominated power structures in society. Lastly, I demonstrate how male critics wrote about *kunsheng* not only to comment on the emerging theatrical phenomenon, but also as a means to burnish their professional personas. By

commenting on the artistic skills and everyday life of *kunsheng*, critics explicitly acknowledged the diverse array of such actresses.

The Licentiousness of *Kunsheng*

Shenbao, the first modern-style Chinese newspaper published in Shanghai, provides a window onto the power dynamics among actors, *dan* actresses, *kunsheng*, men of letters, and the transformation of the official mechanisms for regulating theater in the late Qing.[8] Newspaper reportage served as an informal political and affective space in Shanghai. In the aftermath of the Taiping Rebellion (1850–1964), many educated men migrated to Shanghai to evade the war. Although they still felt a calling to serve the empire, they no longer aspired to participate in the civil service exam. Writing for the newspaper offered them an alternative public space in which to rein in officials and maintain social order (Wei 2010, 6). Concomitantly, officials also used the newspaper as a vehicle through which to express chronic anxiety about the dangers of theater. The Qing state had long been wary of theater for its potential to disturb social order and give rise to co-called moral decay. Official skepticism towards theater resulted in a series of back-and-forth negotiations on the regulation of troupes, which were further inflected by the biological sex of actors and actresses. State bias against female entertainers, moreover, influenced the public perception of actresses, including *kunsheng*.

The boundaries between courtesans and actresses, including *kunsheng*, was blurry in the late imperial era. An 1872 poem published in *Shenbao* appraises courtesan-cum-*kunsheng* Baohe 寶和. A Suzhou male patron, The Master of Red Bean House (*hongdouguan zhuren* 紅豆館主

[8] For an account of the process whereby *Shenbao* successfully Sinicized itself to appeal to a general reading public, see Mittler, *A Newspaper for China?*.

人), wrote eight poems to reminisce about his experience of watching the actresses perform in Shanghai. He adopted the literary alias of "red bean," a popular allusion to deeply missing someone in Chinese literature, implying his longing for the sights and sensations of Shanghai. One poem about the *kunsheng* Baohe reads as follows:

> Shanghai's scenery has been always fabulous,
> All the more so after meeting with Baohe, with whom I share a hometown.
> She was born to be gentle and tender,
> But when she plays a man, she is even more adorable.
> (Hongdou guan zhuren 1872)
>
> 海國風光本絕倫
> 相逢況是故鄉春
> 生成一種溫存態
> 扮作男人更可兒

In this poem, the writer uses "gentle and tender" (*wencun tai* 溫存態), attributes long associated with femininity in Chinese poetic discourse, to describe Baohe, even as he compliments her cross-dressing performance on the stage. Curiously, although gentle and tender might also refer to men's personalities, these terms, to a large extent, signaled an ideal of Chinese womanhood that cherished the virtues of deference to and consideration for others. These virtues especially resonated with the Confucian moral principle of the "three obediences and four virtues" (*sancong side* 三從四德), an influential feminine ethics first articulated in the Han dynasty (206 BCE–219CE) (Gao 2003, 116).[9] The writer does not completely exclude Baohe from these expectations despite her being a courtesan (which breaches womanly decorum). Instead, the

[9] According to Xiongya Gao, Ban Zhao (49?–120?), a female Chinese historian of the Han dynasty, was a great exponent of these feminine virtues. In her book, *Precepts for Women* (*Nüjie* 女誡), Ban enthusiastically extolled the meanings of the "three obediences and four virtues." See Xiongya Gao, "Women Existing for Men: Confucianism and Social Injustice against Women in China," *Race, Gender & Class* 10, no. 3 (2003): 116. However, Dorothy Ko prefers the translation of "Thrice Following–Four Virtues," which downplays contemporary scholars' common interpretation of "*cong* as unconditional obedience of the wife to the whims of the husband." See Dorothy Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers: Women and Culture in Seventeenth-Century China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 6.

poem shows the writer's appreciation of a public woman and actor connoisseurship presented in the idiom of the cult of *qing* (cult of the emotions) literary tradition that had emerged in the late Ming.

Literary scholar Keith McMahon has translated *qing* as "sublime passion," and it encompassed an emotional quality that "reflects the late-Ming scenario in which the supreme heroic figure is the remarkable, talented woman" (McMahon 2008, 136). The discourse of *qing* continued to impact various literary works through the Qing and into the Republican eras.[10] In theater, it also influenced the writing of "flower registers" (*huapu*), a literary genre in vogue from the mid-eighteenth through the nineteenth centuries, primarily dedicated to the assessment and the ranking of male *dan* in cities such as Beijing and Yangzhou. Andrea S. Goldman in her study of *huapu* has pointed out that such texts blended guides to the city with connoisseurship literature about male *dan* actors, which, in turn, were modeled on late Ming courtesan literature. The authors of the *huapu* often exuded strong feelings of sentimentality and wistfulness, emotions bursting with *qing* (Goldman 2012, 21–22).[11]

The Baohe poem, despite focusing on a courtesan playing male roles, is written in this same mode. It begins with a feeling of nostalgia by disclosing that, while the writer and the *kunsheng* had met each other in the bustling city of Shanghai, they happened to share the same

[10] In the early twentieth century, the Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies literary school inherited in abundance this legacy of the discourse of *qing*. Zhang Henshui 張恨水 (1895–1967) was one of the most popular writers among this school. For the continuation and the transformation of *qing* in the twentieth century, see, Haiyan Li, *Revolution of the Heart: A Genealogy of Love in China, 1900-1950* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007). Jiacheng Liu also examines the ways in which *qing* served as an implicit communal interest for early twentieth-century traditionalists and reformists. See Jiacheng Liu, "Writing on Actresses and the Modern Transformation of Opera Fandom in 1910s Beijing," *Modern China* 45, no. 4 (2019): 433–65; "Courting Actresses and Exploring Love in Early Republican China," *Frontiers of History in China* 15, no. 1 (2020): 1–33.

[11] For additional research on *huapu*, see, Cuncun Wu and Mark Stevenson, "Speaking of Flowers: Theatre, Public Culture, and Homoerotic Writing in Nineteenth-Century Beijing," *Asian Theatre Journal* 27, no. 1 (2010): 100–129. Jiacheng Liu's research further argues that the genre of *zhuanji*, or "special collections," is a continuation and a variation of *huapu*; see Liu, "Writing on Actresses and the Modern Transformation of Opera Fandom in 1910s Beijing."

hometown, Suzhou, which was famed for its courtesan houses or *shuyu* 書寓 (Henriot 2001, 23). Discovery of their shared hometown fostered an immediate affinity between the author and Baohe. The excitement of meeting his fellow countrywoman, moreover, prompted his appreciation of Shanghai's wonders, revealing how sentimental attachment to "home," a site for the generation of *qing*, had the magic to incite intimate feelings between the writer and the *kunsheng*, in spite of—or maybe because of—their encounter in a strange city.

The writer goes on to compliment Baohe on her cross-dressing stage appearance (*banxiang* 扮相) with the sentimental and suggestive phrasing: "She was born to be gentle and tender, but when she plays a man, she is even more adorable." This poem surely showcases the tendency at the time to eroticize actresses, even those playing male role types. Baohe's stage gender did not shield her from male desire. Her gender reversal, in turn, aroused the writer's affection. Perhaps seeing a pretty woman playing a handsome man was more entertaining and titillating than seeing her enact characters aligned with her sex characteristics. More curiously, Baohe was not only a *kunsheng*, but also a courtesan, an identity that suggests the possibility of physical intimacy with an admirer. The experience of watching Baohe's cross-dressing performance was thereby more titillating. A courtesan cross-dressing to play a man provided a distinctive sensual pleasure.

Not all *kunsheng* were recipients of such relatively laudatory commentary, even when they identified themselves as actresses rather than courtesans. According to historian Wei Bingbing, with the surge of "licentious plays" (*yinxi* 淫戲) performed in Shanghai during the second half of the nineteenth century, officials began strictly regulating the content that

playhouses staged (Wei Bingbing 2010, 2–5).[12] After 1880, perhaps because actresses' visibility increased enormously, opera critics and journalists gradually began to exhibit hostility toward actresses, especially to those affiliated with the pussycat troupes. Actresses' performances were often denigrated with negative phrases, such as "corrupting of social customs" (*shangfeng baizu* 傷風敗俗) or "licentious" (*yindang* 淫蕩). The New Year print (*nianhua* 年畫), *Pussycat Opera at Tan Garden* (*Tanyuan mao'er xi* 壇園貓兒戲), also reveals the close association between the business of pussycat troupes and courtesans (see figure 3). In this print, a pussycat is performing in a courtesan's establishment. While most of the male patrons concentrate on performances, a few of them are indulging themselves in the company of courtesans (Zeitlin and Li 2014, 143). Both the performances of pussycat troupes and courtesans' acts of coquetry aroused criticism from opera critics and journalists.

Nevertheless, the audience of pussycat troupes were not restricted to wealthy patrons. A newspaper article entitled, "An All-Female Troupe Performance" (*Nüban yanxi* 女班演戲), claimed that a new all-female troupe appealed to a large number of villagers residing in a small town near Hankou. Captivated by the actresses' performances, villagers neglected their primary farming duties. The journalist criticized the incident harshly, "although staging performances can delight audiences' sensory experience, there is nothing worse than corrupting social customs like this" (逢場作戲，雖足動人觀聽，然傷風敗俗莫甚於此) (Unknown 1880). Another article entitled, "The Proliferation of Women's Operas" (*Nüxi shengxing* 女戲盛行), belittled actresses

[12] Wei Bingbing argues that the so-called "licentious plays" were not always highly associated with sexuality. He divides the licentious plays into three categories: first, traditional *kunqu* 崑曲 and Peking opera productions whose plots exhibited gender transgression; second, flower-drum opera (*huagu xi*); third, the plays staged by the pussycat troupes. See Wei Bingbing, "'Fenghua' yu 'fengliu': 'yinxi' yu wan Qing Shanghai gonggong yule '风化'与'风流':'淫戏'与晚清上海公共娱乐 [Public morals and romance: prostitution-related entertainments and public entertainments of Shanghai in late Qing dynasty]," *Shilin* 史林 no. 5 (2010): 2.

as “of the ilk that invite sex and sell their looks” (迎奸賣俏之流) because “most of the romantic plays that they staged were licentious, making audiences cluck with covetous praise” (所演者皆生旦小戲，而淫蕩者尤多，觀者皆嘖嘖稱羨) (Unknown 1884). Coupled with the harsh moral judgements about the pussycat troupes that had surfaced beginning in the late nineteenth century, these performances were tagged as “licentious customs” (*yinmo zhi feng* 淫魔之風) and “licentious songs” (*yin qu* 淫曲), leading to official proscription of all-female troupes (Unknown 1890a; Unknown 1890b).[13] Although the above commentary was not directed against *kunsheng*

[13] Official aversion to theater was not only directed against all-female troupes. In fact, it was aimed at any theater in which actresses engaged. Mixed-sex troupes were also condemned as immoral, for example, in 1891 an article reported that mixed-sex performances in villages near Nanjing were responsible for causing social bedlam: “Each time troupes stage performances in the village, widows lose their chastity and maidens in the inner chambers breach the regulations. There is no greater corruption in social customs than this” (鄉村中每演一次，轍有寡婦失節，閨女逾閑，敗俗傷風，莫此為甚). See Unknown, “E su nan chu 惡俗難除 [The difficulty of extirpating evil customs],” *SB*, March 5, 1891. In spite of such complaints, the number of both all-female and mixed-sex performances increased in the following decade, especially in Shanghai’s foreign settlements. The debate on the legitimacy of actresses continued throughout the late Qing and Republican China. Theater historian Fu Jin in his research on twentieth-century Chinese theater points out that at the beginning of the Republican era, not only officials but also male Peking opera practitioners were ambivalent about the necessity of cultivating actresses. In Beijing, actors even petitioned the Ministry of Education to proscribe the taking on of female apprentices. See Fu Jin, *20 Shi ji Zhongguo xiju shi shangce* 20 世紀中國戲劇史上冊 [A history of Chinese theatre in the twentieth century I] (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2016), 226–32.

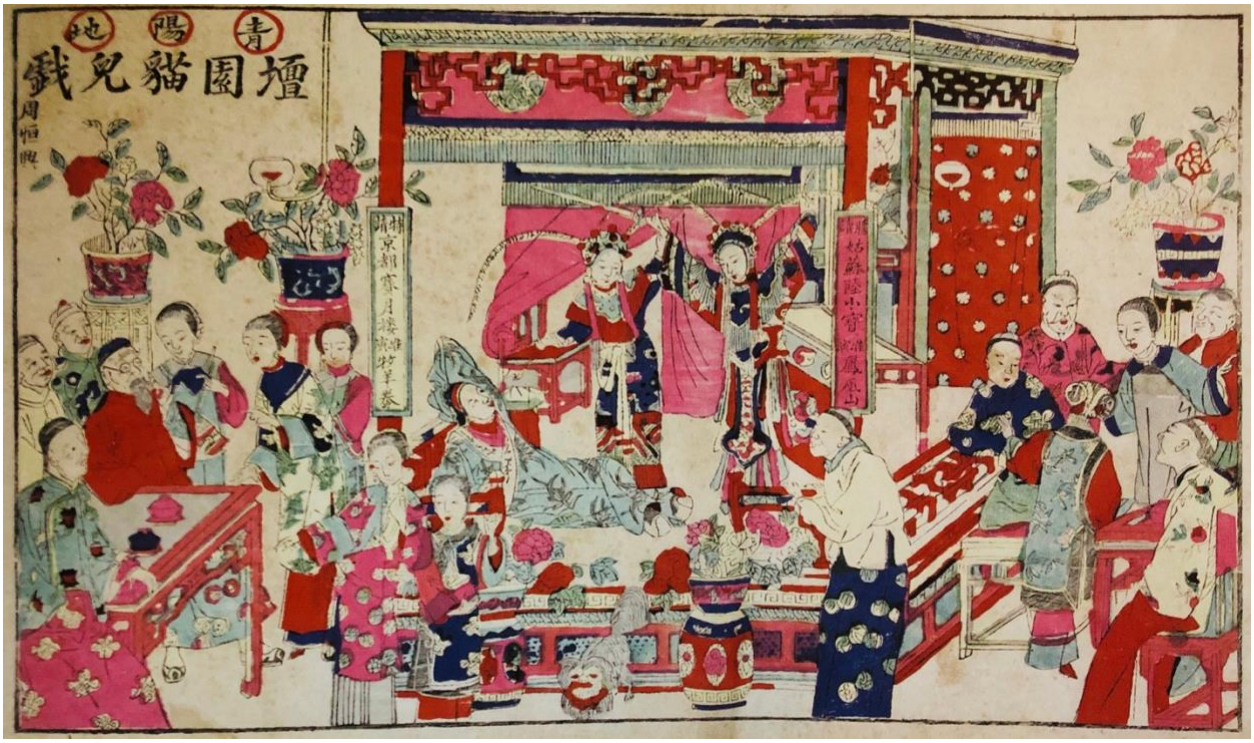

Figure 3: Judith T. Zeitlin and Yuhang Li, eds. 2014. Performing Images: Opera in Chinese Visual Culture. Chicago: Smart Museum of Art, the University of Chicago, 13

actresses per se, it shows that *kunsheng*, despite playing men, were unable to disassociated themselves from the general disdain for and sexualization of actresses.

Undoubtedly, the existence of the all-female troupes greatly legitimized the *kunsheng*, creating a need for women to cross-dress in all-female troupes. At the turn of the twentieth century, however, official aversion to actresses, especially those belonging to the pussycat troupes, was prevalent in urban areas. Statesmen and reformers vented their disappointments with the outcomes of the first Sino-Japanese war (1894–1895) and the "Scramble for Concessions" (1897–1898) on such perceived moral failures. In this political climate, women, who were considered either unable to be economically independent (domestic women) or who violated social norms by displaying their bodies in public (courtesans and actresses), were identified as obstacles for Qing China to realize modernity (Bailey 2012, 24–36). In the city,

older perception of actresses inherited from the courtesan/*dan* literary commentary tradition melded with new ideas of women as backward, often associating actresses with sex workers. Catherine Yeh's research on the Shanghai entertainment world has demonstrated the emergence of new business alliances between the dual identities of courtesans and actresses at the turn of the century (Yeh 2006, 241–247). Nevertheless, aside from a few courtesans-cum-actresses, such as *huadan* Lin Daiyu, who became city-wide stars, the identities of many women who acted for a living were synonymous with prostitutes, especially for those affiliated with the pussycat troupes. A newspaper article published in 1893 claimed that many pussycat troupes mixed teenage girls from commoner families with prostitutes; the latter were prone to making lewd remarks, thereby corrupting daughters from good families. The slippery slope from theater to sex work was clear (Unknown 1893). An article from 1899 also claimed that such all-female troupes were comprised of either actresses or prostitutes who showed talent in singing and dancing (Unknown 1899).[14] The stigma associated with the pussycat troupes was especially prevalent in Shanghai's British Concession due to the inability of Qing officials to police the area. The proximity of the theater and brothel districts further shows that the suggestive associations between acting and sex work were not just rumors: "there is a forest of brothels in the Shanghai British concession. The year before last, there were those who hired girls to learn plays, which were called pussycat troupes 英租界地方妓院林立，前年有雇女孩學習演戲者，名曰貓兒班" (Unknown 1889).

[14] This 1899 article offers further explanation about the origin of pussycat troupes. It suggests that such troupes emerged in Suzhou between the Daoguang (1820-1850) and Xianfeng (1850-1860) reigns. Originally, these troupes were not affiliated with specific theaters, not unlike troupes in Beijing at the time, which circulated through the city's playhouses. Shanghai's Mantingfang playhouse (literally, Fragrant Playhouse) inaugurated the first fixed house-affiliated all-female troupe. See Unknown, "Nüxi jiang shengxing yu Hu shang shuo 女戲將盛行於滬上說 [Women's opera will thrive in Shanghai]," *SB*, December 9, 1899.

Although Qing officials continued to voice disapproval of actresses, theater owners still regarded actresses as the best tactic to shore up their flagging businesses. In June 1896, the Mantingfang/Tongqing 滿庭芳/同慶 playhouse, located in the British concession, in defiance of official warning, insisted on hiring the Guangdong actresses Meiyu 美玉 and Taozai 桃仔 to stage performances together with male actors. The playhouse was officially reprimanded for violating moral decency (Unknown 1896a; Unknown 1896b).[15] This was not the first time that the theater owner, Lu Axiang 陸阿祥, had been warned about hiring actresses, but the lucrative business that actresses attracted drove Lu to repeatedly flout the official regulation. In October 1896, a journalist provided more details about these two actresses: Meiyu specialized in *dan* characters and Taozai had mastered *xiaosheng*, or young male characters. Both had attractive appearances and remarkable skills, which lured audiences to watch their performances. Their interactions on stage seemed realistic, making audiences unable to distinguish Taozai from a man (Unknown 1896c). Although audiences were enthusiastic toward actresses' performances, in the view of Qing officials, such performances violated the principle of propriety (*li* 禮). Rather, cross-dressing actresses represented social transgression that disturbed the established gender order. Women appearing in public to display their bodies on stage already went against the imagery of ideal Chinese womanhood at the time. As women playing men, the *kunsheng* transgressed gender boundaries, thereby, commentators complained, making men and women indistinguishable (*nannü bufen* 男女不分) (Unknown 1890b). Although "making men and

[15] Prohibitions of mixed-sex troupes' performances continued in the 1900s. Major cities like Shanghai, Tianjin, and Beijing maintained such restrictions. See Unknown, "Jinzhi nannü heyan yinxi ji bengbengxi (Tianjin) 禁止男女合演淫戲及蹦蹦戲（天津） [Forbidding mixed-sex licentious performances and bengbeng plays (Tianjin)]," *SB,* September 16, 1905c; "Qing jin nannü heyan xiban (Beijing) 請禁男女合演戲班（北京） [Imploring the official to ban mixed-sex troupes (Beijing)]," *SB,* April 19, 1906a; "Qing jin nannü heyan zhi exi 請禁男女合演之惡習 [Petition to ban mixed-sex troupes]," *SB,* April 19, 1906b.

women indistinguishable" might also be interpreted as a compliment of a *kunsheng*'s performance skills, at the time most journalists and critics rarely considered resistance to gender essentialism as something deserving of praise; in the late Qing, mainstream gender principles were still shaped by Confucian norms.

Gender prejudice in Peking opera was systemic, albeit inconsistent; it extended from actors and actresses' biological sex to their stage gender. Joshua Goldstein has shown that actors who played male roles were more respected than those specializing in *dan* roles: "Though all actors were stigmatized, those who most clearly bore this stigma in the form of feminization—the *dan*—were subordinated even within the profession itself and were barred from performing important rituals involving the worship of vocational deities" (Goldstein 2007, 24).[16] It was not until the May Fourth moment that male *dan* gradually replaced *laosheng*'s respected position and became the cultural icons of the nation (Goldstein 2007). In contrast, actresses' circumstances did not parallel that of actors. Zhang Yuan, in his study of Peking opera actresses, reveals that actresses playing female characters were much more accepted than those acting male roles because it was seen as more "natural" (*ziran* 自然) for them to play women (Zhang Yuan 2011, 61). The criteria for measuring actors and actresses were inconsistent. Femininity, on the one hand, hurt the male *dan* when compared to the male *laosheng* and, on the other hand, was detrimental to the female *dan* when drawing comparison between them and female

[16] This gender preference was embodied in the selection of the head of the actors' guild, *liyuan gonghui* 梨園公會 (literally, the Guild of the Pear Garden). The heads were often "selected from the most famous and respected actors in the community and were overwhelmingly exponents of male roles" (Goldstein, *Drama Kings*, 24). Thus, *laosheng* actor Tan Xinpei 譚鑫培 (1847–1917) once served as the lead, but Mei Lanfang's grandfather, Mei Qiaoling 梅巧玲 (1842–82), albeit celebrated, was never selected to lead because he specialized in female roles. Moreover, sometimes being respected and being popular were two different concepts in the theater. For example, before the reigns of the Xianfeng and Tongzhi emperors, audiences favored the *dan* more than *laosheng*, but concomitantly they also suffered from sexualization and objectification more than the *laosheng*.

impersonators. Within this matrix, the masculinity that the cross-dressing *kunsheng* embodied was also derided as "unnatural" masculine femininity.

Prejudice against women actresses was common in theater throughout the imperial and Republican eras, but, in the late imperial era, journalists and critics mostly ignored the distinctiveness of *kunsheng*. In 1899, an article entitled, "On the Coming Florescence of Women's Opera in Shanghai (*Nüxi jiang shengxing yu Hushang shuo* 女戲將盛行於滬上說)," assumed that audiences often lowered the bar on actresses' performances due to their attractive appearances:

> Generally, most people are captivated by good looks. If male actors are sufficiently pretty, there are patrons who indulge in their appearances and voices and want to have inappropriate intimacy with them; how much more so it is for actresses. Even if actresses stage performances that are not fully skilled, audiences tolerate them because they are women. Not only do they tolerate them, but they take delight in their performances. This is the current trend. (Unknown 1899)
>
> 大抵人情好色者多，男優而美，尚有溺于聲色而狎暱之者，而況于女伶乎。 演劇即不認真到家，人無不以其女而恕之。 不但恕之，且更樂就之，其勢然也。

Aside from accusing audiences of having poor taste due to their male gaze, the *Shenbao* journalist inadvertently exposed the relationships between actors and actresses, as well as audiences. He generalizes audiences' taste in terms of male preferences and highlights the femininity of both *dan* actors and actresses. He attributes the popularity of actresses (and pretty actors) to a complementary attraction, in which one is supposed to be masculine, and the other should be feminine. In this conceptualization, actors and actresses with desirable looks are identified as feminine. Audiences, in contrast, are cast as masculine. Within this gender paradigm, the existence of *kunsheng* becomes relatively awkward. Their stage gender was neither male nor female, making them uncategorisable. Their neither-this-nor-that attributes, thus, led to neglect by late Qing critics.

Beyond Shanghai, despite the absence of foreign concessions, theater owners still operated their businesses to evade official prohibition of licentious performances, including featuring *kunsheng*. In 1905, *Shenbao* reported that the owner of the Qunyu 群玉 Playhouse, in Zhenjiang, Jiangsu, implored a foreign business acquaintance to help him recruit a pussycat troupe from Shanghai. These actresses staged various licentious plays and even had skin showing on stage, successfully appealing to both male and female audiences. With a foreign businessman's assistance, the owner narrowly escaped the closure of his business (Unknown 1905a; Unknown 1905b). But the narrow escape only showcases the uneven power dynamics between the Qing and Western authorities; the Jiangsu official's proscription of actresses was obvious. Although the reportage of the Qunyu playhouse did not explicitly mention the existence of *kunsheng*, they were surely also featured in these sexually suggestive performances since they would have been members of the pussycat troupe. Like previous reports I have analyzed, Republican journalists simplified actresses' stage gender and created a convenient association between public women and licentiousness and neglected the existence of *kunsheng*.

Differentiating Actresses from Prostitutes

Although *kunsheng* were neglected when compared to female *dan*, incessant natural disasters in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries gave them ways to emerge from deep-rooted stigmatization. Advocating charity performances and making donations became a turning point. According to Mindi Zhang, playhouses in Shanghai "began in 1877 to organize benefit performances and send the collected proceeds to Shandong and Henan as part of the relief efforts;" such activities allowed actors to show their patriotism and enthusiastically participate in society (Zhang 2020, 2). Actresses inherited and took advantage of this "tradition"

to improve their public image.[17] During the Chinese famine of 1906–1907, large numbers of Anhui and Jiangsu residents suffered from a severe famine caused by flooding of the Huai River. Although primarily occurring in 1906–1907, this disaster lasted several years. Many actresses, emulating overseas Chinese workers and domestic actors, donated to help the refugees (Ku 1907).

The writer, Ku 哭 (literally, cry), praised actresses' generosity, arguing that actresses' kindness toward refugees should not go unacknowledged by the public. He emphasized that the public should not look upon actresses with contempt just because of their "lowly occupation" (*zhiye zhi jian* 執業之賤); they should be distinguished, he argued, from prostitutes:

> When I initially heard about [actresses' charity events], I also denigrated them for their debased occupation. Thereafter, I began thinking about the differences between actresses and prostitutes in Western countries. Actresses depend on their artistic skills to earn a living. This does not impinge upon their decency. Prostitutes earn money by selling sex. Thus, they are despised by the public. Does our China not have the same problem? In the past, private houses offered [patrons] banquets. Once patrons entered the house, [the actresses] sang songs for them. If someone hired actresses to entertain and urge customers to drink, they also only sang songs and then left. Although nowadays people's morals have gotten worse, and moral standards have been inconsistent, the private houses still only provide two services: holding banquets and urging customers to drink. This is the same as actresses in Western countries who do not provide sex services. How can we despise Chinese singers just because their job is demeaning? (Ku 1907)
>
> 吾初聞之時，亦頗繩其執業之賤。繼思西國歌伎與色伎之不同，歌妓恃一藝以自活，初不礙其人格之高，色妓借賣淫以斂錢，始不齒於齊民之列。吾中國亦何獨不然？書寓者，舊時所謂板局也，入其家者，謳一曲以奉客，招之侑酒，亦只歌一曲而去。今雖風氣日下，品類不齊，而書寓之中猶只設宴侑酒兩事，初無一定夜度之資，則與西國之歌妓正同，安得以其業賤而卑之？

[17] In 1907, not only actresses but also courtesans participated in charity performances to help refugees of the floods along the Huai River. See Yu Shi, "Tensions on the B-Side: The Global Gramophone Industry and Quyi Performances in Early Twentieth-Century Beijing," *Twentieth-Century China* 47, no. 3 (2022): 231–232.

In this article, Ku loosely uses actresses (*nüling* 女伶) and singers (*geji* 歌伎) interchangeably, highlighting the artistic skills of actresses. He distinguishes actresses from prostitutes and sex work, although his narrative conflicts with many other existing archival evidence.[18]

Prior to the twentieth century, philanthropic events and organizations were frequently established by elite men who regarded welfare provision for women and girls as an embodiment of Confucian moral reform (Bailey 2012, 33).[19] However, in the early twentieth century, philanthropic efforts became an alternative path for marginalized groups to burnish their public image. Actresses' philanthropic activities on behalf of refugees, to a large extent, redeemed their sexualization. Philanthropic gestures that signaled patriotism and social responsibility helped these female entertainers eventually carve out a path that led away from the stigmatization of obscenity.

If philanthropy was a road leading to enhanced reputation, theater owners and *kunsheng* understood how to take advantage of it. In August 1908, Shanghai's Danfeng Playhouse (*Danfeng chayuan* 丹鳳茶園) organized a fundraising performance for refugees and led with *kunsheng* En Xiaofeng 恩曉峰 (1887–1949) as the most important star in its newspaper advertisement (Danfeng zhuren 1908). En Xiaofeng was born into a Manchu family in Beijing.[20]

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[18] For analyses on the overlap between actresses and prostitutes, see Gail Hershatter, *Dangerous Pleasures: Prostitution and Modernity in Twentieth-Century Shanghai* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Catherine Yeh, *Shanghai Love: Courtesans, Intellectuals, and Entertainment Culture, 1850-1910* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006); and Zhang Yuan 张远, *Jindai Ping Jin Hu de chengshi jingju nü yanyuan (1900-1937)* 近代平津沪的城市京剧女演员 (1900-1937) [Peking opera actresses in modern Beijing, Tianjin, and Shanghai (1900-1937)] (Taiyuan: Shanxi jiaoyu chubanshe, 2011).

[19] For research on the philanthropic activities of male elites in late nineteenth-century China, see Ruth Rogaski, "Beyond Benevolence: A Confucian Women's Shelter in Treaty-Port China," *Journal of Women's History* 8, no. 4 (1997): 54–90.

[20] Influenced by her father, she originally learned *dagu* 大鼓 (or drum-song), a type of *quyi* 曲藝, or narrative song-art, and was well-known in Tianjin in the early 1900s. Thereafter, she moved to Shanghai where she began performing Peking opera and was dubbed the "female Jiaotian (女叫天)," an allusion to "Small Jiaotian (小叫天),"

Despite not belonging to the highest echelon of Manchus, her family was prosperous and fond of the performing arts. Nevertheless, with the decline of the Qing, lower class Manchus no longer enjoyed privilege as before. Making a living became an imperative concern. En's participation in Peking opera was partly due to family financial crises. Although we cannot be sure whether her Manchu identity shaped her audience appeal, her ethnicity may have provided her with more chances to approach Peking opera as a luxurious hobby (Wang An-chi 2011, 53).[21] En's singing style emulated that of Tan Xinpei 譚鑫培 (1847–1917) and Wang Xiaonong 汪笑儂 (1858–1918), the latter being the most prominent Manchu noble to turn to acting to make a living. En was one of the best *kunsheng* performers in the 1900s and 1910s and was considered the first actress who officially performed with male actors. She once was invited by the *wu sheng* 武生 (or male martial role) actor Yu Zhenting 余振廷 to stage performances in the capital in the early Republican era (Jianyun 1914b, 4; *BJHB* 1931; Laoqiu 1939). The advertisement for En's charity performance was performative. On the one hand, the advertisement promoted the theater and En, herself, in the name of philanthropy. On the other hand, it displayed that En, despite being a *kunsheng* actress, was wise, reasonable, and worthy of support, resonating with the sentiments Ku had suggested in his article: "if there are actresses who are sensible and able to see reason, how can we not advocate and support them, allowing them to increase their

which was the nickname of Tan Xinpei. A journal, *Forum on Drama* (*Xiju congbao* 戲劇叢報), commented that En Xiaofeng was the only *kunsheng* who enjoyed celebrity in the late Qing. See Unknown, "En Xiaofeng zhi jinxi 恩曉峰之今昔 [En Xiaofeng's present and past]," *XJCB* no. 1 (1915): 14–15. See also Unknown, "En Xiaofeng (xu) 恩曉峯（續） [En Xiaofeng (II)]," *BJHB* 4, no. 196 (1931a): 3–4.

[21] In the late Qing, a fair number of Manchu practitioners of Peking opera turned professional, among them including celebrated painted-face Jin Xiushan 金秀山 (1855-1915), *laosheng* Wang Xiaonong 汪笑儂 (1858–1918), male old *dan* Gong Yunfu 龔雲甫 (1862–1932), and *laosheng* Yan Jupeng 言菊朋 (1890-1942). On Manchus in the late Qing, see Pamela Crossley, *Orphan Warriors: Three Manchu Generations and the End of the Qing World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), and Mark Elliott, *The Manchu Way: The Eight Banners and Ethnic Identity in Late Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001).

knowledge and thereby improve their morals? 則既有明白事理之女伶，又安得不提倡之、扶助之，使之日增其智識，而漸進於道德焉” (Ku 1907).

However, haunted by the contradiction between *kunsheng*'s biological sex and stage gender, the niche of *kunsheng* in the marketplace was still ambiguous, even when they were popular. In 1908, En Xiaofeng regularly staged Peking opera in the Danfeng Playhouse, but the theater rarely featured En's sex. In other words, the theater only promoted her as a *laosheng*: "an authentic, super famous Beijing star renowned throughout the realm who excels at both singing and martial skills 京都新到天下馳名真正超等文武名角." Moreover, sometimes the theater attempted to pass off En as a male actor by playing on the semiotic features of mandarin Chinese, which, unlike English, often elides the third person pronoun, in effect downplaying her gender, as in the following passage:

> In the past, this M. [En] frequently staged performances in Beijing and Tianjin. [En Xiaofeng] has a good voice and attractive appearance, and is skilled in singing and martial skills (*yousheng youse, yunwen yunwu* 有聲有色、允文允武). Recent famous actors, such as Wang Guifen and Junior Jiaotian, are no match. Among those who have traveled to the north to watch [En's] performances, all are full of praise [for En]. Because [En] previously only stayed in the north (*beidi* 北地) and did not come south, audiences could only know of [En's] name and send their admiration from afar (Danfeng zhuren 1908a) (see figure 4).
>
> 此君向在京津等處獻藝，有聲有色、允文允武，歷年名角中有如汪桂芬、小叫天輩者，未能與之捷頏，北游者聆其雅奏無不嘖嘖稱奇，祇以向留北地未曾悅駕南中此邦，君子亦惟聞名寄慕而已。

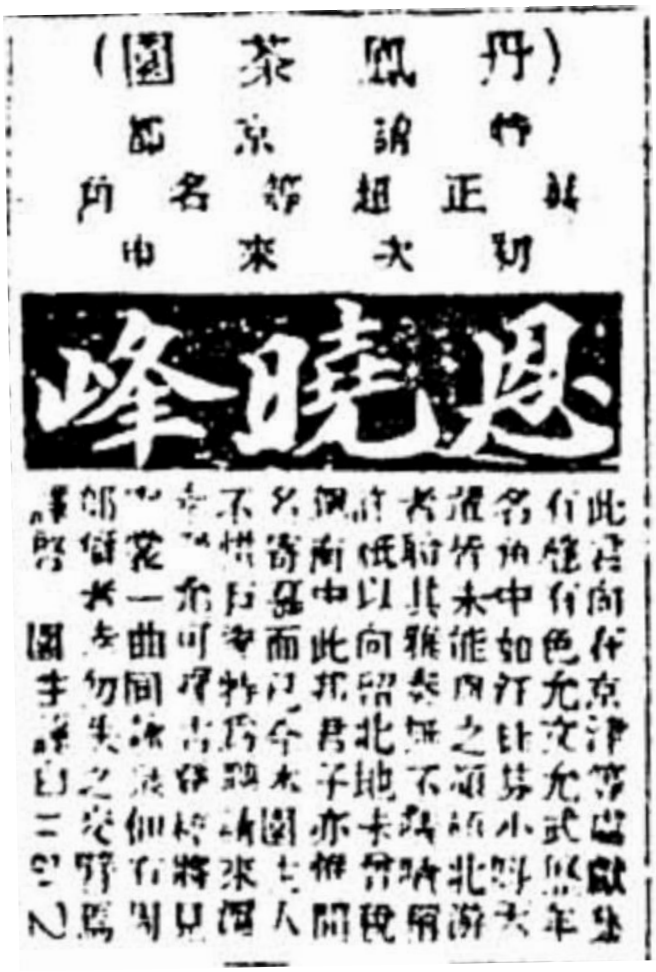

Figure 4: Danfeng zhuren 丹鳳主人. *1908a. "Danfeng chayuan* 丹鳳茶園 *[The Danfeng playhouse]." SB, April 24.*

The theater may have avoided identifying En's role type for several reasons. First, the Danfeng Playhouse was one of the theaters devoted to all-female performances. For audiences who were passionate about Peking opera, it would have been redundant to explain En's role type. Second, pussycat troupes were popular in Shanghai at this time. It may not have been that unusual for audiences to watch this *kunsheng*'s performances. Third, although the fact that the theater consciously compared En with other noted male actors might be interpreted as a display of confidence in En's performances, it also could be read as a demonstration of a sense of inferiority inherent in the gender structure of Peking opera actresses. Being advertised as a

kunsheng was inferior. Actresses who were serious about Peking opera would have to keep a low profile regarding their sex.

