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Cross-Dressing
in Chinese Opera

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INTRODUCTION

The history of Chinese opera can, among many possible characterizations, be instructively described as a series of narrative fragments of “gender trouble.” In the beginning (of its textual history), Chinese theatre was to a significant extent constituted in and through gender b(l)ending. The enchantment of the figure of the “male *dan*” [*nandan/qiandan*] — female impersonator — remains a stubborn residual element in the cultural imagination in some layers of contemporary Chinese societies. The various kinds of queer possibilities in the social and cultural locality of Chinese opera, epitomized in its commanding tradition of cross-dressing, have yet to be examined in depth. Viewing the various dramatic and performance texts and practices as signs of historical processes and drawing on “those gestures or analytical models which dramatise incoherencies in the allegedly stable relations between chromosomal sex, gender and sexual desire” (Jagose 3), the present study investigates Chinese opera in terms of the highly mediated representations of gender and sexuality embodied in the prevalent practice of theatrical cross-dressing presented in a variety of discourses, texts and artifacts from the eighth century to the present time. An attention to the ideological and cultural complexities of theatrical transvestism throughout history underlies this interrogation. This research employs an interdisciplinary approach to address the

prominent configurations of cross-dressing and pertinent issues in classical Chinese drama and today's regional operas, placing them in a larger intercultural context of (trans)gender, theatre, and literary studies. This study draws on contemporary cultural theory as well as traditional historical scholarship.

Cross-dressing has had a unique significance in Chinese opera from the time of the Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368) — the period scholars generally cite as the “golden age” in the history of Chinese theatre. Female players at this time played a leading role on stage, often cross-dressing to play male roles. Later, in the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) periods, both private troupes maintained by the gentry and public theatres prominently featured cross-dressing. Private troupes were predominantly female theatres composed of girl actresses performing in the most elegant Kunqu style, and theatre historians have attributed an important role in the development of the performance of this opera to these young women.

The prevalence of the boy actor/boy actress in the public theatre, which was monopolized by men during the mid- to the late Qing period saw the fetishization of this cross-gendered body into an object of composite desires and taboos. In the modern era, although all-female troupes gradually emerged in the public theatre from the last years of the nineteenth century on, the climax of the sexually ambiguous figure of the male *dan* as a cultural obsession occurred in the golden age of Beijing opera, the 1920s to the 30s, culminating in the body of the ultimate icon Mei Lanfang (1894–1961). In the People's Republic of China, male cross-dressing is at the brink of extinction under the state's cultural policy of discontinuing male *dan* training at Chinese opera schools, while female cross-dressing has survived and developed in a relatively more benign climate than its male counterpart.

The complexity of ideological operations and subversive resistance coded in gender play in Chinese opera is the pressing issue to be examined here. My research goes beyond “the historians' favored position of judging and evaluating theatre history from the text” and embraces investigations of the stage performance itself, i.e., “the very impermanence and fleeting transitoriness of the supercharged experiential moments” which “create problems for historians” (Ferris,

Acting Women x). The significance of this characteristic of *performing*, I believe, goes even further in problematizing relations of power. It is this unstable process that makes the theatre a cultural practice highly dangerous to the powered hierarchy and a possible transforming agency in society for the disempowered. Chinese opera has always been policed and co-opted by rulers through regulation, censorship, prohibition and imposed silence (to borrow Foucault's terms), because it embodies disruptive social immediacy and occupies sociocultural locations embedded among the common people throughout history.¹

Focusing on the indeterminacy of cross-dressing as a destabilizing force, the present study begins by offering a revisionist narrative of a history of Chinese theatre in transvestism, with special reference to the participation of female players in the cultural (re)production and subversion of gender differences in various historical periods. Recent cultural criticism has pointed out that the patriarchy

has lately been dislodged from the status of a transhistorical and unitary phenomenon which was accorded it by varieties of essentialist feminism — the ongoing (and by no means conclusive) attempts to combine class and gender analysis have dismantled it into a historically and culturally variable, complex and even contradictory amalgam of institutions and attitudes.

(Loomba 1)

If this is the case, then it is time to begin a revisionist history of the potential resistance of Chinese female players as agents in negotiating patriarchal containment and male ideological authority in performance, with special attention given to the historical and cultural specificities of Chinese theatre in various periods. If feminist and gender criticism is understood to be “based in very precise political struggles and practices and remains inseparable from them,” if it is important *not* to “homogenize, colonialize, and neutralize the specificities of struggles” (Alice Jardine 15), it is my intention to locate the specificities of the history of women in theatre in imperial China. An awareness of cultural differences is vital in cultural studies today, which are inescapably “inter”; at the same time we also dance on the common ground of “gender-conscious analyses” across cultures “when the culture in

question uses gender as a major organizing principle, in social organization, in *mentalités*, or as is most usual, both" (Malti-Douglas 6). Through a comparison with the experience of women in European theatre, I shall try to particularize the experience of women in Chinese theatre. Discourses on the female performer and the female theatrical tradition in Chinese theatre will be reread to locate points of tension in this cultural production relating to the definition of feminine and masculine difference, and struggles over gender definitions and hierarchies.

