

Nandan, Gender Plasticity, and the Dichotomization of “Artistic” Femininity versus
“Natural” Masculinity from China’s Republican Era to the Early PRC,
1912-Early 1960s

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Guanda Wu

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Jason McGrath, Advisor
Maki Isaka, Co-Advisor

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Abstract

This dissertation is dedicated to the gender politics of male players of female roles during what is known as “the epoch of *nandan* (female impersonators in Chinese theatre),” a historical period between 1912, when the prohibition on *siyu* (private residences of young theatrical players in Beijing) was introduced, and the early 1960s, when the practice of *nandan* in *xiqu* (traditional Chinese theatre) was substantially suspended. It contends that the dichotomization of “artistic” femininity onstage versus “natural” masculinity offstage has been essential to the identity of *nandan* players of *xiqu* in the post-1912 context.

Chapter One studies a recently discovered 1919 novel concerning Mei Lanfang’s early career by Mu Rugai. By equating the relationship between the character Mei Lanfang and his supporters to the late-Qing association between *siyu* residents and their patrons, Mu’s literary account discloses a critical yet suppressed dimension of biographic representations of modern China’s greatest *nandan*.

Chapter Two contends that during the early Republican debates over *xiqu* and its employment of *nandan*, a discourse of “Chinese aestheticism” emerged in Chinese intellectual circles to underline a distinction between *xiqu*’s supposedly “aesthetic” stagecraft and Western-style drama’s purportedly “realistic” *mise-en-scène*. Following the logic of “Chinese aestheticism,” female impersonation has appeared to be one of the most prominent manifestations of this Chinese “aesthetic” tradition. The discourse of “Chinese aestheticism” has contributed to political agendas that have been both historically

progressive and epistemologically restraining: on the one hand, the notion of “Chinese aestheticism” has provided *nandan* practitioners and their supporters with an efficient hermeneutic framework to valorize *nandan*’s performances of femininity onstage; on the other hand, it has suggestively repudiated a *nandan*’s legitimacy in extending his feminine body outside *xiqu*’s semiotic system and consequently suppressed those *nandan* whose were possibly queer.

Chapter Three examines the *Northern China Pictorial*’s photographic representations of Republican-era *nandan*’s masculinity and heterosexuality offstage. In addition, it scrutinizes the representations and receptions of Mei Lanfang’s remarkable performances of masculinity during the Second Sino-Japanese War and how Mei’s performances of wartime masculinity played a profound impact on his later-career repertoires after the war.

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Introduction

Indeed, the sight of a transvestite onstage can compel pleasure and applause while the sight of the same transvestite on the seat next to us on the bus can compel fear, rage, even violence.

— Judith Butler (1988: 527)

Prologue:

Dichotomization of “Artistic” Femininity versus “Natural” Masculinity and the Genesis of “Modern *Nandan*”

In China’s Republican era (1912-1949), with the introduction of the scientific conception of sex and gender and the legal prohibition on *siyu* 私寓,¹ or private residences of theatre players in Beijing, the gender performances of *nandan* 男旦, male players of female roles in Chinese theatre, underwent a critical alteration. Known as “*xianggong*” 相公 (“gentle males”) or “*xianggu*” 像姑 (lit., “resemblance of girls”), the Qing (1644-1911) residents of *siyu* titillated their enchanted patrons by performing a variety of roles—they not only played onstage as professional actors,² predominantly

¹ “*Siyu*” is also known as “*xianggong tangzi*” 相公堂子, which literally means “houses of gentle males.” The term “*siyu*” refers to private residences of theatrical players in Beijing in the late Qing dynasty. Located mainly in the district of the very (in)famous Eight Great Hutongs, pleasure quarters of the empire’s capital, *siyu* housed one of the most popular institutions of sex and entertainment and elicited visits of men of letters from all corners of the empire.

² Throughout this dissertation, I have used the term “actor” to denote both male and female performers, since the term “actress” seems to me to have derogatory connotations that trivialize female actors.

female-role specialists, but also served as euphonious singing waiters and seductive male courtesans offstage. As a result, *xianggong* circulated coherent feminine bodies transcending the boundary of the theatrical stage.

However, when *siyu* as a peculiar Chinese site of homoeroticism elicited increasing hatred from those who considered its presence to be a source of national stigma, it was announced as illicit in 1912, and its inhabitants were urged to rectify their ways of living by the local authorities. Hence, the Republican prohibition on *siyu* as a political intervention redefined the profession by creating the possibility of identifying the beautiful boys as solely theatrical actors; in other words, in the aftermath of the closure of *siyu*, the primary identity of the beautiful boys as theatrical actors was singled out from the multiple roles that originally had constituted their late-Qing personae. Unlike the beautiful boys of *siyu*, the theatricality of whose performances exceeded the territory of the theatrical stage, those males who continued to titillate audiences with their enthralling feminine appearances in subsequent eras had to mark the stage as the only space in which such a theatricality was legitimate.

Yet, the theatricality which was ascribed to the female impersonators' bodies had almost always transcended the boundary of the stage and perhaps functioned in a more complicated way in Republican China than it operated prior. The Republican division between on- and offstage did not simply define the professional space but also further fostered a distinction between female dramatic characters onstage and modern male citizens in the public realm. Hence, it marked the boundary of the stage as a transforming

site for a *nandan* to alter his gendered personae. With the assistance of the aestheticization of female impersonation and the monolithic understanding of the stage as a prerequisite for theatricality, it becomes possible for a modern spectator of female impersonation to read the “women” onstage as “artistic,” “theatrical,” “suppositional,” and thus “fictional,” while comprehending the “gentlemen” offstage as “natural,” “mundane,” and somehow essentially “true” or “real.” The dichotomization of “artistic” femininity onstage versus “natural” masculinity offstage was essential to the identity of what I term “modern *nandan*,” or “*nandan*-as-we-know-them-today,”³ a new generation of cross-dressed males in *xiqu*⁴⁵ (戏曲, lit., “play [of] sung-verse,”

³ My identification of “modern *nandan*” is indebted to Maki Isaka’s study of the gender politics of *onnagata* 女形, *nandan*’s equivalent in Japanese kabuki theatre. Isaka notes that a new epistemological understanding of *onnagata*’s femininity came into existence in Japan at the turn of the twentieth century. Instead of proclaiming an affinity between *onnagata*’s femininity and that of biological women, something that was integral to the understanding of *onnagata*’s theatrical construction of women in the Edo era (1603-1868), modern kabuki historiography insists on an essential distinction between the two types of femininity. The discursive construction of “artistic/artificial femininity” helped *onnagata* distance themselves from biological women in modern times—the latter’s femininity was thought to be “natural” and incongruous with kabuki acting. For Isaka, the construction of artistic femininity, as opposed to natural femininity, marked “the Foucauldian birth of *onnagata*—that is, *onnagata*-as-we-know-them-today” (Isaka 2006: 119). For a book-length analysis of the gender politics of *onnagata*, see Isaka 2016.

⁴ It is notoriously difficult to describe “*xiqu*” in English. While literary scholars generally consider it as a *dramatic* form, musicologists almost always prefer to call it “Chinese opera” and maintain that musical aspects are at foundations of this very art form (Stock 2003: 5). Theatre specialists, unsurprisingly, regard it as a form of theatrical arts. I have no intention to make a contention about what single element is more ontological to *xiqu* than other aspects of the art form. My treatment of *xiqu* as a theatrical art in this dissertation is mainly because I, like most researchers from the discipline of theatre studies, am primarily interested in the performance/theatrical aspect of the art.

⁵ This dissertation is mainly concerned about *nandan* in the “old” Chinese theatrical institution, namely *xiqu*. As is well known, the hybrid *wenmingxi* 文明戏 or “civilized drama” (aka., *xinju* 新剧 or “new theatre”), Chinese emulation of Japanese *shinpa* 新派, also adopted *nandan* as a standard practice during its first decade of performance (Liu 2009: 35-50). It is critical to note that *nandan* in *wenmingxi* differed from their counterparts in *xiqu* in a number of significant ways: while the former were mostly youthful students and intellectuals, many of whom received education abroad, the latter was a “subaltern” group, belonging to the lowest castes; distancing themselves from the former who

“traditional/indigenous Chinese theatre”⁶), whose *offstage* masculinity and heterosexuality needed to be incessantly performed, in order to make their *stage* portrayals of female roles socially acceptable and aesthetically explicable.

It is this split between femininity onstage and offstage masculinity that sustains my interest in this dissertation project, which is dedicated to the male players of female roles during what is known as “the epoch of *nandan*,” a historical era approximately between

were mainly amateur performers, the latter were generally in a family-based profession. Hence, unlike the former, whose main interest in cross-dressing was intrigued by its potential of being a radical, transgressive act, the latter participated in female impersonation because that was the way they made a living.

⁶ The popular usage of terminologies such as “traditional Chinese theatre” or “indigenous Chinese theatre” in English-language scholarship presents numerous problems that deserve scholarly scrutiny. As an umbrella term and a fairly loosely defined taxonomy, “*xiqu*” now refers to more than three hundred theatrical subgenres in the People’s Republic of China (PRC). In this regard, both “traditional Chinese theatre” and “indigenous Chinese theatre” may be misleading concepts. First, it is because *xiqu* currently encompasses theatrical forms that did not come into existence until the early twentieth century (e.g. *yueju* 越剧, “Zhejiang/Yue opera”), even after the establishment of the PRC (e.g. *longjiang ju* 龙江剧, “drama of Heilongjiang”). Hence, it posits a question about the legitimacy of understanding *xiqu* in its entirety as a “traditional” form. Second, postulating *xiqu* as an “indigenous” form seems to inevitably reinforce the purported binary relationship between *xiqu* and *huaaju* (lit. “spoken drama,” Western-style speech-based Chinese drama), which has long paralyzed authoritative historiographical narratives of modern Chinese theatre (recently, Siyuan Liu compellingly counters this conventional view of modern Chinese theatre by pinpointing a vital third positionality that the hybrid *wenmingxi* occupied in the history of modern Chinese theatre, see Liu 2013). In addition to the challenge posed by *wenmingxi*, the postulation of the relationship between *xiqu* and *huaaju* as “indigenous/traditional” versus “Western/modern” not only neglects the fact that *huaaju* has been an increasingly sinicized form of drama since its advent but also fails to acknowledge various forms of foreign/modern influence on contemporary *xiqu*. Apart from these issues, it is also of necessity to call attention to the historicity of the very concept of “*xiqu*” itself. While it is generally claimed that the term “*xiqu*” first appeared in Chinese-language writings no later than the Yuan dynasty (1271-1368), the references of the term have not been specified until the last decades of the twentieth century. Strikingly, during much of the twentieth century, the Chinese appeared to have considerable difficulties with identifying their “indigenous/traditional” theatrical form in their native language. During the historical period between the Republican era and the Seventeen Years (1949-1966), “*xiqu*” was used interchangeably with other terms such as “*jiuxi*” 旧戏 (“old drama”) and “*geju/jiu geju*” 歌剧/旧歌剧 (“opera”/“old opera”) to refer to what is understood as *xiqu* today. To make the matter more complicated, on numerous occasions, “*xiqu*” was also employed as a term referring to theatrical arts in general, synonymous with the contemporary terminology “*xiju*” 戏剧 (lit., “theatre” or “drama”). For instance, a 1933 publication by the famous dramatist and filmmaker Hong Shen 洪深 (1894-1955) is entitled *Hongshen xiqu ji* 洪深戏曲集, which is in fact an anthology of Hong’s *huaaju* plays (Hong 1933).

the 1910s, when the legal prohibition on *siyu* was promulgated and the newly emerged *dan* players of various forms of *xiqu*, among many others, Mei Lanfang 梅兰芳 (1894-1961) of *jingju*⁷ 京剧, Han Shichang 韩世昌 (1897-1976) of *kunqu*⁸ 昆曲, began to garner national and international acclaims, and the early 1960s, when the practice of female impersonation in all major genres of *xiqu* was substantially suspended due to both the passing of several master performers and the tumultuous political and cultural context.

Developments and Omissions:

Nandan Historiography at the Turn of the Century

To be sure, neither *xiqu* nor *nandan* is a novel topic of scholarly inquiry in English-

⁷ “*Jingju*” or “*jingxi*” 京戏 (lit. “theatre of the capital”) is commonly known as “Beijing/Peking opera” in the English-speaking world. The orthodox narrative of the history of *jingju* generally attributes the inception of the theatrical form to the arrival of the four great Anhui theatre troupes in Beijing in and after the year 1790. The theatrical genre, then referred to as “*pihuang*” 皮黄, reached its maturation during the reigns of Emperors Tongzhi 同治 (1856-1875) and Guangxu 光绪 (1871-1908). In the early Republican era (1912-1937), it transformed itself from *pihuang* into *jingju* and attained the “national drama” status in China. In the meantime, *jingju* became internationally recognized primarily thanks to the repeated presences of *nandan* stars (e.g. Mei Lanfang, Han Shichang, and Cheng Yanqiu 程砚秋, 1904-1958) abroad. For an English-language study of *jingju*’s artistic transformation from the late Qing to the early Republican era, see Goldstein 2007. For an English-language study of *jingju*’s historical transformation during the twentieth century, see Li 2010. For a study of *jingju*’s artistry in English, see Wichmann 1991.

⁸ Taking the form of *chuanqi* 传奇 (“transmission of the marvelous”), “*kunqu*” (lit. “tune of Kunshan”) or “*kunju*” 昆剧 (lit. “theatre of Kunshan”) originated in the Lower Yangtze Delta in the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) and predominated on the Chinese stage between approximately sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. By the late nineteenth century, *kunqu* had lost its dominance to *jingju* and other popular *xiqu* genres. In order to alter the undesired status quo, twentieth-century China witnessed a number of initiatives (at the individual, national, and international levels) to salvage the drama from extinction, mostly notably, the founding of the *Kunqu chuanxisuo* 昆曲传习所 (lit., “*Kunqu* preservation and education institute”) in 1921, the performance of the modern adaptation of the Qing-dynasty *chuanqi* *Shiwu guan* 十五贯 (Fifteen strings of cash) in 1956, and the admission to the list of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO (the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) in 2001. For an in-depth study of *kunqu*’s performance history, see Lu 1980.

language literature. Literary appeals of Chinese drama have never failed to elicit attention from those who study late-imperial and early modern Chinese literature.⁹ Apart from literary points of view, English-language scholarship has recently shown a keen interest in scrutinizing *xiqu* of the late-imperial period through a performance perspective, in particular via the prism of theatricality (Yan 2003: 65-89; Volpp 2011). In addition, scholars from a wide range of disciplines (e.g. Chinese history, theatre studies, and musicology) have provided genre-specific studies of *xiqu*, covering not only nationally prominent genres (e.g. *jingju*) but also various popular regional forms (e.g. *yueju*¹⁰ 粤剧, *yueju*¹¹ 越剧, and *huju*¹² 沪剧) (Yung 1989; Wichmann 1991; Stock 2003; Goldstein 2007; Jiang 2012; Li 2013).

Substantial studies of cross-dressing in Chinese theatre made their first appearances in English-language scholarship no later than the turn of the twenty-first century (Chou 1997:130-152; Tian 2000:78-97; Li 2003). Recent literature on Chinese praxis of cross-

⁹ For some of the major English-language scholarly works on Chinese drama of the Yuan (1271-1368), Ming, Qing dynasties, see Idema and West 1982; Idema and West 1995; Lu 2002; Sieber 2003; Kwa 2012.

¹⁰ Commonly known as “Cantonese opera” in English-speaking world, *yueju* 粤剧 enjoys its popularity in the southern provinces of Guangdong and Guangxi in China. The genre also has a significant presence in overseas Chinese communities from Southeast Asia to North America.

¹¹ Commonly known as “Zhejiang opera” or “Yue opera” in English, the Zhejiang/Shanghai-based theatrical genre shares the same pinyin spelling with “Cantonese opera.” Originated in Shengxian of Zhejiang province in the mid nineteenth century, Yue opera attained wider recognition and reached its maturity in Shanghai by the end of the 1930s. In Shanghai, it completed numerous great transformations, most notably, a metamorphosis from an all-male form into an all-female genre (Jiang 2012: 26). In the early PRC era, Yue opera continued to prosper and “became, arguably, only second to Beijing opera on a nationwide scale in terms of the size of its personnel and audience” (Jiang 2012: 3-4). For an in-depth historiography of Zhejiang opera in English, see Jiang 2012.

¹² Often referred to as “Shanghai opera” in English. According to Jonathan P. J. Stock, *huju* has “a documented history of some two centuries” (Stock 2003: 7). Originated in the late nineteenth century, *huju* slowly grew in the 1910s and became formalized in the 1940s (Stock 2003: 8).

dressing generally calls attention to two critical subjects, namely inhabitants of *siyu* in late-Qing Beijing and *nandan* of the early Republican years. During the past decade or so, through their studies of “*huapu*”¹³ 花谱 (“flower registers”/ “flower guides”) of the Qing dynasty, Cuncun Wu, Mark Stevenson, and Andrea Goldman have jointly noted the prominent role that *siyu* played in Qing Beijing’s social and cultural sphere (Wu 2004: 116-158; Wu and Stevenson 2006: 42-59; Goldman 2008: 1-56; Wu and Stevenson 2010: 100-129; and Goldman 2012). The *huapu* studies as a collective disclose a homoerotic world that had been little known prior; and at the center of the homoerotic attractions were bodies of youthful *dan* players, who were fetishized by men of letters and eulogized by them in explicitly eroticized, feminine terms.

While historians of late imperial China such as Andrea Goldman generally conclude that the *siyu* actor, “who even offstage, seems more girl than boy” (Goldman 2012: 30) in their survey of theatrical arts in Qing Beijing, new articulations of female impersonation in Republican China have eloquently evinced that in both reality and representation coherent femininity was no longer a desirable trait of Republican-era *nandan*’s gender presentations (Goldstein 2007). Recent English-language literature on Republican-era *nandan* particularly encourages the reader to comprehend the artistic transformations of

¹³ Composed by literati who frequented *siyu* in literary Chinese, *huapu* is a distinct form of homoerotic writing which documented scholar-actor interactions. Most of the *huapu* books were made available by the historian Zhang Cixi in his early Republican anthology *Qingdai yandu liyuan shiliao* 清代燕都梨园史料 (Historical materials on theatrical circles of the Qing-dynasty capital) and the anthology’s supplements (Zhang ed. 1988 [1934, 1937]). For *huapu*’s stylistic impact on the early Republican fictions on *nandan*, see Chapter One.

xiqu and female impersonation amid the context of China's modern nation building in the early twentieth century (Goldstein 1999: 377-420 and 2007; Zou 2006: 79-97; Yeh 2008: 203-240).

In addition, discussions of prominent *nandan* stars, particularly Mei Lanfang, are also often exercised through a transnational scope—the presences of Chinese female impersonators in Japan, the Soviet Union, and the West have been thoroughly investigated (Banu 1986: 153-178; Cosdon 1995: 175-189; Goldstein 1999: 377-420 and 2007; Rao 2000: 135-162; Saussy 2006: 8-29; Steen 2010: 113-120; Du: 2010; Tian 2012; Yeh 2012: 81-110). Many of the recent accounts, such as Joshua Goldstein's and Nancy Yunhwa Rao's, revisit some of the most influential incidents (such as Mei Lanfang's touring performances in the United States in 1930) in the history of Chinese theatre in the twentieth century, paying particular attention to the self-Orientalizing tendency within the *nandan*'s strategy of embodying the Chinese beauties on US stages (Goldstein 1999: 377-420 and 2007: 264-289; Rao 2000: 135-162).

I am grateful to the *huapu* studies scholars for their acknowledgement of the critical role that the connoisseurship of the *dan* played in Beijing's cultural landscape in the last century of imperial China. I also applaud many of the above-mentioned scholars for their efforts to locate their historiographical works on Mei Lanfang and other Republican-era *nandan* in relation to the altered national and international political and cultural contexts in the twentieth century. However, in spite of the fact that a sizable body of literature has been dedicated to the Chinese practice of female impersonation in the twentieth century,

two critical subjects deserve further scholarly scrutiny.

First, the first half of the twentieth century, especially the years prior to the Second Sino-Japanese War (or *kangri zhanzheng* 抗日战争, the “Resistance War against the Japanese,” 1937-1945), remains as the most prominent historical period, upon which the vast majority of the scholarly works concerning *nandan* was based. Despite the fact that it is generally claimed that the practice of cross-dressing experienced growing difficulty towards the mid-century, thorough study of *nandan*’s artistic transformation during the late-Republican era (1937-1949) and the Seventeen Years (1949-1966) remains to be undertaken.

Second, the existing literature’s sustained interest in *nandan*’s gender performances *onstage* has generally made *nandan*’s *offstage* gender performances a critical-yet-far-less-researched subject to date. With only a few exceptions,¹⁴ much of the available literature not only privileges the theatrical stage as a more prominent site when interpreting the Republican *nandan*’s pathway to national and international iconicity but also tends to understand the gendered division between on- and offstage as a priori, which seems to make it immune to cultural and historical specifications. The limitations of the existing literature’s negligence of *nandan*’s performances of masculinity and heterosexuality are

¹⁴ While numerous narratives about twentieth-century *nandan* exclude the *nandan*’s gendered division from their scholarly investigations, exceptional accounts do exist. In *Drama Kings: Players and Publics in the Re-creation of Peking Opera, 1870-1937*, Joshua Goldstein is notable for employing what he calls “the split between the real and representation” to comprehend the mechanism of Republican *nandan*’s gender alteration between on- and offstage (Goldstein 2007: 250). In her examination of the photographic representations that feature Mei Lanfang, Suk-Young Kim also notes the multiplicity within the personae both on- and offstage that Mei embodied over the course of his career (Kim 2006: 37-53).

profound.

First, this oversight indicates a reductive understanding of modern *nandan*'s gender politics, insinuating that the *nandan*'s offstage performances of Republican-era gentlemen were less performative and historically meaningful than their onstage constructions of female characters. Second, without sufficient attention paid to the *nandan*'s offstage performances, current scholarship remains incompetent to explicate some of the most perplexing phenomena in the history of modern *nandan*. Taking the available literature's treatment of Mei Lanfang's touring performances to the United States—a prevailing research topic on *nandan* in English-language scholarship since the mid-1990s—as an example, while the reverse Orientalism within Mei's tactics of embodying seductive Chinese beauties onstage has been thoroughly scrutinized, the reason behind Mei's determined attempts to counter Western Orientalist depictions of Chinese males by presenting himself as a civilized Republican gentleman offstage has not yet been persuasively elucidated. The complicated interplay between the reverse Orientalism onstage and the counter-Orientalist endeavor offstage was fundamental to the gender politics of the Republican *nandan*'s appearances abroad and has been by and large neglected by the existing scholarship.

Apart from the two omissions above, certain issues regarding *nandan* at the Qing-Republic transition also warrant attention. Between the two prominent bodies of scholarship—the *huapu* studies and the historiographical writings on Republican-era *nandan*—reside largely untold stories of how the socially feminine *nandan* players of the

Qing dynasty could possibly transform themselves into resistant, masculine gentlemen in the era of the Resistance War against the Japanese¹⁵ and of how the stunning triumph of modern *nandan* stars in part relies upon a compelling alienation from their precursors of the Qing dynasty. The omissions of the two bodies of scholarly works perhaps become more noticeable when one considers the way in which the legal prohibition on *siyu* in 1912 has been studied by the extant scholarship. While the historical importance of the prohibition on *siyu* after the founding of the Republic of China as the ultimate closure of male prostitution in Beijing has been repeatedly acknowledged, the existent scholarship concerning theatrical arts in twentieth-century China has remained curiously silent on the profound impact that the legal prohibition has exerted on *jingju*, in particular its female-role players, in the aftermath of the political intervention. As a consequence, the closure of *siyu* is regarded primarily as a concluding point of male prostitution, rather than as the *threshold* of modern *nandan*. For this reason, it becomes necessary to remedy the omissions of the existing narratives of the *nandan*'s pathway toward national and international iconicity during the first half of the twentieth century by calling attention to the profound impact that the elimination of *siyu* exerted on the artistry of *nandan* in the Republican era and beyond.

¹⁵ In the latter part of the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945), Mei Lanfang grew a mustache as a masculine marker of resistance in Japanese-occupied Shanghai (for details about representations and receptions of Mei Lanfang's wartime masculinity, see Chapter Three). Another famed *nandan* Cheng Yanqiu was also known for bravely defending himself against the harassment of Chinese collaborators at the Beijing Railway Station in 1942. After the incident, Cheng, like Mei, also suspended his acting career, a move that was widely understood as an uncooperative gesture toward the Japanese occupation (Xu Jichuan et al., 1990: 176-177).

The 1912 Prohibition on *Siyu* Revisited

In order to remedy the oversight of the available *nandan* historiography, I suggest beginning the study of modern *nandan* by revisiting one of the defining moments in the history of Chinese theatre—the momentous incident which formally introduced legal punishment to the beautiful boys in Beijing’s pleasure quarters. In April 1912, months after the founding of the new Republic, the authorities in Beijing promulgated a legal announcement which consequentially excluded one of the most thriving businesses of sex and entertainment from the city. Owing to its historical significance, the prohibitive text¹⁶ is quoted here in its entirety:

The Central Police Office of the Outer City has announced the following prohibition. It has been verified that the owners of the houses and residences of the properties of Hanjiatan [韩家潭], Wailangying [外廊营], and other places, usually in the name of opera training, seduced boys from respectable families, made them sexually attractive, and taught them to sing. At first, some literati occasionally visited this place to write and eat together. As the practice went on, the place has become a disreputable receptacle and hotbed of the filthy and the foul. The habit has developed into a special custom in Beijing, contaminating the whole country, and [is] ridiculed by foreigners. [Those boys] were known as *xianggu*; in fact, [what they did] was against human nature [*rendao*, 人道]. It

¹⁶ A number of scholars have rendered the text of this legal document into English. Other examples include but are not limited to Zou (2006: 87-88) and Goldstein (2007: 107).

should be known that opera has contributed to the effort of social reform, and being an actor does not disqualify anyone from being a citizen. But if [he] has to make a living by fawning on people and emulating the behavior of unlicensed prostitutes, he has lost all his dignity. At present, the Republic has just been founded; old habits and unhealthy customs should all be reformed. Our office has the responsibility of ordering people's habits to ensure human rights, and will no longer tolerate this kind of decadent fad existing in the capital of the newly established country. Therefore, we issue this order of prohibition. We hope that (those people) repent their past misdeeds, begin to look for honorable jobs, value the integrity of human beings, and become respectable national citizens. After the announcement, anyone who disobeys this order, secretly selling young boys and running prostitution houses, will be punished according to the national law. It is hereby announced. (Kang 2009: 115)

Although Beijing's theatrical world was never unfamiliar to direct political interventions from the legal authorities during the preceding Qing dynasty, the 1912 prohibition on *siyu* was nonetheless exceptional in a number of significant ways. First, unlike the former prohibitions regarding theatre and theatre actors, which were generally introduced directly by the imperial court, the legal regulation concerning *siyu* was actually proposed by a *bangzi*¹⁷-turned-*jingju nandan* named Tian Jiyun 田际云 (1864-

¹⁷ “*Bangzi*” 梆子, or “clapper opera,” is one of the most important theatrical forms in the *xiqu* clan. As a umbrella term, *bangzi* refers to a cluster of northern Chinese theatrical forms ranging from *qinqiang* 秦腔 of northwestern China, *yuju* 豫剧 of Henan province, and to *hebei bangzi* 河北梆子

1925), an actor who had no direct connection with the *siyu* profession and was known for his aspiration to elevate theatrical players' social standing.¹⁸ Second, in contrast to those preceding Qing prohibitions, which often needed to be repeatedly introduced to maintain their effectiveness after their initial releases,¹⁹ the Republican ban on *siyu* seemed to take effect immediately after the establishment of the Republic. The injunction hence marked the founding year of the Republic of China as a historical point of division that set apart *nandan* of the new era from their Qing-dynasty predecessors, in addition to a monumental moment when the transfigured actors allegorically symbolized a nation that was amid a profound cultural and political transition.

Quite contrary to the literal meaning of the Chinese term “*siyu*” may suggest, these

of Hebei province. These regional forms generally share the same theatrical and musical roots that germinated in the Shanxi-Shaanxi border area (Tian 2006: 250).

¹⁸ According to the literary account of the early Republican drama critic Mu Rugai 穆儒丐 (1884-1961), whose literary career will be discussed at length in Chapter One, Tian Jiyun was regarded as an “open-minded” figure in Beijing’s theatrical circle and a founder of *Zhengyue yuhua hui* 正乐育化会 (Association for Music Reform and Citizen Rectification), a Beijing-based *xiqu* actor association which aimed at reforming theatrical arts and uplifting the social status of the actors (Mu 2012 [1919]: 21).

¹⁹ In late-imperial China, theatrical regulations were ubiquitous and omnipresent, which not only censored theatrical repertoires but also determined who had access to theatre acting and theatre spectatorship. In the Qing, the imperial court introduced several important prohibitions to regulate theatrical personnel and spectatorship, mostly notably, mandates that banned female actors from performing on the theatrical stage and regulations that forbade the bannermen to attend commercial theatrical activities in the outer city of Beijing (Chen 2005: 35-86). Over the long course of the dynasty, most of the Qing prohibitions had to be repetitively introduced and reiterated by the imperial court, not only because female actors did engage in theatre acting on various occasions, recurrently threatening the authority of the court, but also because many of the bannermen repeatedly failed to resist the urban attractions and jeopardized their lives and careers by allowing themselves to be immersed in the theatrical spectacles. Unlike these Qing mandates, which eventually became *de facto* ineffective by the last decades of the Qing era, the 1912 prohibition exerted an enduring impact on the theatrical arts and the artistry of *nandan* by permanently eradicating *siyu*. This phenomenon seems to suggest that the Republican government, despite its reputation of being feeble, incompetent, and loosely organized, was arguably more effective in regulating the intersections of theatrical arts and gender and sexuality than the Qing court.

“private residences” of the theatrical players were in fact semi-public realms that elicited visits of literati men and hosted one of the most popular urban attractions in the Qing empire’s capital. At *siyu*, as previously mentioned, it was the *nandan*’s coherent performance of femininity both onstage and off that sustained the literati’s admiration of the beautiful boys. Beginning in the early Republican years, however, one would no longer comprehend *siyu* as a site embodying some kind of sublime bond between the literati and their youthful male lovers. According to the prohibitive announcement, the “disreputability” of *siyu* first of all lies in its overt embrace of eroticism and sexual exploitation. In the late-Qing context, the erotic perhaps manifested itself on multiple dimensions, and sexual exploitation took place in a variety of forms:²⁰ not only could the *siyu* residents’ theatrical performances onstage with their sensual attractions and impulses be sexually consumed, but also as singers-at-table offstage the boys could appear to be sexually appealing in the eyes of their admirers and fandoms; but among the services that were made available to the visitors of *siyu*, what was perhaps the most controversial was the fact that it was a commonplace for the beautiful boys to serve as sex mates of their clientele.