The Variety of Cross-Dressing Women

In the Republican era, the public gradually recognized both actors and actresses as part of a profession. In particular, the tangled line between prostitutes and actresses became clearer than it had been in the late Qing. Audiences also gained better ability to discriminate amongst women who performed, that is, to able to discern who were, in fact, prostitutes, and who were actresses. Among the broader group of "actresses," opera critics began to use the caliber of their skills to evaluate female entertainers' levels of achievement. Republican opera critic Yingxian 瀛仙 claimed that, in the past, despite the prevalence of the pussycat troupes in Shanghai, many actresses were, in fact, courtesans. Courtesans-cum-actresses were lacking in martial skills. As a result, most of them featured singing. Their performances were restricted to certain types of characters. Acting was a kind of side hustle for high-end prostitutes, and so these "actresses," he argued, "could not be considered fully actresses 尚不得謂完全之女伶" (Yingxian 1912).

This emerging standard, to a large extent, was based on whether actresses could replicate actors' performance skills and styles in portraying male characters. In other words, it was not until actresses fully developed martial skills that they were qualified to be considered "actresses":

> Since the emergence of the Wang Troupe and the Gao Troupe at Hankou's pussycat playhouses, their strength has been martial plays, which has won them good reputations. Not long thereafter, Shanghai's playhouses also staged pussycat troupe martial performances to boost business. Since then, female entertainers can be considered qualified to be called actresses (Yingxian 1912).

> 自漢鎮髦兒戲園中有王家班、高家班出，以武場見長，頗負時譽。未幾而滬上髦兒戲園中，亦以武場競勝於舞台，而女伶之資格，乃於是乎完備。

Although the criteria that Yingxian used to measure the professionalism of actresses looks gender neutral, in fact, it presumed the qualification for being called an actress was the ability to enact diverse categories of male role types. Peking opera consists of four fundamental role types: *sheng*, *dan*, *jing* 淨 (painted-face), and *chou*. Except for the *dan* role type, which specifically depicts female characters, most of the role types are used to portray male characters. In addition, the characters who require facility in acrobatic skills include *wu laosheng* (martial old male), *wu sheng* (martial young male), *wu erhua* 武二花 (martial painted-face), *wu chou* 武丑 (martial clown), and *wu dan* 武旦 (martial young female). Among them, only *wu dan* portrays women on stage.[22] In the early Republican context, qualifying to perform martial skills insinuated that actresses had acquired better abilities to perform diverse categories of male role types. The standard of training of martial skills was not a pure standard that demanded actresses be versatile, but rather a reinforcement of the male-centered power structure. Only when actresses were able to cross-dress to perform a wide range of male characters, did they possess the qualifications to be considered actresses.

The emphasis on the ability to cross-dress to play men is demonstrated in opera critic Xuanlang's 玄郎 article, "On Shanghai's All-female Troupes *Lun hushang zhi kunban* 論滬上之坤班." At the beginning of the article, he notes:

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[22] Although the role type of *daoma dan* 刀馬旦 (literally, the sword-and-horse female) also requires actors and actresses to demonstrate martial skills, actors and actresses rarely committed to this role type. The performing style of *daoma dan* lies in the middle of a spectrum from *qingyi* 青衣 (female lead, which emphasizes singing skills) to *wudan* (which emphasizes martial skills). Therefore, it is typical for actors and actresses to learn *qingyi* or *wudan* first. Once they are mature in their performances and wish to broaden their skills, they begin learning *daoma dan* plays.

> There are three all-female troupes in Shanghai. Judging by the completeness of the role types, I recommend Dangui [Playhouse].[23] Zhou Guibao's *laosheng* is the best among all of the all-female troupes. Yishenglei's painted-face is better than Little Kuiguan, not to mention Jin Chu. Zhang Shaoquan, despite having a thinner voice, is versatile and able to imitate many famous stars' repertoires when she is staging plays like *Picking Up Gold* (*Shi huangjin* 拾黃金). This has made her popular with audiences for a time. The rest of the actresses are also great, such as Jiang Liankui's *wusheng*, Zhenzhuhua's *wudan*, and Chai Ziyun's blue robe (*qingyi* 青衣, or mature woman). As for their flower *dan* (*huadan* 花旦, vivacious woman), such as Shisandan and the like, they are also on a par with Wang Keqin and Lu Jufen. (Xuanlang 1913a)
>
> 滬上之坤班凡三，以角色之完美論，當推丹桂。周桂寶之鬚生，其藝實為現在坤班中之冠，一聲雷之黑頭，亦勝於小奎官。金處更無論矣！張少泉音雖稍薄，而唱《拾黃金》等戲，多才多藝，頗能模仿各名角大小曲，亦足號召一時。餘如蔣連奎之武生，珍珠花之武旦，柴子云之青衫，俱楚楚可觀。至於十三旦等之花旦較之王克琴、陸菊芬輩，亦足抗衡一二。

Xuanlang's critique of all-female troupes reveals how he assessed the significance of the role types. He listed male roles first and then the female roles. Among the male character role types, he put *laosheng* first. Although this narrative order inadvertently expressed that male characters were more important than female roles, and that *laosheng* were more crucial than other role types, in the context of commenting on all-female troupes, it shows that having actresses who were expert in male roles, in particular the *laosheng* role type, were essential for playhouses to appeal to discerning audiences (*guqu jia* 顧曲家). This was also why the other two Shanghai playhouses, Qunxian Playhouse and Qun Stage (*Qun wutai* 群舞台), were unable to compete with Dangui. Qunxian and Qun not only had fewer actresses than Dangui 丹桂, but also had fewer talented cross-dressing women (Xuanlang 1913a).

[23] In the early Republican era, there were two Dangui Playhouses in Shanghai, one dedicated to male actors, the other one, dubbed the "Female Dangui" (*Nü Dangui* 女丹桂), was for actresses. The Female Dangui opened in 1900.

The need for a full complement of role types in all-female troupes was not limited to Shanghai, but also extended to troupes in other major cities, such as Tianjin, Beijing, and Shenyang. As critic Yingxian wrote, in Shanghai, Guo Shao'e 郭少娥 and Weng Meiqian 翁梅倩 were noted for civilized *laosheng*; Cheng Changgeng 程長庚 (1881–1880) was famous for martial *laosheng*. In Tianjin, there were civilized *laosheng*, such as En Xiaofeng and Little Lanying, and martial *laosheng* like Zhao Ziyun 趙紫雲. In Shenyang, Liang Yuelou 梁月樓 and Mingyuezhu 明月珠 were known for their civilized *laosheng* performances; Xiaojuchu 小菊處 was famous for martial *laosheng*. In addition, there were Guo Xiuying 郭秀英 who mastered *zhengjing* 正淨 (primary painted-face) and Xiaomantang 小滿堂 who specialized in *wenchou* 文丑 (civil clown) (Yingxian 1912). The variety of the role types showcased the professionalism of actresses.

Competition and the Multiplicity of Performing Gender

While not all opera critics recognized actresses' performances, the zeal of audiences for actresses threatened actors' livelihoods, especially in Beijing. Fu Jin's research has indicated that the performances of women cross-dressers, such as *kunsheng* Little Cuixi 小翠喜 and *wusheng* Gui Yunfeng 桂雲峰, successfully enticed more audiences than those of well-known actors, including *laosheng* Zhang Yuting 張毓庭 and Jia Honglin 賈洪林 (1874–1917) and *wusheng* Yang Xiaolou 楊小樓 (1878–1938). The emergence of *dan* actresses further attracted considerable attention from audiences (Fu Jin 2016, 227). During 1912, the first year of the Republic, actors such as Yu Zhenting even resorted to working with actresses to boost box office receipts. Celebrated *dan* actors, such as Wang Yaoqing 王瑤卿 (1881–1954), despite having his own all-male troupe, were unable to compete with actresses. Many of those actors eventually left

for Shanghai and Hankou to avoid the competition. Thereafter opera critic Hunlang 魂郎 recalled:

> During the turn from fall to winter in the first year of the Republic, Beijing actresses in fact occupied the most preeminent status in the theaters. Sun Yiqing 孫一清, Little Siyu 小四玉, Jin Yulan 金玉蘭, and Lu Xiuyun 陸秀雲 were quite popular. Even the famous actor Yu Zhenting had to rely on actresses to advance his business. At that time, Wang Yaoqing had established an all-male troupe at the Zhonghe playhouse. The troupe only operated two months and then permanently closed for lack of audience. By that time, actresses dominated the Beijing theater world. All celebrated actors retreated to Shanghai and Hankou, not daring to compete with them. (Hunlang 1915)
>
> 當元年秋冬之際，北京坤伶，實佔舞台上最優勝之地位。孫一清、小四玉、金玉蘭、陸秀雲輩頗有左右一般戲迷之勢力。雖大名鼎鼎之俞振亭，亦不得不借重坤伶，以發展其營業。彼時王瑤卿雖組織純粹男伶演於中和，開台兩月，又因座客寥寥，遂爾歇業。彼時北京之劇界，實可謂之一女伶之劇界也。著名男伶，咸退避滬漢，弗敢與之角一日。

An account by celebrated opera connoisseur Luo Yinggong 羅癭公 (1872–1924) confirms the 1912 commercial crisis caused by the lifting of proscriptions on actresses in playhouses, which resulted in actors refusing to share the stage together with them. The following passage records the competition between *dan* actresses Jin Yulan and Sun Yiqing and several prominent male actors—Yu Zhenting, a *wusheng*; Wang Yaoqing, a male *dan*; and Yaoqing's brother, Fengqing 鳳卿, a *xiaosheng*:

> Actresses had always been banned in Beijing. They were only prevalent in Tianjin. After the Eight-Nation Alliance to suppress the Boxers (*gengzi lianjun* 庚子聯軍) entered Beijing in 1900, actresses from Tianjin took advantage of the political chaos to stage performances in the capital. Once the Qing court returned to the capital [from Shaanxi], actresses were completely banned again. In 1911, due to lackluster profits, Yu Zhenting hired actresses from Tianjin and brought them to Beijing to stage performances at the Civilization Playhouse (*wenming yuan* 文明園).[24] Both Jin Yulan

[24] Jin Yulan was widely recognized for her filial piety and female virtues, in addition to her acting skills. She was wrongfully accused of being close to the reformer Jiang Yiwu 蔣翊五 (1885-1913), who launched a revolt against

> and Sun Yiqing were hired by him, thus commencing an era of actresses performing in Beijing. At that time, the performance of mixed-sex troupes was common, and Yaoqing and Fengqing belonged to the same troupe. Many audiences left immediately after watching Jin and Sun's performances. As a result, Yaoqing and other actors were furious and petitioned the police department to strictly implement a policy of single-sex troupes in order to shame the actresses. Within two months, all-female troupes had been established. Their thriving business greatly impacted the male actors, something that Yaoqing and his colleagues had never imagined. (Luo 1934, 797–798)
>
> 京師向禁女伶，女伶獨盛於天津。 庚子聯軍入京後，津伶乘間入都一演唱，回鑾後，復厲禁矣。 入民國，俞振庭以營業不振，乃招津中女伶入京，演於文明園。 金玉蘭、孫一清，皆俞五所羅致也。 是為女伶入京之始。 其時尚男女同班合演，瑤卿、鳳卿皆同班也。 迨金、孫演畢，座客散者遂多，瑤卿等乃大憤，力請于警廳，厲行男女分班以窘之。 不及兩月，完全女班成立，日益發達，男班乃大受其影響，非瑤卿等所及料也。

According to Feng Shanshan, this anecdote was originally published in the *Gongyan bao* 公言報 (Public discourse news) in 1919 (Feng Shanshan 2016, 42), seven years after the events it described, lending credibility to its veracity.[25] Actors' various attitudes toward actresses were mostly grounded in individual interests, which might vary from business profits to role types and kinship networks. Luo explicitly noted that Yu Zhenting recruited actresses due to a lull in business. Yu's less hostile attitude toward actresses as compared with that of Wang Yaoqing

Yuan Shikai's 袁世凱 monarchy in Guangxi in 1913. Around 1913, Jin was executed by then general and Yuan's supporter, Lu Jianzhang (1862-1918). See Minshi 民視, "Jin Yulan xiaoshi 金玉蘭小史 [The short history of Jin Yulan]," *Shenghuo ribao* 生活日報 [SangHwo JihPao], January 8, 1914. However, another article reported that Jin's death was not by execution; see Unknown, "Nüling yuedan: Yi Yanglong zhi chiqing 女伶月旦:易龙阳之痴情 [An assessment of actresses: Yi Yanglong's passion]," *XYZZ* no. 12 (1914b): 2. The actress, Sun Yiqing, once learned *bangzi qingyi* from the actor Bolicui. She originally only performed in rural areas, arriving in Beijing in February 1912. See Unknown, "Sun Yiqing zhi lishi 孫一清之歷史 [The history of Sun Yiqing]," *Qianshuo huabao* 淺說畫報 [The pictorial publication of basic introduction], no. 1214 (1912a): 4.

[25] After Luo Yinggong's death, this piece was anthologized in Zhang Cixi edited *Qingdai yandu liyuan shiliao* 清代燕都梨園史料 [Historical writings on Qing dynasty theater in Beijing]. See Luo Yinggong 羅癭公, "*Jubu congtan* 鞠部叢談 [Collected chats on Peking opera]," in *Qingdai yandu liyuan shiliao (zheng xu bian)* 清代燕都梨園史料（正續編）[Historical writings on Qing dynasty theater in Beijing (the first and second volumes)], ed. Zhang Cixi (Beijing: Zhongguo xiju chubanshe, [1934] 1988), 779–98.

may have been due to his role type—the *wusheng* role.[26] Most of the actresses Yu recruited, such as Jin Yulan and Sun Yiqing, specialized in *dan* roles, and thus did not pose direct threat to him.[27] Wang Yaoqing, in contrast, was a specialist in the *dan* role. The female *dan* represented direct competition with Wang, especially since actresses were such a novelty at the time. In addition, although there were actresses specializing in the *wusheng* role type, they were relatively less of a threat to their male counterparts. Coupled with some Republican theater critics and audiences' argument that women played female roles more naturally, Wang Yaoqing may have sensed a direct threat from the introduction of actresses into Beijing theaters.[28]

Although the details in Luo's 1919 article differ slightly from Hunlang's 1915 narration––which claimed that Wang Yaoqing and actresses belonged to different troupes due to the policy of gender segregation, both pieces point out that, in 1912, the conflict of commercial interest between Wang and the actresses was quite intense. These tensions showed the significant appeal of Beijing actresses, against which the male *dan* had to compete.[29]

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[26] Compared to Wang Yaoqing and Wang Fengqing, Yu Zhenting was relatively open-minded when it came to welcoming actresses to commercial performance, and yet, this did not ensure that he treated them with respect. A 1914 article noted that Yu was notorious for seducing actresses. He once coerced the actress Jin Yulan to submit to him; see Minshi, "Jin Yulan xiaoshi 金玉蘭小史 [The short history of Jin Yulan]."

[27] Republican poet Yi Shunding (1858-1920) once wrote that he watched Jin Yulan's *The Xin'an Inn* (*Xinan yi* 新安驛) and Sun Yiqing's *The River Bend at Fenhe* (*Fenhe wan* 汾河灣). See Yi Shunding 易順鼎, "Kuan shang ju shi 哭庵賞菊詩 [The poem of Kuan watched chrysanthemum]," in *Qingdai Yandu liyuan shiliao (zheng xu bian)* 清代燕都梨園史料（正續編）[Historical writings on Qing dynasty theater in Beijing (the first and second volumes)], ed. Zhang Cixi (Beijing: Zhongguo xiju chubanshe, [1934] 1988), 761.

[28] The debate on the meaning and value of female impersonators did not simmer down until Mei Lanfang's 1930 US tour received considerable success. In 1929, Zheng Zhenduo, an influential journalist and writer, even edited an issue called "The Issue of Mei Lanfang" in the journal, *Literature Weekly* (*Wenxue zhoubao* 文學週報), to criticize female impersonators' transgressive performances, claiming that their performances signified a degradation of Chinese culture. See Xiyuan (a.k.a, Zheng Zhenduo), "Dadao nanban nüzhuang de danjue 打倒男扮女装的旦角 [Get rids of male actors playing female roles]," *Wenxue zhoubao* 文學週報 [Literature weekly], no. 8 (1929): 62–65. For discussion about Mei's transformation from male *dan* to respectable national icon, see Goldstein, *Drama Kings*, 237–89.

[29] These two accounts counter the assessment of Wang Yaoqing's attitudes towards actresses in Xing Fan's "Stars on the Rise: Jingju Actresses in Republican China." Fan argues that Wang Yaoqing was the very first Peking opera

Although *kunsheng* are not directly referenced in the above recollections about actresses flooding the theatrical market in 1912, their performances still impressed many, including the poet Yi Shunding (1858-1920). Yi was famed for his enthusiasm for opera. In 1913, he once wrote a poem entitled, "*Shudou xie ge* 數斗血歌," The song of several buckets of blood) (Fan 2013, 334–38). In this poem, he praised the *kunsheng* Little Cuixi's performance for perfectly showing sublime emotion, which moved him to tears. Her skill, he claimed, was almost comparable to the noted actor Tan Xinpei (直欲追步譚鑫培) (1934, 761). Although his assessment of Little Cuixi might have been exaggerated, Yi's poem showed that *kunsheng*'s performance skills were not as abysmal as portrayed by some critics.

While actresses proved their charisma and abilities through box-office success, and a few critics also acknowledged their versatility in a range of role types, as Peking opera scholar Wang An-chi has indicated, most critics still viewed actresses' performances as amateurish and gimmicky (Wang An-chi 2011, 36). After watching a performance staged by an all-female troupe in the Female Dangui Playhouse (*Nü Dangui* 女丹桂), the critic Xuanlang commented that when he saw audiences' enthusiastic support for actresses, he thought that it was because their childish performances had not only tremendously improved, but also were vastly superior to those of Tan Xinpei. However, his friend told him: "those audience members just use their eyes as ears. Their rapturous ovations have nothing to do with the singing. This is what outsiders are unable to understand 友笑曰，彼輩俱以目當耳者。其叫好也，用意在五聲六律之外，非局

actor to accept female students, showing his enthusiastic support of actresses. See Fan, "Stars on the Rise: Jingju Actresses in Republican China," 68, 77. Fan's conclusion ignores that Wang did not accept his first female disciple until 1927, by which time Wang had already retired from the stage. In other words, commercial competition for box-office successes was no longer the serious threat it had been for Wang in the 1910s. Indeed, by 1927, being the first *dan* actor to accept female disciples increased his fame and income.

外人所得窺測也” (Xuanlang 1912). Xuanlang then realized that these audiences were attracted by the actresses’ appearances rather than their skills.

Sex Segregation as Protection

Although most critics perceived the fans of all-female troupes as neophytes, sex segregation in the theater nevertheless granted actresses a secure and relatively friendly environment in which to cultivate their own performance styles and fans free from direct confrontation with male actors. Moreover, the segregation legitimized the need for actresses to cross-dress as *kunsheng*, *wusheng*, painted-face roles, and clowns, that is, they obtained greater opportunities to develop their careers via staging male characters. In Shanghai, several playhouses provided all-female troupes with space to stage performances, such as the Female Dangui Playhouse, Qun Stage, Great Universe Theater (*Qiankun dajuchang* 乾坤大劇場), and Sincere Emporium (*Xianshi leyuan* 先施樂園). In Beijing, performances by actresses were concentrated at the Zhonghe Playhouse (*Zhonghe yuan* 中和園) and Chengnan Emporium (*Chengnan youyiyuan* 城南遊藝園). The existence of these theaters not only expedited but also necessitated training of actresses in all role types. Women playing men became an essential dimension of Peking opera.

The range of ticket prices for opera performances was also beneficial to all-female troupes. In 1913, the aforementioned critic Xuanlang published several articles documenting that the Female Dangui Playhouse had some outstanding actresses who were noted for male role types, such as *kunsheng* Zhou Guibao 周桂寶, painted-face Yishenglei 一聲雷, and *wusheng*

Jiang Liankui 蔣連奎 (Xuanlang 1913a).[30] While only one year earlier Xuanlang had expressed skepticism toward all-female troupes, he seems to have shortly thereafter become a loyal fan. He explained that compared to the ticket prices for all-male troupes, all-female troupes both cost less and provided for a better viewing experience. The ticket prices for opera performances ranged from fifty to eighty cents, but those for all-female troupes ranged from ten to forty cents (Xuanlang 1913d). The author concluded that actresses' performances were "a good deal for the price" (*jialian wumei* 價廉物美); they were worthy of the attention of Peking opera aficionados (Xuanlang 1913a).

Nevertheless, Xuanlang also projected anxiety about being perceived as a libertine lacking in discernment, which was expressed through his condemnation of the taste of other audiences. He denounced some for coming to the theater just to court actresses. They had no sense of singing and acting:

> I don't like watching the pussycat plays because there are packs of indiscriminating rowdies who are only interested in pretty faces. Whenever they see actresses who are slightly attractive, they just continually shout out praise, no matter how good or bad the performances. Their only goal is courting actresses. When I am "listening to opera," this causes my ears to hurt and my head to ache (Xuanlang 1913b).
>
> 予素不喜聽髦兒戲，緣此中多胡調黨，志在漁色。見有略具姿色者，不問其戲之優劣與否，此悵彼和，一呼百應，大聲叫好，惟以獻媚為唯一之目的。聽戲期間，不覺耳為之震，腦為之漲。

The critic used the term "listening to opera" (*tingxi* 聽戲) to distinguish his connoisseurship from other audiences who frequented theaters to "watch actresses" (*kanxi* 看戲). He emphasized his

[30] Several theaters took the name "Dangui," such as Dangui chayuan 丹桂茶園 and Dangui diyitai 丹桂第一台. Nü Dangui, a playhouse dedicating to actresses, was located at Baoshan street in Shanghai. See Zhang Geng ed., *Zhongguo xiqu zhi: Shanghai juan* 中国戏曲志：上海卷 [The Chinese opera gazetteer] (Beijing: The China ISBN Center, 1996), 634–35.

professionalism by highlighting his ability to measure the success of the actresses' performances. He accused the libertines and rowdies of causing connoisseurs of Peking opera to lose interest in the performance of all-female troupes. If this terrible custom could be reformed, he opined, the business of all-female troupes would greatly improve (Xuanlang 1913a). Xuanlang's comments also echoed to a common assumption that had begun in the late-nineteenth century in the field of Peking opera regarding a distinction between the aesthetics of *jingpai* 京派 (the Beijing style) and *haipai* 海派 (the Shanghai style). It was assumed that *jingpai* prioritized performers' artistic skills, with an emphasis on listening to the singing; *haipai* highlighted the visuality of performance, including the appearances of performers, the newness of the stories, and the fantastic stage sets.[31] The disdain for *haipai* style shown by opera connoisseurs from Beijing may have reflected not only aesthetic preferences, but also have served a coded commentary on the gender of the performers.

Beyond segregation in the physical space of the stage, actresses were also cordoned off in the symbolic space of newspapers, tabloids, and pictorial publications. To be sure, such symbolic segregation was an extension of the perception that actresses' performances were inferior to those of actors, but it also—perhaps inadvertently—promoted an awareness of the range of actresses, including those who cross-dressed to play men on stage. It was common for critics to write about actors and actresses in different articles. They might argue that a specific actress was similar to a certain actor, but mostly this analogy was based on comparison between that actress and her female peers. Opera critic Zhou Jianyun, the editor of *Collected Publications on Peking*

[31] The late Qing encyclopedist Xu Ke 徐珂 in his 1916 encyclopedic collection *Qing bai lei chao* 清稗類鈔(The Encyclopedia of Qing) concluded that the northern performers' artistic abilities were superior to their southern counterparts since northern audiences "listened to" the opera, whereas southern ones "watched" opera. See Xu Ke, *Qing bai lei chao* 清稗類鈔 [The encyclopedia of Qing] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, [1916] 1984,) 5061.

Opera (*Jubu congkan* 鞠部叢刊), once published two articles entitled, “Mirror onto the Pear Blossoms” (*Lihua jing* 梨花鏡). One reviewed *huadan* actresses; the other one evaluated *kunsheng* actresses (Jianyun 1914a; 1914b). This example shows the ways in which critics began to assess the full range of actresses’ specialization on stage. Such critical acknowledgement of actresses in Republican newspapers was something rarely seen in the late Qing.

Kunsheng and Opera Connoisseurship

With increased attention to all-female troupes, women cross-dressing to play men became a vehicle through which a few critics could simultaneously show their fondness for actresses and exhibit their expertise as opera connoisseurs. The trend of valuing the male lead more than other role types, despite gradually undergoing transformation, was still quite prevalent in the first decade of the Republican era, especially when commenting on actresses (Unknown 1914a, 4). The critic Xuanlang, mentioned above, exhibits this tendency. In order to show his virtuosity among fans of all-female troupes, Xuanlang’s performance reviews mostly remarked on the performances of *kunsheng* and actresses who had mastered male role types. This strategic approach helped him to shape narratives that avoided discussing actresses’ physical beauty on the one hand, and effectively displayed his sophisticated taste by valuing male role types, on the other. One of his performance reviews from May 31, 1913, centered on the performances of the actresses Zhao Ziyun and Zhao Tieshan 趙鐵山. Zhao Ziyun was Zhao Tieshan’s mentor (Sun and Xu 1922, 59, 65). They primarily mastered the role types of *wusheng* and *laosheng*, but they

also occasionally played female characters.[32] Xuanlang commented that the performances of both actresses were "vivacious and well executed, as well as exceptionally natural" (*huopo laolian, satuo bufan* 活潑老練，灑脫不凡) (Xuanlang 1913b). They were identical, he claimed, to experienced actors in all-male troupes, never behaving coquettishly like common girls (絕無女兒家忸怩妖嬈之習氣). After voicing his appreciation for the actresses' eschewal of affected femininity, Xuanlang turned to their singing skills, which in general critics framed as the most significant criterion in opera arts. He described Zhao Ziyun as accomplished at singing with unbroken breath (*yiqi hecheng* 一氣呵成) and as having a forceful and sonorous voice. The singing of Zhao Tieshan, he opined, was "round as pearls and smooth as jade" (*zhuyuan yurun* 珠圓玉潤), "her pacing and transitions effortless" (*duncuo ruyi* 頓挫如意) (Xuanlang 1913b). By producing narratives evaluating actresses' singing skills, the critic positioned himself as an expert, distinct from the great majority of fans that flocked to see all-female troupes for more prurient aesthetic enjoyment.

This tendency to adopt the tone of the virtuoso critic is even more obvious in Xuanlang's performance review published on June 3, 1913. Not only does he underscore the singing skills of the *kunsheng* and minimize those of the *dan* actresses, he further comments on three plays: *Re-entering the Palace* (*Erjingong* 二進宮), *Xin'an Inn* (*Xin'an yi* 辛安驛), and *The Temple of the Eight Spirits* (*Bala miao* 八蜡廟) (Xuanlang 1913c). *Re-entering the Palace* features *laosheng*, *dan*, and painted-face singing, in this instance performed by Zhou Guibao as the *kunsheng*, Chai Ziyun 柴子雲 as the *dan*, and Yishenglei as the painted-face. The critic devotes considerable

[32] The book, *Kunling yanshi* 坤伶豔史, claims that both of them specialized in the *wusheng* role type, but later Tieshan changed her role type from *wusheng* to *laosheng*. See Sun Nouwen 孫耨文 and Xu Jinfu 許廑父, *Kunling yanshi* 坤伶豔史 [A sensual history of actresses] (Shanghai: Shanghai hongwen tushuguan, 1922), 59–65.

space to assessing Zhou Guibao's singing skills but pays little attention to Yishenglei and Chai Ziyun. He only writes that Chai's performance was too soft and lacking in vivacity.[33] He goes on to say that the performance of Yishenglei steadfastly stuck to convention (始終循規蹈矩), evidence that she was one of the best painted-face actresses (Xuanlang 1913c).[34] But Zhou Guibao, in spite of the mixed review Xuanlang gave her, was the backbone of the Female Dangui Playhouse. No matter that she was rumored to be an opium addict and her appearance was unsightly, her voice was clear and distinctive (Sun and Xu 1922, 59). Xuanlang comments:

> Guibao has a gifted voice. It is a pity that she has picked up a bad recent trend and cannot stick to the singing patterns. [Although] she calls up sufficient energy, she just uses it to underscore the pauses and transitions. She pretends to put a lot of effort into singing, but in fact is a slacker. Almost every line contains the vocables "ai-ai-ai-ai," a quick trick best to be avoided, all because her mentor was not good at correcting her problems. The first phrase of the regular *erhuang* tune (*zheng erhuang* 正二簧), "do not panic" (*xiu yao huangmang* 休要慌忙), was lacking in breath from the diaphragm (*zhong qi* 中氣). Her singing was perfunctory, especially showing an inability to control the tempo. In the fast-paced patter lyrics, her voice gave out at the end. Her voice was low and muffled, and most disappointing to the audience. Most actresses, however, are weak when it comes to breath control. It is hard to find an actress who is good at everything. For Guibao, even though her skills are insufficiently honed, she is still quite unique (Xuanlang 1913c).
>
> 桂寶則嗓子之根底甚好，惜深染時下惡習，而有失規律。提足全副精神，惟於頓挫上推波助瀾，裝腔做勢，以取巧偷鬆。"噯噯唉唉"之聲，幾於無句不有，迹近花腔，殊無足取。良由教師不善矯正故。正二簧第一句"休要慌忙"，中氣短促，囫圇吞棗，尤涉走板之病。搶板后力更不足，音韻平疲低暗，尤不愜人意。然坤角體氣，大都虛弱不堪，全材甚不易得。如桂寶者，火侯雖未純青，亦已不可多得矣。

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[33] In the article, "Nüling yuedan" (女伶月旦 An assessment of actresses), the critic Wuxingjuyin 吳興菊隱 compares Mei Lanfang and Chai Ziyun, insisting that Chai's performance style was similar to that of Mei. The article also reported that Chai was a virtuous wife and good mother; readers ought not to consider her a common actress,. See Wuxing juyin 吳興菊隱, "Nüling yuedan 女伶月旦 [An assessment of actresses]," *XYZZ* no. 3 (1914): 1.

[34] Information in the magazine, *Fragrance and Elegance* (*Xiangyan zazhi* 香豔雜誌), speculates that Yishenglei was roughly 11 years old at the time. See Unknown, "Nüling yuedan 女伶月旦 [An assessment of actresses]," *XYZZ* no. 2 (1914a): 1. It was common for girls this young to perform on Shanghai's opera stages. See Xuanlang 玄郎, "Lun Hushang zhi chuling 論滬上之雛伶 [On Shanghai's girl actresses]," *SB*, June 29, 1913d.

The very length of Xuanlang's detailed critique shows that he was far more interested in the performance of the *kunsheng* than of the other actresses.

In his review of the other operas, too, the critic pays more attention to those exhibiting the skills of the male roles, commenting, for instance, on the match of characters and role types or expressing disappointment that the superb Zhao Ziyun had too little singing and too many spoken lines; he had much to say, too, about a certain actress in the *wusheng* role who he thought more suitable at playing a *wudan* on account of her come-hither look, ending with praise for the footwork of an actress of just 11 or 12 years old who was certain to become a master of martial arts if she continued to work hard (Xuanlang 1913c). By focusing on actresses' cross-dressing performances and offering constructive criticism, Xuanlang shaped himself as a true connoisseur and purposely distinguished himself from other audience members who were attracted by actresses' appearances and had insufficient knowledge to offer discriminating assessment of the aesthetics of Peking opera.

The early Republican era was the first time critics assessed the opera talents and everyday lives of *kunsheng*. Articles on *kunsheng* focused on not only their stage performances, but also on their family backgrounds, educational levels, personalities, and personal lives. "Mirror onto the Pear Blossoms," documents that the *kunsheng* Zhang Shaoquan 張少泉 (1901–1984) was the daughter of the *laosheng* Zhang Yongquan 張湧泉 and the adopted daughter of the *wujing* 武淨 (martial painted-face) Li Chunli 李春利 . It also explains that she was a filial daughter and very smart (Jianyun 1914b, 5). Such depictions, despite being irrelevant to her stage performances, were prevalent at the time, showing the critics' two-pronged interest in *kunsheng*: talent and personal virtue.

Concomitantly, burgeoning ideas about gender equality, imported from the West, also contributed to the rising interest in women who cross-dressed to play men. In the magazine *Xiangyan zazhi* (香艷雜誌, *Fragrance and elegance*), the editor Wang Junqing 王均卿 (1867–1935) articulated the reason he published the article, "An Assessment of Actresses" (*Nüling yuedan* 女伶月旦).[35] He explained that in Shanghai the vogue for commenting on opera productions and theater artists was quite prevalent, but most of the performance reviews only focused on actors. Therefore, he suggested that his friend Tiaokuang 苕狂 appraise and make comments on actresses to show recognition for women:

> My friend Tiaokuang has long been interested in opera. Over the past few years, he has visited theaters almost daily. He once wrote a book entitled, *A New History of Opera* (*Liyuan xinlishi* 梨園新歷史), which I have already published. Most of the responses to the book have been positive. He offered more praise than criticism of the actors, and he was inclusive of all; truly, he is worthy of the title, "Comprehensive Master-Teacher" (*guangda jiaozhu* 廣大教主). I once made fun of him, saying: "the way of heaven creates men, and that of earth women (*qiandao cheng nan kundao cheng nü* 乾道成男，坤道成女). The Buddha says that all are equal. So why is it that you exclude actresses and not comment on them? Your contempt for actresses is an affront to common truths. Is this not superficial?" Tiaokuang heard me and agreed, and so proceeded to write "An Assessment of Actresses." The tenor of his article is identical to that of his book; he offers more praise than criticism (Tiaokuang 1914, 1).
>
> 予友苕狂，素顯顧曲，前數年，幾無日不在劇場。曾著《梨園新歷史》一書，予已梓而行之矣，褒多貶少，兼容並包，誠不愧廣大教主。予嘗調之曰：「乾道成男，坤道成女。佛言一切平等，何獨歧待夫女伶而不一加評隲耶？君蔑視女伶，得罪公理，不淺哉？」苕狂聞予言而韙之，因作〈女伶月旦〉，亦如前書之宗旨，而揄揚處，則有過之無不及。

[35] The *Xiangyan zazhi* series was published between 1914 to 1916 in Shanghai. A total of twelve issues were published. For the publication history of *Xiangyan zazhi*, see, Ma Qinqin, "*Xiangyan zazhi chuban shijian kaoshu*" 香艳杂志出版时间考述 [The publication history and historical backdrop to *Xiangyan zazhi*], *Hanyu yan wen yanjiu* 汉语言文研究 [Research into the Chinese language and script], no. 3 (2013): 60–66.

Thereafter, “An Assessment of Actresses” became a regular column published serially in the twelve issues of the magazine. Each article was written by a different critic, including among them Tiaokuang, Qiufan 秋帆, and Aolu 傲廬 .

From “An Assessment of Actresses,” it is clear that during this time, not only critics, but also *kunsheng* were becoming conscious of the idea of gender equality. Li Guifang 李桂芳 was one of the *kunsheng* who aggressively advocated for the idea of gender equality. She was born into a wealthy family and had been interested in Peking opera since childhood. Nevertheless, her parents vehemently opposed her hobby. During the early 1910s, with the collapse of the Qing and the establishment of the Republic, the ban on actresses was lifted in Beijing, which strengthened her resolution to become a Peking opera actress. The critic Qiufan noted:

> After China returned to Han control (*guangfu hou* 光復後), the prohibitions on actresses in Beijing were lifted. This change enhanced her resolution. She said: “men and women share equal rights (*nannü pingquan* 男女平權). Men can take advantage of the stage to express their ambitions and anxieties. Why are women alone excluded from this? From this time on, I will [become an actress and] be different from others.” (Qiufan 1915b, 1)
>
> 光復後，京中女伶演戲開禁，遂堅其志，曰：「男女平權也，男子能假舞台吐胸中鬱悶，女子獨不能耶？自今以始，吾將有異於人矣。」

This narrative challenged the contemporaneous assumption that theater practitioners, in particular women, were symptomatic of China’s backwardness. Unlike many of the actresses who mounted the Peking opera stage due to financial duress, Li Guifang’s father was a successful businessman. Although we are not told much about Li’s educational background, we can surmise that she was literate. In other words, she was unusually privileged both economically and culturally as someone who selected Peking opera as her career path. She even thought that she would realize gender equality by becoming an actress. Her story showcased the

transformation of gender ideology from the conventional idea that women were inferior to men (*nanzun nübei* 男尊女卑) to a new adoption of the concept of gender equality. Nevertheless, her boldness had consequences. Her family severed all contact with her. In the closing of the biographical sketch on Guifang, the critic concludes:

> Guifang set her mind on opera and gave up needlework. She accomplished her training in no time at all. The characters she plays are quite innovative. Without this innate cleverness, who would have been able to garner such achievement? (Qiufan 1915b, 1–2)
>
> 桂芳立志戲劇，屏棄女紅。於不知不覺之中，學成斯業，使女伶人物別開生面，非具夙慧者，其誰能之？

Here we see that rather than measuring Li's decision within the framework of Confucian gender relations, the early Republican critic Qiufan championed Li for taking up acting and praised her for using her intelligence to contribute to the development of Peking opera. Women in public space was no longer always regarded as a transgressive practice.