Early modern English drama copiously produced plays built upon cross-dressing as a structural device, specifically that of heroines in male disguise.² Looking at the extant works of classical Chinese drama, the Ming Dynasty writer Xu Wei (1521–1593) appears to have pioneered the use of cross-dressed heroines in his famous twin plays of *Ci Mulan tifu congjun* [Maid Mulan joins the army in her father's stead] and *Nü zhuangyuan cihuang de feng* [The female top graduate declines a she-phoenix and gets a he-phoenix]. The former play portrays a military woman and the latter a gentry woman. Written in the mid-sixteenth century, both plays were dramatizations of existing tales and the story of Hua Mulan had been especially popular, thanks to the household narrative poem "Mulan ci" [The ballad of Mulan], which dates back to the sixth or seventh century. A mainland Chinese critic believes that Xu "inspired" writers in the late Ming and early Qing period to produce a series of cross-dressing plays (Ye Changhai, *Quxue yu xijuxue* 87). It is notable that many of the authors of these works were female writers from the Jiangnan area.³ Equally significant is the predominance of plots involving female cross-dressing.⁴ The only exception is the play *Chen Zigao gaizhuang nanhou ji* [Chen Zigao disguises as a male queen] by the late-Ming playwright and drama theorist Wang Jide (?–1623), who was a student of Xu Wei. With its plot concerning male cross-dressing, the play is unique in the extant works of classical Chinese drama, and opens up a site for the free contention of power for transgender and queer reading. The female cross-dressing dramas form a category of their own that interlocks with issues surrounding the (self-)representation of women and feminine writing. These plays, either written by men to glorify the ability of

women, or written by women aspiring to become men via the imaginary of the cross-dressed heroine, largely resulted in upholding and perpetuating the existing male-dominated power hierarchy. Dorothy Ko rightly argues that

[i]nstead of challenging the ideology of separate spheres by mixing and redefining gender roles, these heroines encouraged their female readers to aspire to be more like men.

(140)

She further points out that prominent woman writers in seventeenth century China were "[r]evered as honorary men in real life" (139). We can interpret the gender condition during this period in China as one of the existence of a single ideal sex — the male — that the secondary sex aspires to transform into. This kind of textual representation does not disturb the premisses of the patriarchal gender system. In the negotiation between containment and subversion, the early new historicist view of authoritarian closure has long been engaged by a more dialectical view attending to social agency, and Ko is quick to point out that these woman writers through their "temporary transgressions of gender boundaries . . . had begun to blur the centuries-old boundary between inner and outer and between the male and female spheres" (141–2).

The interactive negotiation between subversion and containment is my central concern in investigating Chinese opera's three most celebrated figures — the concubine, the woman warrior and the "Butterfly Lovers" and their related dramatic and performance texts in connection to transvestism. These texts are interrogated as fields of contention of desire, power and queer identities. These figures have been reappropriated not just on the Chinese operatic stage in modern times, but also in the process of the globalization of media culture. Concubine Yu of the Hegemon King and Hua Mulan the woman warrior have been capitalized by transnational cinema (*Farewell My Concubine* [1993]; *Mulan* [1998]), whereas the Butterfly Lovers have been implicated in the queer web of subtexts of the "M. Butterfly" imbroglio.

The complexities of gender politics in representing resistance and containment must be situated in the contemporary social-cultural context in order to be effectively decoded. While Hua Mulan, the woman warrior disguised as a man happily returns to the social position demarcated for her by Confucianism at the end of the day, thereby suggesting little room for transformation, perhaps a greater threat is posed to the patriarchy via the bodies of the other military heroines more prevalent on today's Chinese opera stage. Women who do not take up gender disguise yet are potentially more threatening as "virtual cross-dressers" in their resplendent costumes of masculine armor.