²⁰ Regarding the sexual exploitation that *siyu* actors were made to sustain, the narrator of an early Republican novel concerning Mei Lanfang’s early career made a comparison between *siyu* actors and prostitutes and contended that the actors’ lives were even more miserable than those of the courtesans: “Half of the *xianggu* were from respectable families and sold to *tangzi* to learn the profession of *xianggu* because of poverty. They called owners of *tangzi* “masters” and self-identified themselves as “disciples.” Some [*xianggu*] then inherited this business for generations. [...] For *xianggu*, the master-disciple relationship was no different from that between procurers and prostitutes. In the name of “masters” and “disciples”, the masters exploited their disciples more aggressively than the way procurers took advantage of courtesans” (Mu 2012 [1919]: 20).

However, eroticism and sexual exploitation alone seemed not sufficient to justify the prohibition because brothels hosting female prostitutes generally remained unscathed during the Qing-Republic transition.²¹ In this sense, for those who disfavored *siyu*, the primary reason for the elimination of the peculiar Chinese institution of entertainment and sex was perhaps the fact that *siyu* as a site of specifically *homoeroticism* was viewed to be a source of national stigma through foreign eyes.

It is worth noting that when the legal mandate mobilized the concepts such as “*rendao*” (“human nature,” or literally, “the Way of human being”) to consolidate the causes of the eradication (Kang 2009: 115), the way in which the notion of “human nature” appears in the document suggests that the Beijing authorities’ understanding of “human nature” bears the imprint of the Western scientific conception of nature and the body, therefore markedly differing itself from a Confucian conception of humanity. It is because the charges of “crimes” against “(human) nature” seem to not simply refer to the brutal training which the young actors conventionally had to endure, but more importantly, alluded to the androgyny of the *dan* and the male same-sex interactions that sustained the very art. In the context of China’s political and cultural crisis during the Qing-Republic transition, the *siyu* cult appeared to be a particularly disgraceful realm of existence because it might be considered a manifestation of a kind of troubled Chinese masculinity. With the science-sanctioned understanding of gender and sex, the sexual

²¹ As a matter of fact, these abolished *siyu* houses were soon taken over by prostitution businesses hosting female courtesans (Mu 2012 [1919]: 20).

exploitation of the *dan* might be thought to have contributed to the suppression of the young player's presupposed masculine (and heterosexual) body as a purported given of the male sex.

In other words, the language of the legal mandate suggests that a political intervention to terminate *siyu* was warranted for at least four causes: its unreserved embrace of (homo-)eroticism, its likelihood of being an object for foreign ridicule, its purported violation of "(human) nature," and its potential contribution to some kind of paralyzed Chinese masculinity. These four causes were by no means mutually exclusive but worked jointly to stigmatize *siyu* and *siyu*-based performers.

Intriguingly, these causes that authorized the prohibition on *siyu* in the first place did not promptly wane with the ultimate eradication of the *siyu* enterprise in 1912. As a matter of fact, they continued to be employed to rationalize the call for abolishing female impersonation in *xiqu* throughout the early Republican era. However, as we shall see, the practice of female impersonation not only survived but reached its pinnacle during the Republican era. As a result of the growing prominence of female impersonation, the negation of *nandan* had generally lost its intellectual appeals in public discourse by the end of the 1940s. The unprecedented prosperity of the artistry of female impersonation was mainly thanks to numerous counter-strategies that were employed by Republican-era *nandan* and their advocates to counter the arguments against female impersonation. These strategies, which will be discussed at length, include the formulation of a new type of actor-literati relationship (which was aided by an attempt to desexualize the

Republican-era patronage of *nandan*),²² the aestheticization of female impersonation, the (inter)nationalization of *jingju* and other prominent forms of *xiqu*, and the dichotomization between *nandan*'s construction of femininity onstage and their performance of masculinity offstage.

Despite the fact that male-male homosocial bonds continued to buttress the art in the aftermath of the *siyu* prohibition, the actor-patron relationship, at least in dominant representations, appeared to be formed and consolidated by mutually shared aesthetic interests and patriotic causes rather than sexually oriented motivations (For the general audience in the PRC, it was not until the turn of the twenty-first century that cinematic representations of homoerotic bonds between Republican-era *nandan* and literati emerged to contest the prevailing tendency to desexualize the relationship; see the prologue of Chapter One for a brief discussion of this counter-representation.) In the same manner, although sexual dynamics within the actors' embodiment of female roles were still conspicuous in and essential to the way in which the artistry of *nandan* was appreciated, Republican-era advocates of *nandan* denied the existence of eroticism in the reception of *nandan* by aestheticizing *nandan*'s onstage femininity. The metaphysical contemplations of female impersonation postulated both some kind of fictitious, illusionary essence within

²² Wenqing Kang should be credited with first noting this desexualizing tendency within "the actor-official/literati relationship" in the early Republican era in his pioneering study of male same-sex relationship in the first half of the twentieth century (Kang 2009: 135-137). As Kang aptly discusses, the desexualization of the patronage of the *dan* was intimately related to the heterosexualization of female impersonators (Kang 2009: 135-144). What can be added to Kang's point here is that in addition to the actors, those notable patrons of the *nandan* stars were also heterosexualized in dominant representations, as Chapter One of this dissertation hopes to evince.

the theatrical arts and a *sublime* attribute of any refined art in general. For those who defended *nandan*, the purported sublime nature seemed to allow *jingju* and its employment of female impersonation to be appreciated with little sexual allure, as if the distinction between the artistic and the erotic could be clear-cut.

In addition to sublimity, which the advocates of female impersonation reportedly found to be essential to the very practice, the theorization of traditional Chinese theatre also postulated the existence of some kind of Chinese abstractionism/aestheticism/symbolism/expressionism in *xiqu* (with *nandan* as one of the most pronounced manifestations of this “distinct” Chinese aesthetic tradition). The identification of “Chinese aestheticism” helped *jingju*, *xiqu*’s most outstanding form of the twentieth century, gain landmark status as national dramatic form (*guoju*, 国剧), a key development in the history of modern Chinese theatre. Parallel with the nationalization of *jingju* in the Chinese state, *nandan* (intriguingly, rather than other types of role specialists) brought *xiqu* into the global spotlight. Along with Mei Lanfang, other notable *nandan* stars such as Cheng Yanqiu collectively engaged in promoting Chinese theatre on the international stage and jointly exerted influence upon some of the most influential artistic minds of the age, including, among others, Konstantin Stanislavsky, Vsevolod Meyerhold, Bertolt Brecht, Sergei Eisenstein, Max Reinhardt, Charlie Chaplin,²³ Douglas Fairbanks, Mary Pickford, and Paul Robeson. The international recognition

²³ See Chapter Three for details about the interactions between Mei Lanfang and Charlie Chaplin and how Chaplin’s performance in the *Great Dictator* inspired Mei Lanfang during his sojourn in Hong Kong during World War II.

which the cross-dressed Chinese males managed to garner from overseas in turn helped them and their advocates refute the domestic condemnation of female impersonation as a source of national embarrassment. All of these phenomena contributed profoundly to the stunning fact that the body of the *dan* was viewed as increasingly representative of that of the modern Chinese nation in and out of the country toward the end of the Republican era.

But in addition to their remarkable artistic talents, what was also essential to modern *nandan*'s national and international triumph was their noteworthy use of the boundary of the stage as a critical site to alter their gendered personae. At a time when the introduction of science-sanctioned gender normalcy, the promulgation of the *siyu* prohibition, and the iconization of the cross-dressed males as China's national symbols all took place at once, the division between "artistic" femininity and "natural" masculinity acted as an epistemological framework that both regulated and justified the *nandan*'s performances of gender plasticity. For this reason, this dissertation hopes to underscore the essential role that their *offstage* performances of masculinity/heterosexuality played in advancing *nandan* stars' pathway toward national and international stardom in the post-1912 cultural and political context.

Beyond the Dichotomy:

The Scheme of Abjection and Alternative Positionalities

While the dichotomization of femininity onstage versus masculinity offstage appears to be a defining characteristic of modern *nandan*'s presentations of gender, I maintain

that this site-specific split between femininity onstage and masculinity offstage should be understood only as a reflection of the modern binary conception of gender and a result of disciplinary and discursive regulations of gender and sexuality. Hence, the consequence caused by the gendered division entails a two-faceted scrutiny.

On the one hand, the requisite performance of modern *nandan*'s masculinity and heterosexuality offstage brought forth unprecedented occasions on which the *nandan*'s manhood/fatherhood/roles of husband were strategically crafted and most of the time compellingly rendered. And their spectacular performance of masculinity in everyday life enhanced an informed theatergoer's interest in and pleasure of viewing *nandan*'s marvelous construction of femininity onstage.²⁴ Modern spectators of *nandan* were thus privileged to witness how magnificently some of the cross-dressed males were able to move along a considerably wide spectrum of the feminine-masculine scale.

On the other hand, what was at stake in modern *nandan*'s politics of gender was precisely the cross-dressers' own agency of positioning themselves in the gender

²⁴ By "an informed theatergoer," I refer to a spectator who is cognizant of the fact that *nandan* performers are biologically male. Notwithstanding *xiqu*'s well-known practice of female impersonation, it would still be erroneous to assume that all audience members in a *nandan* performance have a prior knowledge of the *nandan* convention. According to Zhang Yihe 章诒和, a veteran *xiqu* scholar and noted essayist, when she watched the *nandan* star Shang Xiaoyun's 尚小云 performance for the first time, she greatly enjoyed the actor's performance but remained ignorant of the *nandan* convention until she was informed by her mother that Shang Xiaoyun was actually a man (Zhang Yihe 2006: 1-2). Zhang's experience suggests that for *nandan* players such as Shang their performances of female roles are compelling enough to make a spectator believe that they are women—Zhang's reception of Shang's performance appears contradictory to the claim that *nandan*'s rendition of female roles is "unnatural" and "artificial," compared to that of female actors (see Chapter Two for a detailed discussion of how the purported "unnaturalness" within *nandan*'s theatrical performance was employed to discredit the artistry of *nandan* in the early Republican era).

spectrum²⁵ as well as the fluidity and flexibility allowed within the reading of their gendered appearances and their interactions with other men. This was because the boundary of the theatrical stage appeared as a dividing line that abidingly regulated *nandan*'s ostensibly flexible presentations of gender. I therefore propose to comprehend modern *nandan*'s gender mystery through what I call the "censored plasticity of gender," by which I refer to one type of "cross-gender" performance, which is seemingly flexible but by nature regulatory and site-specific. This site-specific nature fundamentally distinguishes modern *nandan*'s gender flexibility from that of *siyu* residents of the Qing dynasty. Consequently, one is obliged to ask who might have been marginalized by the introduction of this newly framed gender dichotomy while beholding some of the twentieth-century *nandan* garnering stunning recognition on the international stage. Perhaps only when its framework of abjection is disclosed can we begin to comprehend the profound oppressiveness that the modern normalcy of gender brought into being.

One way to disclose the scheme of abjection, I propose, is to envision and acknowledge a third positionality that has been foreclosed and suppressed by the introduction of the modern gender dichotomy. On the one hand, alternative positionalities decline to embrace the gendered division between on- and offstage as a priori,

²⁵ While I contend that what was at the expenses of the introduction of modern conception of gender and sex was the cross-dressers' own agency of positioning themselves in the gender spectrum, I by no means suggest that *nandan* in pre-modern China enjoyed such an agency. However, in late-imperial China, theatrical actors' lack of freedom of placing themselves along the feminine-masculine spectrum was because of a different form of political suppression. The literary scholar Sophie Volpp asserts that male theatrical actors in premodern China were considered as "feminized men" not only because of the customary practice of cross-dressing but also owing to "their implied sexual availability and their exchange as commodities and gifts" (Volpp 2002: 960).

challenging the legitimacy of comprehending the category of “modern *nandan*” as a coherent, monolithic entity; as a form of marginalized existence, alternative positionalities unearth suppressed and neglected dimensions of historical representations of modern *nandan*, pointing to the rare yet potentially subversive moments when *nandan*’s gender presentations jeopardized the seemingly stable binary structure of gender.

On the other hand, envisioning and articulating the alternative is destined to be an arduous task because dominant representations and authoritative interpretations of *nandan*’s gender duality have all worked collaboratively to undermine this very possibility. As we shall see, in the Republican and early PRC periods, reputable *nandan* were fearful of assuming feminine personae offstage; *nandan* stars repeatedly resisted the understanding that their theatrical performances bore homoerotic overtones, despite the fact that male same-sex bonds (in the form of theatrical patronage and fraternity) were at the foundations of the *nandan* culture; along with literati who longed for wider recognition of female impersonation, Republican-era *nandan* interpreted and valorized their onstage femininity by conceiving and adeptly mobilizing a set of sophisticated aesthetic terms and concepts, a phenomenon that was simply unthinkable prior to the Republican era (see Chapter Two for details about how Republican theorization of *xiqu* contributed to a new hermeneutic framework through which *nandan*’s femininity onstage was conceptualized as an “aesthetic” and “fictional” effect); alternative narratives of popular *nandan*’s pathway toward stardom have been suppressed and physically

eradicated (see my discussion on the 1919 novel *Mei Lanfang* in Chapter One); although “aberrant” readings of *nandan*’s sexuality did exist, they generally appeared on pages of *xiaobao* 小报 (tabloid newspapers), sources of non-reliable information and platforms of low-quality journalism, entertaining readers as rumors, anecdotes, and hearsay and discouraging the general public from seriously contemplating what those who did not neatly fit into the binary structure of gender might have lived through.

Female Masculinity

Although alternative positionalities which could potentially threaten the ostensibly stable gender binary have generally been marginalized and oppressed, it is noteworthy that not all attempts to transcend the dichotomy between femininity onstage and masculinity offstage were prohibited. In fact, certain moves to transgress this site-specific division between masculinity and femininity were politically emboldened as they were desired in the extraordinary political and cultural context of the late Republican era and the beginning years of the People’s Republic. Although coherent presentations of femininity both on- and offstage have generally been undesired since the *siyu* prohibition, post-WWII China witnessed increasingly numerous occasions on which the eminent *nandan* Mei Lanfang’s theatrical rendition of female characters onstage shared the same unyielding soul with the resistant icon that the mustached Mei Lanfang embodied offstage during the latter part of the Second Sino-Japanese War. Distancing himself from the theatrical productions featuring seductive, submissive female characters that he had been so versed in constructing in his early career, in his post-war repertoires Mei Lanfang

foregrounded a growing number of resistant heroines featuring combative appearances and therefore exhibiting a kind of female masculinity. The coherent presentations of masculinity onstage and off, notwithstanding the noted difference between the *nandan*'s male identity offstage and the female gender of his thespian roles, intriguingly transcended the ostensibly rigid dichotomy between femininity onstage and masculinity offstage. This thought-provoking phenomenon seems to suggest that compared to the theatrical construction of masculine women, potential performances of feminine men offstage were subjected to a higher degree of political coercion, perhaps because the very image of feminine Chinese men became particularly unfavorable during the War of Resistance and in its immediate aftermath.

Chapters

The main body of the dissertation is comprised of three chapters. Chapter One begins with a brief discussion of two recent cinematic representations of Republican-era *nandan* by Chen Kaige 陈凯歌 (1952-). For me, the cinemas' competing representations of the *nandan* characters present a paradoxical phenomenon which has elided scholarly attention, and this paradox ultimately suggests to us that: even though a relatively candid depiction of homoeroticism within the patronage of a fictitious *nandan* appeared to be socially tolerable at the end of the twentieth century, biographical representations of any noted *nandan* of the twentieth century were not allowed to enjoy the same degree of flexibility. With the acknowledgement of this doctrine that underpins representations of *nandan* in the post-1912 era, the main body of Chapter One will be a study of a recently

discovered early Republican novel entitled *Mei Lanfang* by the Republican-era Manchu writer and drama critic Mu Rugai. By reading Mu Rugai's literary account in relation to a sizable body of representations of both female impersonation in general and Mei Lanfang in particular, this chapter will disclose a critical-yet-suppressed dimension of biographic representations of modern China's most celebrated *nandan* star.

Chapter Two will trace the discursive formation of modern *nandan*'s purportedly "artistic" femininity during the historical period spanning from the 1910s to early 1960s. The beginning section of the chapter will take a critical look at a number of early Republican debates concerning theatrical arts. I contend that twentieth-century theorizations of traditional Chinese theatre, in particular of female impersonation, came into existence under a peculiar cultural and political circumstance in which the legitimacy of traditional Chinese theatre and of female impersonation was challenged by some of the most influential intellectuals of the time. Because of a strong intention to acknowledge *xiqu*'s artistic merits, the tendency of theorization-by-aestheticization has become conspicuous in the scholarly discourse on traditional Chinese theatre. As a consequence, a discourse of "Chinese aestheticism" emerged in Chinese intellectual circle to underline an essential difference between *xiqu*'s supposedly "aesthetic" (or "expressionist"/"abstract"/"symbolic") stagecraft and *huaju*'s purportedly "realistic" representation of the world. Following the logic of "Chinese aestheticism," female impersonation has appeared to be one of the most prominent manifestations of this Chinese "aesthetic" tradition.

The theoretical efforts to aestheticize female impersonation have exerted a decisive impact on our understanding of the ontological nature of female impersonation today: a *nandan* star's marvelous presentation of femininity onstage is understood as a result of the artist's dedication to the art rather than a symptom of sexual perversion or a peculiar practice of a backward nation. The triumph of the discourse of "Chinese aestheticism" in modern China has appeared to be a rather complicated phenomenon as the notion of "Chinese aestheticism" has turned out to be both historically progressive and ideologically restraining: on the one hand, the notion of "Chinese aestheticism" has provided *nandan* practitioners and their supporters with an efficient hermeneutic framework to valorize *nandan*'s performances of femininity onstage; on the other hand, it has suggestively denied a *nandan*'s legitimacy of extending his feminine body outside the theatrical stage and consequently suppressed those *nandan* whose offstage gender identities did not neatly fit into their prescribed male gender roles. The profound limitations of the discourse of "Chinese aestheticism" will be discussed in greater detail in the chapter's last section, which is dedicated to a long-marginalized subject of modern *nandan*, namely allegedly closeted *nandan* players in the post-1912 era. Despite the fact that available information about these "aberrant" *nandan* practitioners is limited, textual references to possibly closeted actors from early Republican-era tabloid newspapers as well as noted *nandan*'s published diary entries are sufficient to testify their controversial existence in the Republican era. In these textual representations, those *nandan* whose interactions with their (male) patrons still bore homoerotic overtones in the Republican

era were constantly subjected to derision or denunciation: they were ridiculed as “undiscerning” men who conflated the real and the fictional, dismissed as “heterodox” practitioners of the *nandan* artistry, or condemned for living a “decadent” style of life.

While Chapter Two is dedicated to the discursive formation of modern *nandan*’s “artistic” femininity onstage, Chapter Three examines the representations and receptions of modern *nandan*’s purportedly “natural” masculinity offstage. The first half of the chapter mainly investigates the theatre pages of the *Northern China Pictorial*. In this influential periodical of early Republican China, famous *nandan* stars not only appeared to be alluring female characters in dramatic settings but also presented themselves as charming celebrities who circulated their masculine bodies in Republican everyday life. In addition, photographic representations of noted *nandan*’s wives and children also appeared in the pictorial, which helped the *nandan* stars consolidate their image as affectionate husbands, caring fathers, and hence normative heterosexual men.

The second half of the chapter turns its attention to the representations and receptions of two *nandan* stars’ remarkable performances of masculinity during the Second Sino-Japanese War: Cheng Yanqiu refused to perform for the Japanese and their Chinese collaborators and later boldly defended himself against the harassment of the occupation authorities in Beijing in 1942; and Mei Lanfang suspended his acting career during the latter half of the war and astonished those who were concerned about his personal and professional well-being during the war by growing a mustache. After Mei Lanfang returned to the theatrical stage in 1945, an increasing number of his theatrical characters

exhibited a female masculinity which intriguingly transcended the dichotomy between onstage femininity and offstage masculinity.

Chapter One

Mei Lanfang (1919): A Novel that You Are Not Supposed to Read

Prologue:

Chen Kaige and the Paradox of Representing Republican-era *Nandan*

The concluding weeks of the year 2008 witnessed the appearance of a most recent cinematic representation of Mei Lanfang, which attested to the enduring reputation of famous *nandan* stars of the early twentieth century. After a three-year latency, the eminent film director Chen Kaige made a foray into the Greater China market with his new production *Mei Lanfang* (Forever enthralled). Following a number of setbacks in his directing career, in particular the tepidly received blockbuster *Wu ji* 无极 (The promise, 2005), Chen turned to the greatest *nandan* of the twentieth century Mei Lanfang, perhaps in the hope that the *jingju* maestro's legendary life and his enduring reputation in China and beyond could contribute to a much-desired box-office hit.

Chen Kaige's interest in Mei Lanfang's biographic stories is hardly surprising because the very subject of *jingju* had been adeptly explored in his earlier work *Bawang bieji* 霸王别姬 (Farewell, my concubine, 1993), an iconic production that brought the filmmaker unprecedented international acclaim, most notably a *Palme d'Or* award at the Cannes Film Festival and a Golden Globe Award for Best Foreign Language Film. Indeed, many parallels may be drawn between the two *jingju*-themed productions: transregional casts consisting of top stars from both mainland China and Hong Kong, maudlin love stories set in China's tumultuous twentieth century, elaborate *mise-en-scène*

centering upon *jingju*'s flamboyant stagecraft, and most importantly, bodies of the cross-dressed males as peculiar Chinese sites of sensual attraction.

Despite these shared maneuvers, it is also critical to note that the *nandan* characters featured in the two Chen Kaige films are of striking difference, if not of contradiction. This is not only because one is pledged to be a pure fictional construct (originating from a 1985 novel of the same title by the Hong Kong-based best-selling fiction writer Lillian Lee) and the other purports to be a genuine historical figure of fame, but more importantly because the cross-dressed males' gender and sexuality are delineated in a mutually exclusive way: in *Farewell, My Concubine*, what the *nandan* star Cheng Dieyi 程蝶衣 (starring the queer actor Leslie Cheung) circulates both onstage and off is a coherent feminine body, despite his biological sex; however, in *Forever Enthralled*, Mei Lanfang (starring Leon Lai) constantly alters his gendered personae in accordance with the boundary of the theatrical stage, foregrounding a startling distinction between femininity onstage and masculinity offstage.

Paradoxically, audiences of the Chen Kaige films are introduced to two competing representations of the *jingju* culture of the twentieth century: in the purported (cinematic) fiction, homoerotic longings are integral not only to the *nandan*'s own sexuality but also to the connoisseurship of the theatrical art itself; by contrast, in the biopic of the *jingju* maestro, Mei Lanfang unmistakably presents himself as a heterosexual male in life, suggesting his dramatic persona onstage as an illusionary, fictional artifact, and consequentially disavowing any homoerotic overtones associated with the patronage of

his artistry.²⁶

Although subjects like female impersonation and the oeuvre of the Fifth Generation auteur have rarely failed to solicit scholarly attention, the existing studies on Chinese theatre, cinema, and history of gender and sexuality as a collective have curiously remained silent on this rather salient disjunction between the two popular *nandan* characters crafted by the same filmmaker. As a consequence, the neglect of this disjunction and its far-reaching implications continues to prevent us not only from unravelling the paradoxical role that Chen's individual works play in relation to a sizable body of representations of Mei Lanfang and other Republican-era *nandan* (as either genuine historical figures or fictional characters), but also from acquiring a more nuanced understanding of the politics of representing cross-dressed Chinese males since the early twentieth century.

Indeed, rather than comprehending this disjunction as a consequence of Chen's own conflicting takes of the *jingju* culture of Republican China, one might relate the competing cinematic representations of *nandan* to the filmmaker's sophisticated calculations regarding market and spectatorship. There is little question that the

²⁶ In *Forever Enthralled*, it appears that the character Mei Lanfang's disavowal of homoerotic bonds with his fandom plays a critical role in advancing his stardom rather than impeding it. Astonishingly, Mei's determination to distance himself from those who participate in male prostitution ultimately leads to physical violence. In one of the film's opening scenes, through the introduction of a fellow *nandan* actor, the youthful Mei is invited to dine with an interested patron. When the maestro-to-be discovers that he is potentially introduced to sex trade, he slaps the face of the fellow *dan* prior to running out of the dining room. Although the character Mei Lanfang's personal engagement with male prostitution is resolutely denied, *Forever Enthralled* nevertheless implies the existence of homoeroticism within the actor-patron relationship, which has been rare in native Chinese representations of *nandan* since 1912.

international acclaim that the Fifth Generation Chinese auteurs as a collective have managed to acquire from the West in the last two decades of the twentieth century was in part thanks to the youthful, renegade filmmakers' collaboration with Orientalism. In *Farewell, My Concubine*, the seductive *nandan* star Cheng Dieyi's appearance as a feminized Chinese male both onstage and off coincides with the prevailing contemporary Western imagination of the cross-dressed Chinese male, most notably, John Lone's memorable rendition of the *nandan* player Song Liling 宋丽伶 in the Hollywood film *M. Butterfly* (1993, dir. David Cronenberg). However, it is worth noting that the socially and sexually feminine roles that Cheng and Song both assume offstage are something that the vast majority of the native Chinese representations of *nandan* had done their best to circumvent since the formative years of the Republic of China.

Some fourteen years later, when the iconoclastic spirit of the Fifth Generation auteurs had receded and numerous internationally recognized mainland Chinese filmmakers had become engaged in producing commercially driven works for the increasingly lucrative domestic market, concerns about marketability and box-office performance might well have prompted Chen Kaige's striking transformation from a complicit contributor to the Orientalist imagination into an active participant in the orthodox (and unsurprisingly nationalist) discourse on Republican-era *nandan*. In *Forever Enthralled*, a production targeting the Greater China region and the mainland Chinese market in particular, not only does the eradication of homoeroticism keep the production in line with the authoritative narratives of the *jingju* maestro's biography, but also the manipulation of

Mei Lanfang's image as an anti-Japanese patriot in the context of the escalated Sino-Japanese territorial dispute reinforces the way in which the *nandan* par excellence has been delineated and received in the post-WWII context.

Although it is necessary to acknowledge that certain astute calculations about the domestic market might well have contributed to Chen's paradoxical move from *Farewell, My Concubine* to *Forever Enthralled*, the filmmaker's simultaneous embrace of nationalism and commercialism is still not sufficient to explain his resolute departure from the controversial representation of *nandan* which he first constructed in the early 1990s. As the ensuing pages of this chapter will show, what has prompted Chen's rather drastic transformation, at a fundamental level, is perhaps an underlying doctrine that regulates not only Chen Kaige's individual works but also articulations of the life trajectories of modern *nandan* in general. Hence, the incongruity between the two *nandan* characters constructed by Chen Kaige seems to ultimately suggest that even if a relatively forthright portrayal of homoeroticism within the patronage of certain fictitious *nandan* at the turn of the twenty-first century might appear to be socially tolerable (though the controversy over the public screening of *Farewell, My Concubine* indicates that the social lenience that the iconoclastic production enjoyed in mainland China in the early 1990s should be understood only in relative terms), biographical representations of any reputable *nandan* in history would not be allowed to sustain the same degree of flexibility and fluidity.

The acknowledgement of this political rationale that underpins the *nandan*

representations, I contend, not only potentially brings forth a more discerning understanding of the pathway that Chen Kaige underwent from *Farewell, My Concubine* to *Forever Enthralled* at the turn of the century, but also is useful in better comprehending another critical biographical representation of Mei Lanfang and its extended misfortune to date.

Perhaps the most contentious account of the nascent acting career of modern China's most celebrated *nandan*, the biographical representation, about which the subsequent pages of this chapter are mainly concerned, is a 1919 work of fiction entitled *Mei Lanfang* (hereafter *MLF*), a legendary novel that has unfortunately remained hitherto little known in the history of modern Chinese literature. If our reading of the incongruity between the two Chen Kaige films ultimately calls attention to a political doctrine that continues to regulate articulations of life stories of noted male players of female roles to date, the following discussion of Mu's "fictitious" biography of the emerging *nandan* star probes the historical moments when this regulative discourse first came into existence. By setting my discussion of *MLF* in the altered cultural and historical context of the early twentieth century, in which the "time-honored" practice of female impersonation was compelled to justify and reconfigure itself, this study seeks to acknowledge not only the critical role that *MLF* as a literary text plays at the crossroads of different preexisting literary traditions, but also the historical importance that *MLF* signifies as an "aberrant" biography and an abominable alternative to the orthodox narrative of the *nandan*'s pathway toward stardom.

MLF (1919):

A Most Suppressed Account

In 1915, shortly after its first episodes appeared in *Guohua bao* 国华报 (Guohua news), the serialization of the novel *MLF* came to a halt due to the interference by those who were greatly disturbed by its publication. When its author who then signed as “Mu Chengong 穆辰公” continued the episodes in the Beijing tabloid *Qunqiang Bao* 群强报 (Strength in the masses news), once again, Mu’s writings were compelled to be withdrawn from publication.²⁷ However, the two consecutive incidents were simply the outset of an ongoing misfortune that this fictional writing has encountered during the last hundred years or so. In 1918, after the novelist adopted the new name “Mu Rugai” and placed himself in self-imposed exile to Manchuria, he continued the serialized fiction in the Japanese-owned *Shengching shibao* 盛京时报 (Shengching news) and ultimately turned his writing into a published book in the Manchurian city Mukden (today’s Shenyang, also known as Fengtian in the early Republican era). However, the author’s painstaking effort to reach out to general readers was soon proved to be utterly in vain—before the print volumes could be revealed to a wider readership, Mu’s adversaries bought up almost all available copies and burned them into ashes.

Many decades after it was considered to be an extinct text, mainland Chinese readers—but mainly a tiny fraction of privileged scholars—regained access to this legendary

²⁷ In both the main body of the novel and its preface, Mu Rugai indicates that the person who repeatedly intervened the publication of his novel is Feng Gengguang 冯耿光, Mei Lanfang’s prime patron in the Republican era (Mu 2012 [1919]: 12-14, 63-65).

novel around the mid-1990s, thanks to personal reprints of a surviving copy in the collection of the Tokyo Metropolitan Library 東京都立図書館 in Japan. However, at a time when contemporary filmmakers, theatre artists, and bestselling authors have shown a sustained interest in the life stories of famous female impersonators of the early twentieth century (and Mei Lanfang in particular), the recent publication of the mainland Chinese scholar Chen Jun's meticulous edition of *MLF* by a Taiwanese publisher seems to have been of little help to terminate the novel's prolonged misfortune (at least to date) (Mu 2012 [1919]). In the People's Republic of China, despite its apparent literary and historical significance, this early Republican novel remains unavailable to the general readership. In addition, scholarly references to Mu's contentious account have been labeled as acts of slander by the *jingju* maestro's admirers of the present day, including noted intellectuals²⁸—the contemporary Chinese treatment of the Republican writer and his output arrestingly reminds us of the hostility that he first garnered a century ago.