In addition to praising the achievements of women-playing men, these columns also exposed *kunsheng*'s controversial behaviors. Not unlike Li Guifang, the *kunsheng* Chen Huifeng 陳蕙峯 was one of the emerging actresses who was literate. The critic Jianyun even complimented Chen on her elegant speaking manner (*tantu juanyong* 談吐雋永). Her performance skills, including her acting and delivery of lines, were also widely recognized. Jianyun commented that "she is someone who really knows how to perform" (*shi zhen neng zuoxi zhe* 是真能做戲者). However, the critic also pointed out that Chen was reproached by the public for having a permissive personal life (Jianyun 1914b, 6). These narratives reflect that critics were quite aware that personal virtue was not necessarily consistent with performance skills.

Another account revealing the personal life of a *kunsheng*, also by the critic Jianyun, commented on the actress Weng Meiqian, who had once been a courtesan.[36] She was known for having a sharp tongue. She married a certain someone (*moushizi* 某氏子), who was later jailed, whereupon she divorced him and took his money. Although the critic does not directly judge Weng's behaviors, such narratives drew upon associations of sex workers as "ruthless" (*wuqing* 無情). In this piece, Jianyun also explains Weng's transformation from the feminine domain of prostitution to a relatively masculine field:

> Her appearance is mediocre, but she has considerable talent for singing. When she mounted the stage in make-up and costume, her performance caused quite a great sensation. Thereafter, she gave up her career as a courtesan and became a *kunsheng* (Jianyun 1914b, 5).
> 貌不揚，而歌喉天賦。平日粉墨登場，轟動一時。遂棄妓為優。

The critic does not clarify when Weng gave up being a courtesan and decided to become a *kunsheng*. Nevertheless, this depiction of the transformation of Weng's line of work shows the gender fungibility of *kunsheng*.

In addition to recounting actresses' private lives, the critics also reveal that *kunsheng* were often proficient in multiple role types. Little Lanying, for instance, enjoyed celebrity in both Tianjin and Shanghai. In Tianjin, she was considered the best *kunsheng* (Qiufan 1915a, 3–4). She was not only expert in *kunsheng* plays, such as *Kongcheng ji* 空城計 (*Empty Fort Ruse*) and *Dagun chuxiang* 打棍出箱 (*Beaten by Staves*), but also excelled in the painted-face role. The critic praised her as incomparable with other *kunsheng* at the time. Other critics, such as Tiaokuang, concurred that her singing of painted-face characters was quite powerful and

[36] See Sun Nouwen and Xu Jinfu, *Kunling yanshi*, 33.

sonorous (Tiaokuang 1914, 5–6). It was said that her feet were bound.[37] In order to better represent male characters, every time she staged plays, she had to stuff a lot of cotton inside of her stage boots (*xixue* 戲靴) (Wang 2011, 46). Another *kunsheng* by the name of Niu Guifen 牛桂芬 was also quite versatile. As the daughter of the actor Niu Songshan 牛松山, Guifen's acting demonstrated sublime feelings and a heroic spirit (*qigai cangmang, lao dang yi zhuang* 氣概蒼茫，老當益壯). When staging *wusheng* characters, her martial techniques were skillful and vigorous (*bazi laolian, shencai feiyang* 靶子老練，神采飛揚). She was even able to perform the *xiaosheng* role, developing cultured, handsome young male characters who seemed to not belong to this world (*xiaosa fengliu, piaoran chushi* 瀟灑風流，飄然出世) (Jianyun 1914b, 7).

The skills of *kunsheng* were not limited to the male role types. Some of them also had the abilities to play the gender-straight *dan* roles. Jin Fengyun 金鳳雲, for example, was able to play both *laosheng* and *qingyi* characters. Liu Guilin 劉桂林 was noted for her ability to play both civil and martial *laosheng* characters, in addition to being expert in *qingyi* roles and *bangzi* 梆子 plays (Jianyun 1914b, 8).[38] Little Lanfen primarily mastered the *laosheng* role type, but she was also able to perform *laodan* 老旦 (old women) characters (Jianyun 1914b, 9). Although their versatility, to some extent, resulted from necessity, since most all-female troupes were too small to hire many actresses, their abilities to perform various role types, in turn, sharpened their competitive edge and frequently enhanced their novelty for audiences.

[37] On footbinding, see Dorothy Ko, *Cinderella's Sisters: A Revisionist History of Footbinding* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

[38] Liu Guilin was born into a Peking opera family. Her father had mastered the *qingyi* role type. Liu's first stage appearance was at age nine.

Changes in perception of actresses among critics further enhanced the visibility of *kunsheng*. *Xikao* 戲考 (Research into plays), a serial publication containing 40 installments, published a photo of En Xiaofeng, which was captioned, "*laosheng* En Xiaofeng, the first actress of China 中國第一女伶" (Unknown 1912b) (see figure 5).[39] This trend of highlighting the *kunsheng*'s biological sex increased over time. In 1916, the Tiansheng Stage (*Tiansheng wutai* 天聲舞台) in the French Concession placed advertisements in *Shenbao* to promote En Xiaofeng's performances (Unknown 1916) (see figure 6). The advertisement magnifies the name of En Xiaofeng. Unlike the Danfeng playhouse, which had obfuscated reference to En's biological sex in 1908, the 1916 advertisement of the Tiansheng Stage clearly capitalizes on her identity as a *kunsheng*, which reads: "The Tiansheng Stage in the French Concession cordially invites the worldwide, foremost *kunsheng* 法界天聲舞臺禮聘寰球歡迎坤角鬚生泰斗." This reflected a greater public acceptance of the ambiguous gender identity of *kunsheng* by the second decade of the twentieth century.

Republican audiences, however, had new gender anxieties over *kunsheng*. At the bottom of the *Shenbao* advertisement, the Tiansheng Stage explicates that among *kunsheng* only En Xiaofeng and Little Lanying have the talent to eliminate women's mannerisms. Still, the advertisement goes on to criticize Little Lanying for having given birth too many times (*shengyu guo duo* 生育過多), which had the effect of damaging her voice. As a result, En Xiaofeng had become the only *kunsheng* who could both sing and act (*neng chang neng zuo* 能唱能做) with

[39] *Xikao* was published in Shanghai from 1912 to 1925. Its editors included Wang Dungen, who once worked as an editor for *Shenbao*, and Wang Dacuo 王大錯; see Rolston, David 陆大伟, "Mei Lanfang zai *Xikao* zhong de yingzi 梅兰芳在《戏考》中的影子 [Mei Lanfang's presence in Xikao]," *Wenhua yichan* 文化遗产 [Cultural heritage journal], no. 4 (2013): 34–35. On *Xikao*, see David Rolston, *Inscribing Jingju/Peking Opera: Textualization and Performance, Authorship and Censorship of the "National Drama" of China from the Late Qing to the Present* (Boston: Brill, 2021), 210–481.

masculine verisimilitude. At the end of the statement, the theater stressed that although the Tiansheng Stage had outstanding actresses specializing in multiple role types, it was imperative to hire a superb *kunsheng* who had mastered singing skills and was admired by global [audiences] (一超超等寰球景仰唱工鬚生)—a clear reference to En. This advertisement, albeit subjective, simultaneously exhibited contrasting public perceptions of women playing men in the past. On the one hand, it underscored *kunsheng* performance skills, acknowledging their popularity and embracing their stage gender. On the other hand, it displayed contempt for their biological sex and blamed the regression of one *kunsheng*'s skills on her act of reproduction. These contradictory ideas revealed a kind of implicit bias against women in which it was easier for a *kunsheng* who had not yet given birth to inhabit her stage gender. Once audiences were aware of the off-stage identity of the *kunsheng* as a mother, the illusive line demarcating the stage gender and biological sex of the actress was shattered. This was why, perhaps, two years later, after En Xiaofeng had given birth, critics also criticized her voice for not being as sonorous as before (Zhou Jianyun 1918, 20). Thus, while we see that public acceptance of *kunsheng* was no longer so tied to moral virtue as it had been in the 1880s, these actresses were still judged by sexist double standards.

Figure 5

Figure 5: Unknown. 1912b. "Xusheng En Xiaofeng 鬚生恩曉峰 *[Xusheng En Xiaofeng]." Xikao* 戲考 *[Research into plays] 1: 11.*

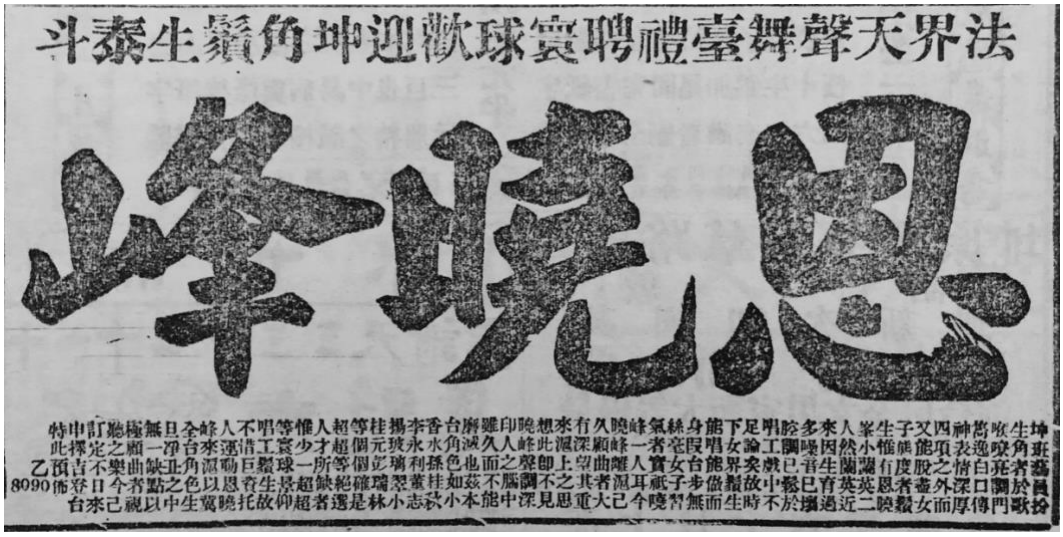

Figure 6: Unknown. 1916. "Fajie Tiansheng wutai 法界天聲舞台 *[The Tiansheng stage in French concession]," SB, November 8.*

Conclusion

At the turn of the twentieth century, the public perception of *kunsheng* underwent several significant transformations. Due to the strict segregation of men and women in theaters, the existence of all-female troupes legitimized the necessity for *kunsheng*. Nevertheless, *kunsheng* were frequently lumped into the broad category of actresses. This generalization resulted in their erasure in the archives. Concomitantly, it was common for the public to associate actresses with sex workers, although this stereotypical association was not always wrong. The newspaper as a new medium also constantly described all-female troupes, their members, and their plays as "licentious." Such prejudice against women performers was entrenched at the end of the nineteenth century.

Entering the twentieth century, with the import of Western ideas—particularly medicalized sexology—some critics began to consciously distinguish actresses from sex

workers. Building upon this new recognition, a few *kunsheng* also devised strategies to further disassociate themselves from sex work. They began participating in philanthropic activities to burnish their perceptions in the public imagination. With the increase in competition between Peking opera troupes, actresses developed expertise in diverse role types to boost box-office successes. On the cusp of the Republican era, they had achieved a completeness of role types, most of which were used to depict male characters. While *kunsheng* and other women cross-dressing to play men increased their visibility in the marketplace, their achievements in playing diverse male characters in fact reinforced male hegemony within Peking opera. Nevertheless, these achievements made actresses more competitive when they were on market. In 1912, with the lifting of the ban on actresses in Beijing, actresses outperformed their rival actors and completely won over Beijing audiences.

During most of the early Republican era, playhouses still strictly followed single-sex casting, partly in response to male actors' hostility towards actresses. Such segregation was not limited to physical space, but also included the symbolic space of newspapers and magazines. Opera critics who were fond of actresses' performances but concerned about others' perceptions of them wrote about *kunsheng* and other women cross-dressing to play men as an outlet for shaping their personas as opera connoisseurs. Although there were still many critics who denigrated actresses' performance abilities, a few opera connoisseurs showed awareness of the significance of actresses, and even *kunsheng*. They borrowed the techniques for reviewing male actors to assess *kunsheng*. Their reviews frequently focused on the stage performances and the off-stage lives of *kunsheng* but exhibited less of a tendency to blur the boundary between their performances and personal lives. In other words, critics realized that *kunsheng* could possess expert performance skills while also having compromised virtue, and vice versa.

At the end of the 1910s, the advertisements for *kunsheng* no longer elided the contrast between their sex and stage gender. The public seemed to accept their identity as women cross-dressing to play men and recognized their talents and efforts. However, actresses' stage gender and their biological sex still went hand in hand. The charm of their stage gender was built upon the invisibility of motherhood. Once critics realized the actresses had become mothers, they often fastened onto their having given birth as the cause of perceived performance flaws. From the 1880s to 1910s, although the transformation in the evaluation of *kunsheng* gradually shifted from assessment of their moral character toward recognition of their artistic skills, *kunsheng*'s everyday gender expression still, more or less, determined how critics and the public perceived individual actresses. In the view of the critics, the successes and failures of *kunsheng* were inseparable from the dynamics between sex and stage gender. However, this gender-inflected perspective did not remain fixed. It slowly changed over the following decades with the continued evolution of *kunsheng*'s performance skills. By the 1940s, critics and audiences were eventually able to celebrate their artistic achievements wholeheartedly and no longer considered them inferior to their male colleagues.

Chapter 2 Performing Gender: Meng Xiaodong and Affective Encounters in Republican China

As demonstrated in the previous chapter, the rise of all-female troupes revitalized the tradition of women playing male roles, offering new career opportunities for women that intersected with the broader cultural, economic, and political transformations in China. Although the number of *kunsheng* increased significantly, few were regarded as equal to their male counterparts, let alone superior in performance skills. This chapter traces the transformation of the *kunsheng*'s social and artistic status from 1920 to 1950, addressing a gap in existing research on Peking opera *kunsheng*. Among the many *laosheng*, or older male role, performers of Republican China, Meng Xiaodong stands out as the most accomplished successor of the Yu School, founded by the male actor Yu Shuyan 余叔岩 (1890–1943).[1] Her significance not only lies in her artistic achievements, but also sheds light on the transformation and performativity of gender roles from the 1920s to the 1940s. Her art destabilized actors' dominant positions in opera across the late imperial to Republican eras. The media reportage surrounding her, however, persistently points to the continued struggles that actresses faced in escaping from normative gender expectations rooted in the late imperial era.

[1] Chinese theater historian Wu Xiaoru 吴小如 states that it is an "iron-like" fact that Meng Xiaodong was the strongest Yu School artist besides its founder Yu Shuyan; see Wu Xiaoru, *Wu Xiaoru xiqu wenlu* 吴小如戏曲文录 [Wu Xiaoru's xiqu essay] (Beijing: Beijing University Press, 1995), 468. In addition, Wang An-chi 王安祈 characterizes Meng Xiaodong as "the number one *kunsheng* (*kunsheng diyiren* 坤生第一人);" see Wang An-chi, *Xingbie, zhengzhi yu Jingju biaoyan wenhua* 性別, 政治與京劇表演文化 [Gender, politics and the performance culture of Beijing opera] (Taipei: National Taiwan University Press, 2011), 74.

Before becoming one of only two official disciples of Yu Shuyan, Meng Xiaodong learned Peking opera from many different teachers.[2] Raised in a family whose men made careers in Peking opera, Meng Xiaodong learned the *laosheng* performing style from her mentor and uncle, Qiu Yuexiang 仇月祥, from an early age, making her debut at New World Theater (*xin shijie* 新世界) in Wuxi at the age of ten (Peichu 1920; Sheyu 1922). At first, she focused on the Tan School (*tanpai* 譚派), a performing style created by *laosheng* actor Tan Xinpei (1847–1917).[3] Some fifteen years later, as a mature professional performer, in 1937, she began formal training with Yu Shuyan, by some accounts gaining a reputation for being his greatest disciple.

Although much work on Meng Xiaodong has been published in the Chinese-speaking world, the entanglement between her on-stage and everyday performances and the specific historical moment—the forceful collision between long-standing local- and Western-imported gender ideologies and practices—has not been systematically analyzed.[4] Through analyzing a

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[2] Yu Shuyan's the other disciple was Li Shaochun 李少春 (1919–1975), famed for the historical figure Lin Chong 林沖 in the Peking opera play, *Wild Boar Forest* (*Yezhulin* 野豬林). Although many celebrated performers, such as Yang Baosen 楊寶森 (1909–1958) and Chen Dahuo 陳大濩 (1910–1988), also deeply admired Yu Shuyan's arts, they could only learn his singing styles privately through imitating his phonograph records and watching his live performances. For accounts of the significant figures of the Yu School successors, see Wu Xiaoru, *Wu Xiaoru xiqu wenlu* 吳小如戏曲文录, 338–359.

[3] Without a chance to directly learn performing skills from Tan Xinpei (who would not teach women students), Meng Xiaodong, instead, implored celebrated *jinghu* 京胡 musician and opera commentor Chen Yanheng 陳彥衡 to teach her the Tan School's classic play, *Shikongzhan* 失空斬, which was adapted from Luo Guanzhong's 羅貫中 fourteenth century historical novel, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. See Xu Jichuan 许姬传, *Xu Jizhuan yitan man lu* 许姬传艺坛漫录 [Xu Jizhuan's casual jottings in the field of Chinese theater] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1994), 246.

[4] Most of the publications are biographies of Meng Xiaodong. See Ding Bingsui 丁秉鐩, *Meng Xiaodong yu Yan Gao Tan Ma* 孟小冬與言高譚馬 [Meng Xiaodong yu Yan Jupeng, Gao Qingkui, Tan Fuying, and Ma Lianliang] (Taipei: Ding Bingsui, 1976a); Cai Dengshan 蔡登山, *Mei Lanfang yu Meng Xiaodong* 梅蘭芳與孟小冬 [Mei Lanfang and Meng Xiaodong] (Taipei: INK yinke wenxue chuban, 2008); Wan Boao 万伯翱 and Ma Simeng 马思猛 *Meng Xiaodong: Quyu shang de chenmeng* 孟小冬: 氈毹上的塵夢 [Meng Xiaodong: Dust and memory on a red carpet] (Beijing: Dongfang chubanshe, 2009); Xu Jinwen 许锦文 *Jingju dong huang: Meng Xiaodong* 京剧冬皇: 孟小冬 [Jingju Emperor Dong: Meng Xiaodong] (Changsha: Hunan shifan daxue chubanshe, 2011). Wang An-chi's essay, "*Kunsheng* Meng Xiaodong," is one of the few articles that speaks to the gender dynamics of her performance. See Wang An-chi, *Xingbie, zhengzhi yu jingju biaoyan wenhua*, 73–124.

large number of tabloid publications, I showcase how media sensation simultaneously challenged and strengthened conventional gender discourses in modern China. Concomitantly, the novel term "new women" (*xin nüxing* 新女性 or *xin funü* 新婦女)—imported by New Culture intellectual Hu Shi from the US in 1918—widely circulated within China. The term, "nüxing 女性," as Tani Barlow has indicated, "was a discursive sign and a subject position in the larger, masculinist frame of anti-Confucian discourse" (Barlow 1994, 265).[5] This western-imported ideology—emphasizing the value of women's professional and economic independence—disrupted the existing structure of gender relations and fomented chaos about where actresses fit within a shifting matrix of performances of gender roles. Using Meng Xiaodong as an example, I examine how the trope of the new woman influenced the actress, and, in turn, how the actress, as a member of this new profession in the twentieth century, responded to and embodied this trope.

Meng Xiaodong was relatively privileged compared to other actresses; nevertheless, her case is illustrative. Although she complained about her circumstances, her Peking opera family background provided important networks to support her development as an outstanding *kunsheng* (Meng 1933). Before becoming Yu Shuyan's disciple, she was taught by not only Qiu Yuexiang—her uncle—but also Chen Yanheng 陳彥衡 (1868–1933), Bao Jixiang 鮑吉祥 (1883–?), and Su Shaoqing 蘇少卿 (1890–1971), all of whom were very knowledgeable about *laosheng* plays. Furthermore, she hired renowned *jinghu* 京胡 musician Sun Zuochen 孫佐臣 (also known as Sun Laoyuan 孫老元, 1862–1936) to serve as her musical accompanist.[6] Sun

[5] Although actresses—professional and, to some extent, economically independent—were not a new phenomenon in China, actors generally held a lower social status than most other people and were, therefore, rarely regarded as icons of progress.

[6] To hire Sun Zuochen, Meng Xiaodong paid him three hundred silver dollars each month, which was a whopping expenditure at the time. See Shuhao 叔豪, "*Jianri baogao* 間日報告 [Every other day report]." *HB*, June 29, 1924.

Zuochen had previously collaborated with Tan Xinpei and was familiar with his various acting skills (Guandu 1924). Moreover, unlike most of the actresses in her era, she was rare in that she was literate. As a 1922 newspaper article pointed out, "Xiaodong is clever and able to read vernacular novels, especially fond of reading *Banyue* 半月 magazine, [although] she did not [formally] receive instruction in reading" (Barlow 1994, 265). This may, to some extent, have contributed to her understanding of the deep meaning of plays and their lines, as well as give her the wherewithal to leave her voice in the historical record, whether in confronting marriage difficulties with Mei Lanfang or expressing her sorrow when Yu Shuyan passed away. Being conscious of her privilege, I focus on the uneven power dynamics between Meng Xiaodong and other actresses based on opera critics' assessment of Meng and other *kunsheng*. If even a privileged figure like Meng Xiaodong was trapped by the gender inequality in the social structure, other actresses faced an even greater challenge in the field.

I begin with an interrogation of what has been called the actress' "body problem," that is, the assumption that actresses' bodies were available for the viewing pleasure and consumption of patrons and audiences, both on and off the stage. Grounded in the concept of the body problem, I examine the ways in which actresses were eroticized and sexualized by the press media and analyze Meng's portrayal and self-presentation in the tabloids after her short-lived marriage to Mei Lanfang, the leading female impersonator (or *qiandan* 乾旦) of the time. I show that due to the celebrated identities of both Mei and Meng, plus their complementary stage personae, their private family matters eventually became a public drama played out before the tabloid-reading public.

I next turn to analysis of Meng's strategic performativity, arguing that, unlike Republican cross-dressing actors who embodied the imaginary of ideal Chinese womanhood on stage to win

recognition both within and outside China, Meng Xiaodong's success was due to her embodiment of the near likeness of Yu Shuyan, her mentor. Her "enactment of Yu Shuyan" assuaged audiences' regret that Yu Shuyan rarely staged performances due to his long-term illness and eventual death. Her strategic "performance," to some extent, effectively helped Meng Xiaodong disassociate herself from the sexualizing male gaze. In doing so, Meng elevated her social status from that of entertainer to artist. However, this elevation was limited, as she became known primarily for performing Yu's art rather than developing her own distinctive style. Nevertheless, given the social status of most actresses at that time, this in and of itself was an extraordinary achievement. Even today, there are few *kunsheng* performers who can compare.

Lastly, I reassess Meng's last public performance at a charity show that Du Yuesheng 杜月笙 (1888-1951) organized in 1947. Through this event, I examine the ways in which gender discourses were constructed and the ways in which Meng challenged the existing discourse to blur its gender boundaries. By analyzing Meng Xiaodong's onstage and everyday performances of gender roles, I then expose the morphology of Chinese eroticism, examining how the eroticism, in turn, shaped opera critics and audiences' affective encounters and, even, contributed to the transformation of gender relations.

Female Bodies as Erotic Commodity

As a gendered performing art, Peking opera was a male-dominated arena occupied by male performers, trainers, musicians, stagehands, and patrons during its first thirty years, from 1840–1870. In the same way, the gendering of role types (*hangdang* 行當) was also hierarchized. Particularly after 1870, as the Qing confronted incessant national threats from

Western powers and Japan, audiences gradually projected their eagerness for patriotic heroes who might save the country onto the *laosheng* role, male characters known for exemplifying the characteristics of loyalty, filial piety, and integrity. Concomitantly, the *dan* role, despite their popularity before 1870, mainly served as a foil for or complement to the *laosheng* role's heroism.

The reconfiguration of political authority and cultural epistemologies in the late Qing and early Republican eras, however, gradually destabilized the *laosheng* actor's superior status, making the male *dan* actor an icon of national aestheticism. Focusing on discontinuity at the turn of the twentieth century, Joshua Goldstein has identified a structural shift of the leading role type from *laosheng* to male *dan* actors.[7] He credits the male *dan* actors' dissociation from erotic entertainment to the ways in which they successfully eliminated "the body problem," a concept derived from Faye Dudden's study on actresses in the late nineteenth-century United States (Goldstein 2007, 239).[8] Goldstein elaborates upon the idea of "the body problem" to illustrate public perception of Peking opera male *dan* actors in the late Qing. Audiences' objectification of their bodies entangled with their self-objectification; this interaction eventually brought male *dan* actors profit and fame and further encouraged sexual objectification.[9]

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[7] For scholarship investigating the association between *xianggong tangzi* and male *dan*, see Yao Shuyi, *Wan Qing xiqu de biange*, 148–240; and Goldman, *Opera and the City*, 17–60. See also Wu Xinmiao, *Liyuan siyu kaolun*; and Wu and Stevenson, "Speaking of Flowers."

[8] Not unlike Chinese women's gender, which was tied to either domesticity or a specific publicness—such as courtesans and streetwalkers—since the imperial era, American women used to be categorized in similar ways: "In early America, women were confined to the privacy of home and family, and the only 'public women' were, as slang neatly indicated, prostitutes." See Faye E. Dudden, *Women in the American Theatre* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 2.

[9] Performers of the *dan* roles provided a range of entertainment services, including sometimes sex work, through what was known as the *xianggong tangzi*, or gentlemen's houses, which served as their places of residence, monitored their training and performances, and liaised with wealthy patrons for their attendance at drinking parties and other assignations.

The male *dan* actor's official disassociation with "the body problem" had to wait until the prohibition on *xianggong tangzi* 相公堂子 in 1912, shortly after the fall of the Qing and the establishment of a republic. In a government proclamation, male *dan* actors' commercial sex services were raised to a level of national morality: Actors had to "rectify their faults, launch proper careers, and respect the personal integrity of human beings, as well as become decent citizens 各謀正業，尊重完全之人格，同為高尚之國民" (cited from Ma 1999, 244). The government's formal decree provided male *dan* actors solid backing. It prohibited the running of *xianggong tangzi,* enabling them to elude the deep-rooted "body problem" that previously had equated performers with prostitutes.[10]

The prevalence of Western realistic dramas—imported by reformists—also catalyzed the traditionalists' advocacy of male *dan* actor's cross-dressing as China's distinctive artistic form. In the first quarter of the twentieth century, a debate on the reassessment of Chinese aestheticism and Western realism emerged.[11] In order to confront imported epistemological and aesthetic threats, the traditionalists, like Qi Rushan 齊如山 (1877–1962), actively advocated *xiqu*'s "exclusive" aestheticism, repeatedly emphasizing the uniqueness of cross-dressing's aesthetic illusion. Of course, other theater cultures, such as Japan's Kabuki and English Restoration

[10] For accounts on the history of male *dan* and their sexuality before Republican China, see Sophie Volpp, "The Literary Circulation of Actors in Seventeenth-Century China," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 61, no. 3 (2002): 949–84; Cuncun Wu, *Homoerotic Sensibilities in Late Imperial China* (New York: Routledge, 2004); and Goldman, *Opera and the City*.

[11] In 1907, a group of Chinese students studying in Japan established the Spring Willow Club (*chunliushe* 春柳社), introducing Western plays, such as *La Dame aux Camélias* (*Chahuanü* 茶花女) and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (*Heinu yutianlu* 黑奴籲天錄), to Chinese society. Influenced by this epistemological turn of utilizing dramas as a didactic vehicle to educate the masses, May Fourth intellectuals Pan Jiaxun began translating Henrik Ibsen's realistic plays (*xieshi xiju* 寫實戲劇) into Chinese; other significant figures, like Hu Shi and Chen Dabei 陳大悲, also joined this endeavor to write plays reflecting social problems and essays to the underline values and functions of dramas. See Xu Muyun 徐慕雲, *Zhongguo xiju shi* 中國戲劇史 [The history of Chinese drama] (Shanghai: Shijie shuju, 1938), 126–40. With a belief in drama's moral inspiration and didactic function, these intellectuals dismissed the existing *xiqu* (Chinese opera)—Peking operas and regional operas—as an outdated expression and believed it should be radically reformed. They particularly condemned its expressive format and cross-dressing aesthetics.

drama, also shared the feature of cross dressing; this was never an exclusive Chinese phenomenon.[12] Nevertheless, in the early Republican era, the traditionalists imbued male *dan* actors with a distinctiveness—expressive aesthetics—to compete with Western theatrical culture. Benefiting from this constructed discourse, male *dan* actors were able to not only escape from the sex work that had once accompanied acting, but also to elevate their social status from popular entertainers to patriotic artists (Goldstein 2007, 237–63).

While the male *dan* actors gradually solved the body problem and elevated their socioeconomic status, the ways that audiences perceived actresses—who were first introduced into Peking opera in the 1870s—changed little; actresses were regarded as immoral and debased figures. Goldstein attributes the constant public vilification of actresses to two causes: first, actresses served as substitutes for the pleasures of objectification that male *dan* actors originally provided; second, as public entertainers, their existence blatantly violated the Confucian code of "good women" (*liangjia funü*) that adhered to domestic life (Goldstein 2007, 109–115). The conventional ideology of imagining women's gender roles—dichotomized between domestic and public spheres—resulted in society's continual denigration of actresses throughout the late imperial and early Republican eras.

The policies of municipal governments further contributed to Chinese society's contempt for actresses. In contrast to its "protection" for male *dan*—outlawing the running of *xianggong tangzi*—the local authorities in Beijing, Tianjin, Shanghai, and dozens of other cities, not only authorized actresses' presence on stage, but also legalized female prostitution, the taxation of which buttressed fiscal resources (Dong 2003, 232; Goldstein 2007, 113–114). The expansive

[12] See Katherine Mezur, *Beautiful Boys/Outlaw Bodies: Devising Kabuki Female-Likeness* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); Satoko Shimazaki, *Edo Kabuki in Transition: From the Worlds of the Samurai to the Vengeful Female Ghost* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

legalization aimed at actresses and prostitutes showed the government's tacit endorsement of women displaying their bodies in public, even as the financial benefit from the prostitution tax made municipal authorities complicit in objectifying public women. Republican opera critic Zhang Xiaoxia 張笑俠 criticized opera reviews for their prurient focus on actresses' physical appearances instead of their artistic skills:

> I remembered when I was editing *Youyichang ribao* (*Amusement Park Daily News* 游藝場日報), a man submitted an essay flattering the actress Su Lanfang. He opened the essay by saying, "Actress Su's look is like that of a lotus flower (*sheng de furong qi mian* 生得芙蓉其面), [her] waist is willowy (*yangliu qi yao* 楊柳其腰), [her] lips are naturally red without wearing any lipstick (*chun bu dian er hong* 唇不點而紅), [and her] eyebrows are kohl-black without applying makeup (*mei bu hua er dai* 眉不畫而黛)." Do you agree that this paragraph is assessing performers? I would say this is highly similar to praise (*peng*) for prostitutes. (Zhang 1930, 16)
>
> 記得余編遊藝場日報時，有某君投一稿，係捧坤伶蘇蘭舫的，他開口便說：「蘇伶生得芙蓉其面，楊柳其腰，唇不點而紅，眉不畫而黛，……」請看這一段是評伶嗎，我看簡直的是捧妓女。

Zhang Xiaoxia's critique of the unknown opera critic exposed the constant voyeuristic gaze and sexual desire projected by male audiences upon actresses. While this passage raises the question of whether it was reasonable to blur the lines between actresses and prostitutes, a 1922 book, *An Erotic History of Actresses* (*Kunling yanshi* 坤伶豔史), explicitly highlighted the close entanglement of the two roles. This book documented ninety-two actresses' biographies from the late Qing to the early Republican era, including actresses of Peking opera, Cantonese opera, and New Drama (*xinju* 新劇). Among these ninety-two figures, seventeen of them had once been or simultaneously served as prostitutes, such as Weng Meiqian, Jinjuhua 金菊花, and Yemingzhu 夜明珠 (Sun and Xu 1922). Actresses, whether living in coastal or rural cities, were notorious for their slippage between these two identities in the public imagination. As another Republican critic Yao Zesen 姚澤森 revealed, in Lanzhou, a relatively rural area in northwest China, some

prostitutes served as “part-time” actresses (Yao 1930, 2). In Shanghai, the custom was even worse. A large number of actresses actively sold sex in order to pursue the pleasures of the flesh and earn handsome profits; audiences also assumed actresses to be debased sexual objects far from the virtue of chastity (Zhonghua shuju 1923, 36–37, 90). These records serve as compelling evidence to show that actresses and prostitutes largely inhabited the same role; it was common for the public to perceive women entertainers as morally compromised figures.

Within this gender-biased structure, actresses’ performing abilities were frequently neglected and infantilized by most opera critics. Republican opera critic Weichun 味蒓 publicly suggested that audience members should not make a comparison between famous performers (*mingling* 名伶) and women performers (*nüling*). Despite hiding behind a sympathetic facade, Weichun’s rhetorical choice of *mingling*—referring to actors—and *nüling*—a term specifying actresses—not only showed his personal prejudice against female performers, but also exposed a tendency to make arbitrary distinction between male and female actors among Peking opera performers. Weichun attributed actresses’ incompetence to the fact that women could not be completely independent from men; the audience, he suggested, should lower the bar and tolerate actresses’ lack of skills. Nevertheless, he was still aware of the absurdity of the prescribed roles and gestures women were supposed to play on stage: “There are many obscene gestures and behaviors inappropriate for women to accurately depict in public” (Weichun 1929, 2–3). In other words, Weichun conveyed contradictory messages shaped by actresses’ “body problem,” in which they were simultaneously objectified to provoke the audience’s pleasure and disciplined by the gender roles that the Confucian conventions sanctioned. However, as historian Jiacheng Liu has pointed out, actresses were not always unconscious of their eroticization. The example of

actress Liu Xikui shows that she could develop her own flirtatious style that male female impersonators were unable to emulate (Liu 2016).

Despite being relatively recognized, Meng Xiaodong's early life was also constrained by commentaries reflecting gender bias. In the early 1920s, among actresses, Meng Xiaodong's artistic ability already impressed Shanghai opera critics. They often wrote articles acclaiming that she surpassed her female peers (Peichu 1920; Zhuokan 1920; Zuifo 1920; Sheyu 1922). While influential newspapers, such as *Shenbao*, rarely published articles about her, the tabloid press, such as *Xianshi leyuan ribao* (*The Daily News of Sincere Amusement Park* 先施樂園日報) and *Dashijie* 大世界 (*The Great World Daily News*), frequently published opera reviews surrounding her. As Lien Lingling has pointed out, entertainment emporium-published tabloids were, on the one hand, utilized as a vehicle to advertise the emporium's businesses; on the other hand, they served as a means to convey writers' ideas and expand their social networks (Lien Lingling 2013). In this sense, when opera critics wrote articles centering on Meng Xiaodong, they not only shared their recognition about Meng, but also propagandized their own artistic preferences by displaying their connoisseurship.