If we assert that the (at times double and triple) cross-dressed players on the Chinese opera stage are conflicting figures taking to task any claim to an authentic or stable gender identity, I find this destabilization no better represented than in the ubiquitous "Zhongdu Xiu Yuan drama mural" — incontrovertibly the ultimate artifact bequeathed us from the classical Chinese theatre of the fourteenth century. This wall painting is seen in the form of photographs or illustrations of various sizes and quality in any number of books and journals concerning Chinese theatre, published in many languages. The wall painting has inspired numerous studies by scholars across cultures and disciplines over the past few decades. These narratives (ranging from historical through anthropological to feminist) and the visual renditions of the mural are re-scrutinized to illustrate a moment of crisis in gender representation in the context of Chinese opera — the studies present conspicuously contradictory interpretations of the mural precisely because they have uniformly presumed the stability of gender representation.

All in all, from the historical practice of cross-dressing through representations in performance, text, and artifact, gender crisscrossing in Chinese opera has inevitably generated the subversive notion of gender as performance, and thereby disrupted the stable order of binary gender. Alisa Solomon argues that "the mutability of human identity promised by theater, and figured by the norm of transvestism, is precisely what makes theater the queerest art, perennially subject to railing by those with a stake in promoting the 'natural order' of the status quo" (*Re-dressing the Canon* 2). Rereading classical Chinese theories on

acting the other sex in relation to the categories of *zhen* [real] and *jia* [fictional] reveals that femininity and masculinity are notions constituted in performance, not essential qualities defined as real or fake given by nature.

The male construction of and obsession with the ideal feminine in Chinese drama, as literature, and theatre, as a performing art, are unique critical issues to be addressed. This specific case of the gendering of genre — discursing Chinese opera in feminine tropes — will be investigated in the context of power contention between the binary poles of Kunju opera and Beijing opera, "prettiness-eroticism" [*se*] and "artistry" [*yi*], the orthodox and the unconventional, the exquisite and the vulgar, the elitist and the popular. The cross-dressing practice prevalent on stage, combined with the obsession with prettiness-eroticism and artistry in traditional theatre aesthetics, have engendered the subversive feminine embodied most poignantly in the male *dan* in Beijing opera, and has rendered Chinese theatre an unstable site of ideological contestation subsuming a simultaneous perpetuation and dismantling of bipolar gender notions and social-political hierarchies. The male *dan*, this most obsessed and obsessive body in Chinese opera is now passing into extinction in the appearance of "the last female impersonator in Beijing opera." The significance of the male *dan* lies in both the performance aesthetics and the gender politics of this special theatrical configuration of the boundary-crossing (fe)male body. The present critique situates its last object of study in context by swinging back to the discourse of sexuality and theatrical cross-dressing in modern China, which is the subject of discussion in the prologue.

In maneuvering queer theory's fluid formulations of gender and sexuality and the cultural tactic of using "queer as a verb," I hope that it "may hold transformative potential" (Louise Allen 20) — that critical reflections on traditional culture can be made to speak to the concerns of today's ideological resistance to political hegemony and cultural dominants, through the unveiling of polyvalent meanings of gendering and gendered differences that are constructed, reproduced, dismantled, and contested in that particular site of Chinese culture — Chinese opera.

NOTE ON TRANSLATION AND ROMANIZATION

Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own. I have generally followed the pinyin system for transliteration of Chinese names and words, but for names of Chinese authors from Hong Kong and Taiwan, I have followed the transliteration systems used in these places. Other exceptions are cases in which the Wade-Giles system was originally used in a quotation, and those terms, such as "Confucius" and "Tao," that are already familiar to English readers.

The textual instability produced in *translating* culture is inevitable in intercultural studies such as the present one. The problem is more seriously exposed when highly cultural-specific terms and concepts are involved. I would like to clarify, as much as possible, several Chinese terms that are used throughout the present work.

We are told that Confucius once said, "If something has to be put first, it is, perhaps, the rectification of names . . . When names are not correct, what is said will not sound reasonable; when what is said does not sound reasonable, affairs will not culminate in success. . ." (*Analects* 118). If what Confucius calls "rectification of names" [*zhengming*] has its validity and advantages in reality, Japanese theatres seem to have attained this in Western discourse. *Noh* and *kabuki*, for instance, have established themselves in English as "Noh theatre" and "Kabuki theatre," they are not referred to as some kind of "opera." Whereas

the traditional Chinese theatrical genre of *xiqu* (very literally, *xi* means “play/drama” and *qu* “songs/music”), whose name has posed great problems in its translation, has not been able to “rectify” its name in an alien discursive practice. Therefore, I shall briefly define my use of the terms “[Chinese] drama,” “[Chinese] theatre,” “[Chinese] opera,” and “[Chinese] music drama” which are used in various contexts to represent the Chinese term *xiqu*. “Chinese drama” is used when the emphasis is literary, while the term “drama” is used as the standard “equivalent” of *xiju* on related occasions (literally *ju* means “drama”; the two characters *xi* and *ju* are often used interchangeably). “Chinese theatre” leans more on the stage, performance, and the spectator-player interaction in the performing location. I use the term “Chinese opera” to refer to the whole tradition of the practice of musical theatre in China, as well as to denote the various regional traditional theatres in performance today, as commonly adopted by ethnomusicologists (e.g., Bell Yung; Chan Sau Yan; Rulan Chao Pian). In addition I have employed “Chinese music drama” to translate *xiqu* only in book and article titles in order to render a more literal translation (this has nothing to do with the Wagnerian notion of *musikdrama*).

