Transgressing the Stage: Female *xiqu* Performers at the Turn of the Twentieth Century

by

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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Title: Transgressing the Stage: Female *xiqu* Performers at the Turn of the Twentieth Century

This dissertation explores a previously overlooked aspect of *xiqu* history - the role of female *xiqu* performers in *fin-de-siècle* China. Focusing on the transitional period between the late Qing and the early Republican era (1870-1937), it argues that female *xiqu* actors were not merely marginal figures but played a crucial role in shaping the stagecraft and culture of *xiqu*, on par with their male counterparts. The study begins by examining the performances of female *xiqu* actors in foreign concessions in Shanghai and Tianjin during the late-Qing period. It highlights how these performers demonstrated their exceptional stagecraft, which was comparable to that of the top male performers of the time. This challenges the notion that female performers were inferior in the *xiqu* tradition.

Moving on to the 1910s in Beijing, the dissertation explores the significant contributions of female players like Liu Xikui and Xian Lingzhi. These performers challenged the traditional *sheng* players of the previous generation, showcasing their talent and pushing the boundaries of gender norms within *xiqu*. The study then delves into the 1920s, a period when female players such as Zhang Wenyan, alongside *nandan* stars, formed the first star culture in modern China. This highlights the importance of female performers in shaping the entertainment industry and popular culture of the time. Contrary to popular belief, the dissertation argues that the triumph of Republican *nandan* stars over their female counterparts was not solely due to the male players'

alleged artistic superiority. Instead, it suggests that various forms of social prejudice against women placed the female actors at a disadvantage in their competition with male players. This sheds light on the complex dynamics of gender and power within the *xiqu* tradition. Overall, this dissertation aims to rectify the neglect of female *xiqu* performers in the study of *xiqu* history. By highlighting their significant contributions and challenging traditional gender roles, it seeks to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the role of women in shaping the stagecraft and culture of *xiqu* during the Qing-Republic transition.

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To those women who had the audacity to enter into a profession that was both promising and perilous in *fin-de-siècle* China.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter Page

I. INTRODUCTION 12

Prologue 12

Literature Review 20

Methodologies and Inspirations 26

Chapters 35

II. ALLURING WOMEN/OUTLAW BODIES: FEMALE ACTORS IN LATE-QING CHINA 48

Spatial Theatre Historiography 56

Female Actors as a Source of Moral Perils 61

Female Actors as Competent Performers of Masculinity 71

Strategies of Survival: Remaking the Space and the Body 80

Coda 84

III. THE UNFILLED PROMISE: FEMALE ACTORS IN THE FIRST DECADE OF THE REPUBLIC 86

Conflicting Aspirations: Acting, Marriage, and the Double Performances of Women Actors 94

The "Natural" Body of Femininity 112

Nannü heyan: From Periphery to Acceptance 119

Coda 125

IV. THE MULTIPLE PERSONAE: FEMALE STARS, PHOTOGRAPH, AND THE POLITICS OF CROSS-DRESSING 127

The Ever-Changing Zhang Wenyan: The Gong Stage, Stardom, and Photograph 130

Meng Xiaodong and the Politics of Cross-Dressing..... 154

Coda..... 164

V. CONCLUTION 165

BIBLIOGRAPHY..... 168

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure Page

1. A theatre troupe of three male and four female actors were expelled by local officers in a small southwestern town Luzhou in Sichuan Province 82

2. A set of two paintings depicting how a local Buddhist monk in Yingkou safeguarded the performances of an all-female troupe from Shandong. 83

3. A set of two paintings depicting how a local Buddhist monk in Yingkou safeguarded the performances of an all-female troupe from Shandong 83

4. Cover of an early Republican anthology of writings dedicated to Liu Xikui, which features a photograph of the female star 96

5. An illustration of the scene "Stealing the Map" of *Twentieth-century New Camélia* 99

6. A photographic portrayal of Liu Xikui in *Fengyue huabao* 101

7. A photographic portrayal of Jin Yuemei in Vol. 20 of *Xikao* 115

8. A photographical portrayal of Zhang Wenyan wearing men's clothing 138

9. A photographical portrayal of Zhang Wenyan in *Cotton Spinning* 139

10. A photographical image of Zhang Wenyan in stylish Western-style dress 139

11. A *Shenbao* advertisement for Gong Stage performances in April 3, 1922 151

12. A photographical portrayal of Zhang Wenyan in *Times Pictorial Weekly* 153

13. A photographical image depicting Guo Ruiqing adorned in men's clothing 161

14. A photographical image depicting Meng Xiaodong in women's clothing 161

15. A photographical portrayal of Meng Xiaodong in men's clothing 162

Figure Page

16. A photographical image depicting female actor Ma Yanyun in men's clothing... 162

17. A poignant scene of *Woman, Human, Demon* 166

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

> There is no need to justify a study of women [in the field of theatre history], the struggles of the last twenty five years have settled that one question, if no more.
>
> — Tracy C. Davis
> in *Actresses as Working Women* (1991: xii)

> Without a personal narrative that allowed for a male supporter, rescuer, or champion, she [Charlotte Cushman] created herself, inscribed her own story, represented herself, first in these tentative pencil scratches and later in playbills on two continents and in the life she had the audacity to live.
>
> — Lisa Merrill
> in *When Romeo was a Woman* (1999: 3)

> Like theater, women were the target of reform as well as spectacles on display.
>
> — Ayako Kano
> in *Acting Like a Woman in Modern Japan* (2001: 7)

I. Prologue

Genres waxed and waned. Repertories were constantly renewed. But political anxiety over the body of a female actor[1] tended to persist transculturally before modern times. While their absence had never prevented the theatrical stage from being a site of erotic sensation, female actors were nevertheless denied access to theatre acting across the globe from ancient Greece to Tokugawa Japan because of a shared moral concern about female actors' sexuality.

[1] Throughout this dissertation, I have employed the word "actor" as a gender-neutral term because the term "actress" bears negative connotations that trivialize female performers.

In Qing-dynasty China (1644-1911), beginning with a legal edict that the Yongzheng 雍正 Emperor introduced to prohibit female subjects from performing for the imperial court, the authorities implemented a series of edicts that virtually terminated female actors' access to both court performances and commercial theatres (Goldstein 2007: 21). In consequence, like ancient Greek drama and Japanese kabuki, various forms of *xiqu*[2] 戲曲 (literally, "drama [of] sung-verse," also known as "traditional" Chinese theatre) such as *kunqu*[3] 崑曲 (or *kunju* 崑劇, "Kun opera") and *jingju*[4] 京劇 ("Beijing/Peking opera") became all-male genres, and it became customary that female characters were performed by *nandan* 男旦 (male players who specialize in performing female roles) in Chinese theatre. And it was only after the founding of the

[2] It is widely believed that *xiqu* reached its maturity during the Song-Yuan transition during the twelfth century in the forms of *zaju* 雜劇 (literally, "variety plays") in the north and *nanxi* 南戲 (literally, "southern drama") in the south. In the Ming era (1368-1644), the form of *nanxi* evolved into the genre of *chuanqi* 傳奇 ("transmitting the marvelous"), while *zaju* became non-existent. In the long nineteenth century (1770-1900), various regional theatrical forms were introduced to Beijing and the imperial household, and these regional theatrical forms gradually became the most popular genres in China. Today, *xiqu* is widely acknowledged as a comprehensive form of traditional Chinese theatre, encompassing over three hundred local genres. However, the concept of *xiqu* as a collective term for diverse singing-dancing dramas was a distinctly modern development. It is not only due to the inclusion of various *xiqu* genres that only came into being in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, such as *yueju* 越劇 (Zhejiang opera), *qianju* 黔劇 (Guizhou opera), *dianju* 滇劇 (Yunnan opera), and *jiju* 吉劇 (Jilin opera), but also because all premodern forms of *xiqu* have undergone modernization in terms of dramaturgy and *mise-en-scène*.

[3] Emerged as *kunshan qiang* 昆山腔 (lit., the tune of Kunshan) in the Suzhou area in the Yangtze River Delta region, *kunqu* adopted the dramatic form of *chuanqi* 傳奇 ("transmitting the marvelous") in the mid-Ming era and evolved into a national genre between the Ming-Qing transition.

[4] *Jingju*, arguably the most prominent genre of *xiqu* in contemporary times, achieved its maturity in the late nineteenth century. It is widely recognized that the emergence of *jingju* can be attributed to the arrival of the renowned Anhui troupes, *sanqing* 三慶, *chuntai* 春臺, *sixi* 四喜, and *hechun* 和春, in Beijing after 1790.

Republic of China (1912-1949) when the Qing edicts had lost their legal impact that Chinese female performers were able to formally return to the theatrical stage; with the reemergence of female actors, *xiqu* evolved into a remarkable age in the second half of the Republican era, when numerous celebrated female performers began to stride towards national stardom.

However, this grand narrative of the history of female actors of the Qing and Republican periods necessitates a number of critical annotations. Firstly, not only did female theatrical performers exist on the Chinese stage for centuries before the High Qing prohibitions were formally introduced, but also those players performed a wide array of dramatic roles ranging from alluring courtesans to male warriors (Chou 1997: 131-137). Secondly, while players in mainstream *xiqu* troupes remained exclusively male during the remainder of the Qing, in the late nineteenth century, the establishment of foreign concessions in the semi-colonial metropolises spanning from Yingkou in the North all the way to Amoy (or Xiamen) in the South provided opportunities for female actors and all-female troupes. These performers found a receptive audience among those seeking transgressive pleasures, as their outlaw performances gained popularity in the theatres of these cities.

Thirdly, while *xiqu*'s exclusive employment of *nandan* as female-role specialists might be considered an unfortunate compromise in the first place, the *nandan* were no longer deemed as substitute players of female roles towards the end of the Qing dynasty. With a growing number of youthful males joining Beijing's *siyu* 私寓 (lit. "private residences") business, which was associated with male prostitution, the *nandan* garnered reputation as both theatrical actors and male courtesans among literati who

came to Beijing from all corners of the country in the late Qing. Such a practice of men playing women did not cease to prosper even after the compulsory closure of the houses of *siyu* in 1912. With the ascendancy of *nandan* stars of *jingju*, such as Mei Lanfang 梅蘭芳 (1894-1961), Shang Xiaoyun 尚小雲 (1900-1976), and Cheng Yanqiu 程硯秋 (1904-1958), the artistry of female impersonation surprisingly reached its pinnacle in the early Republican period (1912-1937), when female actors were available for *xiqu* performances. The prominence of the *nandan* stars peaked during this period perhaps not only because persisting prohibitions on the gender-appropriate casting continued to safeguard the *nandan* convention but also because *nandan* stars, most notably Mei Lanfang, triumphantly toured abroad and brought home much-desired international acclaim for both *xiqu* in particular and Chinese art in general. As a result, during the transitional decades between the Qing and the Republic, the supremacy of the internationally recognized *nandan* stars helped the *xiqu* circles facilitate a popular understanding of the relationship between male performers of female roles and female actors of female characters (also known as *nüdan* 女旦). This perception, which positioned the *nandan* stars as the esteemed masters of *xiqu* on stage, while relegating the newly emerged *nüdan* to the margins of the theatre world, facilitated a popular understanding in preexisting histories of *xiqu*. And this established understanding of the relationship obscured the significant historical contributions made by female actors to Chinese *xiqu* since the late nineteenth century.

Lastly, in spite of the fact that *nandan* stars presented themselves as triumphant performers of femininity in the Republican era, the existence of the *nandan* tradition discomforted many noted Chinese intellectuals and theatre artists, among others, Lu

Xun 魯迅 (1881-1936), Hong Shen 洪深 (1894-1955), Zheng Zhenduo 鄭振鐸 (1898-1958), and Zhang Kebiao 章克標 (1900-2007), who accused *nandan*'s construction of femininity of being "unnatural" because of their male physicality (Lu Xun 2005: 91-94; Hong 1988: 532-538; Xi Yuan 1929: 62-65; Qi Fan 1929: 72-76; Ammirati 2015: 179). By emphasizing the importance of "nature" as a fundamental aspect of true art and highlighting the supposed goal of art to be in harmony with nature (Ying Yi 1929: 71), those opposed to *nandan* performers adopted a hostile stance towards *nandan*'s ornamental dramaturgy and expressed a collective desire for the female body, which promised the intellectuals a plainer, more transparent, purportedly "natural" medium of expressing femininity.

This collective desire for the "natural" or "real" was stimulated by the global flow of realism in literature and arts, which was backed by the burgeoning of natural and social sciences and a motive to represent and critique the modern world. In the theatrical context in East Asia in particular, a call for "straightening" kabuki and *xiqu* by eliminating their stylistic elements such as singing, dancing, and cross-dressing was pronounced in both Meiji Japan and Republican China (Kano 2001: 12; Hu 1918: 313). However, the dichotomy between a *nandan*'s perceived "unnatural" feminine physique and a female actor's presumed "natural" femininity reinforces a gender and sex essentialism that was influenced by scientific theories of gender and sex introduced to China during the early twentieth century.

The aforementioned four critical developments that conditioned the rise of female actors have made any study of female actors in *xiqu* during the Qing-Republic transition exhilarating and difficult in equal measure. On the one hand, it is vital to

acknowledge the legitimacy of women in theatre acting as well as the critical role that women performers played both prior to and after the collapse of the Qing dynasty. On the other hand, while numerous historical sources suggest that those female actors were competent rivals of their male counterparts, social prejudice against women, the supremacy of male *xiqu* stars, and authoritative *xiqu* historiography have collaboratively contributed to the marginalization of the female actors.

This dissertation is dedicated to female actors in *xiqu* during a transitional historical period between the late nineteenth century, when the first generation of female performers in modern times appeared in China's foreign concessions in Shanghai and Tianjin, and the early Republican era (1912-1937), when *xiqu*'s female performers such as Liu Xikui 劉喜奎 (1894-1964), Xian Lingzhi 鮮靈芝 (dates unknown), Zhang Wenyan 張文艷 (also styled as 張文豔, circa 1898-1940), and Meng Xiaodong 孟小冬 (1908-1977) began to garner unprecedented national recognition. This dissertation intentionally aligns with the time frame of Joshua Goldstein's much-acclaimed historical study of *jingju* in English, entitled *Drama Kings: Players and Publics in the Re-creation of Peking Opera, 1870-1937* (Goldstein 2007). In Goldstein's eight-chapter, three-hundred-plus-page monograph on the history of *jingju* during the Qing-Republican transition, he dedicates individual sections of a chapter to discuss various performers, ranging from Wang Xiaonong 汪笑儂 (1858-1918) and Feng Zihe 馮子和 (1888-1942), to the "four famous *dan*" (*sida mingdan*, 四大名旦) including Mei Lanfang, Cheng Yanqiu, Shang Xiaoyun, and Xun Huisheng 荀慧生 (1900-1968). Unfortunately, the performers he focuses on are exclusively male. Goldstein's study gives female performers a marginal position in the articulation of the

history of *jingju*. While there is a brief discussion of all-female troupes in late-Qing Shanghai and female actors in Beijing in the 1910s (Goldstein 2007: 109-111), notable leading female performers like Liu Xikui and Xian Lingzhi are not mentioned. In addition, there is a discussion of the patronage of female actor Xi Caifen 喜彩芬 (dates unknown) and a reference to the marriage between Mei Lanfang and Meng Xiaodong (Goldstein 2007: 240-242). However, other female actors receive little to no attention in Goldstein's study. This is likely because of his belief that it was not until the 1930s that "a handful of actresses had won a degree of critical respect, but they could not escape the milieu that shaped female troupes' performances" (Goldstein 2007: 242). While Goldstein's focus primarily revolves around, as suggested by the title of his monograph, the "drama kings" in the history of *jingju*, my dissertation intends to complement his account by underscoring the critical roles played by those female performers throughout this period of history.

Hence, the aim of this doctoral study is essentially twofold. First and foremost, by considering them as a *historical* subject, this dissertation will scrutinize the early female actors as historically new participants of the theatrical culture. It intends to look at how the female performers shaped the world of *xiqu* and the society at large with innovative dramaturgy as well as their superlative talents to negotiate the changing theatrical culture. It also examines how female actors underwent a remarkable transformation from the late-Qing *yinling* 淫伶 (lit. "obscene performers"), who had intimate ties with brothels, into new professional and societal roles such as theatre actors and female national stars in the early Republican era. The dissociation of female theatre performers from prostitution was a transnational phenomenon after the advent of

modernity, a result of professionalization of theatre performers that took place in many sites across the globe, ranging from Victorian England (1837-1901) to Meiji and Taishō Japan (1868-1926). The rise of the star system in the industry of theatre and entertainment in Shanghai further propelled some of the female performers into national stardom, with the aid of new technologies of representation such as photography and print capitalism (e.g., the production of books, periodicals, and playbills). As a result, some female performers such as Zhang Wenyan were able to secure top star positions in theatrical companies that included both male and female performers. By doing so, the dissertation hopes to discredit the prejudice that the early female actors were artistically inferior to their male counterparts and to refute the widely held belief that *nandan* stars were the first to establish a star culture in twentieth-century China, prior to the emergence of film stars and celebrities in the late 1920s and 1930s.

Second, by considering the female actors as a contested *discursive* subject in the late Qing-Republican public discourse, this dissertation also pays particular attention to the controversy over the legitimacy of female actors during *xiqu*'s *fin-de-siècle* transformation. By parsing the arguments both for and against female actors, my research ultimately attempts to show that the rise of female actors was ultimately facilitated by the evolution of female subjects in Chinese society at large, that is, a transformation from the late-imperial notions of *furen* 婦人 ("married female persons") and *nü* 女 ("daughters" or "youthful, unmarried female subjects") into the newly conceived taxonomy of *nüxing* 女性 ("Women") (Ko 1994: 1-28; Barlow 2013: 51-92; Barlow 2021). While the former group is characterized by domesticity/interiority (*nei* 內) and submission (*cong* 从) (Ko 1994: 1-28), the latter is "a new conceptual and

social subject" who emerged because of a modernist belief that there are certain ontological truths about and socio-economic obligations of being a woman: as a *nüxing*, her physicality is a truthful case of modern theory of human sexuality, her body "can be photographed, stripped naked, used to sell commodities," and she is ultimately expected to be active participants of a civil society (Barlow 2013: 33).

In this way, the re-appearance of female actors in *xiqu* and the inclusion of both men and women on the same stage were in fact intimately related to various social, political, and scientific themes. These encompassed the introduction of natural and social sciences, the pursuit of women's rights, the desire for gender normalcy, the commodification of the female body within capitalist entertainment and printing culture, as well as the influence of nationalism. Hence, as theatre was widely viewed as a critical vehicle for social advancement at the turn of the twentieth century, a thorough study of the cultural, political, and epistemological premises that conditioned the reemergence of female actors would help us better understand the complicated relationship between gender, performance, and modern nation building.

II. Literature Review

Because it is a comprehensive form of art that encompasses elements of literature, music, dance, and fine arts, *xiqu* in both China and the West has been studied by a variety of disciplines ranging from literary studies and theatre studies to musicology and aesthetic studies. In the English-speaking world, classical Chinese drama has historically been a privileged subject of scholars working in the tradition of sinology. Sinologists such as Cyril Birch and James Crump have been instrumental in

the translation of classical Chinese drama and the exploration of the literary and aesthetic crafts of Yuan and Ming dynasties' dramatic works (Tang 1980; Crump 1958: 417-434; Crump 1971:14-29). And their pioneering efforts were followed by literary scholars such as Wilt Idema and Stephen West (Idema and West 1982; Idema and West 1995; Idema and West 2012; West and Idema 2015). Because *xiqu* has a prominent dimension of music and is thus widely known as "Chinese opera" in the West, *xiqu* has elicited the interest of a host of musicologists such as Bell Yung, Jonathan Stock, and Joseph S. C. Lam, who have studied the music aspects of *yueju*[5] 粤剧, *huju*[6] 沪剧, and *kunqu* (Yung 1989; Stock 2003; Lam 2014: 114-139; Lam 2022).

In the realm of theatre studies, which not only draws inspiration from but also distinguishes itself from drama studies, A. C. Scott and Colin Mackerras have played a pioneering role in scrutinizing *xiqu* and its performers through the perspective of performance and stagecraft (Scott 1957; Scott 1958; Scott 1971; Scott 1982; Mackerras 1972; Mackerras 1975; Mackerras 1988; Mackerras 1990). Mackerras, in particular, has made notable contribution to the field of *xiqu* studies by producing surveys of *xiqu* history from its origins to the twentieth century. As a result, Mackerras has established himself as the most influential historian of *xiqu* in the West during the twentieth century.

[5] *Yueju*, also referred to as "Cantonese opera," gained widespread popularity among Cantonese-speaking communities in mainland China, Hong Kong, and overseas communities of Cantonese migrants in Southeast Asia, Europe, and North America. It was the first genre of Chinese theatre to be introduced in the United States, with performances taking place in Chinese communities in North American cities like San Francisco as early as 1852 (Lei 2003: 289-302).

[6] *Huju*, commonly known as "Shanghai opera," is a form of *xiqu* originating from Shanghai. During the early Republican era, it was referred to as *shenqu* 申曲, meaning "the tune of Shanghai."

At the turn of the twenty-first century, theatre historians of the newer generation explored several specific periods of Chinese *xiqu*, such as Qing-court theatre and late-Qing theatre in Beijing, as well as the history of particular *xiqu* genres, such as *jingju* and *yueju* (Zhejiang opera) (Yeh 2012; Chen 2021; Goldstein 1999: 377-420; Goldstein 2007; Goldman 2008: 1-56; Goldman: 2012; Jiang: 2009). In addition to the historical perspective, the exploration of *xiqu*'s artistry and performance aesthetics have also been crucial. Elizabeth Wichmann and Xing Fan have respectively studied the aesthetic conventions of *jingju* in general and revolutionary model *jingju* productions of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) in particular (Wichmann 1991; Fan 2018). Through the specific aesthetic framework of theatricality, Haiping Yan and Sophie Volpp have respectively explored classical Chinese theatre in general and *xiqu* of the long seventeenth century (approximately 1570-1720) in particular (Yan 2003: 65-89; Volpp 2012).

Recent scholarly investigations into *xiqu* during the late Qing and Republican periods have emphasized the importance of understanding *xiqu*'s artistic evolution in relation to the advent of modernity and China's nation-building efforts over the past two centuries (Goldstein 1999: 377-420 and 2007; Cuncun Wu 2004: 116-158; Cuncun Wu and Stevenson 2006: 42-59; Goldman 2008: 1-56 and 2012; Jiang 2009; Li 2010). In addition, most of these scholarly accounts are dedicated either to the connoisseurship of the *siyu* actors of the Qing dynasty or to nationally and internationally recognized male performers such as Yang Yuelou 楊月樓 (1844-1890) and Mei Lanfang in the late Qing and Republican periods (Goldstein 1999: 377-420; Goldstein 2007; Cuncun Wu 2004: 116-158; Cuncun Wu and Mark Stevenson 2006: 42-59; Goldman 2008: 1-56; Goldman

2012; Tian 2012; Yeh 2004: 74-118; Yeh 2004: 53-86; Zhao 2016: 395-419; Guanda Wu 2017).

It was not until approximately a decade and a half ago that substantial English-language studies of female actors in *xiqu* began to appear (Jiang 2009; Liu 2016: 29-51; Liu 2018: 433-465). One notable example is Jin Jiang's comprehensive study of the history of *yueju* or Zhejiang opera, an all-female theatrical form that gained popularity in Shanghai during the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945) and eventually gained a nationwide spectatorship, second only to *jingju*, after the founding of the People's Republic in 1949. Jiang's historical research focuses on the migration of *yueju* from rural areas in Zhejiang to the cosmopolitan city of Shanghai during the Republican era. She also explores how *yueju*'s all-female performances in Shanghai connected with a predominantly female audience throughout the twentieth century (Jiang 2009).

Additionally, historian of modern China Jiacheng Liu explores the construction of a "new flirtatious female subjectivity" by female performers in Beijing in the 1910s, which, argues Liu, differed from the portrayal of the heroine in Ming-Qing literature and the May Fourth ideal of free love (Liu 2016: 29-51). Liu also examines the writings of male *xiqu* fans on female performers in Beijing during the same period and how these writings expanded beyond the traditional Qing-era genre of *huapu*[7] 花譜 (literally, "flower registers") (Liu 2018: 433-465). In Chinese-language scholarship, Taiwan scholar Zhang Yuan's MA thesis-turned monograph on female actors of *jingju* in the three major cities Beijing, Shanghai, and Tianjin between 1900 and 1937 remains the

[7] *Huapu* refers to a large body of literary texts dedicated to the connoisseurship of *siyu* players in nineteenth-century Beijing.

only substantial study of female actors in *xiqu*. In his monograph, Zhang pays a particular attention to media representations (such as *Ta Kung Pao* [8] 大公報 and *Beiyang huabao*[9] 北洋畫報) of these female performers in *jingju* (Zhang 2011). The scarcity of research on female actors in *xiqu* in both Chinese and English scholarship is in contrast to the extensive scholarly works available on female film actors of the Republican era and their work (Zhou 1997; Zhang Zhen 2005: 244-297; Zhang Caihong 2011; Ma 2015). This is a rather unfortunate considering the large number of female *xiqu* actors and their significant fame during the period.

While I am deeply grateful to current scholarship on female *xiqu* performers for its acknowledgement of the significant contribution that the female actors made to the marvelous art of *xiqu*, both empirical omissions and methodological problems within these existing accounts have largely remained unaddressed. First, nearly all the available works have focused on either a particular genre (in particular *yueju* and *jingju*) or a specific locale within a relatively short time period (e.g. 1910s Beijing). As a result, many critical stages of the artistic developments that *xiqu* female actors as a whole facilitated from the late Qing to early Republican periods continue to evade scholarly scrutiny (for instance, all female troupes in Shanghai's foreign concessions before 1912). Therefore, a dissertation-length study of the pathway that female *xiqu* performers as a collective underwent toward national recognition appears be increasingly imperative.

[8] Or *Da Gong Bao*, also known as *L'Impartial* (1902-).

[9] *Northern China Pictorial*, a Tianjin-based pictorial throughout its history of publication between 1926 and 1937 demonstrating a keen interest in theatrical arts.

Second, in addition to empirical omissions, an essentialist understanding of gender and sex also paralyzes existing narratives of female actors' reemergence on the stage of *xiqu*. For instance, in her recent study of female actors in Beijing in the 1910s, Jiacheng Liu applauds the 1910s Beijing stage for its eventual inclusion of "actual" female bodies (Liu 2016: 44-49). Liu explicates that prior to the advent of "actual" female bodies, "due to the symbolism of Chinese theater," female impersonators, "despite their male physicality," dominated the *xiqu* stage because they "were capable of presenting idealized femininity to signify ideas about women, rather than representing real women" (Liu 2016: 32). As a matter of fact, by postulating a female actor's feminine body as "actual/real" and a *nandan*'s feminine body as "idealized" and "idea-based," Liu subscribes to a prevailing understanding of *xiqu*'s rendition of female roles, which was first articulated by the early Republican intellectuals such as Hong Shen[10] 洪深 (1894-1955), who, as previously mentioned, mobilized a distinction between the "natural" and the "unnatural" to refute the prevailing practice of female impersonation. Despite the significant temporal gap between Hong's writing in 1935 and Liu's publication in 2016, both authors suggest that the legitimacy of a female actor performing *xiqu* is believed to depend primarily on the use of her supposedly "real," "actual," or "natural" female body, rather than the achievement of gender equality in theatre acting.

[10] A renowned Republican-era theatre director, playwright, and screen writer, Hong Shen studied ceramic arts at the Ohio States University, where he staged his own English-language dramatic play *The Wedded Husband*. He also attended the influential Workshop 47 taught by George Pierce Barker in the Department of English at Harvard University. The workshop is widely recognized as the birthplace of the serious study of theatre at universities in the United States. For an excellent study of Hong Shen's creative experiences in the United States, see He 2015: 51-105.

The limitations of this discursive distinction between the "idealized" feminine body (of a *nandan*) and the "real/actual" feminine body (of a female performer) are profound. First, this distinction assumes the existence of certain inherent truths about the female body, implying that these essential qualities of femininity cannot be accurately portrayed by a male individual. This line of thinking clearly succumbs to the pitfalls of gender essentialism. Second, if the purpose of having a female actor on the *xiqu* stage is primarily to showcase her "natural/real" body, as both Hong and Liu suggest, it implies that women performers who engage in cross-dressing in *xiqu* are somehow illegitimate. However, this expectation undermines the credibility of female actors and their ability to excel in male roles, as demonstrated by renowned late Republican-era *kunsheng* 坤生 (female actors of male characters) performers like Meng Xiaodong (discussed in Chapter Four). Furthermore, during the late Qing and early Republican periods, numerous young female actors, regardless of their role specialization, convincingly presented themselves as men offstage by embracing men's clothing in their everyday life (discussed in Chapter Two and Chapter Four). This collective interest in defying gender norms challenges the notion of a fixed connection between female actors and "natural" femininity.

III. Methodologies and Inspirations

This dissertation project would not have been conceivable without feminist attempts to separate gender from sex as well as the understanding of gender as performance. The theoretical separation of gender from sex allows this project to acknowledge *xiqu*'s time-honored practice of cross-dressing as a critical means of

transgressing gender norms. The notion that gender is not biologically determined compellingly refutes the gender essentialists' accusation of both *nandan* and *kunsheng*. At the same time, the comprehension of gender as performance enables this research project to argue that the role of "women," as well as "handsome gentlemen," that the female actors assumed in Republican-era everyday life was an effect of repetitive acts. If gender is, as Judith Butler suggests, indeed a performance that is learned over time, constantly rehearsed, and influenced by social interactions (Butler 1990), an in-depth study of the rise of *xiqu* female actors as everyday performers of "women" (or "civilized Republican gentlemen") provides us with an opportunity to witness how fashionable codes of femininity and masculinity actively circulated between *xiqu* stars, theatregoers, and society at large and how the gender of the modern women/gentlemen was made through constant rehearsals and ceaseless imitations.