Why, then, does Mu Rugai's account seem so abhorrent, even nearly a century after its initial appearance and several decades after the passing of all the novel's real-life prototypes? How should we understand *MLF* as a vernacular fiction in relation to robust late-imperial literary traditions of caricaturing social sordidness and of recounting the connoisseurship of the *dan*? And how should we comprehend *MLF* as a biographical

²⁸ One of the backlashes against references to *MLF* was from Huang Shang 黄裳 (1919-2012), a noted contemporary essayist, journalist, and theatre critic, who is credited with inviting Mei Lanfang to produce his autobiography in the early 1950s when Huang worked as a journalist for *Wenhui bao* 文汇报 (The standard) (Huang Shang 2008 [2007]: 111-115; Xu 2012: B5).

account by referring to a sizable body of biographical representations of the *jingju* star (e.g. *Forever Enthralled*), which appeared after Mu's work? An exploration of the two critical questions, I contend, necessitates a tripartite project, consisting of a discussion of the fiction's complicated relationship with the preexisting literary works, an acknowledgement of a critical-yet-repeatedly-suppressed dimension of the biographical representations of Mei Lanfang, and a thorough analysis of the social, cultural, and political imperatives that have made the suppression of Mu Rugai and his writing effective and long-lasting.

MLF and Its Literary Precursors

The author identifying himself as “Mu Rugai” in the preface of his legendary novel in 1919 was born as “Mu Duli 穆笃哩” in 1884 to parents from the Manchu bannermen in Beijing. While developing a keen interest in *jingju* and other local forms of performing arts, Mu received an education from an elite institution for descendants of the bannermen during his adolescence. Following that, Mu, as a cadre of the government-funded study abroad program, was enrolled at Waseda University in Japan, where he witnessed the burgeoning of the anti-Qing/Manchu sentiments among the Han Chinese students. After his anticipated entry into officialdom was blocked up by the abrupt collapse of the Qing empire in 1911, Mu alternatively landed an editorial position in *Guohua News*. In the meantime, signed as “Mu Chengong,” the writer emerged as a theatre historian/critic and a novelist in Beijing until the advent of the controversy over his Mei Lanfang novel, an incident that significantly altered his life trajectory. During his exile in Mukden, the

cultural hub of the Manchus and later part of the Japanese-endorsed puppet state Manchukuo, he adopted the new name “Mu Rugai,” while holding an editorship for the cultural and literary pages of *Shengching News*. After the ultimate end of the Sino-Japanese military conflicts in 1945, Mu returned to his birthplace, Beijing (or Beiping between 1927 and 1949), altered his name once again, this time to “Ning Yuzhi 宁裕之,” and lived a low-key life until his death in 1961.

Composed in the format of traditional linked-chapter novel, *MLF* commits itself to the ups and downs of one of the most distinguished *jingju* families in Beijing, spanning between the rise of the household’s first-generation *siyu* player/owner Mei Qiaoling 梅巧龄 (1835-1882) in the late nineteenth century and the upcoming trip of its third-generation *nandan* Mei Lanfang to Japan in 1919. The main storyline of the family legend centers upon the interactions between the ascending *dan* star Mei Lanfang and his primary connoisseurs, in particular Ma Youwei²⁹ 马幼伟 and Qidong Yeren 齐东野人 (lit., “a vulgar from Qidong,” presumably the character’s pseudonym)—the former is a prototype of the junior Mei’s real-life patron Feng Gengguang, a Japanese-educated Cantonese plutocrat who remained a mainstay of Lanfang throughout the *nandan*’s Republican career, and the latter resembles Qi Rushan 齐如山 (1875-1962), a European-educated literatus whose artistic collaboration with Mei Lanfang during the early Republican years has recently been thoroughly studied in English-language

²⁹ The character’s name is explicitly suggestive of Feng Gengguang 冯耿光 (1882-1975), not only because Youwei was Feng’s courtesy name but also because the character “ma 马” is simply the right half the character “feng 冯.”

literature (Goldstein 2007).

Both thematically and stylistically speaking, this early Republican novel bears the imprint of its literary precursors concerning the patronage of cross-dressed youthful males in Beijing. In the late Qing dynasty, accounts of interactions between literati and actors formed a distinctive literary genre referred to as “*huapu*.” As a form of writing that drastically transformed in the nineteenth century, the late-Qing *huapu* distances itself from the guides to floral plants and female courtesans in the preceding eras by locating a new subject, namely the young male entertainers in Beijing’s pleasure quarters, due to the perceived affinity between flowery charms and the seductive boys (Wu and Stevenson 2010: 102). Produced by men of letters who frequented the houses of theatrical actors, the *huapu* texts are comprised of one but often more of the four categories: “flower rankings” that assess physical beauty and talents of individual actors, collections of sketchy biographies of gifted players, miscellaneous notes documenting visits to the pleasure quarters, and tales of homoerotic romances between actors and their connoisseurs (Wu and Stevenson 2010: 107). Apart from a corpus of writings that entertain readers with its literary and aesthetic appeals, the *huapu* presents itself as a collection of practical and historically valuable guides with insider knowledge about the theatrical world, owing to its faithful documentation of real-life interactions between boy actors and their patrons. The stylistic duality of the *huapu* as both “a documentary and a literary form” (Wu and Stevenson 2010: 101) might have set a formal pattern of delineating actor-literati relations, which likely inspired the later writer Mu Rugai to compose a text that may be

read as both a literary depiction of the connoisseurship of Mei Lanfang and a documentary of the clandestine side of Mei's life.

However, while it is still legitimate to read *MLF* as a literary depiction of the connoisseurship of the *dan*, Mu's primary interest is not in eulogizing the beauty and talent of the *nandan* but in condemning corrupt *dan*-literati relationships, which, Mu thought, had tarnished the theatrical arts. In this sense, despite the stylistic influence that Mu may have received from the *huapu* literature, *MLF* owes a more apparent debt to those vernacular fictions intersecting the subject of female impersonation and that of social exposé. The most notable work of this type perhaps is *Pinhua baojian* 品花宝鉴 (Precious mirror that ranks the flowers, hereafter, *Precious Mirror*) by Chen Sen 陈森 (ca. 1796-1870), an unblessed candidate of the imperial examinations who sojourned in Beijing during the reign of Daoguang (1830-1850). Published in 1849, *Precious Mirror* eulogizes a dignified, sublime love between a young literatus named Mei Ziyu 梅子玉 and Du Qinyan 杜琴言, a *dan* player of *kunqu*. Because of its affirmative representation of the mutual admiration between the two protagonists, the literary scholar Keith McMahon has encouraged readers to comprehend *Precious Mirror* in the context of the Ming-Qing cult of *qing*³⁰ 情 (a polysemous term that may be translated into English as emotions, passion, or feelings, but perhaps none of the English equivalents adequately

³⁰ As a philosophical and aesthetic movement that challenges Neo-Confucianism, the school of *qing* germinated in the late Ming dynasty and sought to counter the Neo-Confucian practice of self-cultivation and self-restraint. Viewing Neo-Confucian dismissal of subjectivity as "pedantic," "hypercritical," and "phony," practitioners of *qing* aesthetics positively articulated desire, emotion, and love in poetry, drama, and fiction during the Ming-Qing political transition (Epstein 2001: 61-119).

conveys the affective intensity associated with the philosophical concept) (2002: 70-109).

For McMahon, the sublimity and purity of the *qing* shared between them lies in the fact that the bond between Mei Ziyu and Du Qinyan not only transcends the difference in their social station but also overcomes any desire for direct sexual intimacy; for example, on an occasion when the scholar and the *dan* player sleep in the same bed and even share the same pillow, they keep their clothes on (McMahon 2002: 88).

However, in this mid-nineteenth-century fiction, what makes the two youthful lovers' practice of *qing* rarefied and highly venerated is not an ideological suppression of individuality and subjectivity—a cause that gave rise to the cult of *qing* in the first place during the Ming-Qing political transition—but rather owing to the excess of desire in the last moments of the Qing empire. Hence, it is the existence of another type of patronage that adds a critical dimension to the theatrical world depicted in *Precious Mirror*. In contrast to the decorous connoisseurs like Mei Ziyu, many of the aficionados of the *dan* are *de facto* deficient in aesthetic tastes; instead, their passions for female impersonation are motivated by exclusively prurient interests. In *Precious Mirror*, this is where a melodramatic vision emerges. Through ludicrous stories and daunting depictions of sex scenes, Chen Sen introduces a coterie of villainous participants in the theatrical world, who may crave the purified, chaste affection between Ziyu and Qinyan but repeatedly fail to emulate them.

It is Chen Sen's nuanced depiction of the sordid side of the theatrical world that relates *Precious Mirror* to a series of fictional accounts dedicated to the exposure of

social problems in the latter stage of the Qing dynasty. Termed as “*qianze xiaoshuo* 谴责小说” (lit., “small talks that chastise or excoriate”)³¹ by the renowned modern Chinese writer Lu Xun 鲁迅 (1881-1936), these accusatory fictions as a collective emerged from an altered socio-economic reality, characterized by the burgeoning of colonial commerce, capitalist enterprise, and a comprador bourgeoisie. These socio-economic transformations jointly contributed to the waning of the Confucian value system, which, in the eyes of these fiction writers, bred moral deterioration and political corruption.

As a pivotal form of an increasingly vibrant urban culture, theatrical arts remained susceptible to the socio-economic changes throughout the long nineteenth century (1790-1911). As theatre viewings transformed themselves from mostly private activities into largely public experiences over the century, public institutions hosting theatrical performances, primarily the *chayuan* 茶园 (lit., “tea gardens”) or teahouses, flourished in Beijing (Goldstein 2003: 758). The proliferation of the teahouse theatres was sustained by a nationwide participation in part thanks to the growth of trade and the accelerated flow of people and private capital. Not only were gifted boys continually sent from the Yangtze River Delta through the Grand Canal under the auspices of southern merchants, but also affluent clientele across the country flocked to the sites of urban attraction in the

³¹ The social exposés exemplify one of the most fertile and influential literary traditions of the Qing dynasty, spanning from the high-Qing fiction *Rulin waishi* 儒林外史 (*The Scholars*, 1750) by Wu Jingzi to the so-called “four masterpieces of social exposures” of the last decade of the Qing era, including *Laocan youji* 老残游记 (*The Travels of Lao Can*, 1903) by Liu E, *Guanchang xianxingji* 官场现形记 (*Observations on the Current Status of Officialdom*, 1906) by Li Baojia, *Ershinian muduzhi guaixianzhuang* 二十年目睹之怪现状 (*Strange Events Observed in the Last Twenty Years*, 1903) by Wu Yanren, and *Nie haihua* 孽海花 (*Flowers in the Sea of Evil*, 1905) by Zeng Pu. For a thorough analysis of late Qing exposés, see Wang 1997: 183-251.

imperial capital. As sizable investments were poured into individual players, predominantly the *dan*, accelerated monetary competition among theatre patrons gravely worried a veteran aficionado like Chen Sen.

As depicted in *Precious Mirror*, Beijing's theatrical culture deteriorated because of the involvement of two types of characters: *hei xianggong* 黑相公 ("ill-intentioned actors," *siyu* players who have mediocre artistic talents but are voracious for monetary gains and unchaste in their interactions with patrons) and *laodou* 老斗 ("old ignoramus," a derogatory term in the late Qing and early Republican eras, referring to wealthy theatre patrons with mediocre aesthetic connoisseurship but obscene desires). While the former is represented by *dan* players such as Rongguan 蓉官, Erxi 二喜, and Yumei 玉美, who profit handsomely from male prostitution, the latter is embodied by the most villainous Xi Shiyi 奚十一, who excels in taking advantage of virtuous yet gullible actors. An heir of a corrupt government official from the southern coastal province Guangdong, Xi perhaps exemplifies the least graceful literatus/theatre connoisseur one could envision: hideous in physical appearance, boorish in manner, and deficient in theatre taste. In spite of these negative attributes, the arriviste Xi Shiyi astonishes Beijing's theatrical circles with the magnitude of his wealth. Although it is a commonplace that dedicated patrons of the *dan* are sustained by households of abundance, Xi's family fortunes appear to be particularly opulent. This is mainly because the Xi family had acquired their financial gains through sources that were historically unprecedented. When its home province Guangdong was among the first to be subjected to colonial trade and global exchange of

commerce, the Cantonese household had accumulated its capital by operating Western-style financial agencies (*yanghang* 洋行), as well as participating in comprador trading.

Competing Narratives:

Patronizing the Ascending Star

Interestingly, it is this moneyed Cantonese patron Xi Shiyi in the mid-nineteenth-century novel that reminds one of another wealthy Cantonese aficionado of the *dan* in Mu Rugai's early Republican novel *MLF*, namely, the character Ma Youwei, whose real-life prototype, as previously mentioned, is the Republican plutocrat Feng Gengguang. Also known as "Feng Youwei," Feng Gengguang was born into a distinguished Cantonese family whose influence penetrated into numerous critical realms and enterprises in the early Republic, ranging from military, diplomacy, and financial services to the media industry. A graduate of Japan's Imperial Army Academy, Feng Gengguang himself had a remarkable career in both military and banking, whose prominent appointments included the chief executive position of the Bank of China.

While Feng's financial endorsement of Mei Lanfang was well known to the Republican theatrical circles and beyond, the *nandan* himself was rather laconic about the relationship between the two. In *Wutai shenghuo sishinian* 舞台生活四十年 (Forty-year life onstage), Mei's eighteen-chapter memoir of his thespian life during the first half of the twentieth century, the actor mentioned Feng Gengguang only twice, which is astonishing considering that Feng is widely considered to be the actor's most important patron during Mei's Republican-era career. In the autobiographic work, Mei noted that he

met Feng when he was only fourteen-year old (circa 1908) (Mei and Xu 1957: 133).

Calling Feng “an enthusiastic and honest man,” Mei admitted that Feng was “an old friend” who generously offered him long-term support, despite the fact that Mei had never been outspoken about the particulars of Feng’s assistance (Mei and Xu 1957: 133).

The only occasion on which Feng’s influence on the actor can be discerned is Mei’s attribution of his stated interest in the play *Yuzhou feng* 宇宙锋 (Beauty defies tyranny, or literally, the “Cosmic blade”) to Feng Gengguang. According to Mei, his passion for this originally unassuming play was in part because the *Cosmic Blade* was the “most praiseworthy play” for Feng (Mei and Xu 1957: 146).³²

In contrast to the dearth of documented interactions between Mei and Feng in the actor’s own account, the development of the romantic relationship between Ma Youwei and the rising *nandan* constitutes the main body of Mu Rugai’s novel. In *MLF*, the narrator explicitly identifies Ma Youwei as Mei Lanfang’s “*laodou*,” who met the *nandan* at a *siyu* house called *Yunhe tang* 云和堂 (lit., “house of the cloudy peace”)³³ after Lanfang was sold there to be a *xianggu* following the early death of his biological father Mei Zhufen 梅竹芬 (1872-1898).³⁴ To explicate the importance of a *laodou* to a

³² See Chapter Three for details about how the *Cosmic Blade* assumed an increasingly prominent role in Mei Lanfang’s later-stage career and the stated important role that Feng Gengguang played in sustaining the *nandan*’s passion for this particular drama.

³³ According to the narrator, located in Hanjiatan, the House of the Cloudy Peace was a popular and lucrative *siyu* owned by the actor Zhu Xiaofen 朱小芬. Mei Lanfang’s engagement in the House of the Cloudy Peace is also confirmed by a photographic portrayal published in *Beiyang huabao* 北洋画报 (The northern China pictorial) in 1928, see figure 1.

³⁴ It is worth noting that Mei Lanfang’s own family had an intimate tie to the *siyu* business. Lanfang’s

xianggu in the Qing dynasty, the narrator notes:

The guests of *xianggu* were distinguished by their degrees of richness. Those who spent money like water and excelled at puffing up actors could gain the title of *laodou*. *Xianggu*'s *laodou*, no wonder, were mostly well-to-do officials and bureaucrats or profligate sons of the rich, who rarely cared about money and regularly made magnificent spending—once this had become a fashion, no one found it strange. While a *xianggu* hosted guests on a daily basis, what he really wanted was to find a single person to serve. The gross shame for a *xianggu* would be the case that no one wants to help him quit the business [*tuoji*, 脱籍]; once becoming acquainted with a rich patron, he would surely keep badgering the person to help him quit. This is conventionally called “leaving the master” [*chushi*, 出师], also known as “taking off the boot” [*tuoxuezi*, 脱靴子].

“Leaving the master” is the most blissful moment for a *xianggu*, [but] only those who possessed considerable wealth could accomplish this; for instance, merely compensation for the master sometimes would cost several thousand dollars, even several tens of thousand dollars. In addition, the *xianggu*'s housing, marriage, and all sorts of chores would also need to be taken care of by the

grandfather Mei Qiaoling, one of the most celebrated and legendary *nandan* of the late Qing dynasty, was the founder of one of the most lucrative *siyu* at the time, the *Jinghe tang* 景和堂 (lit., “house of the scenic peace). Mei Lanfang's uncle Mei Yutian 梅雨田 (1869-1914), a noted *jingju* musician, and his father Mei Zhufen, also a *nandan* player, later inherited the House of the Scenic Peace from his grandfather but the family business soon deteriorated upon the early decease of Zhufen. Mu Rugai includes a historically valuable introduction of the early history of the Mei's in Chapter One of *MLF* (Mu 2012 [1919]: 25-33).

laodou. (Mu 2012 [1919]: 20-21)

The depiction of the *laodou-xianggu* relationship above aptly synthesizes the interactions between Ma Youwei and Mei Lanfang in the novel. Having an eminent background in the military, Ma Youwei is both rich and politically influential, which makes him an ideal candidate for theatre patronage. Shortly after being emotionally attached to the alluring boy, Ma readily reaches an exclusive relationship with the *dan* by frightening away other



Figure 1. Group portrait of a collective of twelve *siyu* players at the House of Cloudy Peace (Mei Lanfang, frontline, second to right, and Yao Yufu³⁵ 姚玉芙, frontline, second to left). The original Chinese caption reads “group portrait of twelve golden hairpins at the House of Cloudy Peace two decades ago;” the original English caption reads “photo showing the twelve junior actors of ‘Yun-Ho-Tang,’ a dramatic group of 20 years ago” (*Beiyang huabao* 1985 [1928], 168: 5). The association between the *siyu* actors and “golden hairpins” unmistakably suggests that the *siyu* players are perceived as feminized men even offstage.

rivals and helping Mei “take off the boot.” The sense of exclusiveness of the romantic engagement lies in the fact that no one would venture to challenge Ma’s status of being the actor’s prime patron. In addition, the body of the *dan* as a sexually objectified

³⁵ Yao Yufu (1896-1966), a fellow *xianggu* who later became Mei Lanfang’s disciple, is also a character of Mu Rugai’s novel, as we shall see on the following pages.

property is solely available to Ma.

The portrayal of the sexual relationship between Ma and Mei constitutes perhaps the most controversial scene in the novel: on one occasion when a friend of Ma Youwei's is curious to know what sustains Ma's passion for the *nandan*, the *laodou* unabashedly boasts about his exclusive knowledge of a peculiar feature of the *dan*'s physical body. For Ma, the ultimate attraction of Mei Lanfang lies in his thorny tongue, a mysterious bodily trait that suggestively makes the *laodou*'s intimate moments with the actor particularly gratifying (Mu 2012 [1919]: 114-115). According to the character Ma Youwei, the noted literatus Luo Yinggong³⁶ 罗瘿公 (1872-1924) once helped him demystify his marvelous finding by relating the thorny tongue to the tipped stamens of plum blossoms. Luo proclaims that this peculiar trait of the body is an indication that the *dan* is an incarnation of the flowery plant—in a manner reminding one of the literary device of “*zhiguai*” 志怪 (lit., “documenting the strange”), a pre-modern literary convention that commonly relates the marvelous in the human world to supernatural causes. For the case of Mei Lanfang, the affinity between the *nandan* and plum blossoms is drawn not only because the allures of female impersonators had been traditionally associated with flowery charms but also because the actor's surname, “Mei,” itself means plum plant in Chinese (Mu 2012 [1919]: 114-116).

³⁶ The character Luo Yinggong explicitly refers to the well-known Republican poet and playwright Luo Dunrong 罗惇融, who styled himself as “Yinggong.” Born in Guangdong, Luo Yinggong is widely known for his patronage of the noted *nandan*, in particular of Cheng Yanqiu, Mei Lanfang's disciple and a major rival of Mei in the Republican era.

Although it is commonly held that “the soul of Mei has long been possessed by the household of Feng,”³⁷ the formulation of a *laodou*-actor relationship between Ma Youwei and Mei Lanfang does not necessarily exclude other literati from interacting with the *dan*. As a matter of fact, it is precisely thanks to Ma’s endorsement that the actor manages to solicit a sizable collective of literati to gather around him; and these aficionados soon formulate a loosely organized interest group known to the public as the “Mei Clique” (*meidang*, 梅党). By collectively helping the *dan* advance his professional career, members of the Mei Clique consolidate and strengthen their social connections not simply with the actor but more importantly with Ma Youwei and other noted literati within the group.

This mode of theatre connoisseurship and theatrical patronage has its historical roots all the way back in the Ming dynasty. As the literary scholar Sophie Volpp notes in her study of the connoisseurship of the theatre in seventeenth-century China, the exchange and circulation of poems in tribute to the actor, most commonly the *dan*, among elite literati provided the men of letters with critical opportunities to enhance their own homosocial liaisons (2002: 949-984). One example that Volpp provides is the case of the romantic relationship between the famed lyricist Chen Weisong 陈维崧 (1626-1682) and a *nandan* player named Xu Ziyun 徐紫云, which motivated a group of the most eminent

³⁷ Or in the original Chinese words “梅魂久属冯家有” (*meihun jiushu fengjiayou*), a verse composed by the character Luo Yinggong in the novel to acknowledge the exclusive relationship between Mei Lanfang and his *laodou* (Mu 2012 [1919]: 92). It is worth noting that the verse unmistakably relates Mei’s real-life patron Feng Gengguang to the *laodou* character Ma Youwei by using the Cantonese plutocrat’s real surname.

literati of the age to compose poems in praise of the romantic bond and to declare “both their desire to emulate Chen and the impossibility of fulfilling that desire” (Volpp 2002: 950). “These poems,” contends Volpp, “are of particular interest in that their authors employ a homoerotic discourse to identify themselves as members of an elite circle of aesthetes” (2002: 950).

If the Ming luminaries’ collective participation in theatrical connoisseurship helped confirm their identities as members of a selective group of social elites, in *MLF*, the admission to the Mei Clique provides those who do not yet belong to the privileged caste with a valued opportunity to advance their social standing. This explicates the intent of the enthusiast Qidong Yeren to join the Mei Clique. Gifted with literary talent yet furtive in his pursuit of officialdom, Qidong Yeren considers the opportunity to work with Mei Lanfang to be a chance to approach Ma Youwei, in the hope that the latter can help to boost his professional career. This worldly desire makes Qidong Yeren a buffoon character in the novel: his blunt flattery of Ma, Mei, and Mei’s family members oftentimes evokes laughter and contempt, apart from his boorish behavior;³⁸ even his own brothers find his excessive toadyism of the star repulsive and hence threaten to end the sibling relationship (Mu 2012 [1919]: 93-97).

In a rather explicit manner, the construction of the character Qidong Yeren lampoons

³⁸ One of the most hilarious scenes takes place in Qidong Yeren’s initial meeting with Mei during his visit to the actor’s house. In order to flatter the actor, the visitor makes an unusual request to pay his respect to Mei’s aunt-in-law in person. When Mei and Ma reluctantly introduce the old lady to the guest, Qidong Yeren astonishes the female host by bowing his head three times to the senior who is utterly unprepared to receive such formal homage from a stranger (Mu 2012 [1919]: 87-88).

the eminent playwright and theatre scholar Qi Rushan,³⁹ whose artistic companionship with the *jingju* actor resulted in several dozen new and reformed plays in Mei Lanfang's repertoire, which turned out to be fundamental to the *nandan*'s stunning national and international triumph during the early Republican years and beyond. Aside from his artistic creations, Qi Rushan left behind a sizable body of writings, including, but not limited to, recollections of his collaborations with Mei and other prominent *jingju* actors, historiographical studies of *jingju* at the Qing-Republic transition, and theoretical treatises on *xiqu* aesthetics, which altogether establish him as one of the most influential and prolific *xiqu* scholars in the twentieth century.

Compared to Mu Rugai's satirical depiction of the scholar's interactions with Mei, Qi Rushan's own account of the formation of his advisory relationship with the actor is far more widely known. As Qi himself first notes and numerous bestseller books on the *jingju* maestro reiterate, this legendary relationship reportedly began with a rather accidental encounter: circa 1912, the literatus, who then was still indifferent to the rising star, attended the actor's performance for the first time and wrote Mei a letter afterward to correct a "shortcoming" in the *nandan*'s rendition of *Fenhewan* 汾河湾 (lit., "The Fen river bend");⁴⁰ much to Qi's surprise, the actor quickly adopted his suggestion and

³⁹ Numerous pieces of information about the character Qidong Yeren points to Qi Rushan, including not only the fact that Qidong Yeren's real surname is Qi 祁, which is a homophone of Qi 齐, the last name of Qi Rushan, but also Qidong Yeren's creation of the play *Daiyu zanghua* 黛玉葬花 (The flower's funeral) resonates with Qi Rushan's critical role in the process of conceiving the play.

⁴⁰ In his letter, Qi accused the traditional performance of the *qingyi* 青衣 role type (lit., "the blue robe," lead female role type) of being "unreasonable" (*buhe daoli*, 不合道理) because in the *Fen River Bend*'s famous "cave-gate" (*yaomen*, 窑门) scene, which depicts a reunion of a couple who are

started to acquaint himself with the newly met enthusiast, an unassuming move that ultimately altered Qi Rushan's attitude toward the nascent *nandan* player (Qi 1979: 6116-6121).

While the legendary encounter between the two talented men has been repeatedly celebrated by later scholars and bestseller authors as one of the most memorable moments in the history of modern Chinese theatre, much less attention has been given to a reported phenomenon in Qi's original writing about his first interactions with Mei. According to the literatus himself, although he was deeply impressed with the *nandan*'s humility and became interested in supervising the actor, the long-term advising relationship between the two did not form until the spring of 1914. In his memoir, Qi reported that shortly after learning about Mei's adoption of his suggestion addressing the *Fen River Bend*, he began to attend Mei's stage performances on a regular basis and provided Mei with artistic advice through correspondences. However, during the initial two years, Qi stated that he never talked to Mei substantially in person and, more strikingly, never met the actor anywhere other than in theatres (Qi 1979: 6120). Then, what were the reasons that resulted in the enthusiast's stated hesitation in meeting the

set apart for eighteen years, the female protagonist Liu Yingchun 柳迎春 appeared to be rather unresponsive to the singing of her long-missing husband Xue Rengui 薛仁贵. Qi therefore advised Mei Lanfang to deliver a series of emotional and physical responses to the male lead in reaction to the male protagonist's singing (Qi 1979: 6117-6120). While Qi has been applauded by many for his effort to reform the traditional performance, it is worth noting that some found Mei's performance of body gestures in this particular scene perplexing and distracting. For instance, after the famous *jingju* player Tan Xinpei 谭鑫培 (1847-1917) played the *Fen River Bend* with Mei Lanfang, he noted that "when I was singing a few lyrics in the scene of the gate of cave-house, I felt that I had not yet reached to the excellent parts but I heard the audience's applause. I finally noticed the reason was that Lanfang was performing body gestures" (Qi 1979: 6120).

actor? And what caused Qi to reportedly oscillate about whether he should continue to strengthen the advising relationship with Mei? In Qi's memoir, he made some explication as follows:

First, I originally held some conservative notions that made me reluctant to approach *dan* actors. Second, [...] since around the founding year of the Republic, [...] my friends often kindly tried to convince me that I would be ridiculed by others if I continued to approach these beautiful *dan* actors. (Qi 1979: 6120)

Other than his "conservative" notion and the potential of being ridiculed by his friends, there was another reason that made the enthusiast reluctant to deepen the relationship. He went on in his recollection:

Then it was shortly after the prohibition over *xianggong tangzi*. Lanfang left this type of business and decided not to meet people with whom he was not familiar, so as to protect his reputation. [...] at that moment, many people esteemed him [Mei Lanfang], while some others were so jealous [about him]. Many people said something pernicious about him, and I truly wanted to figure out whether it was true [...] there were a couple of people who met him a few years earlier than I knew him. Most of them were decent and truthful people, while one or two of them appeared to position themselves as *laodou*, but [their relationships were] definitely not known to the public. (Qi 1979: 6120-6121)

According to Qi, his suspicion that the relationship between Mei and some of his

patrons might still resemble the tandem between *xianggong* and *laodou* was not resolved until he eventually paid a few visits to Mei's house:

Mei himself possessed great character and was an abstemious and self-respecting person. His wife, daughter, and son all looked moderate and placid, rarely leaving the house as well. In my eyes, this type of household was not different at all from a well-mannered family of a scholar; I therefore had often visited his home since then. Those old friends whom he met before seldom went to his house [...] since then I had decided to assist him. (Qi 1979: 6121)

Qi's own depiction of the first encounters between Mei and himself contradicts Mu's literary representation of the inception of the relationship in two significant ways: first, unlike Mu's literary text, which suggests that Qidong Yeren's interest in working with the star is sustained by his desperate desire to scale the social ladder, Qi Rushan's own testimony underscores his initial indifference toward the star and maintains that it was Mei's humility that initiated his interest in assisting the actor, insinuating that it was the *nandan* that voluntarily approached him, not vice versa; second, while Mu's novel sets the first meeting between the two characters in the actor's house (see footnote 38), Qi Rushan's recollection unmistakably notes his original hesitation to work with the *dan* and maintains that his initial encounters took place in theatres only.

The house of the *dan*, as it functioned as both a private residence and a peculiar type

of public institution, embodied a site with paradoxical social functionality.⁴¹ No matter whether it was considered to be a place embracing genuine romantic passions or an institution breeding obscene intrigues and sex trades, the accessibility of the “private residence” of the *dan* metaphorically represented the sexual availability of the *dan*’s body. Hence, a scholar’s entrance to the house of the *dan* not only symbolized an act of penetration but also, upon the advent of the Republic, signified a tabooed move and a potential menace to the legal prohibition on male prostitution. In his recollection, by maintaining his “conservative” notions and his initial hesitation to visit the *dan*’s house, Qi distanced himself from the “old friends” of Mei’s, especially those who seemed to behave as “*laodou*.” By doing so, Qi Rushan presented himself as a person whose passion for Mei Lanfang and his arts appeared to have had little to do with erotic desires or monetary interests but to have been triggered by purely artistic and altruistic causes.