It is necessary to note the delicate difference between the two similar and often interchangeable terms *kunqu* and *kunju*, since this form of Chinese opera is a major reference throughout this study. Kunqu is a specific style of singing and music that prevailed from the mid-sixteenth century to the nineteenth century. The music theatre that performs in Kunqu is nowadays called Kunju (for further explanations, see Wu Junda 3–6; see also Wang Shoutai, [“Xulun”] 1). Although Beijing opera has been the best known in the West of the some 350 regional theatrical forms in mainland China today (*Zhongguo dai baike quanshu*: *xiqu*, *quji* 1), Kunju opera has remained the most revered form in China. It traces its heritage back to the classical dramatic genre of *chuanqi* [literally “marvelous tales”] in the Ming Dynasty, and is esteemed for its classical elegance and perfection in musical expression, stylized acting, dancing and movement. The uniqueness of this form lies in its convention of simultaneous singing and dancing. Due to its appropriation by the literati for three hundred years and its long career of domination in the history of Chinese theatre, Kunqu became the

forebearer and foundation of many subsequent forms of Chinese theatre. The training of Beijing opera performers is very much based on the tradition of Kunju opera, and a considerable portion of the repertoire of Beijing opera is either directly taken or adapted from that of Kunju opera (see Lu Eting for a performance history, Hu and Liu for a comprehensive history; for a brief English explication of Kunqu, see Scott, Introduction; for an explanation of the music of Kunqu as well as Beijing opera, see Liang Mingyue). The term Kunju is a modern usage; in classical dramatic criticism, Kunqu refers to both the musical style and the theatre itself. I shall in general use the term Kunju opera, except in translating classical sources where the term Kunqu was used in the original, and when making historically specific references to this theatrical genre.

The highly culturally specific and multivalent Chinese term *se* renders any translation problematic and contingent. For this, I shall adopt either “prettiness-eroticism” or simply “prettiness,” depending on the context of utterance. I provide further explanation in the “Gendering Genre: The Dialectic of Prettiness-Eroticism and Artistry” section of chapter 8.



PROLOGUE

LU XUN'S STRAIGHT WORDS AND THE QUEER WORLD OF CHINESE OPERA

Lu Xun, Transvestism, Chinese Opera

Lu Xun (1881–1936), arguably the best known modern Chinese writer in his own country as well as in the West, once drew an analogy between theatre and politics by way of a critique of the cultural practice of the female impersonator in Chinese opera.¹ In a short article entitled “Zui yishu de guojia” [The most artistic country] (March 30, 1933), Lu Xun gives a scathing criticism of the hypocrisy and deception in the politics of Republican China. According to him, the Republican government and the corrupt politicians participating in the game of power had hitherto been reluctant to give real democracy to the Chinese people. Interestingly, he opens this mordant article with something that not only has no immediate connection with sociopolitical criticism, but is also seemingly antic — cross-dressing; or perhaps more accurately, transvestism — as Lu Xun obviously implies an inevitable circulation of sexual and erotic energy in a culture which, according to his own unique interpretation, is remarkable for its artistry in cross-dressing:

Our country China's greatest, most eternal and universal “art” is man playing woman. The worthiness of this art lies in the fact that it is entrancing on both sides; or we can call it “the middle path”! What men see is “playing woman”; what women see is “man

playing." On the surface it is neutral; in the inside it is of course all the same still a man. However, were it not for the disguise, could it still be an art?

(503)

The focus of the present cultural project is not Lu Xun or his ideas about Chinese opera. Nor is my critical focus the artistic revival and aesthetic celebration of a traditional heritage presumably endowed with essentially given greatness.² Instead, I find that Lu Xun's brief passage betrays the politics of Chinese opera as a cultural practice: his appropriation of transvestism as a trope in his pungent political protest coincidentally yet appropriately reproduces significant cultural assumptions concerning power as the object of struggle at the intersecting site of cross-dressing, gender construction, and homo/hetero-eroticism in relation to theatre in a culture where theatre has historically been both an integral cultural product, and one of the most unstable cultural products. Lu Xun's essay is therefore a fitting and revealing starting point for my critique which aims at offering an alternative kind of cultural history structured as an investigation of traditional Chinese theatre and drama in terms of the highly mediated representations of cross-dressing, gender, and erotic desire in various discourses in the imperial past, as well as modern times.