Besides the theory of performativity, this project is also indebted to a group of feminist historians of China led by Dorothy Ko and Tani Barlow for their new paradigms of narrating life stories of modern and early modern Chinese women. Dorothy Ko refutes the conventional, (post-)May Fourth literary and historical depiction of Chinese women as a "victimized" collective who were backward and utterly void of agency, an iconic figure of which is Lu Xun's pathetic character "Xianglin's Wife" (Ko 1994: 2). Instead, Ko shows that late-imperial Chinese women, represented by a group of itinerant female teachers, "were extremely creative in crafting a space within the prevailing gender system that gave meaning, solace, and dignity" (Ko 1994: 8-9).

In her 2004 book *The Question of Women in Chinese Feminism* and her most recent monograph *In the Event of Women*, Tani Barlow maintains that "women" ("*funü*"

婦女 or "*nüxing*" 女性) as a historical subject didn't become possible in China until the twentieth century (Barlow 2004; Barlow 2022). By employing the concept of catachresis, defined by Gayatri C. Spivak as "a concept-metaphor without an adequate referent," Barlow shows that a historical catachresis of "*nüxing*" in modern Chinese intellectual history indicated the event of a novelty called "women" (Barlow 2004: 15-26). In her case study of the Japanese herbal medicine manufacturer Morishita Nanyodo's 森下南洋堂 newspaper advertisements, Barlow further contends that commercial advertising provides "women" with a concrete site where the event of "women" could emerge historically (Barlow 2013: 51-92).

Dorothy Ko's historiographic paradigm encourages me to dismiss a prior assumption that the first generations of modern *xiqu* female actors were merely derivative of their talented male counterparts and belonged to a "victimized" collective completely stripped of agency. Hence, Ko's work emboldens me to acknowledge the various moments when some of the *fin-de-siècle* female actors succeeded in creating a social and artistic space which allowed them to demonstrate their admirable artistic talents and to transcend the interiority (domesticity)-exteriority (public) social boundary, in spite of the dreadful patriarchy. The historical catachresis of "women," denoted by Tani Barlow, draws my attention to the historical fact that it was not until the early twentieth century that "women" as a new ontological entity managed to gain its referents from a wide array of sources, ranging from scientific teachings of the female sex, journalistic and advertising publications featuring the new women, to feminist writings that advocated women's suffrage and education. Hence, the historical catachresis of "women" as a metaphor helps better me comprehend the reasons that the

Chinese intellectuals such as Lu Xun, Hong Shen, Zheng Zhenduo, and Zhang Kebiao found *xiqu* a particularly disturbing site were not only because *xiqu* was considered void of adequate referents of this new conceptual subject called "women" but also because the popularity of *nandan* was thought to delay the event of "women" as an anticipated result.

Above all, I owe the greatest intellectual debt to a group of theatre historians who began to explore the fertile theoretical terrains of theatre historiography in the 1980s, which further enabled a rich body of historical research on the involvements of female actors in theatre making in the years to follow. My interest in theatre historiography is first and foremost a personal one. While studying first as a dramatic literature major at a college in China and later completing my first MA program in theatre studies at graduate school at the same institution, I often found myself questioning whether there was more to explore beyond the canonical works of Sophocles, William Shakespeare, Henrik Ibsen, Eugene O'Neill, Cao Yu[11] 曹禺 (1910-1996), Arthur Miller, and Tennessee Williams. In addition, the prevailing curriculum on world theatre history, heavily reliant on American empiricist theatre historian Oscar G. Brockett's foundational text *History of the Theatre*, suggests that theatre was predominantly a privileged art form confined to Europe, as well as a select few Asian civilizations like India, China, and Japan during premodern eras. It is only with the

[11] Having developed a passion for drama during his time at Nankai School in Tianjin and later studied English literature at Tsinghua University, Cao Yu, also known as Wan Jiabao 萬家寶, rose to prominence as the foremost Chinese playwright of the twentieth century with publication of his influential plays such as *Leiyu* 雷雨 (Thunderstorm, 1933), *Richu* 日出 (Sunrise, 1935), and *Yuanye* 原野 (Wilderness, 1936).

onset of modernity that theatre evolved into a transcultural art form, owing to the profound impact of European theatre.

Upon my arrival in the United States for my second MA degree in theatre studies, I was introduced to the emerging field of theatre historiography. I became aware that my dissatisfaction with the discipline of theatre studies was shared by numerous theatre historiographers who believed that the conventional framework of theatre history overlooked non-European theatre as well as the significant historical contributions made by underprivileged individuals, in particular women, people of color, and LGBT communities.

Theatre historiography, as defined by Henry Bial and Scott Magelssen, refers to "the study of the foundational assumptions, principles, and methodologies that determine how theater history is written" (Bial and Magelssen 2010: 1). "To practice theater historiography means to look beyond the record of 'what happened' to analyze how and why such records are constructed" (Bial and Magelssen 2010: 1). The field of theatre historiography emerged both as a scholarly discipline and as a methodology when theatre historians like Thomas Postlewait and Bruce McConachie started challenging the fundamental assumptions held by practitioners of *Theaterwissenschaft* (literally, "science of theatre), which was the dominant paradigm in theatre studies during the twentieth century.

By concentrating on performance-related aspects such as performance history, theatre architecture, and the economic aspects of theatre management, *Theaterwissenschaft* originated in Germany in the early twentieth century and differentiated itself from drama studies: the latter is now considered essentially a branch

of literary studies and "subjective" in nature (Vince 1989: 6). The study of *Theaterwissenschaft* assumes that theatre is a performing art and considers its participants as artists. As a result, theatre's aesthetic quality is deemed as more ontological than any other (i.e., sociological and communicative) attributes of the form. *Theaterwissenschaft* became a distinct discipline within universities first in Germany and was introduced to the United States through Berlin-trained scholar Alois M. Nagler, who later held a faculty position at Yale School of Drama (Vince 1989: 6). In the mid-twentieth century, *Theaterwissenschaft* expanded its influence globally by establishing scholarly communities in Britain, France, North America, and eventually forming the International Federation for Theatre Research (IFTR) in 1957.

Influenced by nineteenth-century German scholar Leopold von Ranke's positivist view of history, *Theaterwissenschaft* demonstrated a strong emphasis on empiricism, striving for scientific rigor in historical research and aligning theatre history with other scientific disciplines (Vince 1989: 7). The emergence of theatre history as an independent academic field in the West by the mid-twentieth century can largely be attributed to the publication of extensive archival research on Greek, Medieval, Renaissance, Enlightenment-era theatre history by empiricist scholars such as E. K. Chambers, Gustave Cohen, Allardyce Nicoll, G. C. D. Odell, Wilma Deiekerkauf-Holsboer, Heinz Kindermann, and Alois M. Nagler (Vince 1989: 7). Because of its Eurocentric and imperialist legacy, theatre history throughout much of the twentieth century focused primarily on the study of the European canon. The so-called "history of the theatre," as presented in theatre historian Oscar G. Brockett's book, *History of the Theatre*, not only relied on the periodization of European history but also predominantly

highlighted the achievements of male playwrights, directors, and performers (Brockett 1968).

In his thought-provoking critique of *Theaterwissenschaft* and Oscar G. Brockett's understanding of theatre history, Bruce McConachie contends that *Theaterwissenschaft*'s postulation of theatre as an art undermines its potential for being studied as a social phenomenon (McConachie 1985: 465). Under the influence of critical theories, McConachie challenges the positivist approach to seeking historical truth in *Theaterwissenschaft* and questions the notion of theatrical performances as static "art objects" confined to the stage. Instead, he advocates for exploring them as dynamic events that unfold between live actors and the audience (McConachie 1985: 470). McConachie argues that theatre history should embrace a *postpositivist* perspective, moving away from a rigid pursuit of objective truth (McConachie 1985: 465-486).

In response to McConachie's 1985 call for "a postpositivist theatre history" in the new century, theatre scholars such as Willmar Sauter and Tobin Nellhaus have delved deeper into the study of theatre, exploring its potential as a social event and a means of communication (Sauter 2014; Nellhaus 2010). At the same time, Thomas Postlewait, a prominent theatre historiographer, has sought to expand the definition of theatre to include a wide range of performance forms such as "dance, opera, folk theatre, puppetry, parades, processions, spectacles, festivals, circuses, public conventions, and related events" (Postlewait 2009: 2). Their theoretical efforts aim to incorporate diverse performance traditions from non-European contexts, as well as the works of marginalized individuals and groups that do not neatly conform to the

traditional European model of drama and theatre. By doing so, they strive to overcome the limitations and colonial legacy of positivist theatre history.

Among these inspiring theoretical and methodological developments taking place in the study of theatre history are the works of Rosemarie Bank and Michal Kobialka, who have explored spatial theatre historiography to transcend the positivist understanding of space and time in theatre history (I will discuss the methodological significance of the works of Bank and Kobialka in detail in Chapter Two). Additionally, theatre historians who have been inspired by feminist and critical race theories have also embraced this call. Their objective is to illuminate the significant contributions made by women, as well as non-European and non-Christian individuals and groups, throughout the history of theatre.

In her groundbreaking study of female actors in Victorian England, *Actresses as Working Women*, Tracy C. Davis rejects Michael Baker's idea stated in his classical work *the Rise of the Victorian Actor* that the rise of the actor in the Victorian era indicated the improvement of the acting profession to the middle-class status because Baker's work focuses only on male actors (Baker 1978; Davis 1991). Instead of focusing on male stars, Davis explores the lives of ordinary and largely-forgotten female actors from a materialist feminist perspective. She specifically examines how these women struggled to differentiate themselves from prostitutes and the challenges they faced in the precarious world of acting, both professionally and financially. Through a feminist prism, Davis challenges the Victorian archive's tendency to belittle and marginalize female performers, thus opening up avenues of inquiry that were traditionally deemed inaccessible within positivist research on theatre history.

Following Davis's lead, Ayako Kano surveyed the historical progression of female actors emerged in *fin-de-siècle* Japan, a nation where all theatrical arts historically excluded women from participation. Her research centers on two influential female performers: the geisha-turned-actor Kawakami Sadayakko 川上貞奴 (1871-1946) and the exponent of *shingeki*[12] 新劇, Matsui Sumako 松井須磨子 (1886-1919). While the former garnered widespread critical acclaim during her tours with her husband Kawakami Otojirō 川上音二郎 (1864-1911) in Europe and the United States, the latter distinguished herself as Japan's first professionally trained female actor in modern times. Ayako Kano's work acknowledges Sadayakko's artistic prowess, often overshadowed by the fame of her husband Otojirō, while also explores Matsui's self-representation as a New Woman, which openly expressed a feminist consciousness, countering the conventional portrayal of her as a femme fatale (Kano 2001: 123).

Feminist engagement also has significantly shaped the conventional narrative of American theatre history since the rise of theatre historiography. For instance, theatre historians like Lisa Merrill have explored the contributions of female performers such as Charlotte Cushman (1816-1876) in the history of nineteenth-century American theatre. In his description of the American-born female star Cushman in his authoritative *History of the Theatre*, Oscar Brockett asserts how Cushman ascended toward national stardom as follows:

> After serving as a utility actress at the Park Theatre from 1837 to 1840, she played leading roles in Philadelphia and New York. Appearing with Macready in 1843, she was much affected by his methods, which she

[12] An important genre of modern Japanese theatre largely based upon realism.

> adopted so successfully that she was often called the "female Macready." (Brockett 1982: 478)

Merrill challenges Brockett's idea that the stagecraft of Cushman was merely derivative of the male star. Drawing upon Cushman's diary journals, Merrill provides a more nuanced understanding of Cushman's unique approach to theatrical performances, restoring the significant historical fact that the first native-born star on the American stage was a woman (Merrill 1999).

The significant advancements in the study of female theatrical actors across diverse regions, spanning from Jacksonian-era America (approximately 1820s-1850) to Meiji (1868-1911) and Taishō (1911-1926) Japan, inspire me to embark on a research endeavor focusing on female actors in *xiqu* in China at the turn of the twentieth century. This decision is not only motivated by the historical neglect of female performers within *xiqu* studies, which have predominantly centered on male stars, but also by the realization that the lives and stories of these Chinese women engaged in *xiqu* are equally compelling and poignant as those of their counterparts in other global contexts.

IV. Chapters

This dissertation project was conceived as I was reading modern *xiqu* historiography and became interested in a number of perplexing questions about it. These questions include: while the accomplishments of late Qing and early Republican male *xiqu* stars are well documented by a myriad of scholarly accounts, how about those female actors who coexisted with their male counterparts during a relatively prolonged period between the 1870s to the early Republican era (1912-1937)? How do

we understand the ubiquity of negative representations of the early female actors in the late-Qing periodicals from a feminist perspective? Why, for some of China's most influential intellectuals of the age, was supplying purportedly "natural" feminine bodies to *xiqu* a more urgent reason than other causes such as gender equity for *xiqu* to have female actors? And what was the relationship between the rise of female actors and the "event of women" as Tani Barlow tellingly describes?

With its three main chapters (Chapters Two, Three, and Four), this dissertation ultimately hopes to fill the scholarly vacuum in modern *xiqu* historiography by making the following contentions. First, instead of considering it as a site that tolerated obscenity, *xiqu* in the late Qing provided a critical space for many talented Chinese women to transcend the interiority-exteriority social boundary within the feudal patriarchy (discussed in Chapter Two). Second, the *nandan* stars' triumph over their female counterparts was by no means decided by the male players' alleged artistic superiority. In fact, the *nandan*'s victory was possible in part because various forms of social prejudice against women caused the female actors to be at a disadvantage in their competition with the male stars (discussed in Chapters Two and Three). Third, we need to understand the formation of the discursive distinction between a *nandan*'s purportedly "unnatural" feminine body and a female actor's supposedly "realistic"/"natural" femininity by referring to the advent of "women" as a new ontological subject in twentieth-century China. Only since some kind of ontological truths about the female sex has been imagined to safeguard the event of "women," the *nandan*'s expression of femininity has appeared "unnatural" and they have become no

longer adequate referents of "women" in *xiqu* due to their male physicality (discussed in Chapter Three).

Fourth, while recent discussions have shed light on the relationship between "photography, performance, and female images" in early-twentieth-century China, these discussions primarily focus on male stars playing female roles, overlooking the fact that female actors like Zhang Wenyan also benefited from the use of photographs and print capitalism to achieve stardom. These female actors actively participated in China's first star culture (discussed in Chapter Four). Last but not least, while there has been extensive research on male performers cross-dressing, there has been a lack of scholarly examination of the possibilities and implications of female actors practicing cross-dressing. My study aims to demonstrate that the commodification of the female performer's body through photography has downplayed the subversive potential of cross-dressing. However, Meng Xiaodong's return to the stage after divorcing Mei Lanfang showcased cross-dressing as a means of self-liberation, thus restoring its political potential (discussed in Chapter Four).

Chapter Two entitled "Alluring Women/Outlaw Bodies: Female Actors in Late-Qing China" is dedicated to a long-neglected subject in *xiqu* historiography, namely female actors of the late-Qing dynasty. The historical neglect of female actors during the Qing era can largely be attributed to the dominant paradigm of theatre research known as *Theaterwissenschaft*. This paradigm tends to overlook the significant historical contributions made by these female entertainers because it primarily considers theatre as a form of creative art rather than a form of entertainment. Within this elite understanding of theatre, the belief is that the creation of art requires literacy and

sustained training. Consequently, the dual roles assumed by female actors of the Qing era, serving both as sex workers and artists, undermine their suitability as adequate subjects for theatre research.

Nevertheless, due to a variety of socio-economic developments, including the expansion of colonialism, the proliferation of urban population, and the flourishing of institutions of public entertainment, women regained the opportunity to perform *xiqu* beginning as early as the 1870s at locales where the Qing prohibitions on both female actors and the so-called "integrated-sex acting" (男女合演, *nannüheyan*) had only a limited impact. Drawing upon a wide range of late-Qing publications, including not only the major newspapers such as *Shenbao* 申報 (or *Shanghai Daily*, 1872-1949), *L'Impartial* (or Ta Kung Pao 大公報, 1902-), and *Xinwen bao* 新聞報 (lit. "The News," 1893-1949), but also the tabloids such as *Tongwen xiaoxian bao* 同文消閒報 (or *The Leisure*, 1900-1907) and *Youxi bao* 遊戲報 (lit. "Game news," 1897-1904), Chapter Two intends to be a first dissertation-chapter-length English-language study of the historical presence of female actors in the semi-colonial metropolises such as Shanghai and Tianjin from approximately the 1870s to the end of the Qing dynasty in 1911.

Countering the widely held assumption that the first generations of modern Chinese *xiqu* female actors were merely derivative of an already refined artistic tradition, Chapter Two argues that the ubiquity of articles and reports on female actors (existing either on the "integrated-sex" stages or in all female theatrical troupes) in the late-Qing periodicals suggests the extraordinary popularity that these women players had enjoyed at the time. However, despite a shared concern about these female actors, writers of the essays and reports presented widely divergent views on the presence of

the female performers. Many published accounts on female actors were composed by those who considered the presences of female actors in foreign concessions and occasionally in outlaw performances in other parts of the country as an overt threat to social morality.

By employing the derogatory term "*yinling*," these authors often underscored the connotation of sexual lasciviousness associated with the female actors' performances and the women's intimate ties with prostitution. For these authors, the existence of female actors in *xiqu* turned the playhouse into a highly sensual sphere, which stimulated audiences' irrational reactions. And even offstage women entertainers were perceived as ominous beings. For instance, after investigating a domestic dispute between two married actors, a reporter representing *The News* claimed that the women entertainers in Shanghai were a source of social disturbance. He therefore urged any men, including male actors, to avoid marrying those entertainers, as it was said that the women would surely commit adultery due to their excessive sexuality (*Xinwen bao* 1895: 3).

On the contrary, many late-Qing accounts presented a more lenient stance towards the advent of female actors. Instead of attributing the popularity of the female entertainers to an unapologetic display of their seductive bodies, this body of writings generally acknowledged the critical role that female actors played in *xiqu*, and many of the articles and reports noted the admirable skills of acting that the female actors possessed. For instance, in an entry in *The News* published on April 3, 1893, the reporter noted that a touring troupe from Suzhou consisting of nine female actors recently gave a splendid performance in Shanghai to celebrate the birthday of the Taoist

deity Wenchang Wang 文昌王. According to the reporter, in the performance, the *dan*'s arms appeared "as agile as those of an ape," and a cross-dresser compellingly performed the God of Wealth (*Xinwen bao* 1893: 2). Overall, "the entire troupe as a whole far surpassed any disciples of the Pear Garden as if they descended from the Heaven directly" (*Xinwen bao* 1893: 2).

As suggested by the aforementioned reports from *The News*, the presence of female actors in semi-colonial Shanghai during the late Qing period was met with a mixed reception. To acquire a more profound understanding of the controversy surrounding the legitimacy of female actors, I turn to the paradigm of spatial theatre historiography developed by Rosemarie Bank and Michal Kobialka. Their approach intends to incorporate developments in modern physics and geometry into the study of theatre history. From the perspective of spatial theatre historiography, I consider late-Qing China as a dynamic environment where significant physical and temporal changes occurred. These changes included the expansion of semi-colonial cities, a large influx of migrants into urban areas, and the proliferation of foreign populations in foreign concessions and beyond. As a result of the drastic physical movements, tensions increased among different social groups, and divergent opinions emerged regarding women's participation in *xiqu*.

Rosemarie Bank's research on female performers in Jacksonian America serves as a reminder that journalistic and pictorial representations should not be taken as absolute truths. Instead, they should be viewed as products of print capitalism, catering to specific target readerships and hosting debates on social issues. Likewise, in the context of traditional Chinese theatre during the late-Qing and early Republican periods,

books and periodicals also played a critical role as products of print capitalism. They fostered conflicting portrayals of female actors and facilitated intense discussions on the intersection of women and theatre, all with the aim of appealing to the middle- and upper-class population.

However, despite the oppressive patriarchy and societal hostility towards women's involvement in theatre acting during the Qing era, the rise of foreign concessions and the influx of young females into urban areas provided a platform for female performers like En Xiaofeng 恩曉峰 (1887-1949) and Li Shoubao 李壽寶 (dates unknown) to establish a unique social and artistic realm. In this realm, they were able to showcase their exceptional talents and break free from the constraints imposed by the traditional division between the private and public spheres.

In Chapter Three entitled "The Unfulfilled Promise: Female Actors in the First Decade of the Republic," my attention is turned to a group of *nüdan* players such as Liu Xikui 刘喜奎 (1894-1964) and Xian Lingzhi 鲜灵芝 (dates unknown), whose acting careers lasted during approximately the first decade of the Republic (1912-early 1920s) and significantly challenged and even outrivaled their contemporary male actors. The chapter will first look at Beijing's theatrical world around 1917, the year marking the passing of the celebrated *laosheng* 老生 (a lead male role type) star and former "King of Actors" Tan Xinpei 谭鑫培 (1847-1917). While existing narratives of *jingju* history generally acknowledge that the year 1917 marked the ultimate decline of the male players of male roles of the previous generation and the ascendancy of the youthful *nandan* such as Mei Lanfang and Shang Xiaoyun (Goldstein 2007: 128), my research intends to point out that the influential 1917 *Shuntian shibao* 順天時報 (or *Shuntian*

Times, 1905-1930) theatrical polls not only advanced the careers of the *nandan* Mei Lanfang and Shang Xiaoyun but also substantiated the stunning popularity of a group of *jingju* female actors led by the *nüdan* players Liu Xikui and Zhang Xiaoxian 張小仙 (dates unknown).[13]

Countering the widely held assumption that the *nandan* such as Mei Lanfang and Shang Xiaoyun were predestined to lead the world of *jingju* into the age of *nandan* in subsequent decades, my study of the female actors in early Republican Beijing suggests that a number of the popular women players such as Liu Xikui and Xian Lingzhi were widely thought to be more artistically promising than their contemporary *nandan* stars at the time, and the *nüdan* players as a collective were initially expected by many theatre enthusiasts to become dominant players of *jingju* in the decades to follow. That is to say, the *nandan*'s ultimate rise to international prominence was by no means decided by their alleged artistic superiority.

The chapter aims to shed light on the study of *xiqu* history by arguing that the 1910s marked a significant transitional period for female actors in two significant ways. First, female actors in *xiqu* gradually distanced themselves from the public image of *yinling* and their association with prostitution, thus reclaiming their place in *xiqu* acting. However, societal factors such as marriage and various forms of gender-based prejudice

[13] In 1917 shortly after the death of Tan Xinpei, the Japanese-owned *Shuntian shibao* in Beijing conducted a public election for three distinguished dramatic titles, namely the "King of Actors," "Number One Female Actor," and "Number One Junior Actor." According to the official announcement published on November 2, 1917, the title of the "King of Actors" was conferred to Mei Lanfang, who received a stunning total of 232,865 votes, and the *nandan* Shang Xiaoyun prevailed in the election for "Number One Junior Actor." However, Mei's and Shang's memorable triumphs oftentimes obscure the historical fact that the female actor Liu Xikui, the recipient of the title of "Number One Female Actor," outperformed Mei in the election by gaining a total of 238,606 votes (*Shuntian shibao* 1917: 5).

(such as sexual harassment and objectification) contributed to the brevity of their acting careers. Second, with the emergence of scientific understanding of gender and sex, and the recognition of female actors as national citizens rather than prostitutes, this led to female performers portraying new women both on and offstage, contributing to the process of modern nation building in China.

My discussion of the female actor's performances of women both on- and offstage is indebted to Tani Barlow's seminal conception of women as a historical novelty that was transculturally circulated across the globe. As argued by Barlow, the modern biological understanding of human women as mammals, akin to other mammals, has led to the recognition of women's naturally bestowed right to make voluntary choices regarding their partners for procreation (Barlow 2022: 82). Consequently, issues such as marriage, maternity, and chastity have gained significant importance not only for female performers themselves but also in the public sphere. This stands in stark contrast to the past, where female actors were predominantly associated with prostitution in premodern China. Meanwhile, building upon feminist political scientist Carole Pateman's theory of the "sexual contract," which asserts that bourgeois marriages exploit women's domestic labor, this chapter also aims to examine the exploitative nature of the relationship between male performer Ding Jianyun 丁劍雲 (also known as Ding Lingzhi 丁靈芝 or Ding Yaxuan 丁雅軒) and female performer Xian Lingzhi. I argue that Xian Lingzhi was exploited by both an employment contract and a sexual contract.

It is also because of the event of women that the female body was viewed as a more immediate and inherently "natural" form of femininity in the early Republican

era. In the final sections of the chapter, I will analyze the discursive practices surrounding both the body of female performers and the practice of *nannü heyan*. In the early Republican era, *nannü heyan* transformed from a marginalized practice to a popular practice that was gradually adopted in many cities in China. By examining both sides of the debate, I will highlight the arguments put forth by opponents who believed the sensations caused by *nannü heyan* were too real, as well as the advocates who saw the practice as a seemingly inevitable trend and as crucial to achieving gender equity.

Chapter Four, entitled "The Multiple Personae: Female Stars, Photograph, and the Politics of Cross-Dressing," focuses on two prominent female *xiqu* actors from the 1920s, Zhang Wenyan and Meng Xiaodong. I begin the chapter with a discussion of the complicated relationship between female *xiqu* actor and the political and ideological ideal of the "new women" (*xinnüxing*, 新女性), a prominent concept originating from May Fourth literature and continuously explored through women's newspapers and journals of the late-1910s and the 1920s. While female actors in *xiqu* of the 1920s did not neatly fit into the social roles of the new women, given their limited access to formal education, the influence of the imperative to emulate the new women remained significant. This influence was evident in their everyday performances of gender and their own perceptions of womanhood. Notably, they sought agency within their marriages and expressed a desire to adopt fashionable trends, such as shortening their hair, as a means to showcase their political stance.

In the section dedicated to Zhang Wenyan, I argue that while her repertoire in Shanghai also incorporated naturalistic stagecraft and modern attire, it differed significantly from Liu Xikui's renowned production *Camellia* in Beijing. These

performances portrayed two distinct types of women and were products of contrasting modes of creation. Drawing inspiration from Laikwan Pang's exploration of "Shanghai-style Beijing Opera" and visual modernity in early twentieth-century China, I examine how the proscenium stage transformed the theatrical experience in Shanghai, making it akin to viewing a picture. The fusion of elements such as soft-spoken delivery of lines and sexually explicit actions resulted in the commodification of the female body in Zhang Wenyan's performances. This commodification worked in tandem with the establishment of the star system in Shanghai's competitive theatre and entertainment industry.

Prior to the rise of capitalism in *xiqu* creation, performances relied on the patronage of individual connoisseurs, with the performers' skill and stagecraft sustaining appreciation and connoisseurship. However, with the establishment of the star system in the 1920s, stars themselves became commodities, serving capitalism's aim for quick valorization and commercial exchange. Instead of directly investing in their admirable performers, some literati found ways to capitalize on their literary skills by writing theatre reviews, offering literary guidance, and engaging in promotional activities, to promote the stars and their productions, ultimately maximizing profits for the capitalist-oriented theatre enterprise. Through new technologies of representation, such as photography, and products of print capitalism, including books, periodicals, and playbills, the images of Zhang Wenyan became ubiquitous in print media, consumed by a wide early Republican audience. This helped her achieve top star status, surpassing her male counterparts at the Gong Stage, the Shanghai theatre she worked for. However,

the star system also objectified her body, reducing her to a "dangerously beautiful object."

In the section dedicated to Meng Xiaodong, I take a close look at female actors' exploration of different possibilities of cross-dressing in the Republican era. During the late Qing dynasty, female performers' practice of cross-dressing offstage was generally considered a scandalous act. In the 1910s, legal prohibitions were introduced in Beijing to enforce a dress code for female actors, suggesting if female actors were perceived to have crossed the line in challenging gender norms, it could potentially lead to governmental intervention. However, in the 1920s and 1930s, the widespread circulation of photographs featuring female actors such as Zhang Wenyan, Guo Ruiqing 郭瑞卿 (circa 1908-?), and Ma Yanyun 馬艷雲 (1902-1954) in masculine personae gave this practice a more lighthearted and enjoyable connotation, circumventing the legal prohibition. Meng Xiaodong, being the most prominent female cross-dresser of the Republican era, added new dimensions to the practice in both her art and personal life. Offstage, Meng used cross-dressing as a means of disguise and self-protection, while onstage, it became a powerful tool for her liberation from the exploitative marital relationship with Mei Lanfang. Early Republican era spectators of *xiqu* were thus privileged to witness how female actors marvelously explored the diverse possibilities of cross-dressing.

In Chapter Five (Conclusion), I explore the parallels between Meng Xiaodong and Pei Yanling 裴豔玲 (1947-), perhaps the most celebrated *nüsheng* player of contemporary China, by highlighting the prejudice and discrimination that Pei experienced in her life as portrayed in female filmmaker Huang Shuqin's 黃蜀芹 biopic

of her, *Woman, Human, Demon* (*renguiqing*, 人鬼情). The portrayal of Pei in the film serves as a poignant reminder that political anxiety over female performers remains prevalent. The ongoing fight against biases towards female performers in *xiqu* further emphasizes the long-lasting nature of this struggle.