The purported substantiation of the former *siyu nandan* Mei Lanfang’s heterosexuality and fatherhood as well as his intention to discontinue the lifestyle of the *siyu* actor appeared to play a critical role in forming the artistic companionship between the two. Through observing Mei and his family members, Qi Rushan reportedly confirmed that the *nandan* was in fact no different from a normative heterosexual male. In addition, the moderateness and placidity of Mei’s wife and children further helped Qi to attest to the patriarchal order within the household and ultimately reach a conclusion

⁴¹ Likewise, the body of the *dan* presented a similar paradox as it was perplexingly both a subject of public fantasy and a sole property of the *laodou*.

that Mei's household looked no different from a scholar's residence.

The stated affinity between the house of the former *siyu* player and the residence of a scholar is worth reading closely here. The actor-literati relationship in late imperial China featured not only homoeroticism but also inequity in terms of social-economic standing, not only because the young boys were generally socially and financially dependent on their patrons and masters, but also because individual actors and even theatre troupes in their entirety "were sold, bestowed upon friends, and bequeathed upon relatives" (Volpp 2002: 949). Within this type of relationship, the young boys generally assumed "inferior" and "submissive" roles versus the literati's "superior" and "dominant" positions. Hence, the declared kinship between the *dan* player and a scholar not only dissolved the inferior role that a beautiful young male actor was conventionally expected to assume, but also acknowledged a relatively independent role that Mei could play in front of a genuine literatus like Qi himself.

Along with the recognition of the relatively autonomous role that Mei Lanfang was said to play before him, what also helped Qi Rushan justify his artistic collaboration with the *dan* was his effort to normalize and demystify the living space of the *dan*. In his recollection, not only did the *nandan*'s residence appear to be a tranquil and placid site, but also the purported confirmation of Mei's heterosexuality and the patriarchal order of Mei's household confirmed patriarchal and masculine codes, which of course Qi would encourage his readers to read as "civilized" codes, shared between Mei Lanfang and the literati class. For the reasons above, the affable *nandan* seemed to be a suitable candidate

for Qi to formulate a new type of artistic companionship that might resemble the modern-day collaboration between a director/playwright/dramaturg and an actor, instead of continuing a much stigmatized *laodou-xianggu* relationship.

To be sure, my comparative reading of Mu's novel and Qi's recollection is not interested in presenting any conclusive finding on which one of the two competing narratives of the greatest *nandan*'s early life is likely more historically faithful, in spite of the fact that factual accuracy is valued by readers of both accounts: Qi Rushan's own recollection of his collaboration with Mei Lanfang has played a critical role in informing our current knowledge of the legendary artistic partnership between the literatus and the *jingju* maestro; and in the preface of *MLF*, Mu bluntly encourages his readers to comprehend his literary representation of Beijing's theatrical world by close reference to real-life figures and events (Mu 2012 [1919]: 12-14), and much of the importance of Mu's literary account lies in the author's unfailing intention to report "ongoing social phenomena in journalistic immediacy," a key stylistic feature of the novelistic genre of social exposés (Wang 1997: 200).

However, compared to the credibility of the two authors, what warrants more attention from us, I contend, is how the competing narratives of Mei Lanfang's early history collectively participated in creating a reformed, modernized discourse on female impersonation, synchronous with the prohibition on *siyu*. At the core of this renewed discourse is the appearance of a new epistemological and hermeneutic paradigm that has been jointly embraced by the two rivalrous accounts. Despite their attesting incongruities,

the two contesting representations of Mei Lanfang's nascent career exhibited a collectively held political stance toward *siyu* and their shared position was predicated upon mutually assumed cultural premises: if in the Qing dynasty sincere opera aficionados such as Chen Sen and numerous contributors of the *huapu* books could still use their literary talents to express their heartfelt admiration of any dignified, sublime *dan*-literati romances, Republican-era intellectuals such as Qi Rushan and Mu Rugai generally found no place in the altered cultural and historical context, which could allow them to produce a positive and affirmative depiction of the *nandan* as an idealized subject for graceful and refined homoerotic passion.

Instead, both Qi and Mu assumed hostile and disdainful attitudes toward *siyu*⁴² and both authors implicitly or explicitly portrayed the lives of the *siyu* players as a disgraceful realm of existence that needed to be overhauled or eliminated. In addition, the *laodou* appeared to be the dominant type of theatre patrons and were directly or indirectly faulted by both accounts for contributing to the exploitation of the *dan*. What is absent in both Qi's and Mu's depictions of the *nandan*-literati relationship is a theatre connoisseur like the character Mei Ziyu in *Precious Mirror*, who is simultaneously morally righteous and emotionally affectionate. This phenomenon points to a defining characteristic of the modern (literary, historical, or journalistic) representations of male admirers of *nandan*,

⁴² It becomes the only viable positionality that a public representation of *siyu* could assume in the aftermath of the ban; and other positionalities toward *siyu* become not only impossible but also unthinkable. It is this unthinkability of other positionalities that discloses the difficulty of articulating any dignified, egalitarian romantic relationship between *nandan* and their male aficionados in post-1912 China.

which is a mutually exclusive relationship between homoerotic passion and moral decency. As a result of the modern-day stigmatization of homosexuality, male same-sex love itself becomes subjected to constant negative representation.

The acknowledgement of the modernized discourse on female impersonation that the two competing narratives are both dedicated to construct perhaps is helpful for us to better comprehend the essential disputes between the two accounts of Mei's early life: Qi Rushan asserts that although he was deeply concerned about the possible continued existence of the *xianggu-laodou* relationship in the aftermath of the legal prohibition on *siyu*, his visits to the residence of Mei Lanfang convinced him that Mei's former style of life as a *siyu* actor had been discontinued; hence, his own interactions with the *dan* were justified. The narrator of *MLF*, however, reports that one of the central problems of Beijing's theatre circles was precisely the fact that the preexisting mode of theatre patronage not only extended into the early Republican years but also arguably proliferated at an accelerating pace; as a consequence, the undesirable relationship between Mei Lanfang and the Mei Clique members not only exploited the young actor himself but also continued to paralyze the artistry of *jingju* as a whole.

The Body of the *Dan* as a Site of Irrepressible Obsession

However, the reported continuation of the preexistent mode of theatrical patronage only partially contributes to the *MLF* narrator's dissatisfaction with the ascendancy of Mei Lanfang. Other concerns also appear to add to the narrator's discomfort about the growing reputation of the actor, among which is the phenomenon that the body of the

nandan appears to be a site of irrepressible obsession, causing spectators' zealous admiration of the cross-dresser. As the character Mei Lanfang's newly conceived *jingju* plays became increasingly favored among Republican urbanites and helped the *nandan* to surpass his competent rivals in the first decade of the Republic, what notably distinguishes *MLF* from its literary precursors is its representation of female spectators' erotic longing for the *nandan*, a new historical phenomenon synchronous with the widening of women's access to public theatrical performances at the turn of the twentieth century.

In *MLF*, the *nandan*'s premiere of his new production *Daiyu zanghua*⁴³ 黛玉葬花 (Flowers' funeral) in the *Jixiangyuan* 吉祥园 (or the Auspice Garden Playhouse) not only titillates many enchanted male audience members but also enthralls female fans of theatre across ages and social castes, not only because of the new drama's experiment with elaborate costuming and renovated *mise-en-scène* but also owing to the *nandan*'s superiority in sexual allure. Among those female spectators who are mesmerized by Mei Lanfang is a prostitute surnamed Feng 冯, who pays all of her savings to a procurer who claims that he could help the enchanted admirer arrange a private meeting with Mei.

However, Miss Feng's investment turns out to be utterly abortive because it is the

⁴³ Premiered in 1916, the *Flower's Funeral* belongs to Mei's repertoire of "ancient costume new plays" (古装新戏, *guzhuang xinxi*), a theatrical genre that Mei Lanfang and Qi Rushan jointly invented during the early Republican era. According to Joshua Goldstein, ancient costume new plays, "generally based on folktales, were aimed at resuscitating ancient models of Chinese beauty" (2007: 122); and many of them "became part of the Peking Opera canon in the post-May Fourth codifications of the genre because they conformed so nicely to the parameters of an invented tradition" (Goldstein 2007: 122).

nandan's disciple Yao Yufu rather than Mei himself that shows up in the appointment, so as to urge the woman to stop harassing his master (Mu 2012 [1919]: 101-104).

Another woman, perhaps even more obsessed with the *nandan* star than Miss Feng, is a young lady called Miss Shi 史. A teenager brought up by a family of means, Miss Shi behaves against the public expectation of a young educated woman and allows herself to indulge in the theatrical illusions that Mei Lanfang enacts. The youthful woman's everyday life is mainly comprised of two routine activities: attending Mei's performances and waiting for the star's carriage in front of her parents' house, which is located precisely on the actor's route to playhouses. Her excessive longing for the star eventually leads the young lady into a lunatic state. Consequently, her hallucinatory mind makes Miss Shi steadfastly trust that she has been betrothed to the star; and the infatuated young lady therefore maintains that she will marry no one other than the charismatic star (Mu 2012 [1919]: 104-110).

In addition to those enchanted women, the body of the *nandan* also appears to be a site of irresistible and perilous attractions for those socially and financially disadvantaged male spectators who are deprived of access to the privileged circle of Mei's (male) fandoms, namely the Mei Clique. In *MLF*, the zealous addiction to theatrical arts (and the artistry of *nandan* in particular) earns an impoverished doctor a nickname "Madman Wang" (王疯子, *Wang fengzi*). Like Miss Shi, Wang spends much of his everyday life stalking Mei Lanfang's carriage, in the hope that he may have a chance to approach the star when the actor enters or exits the vehicle. In order to fulfill his voyeuristic desire to

“see his fill” (看饱, *kanbao*), he even pays a bribe to the carriage’s driver, who thus agrees to accommodate Wang’s request for having Mei’s carriage stop in the presence of crowds of his fans for a prolonged period of time (Mu 2012 [1919]: 67-69). In this way, the character Mei Lanfang appears to be both a beneficiary and a victim of the new theatrical culture that he leads: on the one hand, the commercial triumph of his new plays helps the actor gain unprecedented popularity among Republican theatregoers; on the other hand, because of his exceptional power of seduction, the *nandan* becomes an object that constantly elicits voyeuristic gazes, the prey that persistently magnetizes stalkers, and sometimes even a target of overt sexual assault.

One day, the lunatic doctor ultimately manages to sneak into the star’s carriage and assaults the *nandan* by kissing Mei on the lips. This aggressive move unsurprisingly exasperates the star, who responds to the offender’s absurdity by slapping his face.⁴⁴ However, Mei’s physical punishment does not make the offender regret his wrongdoing. Instead of considering the incident as a moment of humiliation, Wang deems the slap that he receives from the star as a desirable gain from his bribery and a peculiar form of intimacy between him and the beautiful actor that he fetishizes. Hence, for “Madman Wang,” the “intimate” moment ironically appears to be a memorable event of life which he could boast about (Mu 2012 [1919]: 67-69).

⁴⁴ Intriguingly, the physically violent moment in the 1919 novel reminds us of the aforementioned slap that the character Mei Lanfang gives on the face of his fellow *nandan* in Chen Kaige’s 2008 cinema *Forever Enthralled*. Despite a rather long gap of time between the two representations of the *nandan*, the two Mei Lanfang characters both perform physical violence so as to disavow homoerotic connections with his fandom.

The Peculiar Bond:

Mei Lanfang and the Chinese Nation

Compared to the numerous fetishistic theatregoers, whose existence in *MLF* suggests that the *nandan*'s erotic body is a source of an irrepressible and perilous attraction, what makes the narrator of the novel more anxious about the burgeoning popularity of the *nandan* is an emerging correlation between the cross-dresser and the Chinese nation, a symbolic kinship that would continue to proliferate during the following years of Mei Lanfang's career (see Chapter Two for details about that the symbiotic relationship between the *nandan* and the nation was employed by both sides of the early Republican debate over *nandan* to either authorize or discredit female impersonation and also see Chapter Three for details about how this affinity between Mei Lanfang and the Chinese state continued to grow during the late Republican and early PRC years). For the narrator, while the perceived affinity between a theatre artist and a nation may remind one of the significance of William Shakespeare to Great Britain perceived by the noted British essayist Thomas Babington Macaulay (1800-1859) (Mu 2012 [1919]: 153), this mutual reference between the body of the *nandan* and that of the Chinese nation should be understood only in a most sardonic way:

In our China, we eventually have an iconic figure. All people in the society, regardless of class, gender, and age, find spiritual sustenance from him [...]

Even if the twenty-three provinces of China could all be disregarded, Mei

Lanfang should not be neglected because the body of Mei Lanfang contains the

souls of the entire population of some four hundred million. If Mei Lanfang were gone, our society would surely collapse without a bit of vigor. (Mu 2012 [1919]: 153)

One instance of this undesirable affinity between Mei Lanfang and the Chinese nation is perhaps the incident in which several congressmen who oppose the presidency of Yuan Shikai 袁世凯 (1859-1916) uphold Mei Lanfang as a more charismatic candidate for the position and therefore make the name of the female impersonator appear on the ballot for the presidential election of the Republic of China (Mu 2012 [1919]: 66). For the adversaries of Yuan, the nomination of Mei Lanfang, who is perceived to ironically enjoy great popularity among those with conflicting political interests, as a presidential candidate, of course is meant to ridicule Yuan Shikai and his supporters because of the socially inferior roles that theatrical performers (and female-role specialists in particular) traditionally assumed in Chinese culture. For the narrator, as many influential politicians and statesmen are mesmerized by the appeal of the female impersonator, the rise of the *nandan* is particularly ominous to the nation because the statesmen's collective admiration of Mei Lanfang is thought to be at the expense of their service to the nation—a traditional Confucian notion that attributes incompetent governance to the rulers' indulgence in sensual attractions (Mu 2012 [1919]: 66).⁴⁵

⁴⁵ For those who lived through the turbulent last decades of the Qing dynasty, theatre entertainments could be understood as a particularly harmful source that prevented the rulers from dedicatedly serving the nation. Empress Dowager Cixi, the *de facto* ruler of the late Qing dynasty, has been widely known as an enthusiastic patron of theatrical arts (and *jingju* in particular). Cixi's patronage of *jingju* stars, including Mei Lanfang's grandfather Mei Qiaoling, greatly catalyzed *jingju*'s development at the turn of the twentieth century (Yao 2006: 48-67; Liana Chen 2012: 21-36). However, because many

In this way, the *nandan*'s reformed *jingju* plays appear to fail to function as a potential vehicle for social advancement, a progressive role that many wished theatrical arts could assume in the procedure of constructing a modern Chinese nation. Instead, Mei's theatrical rendition of seductive women appears to merely champion the undesirable roles that the stage of traditional theatre was perceived to play in the late Qing dynasty as a site of eroticism and public entertainment and a source of moral corruption. Hence, for the narrator, the congressmen's tactics of nominating Mei Lanfang as a presidential candidate attests to not only an incompetent parliament but more importantly a nation in crisis.

When the *Dan* becomes the King

But an important question now arises: if in the late Qing the existence of *xiangong* was still a local custom of Beijing and the *siyu* players unquestionably belonged to a subaltern group, how could the former *siyu* player Mei Lanfang both in history and in *MLF* become a national idol shortly after the founding of the Republic? In *MLF*, what appears to substantially help the character Mei Lanfang broaden his reputation on the national scale are various forms of products of print capitalism, most notably periodicals that are transregionally distributed and circulated. In these periodicals, dramatic reviews and criticism played a pivotal role in advancing or jeopardizing a theatrical player's career. For this reason, Mei and his patrons strove to maintain amicable relationships with

have attributed the demise of the Qing to Cixi's incompetent governance, her patronage of *jingju* has been deemed as a hedonistic practice, which solicited criticism of moral corruption.

theatre reviewers; sycophantic critics composed laudatory reviews of Mei Lanfang's performances so as to flatter the actor's influential patrons. In *MLF*, several drama reviewers of this type are featured, including not only the critic-turned-playwright/director Qidong Yeren, who manages to approach Feng by fawning upon Mei, but also the Zhang 章 bothers, contributors to the drama review section of the pro-Yuan Shikai *Yaxiya ribao* 亚细亚日报 (or the Asiatic daily news), who play an active role in assisting Mei Lanfang in adopting the title of "King of the Theatrical World" (*jujie dawang*, 剧界大王) (see the ensuing pages for details).

However, for those who find the popularity of Mei Lanfang undeserved, newspapers also function as meaningful avenues to expose the hidden tricks behind the prominence of Mei Lanfang. A newspaper editor who stylizes himself as *Qiansui kulou* 千岁骷髅 (lit., "the one-thousand-year-old skull") considers Mei Lanfang's reputation to be unmerited and thus publishes negative reviews of Mei's performances in *Huangzhong ribao* 黄钟日报 (The yellow bell daily) to combat Mei's advocates. However, these caustic reviews of Mei are soon discontinued in the newspaper because of the interference of Ma Youwei. Along with the disgruntled *Yellow Bell Daily* writer, a young newspaper editor, alluding to the novelist Mu Rugai himself, publishes an unofficial biography of Mei Lanfang in the *Guowen News* to disclose the sordid history of the *nandan*'s route toward national prominence. As a consequence, the young critic's writings are withdrawn from the *Guowen News*, again, due to the pressure from the *nandan*'s formidable patron.

Other than dramatic reviews and biographical writings, theatrical polls, which rank and assess actors' physical charms and artistic talents through popular voting, an increasingly popular phenomenon of the early Republican theatrical culture, perhaps played a more consequential role in widening Mei Lanfang's national reputation. In 1917, Mei was awarded the distinguished title of "King of the Theatrical World" in a poll tailored by the Japanese-owned *Shuntien shinpao* 顺天时报 (Shuntien times), an influential Beijing-based Chinese-language newspaper funded by the Japanese Empire's Ministry of Foreign Affairs to serve as a mouthpiece for Japan's policy toward China. Thanks to the poll, for the first time in the history of *jingju*, a female-role specialist took a leadership position.⁴⁶ Hence, *jingju* historiography generally recognizes the 1917 *Shuntien Times* poll as a critical turning point that not only acknowledges the rise of Mei Lanfang in the world of *jingju* but also marks the advent of what has later been known as "the epoch of *nandan*," a historical era that witnessed a major shift of power between male-role specialists and male players of female roles in *jingju* (Goldstein 2007: 128; Dong 2010: 201).

As a result of the poll, Mei Lanfang acquired a total of 232,865 votes (see figure 2), defeating a rather long list of established players of male roles to capture the theatrical

⁴⁶ While the *dan* was essential to the artistry of *jingju*, famed *laosheng* actors generally occupied more prominent positions in the early historical phase of *jingju*. According to Joshua Goldstein, "from 1850 to 1910, *laosheng* actors bestrode the Beijing drama world, heading the majority of the capital's largest opera troupes" (Goldstein 2007: 13). Among notable *sheng* actors of the day was "far and away the most impressive figure" Cheng Changgeng 程长庚 (1811-1979), a *laosheng* actor and head of the Sanqing company (Goldstein 2007: 12-13). Following the passing of Cheng Changgeng, the *sheng* star Tan Xinpei, a protégé of Cheng, dominated the *fin-de-siècle jingju* stage in Beijing.

(*Shuntien shinpao* 1917: 5). It is noteworthy that although Mei Lanfang ultimately won the theatrical throne by a remarkable margin, Mei's opponents such as Yang Xiaolou had led the "king of drama" competition in the early phase of the poll; and it was only a few days before the official closure of the polls that Mei Lanfang managed to widen considerably his advantage over the rival *sheng* stars such as Yang Xiaolou, Yu Shuyan, and Liu Hongsheng 刘鸿升 (1874-1921). Mei's abrupt large-margin lead at the concluding stage of the competition for the distinction does seem to be in line with *MLF*'s representation of Mei's stunning triumph in the *Shuntien Times* election. In the novel, as the Mei Clique members regard the election as a rare opportunity to help Mei Lanfang to inherit the symbolic dramatic throne, Ma Youwei spends aggressively in buying a massive quantity of copies of the *Shuntien Times* so as to collect blank ballots. *MLF* thus explicitly attributes the *nandan*'s historic winning of the theatrical throne to excessive vote buying at the concluding stage of the election.

As a matter of fact, compared to the rival *sheng* players, a *nüdan* 女旦 (female players of female roles) *de facto* presented a more substantial threat to the ascendancy of Mei Lanfang in the 1917 *Shuntien Times* theatrical elections. One oft-neglected aspect of the legendary poll is the female actor Liu Xikui's 刘喜奎 (1894-1964) acquisition of the title of "Number One Female Actor" (*kunling diyi*, 坤伶第一). To garner this distinction, Liu acquired a stunning total of 238,606 votes, prevailing in the theatrical poll's section concerning female performers. Most strikingly, the *nüdan*'s total votes even surpassed those of the newly crowned king of theatre by a noticeable margin, in spite of the fact that

the two actors participated in two different sections of the comprehensive poll. The threat which Liu Xikui posed to Mei Lanfang is also confirmed by Mu Rugai's literary representation of the *Shuntien Times* poll, in which the emerging *nüdan* rather than the more widely recognized star Yang Xiaolou is generally considered by the Mei Clique to be a more competitive candidate to harvest more votes than Mei Lanfang (Mu 2012 [1919]: 140). This, according to the narrator, is because the female star is endorsed by an unidentified vice minister in the Republican government, who is no less politically and financially powerful than Ma Youwei (Mu 2012 [1919]: 140).

While it is beyond the scope of this chapter to detail the profound impact that the (re-)appearance of female actors on the Chinese stage exerted on the theatre of the early Republican era, it is worth mentioning that Beijing's theatrical stage in the first decade of the Republic witnessed the rise of a considerable number of female stars (mostly female-role specialists) performing in all-female drama troupes, who, according to a recent study of female actors in 1910s Beijing, "were extraordinarily popular, and their enactment was no less mesmerizing for the audience than the male *dan* performance" (Jiacheng Liu 2016: 50).

Indeed, as Mu's literary account and the results of the *Shuntien Times* elections both suggest, many of the first generation of modern female actors were as artistically talented and commercially triumphant as their contemporary *nandan* stars. However, unlike the newly emerged male stars of the 1910s such as Mei Lanfang and Shang Xiaoyun who not only continued to enjoy popularity in the following decades but also acquired the

esteemed status of master performers during their late-stage careers, the first generation of female *xiqu* actors in modern times generally had transient fame. For instance, born in the same year, 1894, as Mei Lanfang, the *nüdan* Liu Xikui embarked on an acting career which was thought by many to be as promising as Mei's before she retired from performing due to her marriage in the mid-1920s. Like Liu Xikui, Fu Zhifang 福芝芳 (1905-1980), a talented *nüdan* player and Mei's second wife, had to officially end her stage career at the age of only seventeen because of her marriage to Mei (Mei Baochen 1994: 137). In 1930, when the Tianjin-based *Northern China Pictorial* held an election for the "Crowned Queens of Female Players" (*nüling huanghou* 女伶皇后), all the winning players appeared to be youthful *nüdan* of the newer generation, attesting to the fading popularity of those *nüdan* who came to fame in the 1910s (*Northern China Pictorial* 1985 [1930], 488: 3).

Even for those female actors who specialized in male roles and were able to defy rigid gender norms onstage, different forms of social prejudice toward women, in particular their expected domestic obligations, appeared to be irresistible obstacles that prevented them from becoming more competitive rivals of their contemporary male stars. For instance, Meng Xiaodong 孟小冬 (1907-1977), perhaps the most excellent *kunsheng* 坤生 (or *nüsheng* 女生, female actors specializing in male roles) in the Republican era, generally suspended her acting career during her short-lived,

bloodstained marriage⁴⁷ with Mei Lanfang between 1927 and the early 1930s. It was not until their divorce that the female star formally returned to the stage and developed a more prosperous career during the remainder of the Republican era.

As a social exposé, *MLF* did not fail to note how marriage acted as a social barrier that prevented a female actor from advancing her acting career. The narrator notes the astonishing fact that Xian Lingzhi 鲜灵芝, a *nüdan* who was versed in both *bangzi* and *jingju* and considered to be as artistically competent as Liu Xikui, failed to make it to the finalist list in the “Number One Actress” competition. According to the narrator, Xian Lingzhi’s flagging performance in the critical poll was because as a married woman Xian lacked the financial support that Liu Xikui managed to solicit from her powerful patron (Mu 2012 [1919]: 145-149).

A product of the new Republican culture of voting, the *Shuntien Times* poll in *MLF* appears to be valued by the individual players, their fandom, and the publishing agency. As the competitions provide the stars with critical opportunities to magnify their reputations, dedicated theatregoers spend a considerable amount of money and time in casting votes to show their loyalty toward their beloved players. Prompted by the

⁴⁷ The mesmerized, lunatic fans of *jingju* that Mu Rugai constructs in *MLF* are reminiscent of a real-life spectator whose zealous passion for the star Meng Xiaodong eventually cost him his own life. In September 1927, an active shooter appeared at Feng Gengguang’s residence in Beijing with an intent to assassinate Mei Lanfang. The shooter was later identified as a fervent fan of Meng Xiaodong, who was deeply saddened by the female actor’s marriage with Mei. The assassination attempt turned out to be unsuccessful after the police were called to kill the shooter on the scene. The incident also caused the death of a Mei Clique member named Zhang Hanju 张汉举. A noted journalist and an admirer of Mei and Feng, the unblessed Zhang by accident was at Feng’s house and killed during the turmoil (Guan 1992 [1942]: 308).

apparent monetary interests, the Japanese-own newspaper⁴⁸ profits handsomely from holding the elections (Mu 2012 [1919]: 143-144). Consequently, instead of attributing the winning of the theatrical throne to the actor's artistic merits, *MLF* ascribes Mei Lanfang's acquisition of the distinguished title (suggestively Liu Xikui's as well) to the involvement of the affluent patrons in the election. By allowing the rich patrons to conduct excessive vote buying, the authoritative newspaper appears in *MLF* to be both a proponent and beneficiary of the corrupt theatrical culture that gravely disturbs the narrator of *MLF*.

Coda

The 1912 legal prohibition on *siyu* profoundly shaped Beijing's theatrical world, particularly the lifestyle of former *siyu* players. As their previous offstage roles as singing waiters and male courtesans were much stigmatized in the aftermath of the ban, former *siyu* residents' continued participation in the theatrical arts was premised upon the ultimate termination of their former way of living. In line with the society's expectations of *nandan* performers as civilized Republican male citizens, the dominant narratives (historical or fictional) of Mei Lanfang's early career either eradicate his history of being a *siyu* player (e.g. *Forever Enthralled* and Mei's influential autobiography) or help Mei to substantiate his termination of the former way of living (e.g. Qi Rushan's memoir), and these popular accounts of the *siyu*-trained performer Mei Lanfang's rise toward national

⁴⁸ In early Republican China, the *Shuntien Times* held arguably the two most influential polls in part because of the newspaper's sustained interest in the artistry of *jingju*. In addition to the 1917 poll that is discussed in *MLF*, the *Shuntien Times* held another poll in 1927 to promote new productions of *nandan* (*Shuntien shinpao* 1927: 5).

stardom in the early Republican era generally attribute the *nandan*'s stunning popularity to the actor's humility, his own theatrical genius, and the Mei Clique members' altruistic endorsement. Contesting this prevailing understanding of Mei's early history, Mu Rugai's inflammatory novel contends that the character Ma Youwei's patronage was fundamental to Mei Lanfang's success and the interactions between the *nandan* and his prime patron still resemble the notorious bond between a *xianggong* and a *laodou* in numerous ways. Hence, Mu's eponymous novel had to be suppressed because its very existence threatened twentieth-century China's most reputable female impersonator's legitimacy of practicing the *nandan* profession in the post-1912 context.

Chapter Two

“Artistic” Femininity: On Its Discursive Formation

Prologue:

The *Nandan* Paradox

While in the Introduction we discussed how the 1912 prohibition on *siyu* marked itself as the threshold of modern *nandan*, Chapter One analyzed how and why Mu Rugai’s aberrant interpretation of the former *siyu* actor Mei Lanfang’s rise to national fame has been repeatedly suppressed since the 1910s. The preceding pages have prepared us for a more in-depth discussion of the defining characteristic of modern *nandan*’s gender performance, namely the dichotomization of “artistic” femininity onstage versus “natural” masculinity offstage.

The attention of the following two chapters of the dissertation will be paid to the construction of the dichotomy between femininity onstage and masculinity offstage. While Chapter Three will scrutinize the representations and receptions of the modern *nandan*’s “natural” masculinity, this chapter focuses on the other end of *nandan*’s gender dichotomy—their purported “artistic” femininity onstage and its discursive formation. Because the aestheticization of the feminine effects onstage took root in the early Republican contestations over the legitimacy of *nandan* as well as the theoretical valorization of *xiqu* beginning in the same historical period, this chapter will also investigate the discursive practices that were centered around *xiqu* and its employment of female impersonation in the early twentieth century.

One of the most thought-provoking phenomena amid the modern transformation of *nandan* lies in the noticeable disjunction between *nandan* as a discursive subject and *nandan* as a practice. The tension between *nandan* as a prevailing cultural practice and *nandan* as a contested discursive subject came into being during the early phase of the Republican era, when the ascendancy of *nandan* stars such as Mei Lanfang began to solicit staunch critiques by those who saw their popularity as one blatant obstacle that prevented the Chinese from building a “civilized” modern nation. The incongruity between the *nandan*’s stunning national and international reputation and the unequivocal intellectual hostility toward female impersonation marked the early Republican era as a peculiar period of history, exemplifying the modern *nandan*’s most prevailing yet most contentious age.

Thanks to the painstaking theoretical effort to aestheticize female impersonation and likely also the *nandan*’s (such as Mei Lanfang’s and Cheng Yanqiu’s) memorable performances of masculinity during the Second Sino-Japanese War, outspoken condemnation of female impersonation appeared to be increasingly rare, if not entirely absent, toward the concluding phase of the Republican period. However, paradoxically, when the merits of *nandan* were ultimately affirmed in the domain of the discursive, female impersonation as a time-honored practice started to encounter a steady decline no later than the 1940s. The discord between female impersonation as an increasingly marginalized reality and *nandan* as a celebrated discursive entity hastened the tension between the practical and the discursive in *nandan*’s modern presence.