Using a rhetorical device that can be related to *xing* in traditional Chinese poetics — i.e., "to begin by mentioning something else to elicit what is intended to be sung about,"³ Lu Xun begins by talking about transvestism, which leads immediately to the political critique which is his real concern. Two lines further down, he writes:

... this Republic has been suffering from the lack of maintenance in these years. Even [the color of] its signboard has totally peeled off, just like the rouge on the *huadan*'s face.

(503)

Lu Xun uses the Chinese opera role-type (*hangdang*) of *huadan* (the "witty young female," a sub-category of the *dan* — the female role-type)⁴ as a simile to embellish his sociopolitical rhetoric. In this context, the transvestism he refers to is obviously the male cross-dressing

tradition on the Chinese stage. We can also see that Lu Xun is unmistakably biased against traditional Chinese theatre as a cultural form: why should the facial makeup of the *dan* player — who is inevitably a male transvestite⁵ as contextualized in Lu Xun's assertion of "China's greatest, most eternal and universal 'art' is man playing woman" — be necessarily and always in a state of "peeling off," as is presumed in his lines? Contrary to Lu Xun's appropriation, the cultural signification of the figure of the *dan* has more often been an obsession with intense feminine prettiness that is also associated with a heightened sensuality.

Renowned for his relentless attacks on the evils of old Chinese culture, Lu Xun seldom talked about Chinese opera and it seems that he had never held a high opinion of it. When he did mention Chinese opera, it was often in a negative context, as is the case in point: male cross-dressing and its ultimate iconic representation on the stage (i.e., the *dan*) is linked with corruption in politics and age-old sociopolitical evils lurking in the shadow of a false democracy. Mei Lanfang, generally acknowledged to be the greatest Beijing opera *dan* performer of this century,⁶ a *female impersonator*, who was also a catalyst for Bertolt Brecht's influential theory of *Verfremdungseffekt*⁷ — is harshly criticized by Lu Xun in a two-part essay "Lüelun Mei Lanfang ji qita" [Brief comments on Mei Lanfang and other topics] (1934), in which Mei is censured as an artist distanced from the masses. Lu Xun also remarks in the same essay that the artistic conventions of traditional Chinese drama are superficial (637–41).

Lu Xun, extolled in 1940 by Mao Zedong as "a chief commander of the revolution of culture in China, a great literary writer, a great thinker, and a great revolutionary" and thus apotheosized in the cultural and academic discourses in the Mainland,⁸ was also arbitrarily misread as having expressed enlightened ideas about Chinese opera, as exemplified by Huang Shang's 1953 article "Lu Xun xiansheng dui xiqu de yixie yijian" [Mr Lu Xun's comments on Chinese music drama]. Recently however, some scholars in mainland China have voiced different opinions, revising the orthodox perspective and criticizing Lu Xun for his negative views on Mei Lanfang and his disparaging criticism of Chinese opera as a cultural heritage.⁹ While everything Lu

Xun said, including his criticism of Chinese opera, was apotheosized as infallible in mainland China, the renowned Japanese sinologist Yoshikawa Kōjirō criticized Lu Xun's views on Chinese theatrical transvestism as impudent in a 1956 article:¹⁰

I think more should have been said about the criticisms on Mei Lanfang's artistry. His marvelous acting embraces the essence of the artful [*sizen denai*]¹¹ in the expression of an old man of sixty disguising as a woman and speaking in an exact female voice. Once Lu Xun's criticism of this was rather rude: "Our country China's greatest, most eternal and universal 'art' . . ."

("Bai Ranhō so no ta" 598)

Immediately following these critical remarks, Yoshikawa quotes the same passage that I analyzed at the beginning of this chapter. Although Yoshikawa comments on this passage out of its political context, his comments expose Lu Xun's biased criticism of theatrical transvestism and Chinese opera.

The change in the interpretation and re-evaluation of Lu Xun's criticism of Chinese opera and Mei Lanfang indicated the opening up of some layers of intellectual space in post-Mao China. As a result there has been an audacious reaffirmation, perhaps excessive at times, of the value of the same traditional musical theatre that was banned as a "feudal evil" for some ten years during the so-called Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966–1976).