When Meng Xiaodong was twelve *sui*, she was able to regularly perform the operas, *Executing a Son at the Outermost Gate* (*Yuanmen zhanzi* 轅門斬子) and *Receiving Divine Instruction in a Dream and Hitting the Stone Tablet* (*Tuozhao pengbei* 托兆碰盃) at the Universe Great Theater in the Great World entertainment emporium, the most upscale indoor amusement park in Shanghai at the time (Qianren 1920). To critics, she excelled at representing

a connection between characters' inner motives and her physicality.[13] After watching her performance of *Empty Fort* Strategy, opera critic Zhidie 稚蝶 commented that most of the actresses relied blindly on their voices (*yiwei si chang* 一味死唱) and ignored the significance of properly interpreting characters' motives and behaviors, but Meng Xiaodong who benefited from her uncle Qiu Yuexiang's instruction, eminently distinguishing herself from other performers and highly impressing audiences (Zhidie 1920). At the end of his essay, Zhidie praised her: "Xiaodong Xiaodong, you are such a rising star (*houqi zhi xiu* 後起之秀)" (Zhidie 1920). Critic Peichu 佩楚 claimed that *kunsheng* Xiaoyuehong's mundane performance made him recall Meng Xiaodong's talents and predicted, "if her voice is not affected by any [physical] factor at the age of sixteen or seventeen, she will definitely share the reputation with [*kunsheng*] Li Guifen 李桂芬 (1901–1984), not to mention will be more successful than [*kunsheng*] En Xiaofeng, Little Lanying 小蘭英, and Chen Huifeng 陳蕙峯 要是到十六七時候，不受其他影響倒嗓，將來一定可以同李桂芬並傳。什麼恩曉峰、小蘭英、陳蕙峯是不必說哩" (Peichu 1920). At the same time, En Xiaofeng and Little Lanying as senior *kunsheng*, were satirized for delivering too much to maintain the good quality of their voices. These depictions of Meng Xiaodong, while laudatory, still strictly followed a notion of gender dichotomy and assumed that the performing skills of actresses and actors would "never be on a par." Meng was labelled "a rising star" when assessed in light of other actresses. Once the critics extended their scope of

[13] Opera critic Xu Jichuan in his article, "Jottings on the Meng Xiaodong that I know," also documented that when she was fourteen *sui*, she had already acquired fame for her handsome stage appearance (*banxiang*) and stentorian voice (*sangyin kuan liang* 嗓音寬亮) in the lead male role in *The Fate of Hongbi* (*Hongbi yuan* 宏碧緣) staged at the Gong Stage (*Gong wutai* 共舞台), one of the most popular theaters in Shanghai. See Xu Jichuan 许姬传. "Mantan wo suo zhidao de Meng Xiaodong 漫谈我所知道的孟小冬 [Jottings on the Meng Xiaodong that I know]," in *Jingju tan wang lu xu bian* 京剧谈往录续编 [Record of Recollections of Peking Opera], ed. Zhongguo renmin zhengzhi xieshang huiyi (Beijing: Beijing chubanshe, 1988), 311.

appraisal to both actors and actresses, such positive praise was muted; nevertheless, her starting point was already higher than that of most of her female peers.

With her established reputation in Shanghai, she was invited to other cities throughout China, including Xiamen, Hankou, Jinan, and Nanking, and she was even invited to tour overseas in Manila (Sheyu 1922; Xiangyin gezhu 1924; Guandu 1924). In 1925, she toured Tianjin and then settled down in Beijing (Chunfeng 1925). It is unclear what factors facilitated her decision to move north, but most of the contemporary Peking opera stars were active and based in Beijing, including Tan Xinpei, Yu Shuyan, Mei Lanfang, and Cheng Yanqiu 程硯秋 (1904–1958). The commentary on performers from Beijing surpassed those based in Shanghai; this, too, may have influenced her decision.[14]

However, moving to Beijing could not protect Meng Xiaodong from commentary that eroticized her. To male patrons and the press media, her biological sex was much more conspicuous than the gender of her stage roles. Performing men on stage could not protect her against the media's reportage of salacious gossip. It was not long after she arrived in Beijing that *Shanghai huabao* 上海畫報 (*Pictorial Shanghai*) published an anonymous article sent from

[14] This commentary on performers from Beijing surpassing those based in Shanghai grounded in a debate on *jingpai* (Peking style) versus *haipai* (Shanghai style). The debate over *haipai* and *jingpai* had begun in the late nineteenth century. The late Qing encyclopedist Xu Ke in his 1916 encyclopedic collection, *Qing bai lei chao*, first explicitly distinguished opera audiences' aesthetics based on their geographical regions: one was the northern style, *beipai* 北派 (also known as *jingpai*, derived from the place-name of Bei*jing*), which prioritized performers' artistic skills; the other one was the southern style, *nanpai* 南派 (also known as *haipai*, derived from the place-name of Shanghai), highlighting performers' physical appearances. To further distinguish between *nanpai* and *haipai*, Xu Jianxiong 徐剑雄 argues that "*haipai* Peking opera" (*haipai jingju*), formed in the early twentieth century, was a branch of performing styles derived from *nanpai* Peking opera (*nanpai jingju*), which formed in 1867 when Peking opera was introduced to Shanghai. Xu specifically points out that *haipai* Peking opera incorporated distinctive features, such as reformed new dramas (*gailiang xin xi* 改良新戲), contemporary-costume new drama (*shizhuang xin xi* 時裝新戲), and trendy set design. See Xu Jianxiong 徐剑雄, *Jingju yu Shanghai dushi shehui: 1867-1949* 京剧与上海都市社会：1867–1949 [Peking opera and the society of Shanghai city] (Shanghai: Sanlian shudian, 2012), 9–10.

Beijing: a retired official, Qi Yaoshan 齊耀珊 (1865–1954), and his son simultaneously became Meng's fans. One day, the father and son ran into each other in the *Kaiming juchang* 開明劇場 (Enlightened Theater)—where Meng Xiaodong regularly performed with other actresses—and were highly embarrassed about their "shared taste" for the same actress (Shangqing 1925). On the surface, this article did not involve in any sexually suggestive content, only centering on the coincidence of an encounter between a father and his son at the theater. However, other commentary generated by the article implied that this was untoward conduct:

> Every time Xiaodong staged performances in *Kaiming* Theater, this old, bearded man squatly sat in the front-row seats. He watched Meng with concentration, explicitly demonstrating his interest in actress Meng. His son also emulated his behavior, frequently visiting *Kaiming* and courting Meng.
> 每逢小冬出演開明劇場時，此黑髯滿腹之老翁，必踞坐前排池座，目直神注，向孟伶大表好感，乃其子日來亦效乃父所為，時臨開明，大示殷勤。(Shangqing 1925)

To Qi Yaoshan and his son, visiting *Kaiming* theater so frequently was not just about enthusiasm for her cross-dressing performances, but a demonstration of their desire for Meng's feminine companionship. Therefore, the embarrassment between Qi Yaoshan and his son was due to a tacit understanding of social convention: were they to pursue the same woman, it would violate the Confucian family order.[15]

After her huge box-office success at *Kaiming*, gossip and slander about Meng Xiaodong not only increased, but also became much more salacious. Having regular performances in Beijing and, occasionally, staged performances in Goddess Civilized Theater (*Tianxian xinming juyuan* 天仙新明劇場) in Tianjin, effectively expanded the spectrum of Meng's audiences in

[15] Whether in Western or Chinese culture, fathers and sons courting the same woman are not tolerated. Both the Greek tragedy *Oedipus* and Cao Yu's 曹禺 1934 spoken drama *Thunderstorm* (*Leiyu* 雷雨) portray conflicts between a father and son over their love of the same woman.

North China. Soon, her "body price was ten times [the original price]," as both her appearance and talent were distinctive (*seyi jianshan* 色藝兼擅) (Kongwo 1926; Wowo 1926). Curiously, although she had moved to Beijing for some time, tabloid publications in Shanghai still paid considerable attention to her, frequently grabbing at chances to produce absurd reportage about her. In June 29, 1926, *Shibao* 時報 (*Daily News*) released an anonymous news item—sent from Beijing—entitled, "On the Rumor that Meng Xiaodong Has Committed Suicide" (*Meng Xiaodong you zijin shuo* 孟小冬有自盡說):

> …Recently, a military officer coveted actress Meng and desired to have her as his concubine, but Meng had no interest in this and utterly refused. Coincidently, Meng's close friend, Miss Jin, was also pursued by the officer. The officer wanted Miss Jin to serve as a concubine and then raped her. Miss Jin could not endure his insult, taking drugs to commit suicide. Meng heard of this tragedy and felt for her deeply. Fearing that the officer would force her, too, to marry him, to maintain her chastity, she also committed suicide by taking drugs. Miserably, she was only eighteen *sui*.
>
> …孟伶近為某軍要人所賞，亟欲藏之金屋。但孟不願，曾嚴拒之。會有金小姐者，乃孟之手帕交，亦為某軍要人所愛，並欲納之，且施以非禮。金不堪其辱，竟仰藥死，孟 O 耗，頓起同病相憐之感，又懼某要人之威逼，為保全清白計，亦仰藥以死。年僅十有八，亦云慘已。(*Shibao* 1926).

On July 6 of the same year, the Shanghai tabloid *The New World* (*Xin shijie* 新世界) published a similar article lamenting Meng's death, proving that the previous article had not been believed. Compared to the previous piece alleging that Meng committed suicide in order to protect her chastity, this piece pointed to a different cause of Meng's death:

> It was said Dong was desired by someone. Initially, she feared his power and did not dare to resist. Next, she was unable to endure his abuse but had no chance to escape. This man was not a person who understood how to treasure women. He not only forced her to have sex every day, but also treated his guests to her body once he tired of her. Finally, Dong died from having too much sex.
>
> 又有謂冬之見賞於某人也，初懾其威，不敢抗。既不堪虐，復不能脫。某要人非能惜花者，且不僅旦旦伐之，饜食之餘，且以饗客水陸交攻，冬乃役死。(Wowo 1926)

Although the writer ended his essay noting that "this allegation is absurd; don't believe it 以言涉無稽，莫之或信," the passage nevertheless spoke to an actress' vulnerability in the face of absurd gossip about sexual scandals. No matter what righteous or loyal roles she performed on stage, she, on account of her public presentation of her body, was still subject to a press that stimulated public interests by commodifying public women, which further invoked the notion that women in public could not be chaste.

Another tabloid article entitled, "General Zhang Took Meng Xiaodong by Force (*Zhang jiangjun ying nong Meng Xiaodon* 張將軍硬弄孟小冬), moreover, offered another crude account of a sexual scandal centering on Meng:

> Originally, it had been rumored that Meng Xiaodong was to marry Mei Lanfang. In fact, this was fake news. Meng recently had a performance in a theater at night. General Zhang, despite being busy with military affairs, went to the theater to watch actress Meng's play, *Zhulianzhai* 珠簾寨 (*Pearl Screen Fort*). When she was performing passages relevant to the [episode in which] the prince passes on an order (*taibao chuan ling* 太保傳令), the general already felt pleased. When the [performer playing] the second queen (*er huang niang* 二皇娘) asked Meng: "You dare to say I don't want to send troops three times," Meng Xiaodong, at this moment, utilized her stage movements (*shenduan* 身段) and a couple lines of dialog (*shuobai* 說白) to flirt with the audience and then won thunderous applause. This made the general even more charmed by her. The next day, he commanded four soldiers to go Meng Xiaodong's residence and bring her to reside in the palace of the general. She was scared of the general's power and had no recourse but to obey his order. Unexpectedly, Meng Xiaodong was "worthy of the name;" her "dong" was too "small" to tolerate the general's well-known dick, which was as long as a stack of eighty-seven coins. Compared to prostitutes, she was unable to endure so much sex. After this, her vagina was damaged by the general. She could only hide her sadness and hold back her tears, going to a hospital to see a doctor. (Sebin 1926)
>
> 孟小冬本有嫁梅蘭芳之傳說，實則並無此舉。現蒞某院演劇一晚，張將軍戎馬之間，往該院觀劇，見孟伶演珠簾寨幾段太保傳令，將軍已有悅意。及至二皇娘問她，你敢說三個不發兵，那時孟小冬賣弄風騷，一種身段，幾句說白，博得彩聲不少，將軍更其傾慕。翌日，令衛兵四名，至孟伶寓處，逼令進府。小冬懼將軍勢，只得隨之同行。不想孟小冬名副其實，這個「冬」實在太「小」了，吃不消將軍久著盛名的八十七個袁頭，遠不及久有耐性與艷娘。接戰之後，夾溝被將軍所瘡，含悲忍淚，往某醫院求診。

This tabloid publication made a crude pun out of Meng Xiaodong's name. The pronunciation of Xiaodong—little winter—was conflated with the meaning of "little hole/vagina." These sorts of scandalous jokes at the actress' expense again displayed her vulnerability in the public eye. No matter what gender actresses performed on the stage, actresses were still assumed to be attainable in front of the audience. They not only replaced male *dan* actors as the locus of audience erotic fantasy, but also offered audiences chances to lust after *kunsheng*. Meng Xiaodong's male costumes could not hide her attractive feminine body; her masculine stage persona was also unable to suppress warlords' voyeurism and libido. Unlike actors, actresses "body problem" was grounded in female anatomy, rather than their stage genders.

Between Domestic Women and Public Women

The public was used to regarding actresses' bodies as consumable goods and constantly published commentaries that sexually objectified public women in tabloid publications; however, there were a few audience members who expressed sympathy and who pointed out that the only solution for actresses to dissociate themselves from sexualization was to leave the public arena by marrying someone. In the same year that the gossip about Meng Xiaodong and General Zhang was widespread, journalist Aoweng 傲翁 (literally, arrogant old man) published two articles in Tianjin's *Beiyang huabao* 北洋畫報 (*The Pei-Yang Pictorial News*) to suggest that, to prevent the spread of more malicious rumors, it was best for Meng to marry a rich husband sooner rather than later. His first article was, "Meng Xiaodong Has Become the Target of Gossips (Meng Xiaodong *wei zaoyaojia de mudiwu* 孟小冬為造謠家的目的物):"

> When Meng Xiaodong performed Peking opera in Tianjin, her reputation was limited. After she arrived in Beijing these past two years, Mei Lanfang and his friends have praised her a lot and often promote her. Unexpectedly, her earnings increased tenfold, and she has become a "star" and a "respected figure" among actresses. She struck it lucky finally. However, once people win fame, they inevitably become the object of jealousy and mockery. What's more, because Xiaodong is an actress, gossips tend to make fun of her and target her to spread rumors. Previously, Beijing people said that Xiaodong was going to marry an actor who was as handsome as Mei Lanfang, but that turned out to be nothing. Now, the gossips have gotten ridiculous; for example, an influential man took a fancy to her, so she did not dare perform Peking opera in public. It was also said that she lived in a rich guy's mansion in Tianjin. A youthful driver sent her here and there. All these things sounded as if they were true, but in fact all of these were misunderstandings. Newspapers in Shanghai were more absurd. They reported that Meng Xiaodong had committed suicide. Actually, she was still alive and well. To my surprise, an actress is able to cause so much gossip; this demonstrates how prone people are to believing rumors. My advice, Xiaodong, is that you should emulate actress X and marry some rich man as soon as possible to prevent people from ridiculing you. (Aoweng 1926a)
>
> 孟小冬從前在天津唱戲的時候，聲名有限，自從這兩年入京以後，給梅郎一班人一捧，居然就聲價十倍，成了坤伶界的「明星」「泰斗」，總算是她走運了。但是人的聲價一高，就不免招人妒忌，受人揶揄。何況小冬是個坤伶，更難免造謠的朋友們尋她去開心，拿她作謠言最好的目的物。以前北京人就說過小冬要和同梅郎一樣標誌的某伶結婚，結果并無其事。現在呢，越鬧越兇了：有某要人看中他了，連戲也不敢出頭露面去唱了。又說什麼見他住在天津某闊老的公館裡，有小白臉的汽車夫陪他開車出門，到這裡，往那裡，說得天花亂墜，好像真有其事似的，其實是認錯了人了。上海的報紙，就更離奇了：說他竟已自盡死了，實則他還好好地活著呢。區區的一個坤伶，居然鬧得滿城風雨，可見社會是善信謠言的啊。但是記者的意見，以為小冬還是學學某伶，好好的快嫁個闊人兒，省得人們拿你來開心。

As anthropologist Luise White has indicated, "people do not speak with truth, with a concept of the accurate description of what they saw, to say what they mean, but they construct and repeat stories that carry the values and meanings that most forcibly get their points across" (White 2000, 30). For tabloid writers and readers, they were not concerned with what truth was. Instead of digging for truth, they sought to obtain pleasure via the repeated fabrication on gossip.

In a second article, Aoweng was excited that Meng Xiaodong had accepted his suggestion to marry someone and thereafter escape the gossips, but, perhaps tongue-in-cheek, noted that his act was identical to those gossipers he had criticized previously. To his surprise,

Meng did not select a "rich man," but the well-known male *dan* actor, Mei Lanfang. Aoweng clearly showed his interest in this couple and attributed their marriage to Mei's principal wife, Madam Wang. He reported that Mei already had two wives—principal wife Wang Minghua 王明華 (?–1929) and concubine Fu Zhifang 福芝芳 (1905–1980); their relationship was not harmonious. Wang had severe lung disease and might pass away anytime. Before dying, "she made her husband reserve (*yuyue* 預約) Xiaodong as a second primary wife (*jishi* 繼室). On the one hand, this could fulfill Mei and Meng's dreams; on the other hand, this could prevent Fu Zhifang from grabbing a chance to be promoted as a principal wife. What a good plan to kill two birds with one stone! 所以決然使其夫預約小冬為繼室，一則可以完成梅孟二人的夙願，一則可以阻止福芝芳，使他再無扶正的機會，一舉兩得，設計可謂巧極 " (Aoweng 1926b). This dramatic exposé not only showcased Mei's family dynamics, but also exposed the chaos that the Chinese family system was confronting in the early Republican period. A respectable or wealthy man having a principal wife and multiple concubines had been common in late imperial times. However, as new ideas about gender equality gradually circulated in the first decades of the twentieth century, society began questioning the longtime practice of concubinage. In 1929, another article titled, "Overthrow Wife-Lord (*qifa*) Mei Lanfang 打倒妻閥梅蘭芳" was published, taking Mei as a primary example to claim that one man should only have one wife. However, in a comic vein, the author goes on to question if every man had to marry three more wives, how would men ever obtain sexual relief from women (Yanhui 1929)? Although the author's reasoning—some men's sexual desire could not be fulfilled—were far from the idea of gender equality, as Margaret Kuo's research on marriage law in Republic China points out, allowing the practice of concubinage "exacerbated the scarcity of available wives for poor men" (Kuo 2012, 121). The Nationalist regime eventually revised the Civil Code in 1930 to execute

the bigamy law in order to secure both the husband and the wife's rights (Kuo 2012, 128). Mei and Meng's marriage reflected that the traditional Chinese family system and marriage structure was undergoing unprecedented challenges.

The rumors about Mei Lanfang's impending marriage to Meng Xiaodong lingered in the press for three years; tabloid journalists sometimes claimed they had married, but sometimes clarified that this was false news. On February 23, 1927, *Beiyang huabao* announced that "Mei Lanfang decided to take Meng Xiaodong as his concubine. Their wedding date was set for the 24th day of this month according to the lunar calendar. 梅蘭芳決納孟小冬為妾，吉期已定舊歷本月二十四日" (*BYHB* 1927). However, on September 26, 1928, Shanghai's tabloid *Fuermosi* 福爾摩斯 (*The "Holmes"*) reported that "Mei Lanfang did not marry Meng Xiaodong," concluding that the rumors had been false: Meng had already gotten pregnant from Mei, the columnist gushed; Fu Zhifang had deliberately hindered Mei from marrying Meng; Wang Minghua had collaborated with Fu Zhifang to prevent Meng from marrying Mei. The report ended up on hearsay evidence: "Yesterday, my friend in Beijing told me that Meng Xiaodong is already performing plays onstage. It's time to put to sleep the rumor about her marrying Mei. 昨有北平友人來言，謂孟小冬已登台鬻藝。嫁梅之說，從此可寢其謠矣" (Sanshiliu yuanyangguan 1928). This passage showcased a common Republican assumption of actresses that the domestic domain frequently conflicted with the public space. An actress could only reside in one of them. If Meng was to perform onstage, it was unlikely for her to be Mei's wife at the same time.

This real-life drama had not ended, however. In 1929, a few interesting photos appeared in the *Beiyang huabao* hinting that Meng and Mei were falling love with each other. The first publication included four titillating photos of Meng with the captions, "Facial expressions of

actress Meng Xiaodong. (From right to left): Flying kiss, throwing a kiss, winking, and thinking" (see figure 7). Aside from the photos, a journalist wrote a short passage to make these photos more titillating:

> When we think of Meng Xiaodong, where is she? To whom is she married? Everybody has a different opinion, and no consensus is to be had… Some said she not only became "a plum wife," but also almost delivered 'a crane child'… It is said that Xiaodong is in Shanghai. However, we received her recent photos, which were very interesting… In Tianjin, many audiences admire Xiaodong. You can take a look, but you can only take a look. Who was the person she responded to with a kiss? Who was the person to whom she was sending kiss? Who was the one she squinted at? Who was the one she was thinking about? It seems that we don't need to further research, because… (Jizhe 1929)
> 談起孟小冬，她現在在哪裡，現隨何人，言人人殊，莫衷一是……有的說不特做了「梅妻」，而且快生出「鶴子」了。 ……小冬蹤跡，據傳現在上海，然而現在本報竟得了她最近的妙影多幅… 津門傾倒小冬的人很喔，大可看看，然而也不過看看而已焉可也，至於她「迎吻」是迎誰的吻？送吻是送給誰？斜睇睇誰？凝思思誰？都在似乎可以不必研究之列，因為……

This journalist used an allusion to Northern Song literatus Lin Bu's story to hint that Meng was already becoming Mei's wife and would deliver Mei's child soon.[16] The word for plum tree in Chinese doubles as the pronunciation of Mei Lanfang's surname, hence the pun suggesting that Meng already belonged to Mei. Although Mei poses flirtatiously in these public photos, the journalist particularly reminded readers, "You can take a look, but you can only take a look." In this sense, once an actress entered the domestic domain, audiences' desire for her was limited to voyeurism alone. Any practice beyond the voyeuristic pleasure was considered violating established social convention. In other words, as Mei's wife, Meng's body was no longer as "public" as before.

[16] Lin Bu 林逋 (968–1028) was a poet, famed for his rejection of official reputation and material success. He lived in Mount Solitude (*gushan* 孤山) alone nearby West Lake, planting plum trees as his wife and raising cranes as his son.

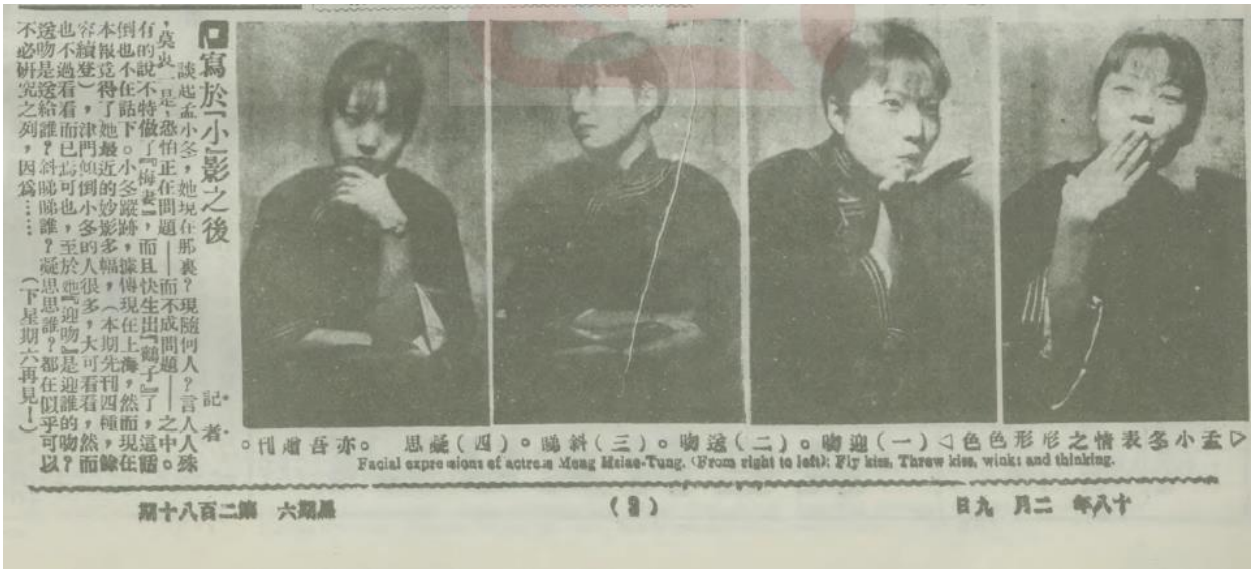

Figure 7: Jizhe 記者. *1929. "Meng Xiaodong biaoqing zhi xingxingsese* 孟小冬表情之形形色色 *[Facial expressions of actress Meng Xiaodong]." BYHB 6 (280): 1.*

The second publication included a photo of Mei Lanfang. It showed that he and Meng were passionately in love. In this photo, he is making a gesture to represent the shadow of a goose and is centered between two lines of calligraphy at the left and right margins of the photo (figure 8, Unknown 1929a). On the right side, the calligraphy written by Mei's "new wife Meng Xiaodong," asks, "what are you doing there?" The other line on the left side, written by Mei Lanfang, answers, "I'm making a goose gesture here." This photo may capture the sweetest moment that Mei Lanfang and Meng Xiaodong ever shared. Thereafter, their relationship deteriorated due to acrimony over who Mei's principal wife was, or, even, whether or not Meng was a concubine. The law upheld monogamy, but in real life many prominent men still had concubines.

Figure 8: Unknown. 1929a. "Guanyu Mei Meng jiehe yizhang zhaopian 關於梅孟結合一張照片 *[A photo about Mei and Meng's marriage]." BYHB 7 (315): 2.*

In most of the commentaries produced by the tabloid press, Meng was portrayed as a sympathetic character, and Fu Zhifang as a jealous wife trying to compromise Meng's happiness. Tabloid publications frequently cast Fu as the central antagonist, often likening her to a shrew in this public family drama, blaming her for the breakup between Mei Lanfang and Meng Xiaodong.[17] In letters that Mei's friends wrote, she was frequently referred to as "*zhongtang* 中堂." News accounts picked up on this, too:

> Note: the meaning of "*zhongtang*" can be explained in two ways. When referring to officers among imperial official rankings, it means an officer whose status is not very high but also not very low, and thus means [Fu] is just one among many within the Party and State of the Mei family. If it is used to refer to poetic scrolls hung on the walls

[17] The "shrew" is a common trope in Chinese literature, often used to depict women who boldly challenge male privileges. For more on this, see Shu Yang, *Untamed Shrews: Negotiating New Womanhood in Modern China* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2023).

> in the living room, two are necessary to create complete rhythming couplets, but the Mei family has three people. Fu Zhifang is in the middle; Lanfang and Xiaodong become the scroll couplets kept separated by the middle (*zhongtang)* Fu Zhifang. In the end, Meng and Mei could only sigh that one was on this wall here and the other was on that wall there. (*BYHB* 1929b)
>
> 按中堂義有兩解，倘為舊官僚中之中堂，則無佛處稱尊，不過梅家黨國中之一要人而已。倘為廳事中所懸之中堂，則中堂合對聯方成款式，梅家固有三人，福芝芳既巍然居中，而蘭芳及小冬，或將成為上下聯，為中堂所隔，終有「一個這壁一個那壁」之嘆也！

This passage shows the author's sympathy towards Mei and Meng, as well as his disagreement with Fu. Over the following three years, "Fu *zhongtang*" became Fu Zhifang's common nickname when tabloid publications commented on the Mei family dynamics (Jizi 1930; Daoting1932a; 1932b; Zouma 1932).

With the circulation of the nickname, "*zhongtang*," the publications even described Mei Lanfang as Fu Zhifang's "exclusive meat" (*jinluan* 禁臠); for example, one commentator claimed that "Fu Zhifang regards Mei as her exclusive meat and won't let other people approach him easily 福芝芳之視梅若禁臠，輕易不容他人之染指"; another maintained that "only Fu would not permit [Mei and Meng getting back together]. She considered Mei her exclusive meat and would never let another person compete with her 獨福終不允，視梅為禁臠，不許第二人爭霄也" (Shanfeng 1930; Leishi 1932a; Leishi 1932b). The writers' use of "exclusive meat" to denote Mei not only effaced his agency, but also, again, objectified him as a commodity that buyers were competing to acquire. As this scandal shows, although the Republican male *dan* was, to a large extent, de-eroticized onstage, he was never completely disassociated from the past bias of sexualization.

In 1930, at the arrangement of Qi Rushan, Mei Lanfang toured the US for several months to seek Western countries' recognition and build international diplomacy by presenting

Chinese culture and art.[18] In order to avoid any argument about partiality, Mei went to the US without bring any of his wives. Nevertheless, the family dynamics between Fu Zhifang and Meng Xiaodong were still uneasy. A tabloid article indicated that when Mei was in the US, his "concubine" Meng Xiaodong was too bored to stay home alone. Meng, as an adopted daughter of "General Dog Meat" (*gourou jiangjun* 狗肉將軍), frequently went to Dalian in northeastern China to idle away the days in the company of the general's concubines. "General Dog meat" denoted general Zhang Zongchang. This eccentric appellation derived from pai gow, a Chinese gambling game, of which Zhang Zongchang was fond. He received this appellation from the Cantonese phrase for playing the game, pai gow. It was uncertain if this General Dog Meat was the same person as the General Zhang who was recorded as having salacious assignations with Meng in 1926, but the Mei family was unhappy about Meng's Dalian trips, especially Fu Zhifang. A tabloid publication claimed that when Mei Lanfang arrived in Shanghai, Fu told him the entire thing right away to vent her anger (Jizi 1930).

Although there were inevitably a few negative reports surrounding Meng, in general, the public showed sympathy towards her and recognized her marginal status within this family dynamic. Despite striving to enter a domestic domain to disassociate herself from the image of public women, Meng was eventually unable to officially join Mei's family. Although Meng and Mei first had courted and then moved in together, they did not organize any official ritual to authorize their marital relationship. In other words, Meng was never formally acknowledged as Mei's concubine, not to mention as a principal wife. A tabloid publication described that "Meng lived in a place outside of the Mei family's residence, being regarded as a mistress. Because of

[18] See Goldstein, *Drama King*s, and Ming Tian, *Mei Lanfang and the Twentieth-Century International Stage: Chinese Theatre Placed and Displaced* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

her ambiguous identity, she was frequently despised by the Mei family (處於外室，視同野鶩。因身份之不明，遂屢遭梅氏家庭之鄙視) (Shanfeng 1930). Moreover, after Mei completed the US tour and came back to Beijing, he lost his beloved adopted mother, who was the wife of his paternal uncle, and the person who had raised him as a child. During his adopted mother's funeral, Meng wanted to mourn for her, but she was denied the chance to do so by Fu Zhifang because of her lack of status within the family (Daoting 1932a; 1932b). Another article also documented that because of Fu Zhifang, Meng Xiaodong had no chance to mourn for Mei Lanfang's aunt to show her filial piety. However, even though this couple confronted such frustrations, the gossip mill assured the interested public that "Mei was unable to forget Meng; Meng, moreover, never rebuked Mei… The person setting up obstacles for them was only Fu *zhongtang* 然梅固未嘗忘情於孟，孟更未嘗厚責於梅… 所橫梗其中者，福中堂一人而已" (Daoting 1932b).

In this public cause célèbre, Mei Lanfang was portrayed as a man who had no agency to deal with the chaotic situation. One writer satirized Mei, claiming:

> King of Actors and Doctor of Literature Mei Lanfang came back from the US to Beijing, China, last month. He not only had to face the sorrow of his aunt's death, but also continued fighting over his pillow by his two beautiful wives. The four characters, *bei xi jiaojia* (joy and sorrow mingled 悲喜交加), are the most suitable words to apply to the Doctor. (Tianjian 1930)
>
> 伶界大王兼文學博士梅蘭芳，於上月由美回國反平後，繼遭伯母之喪，如花美眷，又復爭薦枕蓆。悲喜交集四字，洵足贈諸博士.

Even though in the end Mei and Meng eventually went their separate ways due to her awkward position within the Mei household, commentaries, again, tended to consider Meng a magnanimous woman and Fu a difficult principal wife. In journalist Daoting's 道聽 article, he describes that Meng's friends suggested she hire a lawyer to request alimony, but she answered,

> Wanhua 畹華 (Mei's courtesy name) and I maintained a good relationship, and I understood his difficulties. We had come together without requiring any lawyer's witness. We also had no need to bother many people when separating. (Daoting 1932)
>
> 余與畹華，感情未傷，且深諒其苦衷。前此結合，既無律師。今日紛飛，奚必勞師動眾.

Another tabloid article attributed their separation to Fu Zhifang:

> Even now, Mei and Meng's relationship is not bad. Mei is gentle and sentimental; Meng is especially docile and considerate. The one who could not abide this was Fu *zhongtang* … Now, Mei, albeit painfully, has freed Meng. Meng also did not request any compensation. As the saying goes, 'easy union, easy parting' (*hao lai hao san* 好來好散) is most appropriate to the [circumstances]… When I first saw Mei and Meng's marital situation, and then saw that Shanghai people are prone to sue for divorce and hire lawyers to claim alimony, in contrast the extent of their virtue is like night and day. (Zouma 1932)
>
> 梅孟感情，至今不惡。梅固溫厚多情，孟尤溫婉體貼，所不諒者為福中堂… 今梅忍痛使孟自由，孟亦未嘗提出條件。俗語「好來好散」堪以移贈。…觀於梅孟之事，以視滬人習見之離婚案，對簿公庭，斷斷以爭贍養，使律師染指以去者，其賢不肖，犀啻霄壤焉。

Over six years, a mundane family matter, due to the protagonists' cross-dressing background, was elevated to a level of a public scandal that provoked the tabloid-reading public's interests and sentiments. Eugenia Lean has shown that in the Republican era, the press media became a communal site for the engendering of public sentiment, although those sentiments might conflict with an appreciation of the modern legal code (Lean 2007). The tabloid reportage of Meng and Mei's marriage incited the fans' initial public excitements about this theatrical couple and generated public sympathy (*tongqing* 同情) when they learned of Meng's tenuous position within the Mei household, even though Mei's marital status would amount to bigamy according to the 1930 revised Civil Code. Dating back to 1926 when the rumors about Meng and Mei first starting circulating, *Beiyang huabao* published this couple's pictures and presented them as a complementary couple. Under Mei's photo, the Chinese caption

was “Mei Lanfang who is going to marry Meng Xiaodong 將娶孟小冬之梅蘭芳;” under Meng’s was written, “Meng Xiaodong who is going be married by Mei Lanfang 將娶梅蘭芳之孟小冬.” The tabloid also attached English captions to help foreign readers understand how interesting and unique it was for Mei and Meng to fall in love with each other. Mei’s introduction was “the world-famous thespian in female impersonations.” Meng Xiaodong was portrayed as “a well-known actress famous for her male impersonations,” showing the theatricality of their gender inversion on stage and off stage (Unknown 1926b; 1926c). To a great extent, readers were sympathetic to Mei and Meng and blamed Fu for the separation:

> Outsiders also deeply hoped that this gender inverted couple (the husband performed female roles; the concubine played male roles) could be together forever. However, despite the husband having deep feelings towards the concubine, his principal wife never understood. He communicated with his wife but never obtained permission [to marry Meng]. The husband had no option but to prepare another dwelling to hide his concubine. Year after year, the concubine’s identity was never acknowledged. (Leishi 1932a)
>
> 外人對此一對顛鸞鳳倒之夫婦（郎歌花衫，妾唱鬚生）亦深願有情人終成眷屬。無如郎雖多情，夫人終不能諒。請命再四，終未得通過。不得已，遂別營金屋，權藏阿嬌。年復一年，始終未定名份。

Nevertheless, support for Meng among the readership for the press media did not grant her a sense of security. In early 1933, Meng Xiaodong made a decision to showcase her agency as an independent woman—which was the most obvious feature that the new trope of the “new woman” required in her era—and fight back against the rumors surrounding her. She hired a lawyer to speak on her behalf. On February 1, 1933, *the Newspaper of Justice* (*Zhengqibao* 正氣報) published an announcement entitled, “Meng Xiaodong has hired a lawyer to protect her 孟小冬聘律師保護” to warn the tabloid- and newspaper-reading public against absurd gossip:

> After Ms. Meng Xiaodong returned to Beijing from Shanghai last winter, she hired lawyer Zhang Bolie as her long-term counsel. Here we record Lawyer Zhang’s

> announcement: “I recently was hired as Ms. Meng Xiaodong’s long-term counsel. Hereafter, should anyone harm her life, property, reputation, and any of her rights and interests, I, as a lawyer, will protect her according to the law.” Based on the surmises of the public, the act of hiring a lawyer was in response to a certain famous actor. (Meiyi 1933)
>
> 孟小冬女士，去臘由滬回平後，聘任張伯烈律師為常年法律顧問，茲錄張律師之受任啟事如下：「本律師近受聘孟女士小冬常年法律顧問，嗣後倘有侵害孟女士之生命財產名譽及其他一切法益者，本律師依法保障之。」據一般人猜測，謂孟女士聘任律師之舉，係對某名伶而發云。

This famous actor surely refers to Mei Lanfang.