Given the thorny nature of that *nandan* paradox, this study has no intention to explicate the perplexing phenomenon in absolute, exclusive terms. Instead, I consider my own turn to the discursive on the subsequent pages as a suggestive direction. By underscoring the suggestive nature of this study, I invite fellow scholars and *xiqu* practitioners to join congenial exchanges of thought in order to facilitate a more nuanced comprehension of the baffling historical trajectory of twentieth-century *nandan*. The following sections will be arranged in a chronological order, beginning with a close look at the early Republican period, the formative stage of modern *nandan*. Distancing itself from much of the existing literature on “traditional” Chinese theatre and *nandan* of the early Republican era, which is often preoccupied with material innovations on the stage, such as the reinvented or reformed dramaturgy, repertoires, and *mise-en-scène*, this chapter will instead scrutinize *nandan* and traditional Chinese theatre as contested discursive subjects and hence pay particular attention to the contestations over the legitimacy of *nandan* and the theoretical articulations of *xiqu*. I intend to foreground the epistemological premises and postulations regarding *nandan*, which first appeared in the early Republican debates and have ever since been taken for granted in its subsequent periods. These premises and presuppositions, in my view, both legalized the practice of female impersonation in the post-1912 cultural and political context and put at stake a *nandan* practitioner’s own freedom of positioning himself along the masculine-feminine spectrum.

The ensuing pages will include the subsequent sections: 1) the early Republican

debates over the legitimacy of the so-called “integrated-sex acting” (or *nannü heyān* 男女合演, lit. “men and women playing jointly”) and *nandan*; 2) the theorizations of traditional Chinese theatre, in particular of female impersonation—its origins and development, its political necessity, its epistemological suppositions, its mechanism and rhetoric tactics, and, equally importantly, its limitations; and 3) the impact that the aestheticization of female impersonation has exerted on the *nandan*’s own hermeneutics of their stagecraft.

Part One: The Debates

The Early Republican Debate over *Nannü heyān*

In 1912, with the collapse of the Qing empire, its prohibition on female actors in theatre was officially lifted, though in the last decades of the Qing dynasty female performers did exist in substantial numbers in commercial theatres in China’s foreign concessions (in Shanghai and Tianjin in particular), where the Qing’s ban lacked legal jurisdiction (see Chou 1997: 138-141). The early Qing emperors’ repeated prohibitions banished women from the imperial stage (with notable exceptions⁴⁹) because the imperial court was concerned about female performers’ sexual appeal, which was said to threaten social morality.

⁴⁹ Under the reign of the emperor Kangxi, women were banned from performing theatrical arts initially in 1671 and again in 1709 (Wu and Stevenson 2010: 123). According to Joshua Goldstein, the Yongzheng emperor also promulgated a prohibition of female actors at court in 1723. This court’s prohibition “led to a customary ban on actresses performing in commercial theaters as well” (Goldstein 2007: 21). What needs to be added to Goldstein’s note is that the Qing’s ban on female actors was less effective in rural regions where amateur female performers often performed in *xiaoxi* 小戏 (minor drama) (see Chen 2005: 50-62).

In 1914, when a number of all-female troupes appeared on the stage of *xinju*⁵⁰ in Shanghai, they were soon banned by the Jiangsu Province Education Ministry, which accused the female actors of “offending our social morality” (Feng 1914: 11-12). The Jiangsu provincial government’s prohibition on female performers soon solicited dissatisfaction from those who felt sympathetic to these suppressed women. A theatre critic signed as “Xiao Tian” 啸天 (lit., “roaring to the sky”) refuted the government’s prohibitive text by contending that “the female impersonation that we are employing today is way too artificial. It can create difficulty in the development of plot and weakens the audience’s affective power. Therefore, when performing *zhengju* 正剧 (“serious drama” or “straight drama”)⁵¹ in the West and Japan, *nannü heyan* (sex-intergrated performance) has been exclusively employed”⁵² (Xiao Tian 1914: 6).

Yet, this sympathetic, defensive stance toward the female performers was not

⁵⁰ *Xinju* or *wenmingxi* was a modern Chinese theatrical form that was first introduced to Shanghai in 1907 by oversea Chinese students via Japan. The Chinese term “*wenming*” was a popular expression referring to anything modern (Western-style) or new at the turn of the twentieth century in China, “including modern-style wedding (*wenming jiehun*) and women’s unbound feet (*wenmingjiao*)” (Zhang 2005: 99). The project of building a “civilized” (*wenming*) nation necessarily entailed a departure from what was considered as “traditional,” “Confucian,” or “feudal” in the historical context.

⁵¹ *Zhengju* perhaps is a borrowed concept from the Japanese notion of *seigeki* (“straight theatre”). In the Japanese theatrical context, the principle of “straightening” refers to the practice of minimizing the stylized song and dance and creating a “dialogue-and-realistic-action”-centered theatrical form at the turn of the twentieth century (Kano 2001: 12). The employment of female actors to replace *onnagata* (male actors playing female roles in kabuki) was also part of the “straightening” agenda (Kano 2001: 77).

⁵² It is worth noting that Chinese *xinju* as an imported theatrical form was derived from Japanese *shinpa* theatre (the “new school/style” theatre) (Liu 2009: 36). As a matter of fact, contrary to Xiao Tian’s assertion, *onnagata* from professional kabuki troupes were employed to perform in both *shinpa* and *shingeki*, the two most prominent modern theatrical forms in Japan at the turn of the twentieth century (Morinaga 2005: 119-133).

appreciated by the *xinju* circles as a whole. Zhou Jianyun 周剑云 (1893-1967), a well-known *xinju* actor and critic, however, asserted that there was no need to employ women to assume *dan* roles because the number of competent *nandan* was sufficient to serve the demand (Zhou 1922: 749). In addition, Zhou found *xinju*'s portrayals of love scenes “repulsive” when *nannü heyán* was employed (Zhou 1922: 749). Zhou contended that “*xinju* pursues frankness and verisimilitude in every aspect. It is not like old drama, which is confined by rhyming and restricted by conventions [...] when two parties flirt with their eyes, as if the flirtation were real, they unconsciously expose all kinds of obscene behaviors right before the audience” (Zhou 1922: 749).

The discrepancy between Xiao Tian and Zhou Jianyun is worth a close reading here. Although they held markedly divergent views on the employment of female performers in *xinju*, it is striking to note that the two critics in fact shared a number of similar premises and assumptions. In his essay, when Zhou Jianyun contended that both the use of *nannü heyán* and *xinju*'s purportedly “realistic” style contributed to the discomfort appearing in the theatre's rendition of romantic themes, his point was thus not different from Xiao Tian's on the female performer's declared superiority in embodying “the real” when impersonating female roles. To put it in another way, what has been taken for granted by both authors was a purported affinity between the *nüdan*'s female sexed body and the “realness” within her thespian construction of female characters onstage. The *nandan*'s engagement in *xinju* acting, however, was deemed to be either “way too artificial” (Xiao Tian) or suggestively less “real” (Zhou Jianyun), presumably owing to

his male-sexed body.

The way in which the notion of “*nannü heyán*” appeared in this debate and in the early Republican cultural context at large also merits critical attention. As previously mentioned, the Chinese-language expression “*nannü heyán*” literally means “men and women performing jointly.” Such a notion of “integrated-sex acting” hence seems to suggest considerable flexibility within the choices of casting in terms of gender, for instance, having both male and female cross-dressers playing cooperatively or having both *nandan* and *nüdan* coexisting.

However, it is worth noting that for the early Republican intellectuals, the call for *nannü heyán* was never comprehended as a lenient proposal of allowing *nüdan* to perform jointly with female impersonators. As the dispute between Zhou and Xiao Tian suggested, the two authors both considered *nandan* and *nüdan* as mutually exclusive because the legitimacy of each seemed to exclude the possibility of employing the other. Their divergence only rests on judging the value of having female actors assuming female roles: Xiao Tian saw *nannü heyán* as an inevitable trend, while Zhou accused it of evoking obscenity. Furthermore, when Xiao Tian associated *nandan* with “artificiality” and thus proposed to employ *nannü heyán* to replace it, this ostensibly open-minded critic also suggestively disaffirmed the legitimacy of female performers of male roles on the anticipated stage, in spite of the ironic fact that those females specializing in male roles were integral to the all-female *xinju* troupes toward which he felt sympathetic.

Hence, the early Republican call for *nannü heyán* appears to be a both progressive

and oppressive agenda. While it acknowledged the legality of women's engagement in theatre acting, the early Republican notion of *nannü heyán* was in fact understood to be radically different from an all-encompassing stage on which male and female actors could not only play collaboratively but also impersonate dramatic roles of the opposite sex. In other words, for both sides of the debate, the prospect of adopting *nannü heyán* meant an ultimate exclusion of *nandan* (and certainly *nüsheng* as well) from the *xinju* stage, hence making the practice of *nannü heyán* a more restrictive mode of casting in which only men would play male roles and only women would perform female roles. Only under this shared premise was the debate over the legitimacy of *nannü heyán* in *xinju* pursued. Precisely owing to this communally held understanding, the controversies over the legitimacy of *nandan* in *xinju* and over the acceptability of female performers became an integral part of the mega-debate on *nannü heyán*.

Despite the fact that *nandan*, most notably Li Shutong 李叔同 (1880-1942) and Ouyang Yuqian 欧阳予倩 (1889-1962),⁵³ flourished in *xinju* in the beginning years after its initial introduction in 1907, so-called “gender-appropriate/straight casting” became a standard practice in *xinju* and its later form *huaju* in the 1920s. As *huaju* became an increasingly competitive rival of *xiqu*, the debate related to gender casting in

⁵³ It was in Japan where both Li and Ouyang cultivated their interest in performing *nandan* in *xinju*. Under the direction of famed *shinpa* actor Fujisawa Asajirō 藤澤浅二郎 (1866-1917), Li performed the role of Margurite Gauthier in the of the Chinese student theatre troupe *Chunliu she*'s 春柳社 (Spring and Willow Society) first production *La Dame aux Camélias* in 1907. By 1909, Ouyang replaced Li as the Spring and Willow's leading *nandan* when Li had halted his stage career (Liu 2009: 40-41).

theatrical arts gradually moved away from the circles of *xinju* to the realm of the “traditional” theatre, in which female impersonation had dominated the stage since the High Qing dynasty.

“Nature Is the Standard of All Arts”:

Rejecting Female Impersonation in Pursuit of “Real Art”

In the year 1917, as discussed in the last chapter, surpassing the famous *sheng* stars such as Yu Shuyan and Yang Xiaolou, Mei Lanfang prevailed in the *Shuntien Times* election for the “King of the Theatrical World.” In the same poll, the *nandan* Shang Xiaoyun won the championship in the section for nascent actors. The results of the *Shuntien Times* elections marked the decline of the *sheng*’s prominence on the *jingju* stage, reflecting the growing popularity of *nandan* as a collective in the early Republican era. By the mid-1920s, Mei Lanfang had visited and performed in Japan twice, in 1919 and 1924 respectively. In the late 1920s, under the direction of Qi Rushan, Mei’s agenda of performing in the United States was revealed to the public. The potential trip of Mei Lanfang elicited great attention from those who feared that the *nandan* would embarrass China in front of Western audiences. In July 1929, eleven pseudonymous authors wrote essays opposing Mei Lanfang and female impersonation in general in the “Mei Lanfang Issue” of *Wenxue zhoubao* 文学周报 (The literature weekly), a Shanghai-based literary periodical. In this special issue, critics⁵⁴ who signed as “Xi Yuan 西源,” “Ying Yi 影

⁵⁴ In the *Literature Weekly*’s 1929 special issue on Mei Lanfang, all of the essays attacking the *nandan* were signed by the authors under pseudonyms. To the best of my knowledge, among all of these pseudonyms, only “Xi Yuan” is identifiable, which is a penname used by Zheng Zhenduo 郑振

忆,” and “Jiu Zhi 九芝” condemned Mei Lanfang and female impersonation in general for contradicting the “principle of nature,” to which, they argued, “real art” should conform. Along with other Republican writers and artists such as Hong Shen and Lu Xun, they emphasized *naturalness* within the category of sex and sexuality and found the *nandan*’s androgyny “repulsive,” especially when a *nandan*’s body appeared to be sexually attractive to spectators of both genders.

In his essay entitled “Down with the Representative *Dan* Actor Mei Lanfang,”⁵⁵ Xi Yuan offered perhaps the most outraged call for excluding female impersonation from the theatrical stage. His resentment can be best exemplified by his denial of the *nandan*’s falsetto technique, which he identified as “the most unnatural, most brutal, most despicable, most artificial, and most absurd trick” (Xi Yuan 1929: 64). Xi Yuan regarded female impersonation as “artificial art” or “unreasonable art” in contrast to what he called “*real* art.” For the author, the *nandan*’s falsetto voice as well as his stage gait and posture, which constituted the performance of femininity, could arouse spectators’ “perverted” sexual desires. Moreover, the sexual appeal of the *nandan*’s performance was thought to be contradictory to the fundamental pursuit of “real” art (Xi Yuan 1929: 64). The phrase “sexual perversion” was repeatedly used by the early Republican critics to describe the *nandan*’s androgyny. For example, Hong Shen,⁵⁶ a leading playwright and

铎 (1898-1958), a prominent Republican writer, scholar, and literary critic.

⁵⁵ For an English translation of the essay, see Tian (2010: 75-78).

⁵⁶ Hong Shen studied dramatic arts in the United States from 1916 to 1922, when his credits included

screenwriter in modern China, once noted the reason why he attempted to avoid *nandan* and thus wrote a play featuring only male characters in his early career: “I feel extremely disgusted by female impersonation. Perhaps I have read too many of Prof. Freud’s books about sexual perversion. Once I see a man playing a woman, I immediately feel nauseated” (1988: 533). By squarely identifying the work of Sigmund Freud as the source of his knowledge about sexuality, Hong’s writing attests to the authoritative role that the Western essentialist theories of sexology played in shaping Chinese intellectuals’ understanding about female impersonation in the early twentieth century.⁵⁷

In addition to “perversion,” “Nature” was another ethically charged concept that was introduced to discredit the artistry of *nandan*. In an essay entitled “The Product of an Abnormal Society,” a critic who signed as “Ying Yi” contended that “*Nature* is the standard of all the arts [...] the first prerequisite of a real art is accordance with *Nature* [emphasis mine]” (1929: 71). However, *nandan* performers like Mei Lanfang were thought to act against this fundamental principle of art because of the usage of “unnatural pretence” (Ying Yi 1929: 71). For Ying Yi, the “unnaturalness” could be perceived in Mei’s vocal expression, in his costume, on his face, and through his body gestures (1929:

the staging of his own English-language play *The Wedded Husband* at Ohio State University in 1919 as well as attendance in George Pierce Baker’s influential “English 47” workshop on playwriting at Harvard University. For a recent study of Hong’s creative life in the United States and at Ohio State University in particular, see He 2015: 51-105.

⁵⁷ Megan Ammirati’s recent research intriguingly shows that there is no place in Freud’s own writings where the Austrian neurologist makes a direct association between female impersonation and sexual abnormality (2015: 177-184). For this reason, Ammirati suggests that “Hong Shen overreacted in his interpretation of Freud” (2015: 179). However, Hong’s “unorthodox application of psychoanalysis to treat men-performing-as-women as unnatural and sexually threatening,” as Ammirati adeptly notes, has remained dominant in much of *huaaju*’s history (2015: 179).

71). Here, the author's argument was reminiscent of the debate over *nannü heyán* in *xinju* between Xiao Tian and Zhou Jianyun in the 1910s, in which the two *xinju* critics presupposed a linkage between “artificiality” and *nandan*'s impersonation of female roles and postulated “the realness” within the *nüdan*'s theatrical construction of female characters. What was taken for granted collectively by Xiao Tian, Zhou Jianyun, and Ying Yi was a presupposition that there was some kind of essential femaleness which was granted to female bodies by nature and could by no means be captured by male actors.

However, despite the similar premise that was held by the authors of different historical periods, the contexts in which the cause of the “natural” (or the “real”) was employed to discredit female impersonation must be differentiated: in the 1910s, it was the *nandan* in *xinju* that appeared as a questionable existence mainly because the *nandan*'s rendering of female roles was considered to be at odds with the Western/Japanese import's supposedly “realistic” style; if in the 1910s, the legitimacy of *nandan* in the traditional theatrical institution remained unchallenged, by the end of the 1920s, *nandan* players in general became under criticism because the very practice of men performing women itself was thought by some to be contradictory to modern gender norms, even if the practice of cross-dressing was firmly limited within the boundary of the theatrical stage. Such a phenomenon perhaps not only reflected the increasing intellectual hostility that traditional Chinese theatre encountered in the immediate aftermath of the May Fourth New Culture movement (see Part Two of this chapter for a

discussion of the *New Youth* debate over *xiqu* in 1918) but also suggested that a higher degree of conformity to modern gender norms was desired as Chinese society moved from the 1910s to the 1920s.

“Nature,” as Judith Butler pinpoints in her much-acclaimed *Gender Trouble*, has been used to legitimize heterosexuality and the seemingly coherent categories of sex and gender within regulative discourses (1990: 7, 25-26). Under the disguise of *nature*, sex and sexuality appear to be biologically determined. However, the theatrical stage is often considered as a different realm of existence, thus a legitimate territory, a “protected space” for cross-dressing in imperial China, for example. Female impersonation was in fact employed to remove the Qing emperors’ anxiety over the female performers’ sexual accessibility. Such a cultural and political practice implied that, in the Qing dynasty, the sexual potentiality between male theatergoers and female performers was thought to be more morally threatening than the homoerotic relationship between boy actors and their male patrons. However, when some of these Republican intellectuals started to emphasize *naturalness* within the category of sex and consider the theatrical practice of men playing women as “perverted,” we can identify an overt alteration in the perception of sex and sexuality within Chinese society in the early twentieth century. In his study of Western medical discourse’s impact on the Chinese perception of body and sex in early Republican China, Frank Dikötter aptly synopsised this alteration:

In their use of medical science, new modes of writing about sexuality represented an epistemic shift away from Confucian discourse [...] No longer

were physical bodies thought to be linked to the cosmological foundations of the universe: bodies were produced by biological mechanisms inherent to “nature.”

(Dikötter 1995: 8)

In their critiques, the two *Literature Weekly* authors Xi Yuan and Ying Yi repeatedly used the term “art” (or “real art”) to challenge female impersonation. Other Republican-era writers also discovered the effectiveness of employing similar terms to condemn *nandan*. For example, Lu Xun, a Japanese-educated writer often considered to be China’s greatest of the twentieth century, once denied the artistry of *nandan* in a cynical tone. In his controversial 1933 essay entitled “The Most Artistic Country,” Lu Xun associated the artistry of female impersonation with the peculiarity of the nation and made a caustic remark reminding us of the similar mockery given by the narrator of *MLF*:

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 call it “the middle path!” What men see is “playing woman;” what women see is “man playing.” (in Li 2003: 15-16)

A poignant attitude toward *nandan* can be also found in the critic Jiu Zhi’s analysis of what contributed to the cause of Mei Lanfang’s popularity:

The husbands at first think “after all, he is a man, if I approach him, the wives would not blame me,” then they immediately think in the other way and fantasize Mei Lanfang as a woman. The wives at first think “after all, he impersonates a woman, if I approach him, the husbands would not blame me,”

then they immediately think through the other perspective and imagine Mei

Lanfang as a man. (Jiu Zhi 1929: 82)

It was true, as Lu Xun, Jiu Zhi, as well as Mu Rugai's literary account testified, that the body of *nandan* could be consumed in the erotic fantasies of both men and women. And indeed, as briefly mentioned in the preceding chapter, the integration of female spectators into public theatrical performances after the inaugurating years of the Republic had greatly contributed to the popularity of the *nandan* stars such as Mei Lanfang. However, the oversights of Lu Xun and Jiu Zhi lay in the problematic assumption that the male spectators consumed *nandan* as only a woman and the female aficionados were entertained by seeing *nandan* as exclusively a man.

In this sense, the two critics' analysis of the perception of *nandan* was trapped in a heterosexual discourse. A female impersonator, argues Lesley Ferris, "can be read as a woman, or as a disguised male, as a man who longs for other men, or as a mixture of the three. Depending on the variety of people in the audience, and depending on each individual's gender and sexual preference, each spectator will have their own personal response to such a performance" (Ferris 1998: 168). The critiques of Lu Xun and Jiu Zhi became less eloquent not really because they interpreted the *nandan*'s sexual appeal through the matrix of heterosexuality. The misfortune resided in the fact that they did not see there could be other readings of female impersonation from various spectators of different sexual preferences. For both of them, alternative readings and interpretations of a *nandan*'s body seemed to have not even made their way into the thinkable and the

imaginable. As a consequence, the dynamics of the appreciation of female impersonation were constrained, and many possible interpretations of a *nandan*'s body were left out, appearing as if the heterosexual hermeneutics of *nandan*'s allure are the only legitimate ones.

By putting the term “art” in quotation marks, Lu Xun emphasized the sexual and erotic allure within the appreciation of *nandan* and attempted to discredit the artistic quality within the practice of men playing women. As we will see in the following pages of this chapter, in the early Republican context, the advocates of female impersonation made painstaking efforts to legitimate cross-dressing in the name of art, since the very term “art” suggested to them an essence of fictionality and aestheticization, which often allowed “art” to be immune from a direct association with daily reality. By refuting female impersonation as “art,” the opponents of *nandan* insinuated that the authenticity of “art” lay in some kind of sublime attribute, which enabled an artistic work to be appreciated with little sexual enjoyment. In the moralists' minds, a theatrical art could be, and the consumption of this art should be, not at all sexually driven.

However, in practice, “appreciation of female impersonation,” argued Min Tian, “was based just as much on the actor's sexual dynamics as on his artistic quality” (Tian 2000: 82). The female impersonator's body, therefore, was always a site of eroticism. This tension between the actor's sexual appeal and the anxiety over immorality marked the turbulent history of female impersonation on a transcultural scale. As Lesley Ferris noted in a review of Michelene Wandor's studies on female impersonation during the

Elizabethan period, the cross-dressed boy actors “themselves must seduce the audience to the degree to get them involved and focused on the performance. It is this very eroticism and seductive power that has elicited enormous criticism against theatre at various points in its history” (Ferris 1998: 168).

The West/Japan Authorizes, the Chinese Validate

In the early Republican debate over the *nandan* issue, Western and Japanese receptions of *nandan* also shaped Chinese intellectuals’ own understanding about this indigenous convention. Both sides of the debate used foreign receptions of *nandan* to defend their own stance. In addition, each side of the debate found the effectiveness of using Western practices of female impersonation to endorse their own claim: the admirers of *nandan* attempted to establish female impersonation as a universal, transcultural practice, while the adversaries of *nandan* argued that Western convention of female impersonation was only associated with its “naïve past” and emphasized that gender-appropriate casting was the status quo.

In the “Mei Lanfang issue” of the *Literature Weekly*, Ying Yi and another critic who signed as “Qi Fan” 岂凡 shared their own observations of the receptions of *nandan* in the West and Japan. According to Ying Yi, the author and two other Chinese nationals were once invited to a family dinner in a Western country. During the dinner, the other two Chinese guests were asked to perform a piece of Chinese “opera” after the hostess noted that they were well-versed in the art. However, in observing two Chinese males were impersonating a heterosexual couple, the Western host “Mr. N” was astonished by

the Chinese gentleman's rendition of a female role. After learning that female impersonation was a convention on the Chinese stage, the host sighed, "How incredibly strange the society is" (Ying Yi 1929: 69). For Ying Yi, the experience showed that female impersonation was not a source of "national pride" that exhibited distinct Chinese aesthetic values, but rather a source of "a national shame," marking China as an "abnormal" country.

In line with Ying Yi, Qi Fan's essay entitled "Investigation on Mei Lanfang's Fame Abroad" challenged Mei Lanfang's supporters by introducing his own observation of Mei's first tour to Japan in 1919, a trip that was widely deemed as Mei's first substantial move to magnify his international fame. Qi Fan argued that the Japanese reviews of Mei Lanfang's performances were purposely chosen by Mei's endorsers to substantiate his success in Japan. In order to discredit Mei's reputation in Japan, the author cited a review appearing in *Asahi Shimbun* 朝日新聞, in which the Japanese critic complained about the noisiness of the *jingju* orchestra and claimed that Mei's singing was just like the moaning of a female cat having sex (Qi Fan 1929: 72).

Just as the challengers of *nandan* often used the West (or Japan) to discredit the Chinese practice of cross-dressing, the endorsers of *nandan* also saw the effectiveness of employing foreigners to defend their cultural position. For example, in June 1930, an author in *Shenbao* 申報 (The Shanghai daily), who signed as "Zhi 知," wrote enthusiastically to introduce the American reception of Mei Lanfang to Chinese domestic readers. The author stated that female impersonation was pervasive in Europe and

therefore the American audiences “found nothing strange” in Mei’s renditions of female roles (Zhi 1930: 17). For *nandan*’s endorsers, one of the common strategies to legitimate the cross-dressed Chinese males was to establish female impersonation as a practice transcending cultural boundaries. Hence, references to the Western practices of cross-dressing, particularly in ancient Greece and Renaissance Britain, were often cited to justify the Chinese practice of *nandan*. For instance, in a debate taking place prior to Mei Lanfang’s 1930 visit of the United States, contending against the majority opinion in China that the role type of *laosheng* was the most emblematic of *jingju* and therefore ought to be introduced onto the international stage, Qi Rushan underscored the affinity between *nandan* and the cross-dressed boys in the time of William Shakespeare and maintained that rather than the role type of *laosheng*, it was *nandan* that could be transculturally appreciated by Western audiences (Qi [1964] 1998: 137-139).

However, for the adversaries of female impersonation, this transcultural parallel was invalid to authorize the present Chinese practice. Song Chunfang 宋春舫 (1892-1938), a European-educated playwright and theatre critic, argued strikingly that it was “naïve” for artists to compare contemporary Chinese female impersonation to the time of Shakespeare because contemporary Western theatre had surpassed that epoch of “naivety.” Song asserted that, if female impersonation was maintained, “Chinese theatre would be no different from the theatre of Shakespeare in regards to its degree of naivety” (Song 1930: 283-284).

In the Chinese debate over the *nandan* issue, the West and Japan appeared to be

authoritative sites of reference. The Western/Japanese reception of *nandan* and the Western/Japanese theatre's (un-)employment of female impersonation were among the most effective references to validate the cause of either maintaining or eliminating the Chinese theatrical convention, and the logic that "the West/Japan authorizes, the Chinese validate" was highlighted in the arguments both for and against *nandan*.

The Female Actor as the Bleeding Woman and the Plaything in the Golden House

Among the early Republican writings upholding female impersonation, literary critic and newspaper editor Wang Pingling's 王平陵 (1898-1964) 1934 essay entitled "the Issue of Men Playing Women in National Drama" provided perhaps the most thorough endorsement of *nandan*. In the essay, Wang asserted that certain social and physiological factors had contributed to women's lack of competence in acting in *xiqu*. On the physiological aspect, he contended that *xiqu* actors, who were different from their counterparts in *huaju*, had to obtain strict physical training in singing, dancing, and martial arts since they were very young, but women cannot bear the burden of the *dan* role's demanding physical training. "Women," in the eyes of Wang Pingling, "often experience physiological changes such as obstetric delivery, menstruation, easy sentimentality, and excessive sexuality," and acting as a profession does not allow these physiological changes to negatively affect a performer's career (Wang 1934: 3).

First and foremost, for the author, women are both physically and mentally inferior to men by nature, which disqualified females from the *xiqu* stage. Simply ignoring the physical changes (such as the prominent vocal alteration during puberty) that may limit a

male actor's acting potential, Wang justified the popularity of *nandan* by suggesting an essential superiority rooted in male bodies as well as in their mental qualities. Wang's point resonated with the physiological knowledge about women, which emerged and was unequivocally publicized in the early Republican texts of medical education (many of which targeted general readers). For instance, menstruation was claimed as a source of women's mental instability. "The bleeding female," as testified by the physiological treatises in that period of time, "quickly became tired and irritable, was easily excited and might withdraw into a state of depression" (Dikötter 1995: 41).

Second, when contending that women were not competent in performing female roles, Wang seemed to neglect the historical contributions of female actors on the Chinese stage. Prior to the Qing dynasty's prohibition on women's participation in acting, women not only impersonated *dan* roles but also demonstrated their excellence in performing a variety of male role types. Chinese female performers' competence in acting is exemplified in Xia Tingzhi's 夏庭芝 (ca. 1300- ca. 1375) *Qinglouji* 青楼集 (The Green Bower Collection), a fourteenth-century text that documented the artistic activities of over a hundred female actors. Xia noted that many of these Yuan-dynasty (1271-1368) women were competent in impersonating both female and male characters onstage and some of them were even specialists in portraying male gangsters in *lulinxi* 绿林戏, a genre of classical Chinese drama featuring stories about rebels and outlaws (Xia 1959). Wang's assertion thus appears to be invalid if these female performers are viewed in the context of the larger picture of Chinese theatre history.

In fact, the notion that women were less efficient at artistically representing women in theatrical performances was not peculiar to the Chinese critic Wang Pingling. In early twentieth-century Japan, what was parallel to the Chinese controversy of the *nandan* issue was a fierce debate over whether women should be introduced to take up the roles of *onnagata* in kabuki theatre. For the adversaries of female performers, women were less capable of performing female roles onstage due to not only their physical but also their psychological inferiority. The theatre critic Kojima Koshū 小島孤舟 argued that women's psychological activities were restricted by what he called "simple brain operations" and "monotonous functioning" (in Kano 2001: 22). Therefore, if a woman was employed to perform a role with a complicated personality, she "with her simple brain operations and monotonous psychological functioning could never do justice" (in Kano 2001: 22).

The prejudice toward women's capability in theatre acting was certainly not unique to the East Asian context. The very famous Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, in his essay entitled "Women's Parts Played by Men in the Roman Theater," also unreservedly recognized male superiority in imitating female roles onstage. In the eyes of Goethe, only males could competently play the part of the female roles in Goldoni's play *La Locandiera*, and women's engagement would make the scenes appear "offensive" (Goethe 1993: 47-51). For Goethe, "in theatrical performance," argued Lesley Ferris, "male actors portray female characters more artistically and more effectively than real women" and "women had no access to mimesis" (Ferris 1998: 167). Female performers'

inferiority to their male counterparts, as Goethe hinted in his essay, not only lay in their physical or mental limitations (echoing what the two East Asian critics suggested) but rather resulted from women's "natural" lack of creativity in theatrical presentation. Hence, "women," as we could see in the critiques of the three critics above, had been transculturally depicted as lower beings whose "nature" could be arbitrarily associated with inferior attributes.

For Wang Pingling, not only would women's physical and mental inferiority prevent them from efficiently impersonating female roles in *xiqu*, but also women's lack of self-determination would disturbingly affect their careers. Wang went on:

There is a fact that would prevent actresses from being famous. In this male-centered time, every actress with potential would be purchased and locked in a golden house as a plaything before she reaches stardom. There are so many examples of this in the past and at present. If this trend does not alter, how could the national drama as a profession abolish the system of men playing women!