Cross-Dressing and the Circulation of the Sexual and the Erotic

One of the assumptions underlying Lu Xun's brief statement is betrayed by his automatic consignment of the traditional Chinese stage to the domain of male cross-dressing. An uncritical and unconscious notion of *the* tradition of Chinese theatre as *essentially* a *male* transvestite theatre has been unknowingly inscribed in quite a few minds. This misleading impression was created, to a great extent, by the legitimation of Beijing opera as "the national theatre" in recent times — in Taiwan however, this regional opera is still often referred to as *guoju*, i.e., theatre

of the country. Beijing opera, one among the more than three hundred traditional operatic forms existing in China today, has dominated the Chinese stage for more than a hundred years and it is still regarded as the leading form among all regional operas.¹² It was exclusively a male theatre until the last decade of the nineteenth century when its stage gradually accommodated female performers who had been excluded from the public theatre for about two centuries. In line with this recent perception of "the male transvestite Chinese theatre" held by many people (Chinese and non-Chinese alike), the male cross-dressing practice has forever been foregrounded, signifying the ideology of a male theatre and the patriarchy that produced it. Therefore, we find that the passage by Lu Xun which grew out of this specific cultural context and expresses in various ways its ideological assumptions, has already taken for granted male transvestism as a norm on the traditional Chinese stage, thereby rendering invisible the parallel existence, long history and strong presence of female theatrical performers, including female cross-dressers, who first came into prominence simultaneously with the maturity of Chinese theatre in the thirteenth century. In fact, male performers occupy only the margins in the theatrical records of that time.

This female intervention in the theatre inevitably renders the contention of gender paradigms on the Chinese stage a much more complex cultural signification than conventionally envisioned. Although the public stage was monopolized by men in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, female performers thrived in the private theatre until at least the latter part of the eighteenth century. One must also not overlook the fact that the actress emerged again as a disruptive force in a male-centered cultural formation in twentieth century China, with one of the prominent examples being the success and popularity, since the mid-1920s, of the (almost) all-female regional opera Yueju from Zhejiang province.

By exposing the average impression of "male cross-dressing as the essential Chinese theatrical tradition" as a partial misconception, I do not mean that the historical *fact* (however fluid its discursive constitution would be) of the female presence on the Chinese stage has been intentionally neglected or totally suppressed by scholars and others

concerned. On the contrary, this is a historical fragment that has constituted a part of the existing academic discourse on traditional Chinese theatre. From theatre history to literary history, the history of sex workers to the history of women, the "actress" has been an integral piece among the various objects of the historical narrativization used to validate a patriarchal ideology. The urgent issue is that an ideological repression of female agency is often reinforced by male-centered representations of women performers in the conventional construction of the history of Chinese theatre. The female tradition has to be recharacterized and reinvented in ways different from the conventional writing of literary-cultural history.

Lu Xun's comments also interestingly point to another issue that deserves critical attention in a cultural approach to Chinese opera; that is, the engendering of the spectacle and the spectatorial gaze, and the circulation of the sexual and the homo/hetero-erotic in a multiple crisscrossing within and across the binary hierarchies of man/woman, sex/gender, (male) gaze/(female) object, erotic desire/object of desire — all subsumed within a heterosexual matrix. The sexual ideology implied in Lu Xun's passage is that heterosexuality is the only *normal* sexuality and that women and men's sexual relations with other women/men in the theatre (it so happens that the one he refers to is characterized by cross-dressing) are read in the matrix of compulsory heterosexuality: "What men see is 'playing woman'; what women see is 'man playing'" in his words. The multiple crisscrossing possibilities of non-heterosexual gender and sexual positions are erased: with the male spectator seeing "the *man* playing woman" and the female spectator seeing "the *woman* played by man" (homosexual); the male and female spectator each sees both man and woman in the player's body (bisexual), or even sees beyond sexual dimorphism and envision a "third sex, third gender" (Herdt). This heterosexist assumption, commonly shared by various peoples and cultures, is so prevalent that in the Anglo-American critical discourse it also underpins some radical critiques of gender and sexuality by prominent critics of early-modern English theatre, which, similar to Beijing opera before the twentieth century, was distinguished by its solely male transvestite theatrical practice.¹³ An intervention from a "third category" perspective is required for an effective critique of

theatrical cross-dressing and the circulation of the sexual and the erotic in traditional Chinese theatre, which in imperial times was constituted as a site of rival sexual ideologies that constantly put orthodoxies into question. Chinese opera must not be domesticated by the heterosexual binarism of modern times. Lu Xun's sexual ideology toward same sex desire was already a far cry from that of imperial times. Suffice it to say that the present study is undertaken with an awareness of the Foucauldian critique that "homosexuality" as a form of identity is a modern European invention (*The History of Sexuality*), and that China in imperial times had relatively open and tolerant attitudes toward male and female same sex love (Van Gulik, *Sexual Life in Ancient China*; Xiaomingxiong; Hinsch).