In September of 1933, Meng also posted “An Important Announcement from Meng Xiaodong 孟小冬緊要啟事” on the front page of *Dagong bao* 大公報 (*L’Impartial*) for three consecutive days to clarify rumors surrounding her and how Mei treated her unfairly. Apart from her status within Mei’s household, this announcement also uncovered a shooting tragedy that had transpired in 1927, and which the tabloid publications, despite paying attention to Mei, had rarely linked to Meng. Meng wrote:

> Dear Readers, I began learning art when I was young. I strictly followed my family regulations. Although I did not receive regular education, I understood the demands of basic courtesy (*lijiao* 禮教). I never trafficked in promiscuous behavior. Recently, rumors and slanderous remarks about me have widely circulated such that I can no longer stand it. To help society discern the truth, I am summarizing my story, hoping that gentlemen in China will understand. When I was almost eight *sui*, my father came down with a serious illness; circumstances forced me to take up training in Peking opera. After learning just the basics, I began performing onstage to sustain the family finances. Over the following ten years, I went to Tianjin, Shanghai, Hankou, Guangdong, and the Philippines to perform Peking opera. When I was planning to take a break, someone introduced me to marry Mei Lanfang. At that time, I was young and naïve. I accepted the matchmaker’s suggestion to enter the household in a dual branch marriage (*jiantiao*), serving as one of Mei’s two principal wives, which was public knowledge. However, Lanfang did not address my status seriously. When his adopted mother (*tiaomu* 祧母) passed away, he was unable to fulfill his promise, causing me to lose my rights and benefits. Friends advised him; I also remonstrated with him. Lanfang just ignored us, which showed his coldness. I lament that my family background was underprivileged, which caused me to suffer this blow. I thus determined to disassociate myself from Lanfang. Was this my fault or his? I believe that the public will do me justice without needing more redundant explanation. Besides, I have a more significant

> announcement. Several years ago, a certain person with the surname Li made threats against Lanfang, resulting in a devastating encounter in the ninth *hutong*. Some people thought that Li and I had a relationship; he had acted this way because of me. There were also gossips who, without conducting investigations, compiled fictitious plots to blackmail me. This was extremely insulting. I never knew Li; furthermore, I never interacted with anyone before marrying Lanfang. Wherever I have gone, I have always been guided by the stern instructions of my late father. I have obeyed his regulations and acted with integrity. Heaven alone is witness to my sincerity. Now, I am infuriated that I suddenly have been implicated in Li's accident. Following this announcement, should anyone deliberately harm my reputation or produce fictitious narratives to confuse readers, I have no other recourse than to seek legal assistance. Do not think that because I am a weak woman, I will willingly give up my rights. You are hereby put on notice. (Meng 1933)
>
> 啟者：冬自幼習藝，謹守家規。雖未讀書，略聞禮教。蕩檢之行，素所不齒。 邇來蜚語流傳，誹謗橫生，甚至有為冬所不堪忍受者。 茲為社會明瞭真相起見，爰將冬之身世，略陳梗概，惟海內賢達鑒之。 竊冬甫屆八齡，先嚴即抱重病，迫於環境，始學皮黃。 粗窺皮毛，便出臺演唱，藉維生計，歷走津滬漢粵、菲律賓各埠。 忽忽十年，正事修養。 旋經人介紹，與梅蘭芳結婚。 冬當時年歲幼穉，世故不熟，一切皆聽介紹人主持。 名定兼祧，盡人皆知。 乃蘭芳含糊其事，於祧母去世之日，不能實踐前言，致名分頓失保障。 雖經友人勸導，本人辯論，蘭芳概置不理，足見毫無情義可言。 冬自嘆身世苦惱，復遭打擊，遂毅然與蘭芳脫離家庭關係。 是我負人？ 抑人負我？ 世間自有公論，不待冬之贅言。 抑冬更有重要聲明者：數年前，九條胡同有李某，威迫蘭芳，致生劇變。 有人以為冬與李某頗有關係，當日舉動，疑系因冬而發。 並有好事者，未經訪察，遽編說部，含沙射影，希圖敲詐，實屬侮辱太甚！ 冬與李某素未謀面，且與蘭芳未結婚前，從未與任何人交際往來。 凡走一地，先嚴親自督率照料。 冬秉承父訓，重視人格，耿耿此懷惟天可鑒。 今忽以李事涉及冬身，實堪痛恨！ 自聲明後，如有故意毀壞本人名譽、妄造是非，淆惑視聽者，冬惟有訴之法律之一途。 勿謂冬為孤弱女子，遂自甘放棄人權也。 特此聲明。

The backstory to this announcement was an incident that occurred on September 15, 1927. Mei Lanfang had been invited by his friend Feng Gengguang 馮耿光 (1882–1975), a successful banker, to attend a banquet at Feng's residence. During the banquet, Li unexpectedly showed up and requested to talk to Mei. He pretended that his grandfather had passed away without enough fees to buy a coffin and hoped that Mei could donate some funds to help him with the expense. Mei generously agreed; journalist Zhang Hanju, who also was a guest at the party, volunteered to take Li to a nearby bank to withdraw the cash. It turned out that Li's real intention had been to kidnap Mei and demand a ransom. When the police arrived and pointed a gun at him, he accidently killed the innocent Zhang Hanju (Xuanjing 1927). This 1927 shooting incident was

indeed reported by many newspapers and tabloids, but at that time reporters only regarded this as a ransom-motivated kidnapping. It was rare to see reportage claiming that Meng was implicated in this incident. Meng's public announcement showcased that the tabloids were not the only arena in which rumor and slander circulated, rather there was a social space outside of the press media in which hearsay and guesswork about Meng could bring her harm. Gail Hershatter has pointed out that, in order to protect themselves and speak back, subalterns frequently "employed the rhetoric of social purity and pity" to win the public's sympathy and support (Hershatter 1997, 24). In this announcement, Meng, as an actress long oppressed by both gender and career hierarchies, appropriated similar rhetoric to emphasize her innocence and victimization.

Although most Peking opera actresses were underprivileged, Meng Xiaodong's self-clarification demonstrated the possibility for actresses to, in turn, utilize the press media and, even, courts of law as vehicles to protect her reputation and rights. The press media was not just a space in which Meng was forced to stage erotic stories and family scandals for viewing pleasure. And, indeed, Meng was not the first actress to seek legal recourse for defamation. As Jiacheng Liu's study on the Republican actress Liu Xikui shows, Liu and her mother sued *Xiju xinwen* (戲劇新聞 *Theater News*) for claiming that the actress had unpleasant body odor and successfully warned the tabloid against publishing any further groundless slander (Liu 2016, 29–31). Despite acting bravely, Meng's public declaration reveals that, still, her ultimate goal concerning her marital identity was "*jiantiao* 兼挑" (or equal status, also known as dual branch marriage) as a primary wife along with Fu Zhifang.[19] Fu, by contrast, insisted on the modern

[19] The dual branch marriage refers to "one man maintaining two families in order to succeed both his father and a sonless uncle had formerly been perfectly legal behavior." See Margaret Kuo, *Intolerable Cruelty*, 33.

style of monogamous marriage. This displayed people's complexity and a historical process of gender role transition within the Chinese family system at the time.

Strategic Performativity

Recent scholarship on opera actresses in the Republican era stresses their agency and aims to distinguish these figures' artistic contributions from that of their male counterparts. In his study on how gender and occupational stereotypes affected actresses' social positions and public perception, Weikun Cheng claims that actresses were a group of "pioneering working women, able and willing to change their dependent status by venturing into unfamiliar territory" (Cheng 2003, 36). They bravely "violated the norm of female chastity" to open up more opportunities to marry freely (*hunyin ziyou* 婚姻自由) (Cheng 1996, 206–8). Jiacheng Liu further investigates how actresses, among competitive rival actors, formulated distinctive acting styles, such as the role type of *huadan* and flirtatious manners, to appeal to audiences and score commercial success (Liu 2016, 29–51).[20]

The above research has pushed back against the male-centered and -produced narratives that dominate research on Peking opera, but it does not undermine the mainstream discourse and practice which suggest that male performers dominated the field. In contrast, I am questioning the male-dominated discourse and practice and aim to destabilize it by using the case of Meng Xiaodong to shed a light on the debate over the male and female performers' artistic potential and competence. By analyzing commentary centering on Meng Xiaodong, I examine to what

[20] *Huadan* 花旦 refers to characters of young women who are endearing and coquettish.

extent she was able to escape from the long-lasting body problem and what strategies helped her to do so.

I argue that strategic performativity, performing male mentors, offered the Republican actress a mean to overcome the body problem. Importantly, trapped within a structure of gender inequality, she needed to use male-oriented performativity to destabilize male-centered narratives. Judith Butler argues that "performativity" generates a normative status through repetitive citation (Butler [1996] 2011). Although Peking opera emphasizes its expressive aesthetics, its role types—*sheng*, *dan*, *jing*, *chou*—represent an encapsulation of normative figures existing in everyday life. Nevertheless, the exaggerated representation of these role types is a result of the theatrical conventions on stage. In this sense, representations of *laosheng* performances—in spite of their idealized caricature of male heroism—in fact repeatedly cite and exaggerate performances of men in daily life. This citation, in the Republican context, caused an unsolved gap between men playing men and women playing men. Audiences' assumption that the actress was unable to represent the opposite sex caused biases. The man playing male characters on stage was embodying a theatrical same sex, while the woman, due to the misalignment with her biological sex, exposed a lack when she performed men. Under such circumstances, finding a strategic approach for the actress to shorten the gap between biological sex and performativity was imperative. Other *kunsheng*, such as Little Lanying and En Xiaofeng—who were senior to Meng—or Xu Dongming 徐東明 (1933–1977)—who were in the same generation with Meng—did not fully concentrate on a specific male-invented performing style. Meng Xiaodong's admiration for and dedication to the Yu School enabled her to bridge this gap and gain legitimacy to enact *laosheng* performances. On stage, she performed Yu Shuyan, instead of male characters.

The narratives that tabloid publications produced about Meng Xiaodong reveal the outcome of this strategic performativity. Meng officially became Yu Shuyan's disciple in 1937 (Unknown 1937); although her talents were already recognized before this, this specific event artificially drew a clear line to transform the ways that opera critics spoke about her performances. Beginning in the late 1930s, the reportage surrounding Meng Xiaodong started actively placing her within a broader rank of *laosheng* performers. Tabloid publications frequently made explicit comparisons between her and male *laosheng* in evaluating actors' commercial and artistic achievements. The transformation of such narratives suggests that it was important for actresses to not only advance their talents, but also to strategically select the "right" mentors.

For performers, committing to a respectable performing school was an effective means to shape one's public perception; for an actress, dedicating herself to a specific performing style that male mentors had created showcased her determination to pursue art. Wang An-chi has pointed out that the Chinese opera performing system (*jingju biaoyan tixi* 京劇表演體系) consists of two modules: disciplined acting conventions (*biaoyan chengshi* 表演程式) and the system of performance styles (*liupai puxi* 流派譜系) (Wang An-chi 2006, 7). Grounded on Wang's study, Li Yuanhao 李元皓 further articulates that those performers and performances are core components of the performance style. Outstanding performers rely on their natural gifts and limitations—stage appearance, stature, quality of voice, and so on—to tailor performing styles for themselves via mastery of disciplined acting conventions. The outcome of performance style enriches the repertoire of opera craft, which then offers later performers informative road maps by which to advance their own art (Li Yuanhao 2008, 46–49). For performers, adhering to a specific style simultaneously forecasts the future artistic routes they may want to navigate and,

more practically, becomes a catchline which can be posted on advertisements to appeal to audiences. Unlike regional operas such as *Yueju* 越劇 (Yue opera) and *Yuju* 豫劇 (Yu opera), many of whose performance styles were invented by women artists, even to this day, all the widely recognized Peking opera styles have been founded by men.[21] Exhibiting diligence in a male-invented signature performance style enabled actresses to dispel gender stereotypes that assumed they just provided titillating entertainment. After settling down in Beijing, Meng Xiaodong gradually changed her acting pursuit from the Tan style to the Yu style, the latter of which emphasizes a balance of character and vocal expression and aims to generate "rich flavor" (*yunwei chunhou* 韻味醇厚) through singing.

Scholars have commented that Yu style embodied the spirit of the literati; compared to other *laosheng* styles, this feature enabled the Yu School to be more suitable for actresses to imitate.[22] For example, Tan Xinpei's performance style heavily relied on performers' natural voices. Qilintong's 麒麟童 (1895–1975) singing style was hoarser than that of other master performers (Wu Xiaoru 1995). In contrast, Yu Shuyan emphasized representations of individual words and sounds, plus many of the characters he played were men of letters. These formal

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[21] In Jiacheng Liu's study, she indicates that Republican actresses, such as Liu Xikui 劉喜奎 (1894–1964), Zhang Xiaoxian 張小仙 (1890–?), and Liang Fengxi 梁鳳璽, in fact created their own signature styles, but these styles never were enshrined into the Peking opera historical legacy; see Liu, "Transgressive Female Roles and the Embodiment of Actresses in 1910s Beijing."

[22] Meng Xiaodong's transition from the Tan School to the Yu School was not unforeseeable, as Yu School was in fact greatly inspired by Tan Xinpei's style. In a 1931 essay on the assessment of Tan School actors, it documented that Yu Shuyan was a prominent learner of the Tan School (Xiaocang 1931). However, Yu Shuyan had poor health. In contrast to Tan Xinpei's bright voice, Yu Shuyan's was a bit dark (Butang 1940). Since his voice was not as bright and sonorous in nature as Tan's, Yu Shuyan instead put great emphasis on his expression of the subtlety of words, singing, and rhythms. "His voice is high and not rough; he is able to sing a lot but not get tired. He knows how to use "effort" (*jing* 勁) without letting others notice;" see Xiaocang 肖傖, "Tan Tanpai 譚譚派 [The remark on Tan school]," *XJYK* 1, no. 3 (1931): 2. Grounded on Tan Xinpei's achievements, Yu Shuyan created his own style that let audiences "feel like they are drinking yearly Shaoxing wine" when they were listening to his singing; see Butang 步堂, "Mantan Yu Shuyan de yaozi yu changfa 漫談余叔岩的咬字與唱法 [Casual jottings on Yu Shuyan's enunciation and singing strategies]," *LYHK*, no. 89 (1940): 10. As for the Yu School's unique capturing of the literati's spirit, Wang An-chi has detailed analysis. See Wang, *Xingbie, zhengzhi yu jingju biaoyan wenhua*, 85–96.

features of vocal and acting techniques meant that, first, *kunsheng* actresses could learn the Yu style by constantly sharpening their performance skills, whereas it was quite difficult for them to follow the styles of Tan Xinpei or Qilintong, which were highly dependent on distinctive natural qualities. Second, most of the characters that Yu School played on stage were literary men, indicating that such roles required less training in martial arts. In contrast, characters in Qilintong's Qi style frequently required performers to wear the martial warrior's frame of flags while engaging in acrobatic skills. For opera critics at the time, *kunsheng*'s physical conditions were understood as restraining their potential to present dazzling martial skills. Even in the 1940s, by which time Meng Xiaodong had already earned social respectability, her flag-wearing plays (*zakao xi* 紮靠戲) were criticized for not being solid enough (Weichuang 1945).

Having a male mentor who offered appropriate skill as a model had a specific performative advantage for Meng Xiaodong. It effectively shifted audiences' focus from voyeuristic pleasures and sexual objectification to her level of artistic accomplishment. After Meng Xiaodong became Yu Shuyan's official student in 1937, tabloid publications began "elevating" her status and assessing her performances vis-à-vis other *laosheng* performers, rather than among *kunsheng* entertainers.[23] They commented that actresses could only perform dan

[23] In Xu Jichuan's essay, "Jottings on the Meng Xiaodong that I know." he specifically points out that Meng Xiaodong officially became Yu Shuyan's student on October 21, 1938, but the earliest reportage about her connection with Yu Shuyan was published in the journal, *Ying yu xi* 影與戲 (literally, the screen and drama weekly), in 1937. See Xu Jichuan 许姬传, "Mantan wo suo zhidao de Meng Xiaodong 漫谈我所知道的孟小冬 [Jottings on the Meng Xiaodong that I know]," in *Jingju tan wang lu xu bian* 京剧谈往录续编 [Record of recollections of Peking opera], ed. Zhongguo renmin zhengzhi xieshang huiyi (Beijing: Beijing chubanshe, 1988); Unknown, "Meng Xiaodong shishi Yu Shuyan 孟小冬師事余叔岩 [Men Xiaodong is learning from Yu Shuyan]," *Ying yu xi* 影與戲 [The screen and drama weekly] 1, no. 5 (1937): 11. In the professional Chinese opera community, it is common for performers to have many mentors. Before officially becoming Yu Shuyan's pupil, Meng Xiaodong learned *laosheng* singing skills from Yan Jupeng (another career actor affiliated with the Tan style, as well as the founder of his own Yan style), and Su Shaoqing (an accomplished Tan-style amateur actor). See Hean 訶庵, "Meng Xiaodong baishi ji 孟小冬拜師記 [Documenting Meng Xiaodong requesting to become Su Shaoqing's pupil]," *Tianjin shang bao huakan* 天津商報畫刊 [The Tiantsin shanpao illustrated review] 6, no. 11 (1932): 2; Chunfeng 春風, "Documenting

roles well, having no abilities to play other role types. Wang Qinkui's painted-face and Liang Guiting's 梁桂亭 young man roles, for example, were not regarded as serious performance, not to mention actresses playing martial men. However, "there was an exception: Meng Xiaodong 這裏走個例外，就是孟小冬." Furthermore, Meng's voice was:

> heavier, rounder, and older than Tan Fuying's 譚富英 (1906–1977); higher, more disciplined, and having more nuances than Ma Lianliang's 馬連良 (1901–1966); greater and sweeter than Yan Jupeng 言菊朋 (1860–1942); and more rigorous and pleasant to listen to than Wang Youchen's 王又宸 (1885–1938). (Gaopeng 1937)
>
> 比譚富英的厚、醇、蒼老; 比馬連良的高、正、有味; 比言菊朋的大而甜; 比王又宸的緊嚴、受聽。

Critics at the time also often compared Meng to Yu Shuyan's other disciple, Li Shaochun 李少春 (1919–1975). Li Shaochun was another rising star at the time, known for his ability in martial roles and monkey plays (*houxi* 猴戲).[24] Opera critic Qianli 千里 explicitly compared the two in a 1943 review. The rather long-winded title, "A Worthy Performance of *An Odd Injustice* (*Qiyuanbao* 奇冤報) by Li Shaochun, the First Half of Which I Compare with Meng Xiaodong."

Meng Xiaodong 紀孟小冬 [Ji Meng Xiaodong], " *ShehuirRibao* 社會日報 [The social daily news], June 6, 1925. However, becoming someone's pupil did not necessarily mean that the disciple would receive regular instruction from the mentor. Sometimes, the relationship between mentors and disciples was merely symbolic to elevate the disciple's status and accentuate the mentor's fame.

[24] In current scholarship, the commentary on why Li Shaochun's learning of the Yu School was never as good as that of Meng Xiaodong reaches a common conclusion: Li Shaochun was so busy with staging performances to support his family that he had fewer chances to interact with Yu Shuyan. In contrast, Meng Xiaodong, unburdened by a family to care for, was able to devote considerable time to sharpening her *laosheng* skills and eventually was regarded as the only successor of Yu by Peking operagoers. In Peking opera commentators Ding Bingsui and Wong Sizai's 翁思再 works, they write that Yu Shuyan requested his students to completely concentrate on learning artistic skills. Without his permission, students were not allowed to stage plays. However, Li Shaochun carried a heavy burden of family finance; regular commercial performance was his primary financial income. Furthermore, to satisfy audiences' cravings for all sorts of plays, he not only acted all the time, but also performed plays that Yu Shuyan forbade, like Hongyang Cave (*Hongyang dong* 洪羊洞) and the Monkey King's plays. This narrative, emphasizing that men had a duty to provide for their families, to some extent, obscures Xiaodong's achievements. On the details of Li Shaochun and Yu Shuyan's mentor-disciple relationship, see Peking opera commentator Ding Bingsui 丁秉鏸, *Guoju mingling yishi* 國劇名伶軼事 [The anecdote of Peking opera actors] (Taipei: Ding Bingsui, 1976b), 168–71 and Wong Sizai 翁思再, *Yu Shuyan zhuan* 余叔岩传 [The Biography of Yu Shuyan] (Shijiazhuang: Hebei jiaoyu chubanshe, 2002), 382-394.

The title conveys three assumptions: first, both Meng Xiaodong and Li Shaochun deserved audiences' attention; second, these two performers' artistic abilities were comparable; and third, the critic utilized Meng Xiaodong's performances as the criterion by which to rate Li Shaochun's enactment of *Qiyuanbao* (Qianli 1943a).

Qianli goes on to compare the singing and breathing techniques of Li and Meng: Li's voice was lacking a sense of "age and richness"; Meng was good at the pacing for the brisk "lead-in-meter." The review concludes:

> Xiaodong's mastery of Yu style exceeds that of other performers not only because the ways she sings and acts are similar to Yu, but also because she has achieved the highest level of verisimilitude (*shensi* 神似). Shaochun's mastery of the Yu style is still at an elementary level (*huohou shang qian* 火侯尚淺). He has only learned Yu Shuyan's physical likeness (*xingti* 形體). His [imitation] is like a drawing of a dragon missing the eyes. One might ask how he might capture that verisimilitude. In my humble opinion, if he could hew to the melody with force, his performance would be clear and full of spirit (*qingcui you shen* 清脆有神). … Shaochun just wants to imitate Yu Shuyan, but does not apply force. This is why I regard him as not as good as Xiaodong. (Qianli 1943)
>
> 小冬學余，高人一等處，論去字像、味像，還是一格最高境界，便是「神」似。少春學余，火侯尚欠，只得形體相似，如畫龍尚未點睛也。或謂此段，何以即能有「神」，據我拙見所及，若能有力硬轉硬折，勁頭使得是地方，便能清脆有「神」。……少春處處只求模擬，不敢用力，故視小冬不如也。

Qianli's conclusion suggests that *kunsheng* actresses could compete favorably with male *sheng* actors in terms of artistic achievement. It also shows that after becoming Yu Shuyan's disciple, Meng Xiaodong, to a great extent, transformed public perception of *kunsheng* performers, thereby showcasing the potential of *kunsheng* actresses.

Although Qianli holds a positive assessment of Meng Xiaodong's performance, his analysis nevertheless reveals a "ceiling" to her accomplishments. Her success lies in her verisimilitude, that is, on the performativity of citing a normative Yu Shuyan. Unlike male *dan* actors who created characters to represent ideal Chinese womanhood, every time Meng

Xiaodong performed a male character on stage, she in fact was performing the likeness of a character that Yu Shuyan had created. Her acclaim lay in her ability to perform her male mentor better than her male peers. This unintentional performativity brought Meng Xiaodong glory and won her the legitimacy to play men on stage, but it also meant that she could never develop a Meng style in her own right.

Although opera critics widely recognized Meng Xiaodong's performances, Meng herself was conscious about her biological sex never bringing her the real success an actor enjoyed at the time. In her article memorializing Yu Shuyan's death, she describes why she joined the field of Peking opera and the ways in which Yu taught her and corrected her performance mistakes. She expresses a deep appreciation to Yu, shows great admiration for his artistry, and attributes her good relationship with her mentor because "teacher Yu sympathized with my life experiences 這就是我余老師憐惜我的身世" (Meng 1943). She concludes her article with a self-pitying tone:

> It was unfortunate that I was a woman who had not completed my training. My understanding [about Peking opera] was limited, and I feared that I would fail and disappoint my teacher. Fortunately, I still have male peers who constantly develop their strengths. Naturally, they will be the ones to inherit the mantle of Yu style and continue the outstanding melodies of Tan style. I have no achievements, alas. (Meng 1943)
>
> 只可嘆我一女子，學業未終，領略有限，誠恐一無表現，有辜師恩，幸而尚有同門兄弟，各盡所長，方興未艾。將來傳余門之衣缽，續譚宗之絕調，自然是靠他們的。我是毫無成就的，可哭可嘆！

When Yu was alive, he also expressed his disappointment with Meng's biological sex, acknowledging Meng's diligence but regretting that, due to her female body, she would never fully demonstrate her potential (Unknown 1943).

After Yu Shuyan passed away, both the successes and the limits of Meng's performativity reached their peak. A poem by a Yu-style fan titled, "Crying for Shuyan and Talking to Xiaodong" (*Ku Shuyan jian shi Xiaodong* 哭叔岩兼示小冬), displays this paradox:

“Elegant songs and clever lyrics, beautiful music draws listeners’ attention. Everybody admires Mr. Yu, but they can only request Emperor Dong to represent his appearance and movements 白雪陽春絕妙詞，高山流水繫人思，萬方崇拜余夫子，惟向冬皇索態儀” (Nanpijiawong 1943). Such observations argued that only Meng Xiaodong could compensate for opera fans’ loss, thereby tagging her as little more than the female version of Yu Shuyan. This conflation of identity may indeed have solved Meng Xiaodong’s “body problem” on stage, but it also pointed to Meng’s continued entanglement with the power dynamics of the gender regime. As a *kunsheng*, Meng Xiaodong’s legitimate performativity was sanctioned by reference to her male mentors, rather than from within herself.

Another actor, Yang Baosen, despite never having officially trained with Yu Shuyan, is ranked among the “authentic” disciples of Yu School *laosheng* due to his specialization in the plays of the Yu School. In a newspaper article, the commentator begins the article with ranking performers:

> Yu Shuyan has passed away. If the Yu fans in my generation want to feed their operatic addiction, they can only listen to [the performances of] Meng Xiaodong. Nevertheless, the frequency of her performances is few. We can only look forward to the secondary option, Yang Baosen 楊寶森 (1909–1958). Although Baosen’s learning of the Yu style can be said to have mounted the hall, he never entered the inner chamber; in other words, the exquisiteness of his performances is far inferior to those of Meng Xiaodong, but, in general, it is still good enough. When my generation is extremely eager for [the performances of] the Yu School, Baosen is the only performer to whom we can listen. (Qianli 1943b)
>
> 余叔岩死了，我輩余迷，若想過戲癮，只得聽聽孟小冬。可是她又不常出演，再求其次唯有聽楊寶森了。寶森學余雖云登堂，尚未入室，即細膩處去小冬尚遠，可是大體還過得去。在我輩望余如渴的時候，可聽的人亦唯寶森一人而已。

The assessment, which does not even mention Li Shaochun, conveyed the message that Meng Xiaodong was not only the most promising *laosheng* performer of Yu School, but also signaled

that, despite Meng's self-effacing evaluation of her own skills, her accomplishments within the Yu School to large extent surpassed the boundary of gendered role type—*sheng*—that had long been dominated by men.

The Gatekeeper of the Peking Opera Tradition

In Republican era Shanghai, Du Yuesheng was undoubtedly one of the most influential mob leaders, having a close relationship with the Nationalist government. In 1927, the Nationalists orchestrated a "cleansing of communists" (*qinggong* 清共) campaign to solidify their authority; due to his extensive social networks and wealthy background, Du played a significant role in helping Chiang Kai-shek to carry out this task in Shanghai. Aside from getting involved in political and business matters, Du was fond of Peking opera and even staged performances from time to time (Haishang mingren zhuan bianjibu 1930, 13). According to historian Wei Bingbing, Du frequently, along with other two mob bosses, Huang Jinrong 黃金榮 (1868–1953) and Zhang Xiaolin 張嘯林 (1877–1940), facilitated charity performances featuring top-billed Peking opera stars as a way to whitewash his public reputation (Wei 2013, 247–48). As an opera fan, he was very familiar with Meng Xiaodong. His fourth wife Yao Yulan was also a *kunsheng*, who happened to be one of Meng's closest friends. When Meng and Mei planned to divorce, Du served as one of the many trying to help the couple get back together (Daoting 1932b). Once the decision to divorce had been finalized, Du even acted as a moderator to require Mei to give Meng tens of thousands of Chinese dollars in alimony (Tianrui 1947).

In 1947, Du Yuesheng organized a charity performance at the *Zhongguo xiyuan* (Chinese theater) to celebrate his sixtieth birthday and raise funds to help war and flood refugees.[25] He invited many celebrated performers to the event, including Mei Lanfang, Tan Fuying, Ma Lianliang, Qilintong, Yang Baoshen, to name a few (Laoyitanxi 1947). Although the entire event lasted ten days, from September 2 to 12, Meng only performed one Yu style play, *Sougu jiugu* 搜孤救孤 (*Seeking and Saving An Orphan*), with Zhao Peixin 趙培鑫 (1914–1973, who later became Meng's student) and Qiu Shengrong 裘盛榮 (1915–1971) on two nights. She took the lead role of Cheng Ying 程嬰, a righteous and loyal servant sacrificing his own son to save his master's heir (Laoyitanxi 1947). Among the many brilliant performers, Meng Xiaodong was no slacker. As the best contemporary Yu style performer, she appealed to a wide audience. Tickets for Meng Xiaodong's performances sold the best. According to reports at the time, the Chinese Theater (*Zhongguo da juyuan* 中國大劇院) received lots of calls but could not satisfy all the audience demand (Nongying 1947). Her performances were very successful. Those would-be viewers who could not obtain a ticket, turned instead to the radio to listen to her live broadcasts. Those unable to afford a radio also tried their luck at borrowing one (Manlang 1947).

At the end of her performance, Meng Xiaodong's position on how to perform the curtain call (*xiemu* 謝幕) raised a debate about Peking opera's conventions and reform of its culture. After Meng completed her performance and went backstage, "the audience constantly shouted bravo as if they were mad." They broke into rapturous applause and demanded that she take a

[25] It is uncertain on behalf of which region of refugees Du Yuesheng was fundraising. Some indicated the profit from the performances was for Subei refugees; others wrote that it was for Guangdong and Guangxi refugees; see Laichi 來遲, "Meng Xiaodong yiyan zhi mi! 孟小冬義演之謎！ [The puzzle of Meng Xiaodong's charity performance]," *Luobinhan* 羅賓漢 [The robinhood], August 19, 1946; Manhua 曼華, "Dushou yiyanb juankuan jin bayi 杜壽義演捐款僅八億 [Du's birthday and charity performance only donated eight-hundred millions]." *CB*, October 15, 1947.

bow; however, Meng Xiaodong insisted that her mentor had never taught her this "foreign custom" and refused to leave the backstage. The audience yelled for more than fifteen minutes and refused to leave the theater. Having no other choice, the backstage manager fabricated an excuse for Meng: he announced that she was sick and had no energy to express her appreciation after the performance. The audience refused to accept this and grew angry. They shouted and the situation became very chaotic. After about twelve more minutes, Meng finally agreed to take a bow on stage, and only then did the audience leave satisfied (Muren 1947). Despite Meng's eventually acquiescence to the audience's request, several tabloid articles focused on Meng Xiaodong's refusal to take a bow, as well as her complaint that this was "Shanghai's exclusive style" (*haipai*), and not something that opera troupes with a good reputation did (Huangli 1947; Unknown 1947a). One tabloid article asserted that Meng Xiaodoing was "laughing at" Mei Lanfang by her refusal to take a bow, as the custom of expressing appreciation toward the audience was a new "tradition" invented by Mei Lanfang after China's victory in the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–45). Tabloid readers also expressed disparate opinions about the matter. Some agreed with the stage manager's excuse, believing that "normally" performers should take a bow, but Meng was too exhausted to do so (Manlang 1947). Other writers supported Meng, claiming that

> the act of taking a curtain call should be up to the will of the performer. If the performers did not want to do so, it was not the audience's place to make them change their minds. Needless to say, Meng Xiaodong's performance was part of a charity performance for which she earned nothing. Why did the audience request her to show gratitude? I think that the audience' request was ridiculous. (Kechuan 1947)
>
> 按謝幕一事，本應出於伶人之自動，伶人不謝，觀眾亦無可如何。更何況孟小冬之登台，乃係義演性質，根本沒有包銀進帳，叫她何謝之有？所以我認為觀眾對她的謝幕要求，終屬不倫不類.

In contrast, some writers, albeit implicitly, criticized her for being arrogant; they mocked her throughout the article for putting on the airs of the young woman of a wealthy household, "Big Miss Meng (*Meng daxiaojie* 孟大小姐)" (Muren 1947).

Was Meng Xiaodong's refusal to take a bow simply due to arrogance? Why was she unwilling to conform to Shanghai's theatrical practice? One journalist reported that, on the day of Meng's second performance, Tan Xiaopei, the son of *laosheng* master Tan Xinpei, asked his son, Tan Fuying, to admonish Meng to "not display the temper of a spoiled rich girl again 别再犯大小姐的脾氣了." Tan Fuying and Meng had once studied Peking opera from Yu Shuyan together circa 1930 (Unknown 1947b). Confronting her senior peer's admonition, Meng answered that she had not lost her temper; she just did not want to break convention (Unknown 1947b). Instead of embracing the Shanghai audience's "invented tradition," she regarded herself as a gatekeeper of Peking opera tradition. When she claimed that her mentor had not taught her to take a curtain call at the end of the performance, she was not playing the identity of an arrogant diva or a passive disciple obeying her mentor's regulations. Instead, she was, again, performing her mentor throughout the entire performance, ranging from the stage roles that Yu Shuyan created to the professional etiquette that he demanded. Therefore, playing a Yu style righteous male lead was a performance; being a serious *kunsheng* rejecting Shanghai's trendy custom was also a part of that performance. Both her onstage and backstage personae were performative and contributed to her likeness to Yu Shuyan. As a Peking opera actress representing a new type of professionalism in the Republican era, her resistance to take a bow embodied the cultural practice of inheriting the stage conventions advocated by Yu, who in turn had come to signify a traditionalist artist. It may also have signaled her refusal to acknowledge the newly invented practice that had been adopted by Mei Lanfang. Rather than interpreting

Meng's act as "laughing at" Mei or "displaying a rich girl's temper," it is much more significant to recognize her performativity—protecting one male-invented tradition of Peking opera and resisting another one. Her performativity threaded all her actions and thus empowered her to broaden the purview of contemporary gender dynamics.

Du Yuesheng's charity performance was significant not only for the ways in which it shed light on a conflict between Peking opera's traditional etiquette and reformed sensibility, but also in arousing (renewed) public sentiment towards Mei and Meng's failed marriage. After Du announced which performers had been invited to his charity performance, audiences were excited about its all-star cast. In addition, the charity performance also catalyzed tabloids to dredge up details of Mei and Meng's past love life. Some articles allowed the tabloid-reading public to reimagine the possibility of a Mei and Meng reunion, whether in terms of their stage performance or real life. Among all sorts of rumors, the one that audiences anticipated was that Meng and Mei would perform *Silang tanmu* 四郎探母 (*Yang Yanhui visits his mother*) together––with Meng's impersonation of the male lead Yan Yanhui against Mei's Princess Tiejing. Opera commentator and amateur actor Su Shaoqing, who had once taught Meng Tan style plays and served as a teacher at the National Academy of Chinese Theatre Arts (*Zhongguo xiqu xueyuan* 中國戲劇學院) after 1949, wrote an article confirming that the audiences' dream was never fulfilled. In 1932, at which time Mei and Meng had already separated for a couple of years but had not officially divorced, Shanghai Pathé Records had once delegated Su to enlist the couple's cooperation in recording *Silang tanmu*. Su first received agreements from both sides, regarding this cooperation as a great opportunity for this couple to get back together. However, not long after, the plan of cooperating for the phonograph recording was canceled; Mei and Meng also officially "divorced." Su sentimentally commented:

> They first separated but had not officially divorced, and then disassociated with each other forever and had zero possibility to get back together again. The plan of recording *Silang tanmu* completely failed. What a pity! Two brilliant performers never performed together; two obstacles were never overcome at the same time. Both Mei and Meng were exceptional among performers, like the Peking opera version of Zhou Yu and Zhuge Liang. If someone could have gotten them to record a disc or perform a play together, would this not have been the great fortune of the opera field and opera fans? Now, it would never be fulfilled. This was such a great regret for the world. Knowing that they were unwilling to record a disc together in the past, we can speculate that today they will not perform a play on the same stage. Although it has been over ten years [since their separation], they have never reconciled. Thus, I believe that, although the public wished Mei and Meng would perform *Tanmu* together during Du's charity performance, it would never be realized. (Su 1947)
>
> 先之分居而未有法定手續，至是永斷葛藤，從此無復合之望。合收探母唱片之舉，遂全功盡棄，事敗垂成，致令兩美不俱，兩難不並，惜哉！夫梅孟二人皆人中豪俊，伶界瑜亮，使能合收唱片，或同場演戲，豈非梨園千秋佳話，顧曲家耳福。今也不然，真人世大憾事也。知昔日之不願合收唱片，即可推知今日之不肯同台唱戲。雖事隔十餘載，其裂痕猶未平復焉。吾故曰：此次杜壽義務戲，傳說梅孟將合演探母，雖眾望所歸，但恐難成事實也。

The public conversation generated about this couple was not always positive or fair to either side; moreover, it uncovered the limitations of Meng's strategic performativity. Even though performing Yu Shuyan could to a large extent effectively boost her identity as a *kunsheng* artist, her past relationship with Mei Lanfang still served as a negative force to reduce her occupational choices. Tabloid writer Tianrui 天瑞 recalled that the outcome of Meng and Mei's relationship could be attributed to Meng's loose personality: "Xiaodong was very pretty and had loose morals. Her personality was quite similar to that of men. She was interested in Mei and wanted to capture him (小冬甚美，而不守檢格，其性情頗有幾分似男性，意願愛梅，欲俘而有之) (Tianrui 1947). He then dredged up the shooting incident. Whether the writer's description was true or not, he assumed a fixed, normative gender dynamic between men and women. If a woman like Meng initiated a relationship, she clearly was not virtuous, not to mention her identity as an actress marked her as morally suspect in the eyes of the public. Yet

another article responded to Tianrui's allegations, further unearthing some disturbing "secrets" about Meng. Writer Pinxi louzhu 貧洗樓主 (literally, an owner of an impoverished building) wrote:

> According to my understanding, after Li was decapitated, the police hung his head on the gate for the public to see. One day at dusk, a woman who wore a black veil (Western women had this dress code) went to the gate where Li's head was hung and cried her eyes out. She did not leave until others noticed her. Someone who knew this woman claimed she was King Dong (*dong wang* 冬王). Li was her lover. He pretended that he went to Feng's residence to kidnap Mei and request ransom money, but he in fact hated Mei and wanted to elope with King Dong. The above was what I heard from others. It might be incomplete or wrong. I just documented it and hope Mr. Yu [Tianrui] corrects [my mistakes]. (Pinxilouzhu 1947)
>
> 惟據本人所知，李某被鎗殺後，梟首懸各城門示眾。某晚薄暮，曾有一面黑紗（西洋女子有此裝束）女郎，親臨城門懸首處，哀之慟，泣不成聲。後為人覺，始離去。有識之者謂即冬王，蓋李某乃其情人，以至馮宅綁索為名，實則恨梅，而擬挾冬王以遠颺耳。以上乃道途傳聞，或不盡不實，姑誌之，尚請余先生指正。

This tabloid publication shows that performing her male mentor could indeed help her to some extent disassociate from the crude sexual innuendo that circulated in the 1920s, but it did not enable her to completely redeem all aspects of her personal life.