(Wang 1934: 3)

While contending that female performers would be more likely to prostitute themselves, Wang seemed to forget that male performers too could prostitute themselves, and as a matter of fact, as the previous chapter demonstrates, male patrons' sexual exploitation of *nandan* actors was pervasive in late imperial China, and in fact the public's suspicions about and anxiety over the homoerotic impulses within the literati-*nandan* relationship extended well into the early Republican years. Although the "male-centered" society was

condemned for its oppression of women, female actors, in the depiction of Wang Pingling, also appeared to be self-indulgent and hedonistic and were seen as likely to cross the boundary between theatrical players and an array of socially disresponsible roles (such as mistresses, concubines, and sex workers) that were often associated with sexually desirable women. In this sense, Wang's objection to women's participation in *xiqu* acting resonated with the local government ban on female performers in Jiangsu Province in 1914, where the officials then were anxious over the female actors' possible association with prostitution.

The kinship drawn between female performers and a variety of socially disreputable roles reminds us of what Tracy Davis has found in her study of the rise of female actors in Victorian Britain, that "the similarities between the actress's life and the prostitute's or demimondaine's were unforgettable and overruled all other evidence about respectability" (Davis 1991: 69). Like courtesans, female actors were perceived as "vessels of physical and sexual beauty" and "moved in society as attractive and desirable beings" (Davis 1991: 69). Just like the "concerns about respectability and female chastity" often prevented daughters from families of means from joining the profession of acting in the Victorian era (Davis 1991: 72), in early twentieth-century China, youthful women, in particular those within the upper- and middle- class ranks of the Republican population, were often discouraged from engaging in theatre acting owing to similar

social concerns.⁵⁸ In both cultural contexts, female performers were depicted as more likely to cross the borderline between theatre performance and the socially disreputable roles than their male counterparts. Although appearing as a critic of patriarchal society, Wang negated women's access to acting by reaffirming the misogynist understanding of female performers. This mythical image constructed the female actor as attractive, hedonistic, deficient in self-determination, and destined to become a sexual object of men.

The Aestheticized (Male) Body

In addition to the above-mentioned social and physiological factors that were thought to contribute to females' lack of competence in acting in the "national drama," Wang found that the male "aestheticization" of the *dan* role also had made the art itself inaccessible to female performers. Strikingly, he contended that *nandan* did not impersonate "genuine women" but rather "women with a bit of male characteristics." Wang explicated that the female impersonation had been "aestheticized" (*shenmeihua*, 审美化), "made artistic" (*yishuhua*, 艺术化), and "theatricalized" (*xijuhua*, 戏剧化) through *nandan*'s [male-sexed] bodies (Wang 1934: 3). Therefore, "once females were really employed to assume female roles," their embodiment of female characters "would be less 'natural' and 'tasteful' compared to that of their male counterparts" (Wang 1934:

⁵⁸ According to Liu Yingqiu 刘迎秋 (1919-1998), a *nüdan* of *jingju* and a disciple of Cheng Yanqiu, when she expressed an interest in studying *jingju* with the *nandan* star in 1939, both Cheng and her father strongly discouraged her from becoming a professional *jingju* actor, considering the fact that Liu was then a female college student and raised up by a reputable household (Liu Yingqiu 2010 [1982] : 516).

3). The author is notable for his recognition of the influential role of cultural convention (at least onstage) in authorizing what kind of gender performance could be allowed to appear as “natural.” However, by underscoring the difference between the “women” onstage and women in everyday life, Wang, like many of his opponents, also seems to be trapped by biological determinism since it was an assumed biological essence that constituted what he called “genuine women.”

In addition to the identification of the “aestheticized” bodies of *nandan*, Wang further underlined an aesthetic distinction between the “national drama” and two Western imports, namely *huaaju* and film. He went on:

As I mentioned earlier, the movements of the national drama are all abstract [*chouxian*, 抽象], overtly distinctive from *huaaju* and film’s inclination toward the realistic [*xieshi*, 写实]. All expressions of *huaaju* and film must be as realistic as possible; therefore, the system of “men playing women” or “women playing men,” as an utmost obstacle that bars the realistic nature, should surely be abolished. Yet, in the national drama, it only needs to symbolize abstract meanings, and its interest lies in its reasonable expression of its “hypocrisy” [*xuwei*, 虚伪], [and] the spectators do not demand it to be “realistic” [*zhenshi*, 真实]. Hence, performances in the national drama may employ women to play female roles, which would be rather good; if men playing women can make a better expression, it is also fine. (Wang 1934: 4)

Excluding the contemporary practice of cross-dressing in both Western theatre and

film from consideration, Wang further justified the Chinese employment of female impersonation by pointing to a supposed aesthetic distinction between indigenous Chinese theatre and Western drama and film. The above-quoted passage echoes what I call “valorization-by-aestheticization,” a strategy that had been widely practiced prior to Wang by those who intended to theorize and thus valorize traditional Chinese theatre and its use of female impersonation when the indigenous theatrical form began to encounter competition with *huaju* and film. As a matter of fact, the Chinese aestheticization of the indigenous theatre, in particular of female impersonation, worked in tandem with the Chinese theorization of this very art form throughout the Republican era and beyond. Not only did the practice of theorizing *xiqu* by and large amount to that of aestheticization in the intellectual discourse on traditional Chinese theatre, but also the strategy of “valorization-by-aestheticization” has remained salient ever since the modern metaphysical contemplation of the indigenous theatre first came into being.

Part Two: Chinese “aestheticism” vis-à-vis Western “Realism”

The postulation of some kind of aesthetic essence within traditional Chinese theatre took its origins no later than the 1910s, when the first set of intellectual debates over the legitimacy of the indigenous drama emerged. In 1918, *New Youth*, the mouthpiece publication of the New Culture Movement, published a special issue on the Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen. The European realistic drama with its reformist thought appealed to the intellectuals, who held a belief that *xiqu*, which was generally referred to as the “old drama” at the time, lacked the same capacity to contribute to the ongoing

political and cultural transformations. In its subsequent issues of the periodical in 1918 (in particular, the fourth issue of the fifth volume, later often referred to as the “drama reform” issue), the *New Youth* contributors, many of whom were affiliated with the prestigious Peking University, penned down their dissatisfaction with the indigenous dramatic form.

Considering the “old drama” as a low-end genre within an already “deteriorated” Chinese literary tradition, Fu Sinian 傅斯年 (1896-1950), who was then studying at Peking University, wrote: “contemporary popular old dramas are not worthy of the name of literature [...] While Chinese literature is not attentive to structure, the old drama pays even less attention to it. Without twists and turns, the structure of the old drama is always ‘as straight as the arrow and as flat as the bottom.’ A myriad of Chinese plays were produced in the same mold—there is one omnipotent formula” (Fu 1918: 328-329). In line with his student, in his essay entitled “Evolutionary Notion of Literature and Drama Reform,” Hu Shi 胡适 (1891-1962), then a professor of Peking University, viewed the entire history of literature (with drama as its subordinate) as a trajectory of linear progression and evolution. He thus likened a series of components of the “old” drama, including the use of masks and falsetto chanting, to “breasts of men,” which were thought to be degenerate organs and serving no utilitarian function. By advocating eliminating *xiqu*’s stylized elements, Hu anticipated that *xiqu* could emulate its Western counterpart

and eventually become a speech-and-realist centered form⁵⁹ (Hu 1918: 313).

If Hu still considered *xiqu* as a form retaining a potential to advance along the evolutionary ladder, Zhou Zuoren 周作人 (1885-1967), a Japanese-educated writer and brother of Lu Xun, defied the basis of such a prospect. For Zhou, who appeared to be the most critical of *xiqu* among all its adversaries, traditional Chinese theatre was not only “barbaric,” but also “pernicious to public morals and human hearts” (Zhou 1918: 526-527). As a negative embodiment of China’s feudal past, the “old drama” was claimed to possess “no value of existence,” and, as suggested by the title of Zhou’s essay, “should be abolished” (Zhou 1918: 526-527).

Zhang Houzai and the *New Youth* Debate over Chinese “Old Drama”:

The Advent of the Discourse of “Chinese Aestheticism”

Although the majority of the *New Youth* contributors held a hostile stance toward the indigenous drama, an exceptional account did exist. Appearing as the solitary yet crucial advocate of *xiqu* in the *New Youth* contestation, Zhang Houzai 张厚载 (aka., Zhang Liaozi 张镠子, 1895-1955), also a student of Peking University, shared his genuinely original comprehension of *xiqu*’s dramaturgy. In an opening section entitled “Chinese Old Drama is Pseudo-Imagic [*jiaxiangde*, 假象的],” Zhang defended the much-censured Chinese drama with gusto (due to the originality of Zhang’s thesis, I quote him at length):

⁵⁹ Here, once again, the notion of “straightening” the stylized traditional form into a Western-like speech-and-realist-action centered theatrical genre appeared at the turn of the twentieth century, reminiscent of Xiao Tian’s call for *zhengju* and the Japanese pursuit for *seigeki* (“straight theatre”), a reformed theatrical form conceived by Kawakami Otojirō 川上音二郎 (1864-1911) (Kano 2001: 12).

The number one merit of Chinese old drama lies in the fact that all events and objects are expressed through the means of abstraction [*chouxian*, 抽象], [and] the abstract is spoken of in relation to the concrete [*jutide*, 具体的]. Chinese old drama has remained abstract but never been concrete from day one. Among the six means of inventing Chinese characters, one is termed as “compound ideograms” [*huiyi*, 会意]. Compound ideograms are “recognizable through indication” [*zhierkeshi*, 指而可识]. All events and objects in Chinese old drama are depicted through the approach of “recognition through indication.” For instance, [the movement of] holding a horse whip and upraising a leg signifies the action of getting upon a horseback [...] It proves to be convenient with the employment of the method of “recognition through indication.” Someone jested that among things under the Heaven the theatrical stage is the most spacious. Why? It is because it appears spatially ample for some eight hundred thirty thousand soldiers with horses that Cao Cao dominates to move back and forth on the stage [...] Abroad it must however build larger playhouses to stage martial plays, and one thus would all of a sudden realize that it would be better for theatrical performances to be abstract, and they can be by no means [sufficiently] concrete. If it is performed in a concrete way, how can the stage accommodate eight hundred thirty thousand people? [...] Because it is not possible to detail every aspect, then it would be better to be abstract in each way.

(Zhang Houzai 1918: 344)

Unlike Hu Shi, who considered Chinese drama to be lagging behind on the evolutionary ladder, Zhang rejected maintaining the very perspective of evolution and hence acknowledged *xiqu*'s coevalness with its Western counterpart. However, while the two forms were recognized as coetaneous, they each were purported to possess distinct aesthetic pursuits—whereas Western theatre was said to be “concrete” *on all aspects*, “*all events and objects*” in Chinese theatre remained “abstract” “*from day one*” [emphasis mine]. For Zhang, the means of abstraction was not peculiar to the theatre alone but rooted in the indigenous culture at large, as it is shown through the ancient invention of Chinese written characters. And therefore the theatre, along with the written characters and other forms of Chinese culture, embodied some kind of “abstractionism” which managed to transcend historical specifications and penetrate into a panoply of aspects of Chinese culture. For the author, precisely due to its interest in the “abstract,” the dramaturgy of Chinese theatre appeared to be rather advantageous, compared to that of its Western counterpart. It was because Western theatre’s supposed emphasis on the “concrete” seemed to be inherently problematic—the theatrical stage with its physical boundary was in nature deficient in meeting the demand for a sufficiently specified mimesis, especially when it came to depict a subject such as warfare.

Other than the originality of Zhang’s thesis and his admirable defensive gesture toward *xiqu*, what were equally noteworthy were his questionable references to certain empirical facts and his oversimplification of the considerable diversity within the aesthetic aims of a variety of Chinese and foreign (both Western and non-Western)

theatrical forms. Perhaps more troubling than the empirical flaws and conceptual omissions was the dualistic thinking that was inherent in Zhang's imagination, along with the rhetorical tactics that made the imaginative appear to be somehow factual.

Certainly, one might read the notion of Chinese "abstractionism" as a form of reverse Orientalism. The legitimacy of such a reading not only lies in the fact that Chinese drama was perceived by Zhang to be mutually exclusive to, sharing little common ground with its Western counterpart, and but also rests on the purported trans-historical "abstractionism," a dubious assertion that seems to so neatly fit into a Western imagination of the "Oriental" arts. While the existence of some kind of self-Orientalizing tendency within Zhang's articulation of the Chinese-Western aesthetic dichotomy is undeniable, the author's gesture toward the Oriental Self is still notably distinct from a conventional Orientalist stance taken by his opponents in the *New Youth* debate, especially when Zhang strikingly asserted that the Chinese old drama was by no means artistically and intellectually inferior to its Western counterpart.

With its self-assured affirmation of *xiqu*'s aesthetic merits as well as the profound limitations that its dualistic basis generated, the discourse of Chinese theatrical "abstractionism" has contributed to political agendas that have been both historically progressive and epistemologically restraining. Since the advent of Zhang Houzai's influential account in 1918, "Chinese abstractionism" with its numerous variations

(“Chinese aestheticism,” “Chinese symbolism,” “Chinese anti-realism,” etc.)⁶⁰ has embraced a positive affirmation of indigenous values to combat Western hegemonic cultural codes under the historical contexts in which *xiqu*’s cultural values were questioned or even denied by China’s leading intellectuals and prevailing forms of cultural ideology (e.g. May Fourth radicalism). However, under the same historical circumstances, the discourse of “Chinese aestheticism” has virtually upheld a dualistic divide that has suppressed a more refined negotiation of cultural differences (or cultural *différance*). In addition, as we shall see in the last section of the chapter, the discourse of “Chinese aestheticism” has been mobilized to condemn a *nandan*’s presentation of femininity outside *xiqu*’s semiotic system. Hence, the discourse of “Chinese aestheticism” has presented two interrelated, mutually inclusive facets: on the one hand, it has been a discourse of value confirmation; on the other hand, it has functioned as a discourse of political and ideological oppression.

Aestheticizing the Indigenous Drama in Republican China:

The Specter of Aesthetic Dualism

With the merits and constraints of the discourse of “Chinese aestheticism,” twentieth-century Chinese theoreticians left a copious amount of writings on *xiqu* theory and criticism. One of the first occasions in which Zhang’s theoretical insights recurred was in

⁶⁰ For the sake of consistency, I use the term “Chinese aestheticism” instead of “Chinese abstractionism” in the following part of the dissertation since “aestheticism” as a general term is able to signify a variety of more specific terms that have been used by different Chinese authors to describe the essence of *xiqu*—whether it is “abstract,” “symbolic,” “expressionist,” “ideographic,” or “anti-realistic.”

the mid-1920s during the National Drama Movement (*guoju yundong*, 国剧运动), whose agenda was to emulate in China the achievement and strategy of the *fin-de-siècle* Irish Literary Renaissance. Echoing Zhang Houzai's notion of Chinese "abstractionism" but employing different terms, Yu Shangyuan 余上沅 (1897-1970), a US-educated theatre artist and the most prominent proponent of the movement, identified Chinese theatrical tradition as "non-realistic" (*feixieshi*, 非写实) and "symbolic" (*xieyi*, 写意, lit., "inscribing the meaning") (Yu 1927: 193-201). Yu and his cohorts perceived an aesthetic chasm between (Chinese) "symbolism" and (Western) "realism" and thus proposed to bridge the artistic gap in their proposed national dramatic form "by Chinese, of Chinese, and for Chinese" (Goldstein 2007: 175).

Beginning in the late 1920s, intellectuals such as Qi Rushan and Xu MUYUN 徐慕云 (1900-1974) also theorized the Chinese theatre by developing analogous aesthetic oppositions. For Qi Rushan, "the crucial difference between Chinese and Western drama was not that Chinese was musical and Western spoken, but that the latter one was 'realistic' while the former was 'aesthetic' (*meishuhua*, 审美化, lit. aestheticized)" (Goldstein 2007: 153). If, for Zhang Houzai, it was the compound ideograms that attested to the origin of the trans-historical abstractionism that drama was thought to preserve, Qi Rushan made a similar cultural excavation by locating the drama's supposed aesthetic roots in ancient Chinese art forms, in particular dance, a dubious finding that reprised the purportedly time-resistant nature of "Chinese aestheticism."

Qi elaborated the point in a later essay: "the old drama is derived from ancient dance,

all the actions are choreographed [...] In dance the posture must be beautiful *in every way* [...] Because *every moment* must be beautiful, realism must be eliminated, it [therefore] comes to be aestheticized [emphasis mine]” (Qi 1964: 1335). Hence, “not one moment of Chinese drama,” as Joshua Goldstein finds out, seemed to be able to escape Qi’s comprehensive scope of aestheticization (Goldstein 2007: 153). By articulating the aesthetics of Chinese drama in sheer contrast to realism, which was alleged to be exclusive to Western arts, Qi constructed his theory of the national drama through “a binary opposition that essentialized Western drama as purely mimetic and Peking opera as wholly nonmimetic” (Goldstein 2007: 153).

Xu Muyun, a prominent Republican theatre historian and educator, even made the very aesthetic dualism all-encompassing by postulating an essential aesthetic division between the Western and Oriental arts in general—a thought that remained parallel to the theorization of Chinese fine arts in the early Republican years. In his ground-breaking 1938 monograph *The History of Chinese Drama*, Xu asserted that “all arts in the world, no matter ancient or modern, fall into two umbrella categories, namely the school of symbolism [*xieyi*] and that of realism [lit., “inscribing the real,” *xieshi*, 写实]” (Xu 1977 [1938]: 298). The Oriental arts—and, of course, Chinese theatre in particular—remained within the clusters of symbolism, compared to Western arts which belong to the realistic tradition (Xu [1938] 1977: 298). Contending that “the symbolic” was Chinese drama’s “exclusive meaning and most authentic soul,” Xu’s distilled his interpretation of the fundamental aesthetic characteristics of Chinese drama into a single memorable phrase

“*chuanshen xieyi* 传神写意” (lit., “conveying the spiritual and inscribing the meaning”)

(Xu 1977 [1938]: 299-300).

Xiqu as a “Realistic” Art:

Counter-Discourse of “Chinese aestheticism” during the Seventeen Years

Despite its prevalence in Republican China, the notion of “Chinese aestheticism” encountered growing ideological difficulty in the People’s Republic of China toward the end of the Seventeen Years, when realism was epitomized as the solitary politically correct paradigm of artistic expression. On the one hand, those who articulated *xiqu* in aesthetic terms felt compelled to remain adherent to the official ideology and position *xiqu* within or adjacent to the domain of realism. On the other hand, by using “realism” as a slippery, almost all-encompassing category, they continued to seek to maintain an aesthetic distance between *xiqu* and *huaju* in order to valorize *xiqu* for its aesthetic distinctness.

This new strategy was perhaps best deployed by Jiao Juyin 焦菊隐 (1905-1975) and Huang Zoulin 黄佐临 (1906-1994), two leading scholar-artists during the early PRC era. Jiao and Huang shared considerable similarities in their career paths: they were both European-educated (Jiao received his doctorate from the Sorbonne in 1938 and Huang earned a degree from Cambridge University in 1937); they both served as directors-in-residence at the PRC’s most influential People’s Art Theatres, in Beijing and Shanghai respectively; they were both known, primarily, as directors of *huaju* but with keen interests in *xiqu*; last but not least, they were both dedicated to the study of theatre

aesthetics and theory in addition to artistic praxis.

Refuting the belief that “*xiqu* is symbolic [象征的, *xiangzhengde*],” Jiao Juyin strikingly contended in 1963 that “*xiqu*, from its content to its means of expression, is all realistic [...] [because] the conventions and movements of *xiqu* also have their basis in actual life and are used to represent actual life” (Jiao 1979 [1963]: 212). Jiao’s insistence on the affinity between *xiqu* and real life distances him considerably from his precursors such as Qi Rushan, who understood *xiqu* as a “wholly nonmimetic” form. Yet, any attempt to situate *xiqu* into a realistic/mimetic tradition would inevitably put itself in a thorny position, when one takes *xiqu*’s pronounced use of stylized elements into account. In order to justify his stance, Jiao employed a set of different terms to characterize *xiqu*’s principles and methods, including, most notably, *xunixing* (虚拟性, “the subjunctive nature”) (Jiao 1979 [1963]: 21).

According to Weihong Bao, the Chinese term *xuni* “refers more specifically to the stylized mimetic movement that is consciously differentiated from the purely mimetic (*monide*, 模拟的)” (Bao 2010: 257). But due to the shared root verb *ni*, which means “measuring, copying, and resembling,” Bao finds that “the linguistic affinity between *xunide* and *monide*” also suggests “a kinship between subjunctive and mimetic” (Bao 2010: 257). Bao’s nuanced reading of the coinage of the term “*xuni*” sheds light on Jiao Juyin’s articulation of the aesthetic features of *xiqu*. On the one hand, the concept of “*xunixing*” postulates a mimetic nature of the traditional theatre and thus discursively attests to its kinship with real life, because of the shared root word “*ni*.” On the other

hand, the notion of the “subjunctively mimetic” nevertheless distinguishes itself from the “purely mimetic” and hence helps *xiqu* maintain certain aesthetic distance toward *huaju*.

Labeling Mei Lanfang as “a master of realism,” Huang Zuolin, also touched on the differences within the aesthetic pursuits between Chinese and Western theatres in the early 1960s. Huang viewed that the main divergences of contemporary Chinese and Western theatrical paths were embodied by the differences within the views and methods of three prominent theatrical figures of the twentieth century, namely Mei Lanfang, Konstantin Stanislavsky, and Bertolt Brecht, who met each other during Mei Lanfang’s legendary tour of the Soviet Union in 1935. For Huang, although all the three theatre artists ought to be regarded as “masters of realism” and sharing something in common, their methods presented salient differences and the most basic one lay in the ways in which the “fourth wall” was dealt with—“Stanislavsky believed in the ‘fourth wall,’ Brecht wanted to demolish it, while for Mei Lanfang such a wall did not exist and so there was never any need to pull it down, since the Chinese theatre has always been so highly conventionalized that it has never set out to create an illusion of real life for the audience” (Huang Zuolin 1981: 19).⁶¹ In order to better explicate what he meant by “conventionality,” Huang employed the term “*xiayi*” (写意), echoing Yu Shangyuan and Xu Muiyun in the early Republican era. Admittedly, having difficulty with finding an apt

⁶¹ This passage first appears in Huang’s 1962 essay entitled “On Conceptions of Theatre” (*Mantan xijuguan*, 漫谈戏剧观). In 1981, Huang published an English-language article titled “Mei Lanfang, Stanislavsky, and Brecht: A Study in Contrasts,” which included a substantial portion of the 1962 essay. The English-language passage that I quote here is Huang’s original.

English equivalent for the term, Huang provisionally translated “*xieyi*” into “essentialism” in 1980. By comparing Xu Beihong’s 徐悲鴻 (Péon Hsu, 1895-1953) Chinese ink paintings⁶² with those of Western painters, Huang perceived a Chinese-Western aesthetic opposition between “essentialism” versus “realism,” which was later rephrased by Huang as “ideographic” versus “photographic”⁶³ (Huang Zuolin 1981: 19-20; Mei Shaowu 2004: 124).

The paradoxical discord between the attempt to enlist Mei Lanfang as “a master of realism” and the discursive making of traditional Chinese art as the aesthetic other of the realist tradition foreground the complicated political condition in which the writings about theatre aesthetics were brought into being. On the one hand, “realism,” as Faye Chunfang Fei discerningly observed, “is not only an artistic style but is also an issue of a particular ideology” (Fei 1999: 161). Due to this ideological stipulation, the most efficient strategy of valorizing the traditional theatre and its practitioners was to include them as part of a grand “realist” tradition. On the other hand, perhaps in part because of an ostensible tie between *huaju* and realism and in part because of the ubiquity of stylized elements in *xiqu*, the theoreticians nevertheless saw the necessity of distancing *xiqu* from *huaju* and thus theorized the traditional theatre by developing concepts and terms that

⁶² When considering Xu’s paintings to be representative of a “true” Chinese aesthetic view, Huang seems to overlook the significant European impact on the artist’s techniques. For English-language study of the Western impact on Xu, see Du 2014: 216-244.

⁶³ In a 1987 letter to Mei Shaowu, a son of Mei Lanfang and a veteran translator of English, Huang suggested that the Chinese aesthetic terms “*xieshi*” and “*xieyi*” might be better translated into the English words “photographic” and “ideographic” respectively (Mei Shaowu 2004: 124).

were notably distinct from the “realistic.”

The Impact of “Chinese Aestheticism” on *Nandan*’s Interpretation of Female Impersonation

In addition to its profound impact on twentieth-century Chinese theocratizations of *xiqu*, the notion of “Chinese aestheticism” has exerted a specific yet paradoxical influence on female impersonation as both a practice and a discursive entity. As previously indicated in Wang Pingling’s defense of female impersonation, “Chinese aestheticism” justified the stage of *xiqu* as a “naturally” legitimate space for female impersonators because of its alleged distance from reality. However, in the meantime, the identification of female impersonation as a purportedly fictional entity confined the practice of men playing women within the realm of the theatrical stage and suggestively repudiated a *nandan*’s legitimacy of presenting his feminine body outside the semiotic system of *xiqu*.

The impact of “Chinese aestheticism” can also be discerned from modern *nandan*’s own hermeneutics of the practice of men playing women. Over the course of the twentieth century, numerous *nandan* stars provided exegesis of female impersonation by subscribing to the discourse of “Chinese aestheticism.” In April 1933, the famous *nandan* Cheng Yanqiu returned to China after a fourteen-month sojourn in Europe. In the preceding year, Cheng traveled through Europe and visited such countries as the Soviet Union, Germany, France, and Italy. During his time in Europe, he watched extensively contemporary European theatrical performances, visited the Berlin Observatory,

interacted with numerous leading European artists, including the celebrated German director Max Reinhardt. And these experiences were described by the Chinese *nandan* as “eye-opening” (Zhu Yu 2010 [1933]: 246; *Huabei ribao* 2010 [1933]: 250-256).

In an interview with Cheng Yanqiu shortly after his tour of Europe, a journalist on behalf of the Beijing-based *Shijie ribao* 世界日报 (The world daily) asked the *nandan* to comment on the differences between Chinese and Western theatres that he observed during his stay abroad. Cheng adeptly employed the prevailing aesthetic concepts such as “symbolism” (*xieyi*) and “realism” (*xiangzhen*, 像真, lit., “photorealism”) to differentiate the two theatrical forms. He asserted:

While the makeup of European drama pursues ‘realism,’ that of Chinese theatre focuses on ‘symbolism.’ [...] For European people, when they play villains, they do nothing excessive to stress the villain characters. As for the makeup for all other types of characters, they all pursue resemblance to the real. There is nothing different from the real world [...] However, the merit of the Chinese makeup lies in the fact that as soon as the audience sees it they realize that it is theatre acting. In the meantime, once one sees this type of makeup and dress, one would immediately know that it is a type of *artistic* expression and experience an *aesthetic* sensation [*meigan*, 美感, emphasis mine]. (Zhu Yu [1933] 2010: 248)

When asked the question, “does European drama generally employ men to play male roles, women to play female roles?” Cheng explained why cross-dressing was not

feasible in European drama, as if the practice of cross-dressing was not existent in the European theatrical tradition:

The pursuit of Chinese theatre is symbolism. Once it belongs to the realm of the symbolic, it would be fine to use men to play female roles, and vice versa. The custom of our nation is that women's beauty is perceived to be based upon refinedness and elegance. When men play female roles, they can still somehow possess the natural beauty [...] The aim of European drama is realism. In addition, the beauty of European women lies in the chubbiness of the body. It therefore would be burdensome for men to perform female roles, and it would be impossible for women to play male roles either. However, in Germany there is a masquerade club [...] in which male dancers do embody female roles. While they do makeup, they enlarge their breasts to resemble two bushels of rice. This is rather ridiculous. (Zhu Yu [1933] 2010: 249)

Differing himself from the previously discussed advocates of *nandan*, Cheng Yanqiu attempted to justify the Chinese practice of cross-dressing by taking into account the purported differences between Chinese and European female sexed bodies. Hence, physical differences between the Chinese and European races, for the first time, were employed to authorize the existence of cross-dressing in Chinese theatre. For the *nandan* star, the female sexed Caucasian body presented an obstacle that prevented a male actor from effectively performing female roles in European theatre. And this infeasibility of employing male actors to impersonate (white) women seemed to be substantiated by the

German male dancers' use of artificially enlarged breasts, a practice that the *nandan* star found to be ludicrous.

Cheng Yanqiu's ridicule of the German dancers' use of artificial breasts is striking, considering that in Chinese theatre male players of female roles also utilize numerous strategies to represent certain physical features of women. One such instance is the employment of *qiao* 跷,⁶⁴ stilt-like wooden boards worn by players of certain female roles to represent premodern Han Chinese women's bound feet. Introduced by the legendary *nandan* player Wei Changsheng 魏长生 (1744-1802) from China's inner provinces to Beijing during the eighteenth century, the use of *qiao* was considered an essential skill of *huadan* 花旦 (lit., "flowery *dan*," a subcategory of *dan*, which generally portrays youthful, vivacious maids, comic prostitutes, or other types of young women from humble roots) specialists in various genres of *xiqu*, including *jingju*, before *qiao* was prohibited in the 1950s (Huang Yufu 1998: 38).

Despite the importance of the skill of *qiao* to a *huadan* player, the mastery of *qiao* was notoriously difficult to acquire in *xiqu* training (Huang Yufu 1998: 40-46). The celebrated Republican-era *huadan* player Xiao Cuihua 筱翠花 (aka, 小翠花 or Yu Lianquan 于连泉, 1900-1967) once recalled that the process of learning how to walk and dance with *qiao* was the single most brutal part of being a trainee of *huadan* (Xiao Cuihua 1962: 45). Another *nandan* named Li Jinhong 李金鸿 (1923-2010) even noted

⁶⁴ For a book-length study of the relationship between *qiao* and *jingju*'s construction of female characters, see Huang Yufu 1998.

that after he was trained to wear *qiao*, he could not even find any suitable shoes because his feet became utterly malformed (in Huang Yufu 1998: 44). These *nandan*'s recollections seem to suggest that the (premodern) Chinese female sexed body itself was not necessarily a more suitable object for a male player to represent,⁶⁵ something contradictory to what Cheng Yanqiu implied in the interview.

If the reference to the said racial differences was unique to Cheng's defense of *nandan*, much of Cheng Yanqiu's exegesis of female impersonation still made himself an active participant in the discourse of Chinese "aestheticism." By associating the Chinese practice of cross-dressing with "symbolism," which was claimed to be the ultimate artistic pursuit of Chinese drama, Cheng Yanqiu maintained that *nandan* was an "artistic expression" and the appreciation of *nandan* was sustained by some kind of "aesthetic sensation" (Zhu Yu [1933] 2010: 248). In addition, Cheng Yanqiu insisted that because of this "symbolic" nature, it was advantageous for Chinese theatre to distance theatre acting from reality, echoing Zhang Houzai's defense of Chinese theatre in the 1910s (Zhu Yu [1933] 2010: 248).