CHAPTER TWO

ALLURING WOMEN/OUTLAW BODIES: FEMALE ACTORS IN LATE-QING CHINA

One of the most salient oversights of existing *xiqu* historiography lies in its negligence of female actors in the Qing dynasty. In the voluminous *Zhongguo jingju shi* 中國京劇史 (History of Chinese *Jingju*), an authoritative history of *jingju*, the section dedicated to the rise of female actors and all-female troupes includes biographies of only some twenty-eight players who were active in Shanghai, Tianjin, and Beijing during the prolonged period ranging from the nineteenth century to the 1920s. But many of the women's lives and careers are described by only one sentence or two. Likewise, the recent publication of the ambitious *Ershi shiji zhongguo xijushi* 二十世紀中國戲劇史 (History of Twentieth-Century Chinese Theater) by the authoritative scholar Fu Jin 傅謹, a revisionist history that intends to fill a scholarly vacuum left out by preceding scholarship, also fails to pay adequate attention to late-Qing female actors, though a significant portion of the historical study is dedicated to the last years of the empire. It is also interesting to note that although English-language scholarship on Qing-era theatre has demonstrated a sustained interest in the issue of gender and sexuality in *xiqu*,[14] it has curiously remained silent on the role that female performers played on the Qing-era stage.

[14] Many scholarly works in English have studied the aspect of gender and sexuality in Qing-era *xiqu*. Wu Cuncun (oftentimes with Mark Stevenson) has produced a substantial body of scholarship on *siyu* (literally, "private residences"), an institution of sex, entertainment, and theatre education that hosted young male theatre performers in the outer city of Beijing. See Cuncun Wu 2004; Cuncun Wu and Mark Stevenson 2006: 42-59; Cuncun Wu and Mark Stevenson 2010: 100-129. Also, Liana Chen explored the critical role that the Qing's female ruler Empress Dowager Cixi played in shaping Qing court theatre. See Liana Chen 2012: 21-46.

Perhaps the marginalization of female actors of the Qing in prevailing narratives of *xiqu* history is attributable to certain premises that underlie modern historiography of *xiqu*. An authoritative English-language description of the history of Chinese theatre of the Qing era states:

> The earliest such prohibition [regarding female actors] was issued in 1671 […] Similar bans appeared many more times during the Kangxi reign, as well as during the Yongzheng and Qianlong reigns; the last ban was issued in 1774 […] Owing to relentless central and local government crackdowns, women performers generally disappeared from public view after 1774, except for a small number who appeared in the foreign settlements in Shanghai and Tianjin in the late nineteenth century. (Jiang 2009: 28)

In a word, female actors were thought to be only exceptional and thus played no substantial role in the history (a prolonged period ranging from the reign of Emperor Kangxi of 1661 to 1722 to the collapse of the dynasty in 1911). This view was in line with a prevailing understanding of the Qing-era history of Chinese theatre, which characterizes this period of history as a transition from "a heterosexual theatrical culture to a distinctive masculine characteristic" (Jiang 2009: 27). Scholars of Chinese theatre conventionally attribute this said transition partially to the decline of *chuanqi*, the most popular theatrical form in the Ming and early Qing periods and a token of the cult of *qing*[15] 情. *Chuanqi* was stringently censored during the High Qing (1683-1799) because

[15] A rich, critical aesthetic concept in late-imperial Chinese philosophy, culture, literature, and arts, which may be translated into English as "affect," "emotion," or "love." For excellent

the Qing rulers deemed the Ming's indulgence in the cult of *qing* as a major cause for the demise of the preceding dynasty. In addition, law and social customs that discouraged women's participation in the making of theatre were also said to facilitate this purported masculine characteristic (Jiang 2009: 27).

For instance, one legal document, collected in the *Dingli cheng'an hechao* 定例成案合鈔 (A Combined Copy of Regulations and Leading Cases) edited by the literatus Sun Danshu 孫丹書 (dates unknown)in the last years of the Kangxi reign, dictated the following order:

> There are now female players riding to the city to perform. Although they call themselves "female actors" (*lingnü* 伶女), the women are virtually no different from prostitutes. It is entirely possible that unworthy officials will be obsessed with the females, which could cause the men to squander all their property. Thus, the women must be not permitted to enter the city. Anyone who defies this order shall be penalized in the way that prostitutes are dealt with. (quoted in Wang 1981: 29)

Texts that prohibited female actors are repeatedly cited to proclaim that the theatrical culture of the Qing was a "masculine" one. Yet, legal documents regarding female actors like the one collected in *Combined Copy of Regulations and Leading Cases* existed in a large number in today's archive of Qing-era documents. And the sheer number of the documents prohibiting women actors point to the repeated

studies of how the concept of *qing* shaped late-imperial Chinese literature. See Epstein 2019; Huang 2001.

measures that the Qing court and local jurisdictions had to adopt to keep the regulations in effect. Today, the assertion that the Qing culture of *xiqu* was a "masculine one" seems to be at the foundation of our understanding of *xiqu* history. However, my study of the Qing sources suggests that on various occasions female actors successfully defied the Qing's draconian rules. Such a finding suggests that the bans on female actors were not always efficacious as a modern historian of theatre might expect. Underneath the sizable Qing-era archive of theatre and legal materials lies a riveting story of female actors.

In the literary sketches—*Qing bai lei chao* 清稗類鈔 (Unofficial Categories of the Qing), for instance, various entries attest to the continued existence of female actors during the Qianlong reign. One of the entries particularly noted the popularity of youthful female performers in Nanjing:

> When banquets were held at pavilions by Qinhuai 秦淮 river, children performers sang and were accompanied by stringed instruments, reed pipes, and flutes. During the last years of the Qianlong period, those children between ten and fifteen years of age who had euphonious voices and charming faces were assigned to the roles of *sheng* and *dan*. They each had their own specialty and appeared onstage with makeup and costumes, which greatly moved the spectators. And the [children] players are paid ten times more than male actors. (Xu 1966: 54)

In contrast to the *Combined Copy of Regulations and Leading Cases*, the *Unofficial Categories of the Qing* offers a positive representation of female actors in the High Qing. In fact, the two entries are representative of the two competing perspectives

through which female actors were delineated and understood in the Qing-era archive. The *Combined Copy of Regulations and Leading Cases* entry approached female actors through a moralizing perspective and presented a moral censure of the women who "went astray." This moralizing view enabled the enunciator of the legal order to frame female players as prostitutes, question the women's legitimacy as actors, and insist that their potential presence posed a grave threat to social order. While this moralist stance is shared by many Qing-era accounts of female actors, it is the other perspective on the women that allows us to have a nuanced understanding of them. Looking through the prism of a sympathetic connoisseur, the *Unofficial Categories of the Qing* entry refused to judge the women on moral grounds. Instead, it assessed them mainly on the basis of their artistic competence and noted that the popularity of female players surpassed that of male actors. Despite their divergent views on female performers, the two sources both pointed to the considerable expenses that were entailed by the connoisseurship of female actors. Precisely due to the costs of interacting with female performers, the grim enunciator of the legal order was worried that his men would be deprived of all their property if they indulged in the women and the theatrical spectacles they enacted.

And his concern seemed not entirely unfounded. Another entry in *Unofficial Categories of the Qing* reported that when Emperor Qianlong was on one of his inspection tours to the south, he summoned and rewarded a talented female performer named Zhaorong 昭容 at Qingjiang 清江 (in today's Huai'an) with a handsome sum of precious jewels and knick-knacks (Xu 1966: 66-67). Perhaps the emperor's generosity precisely reflected the worry of the enunciator of the Kangxi order. The imperial ruler himself transgressed the law that he and his precursors enacted, and that transgression

cost him magnificently. Despite legal restrictions, female performers seemed a source of irresistible attractions.

It should be noted that those who appeared in the Qing sources variously as "*nüling* 女伶," "*kunling* 坤伶," or "*jiaoshu* 校書" ("courtesans") rarely participated in a singular profession and thus were not strictly female theatrical actors in the modern sense.[16] Female entertainers in China, before the advent of modernity, might perform *xiqu* on the theatrical stage, but they might also serve as songstresses and sing arias of *xiqu* or popular songs at the dinner table. And in their day-to-day interactions with male patrons, they could also assume the role of prostitutes. Anyone who is familiar with the Ming-Qing literature would know the multiple roles that a female entertainer could enact from Li Xiangjun 李香君, the female protagonist in Kong Shangren's 孔尚任 (1648-1718) early Qing drama *Taohua shan* 桃花扇 (peach blossom fan) and a courtesan versed in *kunqu*. Yet, the services that each individual female entertainer provided varied widely depending upon their expertise, the audience, and the site of performance.

The ambiguity of their identity posed a thorny problem for the Qing rulers as well as for those of us who study theatre history today. For the imperial court and local governments in the Qing, those female entertainers were not legitimate theatrical

[16] Certainly, in compliance with the bans on female actors, male actors engaged in the *siyu* business in Beijing throughout the long nineteenth century garnered significant popularity, largely due to the various services they provided to their patrons. Their interactions with the literati were often imbued with elements of erotica and moral ambiguity, mirroring the dynamics observed between female players and their patrons. This phenomenon is not exclusive to Chinese theatre. In Tokugawa Japan, governmental restrictions on female performers in kabuki led to the substitution of boy performers, who proved to be equally captivating to audiences (Kano 2001: 5).

players because of their suspicious ties to prostitution. For theatre historians of twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the female performers are routinely excluded from narratives of theatre history because theatre studies as an academic discipline (with its origins from the early twentieth-century German field of *Theaterwissenschaft*) postulates theatre as a stage-centered art (rather than mere entertainment or a subfield of literature) and theatre history as a serious and worthy subject of scholarly investigation. Unfortunately, the role of the Chinese entertainers as sex workers undermines their opportunity to be studied as artists. One might point out that this historiographic problem does not haunt Chinese female theatre players alone. Indeed, in late-Qing Beijing, many male performers of *xiqu* (including some of the most superlative ones of the age) were also associated with male prostitution. They have become possible subjects of theatre history because authoritative narratives of *jingju* continue to downplay men's participation in prostitution. It is only recently that the homoerotic bonds between male actors and their patrons have begun to be thoroughly explored (See Wu 2004; Wu and Stevenson 2006: 42-59; Wu and Stevenson 2010: 100-129; Goldman 2012; Volpp 2002: 949-984).

Utilizing an extensive array of late Qing-era sources, this chapter scrutinizes the representations of female actors within late-Qing publications, encompassing not only collections of legal documents but also prominent newspapers and tabloids. It aims to scrutinize how these sources depict female actors of the late Qing period and explores the art of the women performers as well as their role in the society at large. Countering the widely held assumption that the Qing culture of theatre was by nature "masculine," my study finds that female actors (performing either on the "integrated-sex" stages or in

all female theatrical troupes) actively performed in a large territory spanning from Haisenwai (today's Vladivostok) and Yingkou in the North to Shanghai and Xiamen (or Amoy) in the South, and their strong presence greatly altered the theatrical culture. My understanding of the female entertainers is indebted to the theoretical framework of "spatial theatre historiography," a historiographic paradigm that has been developed by theatre historians such as Rosemarie Bank and Michal Kobialka, who intend to apply insights of modern physics and geometry into research on theatre history.

Spatial theatre historiography encourages theatre scholars to think like modern physicists, many of whom believe that an observer's own position and velocity condition his observation of events. According to Kobialka, the Theory of Relativity suggested that "when events are simultaneous for one observer they may not be simultaneous for another observer. Descriptions of the process depend upon the position and the velocity of the observer as well as a frame of reference" (Kobialka 1991: 89). One of the far-reaching consequences of this insight of the theory of relativity for theatre historiography is that it defies the legitimacy of writing positivist theatre history. If theatre historians are some kind of observers of (social or theatrical) events, one might argue that their descriptions of events and their understanding of the relationship between events are conditioned upon their own position and how quickly they move toward or away from the observed.

Through the prism of spatial theatre historiography, I approach late-Qing China as a dynamic site in which a series of prominent physical and temporal changes and movements took place. These developments include but were not limited to large immigration flows, rapid admission of young women into the labor force, the extension

of working hours, and heightened tension between classes. In this rapidly changing world, different fractions of the body politic intersected, and their "parallel universes" collided. Female actors elicited critical attention because various fractions of the population believed that the issue of female actors not only mattered to morality and social justice but also affected their political and economic interests in one way or another.

I. Spatial Theatre Historiography

In the early 1990s, when North America-based theatre scholars such as Bank and Kobialka became increasingly dissatisfied with the positivist approach to theatre history, they began to develop a new historiographic approach which intended to take advantage of major developments in the field of modern physics. For Bank and Kobialka, theatre studies as a modern academic discipline that originated from the German mode of *Theaterwissenschaft* privileged empiricism and positivism. After this European paradigm of theatre studies was introduced to North America through the renowned Berlin-educated theatre scholar Alois M. Nagler in the 1930s and 1940s, this positivist approach to theatre history exerted a powerful impact on theatre studies in the United States. Likewise, theatre research in China has also been shaped, directly or indirectly, by this influential paradigm of theatre research through the introduction of the work of Max Herrmann as well as the influential American theatre historian Oscar G. Brockett. As a result, *Theaterwissenschaft* and its positivist approach to theatre history have contributed significantly to a shift in focus in academia in China from the

study of drama as a subfield of literature to the study of theatre as a stage-oriented art since the 1980s.

Positivist historians, as Kobialka points out, "impose linear time upon both human beings and objects (matter)" because classical physics understands space both as something immutable and as "a homogenous medium which existed objectively and independently of its physical content" (Kobialka 1991: 87). However, developments in physics and geometry in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries such as Einstein's spatial theory of relativity, non-Euclidean geometry, the theory of simultaneous universes, and quantum mechanics undermined the notions of absolute space and time. For instance, the theory of relativity suggests that "future and past were not separated by an infinitely short time interval (the present) but were separated by a finite time interval whose length depended on its distance from the observer" (Kobialka 1991: 88). Hence, "descriptions of the process depend upon the position and the velocity of the observer, as well as a frame of reference" (Kobialka 1991: 89).

How can the advancements in modern physics and geometry improve our understanding of theatre history? Bank took theatres in the Jacksonian era (approximately 1820s-1850) as example. Like many people in late-Qing China, Jacksonians were preoccupied with the kinship between theatre and prostitution. A variety of sources in the Jacksonian era and its subsequent periods condemned the playhouse for its ties to sex trade. For this reason, the noted contemporary theatre scholar Claudia Johnson claimed that Jacksonian theatre fostered prostitution in its third tier (or the gallery), an area where seats were least expensive in a nineteenth-century theatre. Recent positivist scholarship, however, finds this prevailing understanding of

Jacksonian theatre flawed. It is not only because positivist historians fail to identify precisely where and when such aberrant acts occurred but also because many texts produced after the Civil War are not reliable accounts of Jacksonian-era theatre. Although positivist historians are cognizant of the problem with the purported affinity between theatre and prostitution, Bank thinks that the positivist approach to theatre history fails to capture the essence of the problem.

For Bank, Johnson's understanding of Jackson-era theatre is profoundly shaped by twentieth-century preoccupations with sex as well as views of moral majorities on prostitution. In fact, the aberrant sexual acts in the Jacksonian period were a far cry from prostitution in the twentieth century. First, "there was no statutory definition of prostitution in New York until the early twentieth century" (Bank 1991: 73). Even if those engaged in the sex trade were convicted, it was considered as "a misdemeanor not a felony" (quoted in Bank 1991: 73). Second, in the nineteenth century, prostitution "was most typically casual or occasional, rather than habitual or occupational" (Bank 1991: 73). Bank thus holds that the positivist search for "truth" in the matter of prostitution in Jacksonian American theatres is a futile one as "'the guilty third tier' is less locatable as a 'real' object" (Bank 1991: 73). Spatial theatre historiographers encourage scholars to comprehend the history of theatre by taking into account important parameters that condition the space and time of the society that they intend to study. These parameters may include "spin, velocity, position, direction, duration, angle and shift, interval, energy, density, color, rhythm, stretching, contracting, tension, folding, and flow" (Bank 1991: 76) And the interaction between these parameters could engender different dynamics of spatial linkage, including "inbetweenness, parallelism,

simultaneity, self-consistency, self-reflexivity, transformation, isolation, succession, interpenetration, transference, reoccurrence, coexistence, and appearance/disappearance" (Bank 1991: 76). Bank explicates how these parameters enhance our understanding of Jacksonian theatre:

> In Jacksonian theatre […] the velocity and direction of population growth (more, poorer people) affects ticket prices, choice of bill, and "that guilty third tier." The parallel growth of working women and protests about prostitutes may signal simultaneity or transference. Attempts to control young men by controlling young women suggests a tension in consistency between the man and his master and the man and his mate on a number of levels. (Bank 1991: 76)

I maintain that spatial theatre historiography promises historians of Chinese theatre a more discerning understanding of the issue of female actors at the turn of the twentieth century. Like Jacksonian America, late-Qing and early Republican China was a highly dynamic site in which prominent physical movements took place. From the prism of spatial theatre historiography, the spatiality of late-Qing China was characterized by a rapid *expansion* of semi-colonial port cities, a heavy *flow* of migrants into the urban space, and a *proliferation* of Western, Russian, and Japanese population in foreign concessions and beyond. Take Shanghai as an example. After the city was open to foreign trade in the 1840s (the International Settlement was founded in 1845, and the French Concession in 1849), Shanghai enjoyed a steady population growth. From 1843 to 1895, the population of Shanghai doubled, and the growth became even sharper after 1895 as many more projects of urban development were undertaken

(Murphey 1953: 20-21). By 1910, according to Rhoads Murphey's survey, the foreign population in urban Shanghai had exceeded 10,000 with a significant portion of the population being women (Murphey 1953: 23).

During the process, increased *tension* accumulated between Chinese residents and foreign settlers at one level, and among various subgroups of the Chinese population at another level. On the one hand, the tension between Chinese nationals and foreign settlers jeopardized the Qing's sovereignty and its legal regulations, which therefore enabled female actors to prosper in China's foreign concessions and port cities. On the other hand, the friction between varied castes of the Chinese population resulted in divergent stances toward those women playing on the stage of *xiqu*: while youthful women from households of limited means found employment in the theatre, those literati and government officials who were saddened by the decline of Confucian order and cosmology viewed the participation of women as both performers and spectators in theatrical arts as a sign of moral deterioration. In order to cater to the middle and high ranks of the population, late-Qing and early Republican periodicals, as profitable products of print capitalism, promoted conflicting representations of female actors and hosted heated debates over the relationship between women and theatre. While some of the writers called for banishing women from theatre because of the rising middle class's concerns about respectability, others argued for female actors and wrote to acknowledge the critical role which female performers played in the making of *xiqu*.

Spatial theatre historiography also reminds the historian of his/her own positionality and frame of reference in the process of history making. As

aforementioned earlier, *Theaterwissenschaft*, the dominant paradigm of theatre research, has historically downplayed the contributions of female actors in Chinese theatre in both English and Chinese literature on Qing theatre because of the women's dual identity as both sex workers and artists. In other words, *Theaterwissenschaft* conditions the positivist theatre historian's frame of reference and forecloses the possibility of including the female entertainers as valuable subjects of historical investigations of Chinese theatre. It is recent developments in theatre studies, gender and sexuality studies, and performance studies that initiate the possibility of researching this very project. These developments include the rise of spatial theatre historiography, a burgeoning body of scholarship on female performers in modern Western and Japanese theatres, and the growing interest of performance studies in performativity and theatricality beyond the confines of the theatrical stage. As Rosemarie Bank perceptively notes, "the past is not 'out there' waiting to be discovered but is somewhere inside the future" (Bank 1991: 76). Hence, these new scholarly insights and methodologies have conditioned my understanding of what occurred to the Chinese female actors in the past. And I anticipate that the history of the female actors will continue to be shaped in the future.

II. Female Actors as a Source of Moral Peril

Spatial theatre historiography questions whether historical sources necessarily provide historians with access to truth and thus challenges the attempt of positivist scholars to excavate historical facts through archival research. Yet, from the advantage perspective of spatial theatre historiography, historical sources are always conditioned

by the position of the maker and his/her own frame of reference. And the process of interpreting the sources is also conditioned by the position of the interpreter and his/her own epistemological framework. In what follows, by taking into consideration the spatiality and temporality of late-Qing China as well as the position of the observer of the theatre, I will explore the critical role that late-Qing female actors played in theatrical arts and the society at large in order to garner a more profound understanding of the history.

On December 9, 1899, an article entitled "*Nüxi jiang shengxing yu Shanghai shuo*" 女戲將盛行於上海說 [lit., "Female theatres will prevail in Shanghai"] appeared in *Shenbao*, Shanghai's leading newspaper. As the author of the article heralded the advent of a new phase of the Shanghai theatre, such a prospect gravely disturbed the author. This ostensibly inevitable development was the bourgeoning of female performers. According to the author, the performance of female actors took its origins in the all-female troupes commonly known as *mao'er xi* 髦兒戲[17] in Suzhou during the reigns of Emperors Daoguang 道光 (1821-1850) and Xianfeng 咸豐 (1851-1861). There and then, [the *mao'er xi* performances] "caused social disturbances and stained numerous townships, but Shanghai remained a tranquil site [because it was free of these girls]" (*JJLSWXHB* vol. 4: 513). Yet, after foreign concessions were established, some of the *mao'er xi* performers were recruited to stage all-female theatres in Shanghai, and men and women in the city were quickly drawn to the fad (*JJLSWXHB* vol. 4: 513).

[17] Also referred to as 貓兒戲 (literally, "plays of kittens") due to the perception that the singing voices of the young female performers resembled those of kittens.

Framing the *mao'er xi* as a plague that was both contagious and morally poisonous, the author of the article fully subscribed to the moralist view on female actors. Comprehending the women as a source of moral corruption, he seemed greatly distressed by how *mao'er xi* evolved over time. The author noted that the Shanghai *mao'er xi* differed from its precursors in Suzhou in important ways. En route from Suzhou to Shanghai, *mao'er xi* transformed itself from a private entertainment into a public spectacle. In Suzhou, the *mao'er xi* performances hinged upon the patronage of officials and honorable men and were generally staged on private occasions in celebration of festivals, important events, and the like. In Shanghai's foreign concessions, however, the *mao'er xi* performers settled in permanent sites, offered public spectacles on a regular basis, and their performances were available to anyone who was willing to pay a fee.

Moreover, the rise of *mao'er xi* in Shanghai blurred the distinction between female actors and prostitutes even further. Compared to the performers in Suzhou who were generally aged twelve to thirteen years old, the Shanghai performers, having passed the age of fifteen years old, appeared more sexually mature (*JJLSWXHB* vol. 4: 513). In the view of the disgruntled *Shenbao* author, spectators of the Shanghai *mao'er xi* treated the women like "desirable prostitutes" and "followed them like a flock of ducks" (*JJLSWXHB* vol. 4: 513). In turn, those brothels, whose business was affected by the popularity of female actors, also trained their girls to perform *mao'er xi*. Gail Hershatter reported that prostitution had a strong presence in Shanghai's foreign concessions throughout the late nineteenth century. This was partly because unlike the Qing government which generally prohibited brothels, foreign concessions in Shanghai

held a more lenient attitude toward female sex work: while the International Settlement's prohibition on brothels had never been firm and consistent, licensed brothels were established in the French Concession (Hershatter 1997: 38). A foreign health official reported that there was a total of 1,632 Chinese prostitutes in the International Settlement in 1871, and the French estimated that 2,600 prostitutes inhabited in their concession (quoted in Hershatter 1997: 38-39). Against the backdrop of the rampant prostitution, the *Shenbao* author was worried that the connoisseurship of female actors would resemble the courtesan culture:

> As the female theatre gains momentum, its popularity will likely surpass that of brothels. When prostitutes and actors are merged into one, people would approach prostitutes in the name of interacting with actors […] Soon, no courtesan will not be an actor, and vice versa. (*JJLSWXHB* vol. 4: 514)

As the distinction between female actors and prostitutes became increasingly obscured, the relocation of *mao'er xi* from Suzhou to Shanghai also facilitated a change to the repertoire. In Suzhou, the mecca of *kunqu*, *mao'er xi* heavily relied upon the classical repertories of *kunqu*. Their performances of *kunqu*, however, encountered a lukewarm reception in Shanghai. The women's response to the Shanghai audience's craving for novelty was to replace *kunqu* with *pihuang*[18] 皮黄 (precursor of *jingju*). It was because *kunqu* was intelligible to a portion of the gentry in Jiangsu and Zhejiang

[18] *Jingju* was initially referred to as *pihuang* in the Qing era, a term denoting the fusion of *xipi* 西皮 and *erhuang* 二黄, two prominent melodies within the theatrical genre. It was when *pihuang* performers from Beijing toured to Shanghai in the late nineteenth century, the local audience recognized the Beijing *pihuang* as a distinct genre and began referring to it as jingju.

only, whereas the lyrics of *pihuang* were "comprehensible to audiences from all provinces" (*JJLSWXHB* vol. 4: 513).

To be sure, the commercial triumph of female actors did not simply mark a shift of power from *kunqu* to *jingju*. Many accounts also accused female actors of promoting so-called "lewd plays" (*yinxi* 淫戲). Often combined with plots of violence, murder, and crimes, the "lewd plays" tantalize the audience with presentations of sensual scenes. Popular late-Qing "lewd plays" included but were not limited to *Mai yanzhi* 卖胭脂 (Selling rouge blush), *Song yindeng* 送銀燈 (Delivering the silver light), *Fang mianhua* 紡棉花 (Spinning cotton), *Xiao shangfen* 小上墳 (Visiting the tomb), *Luo huayuan* 落花園 (Lost in the garden), *Hai chaozhu* 海潮珠 (Pearl in the tide), *Cuiping shan* 翠屏山 (Cuiping mountain), *Shi yuzhuo* 拾玉鐲 (Picking up the jade bracelet), *Da zhaifan* 打齋飯 (The well-fed monk), and *Shazi bao* 殺子報 (Retribution of the murdered son). Among the plays, *Retribution of the Murdered Son* perhaps best delivers a mixture of intrigue, sex, and violence. Adapted from a real incident in Tongzhou (today's Nantong), the narrative of the erotic thriller is as follows: a young widow surnamed Xu 徐 maintains an intimate relationship with a prurient monk named Nayun 納雲. The widow's son Guanbao 官保 discovers their affair and drives the monk away, which enrages Madame Xu, who then murders her son when the poor boy sleeps. With the assistance from her daughter Jinding 金定, who is forced to dismember Guanbao's deceased body, Madame Xu preserves the remains of the body in an oil jar. The death of Guanbao is eventually discovered by his teacher, and the story ends with the executions of both his lascivious mother and the precept-breaking monk.

In May 1885, when the play was first performed in Shanghai, a *Shenbao* report warned its readers that all the scenes of *Retribution of the Murdered Son* were "extremely poisonous and licentious," while acknowledging that the play was extremely fashionable among theatregoers (*JJLSWXHB* vol. 4: 250). Arguing that new dramas such as *Retribution of the Murdered Son* and *The Well Fed Monk* posed a threat to integrity and sexual faithfulness, another author in the newspaper *Xinwen bao* 新聞報 (lit., "The News") called for an immediate ban on the plays (*JJLSWXHB* vol. 5: 37). He noted particularly on the effect of "lewd plays" on the Shanghai audience:

> When people talk about the pinnacle of the theatre, they generally refer to the heyday of the graceful and elegant performances of *kunqu*. No one has ever associated *jingju* with prosperity and honor. *Jingju* plays now incorporate bizarre and poisonous elements. When they take in local affairs, the situation becomes even worse […] Characters in the new plays, all performed by excellent *sheng* and *dan*, vividly portray erotic scenes and do not cease until they reach the filthiest parts. When the [music] instruments are played, hundreds of people all burst into loud cheering. In the audience, there is no distinction between men and women, between old and young, between rich and poor, and between intelligent and foolish. The eyes of all spectators are on the stage, and all their ears are drawn to it. They turned the theatre into a world that maintains no [social] distinctions. (*JJLSWXHB* vol. 5: 37)

Perhaps the depiction of the theatrical performances above evokes every Confucian anxiety about erasure of boundaries: entertainments such as theatre and

dance were viewed as a source of sensual incitement (thus corruption) rather than harmonization. As the viewers of the lewd plays lost all sense of social distinctions, the performances of the lewd plays also often defied gender taboos by including the practice of *nannü heyan* 男女合演 (lit., "integrated-sex acting" or "men and women performing jointly"). Historically speaking, Chinese theatrical troupes tended to be either all male or all female from the late Ming era onward (Dolby 1976: 109). The customary use of unisex castings was legally enforced in the subsequent periods. Compared to all-female troupes, *nannü heyan* was considered a more morally suspicious practice. This was partly evidenced by the fact that while all-female performances were generally tolerated in varied foreign concessions in the Qing and the ban on female actors was officially lifted after the founding of the Republic, legal prohibitions on *nannü heyan* continued to exist in many cities including Beijing until the 1920s.

The appearances of *nannü heyan* as a transgressive practice in the late Qing era closely coincided with the sensual performances of lewd plays. A Tianjin-based *L'impartial* (*Ta Kung Pao* 大公報) contributor noted how the use of *nannü heyan* in the "lewd plays" significantly altered the culture of theatre in the city in 1904:

> Lately, the social customs of Tianjin have become increasingly decadent. It was quite unlike the years before 1900 […] If there is no female actor in a performance, no one would be willing to watch it. If female actors do not perform "lewd plays," the box-office performance would surely be unpopular. It is imperative to have many licentious women play with male actors in the staging of a lewd performance. They vividly enact

sensual scenes right before the eyes of the audience. (*JJLSWXHB* vol. 6: 27)

According to another *L'impartial* entry, as soon as a Jinan tea house in of Shandong staged a mixed sex performance, the tea house "drew theatregoers like ants crawling to mutton" (*guanzhe ru yizhimushan*, 觀者如蟻之慕羶). After learning about the government's intention to shut down the theatre, spectators worried about missing the spectacle flocked to the tea house (*JJLSWXHB* vol. 6: 71-72). Because of the stunning popularity of *nannüheyan*, it was reported that an excellent female actor in Tianjin could make as many as several hundred foreign dollars per month (*JJLSWXHB* vol. 6: 29). The author continues that such a lucrative business prompted some "respectable households" to send their daughters to study the acting of *xiqu* (*JJLSWXHB* vol. 6: 29), defying the Qing's stringent distinction between commoners and the subaltern—while peasants and artisans belonged to the former, actors, prostitutes, and beggars were within the latter group.