The 1947 charity performance was Meng's last stage appearance. Thereafter, she moved into Du's residence at the invitation of his fourth wife, Yao Yulan, and married Du as his fifth wife in 1950. This time, she completely left the public arena, entering the domestic domain as a concubine. An actress who had once destabilized a male-centered artistic field eventually selected a traditional path to live out her remaining years.

Conclusion

By examining *kunsheng* Meng Xiaodong's artistic life, this chapter reassesses Peking opera actresses' gender roles from circa 1920 to 1950 to analyze the ways in which actresses were eroticized. Even *kunsheng*, who portrayed righteous masculine personae on stage could not escape sexualization and gender bias. The structural and social problems that actresses confronted were different from those faced by actors. Male *dan* actors were eroticized due to their stage persona, but *kunsheng* actresses were sexualized because of their biological sex. Given that biological sex was a fundamental cause of actresses' sexualization, it was much more difficult for them to extricate themselves from the gender system of the times.

Meng Xiaodong was able to negotiate this gender system somewhat via her strategic performativity—performing her male mentor. Through taking Yu-style performances as a vehicle to overcome her "body problem," she eventually won recognition as the best inheritor of Yu Shuyan's performance style. Nevertheless, that performativity had its limitations. It was unable to completely shield her from all aspects of her eroticized early life. Moreover, the performativity constrained her potential to develop her own style. In this sense, the ultimate destination that the strategic performativity offered was duplication of Yu Shuyan in female version, tasked with the obligation to preserve everything relevant to Yu, including his performances, his professional etiquette, and his propensity to rarely appear on the stage.[26]

[26] In 2010, the GuoGuang Opera Company premiered the one-actor production *Meng Xiaodong* in Taipei, with actress Wei Haimin 魏海敏 (1957–) portraying both Meng Xiaodong and Mei Lanfang. This dual role highlighted the meta-theatricality of performance rehearsal while underscoring the persistent struggles of *kunsheng* within a deeply gendered artistic tradition.

Chapter 3 The Memory of Same-Sex Love between *Kunsheng*

French historian Pierre Nora once pointed out that memory and history are opposite in many ways: memory is affective and "only accommodates those facts that suit it"; however, history is reconstruction and "calls for analysis and criticism" (Nora 1989, 8–9). Nevertheless, memory and history do not always conflict with each other. In her research on affective history, literary scholar Lily Wong emphasizes that "affects/emotions are not simply private states of expression; they are public practices that constitute social relations" (Wong 2018, 8). History is shaped through the involvement of human beings, whose behaviors and decisions are influenced by both affective experiences and objective assessments. Historian Gail Hershatter, in her research on Chinese rural women experiences under socialism, utilizes oral narratives—personal expressions—to reinterpret and reevaluate how social relations were practiced at the time (Hershatter 2011, 3, 294). Neglecting the emotions of historical participants leads to an incomplete understanding of history. The same methodology applies to the study of memory. Memory, therefore, plays a crucial role in comprehending social relations and illustrating how affective interactions shape the course of history. By examining the memories of female same-sex love between Peking opera *kunsheng* and their female patrons in Republican China, this chapter investigates *kunsheng*'s affective experiences and memories surrounding same-sex love. I examine how these women cross-dressers established intense affectionate attachments with other women, how they interpreted and reacted to heteronormative gender roles both on and off stage, and how they reinvented their memory of Republican same-sex encounters from the late 1960s to the 1970s.

In Chinese literature and theatrical fan culture throughout the late imperial and Republican eras, male same-sex love and desire were recurring themes. The related sexual practices and literary compositions portraying same-sex encounters have fascinated contemporary scholars, contributing to abundant scholarship on male-male eroticism.[1] In contrast, the topic of female-female eroticism has received less scholarly attention due to the scarcity of relevant writings.[2] This chapter aims to bridge the gap between women and same-sex desires in the field of Chinese cultural history and theater studies by reconstructing women's same-sex history through the lens of affective memories. The key sources that I analyze are Republican tabloids, journal articles, and autobiographies of *kunsheng* published after 1949. These rare sources are where we can find vivid descriptions of the female-female love of Republican-era *kunsheng*. By investigating the case studies of *kunsheng* active between the 1920s and 1950s, this study examines how they manifested their stage gender in real life and presented an alternative expression of female-female affection distinct from conventional same-sex love narratives. In contrast to the prevailing portrayal of same-sex love as melancholic, these actresses showcased an affective experience characterized by delight.[3]

Among these historic figures, I especially focus on *kunsheng* Guan Wenyu. She was born in Beijing not long after the establishment of the Republic of China. Instead of using her original surname, Guan, she adopted the stage name Hao Wenyu 郝文蔚 during the Republican era. She

[1] See Volpp, "The Literary Circulation of Actors in Seventeenth-Century China" and Wu, *Homoerotic Sensibilities in Late Imperial China*. See also, Yao Shuyi, *Wan Qing xiqu de biange*, Goldman, *Opera and the City*, and Wu Xinmiao, *Liyuan siyu kaolun*.

[2] Giovanni Vitiello has attributed the uneven representations of same-sex desire between the two sexes to the fact that "in premodern Chinese culture male homosexuality was deemed a legitimate expression of male eroticism," while women lacked literary space in the dominant sexual ideology to express their same-sex desire. See Giovanni Vitiello, "China: Ancient to Modern," in *The Cambridge History of Gay and Lesbian Literature*, ed. E. L. McCallum and Mikko Tuhkanen (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 125.

[3] Melancholy as a theme that repeatedly occurs in queer studies.

explained that the reason for adopting her mother's family name as her stage name was because most people perceived acting in Peking opera as disreputable (Guan 1986, 10). In July 1948, Guan migrated from mainland China to Taiwan together with her daughter, whose name remains unknown. In the following decades, she worked as an accountant in the Taiwan Railway Administration (*Taiwan tielu guanli ju* 台灣鐵路管理局) and occasionally taught Peking opera to high school and college students (Fu 2009).

My analysis of Guan is primarily based on her memoir, a genre that showcases the personal memories of its authors, while also documenting their historical experiences. Guan claims that she began publishing her memoir in instalments in April 1980 in the magazine, *The Kaleidoscope* (*Zhongwai zazhi* 中外雜誌), in response to an invitation from Wang Chengsheng 王成聖 (1920–2004), the founder of the magazine. After that, *World Journal* (*Shijie ribao* 世界日報), the largest Chinese-language newspaper in the United States, also requested the rights to reprint the essays from August 1984 to April 1985 (Guan 1986, tit. *Xie zai qianmian* 寫在前面 [Written by way of preface]). However, the content of the memoir consists of essays published not only in *The Kaleidoscope* and *World Journal*, but also in *National Opera Monthly* (*Guoju yuekan* 國劇月刊). In 1986, Chang-liou Publisher (*Changliu* 暢流), which was affiliated with the Taiwanese Railway Administration, collected and complied the essays that Guan published sporadically and published the 375-page memoir.[4]

While memoirs often describe events with the emotions attached to them and make "an honest and ethical attempt to restore a sense of history's specifics," I am mindful of the

[4] For details about Chang-liou Publisher, see, Chang Yu Ju 張毓如, *Cheng zhe richang shenghuo de lieche qianjin: yi zhanhou ershinian jian de changliu banyuekan weu kaocha zhongxin* 乘著日常生活的列車前進——以戰後二十年間的《暢流》半月刊為考察中心 [Boarding the "Everyday Life" train: a study on the Chang-Liou fortnightly during the first two decades in postwar Taiwan] (Master's thesis, Taipei: National ChengChi University, 2009).

limitations of memoirs as a research methodology (DuPlessis and Snitow 2007, 23). I read Guan's account as a reconstruction of the joys of female-female love in the Republican era. I recognize that memoirs, more than other sources such as newspapers or legal archives, are shaped by personal emotions and subjective perspectives on social relations. Furthermore, memoirs as autobiographical works often reflect the privilege of the writer. In Guan Wenyu's case, the privilege to write and publish her memoir highlights her access to resources that many of her contemporaries, particularly other actresses, lacked—such as educational opportunities and the ability to write. Her full-time position as an accountant for the Taiwanese Railway Administration, which had its own publishing house, also provided her with the opportunity to compile her essays from journals and newspapers into a book. Consequently, Guan's life experiences made her an outlier among opera actresses of her time. It is important to note that Guan's story does not fully represent or reflect the experiences of other women. However, its uniqueness offers a valuable lens through which to examine the intersections of female same-sex love, social class, and opera performance in the context of Republican China, making it a critical source for understanding both the possibilities and limitations faced by women of her era.

At the same time, I want to emphasize the performative nature of memoirs. As a genre, memoirs publicize personal stories, blending both public and private dimensions. Unlike personal letters or diaries, which are often kept in private spaces, memoir writers are fully aware that they have a readership and the fact that the content they craft will no longer remain private. This duality of memoirs—the tension between intimate revelations and the deliberate sharing of those revelations with a broader audience—highlights the writer's consciousness of their narrative being consumed by others, shaping how they present their life and experiences. As a result, the performative nature of memoirs introduces an element of uncertainty into Guan's

account. Does she convey the "truth" to her readers? Does she exaggerate or downplay certain aspects of her experiences? Although such performative storytelling can complicate efforts to reconstruct history, it also adds a fascinating dimension to the interpretation of her memoir, making it a rich and complex text to analyze.

I argue that the same-sex intimacy of *kunsheng* showcased an alternative possibility that neither aligned with the late imperial trope of sisterhood feelings, nor conformed to the Western-imported sexual knowledge championed by Republican-era New Culture intellectuals. I assess how the female liaisons represented in texts reversed the positions of patrons as subject and actresses as object by borrowing the term, *xia* 狎, which originally referred to the sexual dalliances that occurred between elite male patrons and male *dan* throughout the late Qing and early Republican eras. It is to be noted that Guan never uses the term, *xia*, to denote her same-sex experience, but I read her life through the lens of *xia*. By deploying the concept of *xia*, I reveal how the same-sex love of *kunsheng* imitated the male-male love of elite men and their actor objects of affection, and, in doing so, liberated female desire from the long-standing euphemistic trope of sisterhood.[5] I also analyze how the memories of the trysts of *kunsheng* were represented by and reminisced about via the affective expression of *xia*.[6]

[5] In feminist discourse, sisterhood is frequently used as a term to describe communal solidarity among women; see Rachel Blau DuPlessis and Ann Barr Snitow, eds. *The Feminist Memoir Project: Voices from Women's Liberation* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 36. However, here I use sisterhood to portray sisterly relationships among women.

[6] In Audre Lorde's essay, "The Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," she argues that the erotic motivates women to perceive and embrace the depth of their feelings. This awareness empowers women and grants them a form of power often monopolized by men. This idea resonates with *kunsheng*'s celebration of the liberation of female same-sex love. See Audre Lorde, "The Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," in *Sexualities and Communication in Everyday Life: A Reader*. Edited by Karen E. Lovaas (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2006), 87–91.

Same-sex Love and Women Cross-Dressers in the Republican Era

To maintain the gender relations that buttressed patriarchal hierarchy, imperial men of letters frequently glossed over female same-sex love as a bond of "sisterhood." As Tze-lan D. Sang has noted, female-female intimacy was either incorporated into the broader category of feelings (*qing* 情) among sisters and friends; alternatively, it was perceived as a constitutive part of the marriage system of polygyny that glorified utopian domestic harmony between a husband, a principle wife, and multiple concubines in the imperial era (Sang 2003, 37-65).[7]

During the Republican era, female same-sex desire became more visible with the introduction of the concept of homosexuality by Western sexology. On January 1, 1927, Chinese sexologist Zhang Jingsheng 張競生 (1888-1970), informally known as Dr. Sex, launched the journal *Xin wenhua* 新文化 (New Culture), which he framed as the primary channel for educating Chinese people about gender and sexuality (Wang 2021, 118). Zhang completed his BA and PhD in France between 1912 and 1920, where he was deeply influenced by the scholarship of French intellectuals. After returning to China, he served as faculty at Peking University and was likely the first public intellectual to emphasize sex from a personal perspective.[8] His book, *Sex Histories, Volume One* (*Xingshi diyi ji* 性史第一卷), compiles the personal sexual experiences of seven individuals (Y. Y. Wang 2021, 105). While erotic culture has long been a part of Chinese history, with the 1610 novel, *The Plum in the Golden Vase*

[7] Technically, there was only one formal wife. The others were concubines.

[8] According to Y. Yvon Wang's research on Zhang, his lectures and publications "outlined a utopian philosophy blending racial eugenics, sexual hygiene, radical social experimentation, and aesthetic theory, capped with a nearly fascistic nationalism." See Y. Yvon Wang, *Reinventing Licentiousness: Pornography and Modern China* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2021), 105.

(*Jinpingmei* 金瓶梅), standing as a notable peak of erotic literature in the late imperial era, it is recognized as a work of fiction. However, Zhang's *Sex Histories* focused on real personal accounts, making the discussion of sex from a personal viewpoint a groundbreaking act in Republican China.[9]

As the editor of *New Culture*, Zhang introduced British sexologist Havelock Ellis' (1859-1939) research on homosexuality. Heavily influenced by Ellis, Zhang began showing interest in the causation of *tongxing ai* 同性愛 (same-sex love), which became the common Mandarin translation of homosexuality in the Republican era (Sang 2003, 24; Chiang 2018, 141; Hee 2011, 82–91).[10] Additionally, terms such as *tongxign lian* 同性戀 or *tongxing lian'ai* 同性戀愛 were also used to refer to homosexuality. Zhang even published an announcement in the *Jingbao fukan* 京報副刊 (Jingbao supplement), calling for articles on the topic:

> Have you ever been involved in romantic relationships with individuals of the same sex, such as man with man or woman with woman? Have you engaged in sexual contact with their genitals? [If so,] how did you engage in such contact? Or did you view this relationship solely as a spiritual form of love? How do you currently feel about this inclination?

[9] For research on Zhang Jingsheng's *Sex Histories*, see Wang, *Reinventing Licentiousness*, 89–122.

[10] Tze-lan D. Sang's research shows that the terms "Western homosexuality" and "Japanese same-sex love" entered China in the late 1920s. See Tze-lan D. Sang, *The Emerging Lesbian: Female Same-Sex Desire in Modern China*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 99–126. During the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, Japan utilized *kanji* (Chinese characters) to translate hundreds European words. These translations had a significant influence on the word choices of Chinese intellectuals when importing Western knowledge. As a result, Chinese intellectuals adopted the Japanese translation of homosexuality, "*doseiai*" (same-sex love), and designated "*tongxing ai*" (same-sex love) as the Chinese equivalent. Unlike the term homosexuality, which emphasizes the sexual aspect of same-sex relationships, the term same-sex love in Chinese culture places a stronger emphasis on romantic love and interpersonal connections, aligning with the concept of "free love" advocated by May-Fourth intellectuals. See Sang, *The Emerging Lesbian*, 308; Hee Wai Siam 許維賢, *Cong yanshi dao xingshi: Tongzhi shuxie yu jinxiandai Zhongguo de nanxing jiangou* 從豔史到性史：同志書寫與近現代中國的男性建構 [From amorous histories to sexual histories: Tongzhi writings and the construction of masculinities in late Qing and modern China] (Taipei: Yuan-Liou chubanshe, 2015), 77–79. As Sang indicates, "*tongxing ai* is primarily signified as a modality of love or an intersubjective rapport rather than as a category of personhood, that is, as an identity" (Sang, *The Emerging Lesbian*, 118).

> 你曾與同性（即男和男，女和女）戀愛過否？曾用陰陽具接觸過否？又用什麼方法接觸？或僅看做一種精神的戀愛嗎？你現在對於這個嗜好如何？(Zhang 1926, 6)

However, this does not mean that Zhang supported same-sex love. He still perceived it as a negative sexual orientation and aimed to "guide readers to the right path of sexuality 引導人入於「性的正軌」"(Zhang 1926, 7).[11] In addition, bisexuality, along with other sexological concepts, was introduced to China through Japanese translation as a novel body of knowledge. Nevertheless, the discourse of eminent sexologists—Otto Weininger (1880–1903), Rosa Mayreder (1858–1938), Edward Carpenter (1844–1929), and others—emphasized bisexuality as a biological condition inherent to human beings, rather than a sexual orientation influencing individuals' affections (Chiang 2018, 190).

While the importation of Western sexual knowledge contributed to the development of Chinese sexology and publicized stories of lesbian love, the celebration and pathologization of female-female intimacy coexisted in the newly established regimes that succeeded the fall of the Qing. Women's same-sex love remained a contested site that obscured women's sexual liberation and oppression, especially among Peking opera actresses and their female patrons. These attitudes were woven together with rapidly changing ideas and practices of the Chinese family system and gender relations. Howard Chiang, in his book *After Eunuch*, notes that after the publication of Zhang Jingsheng's *Sexual Histories* (1926), concrete examples of female

[11] Hee Wai Siam, in his research, points out that although Zhang Jingsheng consistently published articles on same-sex love in the journal *New Culture*, many of these articles expressed distain towards the sexual behaviors of the same sex, in particular, sodomy. Hee Wai Siam 許維賢. "'Xingyu' de dixian: Yi Zhang Jingsheng zhubian de *Xinwenhua* yuekan wei zhongxin「性育」的底線 : 以張競生主編的《新文化》月刊為中心 [The bottom-line of 'sex education': Focusing on the journal New Culture, edited by Zhang Jingsheng]." *Zhongwai wenxue* 中外文學 [Chung-wai literary monthly] 40, no. 1 (2011): 84.

same-sex love began to be widely spread in the print media.[12] However, being seen was not the same as being accepted. In some popular writings, the examples of female-female intimacy were used to explain "perverse sexual desire" (*biantai xingyu* 變態性慾) (Chiang 2018, 147–48). Among intellectuals who identified as "progressive" and promoted sexual enlightenment discourse, including women's liberation and free love (*ziyou lianai* 自由戀愛), there was a contradiction in their views on same-sex relationships. While they challenged the traditional notion of "chastity" (*zhencao* 貞操) and advocated for women's autonomy in choosing their partners, female-female desire was often viewed as a symbol of a regressive nation. In other words, the concept of free love was only deemed acceptable when it adhered to heterosexual norms (Sang 2003, 130–132).

Peking opera actresses were introduced to theater in the mid-nineteenth century, and as Chapter One has analyzed, gender segregation on theater stages gave rise to *kunsheng*. The number of cross-dressing actresses grew rapidly, and despite the fact that most critics did not pay attention to them, a few recognized their ambitions and diligence. These actresses continuously demonstrated their commercial and artistic potential to audiences. By the turn of the Republican era, the first generation of *kunsheng*, including En Xiaofeng, achieved considerable box office success in Beijing, Tianjin, and Shanghai. Historian Andrea S. Goldman uses the late imperial courtesan as an example to illustrate that performing androgyny—"the woman who had mastered the male scholar's skills of literacy and poetry"—showcased the great allure of female entertainers (Goldman 2012, 31). *Kunsheng*'s potential to embody gendered practices ambiguous

[12] For research on Chinese sexology and Zhang Jingsheng, see, Hee Wai Siam, "'Xingyu' de dixian: yi Zhang Jingsheng zhubian de Xinwenhua yuekan wei zhongxing"; Howard Chiang, *After Eunuchs: Science, Medicine, and The Transformations of Sex in Modern China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018); and Wang, *Reinventing Licentiousness*, 105–107).

to their own biological sex greatly charmed audiences. After 1920, the legendary *kunsheng* Meng Xiaodong captivated the attention of opera critics and audiences, taking the art of *kunsheng* to new heights and rivaling male actors who played male characters on stage.

The practice of *kunsheng* enacting male roles even extended beyond the confines of the stage. Influenced by emerging fashion trends, it became common for *kunsheng* to don male attire in their everyday lives. This cultural phenomenon reflected a wider societal shift of the time. During the 1920s, the trend of women wearing men's clothing became pervasive throughout Chinese society. According to Xiaohua Zhao's research, this trend began among courtesans in the late Qing as a way to appear novel and unique. In the early twentieth century, female reformists and intellectuals perceived wearing male clothing as a means of expressing their progressive feminism. Nevertheless, it was not until the May Fourth Movement in 1919 that the trend of "having short hair and wearing male clothing" (*duanfa nanzhuang* 斷髮男裝) became a ubiquitous fashion (Zhao 2014, 185–186).[13] Influenced by the strong patriotic sentiments ignited by the May Fourth Movement, which called for both men and women to dedicate themselves to the country, women imitating men's fashion choices, unlike in the late Qing, was no longer regarded as perverse. Between the mid-1920s and the mid-1930s, *changpao* (長袍), a single-piece garment associated with traditional scholars advocating for the equal status for women, became fashionable in Beijing (Edwards 2000, 131; Wu H. 吳昊 2019, 183; Zhao 2014, 187).[14] The new fashion was praised as progressive by male intellectuals. In 1920, writer Xu Dishan 許

[13] Chinese revolutionary Qiu Jin (1875–1907) once claimed that wearing male outfits would transform her from outside appearance to reflect her inner will, helping her to possess men's convictions. See Zhao Xiaohua 赵晓华, "Qingmo Minchu de nü zhuo nanzhuang xianxiang 清末民初的女着男装现象 [Women wearing male clothing in the late Qing and Republican eras]," *Qiusuo* 求索 [Seeker] no. 12 (2014): 185.

[14] In his research, Wu Hao points out that it was not uncommon for Manchurian women, including *Gege* 格格 (Manchurian princesses), to wear *changpao* 長袍 (literally long robes).

地山 (1893–1941) published an article, “Women’s clothing” (*Nüzi de fushi* 女子底服飾), in the journal, *The New Society* (*Xin shehui* 新社會) , which was established in Beijing in 1919 by political activists Qu Qiubai 瞿秋白 (1899–1935) and Zheng Zhenduo 鄭振鐸 (1898–1958). Xu argued that “in the present world, there should be no distinction between men’s and women’s clothing 在現在的世界裏頭，男女底服飾是應當一樣底.” He believed that women wearing male clothing would bring about three positive outcomes: erasing gender differences, eliminating symbols of hierarchy, and saving both money and time (Xu Dishan 1920, 5–7). Concurrently, Chinese feminism, which can be tracked back to figures like He-Yin Zheng 何殷震 (also known as He Ban 何班 or He Zhen 何震, ca.1884–1920?), finally “formed a major part of the daily journalistic fare and widespread editorializing as well as causes for organized political activism” (Liu, Karl, and Ko 2013, 32). The rise of feminist thinking, including the pursuit of women’s liberation, also contributed to the popularity of women wearing male clothing. After 1935, this trend was no longer strongly associated with the implications of national crisis and gender equality; it became just one among many clothing aesthetics in popular culture (Zhao Xiaohua 2014, 186–187).

As public entertainers, some Peking opera *kunsheng* took on the role of fashion trendsetters. Wearing male clothing became a way for them to showcase their fashion sense. It was common to find images of *kunsheng* donning male attire in newspapers and tabloids during the 1920s and the 1930s. In 1926, a photograph of Meng Xiaodong wearing a *changpao* was featured in the *Chenbao xingqi huabao* 晨報星期畫報 (*Weekday morning pictorial journal*; see figure 9). The caption of the image reads, “Meng Xiaodong in male attire 孟小冬之男裝” (Unknown 1926a). In 1928, *Beiyang huabao*, a tabloid known for its support of Meng,

dispatched their photographer to capture her images. They not only published two photographs of Meng wearing a *changpao*, but also reported that her attire generated widespread recognition: "Recently, Xiaodong has been wearing male clothing without applying makeup, and she has received praise from everyone for her graceful and poised appearance 小冬此番出入，均做男裝，不敷脂粉，落落大方，人皆讚美"(See figures 10 and 11) (Banma 1928). In the same year, both *Shanghai huabao* and *Jingbao* 晶報 (*Crystal*) also featured photos of Meng in male clothing. In the *Shanghai huabao* photo, Meng opted for a male suit with a tie and a pair of glasses associated with the image of male intellectuals, presenting the reading public with another aesthetic of women donning men's attire (Unknown 1928; figure 12). However, not all print media interpreted Meng's choice of attire as a display of fashion preferences. The editorial of *Jingbao* viewed her fashion choices as an extension of her personal life and published two news articles. The first article claimed that Meng Xiaodong had taken a break from performing and resumed her career to dispel rumors that her marriage to Mei Lanfang, one of the most popular male cross-dressers in Peking opera, had led to a tragic incident. It was reported that Zhang San 張三 (?–1927), also known as Zhang Hanju 張漢舉, a newspaper staff member, was murdered by one of Meng's male fans who detested Mei (Yican 1928).[15] The second article mentioned Meng's haircut and her preference for male clothing, suggesting that without any indication, readers might mistake her for a beautiful man (*mei nanzi* 美男子) (Jialin 1928). Unlike *Beiyang huabao*, which often supported Meng, *Jingbao* intentionally placed these two news articles side by side, implying a connection between Meng's clothing style and her

[15] For detailed information about the incident involving Zhang San, please refer to Chapter Two.

relationship with Mei. It also hinted that women who adopted male style did so due to their frustrations with men.

Figure 9: Unknown. 1926a. "Meng Xiaodong zhi nanzhuang 孟小冬之男裝 *[Meng Xiaodong wears men's clothes]." Chenbao xingqi huabao* 晨報星期畫報 *[Weekday morning pictorial journal] 1 (31): 2.*

Figure 10: Banma 斑馬*. 1928. "Xiaodong xin yu* 小冬新語 *[The fresh topic of Xiaodong]." BYHB 5 (222): 2*

Figure 11: Banma 斑馬. *1928. "Xiaodong xin yu* 小冬新語 *[The fresh topic of Xiaodong]." BYHB 5 (222): 2*

Figure 12: Unknown. 1928. "Meng Xiaodong zhi nanzhuang 孟小冬之男裝 *[Meng Xiaodong in male attire]." SHHB 337, 2.*

Meng's fashion preferences were primarily discussed within a heterosexual framework, whereas the case of other *kunsheng*, such as Yang Jufen 楊菊芬 (1910–1978) and Guan Wenyu, highlighted their interactions with women. They not only emulated male actors but also one another within the *kunsheng* group. However, their emulation went beyond replicating biological sex or stage performances. Instead, they utilized such imitation as a means to challenge gender norms and expand the representation of the Republican-era women. In a photo published in *Beiyang huabao* in 1928, Yang Jufen can be seen wearing a male suit and hat, referred to as "in

men's foreign dress" in the English caption (Beijing Tongsheng zhaoxiang guan 1928, see figure 13). In the same year, *Shanghai huabao* featured an image of Yang in the male role costume and introduced her as follows:

> *Kunsheng* Yang Jufen, born in Beijing, is seventeen years old… [She] has a fondness for male clothing and lacks feminine features. When dressed in a Western suit and leather shoes, she appears as a handsome gentleman. Her gender becomes complicated and confusing, making it difficult for others to discern. Her performances lack the tender features of women, which is also attributed to her preference for male clothing. (see figure 14; Cheche 1928)
>
> 坤伶鬚生楊菊芬，籍隸北平，芳齡十七…平素喜男裝，無脂粉氣，西[裝]革履，宛然一佳公子，迷離撲朔，或難辨其雌雄，其臨台無女子之柔媚氣者，亦緣於此.[16]

[16] Guan Wenyu in her essay, "A retrospective of my opera life, part 8," also documented that Yang Jufen had a fondness for male outfits. See Guan Wenyu 關文蔚, "Xiju shengya huiyi (ba) 戲劇生涯回憶（八） [A retrospective of my opera life, part 8]." *GJYK* no. 32 (1979b): 61.

Figure 13. Beijing Tongsheng zhaoxiang guan 北京同生照相館. *1928. "Kunling Yang Jufen huazhuang jinying* 坤伶楊菊芬化裝近影 *[Actress Yang Jufen wears men's dress]." BYHB 192: 3.*

Figure 14. Cheche 中中. *1928. "Yang Jufen* 楊菊芬 *[Yang Jufen]." SHHB 416: 1.*

Two years later, the emerging star Guan Wenyu was introduced in the newspaper *Xin Tianjin*, with her stage performance being compared to that of Yang Jufen. The article was entitled, "Hao Wenyu is the Spitting Image of Yang Jufen" (*Hao Wenyu huosi Yang Jufen* 郝文蔚活似楊菊芬)[17]. This article highlights the similarities between the two actresses. In the article, the author writes:

> The singing, speaking, and acting [of Hao Wenyu] all imitates that of Yang Jufen. Their ways of speaking are especially similar. When listening to Hao's speech with closed eyes, [I] felt like there was no difference from Jufen. (Song 1930)
>
> 一切唱念作，無不摹仿楊菊芬。念白尤為神似，閉目聆之，直與菊芬無異.

The similarity between the two actresses extended beyond their stage performances, as both of them preferred to dress like men in their daily lives. In her memoir, Guan Wenyu repeatedly reminisced about her obsession with masculine clothing since childhood, and how taking the path of *kunsheng* perfectly satisfied her desire to be a man. Her parents were supportive of her fascination with male clothing. In her essay, "A Retrospective of My Opera Life, part 1" (*Xiju shenghuo huiyi (yi)* 戲劇生活回憶（一）), published in *National Opera Monthly* (*Guoju yuekan* 國劇月刊), she writes:

> When I was a child, I often felt frustrated about being a girl, so I would frequently imitate men's behaviors and mannerisms, which brought me joy. At the age of twelve, on one occasion, my parents wanted to fulfill my desire (*manzu wo de yuwang* 滿足我

[17] As noted above, Guan adopted the last name of her mother.

> 的慾望). They dressed me as a boy and hired Mr. Song Jianying 宋劍影, a renowned actor specializing in male roles, to be my teacher. (Guan 1979a, 55)
>
> 小時候我就遺憾生為女兒身，故常以模仿男人之種種行為及動作為快。十二歲時，在偶然機會裡，雙親為滿足我的慾望，將我打扮成男孩子模樣，並請了一位名鬚生，宋劍影先生做我的啟蒙老師.

Her fashion preference was never a secret confined to the household. A distant relative of her father, to express appreciation for Guan, gifted her a precious male mink coat: "Because I have liked to wear male attire since I was a child, [the relative] gifted me this precious item to cater to my preference 因作者自幼即喜男裝打扮，為投我所好，故將此珍品送給作者" (Guan 1978, 48; 1979a, 55). These examples demonstrated that in the Republican era, people could be open-minded about the relationship between gender and clothing type. Both *kunsheng* not only performed male characters on stage, but also performed men in their daily lives, challenging the orthodox performance of Peking opera, which dictated that only male actors were legitimate in male roles, and overturning gender dress norms.

However, Guan's fashion choices should not be only understood as her emulation of another *kunsheng*. In her memoir, Guan openly expresses her persistent longing to change her gender, a sentiment that had been present since childhood. Her desire extends beyond cross-dressing practices; she fervently wishes to be a man and harbors a deep resentment towards her assigned biological sex. Curiously, her parents never rebuked her for her interest in gender reversal. They instead hired the actor Song Jianying, who was the disciple of the well-known *laosheng* actor Wang Xiaonong, to teach her *kunsheng* performance (Guan 1986, 2). Guan's enthusiasm for playing a man in daily life motivated her to learn plays, and she became a regular performer at salon-style performances in the homes of the wealthy (*tanghui* 堂會). Into her teens, she was frequently invited to perform on such occasion, which greatly influenced her later

career. Thereafter, Guan was officially invited by many theater owners to perform in different cities, including Wuhu, Nanjing, and Changsha. Indeed, Guan's decision to play male roles on stage can be seen as a way for her to partially fulfill her desire for gender inversion and compensate for her resentment towards her assigned biological sex.

Unlike the representation of cross-dressing culture in the imperial era, when women often cross-dressed in pursuit of a cause, Guan's passion for cross-dressing was more self-affirming. In his research on transgender history in China, Matthew Sommer uses fictional figures to illustrate the paradigm of crossing culture in the imperial era. For example, the legendary folk heroine Hua Mulan 花木蘭 disguised herself as a man to take her aged father's place in the military, thus sparing him from the draft. Similarly, the renowned romantic figure Zhu Yingtai 祝英台 cross-dressed to protect her chastity while pursuing an education alongside men. These examples show that cross-dressing in traditional Chinese narratives was often driven by selfless motives. None of these figures cross-dressed out of personal desire, thereby neutralizing the transgressiveness of gender roles (Sommer 2024, 25–29). In contrast, Guan used opera performances to assuage her resentment at being a woman and legitimize her desire to be a man. By performing male characters, she was able to temporarily inhabit a gender role that aligned more closely with her inner identity and desires. It provided her with a sense of satisfaction and expression, which may have helped alleviate some of the frustrations and discontent she felt towards her own gender. Playing male roles on stage allowed Guan to explore and embody a different gender identity, offering a form of compensation for the limitations and dissatisfaction she experienced in her everyday life.

Although Guan was preoccupied with masculinity, her affective encounters with female fans and other actresses cannot be simply interpreted as a reversal of the power relationship

between male literati and boy actresses from the late imperial era. Instead, Guan's flirtatious encounters exhibited various possibilities of interpretations of same-sex love, revealing the chaotic transformation of sexual knowledge from the nineteenth to the twentieth century. The love affairs between Guan Wenyu and her female fans showcase the coexistence of multiple different concepts of same-sex love. Cross-gender acting not only brought Guan fame, but also gained her the affection of female patrons. In 1938, Guan led her own troupe of around three hundred people to perform at the Changsha Great Theater (*Changsha da juyuan* 長沙大劇院) in Hunan, where she met a female patron named Han Lili 韓莉莉. Guan portrays Han in the following way:

> She had great literary attainments. Her well-educated background made her selective about prospective husbands. [As a result], her hopes for marriage lagged behind [those of other girls]. I didn't dare to ask her age because many girls don't like others to inquire about it. It seemed that [she] was around six or seven years older than me. (Guan 1986, 147)
>
> 她的文學素養頗深，因學問好眼光就高，把婚姻大事也就耽誤了。我沒敢問她的年齡，因為很多女孩子不希望別人問年齡，不過看樣子是比我大六七歲。

Han frequently invited Guan to her place and gave her handmade gifts that symbolized love or affection:

> Miss Han treated me very well during my 52-day performance in Changsha. She did not know I was a woman. We framed our relationship as that of "an older sister and a younger brother." She embroidered a pair of blue satin slippers with white flowers, shaping her name "Lili" into the form of the blossoms on the slippers. [Additionally,] she embroidered a pair of white satin pillows with red threads, depicting the floral variations of the characters "Wen-yu" and "Lili." She would attend the theater every day to watch the performances and would always visit me backstage after the show. Sometimes, [she] would even bring [me] food. (Guan 1986, 147)
>
> 韓小姐待我甚佳。我在長沙演出五十二天戲，她並不知道我是個女性，以姐弟相稱，她先為我綉藍色緞子綉白花拖鞋，且以其名莉莉二字化成花朵，綉在拖鞋之上，並以文蔚、莉莉四字變化畫成花型，用白緞子，紅線綉成枕頭一對相贈。她每天必到戲園子看戲，散戲後必至後台來看我，有時還送些食品來。

Guan stayed in Changsha for fifty-two days and developed a deep connection with Han. Despite framing their relationship as that of siblings—"an older sister and a younger brother" (*jiedi xiangcheng* 姊弟相稱), the handmade slippers and pillows that Han gifted Guan provide evidence of the romantic nature of their encounters. However, it was not until the day before Guan's departure that Han eventually realized Guan's biological sex: "I stayed in Changsha for a total of fifty-two days, and it was right before I left to perform at Xiangtan Theater (*Xiangtan xiyuan* 湘潭戲院) in Hunan that Han Lili finally realized I was a woman 在長沙共計五十二天，即應湖南湘潭戲院之聘，在我起程之前韓莉莉始知我是女性" (Guan 1986, 147). This tardy revelation occurred because Guan consistently dressed in male attire, both during performances on stage and in her personal life off stage.