If Cheng Yanqiu's travel experience in Europe helped the *nandan* assure Chinese domestic readers of the validity of the Chinese practice of female impersonation, Mei Lanfang's legendary touring performance in the United States, which took place

⁶⁵ To be sure, although *qiao* was invented and popularized by *nandan* players, users of *qiao* included not only female impersonators but also female *huadan* players who entered into the *xiqu* profession in the Republican era and did not bind their feet during their childhood. Of course, for these female actors, their experiences of learning how to operate *qiao* were also a painstaking process (Huang Yufu 1998: 40-46).

approximately two years prior to Cheng's visit, provided the celebrated *nandan* star himself with a critical opportunity not only to broaden his personal fame but also to garner a wider international recognition of the Chinese artistry of female impersonation in general. In order to prevent the American public from understanding *nandan* as an "eccentric" Oriental convention, Mei Lanfang fully embraced the notion of "Chinese aestheticism" to underline an essential distinction between biological women and female characters that *nandan* embodied onstage.

In an American report on an interview with the *nandan* maestro during his touring performances in the United States in 1930, a section entitled "Four Children" begins with the following:

The remarkable young man is 36 years of age, married and has four children [...] when I wanted to know if it was difficult for his wife to live with a man who was so amazingly versed in all the feminine tricks and wiles, he smiled deprecatingly [...] "I am not versed in any individual feminine ways. It would not be possible for me to portray any individual woman...and certainly never the American woman." Besides the drama, he is an artist of great merit [...] and a teacher...to pass on his art as a patriotic duty to China. (Whitaker 1930: B11)

Another *Los Angeles Times* journalist wrote:

Although Mr. Mei, off stage, is a bright young man like any other who would pass in a crowd as a Chinese student at one of our universities or as an embassy or consular secretary, on the stage he seems a woman in every look, not an every

day, realistic woman, however, but a woman conventionalized and formalized as art, the action and the acting of the plays themselves. (*Los Angeles Times* 1930: B27)

Numerous studies of the Mei Lanfang troupe's touring performances in the United States have shown that the self-Orientalizing tendency within Mei's construction of alluring Chinese women onstage was essential to his popularity on foreign shores. For instance, by parsing the American reception of Mei's performances, Nancy Rao contends that through their captivating ancient Chinese beauties and lavish *mise-en-scène*, Mei Lanfang's plays reinforced the "aesthetics of *chinoiserie*"—crafts made in the West in "Chinese style"—and constructed an image of China that is "polished, remote, delicate, and placid" (Rao 2000: 143-144). In a more blunt and succinct way, Joshua Goldstein describes Mei's US tour as "tactical Orientalism" (Goldstein 1999: 377-420 and 2007: 264-289).

While the acknowledgement of the reverse Orientalism within Mei's stagecraft is critical, it is also important to note that the *nandan*'s effort to counter the Western Orientalist reception of Chinese males by presenting himself as a cultured Chinese gentleman offstage contributed equally to his resounding success abroad. The fact that Mei was then a married man with four children was widely introduced during the *nandan*'s tour of the United States, though there was no information given to indicate that Mei was also a polygamist and had married three female spouses by 1930. The introduction of Mei's offstage identities as a husband and a father was often associated

with the acknowledgement of the practice of men playing women as a time-honored Chinese “artistry,” as the two above-quoted passages illustrate. The *Los Angeles Times* journalist perceptively noted the dual identities in Mei’s gendered personae: while onstage the *nandan* played female characters, offstage, he would pass as a (male) Chinese student or a diplomat. By postulating that he did not perform “realistic”/ “everyday” women but the ones that were “conventionalized” and “formalized” (*Los Angeles Times* 1930: B27), Mei unmistakably subscribed to the supposed aesthetic/symbolic essence of the art and highlighted the fictionality of the female characters onstage.

In a 1982 essay in tribute to Cheng Yanqiu by his female disciple Liu Yingqiu, Liu also noted a striking contrast between the *nandan*’s appearance at his house and his theatrical enactment onstage. Liu recalled that in 1939 when she, then a college student interested in formally studying *jingju* under Cheng’s guidance, visited the *nandan* at his residence for the first time, she was deeply impressed by the fact that the *nandan*’s behavior was respectable and restrained, his clothing austere, and his personality humble and congenial, and there was no trace indicating Cheng was actually a female-role specialist onstage (Liu Yingqiu 2010 [1982] : 511).

Liu’s observation of Cheng’s offstage persona at home in 1939 resonates with Qi Rushan’s visit of Mei Lanfang’s residence circa 1914. In both accounts, the *nandan* players’ cogent performances of cultivated Republican gentlemen assured the two visitors of the *nandan*’s houses that the male performers of female roles were no different from any cultured male citizen in life. In fact, this salient gendered division between an

alluring woman onstage and a civilized gentleman offstage not only impressed the college student Liu Yingqiu, who met her idol for the first time outside theatres, but also was said to be cherished by the *nandan* Cheng Yanqiu himself. According to Liu, after she expressed an interest in becoming a professional *jingju* player, Cheng told her a humiliating story of his to explicate the reason why he did not even allow his own children to pursue an acting career:

What humiliated me most was an event taking place during the age of warlords [1912-1928] when I went to Shandong to perform. One day, after the warlord Zhang Zongchang [张宗昌, 1881-1932] watched my performance, [he] did not allow me to change my costume and asked me to drink with him [with the dramatic clothes on]. After I heard his words, I was outraged, and it was a harassment, wasn't it? I therefore said to him that it would be discourteous, and I changed my costume and left the place. Since then, I have decided to not allow my own children to sing opera. (Liu Yingqiu 2010 [1982] : 515)

Cheng's refusal to drink with the imprudent warlord Zhang Zongchang while retaining his dramatic costume had numerous implications. First, if serving as a singing waiter was part of the profession of being a *siyu* entertainer in Qing-era Beijing, Cheng Yanqiu's rejection of the request by the powerful patron made it clear that as a *nandan* of the newer generation who was not at all obliged to serve at the dinner table, the identity of a theatrical actor was his solitary professional role. Second, rather than the warlord's wish of having the *nandan* drink with him at the dinner table, what perhaps discomforted

Cheng more was the patron's demand for having him assume his feminine dramatic persona offstage because the potential extension of his feminine body into the exterior of the theatrical stage would destabilize the boundary between the "artificial" and the "real" that the *nandan* steadfastly maintained, therefore jeopardizing the bedrock of practicing female impersonation in the post-1912 era.

Last but not least, if Republican-era patronage of *nandan* publicly distanced itself from the late-Qing *xianggong-laodou* association by both negating any prurient motivation and allowing *nandan* players to assume relatively autonomous roles before their connoisseurs, the warlord's indelicate request suggested that despite their growing national reputation, Republican *nandan* stars, due to their inevitable display of eroticism, could nevertheless fall prey to indecorous-yet-powerful patrons. Disturbed by the continued existence of this exploitative relationship in theatre patronage, Cheng decided to not allow his own children to study *jingju*, a particularly stunning decision for a *jingju* household, given the profession's hereditary nature.

The Nandan Who Went "Astray"

If by participating in the discourse of Chinese "aestheticism," the internationally acknowledged *nandan* stars such as Mei Lanfang and Cheng Yanqiu managed to distance their male gender roles offstage from their onstage feminine personae and justify their own practice of female impersonation, the very discourse of "Chinese aestheticism" could also be mobilized to suppress those *nandan* whose offstage gender presentations did not neatly meet social expectations. By taking advantage of Wenqing Kang's recent

study of male same-sex relations in China during the first half of the twentieth century, this section will scrutinize the representations of a number of known and unnamed (possibly) queer actors who practiced cross-dressing in the post-1912 context. Despite the scarcity of sources that documented private lives of possibly closeted *nandan*, I contend that the scattered accounts concerning the possibly queer men, appearing in Republican-era and early PRC sources, are sufficient to indicate a long-neglected dimension of modern *nandan*. As my discussion hopes to illustrate, the discourse of “Chinese aestheticism” has functioned as a restrictive hermeneutic framework which jeopardizes a *nandan*’s own agency of placing himself along the masculine-feminine spectrum.

In a diary entry dated June 16, 1963, Xun Huisheng 荀慧生 (1900-1968), perhaps the most accomplished twentieth-century *huadan* of both *bangzi* and *jingju* and a major rival of Mei Lanfang and Cheng Yanqiu, provided students of *dan* roles with some first-hand instruction. This particular entry, which was later published in 1980 and entitled “Must Make Efforts to Construct Characters,” allows us to critically examine Xun’s understanding of *nandan*’s construction of their stage roles. On how to efficiently play female characters in *xiqu*, Xun instructed as follows (due to the significance of the text, I quote it at length):

Especially for those who play *dan* roles, they must present female characteristics at every moment and in every movement [...] No matter whether you position your lateral body toward the audience or face it squarely, and no matter if you sit or stand, you must constantly radiate allure [*meijin*, 媚劲], creating a coherent

image of a woman [...] In the past, master performers who played female roles were generally men. On the stage, he acted all like a woman; [once] paying attention to this, he keeps his presentation of female characteristics from beginning to end [...] Nowadays, most female-role specialists are women. Some individual *dan* players hence think that [because] they are women themselves as long as they know the lines and learn some conventionalized movements, they can do well onstage. As a result, they appear slack on the stage—every finger pointing and every movement all look like what they do in everyday life. She may think that it is fine, but the audience would find it not touching. [It is] because she does not know: the custom of women who lived in several hundred or thousand years ago is different from that of our female comrades today; furthermore, performances onstage and movements in life are also considerably different [...] *Xiqu* acting has a whole set of expressive means and conventionalized movements for enacting *dan* characters [...] No matter whether you are a male player of female roles or a female actor of female roles, you should not present your real persona but need to enact histrionics [*zuoxi*, 做戏].

(Xun 1980: 30-31)

One may conceive a research project devoted merely to unpack the impact of Xun's approach to performing *dan* roles on contemporary *xiqu* pedagogy and practice. Such a project would be of great importance in its own right because master performers' instructional notes like Xun's have been generally taken as one of the most authoritative

pedagogical sources, and their profound impact on contemporary *xiqu* practice deserves acute scrutiny. However, what is more pertinent to our concern about the influence of Chinese aestheticism on the *nandan* is Xun's own understanding of *xiqu*'s performance of *dan* roles as he expressed through the above-quoted passage.

To begin with, this passage, as it seems to me, was partly about the “origin” of the *dan* performance in *xiqu*. Xun clearly set his discussion of *xiqu*'s performance of *dan* roles in a historical context. He reminded his readers of the “fact” that the artistry of *dan* roles in *xiqu* was established and conventionalized by female impersonators of the past, and female actors of female roles were said to arrive on the stage only after their male precursors standardized *xiqu*'s performances. In other words, female actors in *xiqu* were claimed to be trainees of an established tradition, rather than practitioners of a theatrical form that has been constantly renewed. Although the assertion that it was *nandan* that initiated and standardized the performances of *dan* roles seems to be our basic knowledge of *xiqu* history today, this understanding appears to be erroneous either when one brings back the oft-neglected female performers before the High Qing era into a larger picture of *xiqu* history or when one examines closely Xun Huisheng's own acting career in the twentieth century.

As previously mentioned, the exclusive role that *nandan* played on the *xiqu* stage was only a phenomenon of some two hundred years. Before the advent of the Qing prohibitions on female actors, in Chinese theatre there were a large number of female performers. Neither *bangzi* nor *jingju*, the two theatrical genres in which Xun was versed,

was developed completely independent of the influence of those female actors. Furthermore, born in 1900, Xun Huisheng was first trained as a *bangzi* actor in Tianjin, where all-female troupes prospered in the city's foreign concessions; by the mid-1910s, when Xun turned to *jingju* to pursue a more lucrative career, the first generation of *jingju nüdan* such as Liu Xikui and Xian Lingzhi had already become fearsome rivals of *nandan*, not to mention that the number of excellent *nüdan* players continued to proliferate during the following decades of the Republican era. In other words, during the bulk, if not the entirety, of Xun Huisheng's career, Xun's own artistry of *dan* roles had both influenced and been influenced by those of his rival *dan* players of both genders. Hence, the assertion that *nandan* singlehandedly initiated and normalized *xiqu*'s performance of *dan* roles was a result of the gross negligence of the contribution of *nüdan* of various historical periods to *xiqu*.

However, what perhaps deserves more scrutiny than Xun's underestimation of *nüdan*'s contribution to *xiqu* is his distinction between female characters on the *xiqu* stage and women's "real" personae in everyday life. On the one hand, Xun applauded the master *nandan* players for consistently acting like women onstage (Xun 1980: 30). On the other hand, Xun complained that some individual female performers appeared to be slack on their embodiment of women onstage (Xun 1980: 30-31). To clarify his point, Xun emphasized that female dramatic characters in *xiqu* and his "female comrades" in everyday life were different, and their differences suggestively rested on three crucial aspects: firstly, the customs of women in antiquity are different from those of women

living in modern times; secondly, theatrical acting, or what he called “enacting histrionics,” and everyday performance are different because *xiqu* acting is relied upon a whole set of performance methods and conventions; and thirdly, a superb *dan* player must constantly “present female characteristics,” “radiate allure,” and keep their onstage performance of femininity consistent, in order to create “a coherent image of a woman,” and therefore the consistency and intensity of a skillful *dan* actor’s performance of femininity also appear to make a well-constructed female dramatic character differ itself from a woman appearing in everyday life.

The reasons that Xun gave to support his distinction between *xiqu*’s female characters and women’s “real” personae in everyday life can hardly be considered as Xun’s own interpretation of the *dan* performance. Rather, his explication of *xiqu*’s performance of *dan* roles precisely reveals the way we understand *xiqu*’s performance of *dan* roles today. Despite the popularity of such an understanding of the relationship between female characters in *xiqu* and women in everyday life, Xun’s reasoning is worth close reading.

When emphasizing the differences between the customs of women in antiquity and those of women in modern times, Xun seemed to underestimate the actual diversity of female characters appearing on the *xiqu* stage. While it is true that plays from *xiqu*’s classical repertoires are generally set in premodern China, various forms of modernized/reformed *xiqu* have appeared on Chinese stage since the beginning of the twentieth century. For instance, Mei Lanfang, Shang Xiaoyun, and other Republican-era *dan* players experimented with modern femininity in their performances of the so-called

“contemporary new costume plays” (*shizhuang xinxi*, 时装新戏) in the first decades of the Republican era. According to Joshua Goldstein, the contemporary new costume plays “combined Peking opera movements, singing, and speaking styles with contemporary story lines, elaborate sets and backdrops, modern props like sewing machines and divans, and [...] fashionable clothing” (Goldstein 2007: 119). In these plays, the heroines are generally modern urban women, who are markedly different from female characters portrayed by *xiqu*’s classical plays. In addition, by the time when Xun composed this particular diary entry in 1963, various productions of “modern plays” (*xiandai xi* 现代戏), which are set in the modern and contemporary period, blossomed in the PRC and would culminate in the ensuing decade.

In addition to his negligence of *xiqu*’s representation of modern women, Xun’s reference to the differences between theatre acting and everyday life also fails to persuasively support a clear-cut distinction between female characters in *xiqu* and “real” women in everyday life. To be clear, trying to make a distinction between the theatrical world and everyday life is one thing. But attempting to distinguish a *dan* player’s performance of femininity onstage from that of a “real” woman in daily life is another. Even if one can always consider the boundary of the stage a material borderline that separates the theatrical from the mundane,⁶⁶ the physical limit of the stage has never been an efficient barrier that prevents the circulation of femininity between *dan* players

⁶⁶ Of course, one may argue that any attempt to make an essential distinction between the theatrical and the mundane would be a futile effort, as the Shakespearean notion of *theatrum mundi* (or “the world as a stage”) reminds us.

and women in everyday life. Here, Xun's separation of a skillful *dan* player's femininity from that of a biological woman resonates with the discursive split between *onnagata*'s "artistic/artificial" femininity and biological women's "natural" femininity in modern Japanese discourse on kabuki acting. As Maki Isaka reports, in the Edo era, *onnagata*'s femininity was perceived to be akin to that of biological women, and *onnagata* and women circulated femininity "in the form of reciprocal imitation" (Morinaga 2002: 246; Isaka 2006: 119). However, since the advent of the twentieth century, modern kabuki historiography has distanced *onnagata*'s femininity from that of a biological woman, proclaiming that the latter is incongruous with kabuki dramaturgy (Isaka 2006: 118-119). And the theoretical construction of "artistic/artificial femininity" helped *onnagata* justify their existence in modern times (Isaka 2006: 119).

Yet, by demanding that a masterful performer of female roles must "constantly present female characteristics" and enact a coherent, consistent image of a woman, Xun Huisheng maintained that what *dan* players presented onstage were characteristics and/or images of women rather than "real" women themselves. For Xun, the distinction between the "real" and the "imagery" seemed to be of particular importance to the contemporary stage of *xiqu*, given the fact that the majority of contemporary female-role players were biological women, who may conflate the "real" and the "imaginary" by extending her "real" femininity onto the stage.

If for a female actor of female roles, a conflation of the "real" and the "imaginary" was believed to potentially make her stage performance less efficient, the same conflation

was said to possibly also cause a problem for *nandan* practitioners. Xun continued his diary entry by making reference to a fraction of *nandan* players who went “astray” in their everyday life:

In the past, I saw some actors (who also played *dan* roles) not only enact histrionics [*zuoxi*, 做戏] onstage but also play histrionics in private; on the stage he made feminine postures, offstage he was also feminine and effeminate. This is a “pretense” [*zhuangzuo*, 装作], which has absolutely nothing to do with the way we [as reputable *nandan* players] perform theatre. (Xun [1963] 1980: 31)

Once again, by calling a *dan* player’s construction of female roles as “enacting histrionics,” Xun Huisheng subscribed to the discourse of Chinese aestheticism and therefore affirmed the supposed artificial nature within *nandan*’s performances of femininity. Following the logic of Chinese aestheticism, Xun accused those *nandan* players who presented socially feminine bodies offstage of blurring the necessary distinction between the “imaginary” and the “real.” By distancing himself and other reputable female impersonators from those *nandan* whose offstage gender performances were at odds with social expectations, Xun questioned the respectability of those who lived an “eccentric” lifestyle. And his dismissal of those possibly queer actors was predicated upon the belief that their offstage performances of femininity were in essence “a pretense,” a result of concealing the performers’ “real” male gender roles and of suppressing their “naturally given” masculinity.

The quoted passages from Xun’s diary indicate that modern *nandan*’s seemingly

flexible presentations of gender were a highly regulatory practice, and the aestheticization of *nandan*'s femininity functioned as a restrictive interpretive framework which put at stake the flexibility and fluidity allowed within the understanding of their gendered personae. As a consequence, those *nandan* who extended their feminine bodies to the exterior of the theatrical stage were dismissed as "heterodox" practitioners of the *dan* artistry and subjected to derision and ridicule.

While Xun Huisheng's stance toward the queer actors was overtly hostile, his account nevertheless disclosed a marginalized group of *nandan* actors whose existence suggested that modern *nandan* was by no means a coherent entity. Despite his acknowledgment of the existence of these marginalized actors, Xun made it clear that his encounters with these "heretical" practitioners took place only "in the past." In the context of the Seventeen Years, the term "the past" (*guoqu*, 过去) did not simply refer to an erstwhile time but also carried a moral judgment. When a Seventeen Years person spoke of "the past," he, as an informant for those who were in the present, was compelled to assume the role of a most poignant social critic. Conventionally referring to the time prior to the triumph of the Communist Revolution in 1949, "the past" signifies a period of history when something "outdated," "corrupt," and "reactionary" prevailed. And therefore as a species in the "past," these "aberrant" *nandan* self-evidently necessitated political correction. Given the fact that Xun was first trained as a *bangzi* actor and entered puberty after the demolition of *siyu*, the unidentified actors that Xun witnessed were probably certain queer actors whose offstage lives remained clandestine in the Republican era

rather than some *siyu* residents who were active in the Qing dynasty. By maintaining the existence of the “heterodox” practitioners within the decadent Republican era, Xun both justified the causes of the revolution and reassured his readers that contemporary *nandan* players remained firmly orthodox.

As previously mentioned in Chapter One, in the post-Qing era, “aberrant” narratives of reputable *nandan*’s rise to national stardom have been repeatedly suppressed and, if necessary, physically exterminated in their entirety. Although alternative readings of certain *nandan*’s sexuality did appear, in these accounts, the *nandan* in question were generally subjected to negative representation. In his recent study of the Tianjin-based Republican-era tabloid newspaper *Jingbao* 晶报 (The crystal), Wenqing Kang notes that an author signed as “Ma’er Xiansheng” 马二先生 (lit., “Mr. Ma, II”), whose real identity was the noted theatre critic Feng Shuluan 冯叔鸾 (1883-?), once documented three unidentified *nandan* players whose interactions with their patrons raised a few eyebrows (Kang 2009: 130). In 1924 essay entitled “Rabbit Owners and Rabbit Slaves,” the theatre critic began with a sardonic depiction of the Republican patronage of female impersonators:

In today’s Beijing, when influential officials are not busy with bringing calamity to the country and taking bribes, none of them do not patronize *dan* actors.

Proudly calling themselves “refined and sophisticated” [*ziming fengya*, 自鸣风雅], what they actually do not only tarnishes the two words “refinement” and “sophistication” but also extinguishes the *dan* performers’ dignity. Please allow

me to give you some facts about three *dan* players, so you will know nothing I just said is exaggerated. (Ma'er Xiansheng 1924: 3)

In what follows, Ma'er Xiansheng reported three relationships between *nandan* and high-profile politicians, which merited the reader's attention. The first one was between an unnamed *dan* player and the Chief Minister of Transportation Wu Yuling 吴毓麟 (1871-1944), and the minister was said to hire the *dan* as a "phantom employee" in his department and to assist the actor in freeloading (Ma'er Xiansheng 1924: 3). The second relationship involved another *nandan* and the Chief Minister of Justice Cheng Ke 程克 (1878-1936). According to the author, the two men often appeared to be mutually dependent as if they were a couple, and the influential official even bought a small house for the actor for the sake of convenience. Cheng's wife, who later discovered the clandestine liaison, was said to be greatly exasperated by her husband's interaction with the actor, and the couple's marriage was said to almost end in divorce (Ma'er Xiansheng 1924: 3). In addition, a third *dan* player was said to be intimate with several noted government officials and congressmen including Li Genyuan 李根源 (1879-1965) and Peng Yunyi 彭允彝 (1878-1943). According to the author, when the *nandan*'s mother recently held a birthday celebration, the aforementioned politicians all showed up to pay tribute (Ma'er Xiansheng 1924: 3). At least two of the three *dan* players were later identified by the theatre critic in another entry in the newspaper. The actor whom Cheng Ke admired was said to be Zhu Qinxin 朱琴心 (1901-1961), a fan-turned-professional actor, while the *nandan* who was close to Wu Yulin was identified as the very famous

Shang Xiaoyun 尚小云 (in Kang 2009: 132).

For Ma'er Xiansheng, these distinguished statesmen's interactions with the *dan* players not only insulted the theatrical world but also humiliated the nation. He concluded the essay in a way that resonated with the wrathful writer Mu Rugai:

Patronizing *dan* players and treating actors as rabbits should be regarded as an humiliation of the theatrical world. On the one hand, those officials and congressmen regarded the *dan* actors whom they treated this way as their friends and brothers. [On the other hand, we] cannot really know how they position themselves. These people in government offices and public venues appeared to be prominent officials and congressmen of the Republic of China. Alas, their insult to our country could not be more grave. (Ma'er Xiansheng 1924: 3)

By calling those powerful politicians “rabbit owners” (兔閹, *tufa*) and the *dan* players “rabbit slaves” (兔奴, *tunu*), Ma'er Xiansheng suggested that these statesmen who interacted with the *dan* players were participating in male same-sex relations, in spite of their self-claimed interest in the theatre. Because the slang “rabbit” (兔子, *tuzi*) in North China refers to those men who play passive, receptive partners in male same-sex relations,⁶⁷ the *nandan* suggestively assumed socially feminized roles in their interactions with the politicians. This is particularly true in the theatre critic's representation of the relationship between Cheng Ke and Zhu Qinxin, in which the male

⁶⁷ According to Wenqing Kang, one interpretation that ascribes the usage of “the rabbit” to “the belief that the rabbit belongs to the yin category, and its sexual features are hard to distinguish” (Kang 2009: 131).

same-sex bond was reductively portrayed as an illegitimate substitute of the heterosexual marital bond. In addition, the *nandan* Zhu Qinxin, in the narration of Ma'er Xiansheng, appeared to strongly resemble the role of a mistress: being kept in a secondary, clandestine house, he seemed inseparable with Cheng as if he was Cheng's spouse, which infuriated Cheng's real wife and jeopardized the couple's legal marriage.

Almost a decade later, another report concerning the relationship between Cheng Ke and Zhu Qinxin appeared in another Tianjin tabloid newspaper *Tianfeng bao* (The celestially wind, 天风报). In 1933, a *Celestially Wind* article entitled "Zhu Qinxin Newly Installed Man-made Intestine" (*Zhu Qinxin xin Zhuang jia Dachang*, 朱琴心新装假大肠) claimed that a young gentleman resembling the actor Zhu Qinxin was seen appearing in a Japanese-owned hospital in Beijing to seek treatment for his sexually transmitted disease (in Kang 2009: 132). To cure the man's anal ulcer, the doctor was said to "cut an inch or so of the patient's large intestine and replaced it with an artificial one made of rubber" (in Kang 2009: 132). The reporter even expressed an interest in learning about whether Cheng Ke was aware of Zhu's infection (in Kang 2009: 133).

In response to the *Celestially Wind* report, Zhu Qinxin soon filed a defamation lawsuit against the tabloid newspaper. According to Tianjin's foremost newspaper *Dagong bao* 大公报 (*L'Impartial*), Zhu Qinxin declared in the court that "considering the national crisis caused by the Japanese injustice, he had not been to any Japanese-owned places for the past six months," not to mention all the other groundless claims made by the tabloid newspaper (in Kang 2009: 133). The two sides of the lawsuit eventually agreed to settle

out of court after the *Celestially Wind*'s editor promised to compensate Zhu Qinxin for the damages to the actor's reputation caused by his report (in Kang 2009: 134).

If in the *Crystal* article the male same-sex romance was framed in a way that strongly resembled a celebrity's heterosexual extramarital affair, the *Celestially Wind* report depicted the male same-sex relationship as both a lascivious lifestyle and a means of disease transmission. In addition, by claiming that the *nandan* utilized medical services provided by a Japanese doctor, the *Celestially Wind* presented the actor as a treacherous Chinese citizen who maintained a suspicious liaison with the Japanese in the context of Japanese aggression in the 1930s. This image was perhaps particularly undesirable for a male performer of female roles, not only because a *nandan*'s thespian construction of femininity could be stereotypically read as having submissive attributes, but also because participating in a profession which was premised upon the public display of eroticism and sustained by the drive for profit, actors were oftentimes suspected to be untrustworthy.

Despite the differences between the two tabloid newspapers' maneuvers of representing the relationship between Cheng Ke and Zhu Qinxin, the *Crystal* and the *Celestially Wind* worked collectively to stigmatize the male same-sex relationship. In both accounts, the male same-sex bond was presented as a threat to social morality in the sense that its existence not only imperiled the heterosexual marriage but also facilitated a decadent lifestyle. In addition, as a platform for gossip, rumors, and other types of unofficial information, the tabloid newspapers supplied their leisure-seeking readers with eye-catching stories about celebrities' private lives. In the form of the *dan*-official

interaction, the male same-sex relationship appeared to a licentious practice of a group of socially and economically privileged men (such as theatre stars and high-ranking government officials), obscuring the fact that a large number of men engaged in male same-sex relationships might still belong to the lower strata of the society. As a consequence, the attention-grabbing stories about these “aberrant” actors and ministers discouraged the reader from seriously contemplating what those *nandan* who behaved at odds with their prescribed gender roles offstage might live through.

If the two tabloid newspapers, through their negative representations, nevertheless acknowledged the existence of the male same-sex relationship between certain Republican-era *nandan* and their patrons, the authoritative publication *L’Impartial* played a decisive role in defending the *nandan* star’s reputation and defying any “aberrant” reading of the *nandan*’s offstage life. In line with other dominant representations of *nandan*’s everyday life (see my discussion of another major Republican-era periodical *Northern China Pictorial*’s photographic representations of *nandan* in Chapter Three), the *L’Impartial* representation of the *nandan* dismissed these eye-catching stories as whimsical speculations and disaffirmed the very existence of the male same-sex bond. Tellingly, by denying his connections with the Japanese and affirming his voluntary boycott of Japanese products, the *nandan* presented himself as a faithful Chinese citizen who was actively fulfilling his citizenship duties of resisting foreign aggression. In this way, the female impersonator also became an active participant in the nationalist discourse. And this image of *nandan* as resistant Chinese citizens would soon become

more desirable after the Sino-Japanese tension escalated into full-scale warfare in 1937 and in the immediate aftermath of the war, as we shall see in the next chapter.

Coda

To conclude, in the first decade of the Republican era, the existence of *nandan* in *xinju* first became a subject that elicited contestations. When the controversy over the employment of *nannü heyán* took place, both sides of the debate suggested that female actors were superior to *nandan* in embodying the “real” when playing female roles. The purported superiority of female actors in presenting “real” femininity is premised upon the introduction of science-sanctioned gender normalcy, which postulates that gender is determined by one’s biological sex, and the female sexed body is a prerequisite for performing “authentic”/ “real” femininity.

As the gender-straight casting became a customary practice by the mid-1920s, the continued existence of *nandan* in *xiqu* also became controversial in the eyes of some leading Chinese intellectuals mainly because the male actors’ embodiment of female roles was considered to be contradictory to gender norms. In order to defend the time-honored practice of men playing women in Chinese theatre, Republican-era advocates of *nandan* and their successors in the early PRC era developed sophisticated aesthetic concepts to valorize *xiqu* and its employment of *nandan*. Consequently, a discourse of “Chinese aestheticism” came into existence in Chinese intellectual circles to postulate an essential distinction between *xiqu*’s supposedly “abstract”/“aesthetic”/“symbolic”/“ideographic” *mise-en-scène* and *huaju*’s purportedly “realistic” representation of the world. Even

during the era of the Seventeen Years, when Chinese artists and theoreticians felt compelled to situate *xiqu* within a broadly defined tradition of realism, they still paid great intellectual efforts to underscore an artistic distinction between *xiqu* and *huaaju*. During a rather prolonged historical period spanning from the May Fourth era to the beginning years of the People's Republic, by postulating some kind of “aesthetic”/“symbolic” essence within *nandan*'s theatrical construction of female roles, both *xiqu* theoreticians and *nandan* practitioners underscored that *nandan*'s onstage femininity was in essence an “artistic” effect, which should be distinguished from “natural” femininity—the latter was thought to belong to biological women exclusively.