Transvestism in Lu Xun's essay is also juxtaposed with political anomaly. However, Lu Xun does not in any way imply any causal relation between the two, while the traditional discourse on *renyao* (human prodigy/human monster) does.¹⁴ The decline of a dynasty, corruption in the court and the bureaucracy, or natural disasters were attributed in the imperial past to the appearance of deviants, a category which included people who disguised themselves as the other sex, or had hermaphroditic sexual features and were non-classifiable as either female or male within a rigid heterosexual binary structure. Nevertheless, the analogical juxtaposition between transvestism and sociopolitical crises appends Lu Xun's remarks to the discourse of the "human prodigy" in imperial China as another utterance of gender anxiety in modern times. Hidden in Lu Xun's words is the assumption of a focal center, a stabilizing (hetero)sexual identity as a frame of reference for the production of steady meaning in a world operating on gendered binary systems. Therefore to him, as well as many others, "in the inside it is of course all the same still a man."

A radical rereading of this short article of Lu Xun's is most instructive in the context of cultural criticism in relation to sociocultural discourses in mainland China today. The opening of China after the death of Mao Zedong in 1976 and its rapid economic reforms (in contrast to its die-hard reluctance in political reform) has enabled a variety of critical voices and fractured the once relatively monolithic socialist country into multivalent sites of ideological contestations.

Former forbidden zones have been transgressed and transformed into unstable and incoherent "twilight zones." From the public realm of power politics to the private realm of sexuality, the sociopolitical planes have been ruptured and spaces opened up for critiques. Among the telltale signs of this are the numerous publications on sexuality, gender, women, eunuchs, etc. The Chinese translation of Robert Hans van Gulik's *Sexual Life in Ancient China* (1961) came out in 1990,¹⁵ that of *Erotic Colour Prints of the Ming Period, with an Essay on Chinese Sex Life from the Han to the Ch'ing Dynasty, B.C. 206-A.D. 1644* (1951) in 1992;¹⁶ new cultural histories of sexuality in imperial China have been written, critiques of sexual oppression past and present are flourishing, a dictionary of "Chinese sexology" has been compiled (*Zhonghua xingxue cidian* [A Chinese sexology dictionary] [1993]), histories of prostitutes and of women as well as literary histories of women writers published in the early decades of the twentieth century have been reprinted . . .

But in this proliferation of discourse on sexuality and gender in the Mainland, which was incited and empowered (again!) by Euro-American culture,¹⁷ is ironically inscribed, among other things, the binary logic of heterosexism and the rigid hierarchy of the natural and the deviant. In a voluminous work published in 1993 by Liu Dalin, probably the most outspoken mainland Chinese scholar on sex culture, a kind of normative-patriarchal-homophobic-heterosexist ideology recurs in his otherwise liberal historicizing of sex in ancient China.¹⁸ For instance, after an account of people's attitudes toward human prodigies in imperial times, he comments:

... as for cross-dressing, nowadays society in ordinary circumstances does not criticize women dressing in men's clothes. However, men's fondness for women's clothes in daily life is an abnormal sexual psychology (it is called "transvestism"). Rectification and treatment are necessary.

(Liu Dalin *Zhongguo gudai xingwenhua* 1: 302)

On another occasion, he calls the practice of cross-dressing among male prostitutes in the Southern Song Dynasty (1127–1279) "extremely abnormal":

These male prostitutes wore women's clothes, applied cosmetics, addressed each other as women. This is a kind of extremely abnormal social phenomenon.

(2: 632)

This unreflective attitude toward sexualities not classifiable by the heterosexual paradigm is prevalent in today's writings on sex in mainland China. The desire to be liberated from the extreme asceticism implanted by the Chinese Communist Party's rule is contained in a deep-rooted heterosexism, resulting in contradictions and self-canceling operations in this discourse that set out to resist oppression, yet is still far from emancipating.