The advertisement of the theater also contributed to the ambiguity of Guan's gender identity. Guan explains, "the theater's advertisement… did not specify if I was a man or a woman. I also did not want others to know that I was female 戲院宣傳方面…並未說明我是男還是女，作者也不願意別人知道我是個女孩子" (Guan 1986, 146). When the theater advertised Guan's performances, it did not reveal her sex. Perhaps making the sex of Guan vague helped box-office receipts. In addition, as the opening of her memoir states, the gender identity Guan recognized and preferred was male; her gender expression was also prone to be masculine.

Unlike the conventional relations between male *dan* and male patrons that usually objectified actors and prioritized the agency of patrons, the relationship between Han and Guan reversed the positions of actor and patron, and the actress' agency was no longer neglected in this case. In this relationship, Guan had the agency to hide or reveal her sex to her female patron. When her performances in one city were finished, she could also pause any relationship as she wished, with no need to continue any responsibility. However, I also want to point out that we

can see Guan's agency clearly because the memoir is written in her voice, but anecdotes about intimacy between male patrons and male *dan* occlude the voice of the *dan*.

However, was Han entirely oblivious to Guan's biological sex? Is it possible that Han discerned to some extent that Guan was a woman during their interactions, yet both individuals harbored a shared enthusiasm for the theatricality inherent in gender performance extending from the stage to daily life? Additionally, if Guan and Han were engaging in a play showcasing the theatricality of heterosexual relationships—a representation aligned with mainstream norms—Han, in the role of initiator within this relationship, ingeniously challenged social norms by mimicking the very conventions they were portraying. Courtship, in this context, ceased to be merely an exhibition of masculinity or the privilege of men; women, too, enjoyed the right to pursue their ideal mate. Nevertheless, the conventional scenario of patrons as the initiator in courtship is reinforced again in this case.

Neither sisterhood nor same-sex love can properly describe the relationship between Guan and Han. The conventional trope of sisterhood requires at least two women to form a relationship. However, although Guan was biologically female, her gender expression, whether on stage or in daily life, was male. Furthermore, Han misunderstood her to be a man for a long time, automatically equating Guan's stage gender with her assigned biological sex. Most of their interactions did not occur within a context in which both of them recognized the other as a woman—a significant factor shaping the euphemistic trope of women's same-sex love.

Additionally, Han was never restricted within an all-female environment, which both Western and Chinese scholars agree could facilitate the development of same-sex love among women. In his article, "The School-Friendships of Girls," Ellis argued that women, especially female students, were easily attracted to same-sex relationships because they were often

restricted to all-female environments (Ellis 2018, 248). Pan Guangdan 潘光旦 (1899–1967) and Wu Jingchao 吳景超 (1901–1968), both strong proponents of Tsinghua University admitting both male and female students, also believed that the environment played an important role in human beings' sexual practices, suggesting that same-sex schools would contribute to the occurrence of same-sex love (Xu Weian 2023, 48–52). In Guan's story, Han approached Guan as an older female fan approaching a younger male actor. Guan, a successful cross-dressing actress, frequently led her own troupe to tour various cities and had more chances to interact with men. Their case was far from the circumstances of sisterhood.

However, the Western-imported idea of same-sex love is not an accurate concept by which to describe Guan and Han's story, either. Zhang Jingsheng once published Ellis' *Research on Same-sex Love* (*Tongxing ai yanjiu* 同性愛研究), which was likely an excerpt from his seven-volume sexology encyclopedia, *Study in the Psychology of Sex*.[18] In this booklet, Ellis argued that while same-sex love may be determined by genes, several factors had the potential to stimulate humans' same-sex desire, including being in a single-sex environment, seduction by a person of the same sex, and frustration with the opposite sex (Ailisi, 23–25). This perspective fails to comprehensively grasp the intricate social and cultural factors that shaped Guan and Han's relationship. I have suggested that Han and Guan's romantic relationship was not determined by purely environmental circumstances. Neither seduction nor frustration can adequately explain their relationship. When they were developing feelings towards each other, Han, perceiving Guan as a biological man, initially developed feelings for her on the assumption

[18] The book *Research on Same-sex Love* (同性愛研究 *Tongxing ai yanjiu*) is stored in the Shanghai Library. It was translated by Yang Huxiao and published by Jinzhong shudian (金鐘書店) without a publication date. However, it is possible that Zhang Jingsheng's Mei de shudian (美的書店) also printed the same book, or that the "Jinzhong" version was a pirated copy.

that she was engaging in heterosexual courtship. Guan, although aware of their shared biological female identity, identified and presented herself as a man, extending her stage gender to their daily life to establish a romantic connection with Han. Her gender identity either on stage or in daily life distinguished their relationship from the confines of same-sex love. Moreover, the notion that frustration with the opposite sex leads to same-sex affection fails to explain Guan's lifelong dream of having a wife, beginning from the age of twelve:

> I once had a long-standing dream. From the age of twelve to twenty-eight, I yearned to marry a wife. Every day, I would stand in front of the mirror, shaving the fine hair on my face, hoping that a beard would grow. Alas! Dreams are but dreams, and they remain unfulfilled. (Guan 1979d, 61)
>
> [我]曾經有過一個長時間的夢想，那就是我自十二歲開始，至二十八歲前，一直想娶一個老婆，每日照鏡子刮嘴上的汗毛，希望長出鬍子來。嗐！夢想終究是夢想，無法成為事實。

Her desire to be a man even reflected in her dreams about physicality. While explicit evidence is absent, there are suggestive hints in Guan's memoir that she imagined herself as engaging in heterosexual practices as the man in the relationship. She admits that she dreamed of having sexual encounters with girls between the age of eleven and thirteen:

> Before getting married, I had three dreams in which I am a real man in his twenties. In one, I wore a long robe and acted scholarly. I was engaging in activities that violated social regulations with an eleven-year-old girl. Regarding the other two times, I had sex with a thirteen-year-old girl. For the strange dreams I had at night, they had nothing to do with my thoughts during the day. I only hope to be a man in the coming life and would feel satisfied that I am no longer a woman. (Guan 1986, 241)
>
> 筆者在結婚之前，曾做過三次夢中我是個真正的、廿來歲的男人，且身穿長袍文質彬彬的同一位十一歲女孩子做出不規矩之事，兩次是與十三歲小女孩子做非禮之事。以上這些怪夢，並不是日有所思夜有所夢，我只希望來生是個男人，不要再是女人就心滿意足了。

Guan's misalignment between biological sex and gender identity was a recurring occurrence during the Republican era. Below, I analyze her same-sex dalliances in light of the culture of *xiaxie* (狹邪 or 狎邪).

The Culture of *Xiaxie* and the Joy of Same-sex Love

The term "*xia*" denotes being close without reverence. In the *Zuo Commentary* (*Zuozhuan* 左傳), an ancient Chinese historical commentary completed around the late fourth century BCE, it is documented that "Huaruo 華弱 and Yuepei 樂轡 had been naughty with each other since they were young 宋華弱與樂轡少相狎," both of whom were descendants of elites from the state of Song. Their mischievous behaviors were described as "*xia*" to illustrate their infringements of bodily boundaries. Throughout Chinese history, *xia* has often been combined with other words, creating terms, such as *xiaji* 狎妓 (to engage in intimate relationships with prostitutes or courtesans) and *xiayou* 狎優 (for male patrons to form intimate relationships with actors, particularly boy actresses). In the Ming and Qing dynasties, *xiayou* became a ubiquitous practice among male elites.[19] In the Qing dynasty, rich merchants (*lao dou* 老斗) also engaged in the culture of *xiayou*, using their wealth to become patrons of boy actresses. Historian Andrea S. Goldman has identified the *lao dou* as "a theatrical patron who had a surfeit of money and time on his hands and who indulged in the pleasures of the theater (including the purchase of intimate

[19] In her analysis of homoerotic sensibility in the Ming and Qing dynasties, Cuncun Wu argues that "in the Qing dynasty, the literati underwent other important changes, and the homoerotic sensibility current in Qing dynasty Beijing cannot be seen as a simple extension of Ming libertinism;" see Wu, *Homoerotic Sensibilities in Late Imperial China*, 56. She indicates that "heightened sentimentality, a new function as a status symbol, and an extreme form of romantic idealism" were added to the sensibility in the Qing; see Wu, *Homoerotic Sensibilities in Late Imperial China*, 56.

relations with boy actresses and entertainment after performances in the winehouses ringing the commercial playhouse district)" (Goldman 2012, 18). The recurring pattern of *xiayou* was characterized by power dynamics influenced by age, economic status, and class distinctions.[20] Whether the patrons were literati or wealthy businessmen, they often held higher social status, were older, and possessed greater wealth than the actors.

In 1923, the writer Lu Xun 魯迅 (1881–1936) proposed the cultural concept of *xiaxie*. In his work, *A Brief History of Chinese Fiction* (*Zhongguo xiaoshuo shilue* 中國小說史略), he expanded the concept of *xia* to introduce *xiaxie* as a narrative type of fiction (*xiaoshuo* 小說). *Xiaxie*, originally associated with the winding alleys and narrow streets where prostitution thrived, has been a recurring theme in Chinese history dating back to the Tang dynasty (D. D. Wang 1997, 53). Lu Xun characterized *xiaxie* as a literary genre focusing on figures such as prostitutes, courtesans, and male actors specializing in female roles. According to him, the mid-eighteenth century novel *A Precious Mirror for Ranking Boy Actresses* (*Pinhua baojian* 品花寶鑑) was the first example of *xiaxie* literature, centering on male *dan* (Lu 1924, 293).[21] From *xiayou* to *xiaxie*, male *dan* served as the link, demonstrating the transformation and extension from a social practice to a literary genre, in which they became the providers of joy and playfulness for their patrons.

Although Guan Wenyu's memoir is not a work of fiction, it inherits the features of the culture of *xiayou* and *xiaxie* novels. Literary scholar David Der-wei Wang, in his research on late

[20] These dynamics were documented in *huapu* (flower registers 花譜), a literary genre dedicated to ranking male actors specializing in *dan* roles.

[21] There are multiple interpretations of to what genre *A Precious Mirror for Ranking Boy Actresses* belongs. Goldman reads this novel in light of the genre of "flower registers (*huapu* 花譜), which emphasized theater gossip and ranked male actors who played female characters during the Qing dynasty. See Goldman, *Opera and the City*, 1-60.

Qing novels, points out that "the sarcastic dimension in Lu Xun's use of the term indicates not only the decadent subject matter but also the air of prurience and even self-congratulation pervading this narratorial discourse" (Wang D. D. 1997, 53). Guan's memoir showcases how *xiaxie* was practiced in daily life. The tones of "prurience and self-congratulation" reveal another aspect of the affective experiences of female-female love, which rarely has been read as a representation of joy.

In both the late imperial and the Republican eras, same-sex love, apart from being seen as abnormal, was often depicted as attachments associated with melancholy (Sang 2003, 58, 108–110). This association between same-sex love and melancholy is not unique to Chinese history. In Western culture, as Heather Love indicates, "the association of homosexuality with loss, melancholia, and failure runs deep" (Love 2007, 6). The love and desire experienced between individuals of the same sex have often resulted in more loss than celebration. Guan's memoir, in contrast, reveals a different atmosphere: one that is joyful and carefree. Her pride in her attractiveness conveys an open cheerfulness, especially when she mentions that at the age of fifteen, "I was extremely fortunate during this period as my desire to be a boy surrounded by girls was completely fulfilled. I had five girls around my age infatuated with me as a fake boy 這段期間真是幸運，過足了男孩子享受艷福的癮，筆者同時有五個年齡相等的女孩子，迷戀著我這個假男孩子" (Guan 1979c, 63).

In addition to the literary features of delight pointed out by Wang, *xiaxie* also encompasses the notion of violating social norms and breaking taboos (Hsiao 2013, 245). Guan's memoir is valuable in that it exhibits an alternative affective experience that many Western and Chinese works of homosexual literature do not capture or portray. It is evident that Guan takes pride in her ability to attract and engage with these girls (and later women). Her same-sex desire

is rooted in her stage gender identity and daily gender expression, blurring the boundary of the traditional trope of sisterhood. Sentences such as "I was extremely fortunate during this period as my desire to be a boy surrounded by girls was completely fulfilled" depict a sense of pleasure without any sadness, highlighting that, unlike typical depictions of same-sex love that often intertwine with affective experiences of sadness, loss, shame, and stigma, Guan's candid remarks demonstrate that same-sex love could be a source of joy. Performing men in real life realizes Guan's reluctance to be a biological woman and enables her to achieve a cheerful female-female love, which was considered pathological and abnormal in the Republican era. Nevertheless, this satisfaction is ironically realized within the framework of heterosexuality.

Slightly different from the common concepts of *xiaji* or *xiayou*, which were often initiated and controlled by officials, literati, or wealthy businessmen, Guan Wenyu's case exemplifies alternative power dynamics. The noticeable shift in power dynamics between actors/actresses and patrons is apparent. In her memoir, the ages of her female patrons do not consistently surpass hers, challenging the conventional reliance on age differential in the power dynamics of such relationships. While patrons bestowed Guan with a variety of gifts, the sentimental meanings of these gifts held more significance than their economic value. In contrast to male patrons who often gifted male *dan* lavish items to emotionally impress them, Guan received gifts, such as a pair of pillows embroidered with mandarin ducks or food, imbued with more affective meanings. It is also evident that Guan's family background was superior to that of most of her contemporary actors and actresses. She pursued an occupation as a *kunsheng* out of passion, instead of for financial insecurity (Guan 1986, 10). Her overall privileges empowered her to navigate relationships with opera patrons and establish an alternative sexual dynamic. Her memoir reveals a new dynamic between female patrons and herself, offering a fresh perspective

on the conventional relationships between male patrons and *dan* actors. It illustrates how the dominant status of the patron could be subverted through her romantic relationships.

Guan overturned the typical position of patron as subject and actor/actress as object-plaything within the culture of *xia*. Her memoir contains several stories about her love affairs with female fans, which demonstrate that Guan, due to her *kunsheng* identity, had more agency to choose whether or not she wanted to maintain a relationship. This freedom was rarely seen in the scenario of conventional *xiayou*, in which the male *dan* was the commodity selected by male patrons. However, in Guan's memoir, the performer no longer plays the role of being the target of *xia* dalliance by older men; instead, they possess the ability to initiate such encounters with their theatrical fans. When Guan toured Xiangtan, Hunan, she encountered another woman patron, Zhou Shaozhi 周紹志, who was approximately four years younger than her. She described that "she [Zhou] had a beautiful appearance, with big eyes and long eyelashes. Her face had a square-round shape. Her stature was neither tall nor short. She was quite vivacious and adorable 她生得很好看，一雙大眼睛，睫毛也很長，臉型方圓，身材不高也不矮，頗為活潑可愛" (Guan 1986, 148). Like Han Lili, Zhou also showered her with gifts to show affection:

> Miss Zhou brought me a lot of gifts, among which was a pair of pillowcases embroidered with the pattern of two mandarin ducks frolicking in water. The pillowcases were not of high quality, just ordinary items purchased from regular stores. There were other lavish gifts not opened yet. She simply grabbed the pillowcases and handled them to me. Pointing at the mandarin ducks, she said, "see, how close they are!" and never took her eyes off me. In my mind, I pondered, "this feels like something out of a play. Why is she looking at me like this?" (Guan 1986, 148)
>
> 那位周小姐帶了許多禮物來送我，其中有枕頭套一對，上面綉著鴛鴦戲水，並非高級品質，僅是普通店中買來之物，其他的貴重禮物並未打開，她僅將這枕頭套拿在手中遞給我看，特別指著上面那對鴛鴦說：「你看，牠倆個有多要好哇。」

> 並且目不轉睛的望著我的眼睛，我心裡在暗想，這好像是在演戲一樣，她為何用這種眼光看我呢？

Although in her memoir Guan claims that she was confused as to why Zhou looked at her adoringly, she indeed fully understood Zhou's feelings for her when she wrote this anecdote, perceiving it as a flirtatious gesture. Her writing, once again, reflects her inflated pride in her masculine charisma, echoing the literary expression of *xiaxie*.

By claiming uncertainty and confusion about Zhou's intentions, Guan skillfully plays out another performance of female-female love in front of her readers. Thus, the memoir becomes a theater stage, performing diverse gender relations. This analogy between the world and theater is not uncommon. William Shakespeare (?–1616) famously expressed a similar idea in *As You Like It*. He wrote, "all the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players" (Shakespeare 2019, 84). Similarly, in the early twentieth century, Peking opera actor Wang Xiaonong, known for his opera reforms, expressed the idea that the world is a theater and we are like actors performing on a stage.[22] Although Wang used this trope to promote Chinese nationalism through theater performances, the concept of the world as a theater and humans as actors can also be applied to understand Guan's everyday performance in a light and amusing way, as her performance revolves around *xia* rather than pursuit of a noble cause. The world becomes a theater and the memoir a stage. Guan utilizes the genre of memoir to "stage" her performance. Readers are spectators witnessing Guan's dramatic portrayal of same-sex love. Within this play,

[22] Historian Rebecca Karl in her book, *Staging the World*, points out that it was common at the beginning of the twentieth century that reformists regarded theater from the views of both literal and abstract space: "Wang Xiaonong viewed the "stage" in both literal performative and abstract metaphorical terms. This double figuration was common by 1904, since one way that Chinese intellectuals had for articulating the concept of their new sense of an uneven global present in which China was participating was precisely through a rhetoric of performance and staging." See Rebecca Karl, *Staging the World: Chinese Nationalism at the Turn of the Twentieth Century*, (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2002), 44.

Guan creates multiple layers to showcase her romantic affair. She perceives Zhou's testing—pointing at mandarin ducks and remarking on their closeness—as acts meant to gauge Guan's reactions. From the readers' perspective, Guan's responses become another performance, intentionally demonstrating her (seeming) inability to grasp Zhou's romantic hints. The playful hints and the exchange of jouissance between them invoke a contagious pleasure that captivates the readers.

Unlike Han, who misrecognized Guan as a man for almost two months, Zhou knew that Guan was a woman. She visited Guan often and rarely missed any of her performances. She even confided that Guan was her ideal husband:

> During one of my performances in *Mumen Valley* (*Mumen dao* 木門道), I portrayed Zhuge Liang as a god cutting wheat. After the show, while she [Zhou Shaozhi] was treating me to a midnight snack, she asked, "you are Zhuge Liang; you must know how to read fortunes. Can you tell me what kind of person that I will marry in the future?" Upon hearing this, I burst into laughter and replied, "as Zhuge Liang, I don't possess the skill of physiognomy or fortune-telling. However, based on my judgement, I believe you will marry an ideal husband."
>
> Shaozhi replied, "I will only marry someone like you." Hearing her words, I felt a great sense of pride and satisfaction, as if I truly resembled a man. From then on, I started to identify myself more as a man. During that period, I became her bodyguard (*huhua shizhe* 護花使者) and often escorted her home after performances. Occasionally, when we stayed up late into the night, I would share a bed with her and her female cousin.
>
> 記得有一天我演「木門道」諸葛亮裝神割麥，散戲後她請我吃宵夜時，她問我：「你是孔明，你一定會算卦，你替我算算將來能與哪種人結婚？」我聽了大笑起來，「我這個諸葛亮，一不會看相，二不會算命，僅憑判斷你定會嫁一位理想的丈夫。」
>
> 紹志說：「若有像你這樣的人我纔嫁呢。」，我聽她如此說法，很得意且暗自欣慰，大概我是像個男人吧！更以男人自居了，在這期間我成了她的護花使者，故時常演罷戲即護送她回去，偶然間玩到深夜，與其堂姐共宿一床。(Guan 1986, 149)

Zhou's infatuation not only enhanced Guan's gender expression, but also made Guan further proud of her gender identity. To Guan, having relationships with female patrons was a way to

prove that she as a *kunsheng* was able to portray a man in real life. Interestingly, if the relationship between Han and Guan still mixed the roles of heterosexual love, in which Han developed feelings for Guan due to misunderstanding, the connection between Zhou and Guan demonstrated purer female-female love because Zhou was always aware of Guan's biological sex. Nevertheless, Guan's infatuation with male identity still cast her relationship with Zhou in a relatively heterosexual rather than a homosexual imaginary. Her obsession with male identity on and off stage revealed her will to select a role that was more heteronormatively dominant within a relationship. The tendency to perform heterosexuality is not uncommon in same-sex relationships and practices, which often associate with and reflect dominant narratives of heteronormativity. Historian Matthew Sommer, in his research on sexual practices and legislation in the Qing dynasty, has noted that "gender implied hierarchy, and since sexual roles defined gender roles, the act of sexual intercourse was seen as a gendered expression of domination. When a male penetrated a female, he put her in her place—both literally and figuratively" (Sommer 2000, 117).[23] This rule applies to same-sex relationships, wherein the hierarchy between male *dan* and their male patrons positions male *dan* to "perform the role of courtesan both on and off the stage," implying his relatively submissive status (Goldman 2012, 31). While readers remain uninformed about whether Guan and her female patrons engaged in physical intimacy, the portrayal of female-female relationships in the memoir reinforces the traditional gender hierarchy, where the *kunsheng*, as someone who imitates men, enjoys more power than her female patrons, thereby reversing the conventional power dynamic between actresses and their patrons. Emulating heteronormative behaviors serves as a means to convey

[23] Matthew Sommer provides additional perspective on how gender expression influenced the allocation of social roles, emphasizing "masculinity was defined by the penetrant role in the division of sexual labor, corresponding to the husband/father role in the division of social labor." See Matthew H. Sommer, *Sex, Law, and Society in Late Imperial China. Law, Society, and Culture in China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 117.

homoeroticism, a phenomenon not confined to China. Similar characteristics are observed in Japan's Takarazuka Revue, an all-female musical theater troupe, where actresses taking on male roles often receive more attention and popularity compared to those portraying female characters.[24]

Although Guan Wenyu inverted the conventional power dynamics between actress and patron, the female-female love she chronicles is light and playful, echoing the concept of *xia* and the literary expression of *xiaxie* novels. While sometimes she had to address female patrons' jealousy, which usually was not easy to finesse, her descriptions demonstrate that she enjoyed seeing women vying for her attention. During her tour in Xiangtan, Han unexpectedly came to visit her. This casual visit resulted in a disturbance. When Han entered Guan's bedroom, she immediately noticed the mandarin duck pillowcases gifted by Zhou and became furious. She interrogated the servants as to where the pillowcases had come from and broke a washbowl in a fit of anger, causing distress to the servants. That night, when Guan returned home from the theater, the servant Gejie 葛姐 informed her of Han's angry reaction, saying, "she saw the pillows on your bed and furiously asked where they were from 她（指韓）見您床上用的枕頭，很生氣並且問這是哪來的？" (Guan 1986, 151). To check whether Han had fallen asleep or not, Guan entered the bedroom where Han was staying. However, when Guan approached, Han unexpectedly opened her eyes and slapped Guan hard across the face. An amusing encounter began:

> I took off my robe and hung it on the clothes rack. I walked quietly to the side of her bed to see if she had fallen asleep or not. While I was looking at her, suddenly, Han's right hand came across my face with a loud slap. Although I received her slap, I was not angry. I touched my face and sat by the edge of the bed, asking, "why are you mad at me?"

[24] For scholarship on the Japanese theater troupe Takarazuka, see, Jennifer Roberson's *Takarazuka: Sexual Politics and Popular Culture in Modern Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

Han grabbed a pillow and threw it at me, asking, “where did you get these pillowcases?” Hearing her question, I found it amusing. I truthfully answered her, “it’s from Miss Zhou Shaozhi, a friend who I just met in Xiangtan.” Han asked furiously, “why didn’t you use the ones I gifted you?”

I hurriedly explained, “Miss, yours were meticulously embroidered on satin. I couldn’t bear to use them. The ones she gave me were purchased from a regular store, nothing special, so [I] used them casually.” Upon hearing this, Lili could not help but want to laugh, but she did not laugh and pouted, saying, “I’ll make [you] new ones if they get worn out.” Just at that moment, a maid came in with water for washing our faces, which helped defuse the tension. I washed my face, and then the maid brought in two bowls of shredded meat noodles and a large cup of ginseng, red dates, and longan beverage. I had grown tired of these foods, but since performing consumed a lot of energy, I had to eat some. I pulled Lili off the bed, saying, “don’t be angry anymore; eat some with me and then go to sleep.” She remained stubbornly huffy, saying “[I] won’t eat.” (Guan 1986, 151)

我將長袍脫去，掛在衣架之上，而後放輕了腳步走到她床前，看她睡著沒有，我正在細看她時，冷不防刷的一聲，韓的右手已打在我臉上一個大嘴巴。雖然我挨了她一巴掌，但我並未生氣，自己摸了摸臉坐在床邊問：「你為什麼生氣？」

韓順手拿起一個枕頭朝我打了過來，且問：「你這枕頭套，是哪裡來的？」，見她這樣問覺得好笑，據實的告訴她：「是在湘潭才認識的朋友周紹志小姐送的。」韓很生氣的問：「為什麼我送你的不用？」。

我忙解釋說：「小姐，你是一針一針綉在緞子上的，我實在捨不得用，她送的這個是在一般商店中買來的，有什麼稀奇，所以隨便用用。」，莉莉聽我如此說法，不由得想笑出來，可是她並未笑仍然鼓著嘴說：「壞了我再做」。正在這時候女傭送進來洗臉水，算是解了圍，我洗完臉。女傭送進兩碗肉絲麵，一大杯人參、紅棗、桂圓湯來，這些東西我實在吃膩啦。可是每天消耗體力太多，又不得不補充一下。首先把莉莉從床上拉起來，「別生氣啦，陪我吃了再睡吧。」她仍然是氣唬唬的「不吃。」

Guan describes the triangle relationship between Han, Zhou, and herself in a humorous vein, staging a play that revolves around female-female love but mirrors heteronormative marriage. These unique dynamics prompt readers to reflect on typical Chinese polygynous marriages, with Han assuming the role of the primary wife who unexpectedly discovers her husband’s intimacy with another woman. She reacted by causing a scene and throwing a tantrum

to regain her husband's attention. Guan's portrayal of the entire experience imitates elite men who sought to navigate multiple love interests. Her imitation derives from her ability to play a male role in real life. However, despite Guan portraying herself as a man both on and off stage, her biological sex determined that this experience fell within the realm of female-female love. The narrative not only reflects the concept of playing house, often interpreted as an emulation of heteronormative marriage, but also carries a playful tone, as if the author were subtly winking at her readers and orchestrating a scripted play centered on female-female love.

Guan's romantic relationships were not limited to female patrons but also included opera actresses. As her memoir documents, four out of her five girlfriends were opera actresses:

> In the spring of 1928, I was fifteen years old. Mr. Hu Xianqing 胡顯卿, the manager of Chengnan Amusement Park (*Chengnan youyi yuan* 城南遊藝園), invited me to perform alongside Jin Youqin 金友琴 (1912–?), one of the greatest four actresses. This was a long-running performance that required actresses specializing in many roles…I was extremely fortunate during this period as my desire to be a boy surrounded by girls was completely fulfilled. I had five girls around my age infatuated with me as a fake boy. Four of these girls specialized in *qingyi* (mature women) and *huadan* (young, vivacious women) roles. Only one of them was known as Laoba (literally, old eighth), who was the eighth sister of *qingyi huadan* actress Zhao Meiying 趙美英 (1894–1966). Everyone called her Laoba. I cannot remember her real name. She did not perform Peking opera, so nobody called her by name; that's why I cannot remember.
>
> 民國十七年春，筆者已十五歲了應城南遊藝園，經理胡顯卿先生之聘，與四大坤旦之一的金友琴合作，這是長期演出，戲路必須要多方能應工… 這段期間真是幸運，過足了男孩子享受艷福的癮，筆者同時有五個年齡相等的女孩子，迷戀著我這個假男孩子。這幾位女孩子全是唱青衣、花旦的，其中只有一位是大名鼎鼎，青衣花旦趙美英女士的妹妹老八，大家只叫他老八，真正的名字我却不記得了，她不會唱戲，沒人叫她名字所以我才不記得。(Guan 1979c, 63)

In this paragraph, the interactions of *xia* occurred between actresses, rather than involving individuals in positions of power and public entertainers. These interactions altered the internal dynamics of *xia*, which originally relied on power imbalance, and transformed such practices into playful scenes, where both parties' feelings matched. This shift in dynamics challenges the

traditional understanding of *xia* between patrons and actors/actresses, as it moves away from the power dynamics and instead emphasizes the interactions between individuals within the acting community.

Performing Women

While Guan expressed a passion for women, claiming that her sexual orientation was exclusively homosexual is problematic. She had male admirers who expressed interest in and pursued her. In her essay, "A Retrospective of My Opera Life, Part 13" (*Xiju shengya huiyi 13* 戲劇生涯回憶 13), she documented a crush on a man named Wu Taixun 吳台勳, who was the fifth son of Northeastern Army general Wu Junsheng 吳俊陞 (1863–1928) (Guan 1986, 50). Their introduction occurred through a matchmaker, and Guan openly admitted her interest in Wu. This suggests that Guan was open to relationships with both women and men. She ultimately rejected Wu's proposal (*tiqin* 提親) not due to her aversion to men but because Mr. Wu was already married. Despite Wu's willingness to divorce and marry Guan, she chose not to involve herself in someone else's marriage and believed that doing so would bring negative consequences to her karma someday (Guan 1980, 65–66).

At the end of fall 1938, Guan encountered her future husband, Lu Ruizheng 陸瑞徵. At the time, he served as a staff member at the China Transport Corporation (*Zhongguo yunshu gongsi* 中國運輸公司), the former Sichuan-Guizhou Highway Transportation Bureau (*Chuangui gonglu yunshuju* 川桂公路運輸局). Guan, in her memoir, recalled that due to their age gap, with her being four years older than him, she initially did not consider him as a prospective spouse for the first four years. However, her perspective gradually changed thereafter:

> At first, there were rumors that we two were a couple. [I] did not clarify them because it was very funny and nothing serious. [However,] the repeated rumors furthered my interest in Lu. Both of us were alone away from home, so an unknowable affection was greatly deepened. We did not locate in a specific province but were back and forth in Guangxi, Guizhou, and Yunnan. Most of the time, we were separated and had little time together. Although we saw each other, we rarely hung out together. He and my disciples got along very well. When my rent was terminated, I could not find another place to stay. Staying in a hotel was inconvenient and expensive. When I was struggling, Lu happened to be assigned to governmental housing and lent me the place.
>
> At that time, rumors [about us] were widespread. I once warned myself that I should show him my gratitude for his assistance. [However,] although his personality was decent and he had a good heart, I could not marry him. Marrying him was unnecessary luck. The best thing to do now was to leave. I should leave him and stay away to avoid falling in love with him.
>
> When I was thinking about leaving, I fortunately was invited [by a theater] in Guiyang and left the area of rumor. After I arrived in Guiyang to perform, not long after Mr. Lu's company, China Transport Corporation, also moved to Guiyang…
>
> This meant that [we two were] really a match made in heaven. (Guan 1986, 243–44)
>
> 起初有人造謠說我二人要好，並未否認，覺得好笑根本談不上其他，再度造謠即助長了我對陸有了好感，因彼此間均是隻身在外，漸漸加深了莫名其妙的一種感情，我們的所在地又非固定一省，而是桂、黔、雲等之間，可以說聚少離多，即使見面彼亦很少同我在一起玩，他與我的徒弟們相處十分融洽，當我遭遇租房到期，找不到房子，如住旅館既不便，又不經濟，正在此困難中恰巧陸配到公家宿舍，借給我住。
>
> 該時謠言四起，我曾對自己警告，受人幫助應當感謝，雖然彼人品不錯、心地善良，不可嫁他，如嫁他未必是福，卅六計走為上策，最好離開他遠去，免墜入情網。
>
> 正求遠去時，幸好及時再度應貴陽之聘，慶幸離開謠言之區。當到達貴陽演唱不數月，陸先生任職的 機關「中國運輸公司」，悉數遷移貴陽……
>
> 這可以說是天作之合了吧。

Guan's decision to marry Lu stemmed from an exhaustion of constantly answering inquiries about her marital status. Additionally, the ongoing Chinese Civil War and the Second Sino-Japanese War made her unable to foresee a time of victory. The wartime conditions posed

obstacles to the development of opera arts, intensifying the complexities of her career. In the midst of these challenges, Lu seemed to be suitable person to whom she could entrust a lifelong commitment (*tuofu zhongshen dashi* 託付終身大事) (Guan 1986, 244). They got married on October 11, 1943 (Guan 1986, 245). The wedding symbolizes the end of Guan's transgender-identity off stage, and her *kunsheng* performances on stage significantly declined thereafter. Playing the role of Lu's wife became her primary focus.

While Guan's portrayal of her encounters with Lu may not have been as animated as her depictions of those with women, it is evident that her interest in him was not entirely absent. A poignant example of the depth of their connection emerged during wartime when Guan was faced with the option of retreating to a safer area by herself with other refugees. Guan adamantly refused to separate from her husband, leading to heated arguments between the couple. The intensity escalated to the point where they contemplated divorce as a result of their differing opinions on whether Guan should leave for a safer location alone (Guan 1986, 274–76). Guan also disclosed that their reunion amidst the chaos of wartime evoked a profound emotion, describing it as "a brief separation makes the couple feel like honeymooners" (*xiaobie sheng xinhun* 小別勝新婚). This sentiment infused her with a sense of tenderness, emphasizing the resilience of their bond even in the face of adversity (Guan 1986, 315).

The union between Guan and Lu was undeniably influenced by societal norms and the significant impact of the ongoing wars, but Guan treated her family life as responsibly as her *kunsheng* career. Despite lacking proficiency in doing housework, Guan, a well-known Peking opera *kunsheng*, dedicated time to practicing cooking and laundry after getting married (Guan 1986, 251–52). This adjustment reflected her willingness to adapt to the expectations and responsibilities that marriage entailed. Furthermore, Guan possessed a profound understanding of

the moralistic parallels between the fictitious tales of opera and the complexities of real-life experiences. The conduct of opera characters served as a source of inspiration for her personal life, influencing her roles in the tangible world, such as her understanding of the role of a wife within the confines of heteronormativity and the accompanying responsibilities. She wrote:

> I once thought that I began wearing male attire since 1925, at the age of twelve. I performed the male role for a long time and always wanted to be a sanctuary for others. I did not accept tender love from others, being a leader for many years. Once married, I became someone's spouse. I had to change my old lifestyle and become a dutiful wife and loving mother persistently. I must adhere to [the traditional division of roles,] with men taking care of careers and women managing domestic responsibilities, assisting the husband, and educating the children.
>
> Moreover, I could not let others ridicule Mr. Lu's lack of discernment in marrying a wife inept at housework. After marriage, the model roles I was going to play were Wang Baochuan in *The Red-Maned Steed* (*Hongzong liema*), Liu Yingchun in *The River Bend of Fenhe* (*Fenhe wan*), and *Mother Meng in Mother Meng Selects Neighbors* (*Mengmu zelin*), instead of roles, like Zhu Maichen's wife, Cui Shi. (Guan 1986, 244–45)
>
> 曾想我自民國十四年（十二歲）開始即穿男裝，當男人當的太久了，總想做他人的避風港，不願接受別人的憐愛，多年居於領導人的地位，如一旦結婚即成為別人的眷屬，必須改變往日的作風，且須持之以恆做一賢妻良母，務求男主外女主內，負相夫教子的責任。
>
> 更不能令別人笑陸君沒有眼光，娶來了一個不會做家事的太太，婚後必須扮演的角色，要以紅鬃烈馬之中王寶釧、汾河灣中的柳定春、孟母擇鄰的孟母等為標準，不能演朱買臣的老婆崔氏一類的角色。

When Guan first visited her mother-in-law in 1946, she seamlessly incorporated the "old morality" (*jiu daode* 舊道德) she had learned from the stage into her new family dynamics (Guan 1986, 342). Her portrayal as a sweet daughter-in-law proved to be remarkably successful, as she humbly recounted in her memoir:

> In front of our neighbors, she (the mother-in-law) would frequently praise me as a daughter-in-law who understands filial piety. The truth is, I had no real understanding of what true filial piety meant. Nevertheless, life is akin to a play. I simply transposed stories of loyalty and filial piety from the stage to our home. It was my achievement to

> properly perform in front of her. However, this did not qualify as genuine filial piety. (Guan 1986, 343)
>
> 她常在芳鄰面前誇讚筆者，是個孝順媳婦。其實我懂什麼是真正的孝順，反正人生如戲，我是把戲台上的那些忠孝的事兒，搬到家裡發揮，能在她老人家面前表演的得當也算是我的成功，也談不上是孝順。

If the characters that Guan performed could be distinguished as characters on stage and social roles in real life, the stage characters that she played and witnessed often contributed to the development and interpretation of her social roles.