When positivist historians search for "truth" in the archive on late-Qing theatre, they may argue that moral accusations against the female actors, though existing in a large number, do not necessarily reflect historical truth. They may point out that positive representations of late-Qing female actors did exist, and thus a positivist historian who intends to present a "fair" assessment of the history feels obligated to take into consideration all competing representations. While a comprehensive survey of historical sources is important, the positivist search of truth itself prevents us from gaining a more profound understanding of the issue. From the prism of spatial theatre historiography, perhaps the overarching question for the theatre historian to pursue is

neither “what did the female actors perform?” nor “how were their performances received?” but rather “why was there so much discursive attention paid to the moral threat of female actors during the late Qing?”

Spatial theatre historiography enables the historian to scrutinize late-Qing theatre as a site where multiple discontinuities took place and brought forth a system-wide transformation and shifts of power. Those who found female actors, lewd plays, and *nannüheyan* morally repulsive in part because theatregoers across various social strata were drawn to the same spectacle and present in the same (and often crowded) space and because the entry of daughters from respectable households into the profession of *xiqu* acting jeopardized the social distinction between commoners and the demeaned classes. A further threat that also contributed to the moralists’ hostility toward female actors was the fact that the existence of female performers even turned the space outside of the stage into a site of theatricality by practicing transvestitism offstage around 1903 in late-Qing Shanghai. An entry in the Shanghai-based *Youxi bao* 遊戲報 [The games] states the following:

> The practices of women playing men, or men playing women, blurring the distinction between men and women, male and female, are grave transgressions of norms […] Since recent years, *mao’erxi* has gained stunning popularity. When a *mao’erxi* player named Wu Xinbao 吳新寶 performed at the Meixian 美仙 playhouse at Erma Road, she was arrested for dressing like a man. After a careful investigation, [the police] found that she had piercings, and that her forehead was covered with bangs. Given the fact that after all she played male characters in

> theatre, and was therefore somewhat different from an average woman, the police released her. The incident prompted many female actors at Qunxian and Nixian playhouses to wear men's clothing. Prostitutes also followed suit. Many were reluctant to assume feminine personae but opted to behave like men. On a recent morning, a female actor, who adorned herself with a man's black hat, a leather robe, a pair of satin shoes, went to see some Doctor Zhang. People were not aware that she was a woman. And the doctor failed to make sense of the situation until a nanny who came with the performer explained everything to him. (*JJLSWXHB* vol. 5: 274)

From a historical perspective, Qing sources typically did not emphasize attire, as women were often confined indoors, and prostitutes were considered exceptions because they were not held to the same standards as *guixiu* 閨秀 (young ladies of the inner chamber). Therefore, the entry's significant focus on Wu Xinbao's attire might indicate that Western concerns regarding appropriate gender roles were displacing the traditional Chinese dichotomy between interiority (domesticity) and exteriority (public). By dressing like men offstage, the female actors evoked a deeply entrenched prejudice toward theatre and actors, resonating with both the negative connotation of the Latin idea of *theatrum mundi* ("theatre of the world") and what Jonas Barish calls "antitheatricalism" (Barish 1981).

For those who viewed transvestism as a transgression of norms, the female actors transformed the city of Shanghai into a magnified theatre space. "Theatre," in their eyes, evokes "an excessive quality that is showy, deceptive, exaggerated, artificial,

or affected" (Postlewait and Davis 2003: 4). Paradoxically, it also conjures up "an inner emptiness, a deficiency or an absence of that to which it refers" (Postlewait and Davis 2003: 4). Hence, this antitheatrical stance, which is first observed by Jonas Barish in the Judaic-Christian tradition but certainly also existent in varied non-Western contexts, accuses theatre/actor of being both excessive and hollow and condemns theatre for its surplus and for its lack (Postlewait and Davis 2003: 4).

Owing to antitheatricalism, actors become subject to moral scrutiny in various cultures and contexts. "Actors' social behaviors and identity," argue theatre historians Thomas Postlewait and Tracy C. Davis, "have often been seen as threats to the order and standards of the community" (Postlewait and Davis 2003: 5). This seemed particularly true when those female actors who began to circulate offstage socially in masculine persona and tore down preexisting distinctions of sex and gender. Adversaries of female actors sought to contain the women in traditional gender roles in order to restore the old universe.

III. Female Actors as Competent Performers of Masculinity

While many who wished to maintain the old social order portrayed female actors and their performances as a cause of moral disturbances, a close look at textual and pictorial representations of late-Qing female actors suggests that many sources challenged the moralist prejudice toward the women and objected to portraying them as moral reprobates. The stunning popularity of *mao'er xi* provoked competing understandings of the female actors. For the moralists, it was the erotic dynamics within the performances that sustained *mao'er xi* as a fad. Laudatory comments on *mao'er xi*,

however, maintained that the magnetic attractions of the women were mainly due to their artistic competence rather than their sexual allure. Of course, one might point out that between the erotic and the artistic a clear-cut division could never be drawn in the appreciation of *xiqu* performances. Indeed, the body of a *xiqu* performer is almost always a site of both aesthetic and erotic attractions. Nevertheless, appreciative spectators of female *xiqu* actors challenged the understanding that the spectacular appeal of female actors of the Qing was merely sexually driven. Various *xiqu* cognoscenti, drama critics, and the like, commented particularly on female specialists of male roles and their powerful performances of masculinity onstage. Their accounts suggested that the art of those *kunsheng* 坤生 (female players of male roles) was on par with, if not superior to, that of their male counterparts.

During the reign of Guangxu Emperor, *mao'er xi* had reached its maturity. Excellent *mao'er xi* performances could be found in such cities as Wuhu, Tongzhou, Hangzhou, Zhenjiang, and Jiangning (today's Nanjing). In other words, they were no longer a practice only available in foreign settlements in Shanghai and Tianjin (*JJLSWXHB* vol. 4: 549, 550, 551, 552). Although *mao'er xi* became a national phenomenon, the city of Shanghai remained the most influential hub of *mao'er xi* performances: not only did astute merchants recruit talented female actors from Shanghai to perform in other parts of the country (*JJLSWXHB* vol. 4: 533), but gifted female actors from elsewhere toured Shanghai in order to acquire national prominence (*JJLSWXHB* vol. 5: 624). As Xu Ke concluded in *Unofficial Categories of the Qing*, "during the Guangxu and Xuantong 宣統 [1908-1911] eras, *mao'er xi* blossomed. The

performances were of distinct quality, and some performers surpassed their contemporary male actors" (Xu 1966: 54).

A *Shenbao* contributor recalled in 1896 that all-female performances were staged in Xianping (today's Liaoyang), a township in Manchuria:

> One day, a female actor named Bao Shan 寶珊, who was a specialist of male roles, was invited to perform. When she appeared in the play *FaZidu* 伐子都 (Taking Revenge on Zidu), her sword sparked flashes of cold steel, and her masterful use of the sword brought forth a gust of swirling wind. It stirred a sensation among some myriad spectators in the playhouse. As they clambered toward the theatrical stage and pushed against each other for a better view of the player, the pillars of the stage collapsed. All performers fell down on the floor and went into a panic, though fortunately no one was injured. (*JJLSWXHB* vol. 4: 452)

A play that blends true historical figures in the Spring and Autumn era (770 BC-476 BC) with made-up events, *FaZidu* features a jaundiced young general named Zidu who murders his superior in order to take the chief commander's military achievements as his own. On his way to the state capital, Zidu experiences hallucinations and believes that the ghost of the murdered commander appears to take revenge on him. A traditional play foregrounding spectacular presentations of martial arts and acrobatics, *FaZidu* concludes with a breathtaking scene: Zidu, troubled by a hallucinatory mind and surrounded by people coming to congratulate him on his military achievements, falls from a tower at the center of the stage and dies following the incident.

Unlike those moralists who attributed the popularity of female performers to their ties to prostitution and/or sexual impulses, the *Shenbao* report challenged such a reductive understanding of Bao Shan's popularity. It was Bao Shan's masterful command of the sword that transformed the theatrical stage into a site that was worth seeing. If we read the *Shenbao* report more perceptively, the accident that took place in the playhouse appeared to be a rather metatheatrical moment. Zidu's performance appeared to be a play within a play in the sense that the spectacle enacted by the female actor Bao Shan was in the sightlines both of the theatregoers in the highly engaged audience and of those dramatic characters who came to congratulate Zidu embodied by Bao Shan on the stage. The body of the male protagonist as a site of attraction evoked rich dynamics and fluidity within the reception of the performance. The display of the martial arts movements transformed the theatrical stage into a spectacular space, a defining aesthetic mechanism inherent in the "military (*wu* 武) dramas of war, rebellion, and heroic adventure," as Mary Farquhar and Chris Berry point out (Farquhar and Berry 2005: 35).

But aside from appreciating her spectacular presentation with the sword, a discerning reading of the report whould never fail to note the crossed-dressed female body itself. Inevitably, the existence of the female *sheng* added a critical gender dimension to the performance: the female actor may be read as a woman displaying female masculinity, a man with some kind of feminine characteristics, or perhaps a bit of both. Such flexibility within the reception of the cross-dressed female actor could tantalize theatregoers of both sexes. This perhaps explained why the performance was so intensely magnetic that the spectators could not help moving close to the charismatic

performer. Of course, the ripples of excitement that went through the spectators eventually led to the chaotic situation in the playhouse: the beams of the stage collapsed, and all performers threw themselves on the ground, which caused the dramatic action to end abruptly. But are we certain that the accident was not what the audience craved? After all, the incident seemed salvational since it prevented the protagonist from dying from the premediated accident in the drama.

To be fair to those who were against female actors in the late-Qing era, not all adversaries of *nüling* were conservative moralists who viewed female actors as a source of moral perils. Rather, though constituting a minority, they contended that the problems with female actors lay within the artistic realm rather than in moral ills. Hence, for them, their hostility toward female actors was because they believed that compared to their male counterparts, *nüling* in general were sub-competent performers. One reason that was employed to belittle female actors was the female body, in particular the female voice. Zheng Zhengqiu[19] 鄭正秋 (1889-1935), then an emerging drama critic and later a prominent director of early Chinese cinema, commented upon the fierce competition among famous *sheng* actors in 1911 in Shanghai and contended that no female *sheng*, even En Xiaofeng 恩曉峰 (1887-1949), whom Zheng considered to be China's greatest female *sheng* at the time, could compete with top male *sheng*

[19] A Shanghai-born Cantonese drama critic, screen writer, and filmmaker who, with others, founded the Mingxing 明星 Film Company (in English, "The Star Motion Picture Company") in 1922, a major film studio in the early Republican era.

players such as Liu Hongsheng[20] 劉鴻聲 (1876-1921) and Gui Junqing[21] 貴俊卿 (?-1939) (*JJLSWXHB* vol. 6: 616).

In a 1911 review of En Xiaofeng's performance, Zheng Zhengqiu contended strikingly that "the number of female actors who can sing is small, and the number of female players who can sing well is even smaller" (*JJLSWXHB* vol. 6: 605). Zheng attributed the "weakness" of female actors to the physiology of the female body. He asserted that "the 'singing voice' [*gehou* 歌喉] of women was inferior to that of men […] because women have less sufficient 'abdominal energy' [*zhongqi* 中氣] than men" (*JJLSWXHB* vol. 6: 605). For this reason, Zheng held that female actors should be discussed and appreciated as a separate (and less important) category because of the purported physical limitations (*JJLSWXHB* vol. 6: 616).

Despite Zheng's assertion that the art of female *sheng* was not on par with that of their male counterparts, my survey of late-Qing sources suggested that the female-sexed body was never a physiological obstacle that prevented female actors from efficiently performing theatrical roles (and male roles in particular). As a matter of fact, varied sources claimed that *mao'er xi* performances were "in sync with the *jingju* troupes of male actors" at the time (*Shenbao* 1925: 7). Those *xiqu* cognoscenti who enjoyed the performances of *nüling* consciously appreciated the art of female actors by referring to the stagecraft of their contemporary male actors. Their accounts suggested

[20] A native of Beijing, Liu has been known for his excellent singing skills, which founded the Liu school of *sheng* roles.

[21] A native of Beijing who later gained fame in Shanghai, Gui Junqing was educated at Tongwen guan 同文館 [The School of Combined Learning] in Beijing and known as a famed *sheng* player of the Tan Xinpei School.

that female actors and male performers contributed equally to the prosperity of *xiqu* in the late Qing era.

Rather than having an inferior voice, many late-Qing female performers of male roles impressed the audience with their superlative vocal quality. A *Shenbao* contributor who attended a *mao'er xi* performance in Shanghai in 1898 applauded a *kunsheng* named Xiao Ruyi 小如意 for her superb embodiment of the male protagonist Silang 四郎 in the famous excerpt "*Tanmu* 探母"[22] (Visiting mother), a piece places extraordinary demands on singing skills. This critic noted that the performer's acting was "utterly graceful," and "her nightingale-like voice pierced through the clouds" (*JJLSWXHB* vol. 4: 487). "No actor in the Pear Garden," he argued, "has ever had a comparable voice and facial appearance" (*JJLSWXHB* vol. 4: 487). In addition, a *jing* 净-role (or the "painted-face," a role type for famed mythological/historical male figures with strong personalities) player surnamed Jin 金 was a prominent performer of the Qunxian 群仙 Garden, a playhouse which featured *mao'er xi*, in Shanghai around 1900. Jin was said to possess a high-pitched voice, which was loud enough to "shake the beams of the palace" (*xiangzhen wuyu*, 響震屋宇), and her performances "had no feminine traces," suggesting that she was a highly competent player of "the painted face" at the time (*Shenbao* 1925: 7).

[22] A *zheji* 折子 (literally, "opera excerpt" or "opera highlight") sequence portrays a narrative adapted from the *Yangjiajiang yanyi* 楊家將演義 (Family saga of the Yang's), which recounts the heroic tale of the Yang generals defending the northern borders of the Song dynasty. It is worth mentioning that Chinese *xiqu* performances in the Ming and Qing eras often focused on popular *zheji* sequences rather than presenting the entire play.

Aside from the sources that applauded the female actors for their excellent voices, varied cognoscenti reported that some of the best female actors of the age were comparable to, even superior to, their contemporary male stars. For instance, a young female actor named Li Shoubao 李壽寶, whose age was between twelve and thirteen, impressed her audience with her marvelous stage performance in Shanghai in 1902 (*JJLSWXHB* vol. 5: 265). In a rave review of the player, the drama critic noted that "from beginning to end, all spectators applauded her embodiment" of the martial *sheng* role (*JJLSWXHB* vol. 5: 265). "Although the actor was still young, everything in her performance was so exquisite, and her performance was on par with that of Qi Zhandeng[23] 七盞燈 of the Dangui 丹桂 Garden" (*JJLSWXHB* vol. 5: 265), a top male star in Shanghai at the time.

Likewise, a Tianjin-based spectator watched performances of a theatrical troupe which called itself "*Shuangqing he* 雙慶和" [lit., "double celebration and peace"] in the city's prominent Daguan 大觀 Teahouse on the twenty-second day of the second month of the year 1907. According to the spectator, the staff of the *Shuangqing he* company consisted of some five dozen male and female players with the female actor Xiao Lanying 小蘭英 as the most prominent player (*JJLSWXHB* vol. 5: 347). The evening program of the troupe which the theatregoer attended was comprised of some seven or eight pieces, with Xiao Lanying's performance of *Dagun chuxiang* 打棍出箱

[23] Qi Zhandeng, literally meaning "the seventh lantern," is the artistic pseudonym of Mao Yunke 毛韻珂 (1885-1941), a proficient performer skilled in both *wenxi* 文戲 (civil plays, emphasizing singing abilities) and *wuxi* 武戲 (military plays, focusing on martial arts and acrobatics).

(Misfortune of the scholar Fan Zhongyu) being the last (and, suggestively, the most significant):

> Her costuming was so beautiful, and her steps were so firm. Once the actor appeared onstage, she won a warm round of applause. Her singing emulated that of Tan Xinpei yet sounded utterly natural, far surpassing that of Zhang Yuting 張毓庭 [a famed *sheng* player of the Tan Xinpei school]. The posture and manner were so natural, and her facial expressions were so real that no one could discern that the character was performed by a woman. (*JJLSWXHB* vol. 5: 347)

As the two reports above suggested, *xiqu* spectators consciously appreciated the performances of the female players of male roles such as Li Shoubao and Xiao Lanying by referring to the stagecraft of their contemporary male actors. Their observations suggested that these young female actors were as artistically competent as male star players, discrediting Zheng Zhengqiu's claim that no female *sheng*, En Xiaofeng included, was on par with top male stars. In fact, a review of En Xiaofeng's performances squarely challenged Zheng Zhengqiu's biased view on En herself and female actors in general. A connoisseur who signed as "Tiankong" (lit., the sky) published a set of seven theatre reviews in 1911. Countering Zheng Zhengqiu's proposal to analyze female actors in general as a separate and inferior taxonomy, Tiankong reviewed a mixture of top male and female star players in Shanghai at the time, including the aforementioned performers such as Liu Hongsheng, Gui Junqing, Qi Zhandeng, and En Xiaofeng. According to Tiankong, En Xiaofeng was versed in a rich repertoire of *laosheng* plays, and her performances were noted for having a distinct

singing voice for each individual character she performed (*JJLSWXHB* vol. 5: 198). Her superlative singing quality helped En Xiaofeng to outshine "thousands of rivalrous male actors" (*JJLSWXHB* vol. 5: 198). Such a remark discredited Zheng Zhengqiu's negative assessment of En. And Zheng's claim that despite being the most excellent female *laosheng*, En was not comparable to top male stars such as Liu and Gui was only representative of his personal view rather than a widely held opinion.

IV. Strategies of Survival: Remaking the Space and the Body

Besides historical sources that commented directly upon the artistry of female actors, another set of late-Qing sources (textual and pictorial) further disclosed a critical dimension of the lives of female actors. Instead of evaluating how well (or incompetently) the female actors performed as theatrical players, these sources suggest to us what *xiqu* acting as a livelihood and a form of profession meant to those young women in the late Qing. Despite adverse environments under which the female actors were situated, I contend that many female actors strategically resisted patriarchy and defended their livelihood by remaking the theatrical space and their (female-sexed) bodies to their advantage.

Female actors in the Qing generally worked in an adverse environment, and their presence readily elicited attention from the authorities and the general public. For instance, when a theatre troupe consisting of three male and four female actors appeared in Luzhou in China's western province Sichuan, they attracted the attention from the local authorities, who expelled the actors from the city limits (*Yulun shishibaotuhua* 1909: 7). The incident was depicted in a painting appearing in the Shanghai-based

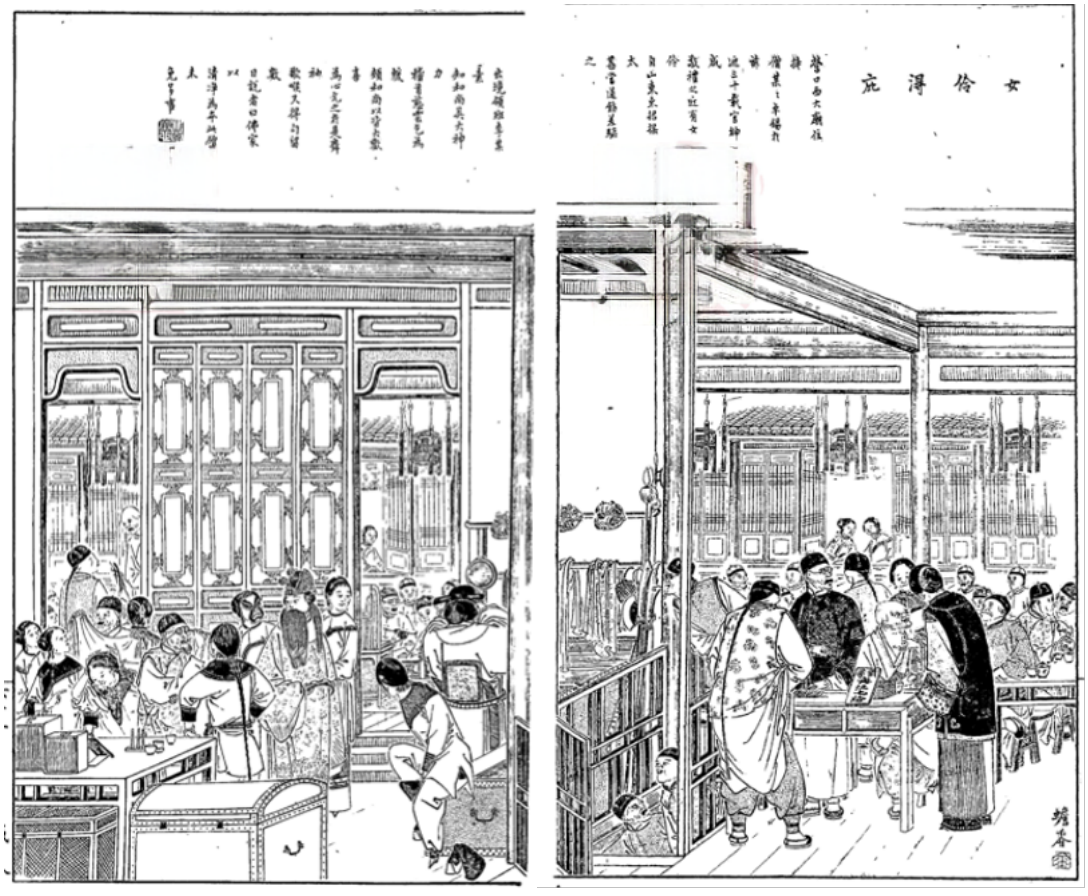
pictorial *Yulun shishibaotuhua* 輿論時事報圖畫 (lit., "Pictorials of contemporary events") (Figure 1). In that painting, the theatrical performers, followed by three local officers, become a public spectacle. The spotted and striped outfits of the women distinguish the four female performers from the rest of the troupe and the crowd behind them. They thus become the center of the spectacle and objects of the public (and exclusively male) gaze. While all members of the troupe were ordered to leave the city, the painting is entitled "*Quzhu nüling*" 驅逐女伶 ("Banishing female actors"), suggesting that the women were the source of the entire problem.

In contrast to those female actors in Luzhou, who were deprived of the opportunity to perform, an itinerant all-female troupe succeeded in challenging the local authorities in Yingkou in Manchuria circa 1885. According to a set of two paintings entitled "Nüling debi" 女伶得庇 ("female actors were safeguarded") in *Dianshizhai huabao* 點石齋畫報 (Dianshizhai Pictorial) (Figures 2 and 3), the performances of a group of female actors who travelled from Shandong worried the local authorities in Yingkou, who planned to banish the female performers (*Dianshizhai huabao* 1885: 10-11). After the female actors became aware of a Buddhist monk at Yingkou's Grand West Temple 西大廟, who had been esteemed by local people for more three decades, they approached the religious leader for help. The monk was willing to peacefully resolve the conflict and agreed to sit inside the building where their performances were staged. As a result, the performance of the female actors continued for a few more days before they eventually left Yingkou (*Dianshizhai huabao* 1885: 10-11). In the Yingkou

Figure 1. A theatre troupe of three male and four female actors were expelled by local officers in a small southwestern town Luzhou in Sichuan Province. (*Yulun shishibaotuhua* 1909: 7)

incident, the female actors appeared to make a rather astute move by having the monk involved in the case. As suggested by figures 2 and 3, when the female players are wearing their makeup and dramatic costumes in the green room, the unexpected appearance of the venerable monk elicits attention from both the theatregoers and those inside the green room, and the presence of the monk in the audience ultimately legitimates the performances which might otherwise seem morally suspicious. With his authority, the monk turns the theatrical space into a solemn and peaceful site where no dispute or turmoil is allowed. By turning the morally suspicious teahouse into a solemn space under the aegis of the influential monk, female actors successfully defied the local authorities and managed to continue their performances.

If the female actors in Yingkou defended their performances by remaking the space, other female actors such as Zhou Yu'e 周玉娥 defended their performances and their dignity by remaking their female-sexed body. Based in Tianjin, Zhou Yu'e was widely known as a celebrated female *jing* player of the late Qing. According to an early Republican writer, when a prurient *xiqu* theatregoer surnamed Liu wanted to take advantage of the female actor in the last years of the Qing, he asked Zhou Yu'e to perform the play *Yuguoyuan* 禦果園 ("Imperial garden") for a private performance and promised to pay the owner of Zhou's company a handsome sum (Haishang shushi sheng 1928: 55-56). Because the play *Imperial Garden* features the *jing* character



Figures 2 and 3. A set of two paintings depicting how a local Buddhist monk in Yingkou safeguarded the performances of an all-female troupe from Shandong. The description reads: "The

> abbot of Xidamiao in Yingkou has been highly respected and revered by officials and scholars for nearly thirty years. Recently, female performers from Shandong arrived and caused quite a stir, behaving inappropriately. They were ordered to leave immediately. However, the owner of the theatrical troupe surnamed Li, knew that the monk possessed great spiritual power and was known for his compassion. Li pleaded for leniency on behalf of the performers, and the monk, delighted by the request, agreed. As a result, the performers showcased their dancing and singing skills, and were allowed to stay for a few more days. Commentators said that in the Buddhist tradition, purity is considered fundamental, and this monk avoids unnecessary complications." 營口西大廟住持僧某，卓錫興茲，近三十載，官紳咸敬禮之。近有女伶，自山東來，招搖太甚，當道飭差驅之出境。領班李某素知和尚具大神力，緝首慈雲，乞為緩頰，和尚以皆大歡喜為心，允之，於是舞袖歌喉，又得勾留數日，說者曰，佛家以清淨為本，此僧為免多事。(*Dianshizhai huabao* 1885: 10-11).

Yuchi jingde 尉遲敬德 who is nude above the waist, Zhou Yu'e was fully cognizant of Liu's malice. In the actual performance, Zhou defied the voyeuristic gaze of Liu by using the *jing* character's thick and pronounced beard to cover her breasts. Liu found that he was tricked by Zhou but had to pay for the performance nevertheless (Haishang shushi sheng 1928: 55-56). In this incident, the long and pronounced beard, essential to the identity of a *jing* role in *xiqu*, functioned as a token of the male sex and a symbol of military masculinity. Zhou Yu'e strategically defended her dignity by compellingly performing masculinity onstage.

V. Coda

Female *xiqu* actors of the Qing era have long been overlooked by scholars of Chinese theatre. The predominant paradigm of theatre research *Theaterwissenschaft* forecloses the possibility of acknowledging the historical contributions of these female entertainers owing to the women's dual identity as both sex workers and artists. By

parsing the arguments both for and against female actors, my research attempts to show that female actors' strong presence on the theatrical stage and in the society at large was facilitated by political, economic, and cultural transformation in late-Qing China. Female actors succeeded in creating a social and artistic realm which allowed them to demonstrate their admirable artistic talents and to transcend the interiority (domesticity)-exteriority (public) social boundary, despite patriarchal social norms. Their endeavor continued to encounter new opportunities and challenges in the next decades after the founding of the Republic of China, when the evolution of female subjects in Chinese society transformed from the late-imperial notions of *furen* 婦人 ("married female persons") and *nü* 女 ("daughters" or "youthful, unmarried female subjects") into the newly conceived taxonomy of *nüxing* 女性 ("Women") (Ko 1994: 1-28; Barlow 2013: 51-92). This will be discussed in Chapter Three.

CHAPTER THREE

THE UNFILLED PROMISE: FEMALE ACTORS IN THE FIRST DECADE OF THE REPUBLIC

While Chapter Two focused on female performers during the late Qing dynasty, when their presence was constantly monitored by authorities, this chapter explores female performers in *xiqu* during the first decade of the Republican era, when the restrictions on female actors were officially lifted. I will examine how exceptional female performers like Liu Xikui 劉喜奎 (1894-1964) and Xian Lingzhi 鮮靈芝 (dates unknown) challenged the dominance of male *sheng* actors of the prior generation, complicating the traditional narrative that attributed the decline of *sheng* to the rise of *nandan* like Mei Lanfang and Shang Xiaoyun. Additionally, I will discuss how women actors, such as Liu Xikui, portrayed the virtue of chastity both on stage and in their personal lives, drawing from Tani Barlow's concept of women as both a historical novelty and an event.

In my analysis, I will also utilize Carole Pateman's concept of the "sexual contract" to demonstrate how female performers were compelled to conform to societal expectations of women, particularly in their decisions regarding marriage, and how marriage acted as a barrier to the careers of female actors, unlike their male counterparts. This chapter will closely examine the case of Xian Lingzhi, who experienced forced marriage and faced exploitation through both an employment contract and a sexual contract.

In the final sections of the chapter, I will analyze the discursive practices surrounding the body of female performers and how the event of women along with science-backed notion of sex reinforced the notion that the female body embodied a more immediate and inherently "natural" form of femininity. I will also take a close look at the debate surrounding the practice of *nannü heyan*, which transformed from a marginalized practice in the Qing dynasty to a seemingly inevitable trend. By examining both sides of the debate, I will highlight the arguments put forth by opponents who believed the sensations were too real, as well as the advocates who saw it as crucial to achieving gender equity.