Another recent critical work on China's sexual culture, *Zhongguo Xingwenhua* [The sex culture of China] published in 1994, again reproduces the heterosexist binary logic. Posing as a critique of Chinese sexual ideologies with examples drawn from both the past and the current social reality in China, and staking out a self-proclaimed confrontational position against sexual oppressions and taboos at a time when "the waves of great cultural reflection is overwhelming an open China that is under reform" (Zheng Sili 5), the writer appropriates Lu Xun's oft-quoted commentary on theatrical transvestism, removes it from its larger sociopolitical context, and asserts:

In Chinese society, "sexual displacement" is a kind of commonly seen psychological *anomaly*. . . in ancient drama there were often women dressing as men or men dressing as women due to the *restrictions* of theatrical conventions, resulting in the tendency of gender displacement in performers of certain role-types (mainly the young male and the young female role-types). From this, the *anomalous* aesthetic psychology in society was reinforced. Lu Xun had criticized this *unhealthy* social practice and psychology. He said that a major characteristic of Chinese drama was men playing women and women playing men, which could gratify men as well as women for the reason that men saw "women playing" while women saw "men playing," thus pleasing everybody. In fact, this kind of psychology aptly reveals the *sickness* of Chinese society.

(360; emphasis added)

The normative agenda underpinning this work turns it into an accomplice of the ideology it seeks to challenge. Unreflectively contained in hierarchical binary thinking, the writer, in representing the production of “sexual displacement” in traditional Chinese theatre and citing Lu Xun’s words, at once prescribes and legitimizes what is asserted to be “normal, natural and healthy,” while simultaneously rejecting what is relegated to the position of “abnormal, anomalous and sick.” The work’s critical posture of tracing the genealogy of Chinese sexual culture and questioning sexual oppressions in Chinese society past and present paradoxically reinscribes a dominant and dominating heterosexist ideology. The stage practice of cross-dressing, which bends the heterosexual binary genders of male and female, is also seen as an abnormal “restriction,” implying a normative assumption that a performer playing her/his gender is “natural and free of restrictions.” This is exactly in line with the Party’s policy on cross-dressing in Chinese opera as set down since the 1950s (see the chapter “The Last Female Impersonator” for a detailed discussion). The removal of Lu Xun’s remark on theatrical transvestism from its incisive political context results in an ahistorical reading and a reduction of the scope of the interpretative and critical possibilities opened up by a remark interlocking the fields of theatre, gender and politics.

In addition, Lu Xun’s focus was also a one-way male cross-dressing — “men playing women” and the grave misappropriation of this focus onto a two-way cross-dressing — “men playing women” and “women playing men” — is a consequential misreading that could mislead the critique of gender and sexuality in Chinese culture, for it is the anxiety of male homoeroticism, not lesbianism,¹⁹ that underlies Lu Xun’s passage. And it was mostly male homoerotic desire and the anxiety it generated that had created multiple and multivalent discourses on desire and the ambiguously gendered body. The overly and overtly visible gay and ambiguous bodies in official histories, notation books [*biji*], fiction and drama have made possible the reconstruction of “a male homosexual tradition in China” (Hinsch) in contemporary research. In fact, a collection of 52 stories (historical, literary, and legendary) of male homosexuality had already appeared by the early seventeenth century. Entitled *Duanxiu pian* [The cut sleeve compendium], it was

compiled by Wuxia Ameng and adorned with the compiler’s comments. In modern times, the first edition of Xiaomingxiong’s compilation *Zhongguo tongxingai shilu* [History of homosexuality in China] (1984) was a pioneering work.

Contrary to the widespread accounts of male homosexuality, references to lesbianism in traditional sources are rare; so much so that Bret Hinsch can only give a six-page account of lesbianism in imperial China in his book, and because of his “failure” to give an equal treatment, he offers an apology (7).

It was due to the specific historical-cultural constructions of sexualities in imperial China which placed so much weight on male homosexual and homosocial desires, that the notion of the male transvestite theatre was given a pre-eminent position in theatrical discourse. It was not an accident, nor was it merely the influence of the dominant male cross-dressing practice in Beijing opera that caused Lu Xun to show a blindness by failing to mention (suppressing) female cross-dressing and/or a two-way cross-dressing while privileging male transvestism in traditional theatre as “the greatest artistic achievement in China.”

The ideological assumptions about gender that I have delineated with reference to Lu Xun’s brief passage are not unique to one person, but are shared and/or contradicted to different degrees by people in specific historical moments in one culture, e.g., Chinese, and cross-culturally for instance, Chinese and English, as drawn on in the present study. These commonly held assumptions are not to be taken for granted and I have already hinted at some of the questions that will be raised in the context of the present critique: How far are these assumptions sanctioned and/or contended in various specific historical moments in the history of Chinese opera? If monolithic, unitary and linear concepts in cultural analysis are highly questionable, then what do the complexities and contradictions in the construction and reproduction of gender relations tell us about Chinese opera, not merely as a literary-aesthetic form, but as an institution participating in, and helping to create, the struggle of power in culture and society in various historical moments? Putting the issue in a broader perspective, what are the differences in cultural meanings, if any, between China (with the late