Like many actresses at the time, Guan ended her stage career after marrying, keeping her promise to her husband not to perform opera anymore (Guan 1986, 258). Nevertheless, her "opera addiction" (*xiyin* 戲癮) persisted: "although my passion for opera remained strong, to respect my husband's feelings, I decided not to participate in commercial plays. I declined all invitations 我雖然戲癮仍然很大，但是為了顧及外子的心意，已下(Guan 1986, 258–59)定決心不唱營業戲，那些來請者我都婉言辭謝" (Guan 1986, 258). However, there were a few performance invitations she could not decline due to a sense of obligation (*renqing* 人情). She made sure to discuss these with her husband and reach a consensus (Guan 1986, 256–59, 262). She illustrates how she persuaded her husband to agree to the performance:

> When I mentioned the invitation to perform to my husband, he expressed disproval. His rationale was that, despite his modest stipend, we had sufficient means for our living expenses. There was no need for me to stay late [to perform opera] and exhaust myself. I explained that a husband and a wife are a union, sharing both honor and disgrace. Nowadays, society emphasizes gender equality, and we are facing national crises. [We] should do whatever we can do. Moreover, performing opera is an art, not inferior to any other profession. The general public widely acknowledges my talent [in performing *kunsheng*]. I often receive compliments and need to put more effort into [the opera]. If I were to give up my stage life, the public believes it would be a huge loss for the field of Peking opera. Also, those opera practitioners rely on me [to earn profits]. I should comply with their wishes. Not to mention, helping people is the source of happiness.
>
> He heard my thoughts and no longer tried to stop me. (Guan 1986, 258–59)

> 當我將此事（邀演）向外子提起時，他不以為然，他的理由是，雖然他的收入不多，但生活不成問題，何必過此夜半生活，耗費體力。我則解釋，夫妻本屬一體，榮辱與共，現在社會男女平等，且又是國難當頭，應各盡其力，再者唱戲這一行業，是一種藝術，也不次於其他行業，且眾人公認我這方暫有相當成就，常被稱讚，實在應該努力再努力，如放棄舞台生涯，眾人以為是梨園一大損失，再者那些人如今均仰賴於我，確實應該順乎人情，何況，助人為快樂之本。
>
> 他見我如此說，也就不再多講。

Despite Guan's successful persuasion of her husband and her return to stage performances, the "discussion" proved challenging. The prevailing norm dictating that women should not perform after marriage persisted. This also demonstrates that even a woman who was determined and had been a leader for a long time still had to use national crises and other factors to justify the continuation of her career.

At the end of 1944, Guan made a significant decision to sell off all her costumes, demonstrating her commitment to fully dedicating herself to the family and biding farewell to her *kunsheng* career. Despite her occasional performances after marriage, her enduring popularity led to numerous invitations, ranging from charity events to commercial plays. Reflecting on this, she wrote, "people frequently approached me to discuss the possibility of mounting performances. In my husband's view, he believed that if the costumes were not disposed of, it would be challenging to dispel my inclination to return to the stage 因時常有人來洽談唱戲之事，外子看在眼中，總覺得行頭（戲裝）如不除去很難斷絕了我再唱戲的念頭" (Guan 1986, 293). Furthermore, she acknowledged the time- and energy-consuming nature of preserving those lavish costumes. Eventually, the Family Troupe of Li (*Li jiaban* 厲家班) purchased all the costumes. This marked Guan's true retirement from the stage. If her wedding

symbolizes the termination of playing men in real life, selling her costumes signifies the cessation of her cross-dresser identity on stage.

Memoir Writing as Affective History

In July 1948, Guan migrated to Taiwan when her husband secured a job at the Taiwan Tobacco and Wine Monopoly Bureau (*Taiwan yanjiu gongmai ju* 台灣菸酒公賣局) (Guan 1986, 375). In Taiwan, despite the presence of state-sponsored and privately-owned Peking opera troupes, Guan did not directly involve herself with these organizations. Instead, she served as an accountant in the Taiwan Railway Administration and retired in 1981 (Fu 2009). Nevertheless, she occasionally taught opera in schools, including at the Fuxing Opera School (復興劇校 *Fuxing juxiao*, now the National Taiwan College of Performing Arts), a professional Peking opera school, and the student clubs at Taipei First Girls High School and National Taiwan Normal University.[25] Her students included *laosheng* Ye Furun 葉復潤 (1947–2018), *laodan* Qu Fumin 曲復敏 (1948–), and *laosheng* Wu Xingguo 吳興國 (1953–), all of whom are highly recognized opera stars.[26] She also taught many outstanding amateur opera performers, such as Zhang Jisheng 張吉生, Fu Wuguang 傅武光 (1944–), and Liu Xiangfei 劉翔飛 (1951–

[25] For insights into the development of opera schools, public troupes, and private troupes in Taiwan, see, Nancy A. Guy, *Peking Opera and Politics in Taiwan* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005); and Wang An-chi, *Taiwan jingju wushi nian* 臺灣京劇五十年 [Fifty years of the development of Peking opera on Taiwan] (Taipei: Guoli chuantong yishu zhongxin, 2002).

[26] Qu Fumin graduated from Fuxing Opera School and specialized in *laosheng*. In 1981, while working for the Fuxing Chinese Opera Troupe (*Fuxing guoju tuan* 復興國劇團), the troupe leader, Liu Boqi, requested her to perform the *laodan* character, Dowager She (She taijun 佘太君), in *Yanmen Pass* (*Yanmenguan* 雁門關). From then on, Qu gradually shifted towards the role of *laodan* and ceased her *laosheng* performances in 1990. For further details, see Lin Jiayi 林佳儀, *Laosheng laodan yishenjian: Qu Fumin de jingju biaoyan shengya* 老生老旦一身兼: 曲復敏的京劇表演生涯 [Excelling in Both Senior Male and Female Roles: Fumin Qu's Performing Career in Peking Opera] (Taipei: Taibei shi zhengfu wenhua ju, 2017), 75–90.

1990). She began composing her memoir in the late 1970s and eventually published the book in 1986.

Memoirs encompass emotions, yet they also offer insights into history. For Guan, her memories represent the history she both lived and witnessed. A memoir presents discourses that are not dictated by authorities, revealing to readers an individual's unique perspective on the world. When crafting the memoir, Guan was working for the railway administration during the day and supporting extracurricular activities at several colleges and high schools. Writing the memoir required additional time. She could only use her noon break (*wuxiu* 午休) to compose it:

> Due to my busy schedule, I could only utilize the free time after lunch. When my colleagues were taking naps, I began quietly reflected on my past. Scenes from my past surfaced one after another. I wrote down what I remembered without additional exaggeration or embellishment, much like a spring silkworm spitting silk—word by word, sentence by sentence. I wrote [my memory] plainly on scraps of paper or the back of overdue monthly accountant reports. After leaving the office, I transcribed this content onto standard writing paper, titling it, *A Life in the Theater for a Woman Cross-Dressing to Play Men*. (Guan 1986, tit. *Xie zai qianmian* 寫在前面 [Written by way of preface])
>
> 因無餘暇寫即利用中午飯後空閒，同事們在午睡時，我便靜靜的思想往事，由腦海中一幕一幕的呈獻在眼前，好似春蠶吐絲一般，一點一滴的，把記憶所及，無絲毫染色，也沒有美妙文章，平鋪直敘寫在廢紙上，或過期的會計月報表之背面，下班後空閒時抄於稿紙上，命名「女扮男裝戲劇人生」。

Guan emphasizes the appeal of her essays through asserting that "all of them are true stories; not a single sentence is false" (全是真實故事，沒有一句虛言) (Guan 1986, tit. *Xie zai qianmian* 寫在前面 [Written by way of preface]). Her claim of presenting narratives "without additional exaggeration or embellishment" highlights the objective nature of her memory, which in turn compels readers to engage with the text.

However, the assertion of authenticity in literary pursuits can be perceived as a rhetorical device that serves the objectivity of history. Can memoir truly remain authentic and free from the

dictates of authority? Is it possible for writers, who are also participants in society, to completely elide the influence of politics in their everyday lives? Although Guan emphasizes authenticity and provides a wealth of fascinating stories that readers cannot obtain from other sources, her memoir clearly omits political details, especially after 1949. This demonstrates a paradox conveyed through her book. On one hand, her declaration of authentic storytelling implies an indisputable truthfulness in the homoerotic and heterosexual narratives presented. On the other hand, the intentional omission of political context may lead readers to wonder if actually there are "spicier" same-sex stories that Guan has chosen to withhold. This uncertain duality accentuates the inherent absurdity of Guan's memoir, suggesting that the pursuit of authenticity may itself be a complex interplay of truth and omission, compelling readers to question the very nature of her narrative. Consequently, this tension invites a deeper exploration of how personal histories are shaped, not just by individual experiences but also by the broader sociopolitical landscape in which they exist.

The launch of Guan's memoir is particularly noteworthy in the context of late 1970s and 1980s Taiwan, where the government was emphasizing "uniting China under the Three Principles of the People" (*sanmin zhuyi tongyi Zhongguo* 三民主義統一中國), as attested by one of the prefaces in Guan's memoir (Guan 1986, tit. Chen Shan xu 陳珊序 [Preface by Chen Shan]). From 1947 to 1987, due to tensions across the Taiwan Strait, Taiwan had one of the longest periods of martial law in the world. When we consider the timeline of Guan's writings alongside these significant historical events, the performative nature of her memoir becomes even more apparent. Most of Guan's essays and books were published between 1978 and 1986, a period that followed the end of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) in mainland China. Due to political rhetoric and policies in Mainland China, the perceived necessity of a state

orchestrated "cultural war" (*wenhua zhan* 文化戰) in Taiwan was particularly strong in the 1960s and 1970s, reinforcing the emphasis on Taiwan as the "real China." This narrative aligned closely with the political agenda of the Nationalist Party. Although by the time Guan's memoir was published the rhetoric of the cultural war had gradually softened, it still persisted. Concomitantly, the timeframe of Guan's publications coincided with Taiwan's gradual transition from dictatorship to democracy, a transition that did not fully materialize until the first presidential election in 1996. Civil society, including the realms of publishing and literary production, were the first to liberalize.[27]

Although Taiwan did not celebrate its first LGBT Pride event until 2003, unlike the Chinese Communist regime, which was restrained by rigid gender principles and strictly suppressed narratives about homosexuality, same-sex literature (*tongzhi wenxue* 同志文學) has long been a part of its cultural landscape, in contrast to mainland China, which has strictly suppressed narratives related to homosexuality.[28] Notable examples include writer Pai Hsien-yung 白先勇 (1937–), who starting in the 1950s published short stories that either hinted at or directly portrayed affective and physical encounters between same-sex individuals, such as *The Lonely Seventeen* (*Jimo de shiqi sui* 寂寞的十七歲). In the 1970s, writers like Guo Lianghui 郭良蕙 (1926–2013) and Xuan Xiaofo 玄小佛 (1950–) explored female same-sex relationships in their novels. Queer literature scholar Chi Ta-wei 紀大偉 highlights Guo's *Beyond the Two Kinds*

[27] For further research on civil society liberalizing ahead of the authorities, see Anson Au, "Networks, Politics, and the Literary Public Sphere: The Foundation of Modern Democracy in Taiwan (1970s–1990s)," *Sage Open* 10, no. 2 (2020): 2158244020927414. https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244020927414. See also, Hsiao Shu-Lin 蕭淑玲, "Taiwan dangwai zazhi dui dangwai yundong de zuoyong (1979-1986) 台灣黨外雜誌對黨外運動的作用（1979~1986）[The function of opposition magazines in the opposition movement (1979-1986): A case study of the Formosa system in the 1980s period] (Master's thesis, Taoyuan: National Central University, 2006).

[28] For the history of Taiwan's *tongzhi* literature, see Chi Ta-wei 紀大偉, *Tongzhi wenxue shi: Taiwan de faming* 同志文學史：台灣的發明 [A queer invention in Taiwan: a history of tongzhi literature] (Taipei: Lianjing chubanshe, 2017).

(*Liangzhong yiwai de* 兩種以外的), later retitled *The Third Gender* (*Di san xing* 第三性), and Xuan's *Outside of the Circle* (*Yuan zhi wai* 圓之外) for their distinctive portrayals of tomboy characters in the 1970s Taiwanese queer literature landscape (Chi 2017, 194–204). In 1983, Pai Hsien-yung released his first novel, *Niezi* 孽子 (Crystal boys), which explores the encounters among several young gay men and their family dynamics. Given these precedents, Guan's memoir might not be as earth-shattering as it initially seems, despite its claims of authenticity. Thus, the political climate and existing same-sex literature, albeit limited in number, undoubtedly influenced both the content and reception of Guan's work, shaping how much she could share of her narratives and highlighting the delicate balance between personal expression and prevailing sociopolitical conditions.

Ultimately, politics—whether within or beyond the national agenda—implicitly and subtly shaped the performativity of Guan's memoir. The relative openness of Taiwanese authorities, along with the public's gradual (though still conservative) acceptance of same-sex love in the 1970s and 1980s, may have acted as a political catalyst, underscoring Taiwan's democratic values in contrast to those of the Chinese Communist Party. In this context, Guan's memoir illustrates a convergence of individual affection, gender politics, and national policies, presenting an alternative history rich in emotional experiences and the evolution of gender paradigms. It subtly preserves the memory of female-female love, safeguarding a part of history that was once viewed as taboo or even perverse. Furthermore, her memoir offers readers a multifaceted performance that operates on various levels—encompassing the realms of opera, female same-sex love, heteronormative love, and national representation.

Conclusion

Guan Wenyu's story challenges the binary assumption of *kunsheng*'s sexualities. Her sexual engagements went beyond the traditional categories of heterosexuality or homosexuality. Her romantic interactions with actresses, female patrons, and heterosexual men provide infinite possibilities for expanding the existing spectrum of gender expression. The roles she demonstrates in her book illustrate that the gender spectrum does not have to be linear but can take on a multi-angled geological shape. At the same time, her story reveals that the history of sexuality does not necessarily follow a linear trajectory, as public attitudes in the Republican era may have been more liberal toward same-sex love than those in PRC and Taiwan until the KMT gradually loosened its control in the 1970s.

Although Guan challenges conventional male roles on and off the stage in various ways, it is crucial to recognize the paradox inherent in her stories. To a large extent, she subscribed to normative gender ideology. Her affective interactions with other women often mirrored conventional heterosexual relationships, reflecting her internalized beliefs about gender dynamics. This adherence to traditional patterns was particularly evident in her own marriage, which ultimately led her to retire from the stage to focus on family life (not unlike the experience of Meng Xiaodong after her union with Du Yuesheng). Thus, while her narrative reveals a bold critique of societal norms, it also underscores the complexities of navigating personal gender expressions within the constraints of those very norms. In this tension between challenge and conformity, Guan's story invites a nuanced exploration of the interplay between individual identity and broader societal norms.

Conclusion

This project historicizes the transformation of Peking opera *kunsheng* from the 1880s to the 1980s, demonstrating how they evolved from a minority group overshadowed by and in competition with male actors' commercial success and artistic talents into figures with agency, capable of competing with their male peers, and finally gaining autonomous voice. By analyzing the lives of *kunsheng* on and off the stage, I reveal the complexity of Chinese women's everyday theatrical and sexual practices and situate them within the discursive encounters between imported Western sexology and existing Chinese sexual knowledge at the turn of the twentieth century. As a result, this research aims to complicate Chinese gender relations through the lens of *kunsheng* and their eroticism. *Kunsheng*, I show, offered an alternate to the concept of the gender binary, thereby showing the multiplicity of Chinese genders and sexualities.

Although the origins of *kunsheng* can be traced back to at least the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368), they were banned from commercial stages for most of the Qing dynasty. It was not until the late nineteenth century that entertainment demands and commercial stimulation led to the establishment of all-female troupes in Shanghai, thus introducing Peking opera *kunsheng*. Due to the long-term stigmatized association between actresses and sex workers, actresses, including *kunsheng*, were frequently assumed to be available for sexual services, a perception that was not entirely unfounded. Existing archives surrounding all-female troupes often used the term, "licentious," to describe the plays they staged, claiming they involved racy elements and violated social norms. The inversion of *kunsheng*'s biological sex and stage genders provided additional layers of entertaining pleasure, yet most opera critics did not appreciate this role reversal as

much as they did that of the male *dan*, and frequently lumped *kunsheng* in as a group with straight-sex actresses. Furthermore, unlike *laosheng* actors, some of whom were even sponsored by Empress Dowager Cixi (1835–1908), opera critics often overlooked *kunsheng*'s performance skills.

Although *kunsheng* lacked the privilege of opera critics to influence and, even, manipulate perceptions of themselves in the public media, they devised several strategies to shape their public images. By participating in philanthropic activities, they showed the public that their moral standards were as strong as those of other citizens. This also implicitly echoed the discursive trend of the "new women" introduced to China during this period, showcasing the coexistence of economic independence and moral virtues in women. Additionally, by emphasizing their stage roles and eliding their biological sex in theater advertisements in newspapers, they directed the reading public's attention to their performance skills. Thus, despite being women cross-dressers who were not as noticeable as their male counterparts, *kunsheng* subtly devised strategies to carve out space for themselves in the public media. Concomitantly, with the improvement of their performance skills, some opera critics gradually noticed their talents and shifted their critique from *kunsheng*'s off-stage morals to their on-stage performances.

Unlike male *dan* who were sexualized because of their feminine roles on stage, *kunsheng* were eroticized due to their biological sex, the novelty of which boosted box office success. Numerous tabloid articles published during the Republican era showed that *kunsheng*, whether single or married, were unable to escape daily critiques for being women. Single *kunsheng* often encountered vicious slander and gossip about becoming the concubine of a general or an official. Even those in stable marriages could not avoid sex discrimination. Motherhood became a

common pretext for opera critics to criticize the perceived decline in their singing skills and voices. At the turn of the late Qing dynasty and early Republican China, *kunsheng* gained increased visibility among theatergoers. However, this heightened visibility was often overshadowed by the sexualization and eroticization of their performances.

Entering the Republican era, with the prevalence of public media and the lifting of the government ban on actresses, *kunsheng* exercised their agency and participated in public media in a more direct manner. They refused to entirely forfeit their right to speak for themselves or to let tabloid articles define who they were and what they did. As a result, they either hired lawyers to warn the public that spreading slander would result in legal consequences or they publicized their grievances about experiencing continual misunderstanding from society. For *kunsheng*, public media was no longer a harmful domain that they had to endure. Instead, it became a tool they could also utilize, although this opportunity was not shared by all.

By advancing their performance skills, *kunsheng*, such as the legendary Meng Xiaodong, not only won recognition from opera connoisseurs, but were also considered to possess superior artistic skills in comparison with their male peers. Although the connoisseurs' compliments were sincere, their assessments of *kunsheng*'s performances were often based on how well they imitated their male mentors, thus suppressing the possibility for *kunsheng* to create their own performance styles. Despite women receiving more opportunities to engage in public media, their agency was still unable to be fully exercised in their performances. Male discourse continued to dominate Peking opera, and the virtuosity of *kunsheng* still had to rely on the foundations established by their male mentors.

Although *kunsheng* lacked opportunities to develop their own performance styles, a few of them exhibited an alternative form of same-sex love that was distinct from the power

dynamics between literati and male *dan*. Unlike most portrayals of same-sex love, which were frequently depicted as melancholic, *kunsheng* demonstrated the possibility of a cheerful same-sex love, thereby complicating the understanding of women's sexual practices in everyday life. By imitating heterosexual relationships, *kunsheng* who were dissatisfied with their sex roles, such as Guan Wenyu, reversed the power dynamics between actresses and patrons, embracing affective encounters with female patrons and actresses who specialized in female roles. Unlike earlier *kunsheng*, who were often objectified and regarded as sexual playthings by male patrons, Guan's same-sex relationships revealed that *kunsheng* in her era had greater agency in deciding whether to remain in a relationship and whom to pursue. Female patrons, to some extent, were selected by the *kunsheng*, thus highlighting the unique form of sexuality that women in such cross-dressed roles brought to the fore. However, *kunsheng* were not fixed in their sexual orientations; they might still develop feelings for men and marry a man they deemed worthy. This complexity revealed the Republican era as a relatively permissive period characterized by a multiplicity of discourses and practices.

Although the experience of *kunsheng* revealed the complexity of sexual discourse and practice in the Republican era, it was not until the 1970s in Taiwan that Guan Wenyu began sharing her stories through memoirs. Guan's memoir recounted her affective experiences with female patrons, actresses, as well as a few men, during the 1930s and the 1940s. Primarily, her memoir showcased individual affective experiences and demonstrates that, during the postwar period, *kunsheng* possessed greater agency to reveal their affective stories to readers, regardless of the gender of their partners. The privilege of sharing personal stories and modified concurrent discourse was no longer solely controlled by reporters or writers, most of whom were male; women were eventually able to write for themselves and, indeed, share their sexual desires

publicly without relying on others for representation. However, the same-sex love stories that Guan presented were not entirely outside the bounds of social norms. They still, to some extent, mimicked the dynamics of heterosexual relationships, which may have made them more acceptable to the reading public. Despite the reversal of gender dynamics between Guan and her female romantic interests, their encounters still reinforced heterosexual norms due to the male roles *kunsheng* played both on and off the stage. This blending of traditional motifs with personal narratives was not done in isolation but coincided with the political and social contexts of postwar Taiwan, leading to an alternative evolution and performative nature of gender and sexual identities.

By the time Guan's memoir was published, literary works exploring same-sex encounters had already appeared in the 1970s, laying the groundwork for greater public acceptance. Although Guan's memoir is presented as authentic, the stories she shared took place at least thirty years prior. This temporal distance, along with earlier literary precedents, effectively neutralized the transgressiveness of her storytelling. Moreover, the lingering effects of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) across the strait in the Mainland, which radically restructured Peking opera, provide a stark contrast to Taiwanese society's relative openness. This context fosters an understanding of the relative freedom of gender performance in the second half of the twentieth century in Taiwan, creating space for the growing significance of personal voices in challenging and reshaping cultural narratives.

While *kunsheng*'s journey may suggest a linear progression of women's agency, the history of Peking opera women cross-dressers is far from straightforward. During the 1920s to 1940s, although they were not appreciated by New Culture intellectuals like Hu Shi and Lu Xun, *kunsheng* enjoyed significant prominence, with their performances frequently advertised in

newspaper columns. However, after the KMT lost the Chinese Civil War (1946–1949) and retreated to Taiwan in 1949, the popularity of opera cross-dressers was no longer as prevalent as it had been in the past. This decline was exacerbated by the complex political entanglements and continuous conflicts between the KMT and the CCP. In Taiwan, the commercial value and popularity of Peking opera never reached the levels seen in mainland China prior to 1949. Although a few Peking opera troupes toured Taiwan during the Japanese colonial period (1895–1945), the genre was never as popular as Taiwanese opera (*Kua-á-hì*) or glove puppetry (*Pòo-tē-hì*).[1] After 1949, while many Peking opera troupes and training schools were established, the majority were funded by Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense (Guy 2005, 33–41). Outside of this state-sponsored system, few private commercial troupes were able to survive.[2] Consequently, the commercial development of *kunsheng* was not as promising as in previous eras.

In mainland China, the development of *kunsheng* experienced an extended hiatus after 1949. Despite the grandfathering in of eminent cross-dressing performers in the 1950s, opera schools ceased offering training in such performances due to communist gender norms and had to wait until the 1990s to be resumed. The outbreak of the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s further exacerbated the dire circumstances faced by Peking opera practitioners, especially those specializing in cross-dressing roles. Although Peking opera gained some popularity during the

[1] For Peking opera troupe troupes' activities in Taiwan during the Japanese colonial period, see, Xu Yaxiang 徐亞湘, *Rizhi shiqi Zhongguo xiban zai Taiwan* 日治時期中國戲班在台灣 [Chinese Opera Troupes in Taiwan During the Japanese Colonial Period] (Taipei: Nantian shuju, 2000).

[2] The Contemporary Legend Theater (當代傳奇劇場), led by actor Wu Xingguo, is the most successful private Peking opera troupe in Taiwan. Founded in 1986, it remains active today. Before its establishment, it was rare for opera troupes to survive beyond five years. For example, the Gu Troupe, led by the renowned actress Gu Zhengqiu 顧正秋 (1929–2016), regularly staged opera performances at Yongle Theater (*Yongle zuo* 永樂座) in Taipei, from 1948 to 1953. In the 1970s, the Qulin National Opera Troupe (*Qilin guoju tuan* 麒麟國劇團), owned by actor Zhou Linkun 周麟昆 (1911-1984), regularly performed at the Jinri Shijie Department Store (今日世界百貨) from 1969 to 1973. For further scholarship on Taiwan's Peking opera, see Wang An-chi, *Taiwan jingju wushi nian*.

Cultural Revolution due to the adaptations of stories aligned with communist agendas—leading to the emergence of model revolutionary operas (*yangbanxi* 樣板戲)—the communist insistence on gender-conforming performances further halted the cultural inheritance of cross-dressing traditions. As a result, the careers of opera cross-dressers stagnated, and their numbers declined. Nevertheless, despite the pressures of the communist gender agenda and the Cultural Revolution, which resulted in a reduction of both male *dan* and *kunsheng* roles, these performances did not entirely disappear.

In mainland China, the recognition of cross-dressing in Chinese opera slowly improved after the Cultural Revolution. Traumatic memory facilitated a resurgence of interest in "traditional" culture, prompting Chinese people to reexamine their cultural heritage, including the traditional plays and performance practices in Peking opera. The significance of cross-dressing performances was reaffirmed. However, while the older generation of Peking opera cross-dressers, such as *kunsheng* Zhang Wenjuan 張文涓 (1923–), are still alive, and many served as opera teachers, few younger individuals dedicated themselves to cross-dressing performances, leading to an inheritance crisis within Peking opera.[3] Most performing arts rely on the transmission of skills and knowledge between mentors and apprentices. Without the participation of new generations, the art form risks extinction. In 1992, the Shanghai City Traditional Opera School (*Shanghai shi xiqu xuexiao*, 上海市戏曲学校) made an exception by offering education in women cross-dressing performances.[4] Wang Peiyu 王珮瑜 (1978–) became

[3] For research on Zhang Wenjuan, see, Cheng Hsiao-Yuan 程筱媛, "Ershi shiji qianqi Shanghai zhi jingju nvling yanchushi yanjiu 二十世紀前期上海之京劇女伶演出史研究 [Research on the history of Peking opera actresses' performances in Shanghai during the first half of the 20th century (1900-1949)]" (Master's thesis, Taipei: Taipei National University of the Arts, 2019), 49–54.

[4] In 2002, the Shanghai City Traditional Opera School was merged into the Shanghai Theatre Academy (Shanghai xiju xueyuan 上海戏剧学院).

the first *kunsheng* student in state-sponsored Peking opera schools after 1949 (Ji Xiaoting 2023). Her artistic success reminded many of the *kunsheng* master Meng Xiaodong (Hebaotang 1996).[5] Additionally, her active engagement on social media platforms, such as Bilibili and TikTok, helped her gain more support from fans. While her efforts to promote Peking opera have been inspiring, she has faced criticism from some audiences who accuse her of acting like an influencer, rather than an artist. Nevertheless, her widespread recognition and career success has demonstrated that Peking opera *kunsheng*, once again, have the potential to captivate society, highlighting the complex and winding nature of the role's development (Ji Xiaoting 2023).

Meanwhile, in Taiwan, Peking opera cross-dressers were celebrated, as the KMT sought to legitimize its political position as the rightful government of China by promoting the preservation of traditional Chinese culture. The Cultural Revolution's outbreak provided an opportune moment for the KMT to showcase its understanding and knowledge of authentic Chinese culture to the international community. The Taiwanese authority's political agenda led to frequent Peking opera tours from Taiwan to Europe, America, and other Asian countries between late 1957 to 1991 (Guy 2005, 53–61). Consequently, opera cross-dressers became cultural symbols that fulfilled the KMT's political needs and garnered greater recognition from operagoers, shaping an alternative appreciation of Peking opera among Sinophone audiences.

In Taiwan, whether in theaters or opera schools, cross-dressing performances were not uncommon. One of the most notable male *dan* performers was Cheng Jingxiang 程景祥, renowned for his extraordinary skill in performing *qiao*—the use of high-heeled shoes that

[5] After 1949, the first male *dan* officially graduating from opera schools in China was Liu Zheng (刘铮, 1974–). In 2003, Liu enrolled in the Beijing Vocational College of Opera and Arts (*Beijing xiqu yishu zhiye xueyuan* 北京戏曲艺术职业学院).

allowed actors to mimic the mannerisms of women with bound feet.[6] Additionally, the number of *kunsheng* increased significantly due to the nurturing environment provided by opera schools. In the 1980s and 1990s, female-painted-face performer Wang Haibo 王海波 became a prominent figure in cross-dressing performances and was recognized by China's prestigious Plum Performance Award in 1991, one of the highest honors in theater performance. Today, a few *kunsheng* continue to stage opera performances regularly in Taiwan, including Zou Ciai 鄒慈愛 (1963–), Liu Huadi 劉化蒂 (1962–), Wang Yinghua 王鶯華 (1962–), Xie Fuqing 謝復青 (1970–), and others, demonstrating the multiplicity and inclusive potential of Sinophone performing arts.[7]

My study contributes to Chinese opera history and gender history by filling the gap in the scarce scholarship on *kunsheng*. My research emphasizes *kunsheng*'s dynamic and evolving role in Peking opera and their reflection of changing Chinese gender relations within the broader socio-cultural landscape. It underscores their transformation from marginalized performers to prominent figures who not only advanced Peking opera but also challenged social norms and contributed to the diversity of gender identities, orientations, and practices. This trajectory reflects upon the complexity of gender relations and cultural exchanges between China and the Western world, offering insights into the intricate interplay of performance, sexuality, and identity within a shifting historical context.

By analyzing the storytelling and performative nature of one *kunsheng*'s memoir, which I consider an affective archive, I situate the memoir within the political and cultural landscapes of

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[6] For research on the history and application of qiao, see, Huang Yufu, *Jingju, Qiao he Zhongguo de xingbie guanxi 1902–1937* 京剧・跷和中国的性别关系, 1902-1937 [Peking opera, qiao, and China's gender relations] (Beijing: Shenghuo, dushu, xinzhi sanlian shudian, 1998).

Taiwan to examine how Taiwan, as a Sinophone community, engaged with transgender identity. It is essential to emphasize that—whether in China or in Taiwan—this identity has had its own historical and cultural context, which cannot be understood through the generic terms, "transgender," commonly used in Euro-American countries. As Matthew Sommer in his research on Chinese transgender history points out, "the term 'transgender' is new (although people who trans gender are not)" (Sommer 2024, 6). Additionally, Peking opera productions have undergone significant transformations, shifting from a focus on masculine nationalist themes to an exploration of women's stories and subjectivities throughout the 1990s and 2000s. Daphne Pi-Wei Lei, in her book *Alternative Chinese Opera in the Age of Globalization: Performing Zero*, notes that, after the millennium, Taiwan's alternative Peking opera productions (*xinbian jingju* 新編京劇) employed "depoliticized modernity and deliberate effeminization" to expand the performance scope of Peking opera (Lei 2011, 56). These productions enriched traditional themes from the periphery without overtly challenging patriarchal structures (Lei 2011, 23–63). While these alternative opera productions are not directly related to kunsheng, their use of femininity to subtly contest hegemonic norms resonates with the kunsheng framework. In this study, my objective is to illuminate the possibilities regarding gender identities and relations that *kunsheng* can offer, highlighting how these differ from the dynamics provided by literati and male *dan* performers, and exploring the unique contributions and opportunities Taiwan can provide to other Sinophone communities. Specifically, I explore how Taiwan's historical trajectory, particularly the tensions across the Taiwan Strait, uniquely enabled *kunsheng*, such as Guan Wenyu, to write and publicize their stories.

This study also engages with conversations in Queer Studies. Although I avoid using the term, "queer," to describe cases involving in same-sex love and cross-dressing, as I wish to avoid

the confusion of conceptual imposition. Many *kunsheng* stories extended beyond the boundaries of the gender binary and conventional heterosexuality. I situate these stories within their unique sociocultural context, analyzing the "queerness" of these figures and experiences from late Qing to Republican China. Historian Howard Chiang in his Sinophone research uses the story of the Taiwanese intersexed soldier, Xie Jianshun 謝尖順 (1918–?), to explore the "queer emergence of transsexuality in postwar Taiwan" (Chiang 2018, 239). With the involvement of the authorities and the close attention of Taiwanese society, Xie ultimately underwent gender affirmation surgery to become a woman. Building upon Chiang's Sinophone queer approach, I examine how *kunsheng* in Taiwan navigated these gendered relations, showing how their stories reflected a complex interplay between local cultural norms and broader social, even global, forces, while offering insights into gender fluidity and identity formation specific to the Sinophone queer world.

Lastly, this research reads archives through the lens of performativity, opening up new possibilities for literary interpretation and historical reconstruction. Rather than focusing solely on whether certain archives, such as tabloids and memoirs, are objective enough to reflect historical facts, I propose examining their performative nature. This approach emphasizes how these texts were actively constructed identities and events, rather than mere records of them, allowing us to explore the ways in which history and personal narratives are shaped by social and cultural performance. Moreover, the specific time and place in which these archives were produced may also reveal the performative dimensions of society's gender imaginary, with writers and readers conspiring to create performative actualities.

Although this project aims to trace a comprehensive trajectory of Peking opera *kunsheng*, it has not yet had the opportunity to fully explore an in-depth trajectory of the development of

kunsheng in postwar Taiwan, a period that overlapped with the era of high socialism (1949-1978) in mainland China, and its developments into the twenty-first century.[8] This historical divergence between Taiwan and China created a dramatic distinction in state perceptions of *kunsheng* across the Taiwan Strait, significantly influencing their education and legacy in both countries. Future research could further investigate these differences to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how *kunsheng*'s role and representation evolved in different political and cultural environments, thus shedding light on the broader implications of these changes for Peking opera and East Asian cultural history.

[8] High socialism refers to the era from 1949-1978." See Jeremy Brown and Matthew D. Johnson, *Maoism at the Grassroots: Everyday Life in China's Era of High Socialism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015).

Bibliography

Abbreviations

Periodicals Cited More Than Once

BJHB Beijing huabao 北京畫報 [The Peking pictorial news]

BYHB Beiyang huabao 北洋畫報 [The pei-yang pictorial news]

CB Chengbao 誠報 [Honesty]

DFRB Dongfang ribao 東方日報 [The eastern daily]

DGB Dagongbao 大公報 [L'Impartial]

DSJ Dashijie 大世界 [The great world daily news]

FB Feibao 飛報 [Fly]

FHZZ Fanhua zazhi 繁華雜誌 [Flourishing magazine]

GJYK Guoju yuekan 國劇月刊 [National opera monthly]

HB Hongbao 轟報 [Blast]

JB Jingbao 晶報 [Crystal]

LB Libao 力報 [Force]

LYHK Liyan huakan 立言畫刊 [Liyan journal]

SB Shenbao 申報 [The Shun pao]

SHHB Shanghai huabao 上海畫報 [Pictorial Shanghai]

SHRB Shehui ribao 社會日報 [The social daily news]

SLJ Sanliujiu huabao 三六九畫報 [369 Pictorial]

XB Xibao 錫報 [The newspaper of Wuxi]

XJCB Xiju congbao 戲劇叢報 [Forum on drama]

XJYK Xiju yuekan 戲劇月刊 [Drama monthly Journal]

XRB Xiao ribao 小日報 [The Petty News]

XSJ Xishijie 戲世界 [The world of theater]

XTJ Xin Tianjin 新天津 [Hsin Tientsin daily news]

XTJHB Xin Tianjin huabao 新天津畫報 [New Tianjin pictorial]

XYZZ Xiangyan zazhi 香艷雜誌 [Fragrance and elegance]

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