On July 15, 1919, a newspaper report published by Shanghai-based *Shishi xinbao* 時事新報 (China Times) informed the reader of "a war between male and female actors" (*nannüling zhi zhanzheng* 男女伶人之戰爭) that has been ongoing for years in Beijing (*Shishi xinbao* 1919: 2). According to the report, "since female actors [in Beijing] appeared, various playhouses in Dashilar 大柵欄 [the city's foremost commercial district] have been dominated by female actors. For long, male actors have been unable to find a foothold […] and it was not until this year that male performers eventually seized an opportunity to compete [with female actors]" (*Shishi xinbao* 1919: 2). The writer of the report predicted that the competition between Sanqing Garden 三慶園 and Zhonghe Garden 中和園, two prominent playhouses in Dashilar, would continue, and "the results of the war will become clear by the mid-autumn festival" (*Shishi xinbao* 1919: 2).

Although existing narratives of *jingju* history generally acknowledge that the first decade of the Republic marked the ultimate decline of male players of male roles

of the previous generation best represented by the *laosheng* superstar Tan Xinpei 譚鑫培 (1847-1917), it conventionally attributes the waning popularity of veteran *xiqu* players of the last generation to the ascendancy of youthful *nandan* such as Mei Lanfang and Shang Xiaoyun 尚小雲 (1900-1976) (Goldstein 2007: 128). However, this chapter intends to show that the history of *jingju* from 1912 to the early 1920s is more complicated than many existing accounts suggest. Countering the widely held assumption that the rise of the *nandan* stars was mainly responsible for the fading popularity of male *sheng* roles, my study suggests that talented female players such as Liu Xikui and Xian Lingzhi, whose artistic pinnacle lasted during approximately the first decade of the Republic (1912-early 1920s), contributed equally to the decline of celebrated male *sheng* of the former generation. As a matter of fact, many of these female actors were widely considered to be more artistically promising than their contemporary male stars at the time. And the *xiqu* world during this historical period witnessed a fierce rivalry between male and female actors in Beijing and beyond. That is to say, Republican *nandan*'s ultimate rise to national and international prominence in the following decades was by no means decided by their alleged inherent superiority. Rather, the *nandan*'s unprecedented prominence was possible in part because marriage, maternity, and various forms of discrimination against women deprived many equally competent female actors of the opportunity to become epoch-marking players of *xiqu* in the decades that followed.

Inspired by Tani Barlow's in-depth historical study of modern Chinese women, in particular her understanding of *nüxing* 女性 (women) as a "historical novelty" in the twentieth century (Barlow 2013: 53), this chapter explores "women actors" (*nüjiao* 女

角, *nü yanyuan* 女演員) as an event in the first decade of the Republic. Barlow comprehends *nüxing* as an "event, not simply a rhetorical category or a natural fact" (Barlow 2013: 52-53). By calling it an "event," Barlow means that the advent of *nüxing* ushered in a historical turn because "eventualization" signifies "a relative discontinuity, an 'epistemic shift' or a rupture" in a structuralist historical narrative (Barlow 2022: 8). On the one hand, "*nüxing*" was one of the neologisms concerning sex and sexuality, which arrived in the Chinese language as a result of modernity: along with other words such as "*xingbie*" 性別 (sexed gender), "*xing xingwei*" 性行為 (sexual behavior), and "*nanxing*" 男性 (male), "*nüxing*" came into existence in the Chinese language after these words "were cycled through Chinese treaty port translations of European languages and Japanese in elite language reform" (Barlow 2004: 33). On the other hand, "*nüxing*" itself is more than a new word. As an event, the advent of "*nüxing*" signifies "the arrival of a real abstraction" (Barlow 2013: 66), promises a universal subject, and embodies a newly discovered truth about human sexuality.

Prior to the advent of modernity, discourses in gender differences in China were largely metaphysical: physical bodies were "thought to be linked to the cosmological foundations of the universe" (Dikötter 1995: 14). But now it seemed increasingly apparent that the universe is a physical entity and devoid of a teleology (Henderson 1984). Accordingly, human bodies were said to be produced by physiological mechanisms inherent in "nature" (Dikötter 1995: 14). Through "childbirth manuals, gynecological treatises, books of medical remedies, family handbooks, marriage guides and primers on sexual hygiene," gender differences were now believed to be

biologically determined, and "male and female bodies were imagined to be autonomous entities" which could be analyzed free of any metaphysical context (Dikötter 1995: 20).

Furthermore, gender relations were no longer considered merely a matter of social ethics since now "human sexuality and reproduction were thought to be tied to the power of the state" (Dikötter 1995: 17). The woman was expected to contribute to the body politic because heedless mothers who produce less capable offspring would jeopardize the nation (Dikötter 1995: 17). For Barlow, a newly discovered truth about female sexuality is that "every woman possesses natural rights and an innate knowledge about sexual selection" (Barlow 2022: 8). In this sense, the event of women is in part an event of empowerment. It is now believed that the woman can improve her life and the social processes that facilitate evolution by practicing those rights and choosing "to procreate with the best available mate" (Barlow 2022: 8). As a result, women are entitled to make voluntary decisions on their marriage (e.g., decisions to marry or divorce).

The event of women actors could not have taken place without the event of women. As the event of women prompted voluntarist actions to confirm truthful beliefs about the female sex (Barlow 2022: 6), women actors and their advocates installed such a science-sanctioned "truth" that the female sexed body is a plainer, more straightforward, and essentially "natural" medium of femininity. This recognition not only legitimized women actors as adequate players of femininity in *xiqu* but also jeopardized *nandan*'s legitimacy of embodying female characters onstage. This marked a fundamental shift, a critical epistemic turn, in the understanding of the relationship between players of the *dan* and their theatrical enactment.

It is in the event of women actors in the twentieth century that we could begin to argue that the body of *nandan* was an "ornamented" medium of femininity, and their embodiment of women was an "artifact" in essence. In the nineteenth century, however, noted literary accounts of the connoisseurship of the *dan* suggested otherwise. For instance, let us consider Chen Sen's 陳森 (1792-1848) *Pinhua baojian* 品花寶鑑 (Precious Mirror for the Appreciation of Flowers, hereafter *Precious Mirror*), a linked-chapter novel dedicated to the connoisseurship of the *dan* in Beijing during the reign of Daoguang 道光 (1782-1850). In the novel, literati from various regions of the country converged in the empire's capital to engage with captivating male performers of female roles. It was not uncommon for passionate theatre enthusiasts to praise the "natural" allure of *nandan*, while disregarding the physical attractiveness of the female body as "ornamented" and "affected" (Chen 1990: 12).

In addition, the event of women actors also highlighted the seeming truth that those female subjects in the profession of *xiqu* acting were, after all, *women*. The event of women "emphasized women's evolutionary primacy," as modern sociology of sexuality repeatedly suggests (Barlow 2022: 82). Due to "the alleged central reality of sexual selection, it seemed that human women ought to be choosing their own partners for procreation, as all other mammals did" (Barlow 2022: 82). Because women actors were women, such issues as marriage, maternity, and chastity became essential to the development of their career as actors. The marital decisions they made and their roles as both wives and mothers captivated the attention of theatre enthusiasts and the broader public, drawing them into the world of these famed women performers. This was simply unthinkable during the Ming-Qing era: because of the multiple roles (actor,

singer, prostitute, etc.) that a female entertainer enacted in late imperial China, patrons of *xiqu* were rarely concerned about the entertainers' chastity and marital status.

However, the history of women actors also revealed to the fullest the oppressive nature of marriage as a bourgeois institution. Feminist political theorist Carole Pateman compellingly analyzes the bourgeois marriage through the perspective of contract theory and argues that bourgeois marriage is a deceptive contract for women (Pateman 1988). According to Pateman, conventional wisdom suggests that the social contract of modern civil society is about freedom, and it provides two interpretations of how civil freedom is created and safeguarded through the making of the social contract (Pateman 1988: 2). One prevailing theory suggests that "the inhabitants of the state of nature exchange the insecurities of natural freedom for equal, civil freedom protected by the state" (Pateman 1988: 2). As a result, all adults in civil society are given the same civil standing. Another popular interpretation of the social contract suggests that modern civil society came into existence after patriarchal rule was overthrown. And this new civil order is believed to be "anti-patriarchal" or "post-patriarchal" (Pateman 1988: 2).

From the perspective of gender, Pateman, however, contends that civil society not only fails to extend an equal civil standing to both genders but also is incapable of transcending patriarchy. For Pateman, the original contract of civil society consists of not only the social contract but also the sexual contract. While the social contract presents itself as "a story of freedom," "the sexual contract is a story of subjection" (Pateman 1988: 2). It is because the original contract legitimizes men's political right over women and ratifies "orderly access by men to women's bodies" (Pateman 1988: 2). The subjection of women also lies in the fact that the marriage contract is in essence

a contract of labor division not only because the employment contract is conditional upon the marriage contract but also because the construction of the "worker" takes for granted that he is a man who has a wife to help him take care of his mundane needs (Pateman 1988: 131). In other words, the marriage contract forecloses the civil identity of a woman as a "worker."

In her groundbreaking study of the genealogy of the idea of "love" in modern Chinese literature, thought, and popular culture between 1900 and 1950, Haiyan Lee invokes Pateman's insights about bourgeois marriage. Lee notes that while the bourgeois marriage as the modern sexual contract promises women "security, status, and domestic happiness," patriarchy rarely succeeds in delivering its promises (Lee 2007: 119). As suggested by works of early Republican literature such as female writer Ling Shuhua's 凌叔華 (1900-1990) short stories, bourgeois marriage is not the natural end of the liberated woman, "but rather the negation of freedom and gender equality" (Lee 2007: 121).

Indeed, for the female protagonists in Ling's short stories, the newlywed wives and daughters of well-to-do families, their bourgeois marriages prevent them from achieving financial independence and developing a professional identity. The female *xiqu* stars in Beijing, however, offer a different perspective on the oppressive nature of marriage. Women such as Liu Xikui and Xian Lingzhi not only had successful careers as actors but also achieved stardom in their profession, making them part of a select group of women who could accumulate wealth and acquire a professional identity through their own talents in the 1910s. Yet, the institution of marriage led to either significant shortening of their careers in some cases, as seen in the example of Liu

Xikui, or resulted in female actors being exploited as a convenient source of financial gain for their husbands, as exemplified by the case of Xian Lingzhi.

I. Conflicting Aspirations: Acting, Marriage, and the Double Performances of Women Actors

In 1915, a theatre enthusiast signed as "Tisheng" 惕生 concluded that the most prominent phenomenon that occurred in Beijing's theatrical world after the founding of the Republic was "the competition between male and female actors" (Tisheng 1915: 9). Unlike various port cities such as Tianjin and Shanghai, where female actors had a strong presence in the late Qing era, Beijing became a major market for female *xiqu* actors only after the legal prohibition on female players was officially lifted in 1912 as a result of the collapse of the Qing. According to Tisheng, beginning in 1912, female actors from "Tianjin, Shanghai, Fengtian [today's Shenyang], and Zhangjiakou flocked to Beijing and performed at the playhouses such as Sangqing and Zhonghe, "jeopardizing the livelihood of almost all male actors" (Tisheng 1915: 10). This marked a turning point in Beijing's theatrical world, which was described by the esteemed *nandan* Wang Yaoqing[24] 王瑤卿 (1881-1954) as "flourishing of *yin* and decline of *yang*" [*yinsheng yangshuai* 陰盛陽衰] (quoted in Tisheng 1915: 9). To further describe how female actors prevailed over their male rivals, Tisheng wrote:

> When famed female actors including Liu Xikui, Xiao Xiangshui, Xiao Yueying 小月英 [1878-1954], Zhao Ziyun 趙紫雲 [dates unknown], and

[24] Born in Beijing, Wang Yaoqing was one of the most influential *nandan* players of the late Qing era. In the Republican era, Wang was known for his dedication to *xiqu* education.

> Li Xiaolai 李小來 [dates unknown] arrived in Beijing altogether, they competed with each other for fame […] to the extent that almost no male actor was able to find a foothold […] At the time Liu arrived in Beijing and performed at Sanqing, Tan Xinpei performed at Tianle. While audiences for Sanqing's matinee programs became densely packed prior to 1 pm, the Tianle performances, albeit popular, could not compete with those at Sanqing. Toward the end of the prior year, when Liu Xikui staged *Xin chahua* 新茶花 [New Camélia], people in Beijing were over the moon. On those same evenings, Yang Xiaolou 楊小樓 (1878-1938) performed *Chang Banpo* 長板坡 and Wang Fengqing 王鳳卿 (1883-1956) performed in *Zhan Chengdu* 戰成都 [Battle of Chengdu]. Although the admission fee for the performances of the male stars was only 0.6 dollar, the audience they could draw was meager. While the admission fee for Liu Xikui's performance of *New Camélia* cost one dollar, in front of the gate of the playhouse were parked a large number of carriages and cars, and the seats were filled up with the middle and lower ranks of the bureaucrats. The playhouse had no space by 9 am. When the matinee performance ended, all remained seated and awaited the evening performance so as to prevent their seats from being taken. (Tisheng 1915: 10)

Tan Xinpei, Yang Xiaolou, and Wang Fengqing were all noted male actors of *sheng* roles, who acquired fame in the Qing era and were among the favored players of Empress Dowager Cixi. And Yang's and Wang's aforementioned plays, *Chang Banpo*

and *Battle of Chengdu*, belong to *xiqu*'s traditional repertoire of the Three Kingdoms, the stage of which was "dominated by military heroes and patriotic scholars […] as models of masculinity" (Goldstein 2007: 54). The popularity of these *sheng* plays was in sync of the advent of *jingju* as a distinct *xiqu* genre in the last century of the Qing, "a time when the two pillars of Chinese masculine identity – the *wen* of culture and the *wu* of military prowess–were being directly challenged by imperialism" (Goldstein 2007: 54).

Figure 4. Cover of an early Republican anthology of writings dedicated to Liu Xikui, which features a photograph of the female star (Zhang Qicai 1915: n.p.). Courtesy of the Shanghai Library.

However, in the newly founded Republic, neither those male *sheng* stars of the late Qing nor the traditional modes of masculinity were able to guarantee a hit to the box office. To unravel the secret behind Liu's triumph over those male *sheng* competitors, a Japanese theatregoer, who frequented Chinese playhouses in Beijing,

attributed two causes to the stunning success of *New Camélia*: "First, Liu's appearance is alluring enough to enchant the world; second, *New Camélia* is based upon a modern script, which marks a far cry from traditional plays and thus arouses people's curiosity […] *New Camélia* differs from traditional plays: as the main interest of the latter is in singing, the former is much stronger than the latter in depicting real-life society, satirizing contemporary ideas, and advocating for new perspectives" (San Lang 1915: 33-34).

New Camélia delineates a Chinese courtesan's transformation into a woman patriot who helps China defeat foreign aggression. Liu's *New Camélia* was one of the *Shizhuang xi* 時裝戲 ("contemporary-costume plays") productions that were staged by youthful *dan* players in the 1910s. As a hybrid, experimental form of theatre, contemporary-costume plays incorporated "elaborate sets and backdrops" and "modern props like sewing machines and divans" into *jingju* performances (Goldstein 2007: 119). Yet, perhaps the most eye-catching components in contemporary-costume plays were their heroines' fashionable costumes and accessories, from which the theatrical genre takes its name. The emphasis of the plays like *New Camélia* on the visual aspect of performance contributed to what scholars of modern Chinese culture call a "visual turn" in the history of *jingju* (Dong 2010: 201-203), a historical transition that *jingju* underwent from a singing-centered theatre into a form that maintains a balance between singing and visual presentation. In this process, the reformed repertoire of *jingju* played a pivotal role in circulating renewed codes of femininity: while the charming clothing, makeup, accessories, and hairdos in contemporary-costume plays refashioned the

exterior of the female sexed body, novelties like sewing machines reconfigured social and economic activities of a modern woman.

Aside from the heroine's charming appearance and the play's spectacular *mise-en-scène*, the modern theme of *New Camélia*, as suggested by the aforementioned account of the Japanese theatregoer, also contributed to Liu's stunning success. In contrast to *jingju*'s classical *sheng*-based repertoire, which takes its thematic sources from premodern Chinese history, folklore, and the literary canon and celebrates the conventional mode of masculinity, *New Camélia* constructs a modern heroine by highlighting women's contribution to the nation against the backdrop of imperialism and colonialism.

Liu Xikui's 1915 *jingju* rendition of *New Camélia* was perhaps the most influential and commercially successful adaptation of an existing drama that premiered in Shanghai in 1907 (the full name of the Shanghai production is *Ershi shiji xinchahua* 二十世紀新茶花, Twentieth-century new Camélia) and inspired many variations in the following years. As a result of a series of complicated intercultural exchanges and genre crossings, *New Camélia* mixed varied sources, including an anecdote widely circulated in Japan concerning a Japanese courtesan who served as a spy in Harbin during the 1904-1905 Russo-Japanese War (*Tuhua ribao* 1909: 6) and a Chinese *xinju* 新劇 (lit. "new drama")[25] play entitled *Yuanwaiyuan* 緣外緣 (Serendipity), which itself is a loose

[25] Also known as *wenmingxi* 文明戲 (lit. "civilized play") and inspired by Japanese *shinpai* 新派 ("new school," the first form of Western theatre in Japan) (Liu 2006: 342-355; Liu 2007), *xinju* was first staged in China in 1907 and had evolved into what we know as "*huaju*" 話劇 (lit. "spoken drama") by the mid-1920s. Distinguishing itself from *xiqu*, *xinju* adopts the speech-and-realist-action-based form of modern European theatre; its repertoire also borrows heavily from Japanese *shinpai*.

adaptation of the maudlin romance that the French writer Alexandre Dumas fils depicts in his novel *La Dame aux Camélias*.

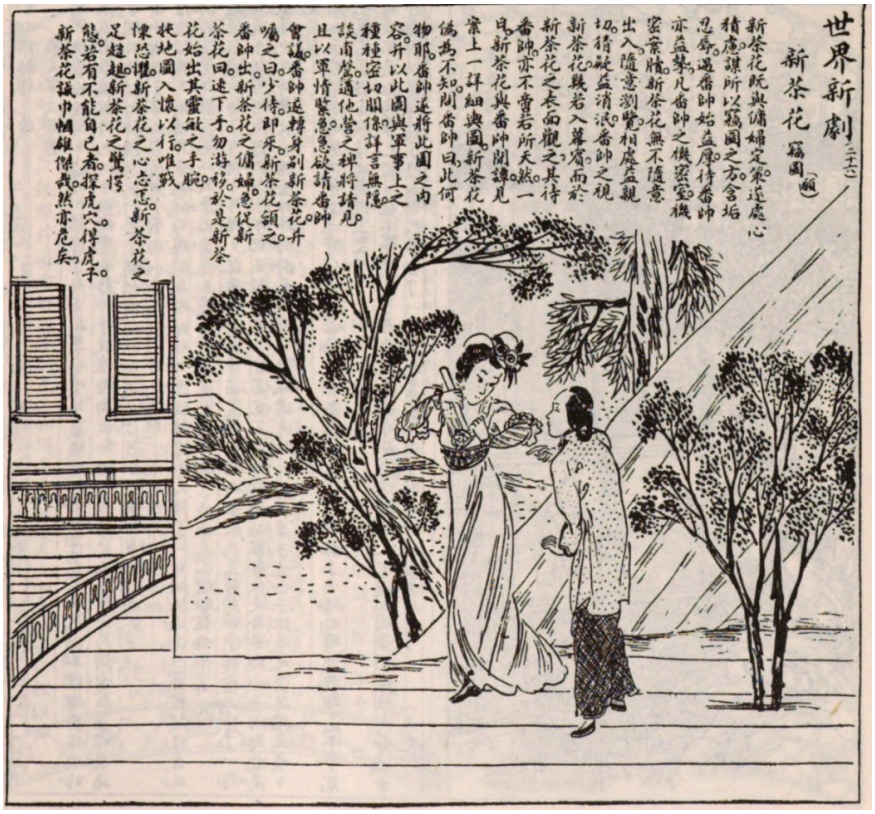


Figure 5. An illustration of the scene "Stealing the Map" of *Twentieth-century New Camélia* (*Tuhua ribao* 1909: 6).

While it is quite unfortunate that neither the script of the original *New Camélia* nor that of Liu's latter-day adaptation is extant, readers today could have a grasp of how the drama masterfully instills the theme of national redemption and the imperative of women's political awakening into a series of dramatic coincidences by leafing through illustrations of the play's major scenes published by the Shanghai-based periodical *Tuhua ribao* 圖畫日報 (Pictorial daily) (figure 5). Set against the backdrop of a fictitious war between China and a foreign nation (alluding to Russia), the play evolves around the ups and downs of the marital bond between a prostitute who calls herself

"New Camélia" and a Chinese army officer Chen Shaomei 陳少美. While the former is born into an impoverished household and sold to a brothel as an orphan, the latter is a son of an honorable household and receives a fine education abroad. Despite their strikingly different social backgrounds, the couple forges a marital bond, which agonizes Shaomei's father, who persuades New Camélia to leave Shaomei for the sake of the promising young man. As a result, New Camélia exasperates Shaomei on purpose by approaching a marshal of the foreign army and escorting the alien commander during his tour of a garden. When a battle between China and the foreign army breaks out, New Camélia eventually fulfills her patriotic duty by stealing an important map from the foreign camp, which helps China win its battle against imperialist aggression. After Shaomei realizes his wife's fidelity to him and the mother country, the couple reunites.

Perhaps one can better understand the profound implication of *New Camélia* by comprehending the fascinating story of the drama as a courtesan's metamorphosis into a chaste woman, a transformation that a prostitute undergoes from being a member of a subaltern population to become an honorable woman who contributes to the imperative of national redemption. In this play, being a former courtesan becomes New Camélia's enduring stigma, which elicits strong objections from Shaomei's father to the free-will marital bond, a cultural position suggesting that the distinction between nobility and the subaltern should never be blurred. This deeply entrenched prejudice towards courtesans perhaps also haunts Shaomei, a foreign-educated young man who marries New Camélia despite parental objections, when he sees New Camélia escorting the foreign commander in the garden and suspects that his wife is committing adultery. Shaomei's

suspicion of his wife's infidelity evokes again the stereotype of the courtesan who is conventionally portrayed as frivolous, calculating, hedonist, and deficient in credibility.

Figure 6. A photographic portrayal of Liu Xikui in *Fengyue huabao* 風月畫報 (Fengyue pictorial) (1933: 2).

Hence, New Camélia's heroic deeds not only redeem a nation in crisis but also distance herself from her former role as a courtesan. By demonstrating her allegiance to the nation and her husband, New Camélia wins herself dignity and respect, which further stabilizes their free-choice marriage. In a profound way, the life trajectory of New Camélia resonates with the historical path that female actors underwent from the Qing dynasty to the Republican era, the route of those who were first suspected to be prostitutes and then became accepted as members of the modern category of "*nüxing*," women who were entitled to practice their natural rights as women, including the right to marry and divorce on a voluntary basis.

Various early Republican sources suggest that the stunning popularity of Liu Xikui in the 1910s was in part because Liu was of marriageable age, and many powerful enthusiasts of Liu's performances fantasized about marrying her. In 1917, when the

Beijing-based Japanese-owned *Shuntian shibao* 順天時報 (Shuntian Times) conducted an influential public contest for three distinguished dramatic titles (for male actors, female actors, and children players, respectively), Liu Xikui prevailed in the competition among female performers for the title of "Number One Female Actor" (*kunling diyi* 坤伶第一) by gaining an impressive total of 238,606 popular votes (*Shuntian shibao* 1917: 5). In that contest, Liu not only outperformed Mei Lanfang, who received a total of 232,865 popular votes and won the title of the "King of Theatrical World" (*jujie dawang* 劇界大王), but also her most formidable rival *nüdan* Xian Lingzhi, who did not even rank among the leading contenders in the competition (*Shuntian shibao* 1917: 5). According to the 1919 novel on Mei Lanfang by theatre critic Mu Rugai 穆儒丐 (1884-1961), the reason that Liu Xikui outperformed Xian Lingzhi was that unlike Liu who was unmarried, Xian had a husband and thus could not round up enough votes (Mu Rugai 2012 [1919]: 146).

Certainly, not all enthusiasts of *xiqu* in Beijing believed that the popularity of Liu Xikui was conducive to the theatrical world in Beijing. Liu appeared to mesmerize many members of the high ranking male population (bureaucrats, plutocrats, former members of the imperial household, and the like), and it was said that the powerful warlord Cao Kun 曹錕 (1862-1938), who would later win the 1923 election for the President of China through bribery, made a marriage proposal to Liu (Sao Ying 1923: n.p.). Because of the liaison between the female actor and the male elite, some literati even labeled Liu as a "fox spirit" (*hugu* 狐蠱) (Canghai buyi 1915: 9), a mythical creature in Chinese culture known for seducing men of power, exposing deep-seated misogyny. Some went so far as to interpret the rise of Liu as an ominous sign for China,

arguing that her relationship with the male elite could jeopardize the prosperity of the Chinese state (Wanghui dungen 1915: 3). This sentiment echoes the story of Daji 妲己, the favored mate of the last king of the Shang dynasty (1600-1050 BCE) and a malevolent fox spirit in Chinese mythology. Daji is accused of mesmerizing the king and being responsible for the downfall of the Shang dynasty.

But despite the reference to the ancient mythological figure, the negative representations of Liu Xikui perhaps resonate more strongly with the archetype of the femme fatale. Feminist film scholar Mary Ann Doane famously argues that the image of the femme fatale best represents modernity itself (Doane 1991). In the midst of industrialization, while the male body becomes alienated and subservient, women become even more closely associated with the physical form. The woman is forced to represent the body, in contrast to the man who represents the intellect. This creates a complex dynamic for the modern subject of women as sexual beings, as she is seen as threatening due to her sexuality, yet also lacks control over her own desires "because she is subjected to sexuality" (Kano 2003: 183).

Despite the characterization of the woman actor as a dangerous seductress who posed a threat to both the theatrical culture and the nation, Liu Xikui in fact led a low-key life offstage and appeared cautious about selecting a spouse. Between 1915 and 1920, Liu Xikui's potential marital choice generated much speculation, making her perhaps the most wanted bride in China. At least one account suggested that Mei Lanfang, Liu's major rival, was also interested in marrying her but that idea was rejected by Liu herself (Mu 2012 [1919]: 131). Perhaps because she was fully aware that marriage and acting were mutually exclusive aspirations for an early Republican

woman like her, the female actor seemed to discourage all her pursuers in order to extend her career onstage. In the process, Liu as the breadwinner of her family demonstrated relative autonomy in making decisions about her marriage, a fact that set her apart from her precursors in the Qing. But the early Republican years nevertheless tested how far a superlative *xiqu* actor could go if she happened to be a woman. And the result of this test was not encouraging: in 1919, when her major male rival Mei Lanfang embarked upon his first trip abroad and launched his legendary acting career ahead, the *nüdan* par excellence was about to reach the end of her stage life.

In January 1921, a number of reports stated that Liu married a middle-level bureaucrat named Cui Chengchi 崔承熾 who was a sector head within the Department of the General Staff 參謀部 (Qianfu 1921: 4). This was much to almost everyone's surprise because Cui was neither particularly rich nor famous. While there is no definitive explanation for why Liu Xikui chose to marry down ("下嫁") (*Shengjing shibao* 1921: 7), it is evident that she made the decision to select Cui over several influential politicians and wealthy individuals, a choice that challenged the conventional perception of female actors as hedonist individuals. As a result of the marriage, Liu retired from the stage and rarely made any more public appearances. However, this free-will marriage did not bode well: Cui was dismissed from his post because a senior officer in the Department of the General Staff was so jealous of him (*Minguo ribao* 1921: 8). The couple returned to the national spotlight again three years later when Cui died unexpectedly. It was reported that after learning about the passing of Cui, a powerful man (alluding to the warlord Lu Jin 陸錦, 1879-1946) intended to take the

widow as a concubine but Liu fiercely resisted the idea by threatening to commit suicide.

In Liu Xikui's life, we have observed a double performance that she enacted both onstage and off. In Liu's most popular play *New Camélia*, her dramatic role chooses to marry the heroic young man despite parental objections and bravely proves her fidelity to her husband and the nation in the context of foreign aggression; and in her life, Liu rejected marriage proposals from many powerful men and made a voluntary decision to marry an obscure bureaucrat. After the death of Cui, Liu boldly acted to prevent herself from becoming a concubine, a sexualized role into which many female actors in the Qing were forced, and thus maintained her chastity to her husband.

As Haiyan Lee observes, despite being challenged by liberals, communists, anarchists, and the like, in the aftermath of the May Fourth Movement, the old Confucian virtues such as chastity by and large remained central to Chinese marital life but functioned in a markedly different way. In premodern China, chastity was "a moral code whose binding power was vested in an external source—the heavenly principle"; in Republican China, however, "chastity was now *a voluntary ethical choice* [emphasis mine], the outcome of the moral will's ability to check desire's propinquity to excess" (Lee 2007: 191). Through Liu's life, we observe how she practiced her rights to marry and not to (re)marry successively on a voluntary basis. When Liu was lauded for being a model of chastity (*Sumin bao* 1924: 7; *Shengjing shibao* 1924: 7), an affinity between the woman onstage and the woman in real life was achieved.

Whereas it was the right to marry on a voluntary basis that Liu Xikui performed as a young unmarried woman, it was the right to divorce that Xian Lingzhi actively

pursued as a victim of forced marriage. Versed in *bangzi*[26] 梆子, *jingju*, and *kunqu*, Xian Lingzhi was one of the most versatile female players in Beijing in the 1910s; her artistry and talents were widely considered to be on par with those of Liu Xikui and top male stars of the age. One saying that circulated widely among theatregoers in Beijing in the 1910s claimed "if a theatregoer who comes to Beijing does not listen to Xian Lingzhi, his trip would be an utter waste of time" (*tingxi buting xiannüer, konglai Beijing zoutang'er* 聽戲不聽鮮女儿, 空来北京走趟儿), which attested to Xian's superlative stagecraft (*Shehui dingqi rikan* 1920: 3). A theatre critic once compared the stagecraft of Xian Lingzhi to that of Mei Lanfang and argued that Xian outrivaled Mei because of her superb versatility. For the critic, Liu would be capable of performing all Mei's popular plays despite the considerable width of Mei's repertoire. In contrast, if Mei was given an opportunity to perform a play at which Xian Lingzhi excelled, say, *Shuzhuang zhiji* 梳妝擲戟 (a sequence of two theatrical scenes "combing hair" and "throwing a javelin"), his performance would not do it justice (*Shehui dingqi rikan* 1920: 3).

Set in the last and tumultuous years of the Eastern Han Dynasty (25-220) and loosely based upon the historical novel *Sanguo yanyi* 三國演義 (Romance of the Three Kingdoms), the two consecutive scenes *Combing Hair* and *Throwing a Javelin* together depict a deadly intrigue set up by a Han loyalist Wang Yun 王允, who intends to use the beautiful maiden Diaochan 貂蟬 to undermine the relationship between the treacherous

[26] *Bangzi* 梆子 (the "clapper opera") is a popular genre of *xiqu*, which has a strong presence in North China.

warlord Dong Zhuo 董卓 and his general and foster son Lü Bu 呂布. In that play, Diaochan uses her charms to mesmerize both men so that the rebellious men are prevented from posing an immediate threat to the troubled Han imperial household. On the one hand, the beautiful maiden is surely a victim of forced marriage because the path of her life is constantly shaped by powerful men with conflicting interests, and she has no say in what man she will marry. On the other hand, Diaochan is not deficient in agency. In that play, in her meeting with Dong Zhuo, a tearful Diaochan accuses Lü Bu of harassment and threatens to commit suicide to preserve her chastity. Diaochan's compelling performance of innocence convinces Dong that his disrespectful foster son harasses his most beloved mate. The rivalry between Dong and Lü eventually prompts Lü to rebel against Dong. In this way, Diaochan severely weakens the patriarchal bond between the men and successfully carries out revenge against the patriarchy.

Perhaps what made Xian Lingzhi a compelling performer of Diaochan in the Three Kingdoms play was her own experience of being a victim of forced marriage. This visceral experience foregrounded a sharp inequality of gender between female *xiqu* stars like Xian Lingzhi and her male rivals such as Mei Lanfang. As a youthful woman Xian Lingzhi was forced to live with a man who happened to be her guardian and a notorious sex offender. She was exploited by her husband during the entire period of their marriage despite her extraordinary fame in Beijing's theatrical world. In contrast, the growing reputation of Mei Lanfang helped him to sustain a polygynous marriage: Mei took the female actor Fu Zhifang 福芝芳 (1905-1980) as his second wife in 1921 and would take the noted *kunsheng* 坤生 (female actors of male roles) Meng Xiaodong as his concubine in 1927 (for details regarding Mei Lanfang's martial history, see

endnote 40). Ironically, while Mei's career steadily advanced in the 1920s, marrying Mei virtually ended or suspended the acting careers of Fu Zhifang and Meng Xiaodong.

Because Xian Lingzhi lost both her parents when she was a child, Xian was brought up by her older sister and her husband Ding Jianyun 丁劍雲 (aka. Ding Lingzhi 丁靈芝 or Ding Yaxuan 丁雅軒). Ding Jianyun was a *dan* player who was co-founder of *Kuide she* 奎德社 (Kuide society), an all-female theatre company. He was banished from Shanghai when he was a young actor because he committed rape there. After Xian Lingzhi's older sister died, Ding taught the younger sister to perform the *dan* role. However, the growing reputation of Xian Lingzhi only increased the tension between Xian and Ding. When Ding relied upon the monetary gains earned by Xian Lingzhi from her performances, he became intensely jealous of the interactions between Xian Lingzhi and male connoisseurs of her performances. As a result, he sought to appease his jealousy by taking another woman as a concubine to join his household (*Xinwen bao* 1921: 5). This act not only irritated Xian Lingzhi but also left her feeling deeply ashamed of Ding's betrayal. Xian Lingzhi made a desperate attempt to end her life by swallowing a golden ring. Fortunately, her friends intervened in the nick of time and managed to rescue her from the dire situation (*Xinwen bao* 1921: 5). Following the incident, Xian suspended her stage career around 1920, and the female star's career abruptly came to a halt when it was at its pinnacle.

Approximately a decade after 1920, the female star (re)appeared in national news when Xian Lingzhi filed a divorce lawsuit in Tianjin, the city where Ding resided. It was reported that Xian and Ding had lived apart for years, and Ding Jianyun intended to circumvent the lawsuit by denying that they had ever married each other. Ding's

denial of the marriage further resulted in a series of lawsuits that were in turn filed by the two parties involved. Between 1930 and 1935, Xian and Ding appeared intermittently before the court in Tianjin to defend their case. Perhaps in part because the female actor was extraordinarily famous and in part because her life now seemed so wretched, the hearings received extensive media coverage, resulting in varying interpretations of marriage, free love, and women's rights.

One contributor to the Shanghai-based tabloid *The Diamond* (*Jingangzuan* 金鋼鑽) attempted to present Xian's experiences in a didactic frame. After observing one of the court hearings, he noted that "as the beginning and the end of the marital relationship are now revealed to the public," Xian Lingzhi appeared to be in a "melancholic state" before the court, foregrounding "her pain of being lonely and separated" (Zhihu 1930: 3). In an imperative tone, he wrote: "I appeal to young men and women that love ought to be free but they should be cautious in the beginning. May they be careful and prudent when taking their first steps in love" (Zhihu 1930: 3).

It is noteworthy to observe the conservative reporter's attempt to curtail free love by emphasizing the potential dangers of deviating from the traditional arranged marriage. This report on the lawsuits portrayed the female actor as an abandoned woman whose melancholy resulted mainly from loneliness and separation. This position, however, it obscured the fact that it was Xian Lingzhi who initiated the petition for divorce and wished to end her relationship with the abusive man. More important, it disregarded the fact that the marriage in question was forced upon the young woman without her consent or when she was not yet mature enough to make decisions about marriage. One could even argue that there was no genuine marital bond

at all, as any marital bond should be based on mutual agreement between both parties. Xian's decision to file for divorce was merely a strategic compromise to protect her reputation and financial interests.

In contrast, a report appearing in the Shanghai-based theatre periodical *New Robin Hood* (*Xin luobinhan* 新羅賓漢) underscored that the bond between Xian and Ding was a result of a forced marriage, indicating that their relationship was not based on mutual affection or free will. The reporter noted that "local people in Tianjin felt ashamed of Ding's conduct and character," and former members of the Kuide Society were willing to testify before the court that Xian was repeatedly mistreated and abused by the man (Meihua lao 1930: 3). It was reported that under such a circumstance, the court recognized the validity of the marriage, approved the divorce, and warned Ding not to harass Xian Lingzhi anymore (Meihua lao 1930: 3).

In line with the *New Robin Hood* entry, a reporter who signed as "Mugong" 睦公 and was present in one of the hearings stressed that what Xian Lingzhi could gain from the court was independence rather than separation. He noted that Xian Lingzhi, who held a subordinate position as Ding's younger sister-in-law, could not avoid falling victim to Ding's scheming because Ding Jianyun as an individual was long known for being "a cruel and heartless boor" 固一梟獍者流 (Mugong 1930: 2). Before the court, according to the reporter, Xian Lingzhi appeared in tears and compellingly described how she had lived with Ding Jianyun in the name of his wife and how Ding physically abused her when they were together (Mugong 1930: 2).

If marriage indeed can be understood as a contractual agreement, it is typically ratified through one or several performative acts such as verbal acknowledgement from

parents, exchange of verbal vows between the bride and groom, and/or an announcement from a witness/officiant. However, in the case of Xian's marriage, the contract appeared to lack the crucial element of consent or ratification being performed. As a consequence, Ding Jianyun refuted the existence of the marriage and shamelessly proposed that, as the leader of the Kuide Society, the agreement between Xian and him was merely an employment contract rather than a marital one. Based on this understanding, he refused to fulfill any further obligations beyond those of a guardian-employer of a child worker. Despite Ding Jianyun's testimony, the judgment of the court indicated that the members of the court (and likely many other attendees to the hearings) were not convinced of its truthfulness. On the other hand, Xian's tearful accusations of Ding's aggression persuaded many attendees at the hearings, including reporter Mugong, that she and Ding had been in a marital relationship. Xian's emotional testimony in court mirrored her character Diaochan's compelling convincing portrayal of innocence onstage. In both instances, Xian's powerful performances of a maudlin, vulnerable woman helped her establish credibility and ultimately convinced her listener(s) that her accusations against the man, whether it was Lü Bu or Ding Jianyun, were truthful.

Unlike the case of Liu Xikui, whose marriage virtually ended her acting career, the experience of Xian Lingzhi as a married female actor was even more oppressed since she was subjected to a double exploitation. As Pateman perceptively argues, marriage as a sexual contract is inherently unjust towards women because men often fail to fulfill their promises of providing women with security and domestic happiness. Pateman's classical understanding of the mechanism of civil society suggests that men

and women are subject to different contracts, and "the employment contract presupposes the marriage contract" (Pateman 1988: 131). While the latter confines women within the private/domestic space, the former allows men to contract out their labor in the public sphere. In the case of Xian Lingzhi, the dispute between Xian and Ding was focused precisely on the nature of the relationship: Xian believed it to be a marriage contract, while Ding insisted that the bond was simply formed by an employment contract.

From the vantage point of contract theory, Xian was in fact exploited by both a marriage contract and an employment contract as she fulfilled on the roles of both a wife and an actor in the Kuide Society. This resulted in a dual form of exploitation for Xian as a married woman actor. To better understand the extent of this exploitation, we should consider the situation of Ding, who was also a *dan* actor but was gradually losing his role to popular women actors in the competitive labor market. While it might be true that professional women actors in the late Qing period still could not pose substantial threat to men's labor, the fact that women became a threat in the first decade of the Republic indicates a notable change in women's economic status and identity. Hence, by breaking away from Ding, she was able to liberate herself from both contracts. Mugong thus viewed the lawsuit as a symbol of "fighting for autonomy" (Mugong 1930: 2), suggesting that Xian should be commended for standing up against patriarchy.

II. The "Natural" Body of Femininity

When *nüdan* players such as Liu Xikui and Xian Lingzhi boldly exercised their right to marry and divorce on a voluntary basis, despite facing numerous obstacles, early Republican spectators of female actors were fortunate enough to witness a dual performance of women that these *nüdan* actors enacted both onstage and in everyday life. If the event of women is partly an event of enfranchisement, the event of women actors is also about empowering women actors, in particular about recognizing women actors' right to represent themselves in theatre, where such a right had been long been suppressed. As mentioned above, during the Qing era, it was the body of the *nandan* that was deemed as a "natural" and more refined form of feminine charms, while the feminine beauty of young women was said to be "affected." In the early Republican era, however, the science-sanctioned notions of gender allowed *nüdan* and their advocates to argue that the female-sexed body is a "natural" and "immediate" medium of femininity, while the body of the *nandan* is "affected" and "ornamented."

One of the contributors to the section on female actors in the Shanghai-based women's magazine *Xiangyan zazhi* 香艷雜誌 (Allure magazine) spoke highly of Lin Fengxian 林鳳仙 (dates unknown), a *nüdan* who was active between late Qing and early Republican years. The contributor contended that the female body was better suited for performing *huadan* roles due to its perceived ability to immediately convey female roles. He wrote: "The use of the female body in performing a *huadan* character is like riding a light carriage on a familiar road; it is utterly natural and does not allow for affection or pretense" (*Xiangyan zazhi* 1914: 2). A literatus who adopted the pen

name “Qulu” 蘧廬, none other than the noted early Republican novelist Liu Qulu[27] 劉蘧廬 (dates unknown), echoed the *Allure Magazine* entry when he compiled a biography for each remarkable female actor that he encountered during his sojourns in Shanghai, Hankou, Tianjin, Beijing, and Manchuria between 1924 and 1928. Qulu noted the reason that he particularly enjoyed female actors’ performances was because “men who dress up as women cannot avoid the flaw of being artificial and contrived (*jiaorou zaozuo* 矯揉造作)” (Qulu 1928: 1). It is important to mention that in both of the accounts mentioned above, the authors did not specifically address the issue of aesthetics. In their view, the mere use of the female body allows for *xiqu* performances of femininity to appear more natural compared to those embodied by male performers. This perceived “natural” bond between the female sex and femininity is clearly influenced by a biologically determined understanding of sexual differences.

While these two accounts both stress that the female body presents an immediate form of femininity, thus thwarting the flaws of affection or artificiality, other critics suggested that the advantage of the female body lay in the purported physical traits of the female sex. When the theatre critic “Juping” 菊屏 reflected in *Shenbao* in 1925 to reflect upon the achievements of the first generation of female actors two decades earlier in Shanghai, he contended: “women are naturally gentle, and this quality is inherent in them. When playing female roles, they can rely upon their natural abilities and pureness to achieve success. It is not something that male actors can imitate by

[27] A literatus known for his dramatic criticism as well as his linked-chapter novel *Haishang Xiaojinku* 海上銷金窟 (The pleasure quarters in Shanghai), a literary portrayal of the sordid side of Shanghai’s urban excitement.

dressing up as women" (Juping 1925: 7). In other words, the purported gentleness and purity of the female sex were considered to be key to the triumph of the female actors' embodiment of *dan* roles. For the author, the reason that Jin Yuemei 金月梅 (1882-1924, figure 7) as a *huashan*[28] 花衫 player was "unrivaled for many years and no male performer was able to compete with her" was precisely because as a female person Jin Yuemei demonstrated such gentleness and purity (Juping 1925: 7).

Figure 7. A photographic portrayal of Jin Yuemei in Vol. 20 of *Xikao* 戲考 (Research into plays) (1917: 7).

In the same vein, early Republican journalist and theatre critic Wang Xiaoyin 王小隱 attributed women's advantage of performing female roles to some kind of physical quality inherent in the female sex. Wang claimed:

[28] A female role type combines *qingyi* and *huadan*, with a focus on singing, dancing, and movements.

> The *qingyi* and *huashan* characters played by female actors are more natural than those performed by male players […] [The strength of] utilizing the female physique to portray female roles is rooted in the same "infatuating heart" [*fangxin* 芳心] shared between the female actor and the female character, as well as the many distinctive qualities that the female body possesses. The female actor is capable of meticulously attending to even the most minute details, resulting in flawlessly subtle performances. (Wang Xiaoyin 1929: 3)

Unlike *nüdan* advocates who generally regarded the female sexed body as a superior medium of femininity, those critics who were not satisfied with *nüdan* performances, like You Bankuang[29] 尤半狂 (1900-?) and Zheng Guoyi 鄭過宜,strikingly argued that *nüdan*'s performances were often at odd with the principles of nature. For them, possessing a female sexed body alone did not necessarily confer an advantage upon these *nüdan*. Bankuang (You Bankuang) wrote in the Shanghai-based theatre magazine *Xiju yuekan* 戲劇月刊 (Theatre monthly) in 1928, asserting that "today's female actors have a childlike voice (*eryin* 兒音)" (Bankuang 1928: 5). This vocal characteristic was deemed undesirable and was believed to limit female actors' *xiqu* performances, implying that being a woman was perceived as a hindrance rather than an asset in a *nüdan*'s execution of *xiqu* performance. Furthermore, You Bankuang observed that the performances of female actors seemed to be "artificially contrived" rather than authentic. In the case of *nüdan* players, except for the notable instances of

[29] A native of Suzhou, You Bankuang was a renowned early Republican newspaper editor and drama critic.

Yuan Hanyun 袁漢雲 and Yuan Meiyun 袁美雲 from Jiangsu, they mostly captivated the audience at the cost of their own self-respect (Bankuang 1928: 5). Rather than directly censuring the women, he ascribed this trend to the guidance of their (male) mentors who exploited the sensual allure of their female apprentices for financial profit (Bankuang 1928: 5).

Zheng Guoyi, who wrote under the penname "Guoyi," also wrote in *Theatre Monthly* in 1928 and compared the performances of *nüdan* to those of *nandan*, asserting that *nüdan*'s performances appeared even more affected than those of their male counterparts. He explained:

> In theory, for male performers of *dan* roles, their performances should appear affected and contrived. On the other hand, when female actors portray *dan* roles, they would do so with a pure and natural approach, which allows them to achieve twice the result with half the effort. [In reality,] though, when exceptionally talented *nandan* grace the stage with their exquisite makeup, alluring expressions, and captivating gestures, they leave the audience mesmerized, exhibiting no hint of artificiality. In contrast, outstanding *nüdan* believe that they can create an alluring portrayal by obscuring their teeth and bending their waists. Yet, viewers often find such depictions overly exaggerated, lacking the essence of *pure naturalness* [emphasis mine]. Additionally, their voices are sharp, narrow, and even jarring, which are called *guiyin* 鬼音 (lit. "ghostly voices") by *xiqu* connoisseurs, unlike the harmonious and pleasing voices of *nandan*. (Guoyi 1928: 5)

According to Zheng Guoyi, highly skilled *nandan* performers, benefiting from their supposedly superior vocal quality, may captivate theatregoers who are accustomed to *xiqu* conventions. On the other hand, *nüdan* performances, limited by the perceived inferiority of female voices, may come across as "unnatural" and "affected." Like You Bankuang, Zheng Guoyi attributed the perceived issues with *nüdan* performances to the way female players were instructed. However, he presented a distinct reason for the flawed instruction of female actors. He elucidated:

> Regarding the instruction of *nüdan*, it is not uncommon for them to be taught just like *nandan*. The pedagogy for female actors is essentially the same as that for male performers [...] However, the problem lies in the fact that the teaching methods are entirely identical to those used for male actors. Hence, they are inappropriate. The natural vocal range of *nüdan* is not inherently broad, and when coupled with attempts to imitate male actors, the result is unavoidably jarring to the ear. The graceful physical movements of *nüdan* are already quite elegant, but when combined with excessive imitation of the mannerisms of *nandan* [男伶之矯揉], their natural charm is entirely lost. (Guoyi 1928: 5)

Zheng Guoyi's arguments demanded careful examination. On the one hand, he seemed to be an unapologetic advocate of *nandan*, asserting that the male players' artistic achievements are partly sustained by the superiority of the male voice. On the other hand, he proposes that female actors could effectively perform female roles in *xiqu* if appropriate approaches were adopted. For Zheng Guoyi, it was justifiable for male actors playing *dan* roles to incorporate mannerisms in their embodiment of female

characters. This observation suggested an inherent gap between male physiques and the female roles they played, necessitating deliberate efforts to bridge this divide. In contrast, Zheng Guoyi voiced criticism toward the performances of female actors, deeming them as "excessive." He argued that replicating the mannerisms of male actors resulted in a distortion of their natural beauty. To put differently, while Zheng Guoyi championed *nandan* performances, he also held the belief that femininity inherently resided within the female sex, serving as an immediate and natural conduit. He proposed that female actors possessed a distinct advantage in *xiqu* performances if they embraced their natural and genuine femininity.

III. *Nannü heyan*: From Periphery to Acceptance

Apart from the belief that the female sex promised a natural form of femininity, the practice of *nannü heyan* was also harnessed by Republican critics to provide a rationale for employing female actors in *xiqu* performances. In the late Qing era, as I elaborated in Chapter One, *nannü heyan* was viewed as a marginalized practice, a novelty that was introduced by astute owners and managers of theatre companies. It often faced condemnation due to its perceived obscenity, and almost no critic was willing to advocate for its legitimacy. After the founding of the Republic, however, legal regulations regarding *nannü heyan* became site-specific. In the first two decades of the Republican era, each city had its own policies, and local authorities oftentimes needed to consider individual cases.

For instance, while Tianjin was among the first to lift the prohibition on *nannü heyan* and became known as a metropolis relatively lenient about *nannü heyan* (Ma'er

xiansheng 1917: 12), Beijing maintained its prohibition on the practice until 1930. In Shanghai, each geographic section (the international settlement, the French concession, and Chinese territories) enacted its individual policy before *nannü heyan* became a standard practice in the city in the 1920s. During the process, the issue of *nannü heyan* became central to discussions of theatre aesthetics of the real and the question of what qualifies a woman. While many critics questioned the legitimacy of adopting the practice since a strong and persistent hostility towards *nannü heyan* still prevailed in public discourse, others saw *nannü heyan* as an inevitable trend and a significant milestone in social advancement.

Prior to *xiqu*'s adoption of *nannü heyan*, the controversy over *nannü heyan* took place among practitioners and critics in the circles of *xinju*, where the demand for *nannü heyan* seemed more imperative. Zhou Jianyun 周劍雲 (1893-1967), a renowned theatre critic, provided two arguments to back up his belief that *nannü heyan* was unwarranted. First, educated male players were thought by Zhou Jianyun to have an advantage in improving the characters they played, while young women, who were often lacking in education, were said to struggle to do the same. Second, unlike *xiqu*, which was believed to be constrained by poetic rhyming, *xinju* aimed for a more "direct and realistic" (*shuaizhen* 率真) approach. The aesthetic traits of *xinju* often resulted in romantic scenes that appeared too explicit and unsuitable for the audience (Zhou 2020 [1918]: 363).

The noted literatus Wang Dungen 王鈍根 (1888-1951), who wrote under the penname "Dungen" in *Shenbao*, however, praised the Minxing Society's (*Minxing she*, 民興社) employment of *nannü heyan* in their *xinju* performances in Shanghai in 1914.

Wang believed that the *xinju* troupe's choice was based on a commitment to "seeking truth from facts" (*shishi qiushi*, 實事求是) and that *nannü heyan* promised a more truthful representation compared to unisex casting (Dungen 1914: 13). Like the other aforementioned critics such as Liu Qulu and Wang Xiaoyin, Wang Dungen admired the female actors for their ability to embody "femininity" (*jinguo zhiqi*, 巾帼之气), while criticizing cross-dressed male actors for appearing "affected" (Dungen 1914: 13). More important, Wang envisioned that *nannü heyan* should be a standard, trans-generic practice in both *xinju* and *xiqu*. He referred to the West as an authoritative source by underscoring the sheer number of talented female actors in the West and by pointing out that *nannü heyan* was the norm in Euro-American countries. Furthermore, Wang Dungen asserted that the intrinsic qualities bestowed upon women, referred to as "heavenly bestowed traits" (*tianfu zhi texing*, 天赋之特性), eluded complete comprehension by men, just as the attributes inherent to men remained beyond the reach of women (Dungen 1914: 13). Through this assertion, he conveyed the idea that the differentiation between genders was inherent, dictated by nature, and not something that could be transcended.

Science-sanctioned knowledge of gender differences appeared to play a decisive role in bolstering support for *nannü heyan*. Gu Jianchen 谷剑塵 (1897-1976), a *huaju* playwright, theatre educator, and theorist, notably discussed how medical sciences and psychology informed his comprehension of gender differences, and how this understanding justified his embrace of *nannü heyan* in Chinese theatre. He wrote:

> [Knowledge of] "sexology" (*xingli* 性理, lit., "science of sex"), "anatomy," and "vocal cords" informed me that while even men may be

> able to exhibit certain feminine characteristics, attaining true verisimilitude (*bizhen* 逼真) for the purpose of mimesis would present considerable challenges. For this reason, we know that *nannü heyan* is a must in theatre acting.

To dissociate *nannü heyan* from immorality, Gu censured Confucian ethical codes, considering them as obstacles that hindered the advancement of art. Gu continued:

> The slaves of the old Confucian doctrine, despite opposing us with the pretext of "men and women should not touch each other when giving or receiving an item" (*nannü shoushou buqin* 男女授受不親) and "harmful to social customs and morality" (*youguan fenghua* 有關風化), are no longer worth our attention. Their opposition only leads them to go around in circles before the tombstones. Hence, for those of us engaged in theatre education and who are currently advocating for *nannü heyan*, as long as the men and women are willing to make sacrifices for the sake of art, they should be absolutely free from the constraints of the environment. (Gu 1923: 1)

Rather than viewing it as a symptom of social regression, Gu insisted that incorporating *nannü heyan* could signify a milestone in social progress. According to Gu, art, in particular theatre, ought to lead the way in driving social transformation. He believed that theatre practitioners have a responsibility to transform the stage into an inclusive space, devoid of gender biases.

Aligned with Gu Jianchen's stance of rejecting the notion of *nannü heyan* as an obscene practice, distinguished journalist and theatre critic Ma'er Xiansheng 馬二先生 ("Mr. Ma'er," Feng Shuluan 馮叔鸞, 1884-1942) contended that *nannü heyan* did not inevitably result in a deterioration of morality. He illustrated this with an example from the theatre scene in Shanghai: "While *nannü heyan* is permissible in the French concession, it is prohibited in the International Settlement and the Chinese territories. However, the social morals and customs in the French concession showed no significant difference from those in other parts of the city" (Ma'er Xiansheng 1917: 12). By presenting this viewpoint, Ma'er Xiansheng insisted that *nannü heyan* was not be blamed as the cause of Shanghai's "most rampant decadence" (Ma'er Xiansheng 1917: 12).

Ma'er Xiansheng stood out from all other advocates of *nannü heyan* due to the sheer volume of writings he produced dedicated to the subject, which established him as arguably the most tireless and significant proponent of *nannü heyan* during the early Republican era. Most notably, Ma'er Xiansheng maintained that there were two distinct types of *nannü heyan*, and any discussion pertaining to the practice should be approached with this awareness. For him, the phrase "*nannü heyan*" was misleading, as its literal meaning implied a haphazard blend of male and female actors performing together on stage. Ma'er Xiansheng believed that this form of *nannü heyan* was already being brought to life at Shanghai's Gongwutai 共舞台 (The Gong stage),[30] along with several playhouses in Tianjin and Yingkou (similar to the instances of *nannü heyan*

[30] The star system of the Gong Stage and its employment of *nannü heyan* will be discussed in detail in Chapter Three.

discussed in Chapter One). In these cases, not only did men and women perform collaboratively onstage, but cross-dressing was also commonly practiced (Ma'er Xiansheng 1917: 12).

For Ma'er Xiansheng, what he and other proponents of *nannü heyan* advocated was in fact another type of *nannü heyan*, that is "*nanyannan*, *nüyannü* 男演男,女演女" [lit., "men playing male characters and women taking on female characters"] (Ma'er Xiansheng 1917: 12; Ma'er Xiansheng 1920: 2). In other words, they yearned for gender-straight casting, a practice embraced in the West, to become the standard in Chinese theatre as well. To further justify gender-straight casting, Ma'er Xiansheng undertook a staunch critique of cross-dressing. While acknowledging the talent of *nandan* performers like Mei Lanfang and Feng Zihe 馮子和 (1888-1942) and *nüsheng* performers such as En Xiaofeng and Zhao Ziyun 趙紫雲, he maintained that these cross-dressers were exceptions to the norm, a viewpoint neglecting the longstanding convention of cross-dressing in Chinese theatre. Furthermore, he accused cross-dressing of being "unnatural" and contended that: "it is unnatural for men to play women, and even more unnatural for women to play men. *Nannü heyan* can avoid this difficulty. This is a consideration entirely based upon artistic progress" (Ma'er Xiansheng 1920: 2). It is important to underscore that Ma'er Xiansheng employed the criterion of nature not solely to recognize the rights of women in performing female characters, but also to invalidate the acceptability of cross-dressing. In other words, the discussions surrounding *nannü heyan* had put an end to cross-dressing within the projected scope of modern Chinese theatre, be it *huaju* or *xiqu*. This intellectual discourse contributed significantly to the eventual acceptance of gender-appropriate casting in *huaju*, while

also leading to the marginalization of crossing-dress (in particular *nandan*) in *xiqu*. As a result, the intellectual project of *nannü heyan* in twentieth-century China can be seen as both emancipatory and normative: on the one hand, it emancipates men and women by legitimizing their co-existence onstage; on the other hand, it suggestively undermines the legitimacy of cross-dressing.

IV. Coda

In this chapter, I discussed how the creation of the modern concept of woman brought into life the event of women actors: because women actors were prompted to confirm the truth that they were women (as both a biological truth and a social identity), they enacted a double performance both onstage and -off: while actively contributing to the call for redeeming their fallen state/nation, they performed their roles as victims of forced marriage, asserting their agency by exercising the prerogative to select their spouses based upon their own volition. The event of women helped female actors confirm the ostensible truth that the female sexed body embodied a more immediate and intrinsically "natural" form of femininity. While this recognition justified the participation of women actors as adequate players of female roles in *xiqu*, it also suggested that *nüsheng*'s embodiment of male characters was by no means natural and should be understood as an artifice. While the event of women as an intellectual project seemed to raise doubts about the credibility of female masculinity, a number of female actors in the Republican era, some of whom enacted male characters onstage or embodied masculine traits in their lives, contested the belief that their performances of

masculinity were merely an illusion. The subsequent chapter will delve deeper into the lives and gender politics of these women for a more comprehensive analysis.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE MULTIPLE PERSONAE: FEMALE STARS, PHOTOGRAPHY, AND THE POLITICS OF CROSS-DRESSING

In Chapter Three, I explored how two celebrated female actors of the 1910s, Liu Xikui and Xian Lingzhi, performed the role of women both on- and offstage at a time when women felt compelled to make voluntary decisions about their marriage and contribute to the nation as loyal citizens. Onstage, their portrayals of chaste, courageous women resonated with audiences, earning them acclaim in the theatre and reinforcing the role of women in the bourgeois family and society. Offstage, their battles for the right to make voluntary decisions about marriage and divorce garnered significant media attention and garnered sympathy for these talented performers.

In this chapter, my attention is paid to perhaps the two most celebrated female *xiqu* actors of the 1920s, namely Zhang Wenyan 張文艷 (also styled as 張文豔, circa 1898-1940) and Meng Xiaodong 孟小冬 (1908-1977). During the early 1920s, Zhang was highly esteemed as the foremost female *dan* actor in South China. However, her career came to an end in 1926 when she got married. Also in the early 1920s, Meng Xiaodong emerged as a superlative female performer and swiftly garnered recognition as the most influential female actor by 1926. As we shall see in what follows, both on- and offstage remained to be two critical dimensions for female performers such as Zhang and Meng to navigate their performances of gender. The rise of the New Women (*xinnüxing*, 新女性) discourse, beginning with May Fourth literature and continuing through women's newspapers and journals of the late-1910s and the 1920s, promoted a

new concept of womanhood, characterized by a modern school education, revolutionary ideals, and self-sufficiency (Feng 2004: 2). While female actors in *xiqu* of the 1920s did not neatly fit into the social roles of the new women, such as lacking formal education (which will be discussed in detail below), the political and ideological imperative to emulate the new women still played a significant influence on their everyday performances of gender and their own perceptions of womanhood (for instance, they sought agency in their marriages and expressed an interest in shortening their hair to stay fashionable and demonstrate their political stance).

Meanwhile, during the 1920s, the media emerged as another dimension, playing an increasingly crucial role in shaping female actors' public personae. Before these actors became celebrities in the media, the performances of *xiqu* relied upon the patronage of individual connoisseurs. It was the skill and stagecraft of the performers themselves that sustained appreciation and connoisseurship. However, starting in the 1920s, advancements in photographic technology allowed early Republican readers to fetishize photographic representations of female stars available in various forms of print capitalism, such as books, periodicals, and playbills. The commodification of the female performer's body by print capitalism turned the female performer into a spectacle. Both Zhang Wenyan and Meng Xiaodong captivated early Republican readers and theatregoers with their diverse and remarkable personas.

Beside these photographic representations, female actors' pathway toward stardom was also sustained by the commercialization of theatre experiences and the implementation of the star system in the entertainment industry, particularly in Shanghai. Historically speaking, *xiqu* performances were known for their highly

flexible performance spaces, allowing audiences to appreciate the shows from various perspectives, and encouraging diverse modes of appreciation. However, in the 1920s, as we will examine, the introduction of Western-style proscenium stages and modern lighting and scenery equipment in Shanghai transformed the *xiqu* stage into an illusionary space, reducing the presence of *xiqu* performers to mere images, and standardizing the mode of appreciation. The Gong Stage (*gongwutai*, 共舞台), a recently established theatre in Shanghai, successfully created a star system that showcased female stars like Zhang Wenyan in its *nannü heyan* spectacles. This was achieved through various promotional strategies, including theatre reviews and advertisements. Although existing research in both Chinese and English privileges *nandan* players as the trailblazers of China's first star culture, my research intends to highlight the significant role that female stars such as Zhang Wenyan played in facilitating the culture.

The star culture also played a significant role in shaping the perception of female performers' offstage cross-dressing practices among early Republican theatregoers and the general public. As discussed in Chapter Two, during the late Qing dynasty, female performers' practice of cross-dressing offstage was generally considered scandalous. Additional legal prohibitions were introduced in the 1910s in Beijing to enforce a dress code for female actors to prohibit any serious defiance of gender norms. However, in the 1920s, the widespread circulation of photographs featuring female actors such as Zhang Wenyan and Guo Ruiqing 郭瑞卿 (circa 1908-?) in masculine personae gave this practice a more lighthearted and enjoyable connotation. Furthermore, Meng Xiaodong, as the most prominent female cross-dresser in the

Republican era, added new implications to the practice of cross-dressing in her art and personal life during the 1920s and 1930s. Offstage, Meng employed cross-dressing as a means of disguise and self-protection, while onstage, it became a powerful tool for her self-liberation from the exploitative marital relationship with Mei Lanfang. Early Republican spectators of *xiqu* were therefore privileged to observe how female actors remarkably explored the rich possibilities of cross-dressing.

I. The Ever-Changing Zhang Wenyan: The Gong Stage, Stardom, and Photography

On December 26, 1926, a Shanghai tabloid reported a domestic dispute between the wealthy Republican-era socialite Yuan Siyan 袁思彥 (aka, "the Sixth Young Master of the Yuan's" 袁六公子, 1895-?, son of the former Qing official Yuan Shuxun 袁樹勳, 1847-1915) and female *xiqu* star Zhang Wenyan, whom Yuan recently took as his concubine (Huasheng 1926: 2). According to the tabloid, what was central to the dispute between Zhang Wenyan and Yuan Siyan was over how the woman should stylize her hair. When Zhang Wenyan intended to shorten her hair and adopt the fashionable "duck's butt" (*yapigu*, 鴨屁股) hairdo, her husband categorically rejected that idea. Feeling unsettled by Yuan's objection, Zhang contended that "despite [the traditional Confucian belief] that children are indebted to their parents for their physical attributes like hair and skin, in today's civilized world, even parents should not meddle in [their child's choice of hairstyling], let alone others" (Huasheng 1926: 2). However, Yuan cautioned his concubine about the dire consequences faced by those innocent young women in Hankou who heeded the KMT's plea to shorten their hair, only to be

subsequently targeted by the vengeful forces of warlord Wu Peifu 吳佩孚 (1874-1939) during the Northern Expedition.

In his monograph *It*, theatre historian and performance theorist Joseph Roach explores the allure of celebrities in the Anglophone world from the seventeenth century onwards. Roach notes the significant role that hair has played in enhancing the appeal of what he refers to as "abnormally interestingly people" (Roach 2007: 117-145). Throughout history, from King Charles II to American female actor Lillian Lorraine, hair has been a crucial element in establishing their iconic status. Roach's research underscores the vital role of hair in asserting an identity and evoking emotions. Contrary to the common perception of hair as a natural attribute, Roach argues that it exists in the realm between culture and nature because it can be manipulated and styled (Roach 2007: 126). Roach's understanding of hair as both a symbol of self-assertion and an emotionally charged token is useful in better understanding the complicated relationship between a hairdo and its wearer during the Qing-Republic transition. In early twentieth-century China, hairstyling emerged as a particularly crucial means of expressing oneself physically, and alterations to one's hair carried significant political implications. Men severed their queues to demonstrate their transformation from imperial subjects of the Manchu empire into enlightened male citizens in the Republic.

Inspired by the New Culture Movement and the KMT's revolutionary efforts, young women embraced shorter hair as both a form of resistance against patriarchal norms and a bold declaration against reactionary warlords. In addition to being a token of political manifesto, reformed stylization of hair for women also facilitated modern

codes of femininity that refashioned womanhood in a modern context. An early Republican tabloid noted the fast speed at which women altered the style of their hair:

> When it comes to women's hair, it can be said that it has undergone tremendous changes. In this period of over two decades, I wonder how many new styles have emerged […] The climax of the revolution brought about a new reform, which was the women's haircut movement. It was during the period of the Northern Expedition victory of the Revolutionary Army, between the 15th and 16th years [1926 and 1927] of the Republic of China, that the haircut movement became popular among women. With a single call, everyone responded eagerly, competing to show off their new hairstyles. Middle-aged women, young girls, married women, and unmarried maidens, all believed that cutting their hair was the most fashionable trend. They sacrificed their beautiful hair buns and braids, enduring the pain, and cutting them off. As a result, the hair that remained on women's heads became short and stubby, resembling a "duck's butt" […] The "duck's butt" style later evolved into the "airplane style" [飛機式] because perm techniques were still very childish back then. Apart from using water and fire to perm it, there were very few options for electric styling […] However, things are different now. Electric styling has become popular and widespread, with new styles emerging every day. The airplane style is now a thing of the past, replaced by the trend of "streamlined" hairstyles [流線型]. (*Fenbao* 1939: 3)

From the "duck's butt" style in the 1920s to the rise of the "airplane" style and the "streamlined" style in the 1930s, with the advancement of hair styling technology, women in middle- and high-ranking positions in Republican urban population quickly adapted their hairdos to assert their identity and political stance. This also allowed them to participate in the construction of a redefined womanhood in urban China, characterized by the new concept of the "new woman." The "new woman" first emerged in May Fourth literature as a central figure and was further explored by women's pictorials in the late 1910s and 1920s (as well as Chinese cinema in the 1930s). According to Jin Feng, the "new woman" defines herself against old stereotypes such as the "caring mother" and the "filial daughter" by "attending Western-style schools for a modern education," pursuing careers that utilize their professional skills, and advocating for revolutionary changes through participation in demonstrations, rallies, and other political activities (Feng 2004: 2).

It is not certain to us today whether Zhang Wenyan eventually embraced the desirable "duck's butt" hairstyle or whether she would continue experimenting with different hairdos in the years leading up to her death from kidney failure in 1940. If the marriages of early Republican female performers had a significant impact on their stage careers, Zhang's marriage to Yuan was no exception. Her marriage marked the decline of Zhang's prominence as a leading female *dan* star in South China, and the domestic dispute also signaled the end of her media attention. In the early Republican era, female performers on the *xiqu* stage had a rather complicated relationship with the desire to become the new woman. On the one hand, *xiqu* acting nevertheless enabled some of the women coming from the subaltern caste to realize their own talents and gain wide

recognition. On the other hand, their rural upbringing and lack of literacy prevented them from fully embodying the ideals of the new woman.[31] This clearly set them apart from their counterparts in the realms of cinema and *huaju*.[32] In the case of Zhang Wenyan, her bold challenge to Yuan Siyan verbally showcased her defiance against the patriarchal norms prevailing in her household. However, it is likely that Zhang Wenyan's dependence on Yuan Siyan's immense wealth hindered her from attaining the independence and self-sufficiency desired by the imperative to embody the new woman in urban China in the 1920s.

This predicament also extended to her performances on stage. In her early career, Zhang Wenyan remarkably transformed her stage persona from a nurturing mother adhering to Confucian ideals into a woman who actively resisted patriarchy, as her troupe toured between a variety of sites in Southern China and Taiwan. However, it was in Shanghai, the city where she eventually settled down, that she became widely known as a lascivious wife on stage. On the one hand, the Gong Stage elevated her to

[31] It was not until 1930 when the Professional School of Chinese *Xiqu* (*Zhonghua xiqu zhuanke xuexiao*, 中華戲曲專科學校) was established in Beijing that actors of *xiqu*, in particular female actors, were required to take a literacy curriculum along with their training of *xiqu* acting. During the late 1930s, there were female college students like Liu Yingqiu 劉迎秋 (1919-1998) who expressed a desire to become *xiqu* actors. However, this aspiration was still considered unthinkable at the time, and Liu faced numerous discouragements. (Liu 2010: 505-529).

[32] It is worth noting that *xiqu* actors differed significantly from their counterparts in the Western-inspired theatrical form of *huaju*, particularly in terms of their family background. *Xiqu* was predominantly a profession based on family ties and had strong connections with prostitution. Hence, its performers belonged to the lower social caste during the Qing dynasty. In the early Republican era, female *xiqu* performers typically came from established theatrical families or improvised rural or urban households. It would have been unthinkable for a female college student like Liu Yingqiu to enter the profession. On the other hand, *xinju*, an early form of *huaju*, was introduced to China by Chinese students who had received education in Japan. Many participants in *xinju* were generally educated youths associated with prestigious educational institutions such as the Nankai School in Tianjin.

the status of a top star, earning her magnificent fame that surpassed her male counterparts in the same troupe. On the other hand, the star system objectified her body, reducing her to a "*youwu*" 尤物 or dangerously beautiful object.

Born into a family deeply involved in the theatre business, Zhang Wenyan began her acting career at the age of seven years old in Zhenjiang, where her rendition of the female protagonist Sanniang in the play *Sanniang Educating Her Son* (*Sanniang jiaozi* 三娘教子) compellingly portrayed an ideal Confucian woman. Derived from the Qing dynasty author Li Yu's 李漁 (1611-1680) renowned novel *Silent Plays* (*Wushengxi* 無聲戲), *Sanniang Educating Her Son* presents a didactic account of a concubine's conscientious fulfillment of her maternal duties by fostering her husband's son with his other wife when the boy's biological parents are absent. With the performance of *Sanniang Educating Her Son*, the seven-year-old prodigy, along with her nine-year-old sister Wenkui 文奎, "caused a sensation among the audience in Zhenjiang" (Hua'elouzhu 1923: 8).

Guided by their father Zhang Xiqing 張錫卿, an actor-turned theatre company owner, the sisters later embarked on tours that took them to various cities in South China, including Shashi in the West and Nantong in the North. Eventually, the itinerant troupe continued their journey southward to the Japanese colony of Taiwan, where the female actor's body became representative of China's national identity. As the theatre company toured from Tainan to Taipei, it advertised their performances with placards that displayed the words "China Zhang Wenyan" (Hua'elouzhu 1923: 8). The troupe's Chinese identity reportedly garnered enthusiastic support from local theatregoers,

inspiring the young performer to showcase her talents to the utmost (Hua'elouzhu 1923: 8).

In Taiwan, the troupe's repertoire foregrounded the *jingju* play *The South Heavenly Gate* (*Nantianmen* 南天門), in which Zhang Wenyan took on the role of the female protagonist, Yujie 玉姐, the daughter of the Ming official Cao Zhengbang 曹正邦. Set during the late Ming dynasty, a time when the corrupt eunuch Wei Zhongxian 魏忠賢 (1568-1627) held virtual control over the Ming's affairs of state, Yujie's righteous father and nearly all of her family members are ruthlessly murdered by Wei Zhongxian's aides. Yujie, accompanied by her solitary surviving servant Cao Fu 曹福, embarks on a treacherous journey to escape with their lives, navigating dangerous mountain paths amidst harsh winter conditions. In a selfless act, the elderly servant sacrifices his own clothing to protect Yujie from the brutal weather. As a result, Cao Fu succumbs to the harsh effects of both hunger and cold, evoking tears from the virtuous young woman. Although it is true that each individual genre of *xiqu* has salient local traits which can make it challenging for unfamiliar theatregoers to fully appreciate the art, Zhang Wenyan's rendition of the vulnerable young lady during a time of political turmoil managed to transcend cultural boundaries. The performance "moved all members of the audience to tears," as it was said to evoke a "deep sense of sorrow and loss for their [former mother] country" (*wangguo zhitong* 亡國之痛) among the spectators (Hua'elouzhu 1923: 8).

After their return to the Chinese mainland, Zhang Wenyan further extended her reputation as a commanding star in the realm of *xiqu* in Hangzhou. In the 1910s, when

performing at the Phoenix Stage (*feng wutai* 鳳舞台) in Hangzhou, Zhang Wenyan acquired her fame for her compelling portrayal of the female protagonist in the play *Xuemei Mourns for Shang Lin* (*Xuemei diaoxiao* 雪梅吊孝) (Muxi 1936: 2). The play centers around the indomitable female protagonist, Qin Xuemei 秦雪梅, who boldly defies her father's orders by attending the mourning ceremony for her husband, Shang Lin 商林, a young man tragically consumed by mental anguish from being forcibly separated from his beloved wife. Onstage, Zhang Wenyan portrays Qin Xuemei as a defiant figure, openly resisting her father's orders and condemning patriarchal structures. Offstage, in Hangzhou, Zhang Wenyan further challenged traditional gender roles by donning men's clothing, as depicted in figure 8. Her embodiment of masculinity outside the theatre earned her the moniker "Prince Wenyan" (*Wenyan qinwang* 文豔親王) among theatergoers in Hangzhou, highlighting the impact of her bold defiance of gender norms both on- and off the stage.

In the early 1920s, Zhang Wenyan relocated to Shanghai, a city known for its highly competitive yet profitable theatre industry. Her repertoire there took a notable departure from both her plays during the Taiwan era, which emphasized Confucian ideals of womanhood and female vulnerability, and the Hangzhou-era repertoire that showcased defiance of patriarchy. In Shanghai, her productions prominently featured alluring female characters, including courtesans and married women who succumbed to seduction. Calling Zhang Wenyan a "dangerously beautiful object," renowned theatre critic Zheng Guoyi praised the female actor's charms, saying they "surpassed those of any contemporary actors" in Shanghai at the time (Zheng 1944: 3). Zheng attributed her

remarkable stunning success to her adoption of modern clothing, soft-spoken delivery of lines of *jingju*, and her natural execution of acting in general as a whole:

> [Zhang Wenyan] created plays with modern costumes [*shishi zhuang* 時世裝], emulating Shanghai and Suzhou dialects with her soft-spoken delivery. Her expressions were lively and captivating, making the audience feel intoxicated. She was such a "dangerously beautiful object," with whom no present-day actor cannot compare. In summary, Zhang Wenyan's rendition is pure and natural, without any pretense or artificiality. This is not something that can be achieved through forced efforts or simply by imitating others. If others were to imitate her, they would only end up with a distorted and uglier version. (Zheng 1944: 3)

Figure 8. A photographical portrayal of Zhang Wenyan wearing men's clothing (*Xiaoshuo daguan* 1917: n.p.).

Similar to Liu Xikui's renowned production *Camellia*, Zhang Wenyan's repertoire in Shanghai emphasizes naturalistic stagecraft, setting it apart from the

traditionally elaborate *mise-en-scène* of *jingju*. Moreover, the incorporation of modern clothing, the use of Shanghai and Suzhou dialects in dialogue delivery, and the use of popular songs (instead of *jingju*'s own stylized music tunes) provided local Shanghai theatregoers with a newfound immediacy in appreciating the female body during *xiqu* performances. However, unlike Liu Xikui, who portrayed patriotic, chaste women, Zhang Wenyan's Shanghai performances depicted seductive characters, suggesting the commodification of the female body.

Figure 9 (left). A photographical portrayal of Zhang Wenyan in *Cotton Spinning.* (*Shehui zhihua* 1924: n.p.) Photo credit: Xinxin Photo Studio.
Figure 10 (right). A photographical image depicting Zhang Wenyan adorned in stylish Western-style dress, accompanied by a poem extolling her beauty and her art. (*Xinhua* 1922: n.p.)

According to theatre critic Shao Jingcheng (邵靜澄), Zhang Wenyan's most prevailing production was *Cotton Spinning* (*Fang mianhua* 紡棉花) (figure 9), a play that elicited an immediate sensation at Shanghai's Gong Stage. *Cotton Spinning* centers around the story of a young silversmith who leaves his newlywed wife just three days

after their marriage, only to return home three years later. Out of loneliness, the wife who is left behind at home succumbs to the seduction of a male stranger. However, that man later turns out to be her husband in disguise, and thus results in a series of hilarious effects. Due to its simple dialogue and plot, the play provides *xiqu* performers with abundant space to showcase their dance sequences and bodily gestures. Zhang Wenyan's rendition, particularly her sexually inviting poses like posing at the edge of the stage and adjusting her waistband, mesmerized audiences and generated a fetish for the female performer (Shao 1923: 4). Spectators were reportedly so enthralled that they were said to have "almost forgotten their own last names" (Zheng 1944: 3).

In her monograph on visual modernity in modern China, *Distorting Mirror*, Laikwan Pang delineates the remarkable transformation that *jingju* experienced after this theatrical genre arrived in the cosmopolitan city of Shanghai, an aesthetic development that Pang characterizes as "from listening to watching" (Pang 2007: 133-163). Pang contends that the way of appreciating "the Shanghai style of Peking Opera" in the early twentieth century was significantly different from the traditional way of attending *jingju* performances in Beijing. In Shanghai, various inovations were implemented by astute theatre owners and performers to enhance the visual aspects of *jingju* performances. One such change was the incorporation of contemporary, Western-style theatres. The advent of the proscenium stage in Shanghai, commonly referred to as the "picture-frame" stage by *xiqu* spectators, introduced a spacious, semi-oval area for the enactment of performances. This particular physical layout limited movement to a singular plane, thereby helps performers generate a two-dimensional illusion that privileged a fixed perspective for the audience (Pang 2007: 151).

As a result, the appearances of the "picture-frame" stage homogenized and regulated the experience of attending theatre. The proscenium stage demanded the audience's constant attention and caused them to appreciate *jingju*'s *mise-en-scène* in a manner similar to viewing tableau pictures (Pang 2007: 151). Such a mode of *xiqu* appreciation also transformed the physical presence of *jingju* actors into flattened images. In contrast, the traditional Chinese stage generally featured an open and deep space, allowing for multiple views and perspectives. In addition, the presence of columns, often adorned with inscribed words, on the traditional stage, served to detach *xiqu* spectators from fully immersing themselves in the illusion created by the performance. It goes without saying that the setting of the teahouse embraced the noise and distractions inherent in the traditional way of appreciating *jingju* (Pang 2007: 151-152). For Pang, the introduction of the proscenium stage in Shanghai was a direct consequence of the advent of modern consumer society and the appreciation of *jingju* as a cultural commodity within the entertainment industry. While capitalism and consumer culture frequently tout the expansion of personalized options, the purported freedom of choice is just an illusion. The commoditization of *xiqu* performances has, in reality, resulted in a homogenization of the audience's experience in appreciating *jingju* (Pang 2007: 152-153).

However, the influence of the commodification culture on Zhang Wenyan transcended mere participation in performances on the proscenium stage. It is critical to acknowledge the role of Zhang Wenyan as a performer employed by the renowned Gong Stage. The Gong Stage was a prominent theatrical enterprise, featuring a theater troupe and an affiliated stage located right next to Shanghai's renowned Great World

(*dashijie*, 大世界). Located in the French concession, the Great World was an amusement complex which was first opened to the public in 1917 and later underwent multiple reconstructions and expansions during the following years of the early Republican era (Shen 2006: 99). The amusement complex has remained operational until today, even though its business was suspended multiple times in history (for instance, during the Cultural Revolution of 1966-1976). In the early Republican years, the appearance and commercial triumph of the Great World as a prominent public entertainment facility were sustained by the rapidly growing consumer base in Shanghai. According to a 1929 survey conducted by a government agency in Shanghai on workers' income, the average monthly income for a household with both a male worker and a female worker in Shanghai was approximately 28 yuan. Given the fact that the essential expenses for such a family at the time averaged around 23.8 yuan, it thus allowed even some members of the working class to have surplus for leisure and entertainment (quoted in Zhang 1990: 748).

According to Shen Liang, a leading historian of the Shanghai Great World, by the 1920s, the Great World was already attracting an average of approximately five thousand visitors per day (Shen 2006: 103). And for a mere 0.2 yuan, visitors in the 1930s could gain access to the amusement complex and enjoy a multitude of exciting attractions, with additional options available at an extra cost (quoted in Shen 2006: 102).[33] At its pinnacle, the Great World featured twelve theatres of various sizes and

[33] For example, by paying a modest additional fee of 0.4 to 1 yuan, visitors to the Great World could enjoy an evening performance of *jingju*. The cost for a matinee performance was even more affordable, ranging from 0.2 to 0.6 yuan. The setting of the Great World as an amusement complex placed *jingju* performances in direct competition with cinema, magical shows, and many other entertainment options. At that time, the average price for a first-class cinema ticket was around 0.6 yuan (Shen 2006: 102).

offered a wide range of popular entertainment, including *xiqu* performances and other forms of Chinese performing arts, as well as Western-oriented programs such as motion pictures, exhibits, magic shows, and acrobatics.

If the advent of visual modernity (e.g., the introduction of the proscenium stage) in Shanghai transformed the conventional way of experiencing *xiqu* performances and facilitated *jingju*'s turn from "listening to watching," the Gong Stage took this transformation to a whole new level by both competing with and drawing inspirations from various Western-informed entertainment options in the Great World. The Gong Stage took a pioneering role in captivating viewers of *xiqu* with visual spectacles. For instance, it was the first theatre of its kind to incorporate films and slides into *xiqu* performances. One source reports that the Gong Stage superimposed motion pictures on theatrical performances, "creating such illusions as a performer walking from cinematic space into theatrical space" (Pang 2007: 155). In other words, *xiqu* performance underwent a transformative infusion of diverse mediums, rendering the theatrical experience increasingly hybrid. Besides, the Gong Stage was also groundbreaking in its utilization of gadgets, advanced lighting apparatus, and other mechanical devices during *xiqu* performances. This pioneering approach facilitated scene changes and thus redefined the tempo and flow of *xiqu* performances. Meanwhile, it enabled the inclusion of awe-inspiring elements such as "flying swordsmen and other magical performances" (Pang 2007: 155-156), making the theatrical performances even more hallucinatory and visually stirring. It is in the context of consumer culture and the dynamic environment of the Gong Stage that Zhang Wenyan's Shanghai-era productions, such as *Cotton Spinning*, diverged significantly from her earlier works by foregrounding a fusion of

modern attire, Western-style dance choreography, Western musical instruments, soft delivery of *jingju* speeches, and visually stimulating poses and gestures.

However, there was another critical dimension that distinguished female actors in Shanghai, in particular those who worked for the Gong Stage, from other female *xiqu* performers in the 1920s. Originally established by Huang Jinrong 黄金荣 (1868-1953), a tycoon and entrepreneur in Republican Shanghai, the Gong Stage later transformed into a collective ownership model. Renowned for its rigorous adherence to the star system and the practice of *nannü heyan* (Zhaosui 1929: 2), the Gong Stage employed a unique approach to elevate leading actors to the status of top stars. Prior to each performance, the entrance of the Gong Stage would showcase photographs showcasing the dramatic and everyday personae of these leading performers, accompanied by a prominent placard proclaiming the ongoing *nannü heyan* spectacle (Ruixue 1928: 2). This innovative practice, accompanied by promotional efforts such as theatre reviews and advertisements, played a significant role in enabling actors to attain the coveted position of top star. As a result, female actors were able to seize unprecedented opportunities and surpass their male counterparts in the same troupe to become top stars.

In an essay entitled "Female Performers and Female Stars" (*nüyou yu nümingxing*, 女優与女明星), a theatre critic who signed as "Minghui" (明晦) noted a thought-provoking phenomenon in the recent decade: when minor *xiqu* female players

from Shanghai, such as Ma Jinfeng[34] 馬金鳳 (1905-1931), relocated to Beijing for performances, they often achieved swift success and quickly acquired national reputation. Conversely, when female actors who were trained in Beijing, such as Bi Yunxia[35] 碧雲霞 (dates unknown), were recently invited to Shanghai, hardly any could compete with their Shanghai counterparts working for the Gong Stage such as Zhang Wenyan (Minghui 1926: 11). Reflecting upon the phenomenon, Minghui proposed a critical distinction between what he termed "FEMALE PERFORMERS" (*nüyou* 女優) and "FEMALE STARS" (*nümingxing* 女明星) (Minghui 1926: 11). According to the author, female stars wielded significantly more influence than skillful female performers in terms of box-office performances. He delineated how the connoisseurship of female stars differed itself from the patronage of female performers from the perspective of a theatre critic:

> In this era when female stars were at the height of their glory, how could unfamiliar female performers possibly compete with these stars? Whether it's the social skills or the accommodating manners [*qianjiu gongfu* 遷就功夫] of entertainers, can any of them match those of female stars? Vulgar literati, who lavish attention on female stars, can enjoy their company and watch their performances for free, even getting to kiss their hands. Patronizing female performers requires dipping into one's

[34] A *huadan* player of *jingju* performed at Qiankun Grand Theatre (*qiankun dajuchang*, 乾坤大劇場) of the Great World complex before relocating to Beijing circa 1922. Her later career saw her gain recognition under the stage name Qin Xuefang 琴雪芳.

[35] Born in Shanghai, Bi moved to Beijing in 1913 and was invited to perform in Shanghai again in the mid-1920s.

> wallet to attend performances. If one desires to socialize with female performers, it's even more costly than befriending the average star. (Minghui 1926: 11)

As suggested by Minghui, the conventional mode of theatrical patronage necessitates a consistent and substantial financial commitment from individual literati towards the performer. Consequently, interacting with a *xiqu* performer becomes a costly pursuit. This mode of patronage can be traced all the way back to at least the late Ming era, as exemplified by the popularity of *jiaban* 家班 of the Ming-Qing transition[36] and the *siyu* business of the late Qing dynasty. It would be simply unthinkable for any literatus lacking financial means to engage in theatre patronage. Meanwhile, it was the performer's talents and stagecraft that sustained the literati's interest in investing in him/her. In contrast, with the rise of the star system in the creation of *xiqu* in the early Republican era, the opportunity arose for the literati to serve a different role in advancing the careers of *xiqu* performers. Rather than directly investing financially in their admirable performers, they found a way to capitalize on their literary skills. By writing theatre reviews, offering literary guidance, and engaging in promotional activities, they were able to quickly promote the stars and their productions, maximizing profits for the capitalist system (Minghui 1926: 11). This not only allowed them to

[36] *Jiaban* 家班 refers to theatrical troupes owned by Chinese literati or scholar-officials in premodern China. *Jiaban* reached its pinnacle during the Ming-Qing transition. The most prominent *jiaban* troupes include those of Shen Shixing 申時行(1535-1614), Shen Jing 沈璟 (1553-1610), Tu Long 屠隆 (1543-1605), and Li Yu 李漁 (1611-1680). For an excellent survey of the history of *jiaban* (literati-owned troupes), see Chapter Eight entitled "*Lidai jiaban*" 歷代家班 (literati-owned troupes of different dynasties) of the monograph *Zhongguo xibanshi* 中國戲班史 (History of theatrical troupes in China) (Zhang 2003: 167-193).

benefit financially from endorsing the stars, but also provided them with the opportunity to personally interact with these alluring performers in person.

In his groundbreaking study of the star system, British film scholar Richard Dyer explicates that the star system hinges upon a series of maneuvers that the industry deploys to build up star images, including, among others, "publicity, promotion, fan clubs" (Dyer 1998: 12). The purpose of having promotion for the star is to "construct a star image, in that it is the most deliberate, direct, intentioned and self-conscious" (Dyer 1998: 60). For Dyer, promotion for stars in Hollywood usually incorporates two aspects: first, material concerned directly with the star in question, among others, press handouts, fan club publications, fashion images, advertisements featuring stars endorsing specific commodities; and second, material aimed at promoting the star in a particular production (Dyer 1998: 60). Furthermore, "the importance of publicity" lies in its supply of a more "authentic image" of the star because of "its apparent or actual escape from the image that the star system tries to promote" (Dyer 1998: 61). The press and dedicated fans are "often taken to give a privileged access to the real person of the star" (Dyer 1998: 61).

Dyer's examination of the importance of promotion and publicity within the Hollywood star system offers valuable insights for better comprehending the star system in the Shanghai *xiqu* industry. It sheds light on the mutual dependence between Republican literati and female *xiqu* stars in Shanghai and how this relationship contributed to sustaining a female star's prominence. As Minghui suggested, Republican literati could derive financial benefits from contributing rave reviews of female *xiqu* stars and engaging in promotional activities on their behalf. In return,

female stars like Zhang Wenyan, who were essential to Shanghai's theatre and entertainment industry, would typically reciprocate by accommodating the literati. As a result, literati could access opportunities to interact directly with female stars and enjoy privileged treatment.

In contrast, for female performers from northern China, such as Bi Yunxia, who had not yet established themselves within Shanghai's theatre industry, leveraging the star system to enhance their fame and influence was simply not feasible. The patronage of these so-called "female performers" was still very much dependent upon the traditional code, which required them to secure well-to-do patrons. This reliance on traditional patronage placed them at a disadvantage when competing with established local Shanghai stars, whose prominence was bolstered by the comprehensive and sophisticated machinery of the capitalist star system.

In the field of film studies, a discipline where star studies first came into existence, film scholar and critic Richard Schickel famously contends that the very medium of film is essential to the rise of stardom by comparing cinema and theatre. Schickel argues that "the stage is a less intimate medium (even though the audience is physically in the presence of the actors) because the proscenium has a profoundly distancing effect-no close-ups here" (Schickel 1974: 6). Schickel's analysis implies that, in contrast to theatre, cinema offers inherent advantages in fostering an illusion of intimacy between actors and viewers, a quality that significantly contributes to the star system. Likewise, the influential early 20th-century Hungarian film theorist Béla Balázs posits the close-up as the quintessential domain of the medium of film. For Balázs, the close-up that isolates a character's look and personality fundamentally sets film apart

from stage performances (Balázs 1970: 188). The cinematic technique is thought to unveil the unfiltered personality of the individual, fostering an intimate relationship between performers for the camera and their audiences (Balázs 1970: 188). This illusionary and fetishized bond of intimacy is considered essential in the creation of stardom (Schickel 1974: 6; Walker 1974: 5).

While the aforementioned film scholarship generally stresses the importance of the film medium to the making of the star system, both existing research on renowned male *xiqu* actors' ascent to national stardom and my own study of female *xiqu* stars in Republican China suggest that the physical distance between performers and theatergoers, imposed by the proscenium stage, did not prevent the early twentieth-century *xiqu* industry from effectively establishing the star system or fostering an illusionary bond of intimacy between theatre actors and their fandoms. During the early Republican era, the *xiqu* industry strategically utilized innovative techniques of representation, such as lithography and photography, along with promotional maneuvers of print capitalism, such as theatre reviews and advertisements. These efforts were aimed at promoting *xiqu* stars and bridging the distance between the stars and theatregoers, both within the theatre and beyond its confines.

Catherine Yeh explores the significance of lithographical representations, deeply influenced by nineteenth-century European and Japanese periodicals, within the Shanghai-based periodical *Tuhua jubao* 圖畫劇報 (Theatre illustrated, est. 1912) in constructing the public persona and national image of male *xiqu* performers such as Tan Xinpei and Mei Lanfang (Yeh 2004: 53-76). Furthermore, in examining Mei Lanfang's evolution through photographic documentation across the international star's acting

career, performance historian Suk-Young Kim observes that photography played a pivotal role in elevating Mei Lanfang's national and international prominence, allowing the female impersonator to surpass the achievements of *xiqu* players of the previous generation:

> Photos of Mei's performances were published in urban newspapers and stage bills wherever he toured, transforming him into a naturally recognized figure. In this respect, Mei was the first mass-media star of China whose face was known to all Chinese, thereby surpassing the fame of preceding Beijing opera stars, such as Tan Xinpei (1847-1917) who may have possessed talent equal to that of Mei, but whose career pre-dated the age of print capitalism in China. (Kim 2006: 39)

Kim perceptively observed the significant role that photograph and print capitalism played in propelling Mei Lanfang's rise to national stardom. In the same vein, Laikwan Pang noted that the renowned "four greatest *dan* players" (*sida mingdan*, 四大名旦) of *jingju*, including Mei Lanfang, Shang Xiaoyun, Xun Huisheng 荀慧生 (1900-1968), and Cheng Yanqiu, all showed a keen interest in posing for tableau photos. Their photographic portrayals, often utilized as symbols in advertisements for various commodities, proliferated throughout Republican books, periodicals, and playbills (Pang 2007: 90-92). Thanks to these photographic representations, "*dan* performers formed the first star culture in China" years before film actors ascended to

national stardom (Pang 2007: 90).[37]

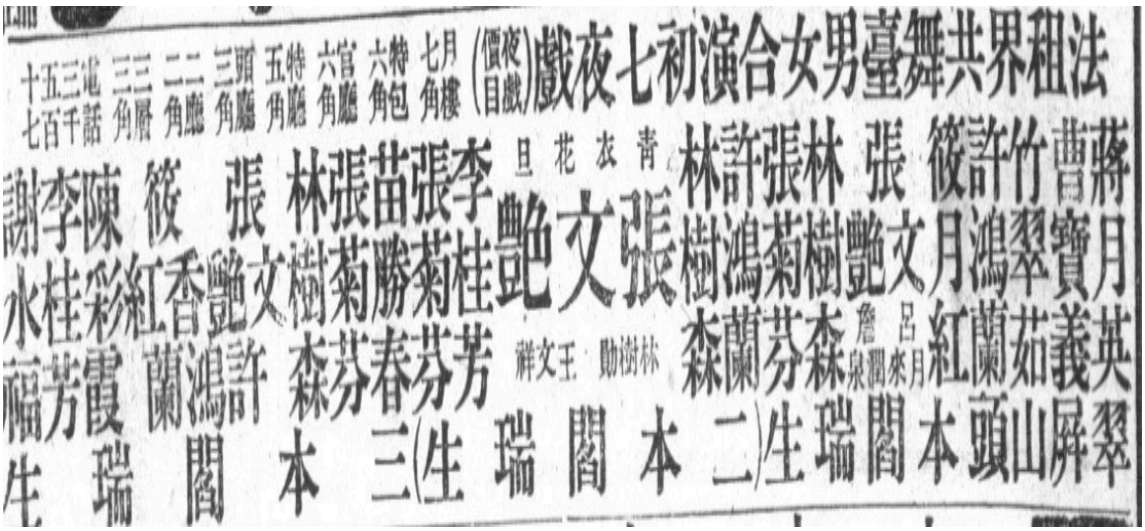


Figure 11 depicts a *Shenbao* advertisement for Gong Stage performances in the evening of April 3, 1922, highlighting the prominence of "Zhang Wenyan," whose name is prominently enlarged, overshadowing other male and female actors of the Gong Stage, indicating Zhang Wenyan's status as a star performer in the troupe (1922: 12).

While existing literature generally focuses on how print capitalism contributed to the rise of male *xiqu* actors as national stars, the process in which the same print capitalism facilitated the rise of female actors to stardom has been largely overlooked. In the case of female stars like Zhang Wenyan, their ascent to national stardom was significantly propelled by advertisements that distinguished these stars actors from their peers, regardless of gender (see figure 11). Also, Zhang Wenyan's rise to stardom greatly benefitted from the aid of photography. Writing in retrospect in 1936, an author

[37] Pang provides an excellent study of photography's influence on the trajectory of the *dan*'s rise to stardom. But her examination of the interplay among "photography, performance, and female images" is solely dedicated to male actors portraying female roles, as she contends that "The Qing government banned both female performance and prostitution, thus *dan* performers became the most available and visible symbol of 'female' eroticism" (Pang 2007: 89). My study intends to complement her work by underscoring the significance of female players in the historical process.

signing as “Muxi (慕溪)” reminisced about his sojourn in Hangzhou circa 1919. During his time there, he discovered that various photography studios prominently showcased photographical portrayals of Zhang Wenyan when the female actor was performing at the Phoenix Stage at that time (Muxi 1936: 2). Another source also indicated that photo studios and Zhang Wenyan mutually benefitted from each other:

> For photo studios in and beyond the confines of the city walls of Hangzhou, once Zhang Wenyan pays a visit to take a photo, regardless of the size, studios would be happy to waive the fees. Hence, in every photo studio in and around the city, Zhang Wenyan’s presence is ubiquitous. Passersby, upon seeing her, all exclaim, “This is Zhang Wenyan.” (Gonglou 1918: 8)

The exclamation of Hangzhou residents, “This is Zhang Wenyan,” underscores the immediate impact and illusionary connection that photography offers, allowing viewers to feel a sense of proximity to the alluring actor’s physical presence. As a product of print capitalism, photographs have the ability to reproduce themselves, leading to a proliferation of the female actor’s image throughout the city. This ubiquity transformed Zhang into an ideal star for mass consumption. Photographic portrayals of Zhang Wenyan published by Shanghai periodicals suggested that Zhang continued to collaborate with photo studios to advance her stardom after she relocated to Shanghai. One such example is the previously referenced photographic portrayal of Zhang Wenyan in *Cotton Spinning* published by the magazine *Shehui zhihua* 社會之花

(Societal flower) (see figure 9). The credit for that image goes to Xinxin Studio (*xinxin zhaoxiangguan*, 心心照相館), a renowned establishment founded in 1922. Located in

Figure 12. A photographical portrayal of Zhang Wenyan in *Times Pictorial Weekly* (1924: 2). Photo credit: Xue Yiru. The description reads: "The female actor Zhang Wenyen, known for her beauty and talent, is highly admired at present. Many gentlemen were infatuated with her and even bestowed her with the title of a prince. Some even compared her to the renowned Cao Kun in terms of power and fame. Recently, this female actor returned to Shanghai from Wuhan and continued to perform on the Gong Stage. However, it is noticeable in this recent photograph that her jade-like face has become thinner compared to before." 女伶張文艷以色藝噪于時，公子之為顛倒者不少捧之，尊以親王之號。嗜者舉以與"武義親王"[曹锟]比美。近該伶由漢返滬仍隸共舞台，此係最近攝影，玉容較前消瘦矣。

Nanjing Road in the International Concession, the studio boasted state-of-the-art equipment imported from Germany (*Shishi xinbao* 1922: 10; *Shenbao* 1923: 18).Another example is a photograph featured in the *Shibao tuhua zhoukan* 時報圖畫週

刊 (Times pictorial weekly) in 1924, which depicted Zhang Wenyan's offstage persona (figure 12). According to *Times Pictorial Weekly*, the image was a work by noted photographer Xue Yiru 薛逸如, owner of Xinyi Photograph Studio (*xinyi zhaoxiangguan*, 新藝照相館). Located in Xinzha Road 新閘路 in the International Concession, a 1929 advertisement asserted that the studio was one of the finest in Shanghai, "attracting famous film actors and dance stars" (*Xiao ribao* 1929: 2).

These instances suggested the popularity of the *dan* images in early Republican China was not limited to the renowned *nandan* stars, and female actors like Zhang Wenyan also contributed greatly to the first star culture in China. A close look at the images of Zhang Wenyan (figures 8, 9, 10, and 12) suggests that the charismatic female star possessed a remarkably versatile physicality. The images vividly showcase her ability to effortlessly embody various styles of clothing, hairstyles, and poses, attesting to the actor's exceptional malleability of her appearance. As Zhang Wenyan marvelously transformed herself into various personae and captivated the early Republican public as the unrivaled leader of female *dan* in South China in the early 1920s, Meng Xiaodong emerged as a female actor of a newer generation. Ultimately, Meng became the most influential female performer from the mid-1920s onward and impressed theatergoers with her remarkable portrayals of masculinity both on and offstage.

II. Meng Xiaodong and the Politics of Cross-Dressing

Born in 1908 into a distinguished theatrical family in Shanghai, Meng was trained as a specialist of male roles at a young age under the tutelage of her uncle-in-law

Qiu Yuexiang 仇月祥 (dates unknown). She acquired her first substantial stage experiences at the Gong Stage as a junior actor for the production *Executing Yan Ruisheng*[38] (槍斃閻瑞生, *Qiangbi Yan Ruisheng*), in which Zhang Wenyan served as a lead actor. After her stint as a Gong Stage performer between 1920 and 1921, Meng Xiaodong joined an itinerant troupe that traveled southbound to the Philippines in the remaining months of 1921. Upon her return to China, she performed at a variety of cities ranging from Hankou and Shanghai to Tianjin and Beijing. By 1926, Meng Xiaodong had already gained recognition as the most talented female performer, as noted in a theatre review published in *Ta Kung Pao*:

> After several months of performing in Beijing, Meng Xiaodong has garnered praise […] Someone said that she is not only the best among all female performers, but even compared to the famous male actors of today, she is not inferior. Recently, when I watched her performance, it was not an exaggeration to say that she was excellent. Despite being a woman, Meng Xiaodong flawlessly portrayed male lead roles, known as *xusheng* 须生.[39] Remarkably, she lacks any trace of feminine traits [脂粉味, *zhifen wei*], which is a remarkable advantage [for female players of male roles]. Whenever she appears on stage dressed as an official, those

[38] The Gong Stage's *jingju* play *Executing Yan Ruisheng* was a significant addition to the array of cinematic and dramatic productions centered around the trial of Yan Ruisheng. Yan was a college-educated banker who infamously committed the murder of a famous prostitute Wang Lianying 王蓮英 in Shanghai in 1920. This shocking incident sparked a media frenzy, eliciting acute public attention.

[39] *Xusheng* roles, literally male characters with long beards, are also known as *laosheng* 老生 ("older *sheng*") characters..

> unaware of her background would never suspect that she is a female performer. (*Ta Kung Pao* 1925: 6)

The remainder of the review continued to comment on Meng Xiaodong's stage presence, facial expressions, postures, delivery of lines, as well as singing skills, all of which were considered on par with the most talented male players of male roles of the age (*Ta Kung Pao* 1925: 6). As the female actor's compelling performances of masculinity onstage acquired national distinction, it was her ability to convincingly act like a man off stage that garnered even more media attention (Yinzhi nüshi 1926: 10). This is perhaps one of the most thought-provoking aspects of the gender politics of *xiqu* actors in the early Republican era. Recent studies on Qing and Republican *nandan* generally conclude that the legitimacy of female impersonation hinged upon the *nandan*'s departure from their previous association with male prostitution as well as their participation in the *siyu* business in Qing-era Beijing (Cuncun Wu 2017: 17-82; Guanda Wu 2017). That is to say, for *nandan* players, the biggest challenge was to maintain their femininity only onstage and not in their mundane life. As a result, Republican *nandan*'s ostensibly plastic presentations of gender were in fact a highly regulatory practice (Guanda Wu 2017: 22). In addition, Republican *nandan* and their proponents developed a wide range of new aesthetic terms to emphasize the inherent "aesthetic" quality of *nandan*'s femininity, contrasting it with the perceived "natural" or "real" femininity of biological women (Guanda Wu 2017: 76-142).

It is intriguing to note that in the case of *nüsheng*, there never seemed to be a need to distinguish their masculinity from that of biological men in the Republican era. The level of intellectual attention given to male impersonation never equaled the fervor

dedicated to theorizing female impersonation. Throughout the Republican era, the stagecraft of *nüsheng* remained an undertheorized terrain. This implies that, unlike female impersonators, who faced significant criticism from prominent intellectuals, male impersonators never felt compelled to justify their existence onstage. Perhaps this means that women's cross-dressing in general was more socially tolerable than that of men in Republican China. It is perhaps because patriarchy tends to prioritize masculinity over femininity, leading to the perception that failed masculinity was more undesirable than inadequate femininity.

Indeed, compared to *nandan*, one might find that female performers appeared to enjoy a higher degree of freedom in presenting their gendered persona both on- and offstage. As we have seen earlier in this chapter, it was not uncommon for female *xiqu* stars like Zhang Wenyan to wear men's clothing and strike a pose for the camera (figure 8). Such a practice became increasingly popular among female performers of *xiqu* toward the 1930s, regardless of the gender roles they actually portrayed onstage (figures 15 and 16). Furthermore, some female performers even received praise from theatre critics for their cross-dressing in everyday life, as it was seen as a commendable lifestyle choice. This set them apart from other female actors who were often stereotypically perceived as excessively feminine.

For example, Guo Ruiqing, a Beijing-based *laodan* 老旦 ("older *dan*," a subtype of the *dan* which depicts elderly women, featuring minimal or no makeup and costumes that are understated in color and design) performer, was known for her preference for dressing like a man offstage (figure 13). Theatre critic Liu Julu attributed this choice to Guo Ruiqing's respectable personality and manner of life:

> Guo Ruiqing is naturally virtuous, innocent, and filial. She has a particular fondness for simplicity and detachment from worldly pursuits. She typically wears men's clothing and refrains from using makeup. She does not go out without reason, and even when she does, she does not linger. She treats others with courtesy […] does not enjoy associating with fellow female performers, thus avoids adopting any negative habits of the Pear Garden. Prior to going onstage and after each performance, she would spend her free time with her mother. (Liu 1929: 6)

Although *laodan* Guo Ruiqing's choice to wear men's clothing offstage is seen as a reflection of her restrained personality and thus much admired, this does not suggest that any practice of cross-dressing by female actors was socially acceptable during the early Republican era. If female actors are perceived to have crossed the line in challenging gender norms, it could potentially lead to governmental intervention. For instance, in 1918, the police department of Beijing issued a legal prohibition to owners of all-female *xiqu* companies, announcing that all female performers should adhere to a dress code that discourages "wearing excessively flamboyant or gender-ambiguous attire" (Yi San 1918: 13). In a grim tone, the Beijing authorities warned: "In the event of non-compliance, they may be requested to discontinue their performance and could potentially face significant consequences upon verification of violation" (Yi San 1918: 13). This suggests that there was nevertheless a boundary in place regarding female actors' cross-dressing.

For female actors like Zhang Wenyan and Ma Yanyun 馬艷雲 (1902-1954), striking a pose for the camera could be seen as a chic and playful activity. In the case of

Guo Ruiqing, perhaps in part owing to the fact that Guo performed female roles onstage, her cross-dressing offstage was generally treated with respect. Therefore, in both cases, occasionally crossing the gender boundary seemed less suspicious. However, if the practices of some female actors were viewed as indeed serious and potentially posing a threat to gender norms, their transgressive acts could result in legal repercussions, as indicated by the 1918 legal document.

But Meng Xiaodong's practice of cross-dressing was perhaps more complicated than any of the situations mentioned above. As aforementioned, Meng's compelling performances of male characters were said to defy any suspicion that she was a woman (*Ta Kung Pao* 1925: 6). In fact, it also turned out that Meng's offstage persona was so convincing that no one could tell she was female: "Xiaodong, disguised as a man with a masculine appearance, not only presented herself confidently on stage but also carried herself with grace and ease in social interactions offstage. Her bold and straightforward demeanor, evident in her every expression, made it almost unbelievable that she was actually a woman dressed as a man" (Dong Ye 1931: 3).

Despite engaging in an ostensibly transgressive act, Meng Xiaodong never really faced any legal consequences. This was likely due to two reasons. First, in early Republican periodicals, alongside photographs showcasing Meng's masculine personae, there were also frequent depictions of her feminine personae offstage. These images were often accompanied by textual descriptions that emphasized her identity as a female performer, thus reinforcing the understanding that Meng Xiaodong was after all a woman (see figure 15). Second, it was widely known that Meng Xiaodong's choice to dress like a man offstage was not entirely voluntary. An entry in *Shengjing shibao* 盛京

時報 (The Mukden Times) stated that Meng Xiaodong decided to cut her hair short and adopt men's clothing around 1926 in response to the distress caused by her obsessive fans who relentlessly pursued her (Yinzhi nüshi 1926: 2). Lu Xun famously wrote in 1933 to suggest that the stunning popularity of cross-dressers like Mei Lanfang stemmed from the expectation that transvestites in *xiqu* should be capable of entertaining both the husband and the wife (Lu Xun 1973 [1933]: 503-5). The greatest May Fourth writer's disapproval of cross-dressing is rooted in the perception that it promotes artificiality, hindering the nation's pursuit of the real. Such an understanding of cross-dressing both bears strong homophobic overtones and evokes a deep-rooted prejudice against theatricality, as I discussed in Chapter Two. While Lu Xun's words were intended to ridicule the Chinese women and men who were so obsessed with cross-dressers, it is true that Meng Xiaodong was greatly disturbed by obsessive admirers of both genders. Many mid-aged wives from rich households formed support groups (referred to as *yitaitai tuan* 姨太太團), with the intention of adopting her as their own daughter. Also, men of different ages became fans and expressed their desire to marry her (*Shanghai huabao* 1925: 2).

In Chapter Two, I discussed how the late-Qing *mao'erxi* player Wu Xinbao wore men's clothing offstage to challenge ideological prescriptions of gender roles. In

Figure 13 (left). A photographical image depicting Guo Ruiqing adorned in men's clothing. (*Shehui zhihua* 1924: n.p.)
Figure 14 (right). A photographical image depicting Meng Xiaodong in women's clothing. (*Beiyang huabao* 1926: 1)

the case of Wu Xinbao, the practice of cross-dressing provided her with the opportunity to perform a "truer" version of herself. However, for Meng Xiaodong, cross-dressing offstage served an utterly different purpose. It was employed as a means of self-protection, an act of disguise that potentially helped Meng to conceal her "real" identity and fend off unwanted attention from overzealous fans. In March 1927, Meng Xiaodong married Mei Lanfang as the male polygamist's concubine.[40] Before 1927, on various occasions, the female impersonator par excellence and the most talented male

[40] Mei Lanfang married his first wife Wang Minghua in 1910, and the woman died of tuberculosis in September 1928. In 1921, Mei married female actor Fu Zhifang as his second wife (Fu 2016: 203, 220, and 231).

impersonator did portray a romantic couple on stage, each in their specialized role. In 1927, the romantic bond was eventually formed in actuality, albeit with reversed gender roles. However, their romantic connection came at a huge price for the female actor: she was confined to performing solely as a concubine, an unmistakably feminine role; and the supposedly eternal nature of marital bonds meant that she would be confined to that role for the remainder of her life.

Figure 15 (left). A photographical portrayal of Meng Xiaodong in men's clothing. (*Beiyang huabao* 1928: 1)
Figure 16 (right). A photographical image depicting female actor Ma Yanyun in men's clothing (*Beiyang huabao* 1928: 1)

Only months later, a homicide taking place at the residence of Feng Gengguang[41] 馮耿光 (1882-1975) in Beijing served as a chilling reminder of the intensity of passion exhibited by some of the female actor's fandom. One day in July in 1927, a college student in Beijing named Li Zhigang 李志剛 (some sources say: Lu

[41] Feng Gengguang, also known as Feng Youwei 馮幼偉, was an early Republican finance magnate and a long-term proponent of Mei Lanfang.

Zhigang 盧志剛) appeared at a gathering of Feng's friends, Mei Lanfang included, and demanded a large sum of money from Mei (*Shengching shibao* 1927: 4). According to The *Mukden Times*, Zhang Hanjun 張漢舉, an attendee at the party, tried unsuccessfully to appease the unexpected intruder and was tragically shot to death by Li Zhigang. It was later revealed that the intruder, actually brought up by a well-to-do family, was a devoted fan of Meng Xiaodong and had reportedly spent a significant amount of money to get close to the female actor. Consumed by jealousy over the recent martial bond between Mei and Meng and anguished by the female actor's sudden disappearance from the stage, Li sought revenge against the greatest *xiqu* actor of the age (*Shengching shibao* 1927: 4). Unfortunately, the college student's passion for the theatre and the handsome woman ultimately cost him his own life, as he was later shot to death by the police.

It became apparent that Meng Xiaodong's choice to practice cross-dressing offstage did little to quell the fervent adoration of her fans. Although we cannot determine the precise reasons behind Li Zhigang's unbridled passion for Meng, it is plausible that the man's admiration for the masculine woman was only intensified by Meng's cross-dressing off the stage, considering Li's enthusiasm for *sheng* characters that Meng embodied onstage. And for sure, Meng's sudden departure from the theatre business due to marriage had further heightened Li's longing for the actor. A published account, written two years after the incident and signed as "Xun Xiang 薰香," praised Li Zhigang for his "heroism." The author, a fan of Meng Xiaodong and a sympathizer of women, contended that by denying Meng the opportunity to continue performing onstage, the marital bond enslaved the talented female actor and made her a victim of

polygamy (Xun Xiang 1929: 3). As a result, he urged Meng Xiaodong to break free the constraints of marriage and strive for her independence (Xun Xiang 1929: 3).

III. Coda

In 1933, Meng Xiaodong again astonished the public by announcing that her martial relationship with Mei Lanfang had come to an end. In a most unexpected way, the fans of Meng Xiaodong's had their wishes fulfilled. After a hiatus of over half a decade, Meng made a triumphant return to the stage playing loyal officials and wise scholars and would reach a new height in her professional career in the late Republican era. In other words, the end of the marriage helped the female actor to resume an acting career that had once been hindered by her role as a concubine offstage.

Before she was taken by Mei Lanfang as a concubine, Meng Xiaodong tactically used cross-dressing offstage as a way to disguise herself and circumvent unwanted attention from overly enthusiastic fans. In contrast to the intention of the aforementioned Wu Xinbao, one might argue that Meng Xiaodong's motivation downplayed the potential for cross-dressing to be understood as an act of defiance. However, when Meng marvelously returned to the stage after breaking free the constraints of patriarchy, she revitalized the political significance of cross-dressing. If her marriage had confined Meng within the domestic space, her crossing onstage restored the transgressive potential of cross-dressing and symbolized her pathway toward self-liberation.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

In 1949, on the cusp of the founding of the People's Republic, Meng Xiaodong relocated from Shanghai to Hong Kong. The following year, she wedded the former Shanghai tycoon Du Yuesheng 杜月笙 (1888-1951) as one of his many concubines in Hong Kong. At forty-two, Meng's acting career came to a close, and she never returned to the stage, even after Du Yuesheng's passing in 1951. Divorcing Mei Lanfang in the early 1930s granted Meng an additional sixteen years in the spotlight. Her nearly twenty-five-year career on stage distinguished her as one of the longest-lasting female actors of the Republican era. Nevertheless, retiring at forty-two, a relatively young age for a male-role specialist, hinted at the challenges Meng encountered as a female actor. In her later life, she could not break free from the confines of societal expectations, ultimately being relegated to the role of a concubine.

When studying the legendary life of Meng Xiaodong, I could not help but draw parallels to the present-day presence of male impersonators in the realm of *xiqu*, particularly Pei Yanling 裴豔玲 (1947-), a highly acclaimed female performer of male roles in both *jingju* and *bangzi*. While female cross-dressers like Pei remain a minority, there has been a moderate revival of male impersonation in Chinese *xiqu* performances since the 1980s, a practice that had been largely suppressed during the Cultural Revolution. In the late 1980s, when the Fourth-Generation female filmmaker Huang Shuqin 黃蜀芹 (1939-) was given the opportunity to shoot a film dedicated to

contemporary Chinese women, Huang turned her attention to the marvelous life story of Pei Yanling.

Woman, Human, Demon (*renguiqing*, 人鬼情), Huang's critically acclaimed biopic of Pei, is hailed as "the first Chinese film [of female consciousness]" (Dai 2004: 253). The story follows the journey of Qiu Yun 秋芸, the female protagonist, as she overcomes various social obstacles to become the most celebrated performer of the male exorcist Zhong Kui 鍾馗. Born in a rural village in northern China, Qiu Yun makes a promise to her father that she will only portray male characters if she is allowed to learn and perform *xiqu*. Ironically, Qiu Yun's father, who is also a *xiqu* actor, holds the belief that women should not pursue acting due to the fact that Qiu Yun's mother, a female actor herself, eloped with another man.

Figure 17. In a poignant scene of *Woman, Human, Demon*, young Qiu Yun is dragged out of a women's bathroom, sparking a flurry of questioning from onlookers regarding her gender identity.

However, being a *nüsheng*, Qiu Yun faces even greater prejudice and discrimination. In one poignant scene, the young Qiu Yun, who maintains short hair offstage, is forcibly pulled out of a women's restroom and subjected to public

humiliation on the street. This mistreatment initially arises from the misconception that she is a boy. Even after the majority of bystanders become aware of her true gender, they continue to ridicule her for her choice to dress in a more masculine manner in her daily life. Prejudice toward her participation in *xiqu* performance persisted when she reaches adulthood: Qiu Yun has to constantly cope with a disgruntled husband, who thinks that it is disgraceful for a woman to play an ugly male character, while it is also worrisome for a man to have a wife enjoying playing alluring female characters. The biopic of contemporary China's most celebrated *nüsheng* serves as a poignant reminder that female *xiqu* actors in post-Mao China continue to face various social obstacles, much like their predecessors did at the beginning of the previous century. The ongoing struggle against prejudice towards female performers is a testament to the enduring nature of this battle. For this reason, it becomes increasingly imperative to conduct a comprehensive examination of the cultural, social, and epistemological parameters that have contributed to the oppression of female actors.

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