As *nandan*'s legitimacy of performing “artistic” femininity onstage was affirmed, the discourse of “Chinese aestheticism” suggestively repudiated a female impersonator's legitimacy of performing femininity outside the semiotic system of traditional Chinese theatre. A considerable number of *nandan* players maintained that their feminine personae should be restricted to the stage only and some such as Cheng Yanqiu considered the request for having them retain their feminine bodies offstage as harassment. This phenomenon hence made modern *nandan* markedly different from their counterparts in *siyu* in Qing-dynasty Beijing.

However, textual references to allegedly closeted actors did exist, though the available information about these *nandan* was limited. Their “aberrant” offstage lives once elicited attention from Republican-era tabloid newspapers, which presented the existence of the queer *nandan* as a threat to social morality and condemned them for

conducting a licentious lifestyle, though these charges were firmly denied by the *nandan* in question. In addition, noted *nandan* players also have accused these possibly queer actors of being heterodox practitioners of the *nandan* artistry. In dominant representations of reputable *nandan*'s offstage lives, they impressed the general public with their compelling performance of masculinity and heterosexuality, which will be the subject of the next chapter.

Chapter Three

“Natural” Masculinity: Representation and Reception of Modern *Nandan*’s Gender

Performance Offstage

Part One: The *Northern China Pictorial*: A Case Study of Photographic Representations of *Nandan*’s Gender Duality

In the Republican era, what coincided with the theoretical construction of modern *nandan*’s “artistic” femininity was the increasingly wide circulation of visual representations of the *nandan*’s personae both on- and offstage through the apparatus of print capitalism. By focusing on the *Northern China Pictorial* (hereafter *NCP*), a Tianjin-based pictorial newspaper publishing between 1926 and 1937, the first half of this chapter will investigate how this influential early Republican publication’s photographic representations of the *nandan*’s gender duality helped generate and publicize the division between “artistic” femininity and “natural” masculinity.

As the veteran scholar of performance history Suk-Young Kim notes, the accelerated expansion of print capitalism and journalism in China during the first decades of the twentieth century greatly promoted theatre stars such as Mei Lanfang in the publishing market (2006: 39). Kim writes:

The printing industry and journalism boomed in early twentieth-century urban China, which extended to the entire nation, and the increasing literacy rate made it possible to disseminate Mei’s image throughout the publishing market. Photos of Mei’s performances were published in urban newspapers

and stage bills wherever he toured, transforming him into a nationally 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)

Under the slogan “publicize social news, promote arts, and instruct common sense,” the *NCP* established itself as a middle-to-high-brow pictorial newspaper targeting an urban readership in northern China, encompassing two major Chinese metropolises, Beiping and Tianjin. Printed on luxury paper, illustrated with high-quality images, the exquisitely designed *NCP* was initially a semi-weekly publication (publishing on Wednesdays and Saturdays) after its first appearance in July 1926. Beginning with Issue No. 225 (dated on October 2, 1928), it started to be printed three times per week (on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays) until the end of July 1937, shortly after the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War. During some twelve years, the pictorial produced a total of thirty-two volumes consisting of a stunning total of one thousand five hundred and fifty-seven issues, marking itself as one of the most published pictorials in Republican China.

Throughout the life span of the *NCP*, the publication exhibited some shared formal and thematic characteristics. With only a few exceptions, each issue generally consisted of four pages. Its pages documented every aspect of the bustling urban life of Republican

China and beyond and covered a wide variety of topics ranging from politics, military affairs, social news, to sports, from natural sciences to forms of arts and literature.

Through its mixture of journalistic reports, didactic articles, art reviews, and advertisements (which were ubiquitous in the *NCP*), the pictorial newspaper offered a comprehensive, practical guide to its urbanite readers who were in eager quest of modernity in early twentieth-century China.

Aside from these formal and thematic conventions mentioned above, it is also noteworthy that the pictorial was partly bilingual, at least during the first third of its life span. While the pictorial newspaper was composed primarily in Chinese, the Chinese-language title of each entry was generally accompanied by English translation in its early volumes (vols. 1-12), a publishing strategy that not only gave the periodical a cosmopolitan appeal but also attested to the publisher's ambition to solicit a wide readership, including northern China's foreign population as well as domestic Chinese-English bilingual readers.

Yet, we should never neglect the fact that as a *pictorial*, the *NCP* defined itself first and foremost by its abundant supply of spectacular and attractive images. Its featured images could cover the most thrilling subjects such as military battles in ongoing wars and the most sensual ones such as nude female (oftentimes Caucasian) bodies. But Republican celebrities seemed to interest the *NCP* more than anything else. This is in part evidenced by the fact that sizable photographs of celebrities (ranging from politicians and entrepreneurs to artists and noted academicians) and/or their family members were

routinely printed on the cover pages of the publication. In addition, a considerable number of the *NCP* issues included the so-called “special pages,” which were dedicated to individual celebrities, as we shall see in greater detail in the following pages.

Theatrical arts, including both traditional Chinese theatre and *huaaju*, often took up substantial portions of the periodical. The important role that theatrical arts (and *jingju* in particular) played in the *NCP* could be observed in two aspects. First, sizable photographic portrayals of *jingju* actors either onstage or offstage often appeared as featured photos on the cover pages of the publication. For instance, the cover page of Issue No. 81, which was dedicated to the *nandan* maestro Mei Lanfang, featured a recent photographic portrait of the actor’s offstage persona (figure 3); and the opening page of Issue No. 324 foregrounded an image of the late Tan Xinpei (figure 4). Second, special issues on theatrical arts (*xiju zhuanke*, 戏剧专刊)⁶⁸ were published on a weekly basis, beginning in the early phase of the pictorial (in most cases, it appeared on the third page of each Saturday issue); and the periodical ended up with a total of 422 special issues on theatrical arts over the course of its history.

The *NCP*’s consistent interest in *jingju* and its stars was likely in part because the family of the publication’s founder Feng Wuyue 冯武越 (1897-1936) had a rather intimate connection to theatrical circles in northern China. Wuyue’s paternal uncle was Feng Gengguang, whose patronage of Mei Lanfang constitutes the main storyline of the

⁶⁸ The special issues are also identified by their English titles “the World of Drama” in this pictorial.

early Republican novel *MLF*. As mentioned in Chapter One, in *MLF*, the narrator explicitly identifies the character Ma Youwei, who strongly resembles the senior Feng, as the *nandan*'s *laodou*, and such a literary representation of the interaction between Mei and Feng exasperated the senior Feng, who purchased all available copies of *MLF* and threw them into a fire.



Figures 3 (left) and 4 (right). The cover-page photos feature Mei Lanfang (*Beiyang huabao* 1985 [1927], 81: 1) and Tan Xinpei (*Beiyang huabao* 1985 [1929], 324: 1) respectively.

If the literary representation of the relationship between the *nandan* and his prime patron as a continuation of the late-Qing association between *laodou* and *xiaodan* was something that the Fengs intended to circumvent (or physically eradicate, to be precise), then the question would be what kinds of images of Mei and his fellow *nandan* were sanctioned by the Fengs and circulated through the periodical funded by his own household? My reading of the periodical points to some crucial features in the way in which the *nandan* photographs were displayed.

In terms of thematization, the *NCP* photos regarding *nandan* can be generally put into two broad categories, namely *juzhuangzhao* 剧装照 (or *xizhuangzhao* 戏装照, photographs featuring *nandan* in dramatic female roles, hereafter *JZZ*, e.g. figure 5), and *bianzhuangzhao* 便装照 (lit., “casual-costuming photos,” hereafter *BZZ*). As an antithesis of the *JZZ* photos, the genre of the *BZZ* photos depicts the personae of *nandan* in “everyday life” (figure 6).



Figures 5 (left image). Mei Lanfang’s (left) and Yao Yufu’s (right) dramatic personae in the ancient costume new play *Xi Shi* 西施 (*Beiyang huabao* 1985 [1927], 81: 3).

Figure 6 (right image). The *BZZ* photograph features two acclaimed *nandan* Yao Yufu (left) and Cheng Yanqiu (right) (*Beiyang huabao* 1985 [1929], 324: 3).

Intriguingly, like the way the *nandan* photos are displayed in other Republican publications, in the *NCP*, a *nandan*’s *BZZ* photos are sometimes juxtaposed with photographs featuring the same *nandan* in dramatic roles (for instance, in a “special issue” dedicated to the *nandan* Xun Huisheng, Xun’s *BZZ* and *JZZ* photos are juxtaposed on the same page, see figure 7; also see figure 8 for another example of the spatial

juxtaposition of Cheng Yanqiu's *BZZ* and *JZZ* photographs). In other words, the two identities (one is explicitly dramatic and the other is purportedly “mundane”) presented by the same actor are often displayed within the same spatial domain. Therefore, it is almost impossible for the viewer to read the two types of photographs separately.



Figures 7-8. The dual identities of the famed *nandan* Xun Huisheng (*Beiyang huabao* 1985 [1928], 176: 5). *Nandan* Cheng Yanqiu's dual identities (*Beiyang huabao* 1985 [1928], 218: 3).

As a matter of fact, the spatial juxtaposition between photographs featuring an actor in his/her dramatic roles and those depicting the person in “real” life had become a fashionable exhibition convention in Chinese publications since the early Republican era. Although actors in general were subjected to this exhibition convention, Republican-era periodicals such as the *NCP* favored *nandan* as its privileged subjects. In a typical

representation of a *nandan*'s dual identities (for instance, figures 7 and 8), the actors are separated spatially from their roles. In each type of photograph, the person's gender is overtly marked through the costuming, makeup, posture, facial expression, and hairstyle—all of the parameters encouraged a gender-oriented reading of the two figures in a spatial juxtaposition.

However, gender is not the solitary factor that differentiates the two figures appearing in the same space. In fact, the two figures are not only distinguished by the distinction of gender but also separated by the boundary of an assumed theatrical stage. In a photograph featuring a *nandan* in his dramatic role—no matter whether the performer was actually on a dramatic stage or not—the space in which the female dramatic character was situated appeared to be “theatrical,” “illusionary,” and in essence “fictional” because the elaborate stylization of the costuming, makeup, posture, facial expression, and hairstyle greatly distinguished a female character from a mundane male person as he appeared in Republican everyday life.

With the nearby *BZZ* photograph as an antithesis, the female character appearing in the *JZZ* photograph(s) then became compelling evidence to substantiate how adroitly a male player of female roles in the artistic realm of *xiqu* could conceal his “real” gender. Thus, the spatial juxtaposition between the *BZZ* and *JZZ* photographs did not simply create the possibility of reading the two gendered personae performed by the same body together, but also encouraged the reader to interpret the body within the economy of biological determinism and to comprehend the gendered personae through the

epistemological division between “artistic” femininity onstage and “natural” masculinity offstage.

In addition to the *JZZ* and *BZZ* photographs, two additional types of *nandan*-related photos also frequently appear in the *NCP*. I identify the first type as “family portrayals.”

In the *NCP*, the category of “family portrayals” includes two subgenres. The first one literally features the family of *nandan*, in which both *nandan* players and their family members appear (figure 9 features Mei Lanfang and his first wife Wang Minghua 王明华, 1892-1929, and figure 10 portrays the honeymoon of Mei and his second wife Fu Zhifang at Beidaihe). The second subgenre, however, displays not *nandan* players



Figure 9 (left). Mei Lanfang and his first wife Wang Minghua (*Beiyang huabao* 1985 [1928], 157: 3). Figure 10 (right). Mei Lanfang and his second wife Fu Zhifang during their honeymoon at Beidaihe (*Beiyang huabao*: 1985 [1929], 364: 1)

themselves but their family members solely. For example, the image displayed in figure 11 is simply entitled “Mei’s wife Fu Zhifang with her children” (*Beiyang huabao* 1985 [1929], 397: 3). In addition, the boy appearing alone in figure 12 is identified as “the

beloved son of the famed actor Cheng Yanqiu” (*Beiyang huabao* 1985 [1929], 397: 3).

The publication and circulation of the photos featuring *nandan*’s family members attest to an overt alteration in the reception of *nandan* in the early Republican era. Unlike the Qing *huapu* books, which generally downplayed information regarding *nandan*’s spouses and children, Republican publications such as the *NCP* showed a consistent interest in *nandan*’s private lives. The display of the family portrayals shaped the reception of *nandan* in two different ways: first, it engendered and facilitated the reading



Figure 11 (left). Fu Zhifang and her children (*Beiyang huabao* 1985 [1929], 397: 3)



Figure 12 (right). The “beloved son of Cheng Yanqiu” (*Beiyang huabao* 1985 [1929], 397: 3)

of the *nandan* as fathers/husbands, thus confirming that the *nandan* was in fact no different from a normative heterosexual male; second, the way in which *nandan* and their family members were circulated was in fact no different from how other social celebrities’ private lives were consumed by the public. This phenomenon not only reflected the improved social standing of theatrical actors in the early Republican era but

also revealed an increasingly blurred distinction between famed female impersonators and other male social celebrities.

The increasingly blurred distinction between *nandan* stars' performances of masculinity and those of other Republican gentlemen was further reinforced through the display of the last type of *nandan*-related photographs that I identify in the *NCP*, which feature *nandan* offstage with other gentlemen (e.g. figure 13, featuring Mei and two other Republican gentlemen, and figure 14, depicting Mei and other Chinese and Japanese celebrities). In these photos, the theatricality of the *mise-en-scène* was downplayed by the mundane settings in which the *nandan* and others were situated.

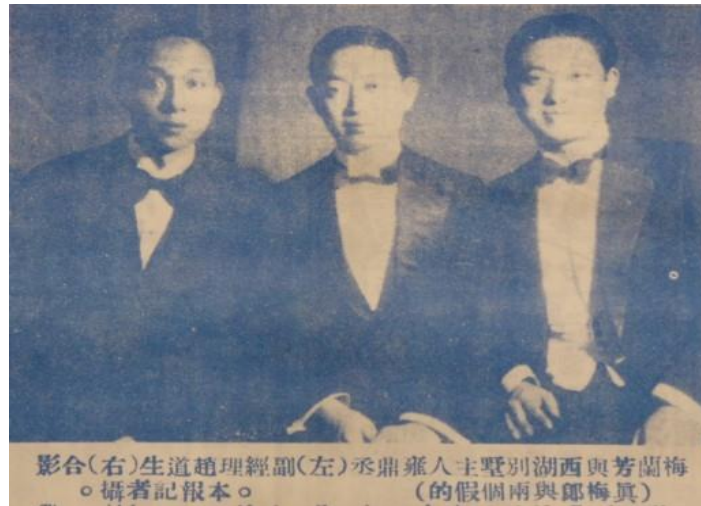


Figure 13. A photographic image, entitled “The Authentic Mei Lanfang with Two Counterfeit Mei Lanfang,” featuring Mei Lanfang (middle) and two other Republican gentlemen, namely Yong Dingcheng (left) and Zhao Daosheng (right). (*Beiyang huabao* 1985 [1930], 421: 3)

Figure 13 perhaps deserves our particular attention. Taken by a *NCP* journalist, the photograph features Mei Lanfang, the owner of a newly opened Tianjin luxury hotel Yong Dingcheng 雍鼎丞, and the hotel’s associate manager Zhao Daosheng 趙道生.

In the image, the shared stylization within their suits, postures, facial expressions, and hairstyles between Mei Lanfang and his male admirers denied any ambiguity in reading the *nandan*'s gender and social standing in everyday life. In addition, by naming the photograph "The Authentic Mei Lanfang with Two Counterfeit Mei Lanfang," the *NCP* journalist also suggested that the *nandan* star himself embodied an authentic source of masculine fashions, which elicited other male members of the society to emulate.



Figure 14. A photograph documenting Mei's visit to the Tokyo Radio Broadcasting Station. (*Beiyang huabao* 1985 [1930], 436: 3)

Part Two: Mustache as Resistance: Representation and Reception of Mei Lanfang's

Masculinity

While in the early Republican publication *NCP* the masculine qualities of the *nandan* stars were primarily seen as complying with the "civilized" modern/Western codes of manhood, during the impending war against the Japanese, the *nandan* stars such as Cheng Yanqiu and Mei Lanfang once embodied another type of masculinity, the nature of which was charged with overt political causes. In this section, we will scrutinize the representation and reception of Cheng's and Mei's performances of masculinity in a new

cultural and historical setting, namely the latter half of the Second Sino-Japanese War. In addition, we will also investigate how Mei Lanfang's performance of wartime masculinity exerted an impact on his theatrical enactments onstage in the post-war era. While much of the available literature privileges Mei Lanfang's rendering of femininity when interpreting his pathway to national iconicity, this section contends that Mei's performances of masculinity have contributed equally to his durable reputation (in China in particular). Not only did audiences after the war read Mei's embodiment of Chinese beauties onstage in relation to the once mustached gentleman offstage, and vice versa, but they also saw his dramatic characters exhibiting a female masculinity⁶⁹ that became increasingly prominent in Mei's later-career repertory.

In January 1941, during the Second Sino-Japanese War, the first episodes of a popular novel entitled *Qiu taitang* 秋海棠 (Begonia) by the famous Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies School writer Qin Shou'ou 秦瘦鸥 (1908-1993) appeared on the literary pages of the influential Shanghai-based newspaper *Shenbao*. As Japanese troops swiftly advanced into the Chinese heartland after the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War, Shanghai's Euro-American concessions temporarily remained "safe zones" for patriotic Chinese writers, artists, and the like, due to the metropolis's semi-colonial status. Hailed as "arguably the most popular novel of the Second Sino-Japanese War Period" (Wang

⁶⁹ The employment of the concept "female masculinity" is inspired by Judith (Jack) Halberstam's celebrated study of the masculine effects displayed by the female body (1998). However, differentiating itself from the cases of female masculinity that Halberstam investigates, Mei Lanfang's theatrical construction of the masculine female roles does not necessitate a female identifying performer. Hence, it invites us to reconsider the alleged symbiosis between female masculinity and the female sex.

2003: 149), *Begonia* depicts the life of a fictional *jingju nandan* named Wu Yuqin 吴玉琴, who is known onstage as “Begonia,” during the age of warlords. Sold into a *jingju* troupe at the age of thirteen, Wu Yuqin is chosen by his master to perform the role of *qingyi*, the most essential subtype of the *dan*. While gifted in the art, the boy actor holds an ambivalent attitude toward his own profession and is constantly confused about his own gender identity offstage. Living in a warlord-dominated society as a *jingju* actor, Wu is repeatedly harassed by powerful patrons, including a division commander who finds the youthful *nandan* more seductive than his own wives. Despite the proliferating popularity that the *nandan* enjoys in both Beijing and Tianjin, the actor feels increasingly nauseated about the “trick of men playing women” in part because of the existence of the malicious patrons and in part due to the ultimate realization of the “fact” that he, even though performing femininity onstage, is unmistakably a man offstage.

Falling in love with a well-mannered young woman, who happens to be a concubine of a powerful warlord, the *nandan* reaches the turning point of his life. Following the birth of a daughter from the relationship with the woman whom he dates clandestinely, the *nandan*’s covert romance is exposed, which eventually leads to a most formidable punishment an actor could ever imagine. By carving a cross on Wu’s face, the enraged warlord consequently terminates the *nandan*’s career and transforms the beautiful cross-dresser into a disfigured man. With a scar that remains permanently on his face, the once famous star retreats from a bustling urban world and lives humbly as a farmer in an impoverished rural town with his solidary daughter. After years of hardship, he dies

completely destitute.

Echoing many of the previously mentioned early Republican writers and critics who refuted the legitimacy of *nandan*, the narrator of *Begonia* portrays the very existence of female impersonation as a sign of a “perverted” society. However, unlike those intellectuals who called for the abolishment of female impersonation from the exterior of the theatrical world, Qin Shou’ou has his novel’s protagonist condemn the practice of *nandan* from within. For Wu Yuqin, he as a *nandan* practitioner suffers from a double oppression: the salacious patrons exploit him as an object of voyeurism, and the institution of female impersonation purportedly suppresses his “naturally given” male gender. It is only through the clandestine heterosexual romance that he acquires the opportunity to confirm his “naturally bestowed” role as a(n) (illegitimate) husband and a father. And the scar on his face, a permanent sign that attests to the warlord’s brutality, significantly reduces the cross-dresser’s feminine allure and ironically transforms the androgynous person into the man of fortitude that he much desired to become. In this sense, *Begonia* can be read as much as a novel condemning the savagery of the warlord era as one that accuses the institution of *nandan* of purportedly suppressing its practitioners’ “natural” male gender roles.

Previous studies of *Begonia* have found that the *nandan* novel enjoys “a dubious position” in the Sino-Japanese War literature: on the one hand, Qin Shou’ou maintains that his *Begonia* is a “patriotic novel”; on the other hand, the novel is in fact devoid of any explicit accusations of Japanese atrocities and attributes the tragedy of the

protagonist's life solely to the brutality of the warlords of the early Republican era (Wang 2003: 150). Indeed, the novel's portrayal of the covert love affair and its silence about Japanese aggression together seem to make *Begonia* a typical work of Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies fictions, a popular early Republican literary school whose output has been criticized by leftist writers and critics for causing its readers to indulge sentimental fantasies and thus diverting their attention from the bitter reality.

However, one may argue that by portraying the misery of people who live under tyranny, the novel inevitably prompted those living in wartime Shanghai to comprehend the atrocious world in the fiction by referring to the coarse reality of the ongoing war. More importantly, by giving the mistreated *jingju* actor a stage name "Begonia," the flowering plant resembling the shape of the Republic of China, the novel symbolically relates the *nandan*'s scarred body to the mutilated body of the Chinese nation and therefore makes Qin Shou'ou's narration of a female impersonator's tragedy an allegory of a nation in danger.

Thanks to its reticence to directly condemn Japanese aggression, the novel continued to enjoy popularity even after December 1941 when the Japanese took over the city of Shanghai in its entirety. In 1942, the well-known director Maxu Weibang 马徐维邦 (1905-1961) obtained *Begonia*'s movie copyright and adapted the *nandan* story into a film which premiered in December 1943 (Fan Boqun 1989: 251-268 and 2000: 305-312). Before the release of the film, the noted artists Fei Mu 费穆 (1905-1951), Huang Zuolin, and Gu Zhongyi 顾仲彝 (1903-1965) collectively rewrote the story for a *huaaju*

adaptation which ran for more than five months between 1942 and 1943 (Gu Zhengqiu 2010 [1997]: 29-30, Fan Boqun 1989: 251-268 and 2000: 305-312). According to the famous *nüdan* player Gu Zhengqiu 顾正秋 (1929-2016), in order to prepare himself for playing the *nandan* character in the *huaaju* production, the famous actor/director Shi Hui 石挥 (1915-1957) often attended Cheng Yanqiu's performances to study *jingju*'s approach to performing *dan* roles (Gu Zhengqiu 2010 [1997]: 29-30). Later when Shi Hui compellingly portrayed the tragic *nandan* character on the *huaaju* stage, his rendition of the fictitious *nandan* deeply moved Cheng Yanqiu and Mei Lanfang, arguably the most celebrated *nandan* performers of the age, who both happened to be in Shanghai and burst into tears while watching the *huaaju* production (Gu Zhengqiu 2010 [1997]: 29-30).

Despite the original story's negative representation of the *nandan* profession, Cheng Yanqiu's emotional response to the *huaaju* production becomes quite understandable if one compares the fictional *nandan* Wu Yuqin's artistic trajectory with Cheng's own: similar to the fictitious *nandan*, Cheng was also born into an impoverished household outside of the *jingju* profession and sold to a *jingju* troupe to study the artistry of *qingyi*; and like the fictional *nandan* star who is encircled by salacious warlords, the famous *nandan* star was also once greatly disturbed by the notorious warlord Zhang Zongchang, an incident that Cheng Yanqiu considered as the most humiliating event in his life, as mentioned in Chapter Two.

More intriguingly, the fictitious *nandan*'s transformation from a *jingju* star into a farmer very much foreshadowed Cheng Yanqiu's own life in the latter half of the Second

Sino-Japanese War. Although Cheng's premiere of the tearjerker *Suolinnang* 锁麟囊 (The unicorn purse) in Shanghai in 1940 brought the *nandan* unprecedented fame, his professional career soon deteriorated after 1942 when the *nandan* first refused to perform for the Japanese and their Chinese collaborators and later boldly defended himself against the harassment of the occupation authorities at the Qianmen railway station in Beiping (Bai Dengyun 2010 [1983]: 21; Xia Changgui 2010: 294-295). Although Cheng Yanqiu and his family remained generally unscathed after the incidents, the tension with the authorities in Japanese-occupied Beiping eventually caused the *nandan* to suspend his stage career. By 1943, Cheng Yanqiu had completed his remarkable transformation from a popular *jingju* star to an assiduous farmer who lived modestly in Beiping's western suburb until the end of the war (Xia Changgui 2010: 294-295).

Like Cheng Yanqiu, whose metamorphosis from a *nandan* player into a farmer won him a reputation as a patriotic artist, Mei Lanfang, the other *nandan* star who was also deeply moved by the *huaju* production of *Begonia*, also remained uncooperative toward the Japanese during the Second Sino-Japanese War, which helped Mei establish his image as a resistant hero after the war. In *Kyōgekitechō* 京劇手帖 (*jingju* manual), a handy guidebook to Chinese *jingju* produced for welcoming Mei Lanfang's third (and last) formal trip to Japan in 1956, begins its introduction to the greatest *nandan* of the twentieth century with a forward by Uchiyama Kanzō 内山完造 (1885-1959), a friend of Lu Xun's and the owner of the well-known Uchiyama Bookstore in Republican Shanghai. In this opening text, Uchiyama perceptively notes the dual identities associated

with the *nandan* star in Japanese-occupied Shanghai in the early 1940s: on the one hand, Mei was known as a celebrated actor of female roles; on the other hand, he was hailed by Uchiyama as “a great mustached man” (*hige no ijōbu*) (Uchiyama 1956: 4). In lieu of a survey of Mei Lanfang’s stunning artistic achievements onstage, Uchiyama’s introductory text focuses on the story of how Mei as “a great mustached man” had repeatedly refused to return to the stage in Shanghai during the Japanese occupation. Mei’s mustache, as Uchiyama’s phrase *hige no kōsen* (the mustache’s resistance) suggests (Uchiyama 1956: 4), served as an embodied marker of masculinity that indicated both the maestro’s decision to halt his stage career and his resistance against Japanese aggression during the latter part of the Second Sino-Japanese War.

Mei Lanfang and the Japanese:

The Prewar Bond

Although Mei Lanfang’s trip to Japan in 1956 was eagerly anticipated by numerous progressive individuals and groups, the presence of the once mustached gentleman in postwar Japan still elicited hostility from those who were anxious about the political signification of the visit at the height of the Cold War. Tension escalated as Mei’s troupe premiered at Tokyo’s Kabuki-za on May 30. The Chinese company was greeted by anti-Communist leaflets composed in a grim, interrogative tone: “Anti-Japan Mei Lanfang, why did you come to Japan?” (*The Japan Times* 1956: 3)

The labeling of Mei Lanfang as “anti-Japan” in the postwar era is surprising

considering the actor's close prewar connections with the Japanese.⁷⁰ Before his theatrical genius was noted outside East Asia, Mei had already made himself one of best-known Chinese celebrities in Japan. Sponsored by Ōkura Kihachirō 大倉喜八郎 (1837-1928), an eminent Japanese plutocrat, the Chinese actor had visited Japan twice, in 1919 and 1924, performing at the Imperial Theatre in Tokyo.⁷¹ On these trips he made connections with such Japanese counterparts as Matsumoto Kōshirō VII 七代目松本幸四郎 (1870-1949), Morita Kan'ya XIII 十三代目守田勘弥 (1885-1932), Nakamura Utaemon V 五代目中村歌右衛門 (1865-1940), Nakamura Jakuemon III 三代目中村雀右衛門 (1875-1927), Onoe Baikō VI 六代目尾上梅幸 (1870-1934), and Satsuki Nobuko 五月信子 (1894-1959) (see Mei Lanfang 1957:16; Wang and Liu 1994:75-82, 97-100). In return, Mei hosted individual artists and touring theatre personnel from Japan in Beijing, most notably kabuki actor Ichikawa Sadanji II 二代目市川左團次 (1880-1940) in 1924 and the Morita-za troupe led by Morita Kan'ya XIII and Murata Kakuko 村田嘉久子 (1893-1969) in 1926 (Mei Shaowu 1984: 49-55).

In addition to the expansion of his international reputation, Mei's Japanese connections also added to his domestic influence. Prior to the war, Mei succeeded in two critical polls (arguably the most influential ones of their kind in Republican China), both tailored by the *Shuntien Times*. As mentioned before, as a result of the first poll in 1917,

⁷⁰ It was precisely this prewar tie that made Mei's trip to Japan possible in the mid-1950s, given that the formal relationship between the People's Republic of China and Japan didn't exist until 1972.

⁷¹ For a thorough study of Mei Lanfang's formal visits to Japan during the Republican era, see Tian (2012: 15-56).

the twenty-three-year-old *nandan* Mei Lanfang, defeating a number of established *sheng* players, was voted “King of the Theatrical World” (*Shuntien shinpao* 1917: 5). A decade later, when *Shuntien Times* held a different poll to promote new productions of *dan* players, Mei managed to have his *Taizhen waizhuan* 太真外传 (Informal biography of Taizhen) elected one of the most favorable new plays, despite an unprecedented challenge from rivalrous *nandan* of the newer generation (*Shuntien shinpao* 1927: 5). Although Mei excelled at placating and accommodating those with competing interests (who nonetheless managed to steadily advance his career during the political ebb and flow of the early Republican era), his interactions with the Japanese still discomfited Chinese nationalists. According to a pseudonymous author studying in Japan during Mei’s 1919 visit, Chinese students in Japan were outraged when he was excessively banqueted as they gathered in Tokyo in observation of the National Shame Day of the Republic of China on 7 May, the fourth anniversary of treaty that forced the Chinese to concede to the expansion of Japan’s illegal rights in China (Qi Fan 1929: 74-75).

Reading the Mustache amid the War

While certain details about Mei Lanfang’s personal trajectory during the Second Sino-Japanese War remain unavailable, it is generally known that Mei’s household migrated to Hong Kong from Shanghai in the spring of 1938, a few months after the outset of the war. Beginning in 1938, reports on seeing the *nandan* in Hong Kong still

brandishing a mustache startled readers in both mainland China and Japan,⁷² as did rumors that he had drowned in an assailed vessel or was burned to death in the bombing raids (see Piaobo sheng 1940: 27; *Liyan huakan* 1941: 15; Fedorenko 1960: 286-87; Mei Baochen 1994: 24-25; Ozaki 2004: 293). The mystery overshadowing Mei was finally solved on July 26, 1942 when the *nandan*, his mustache intact, appeared at the Dachang airport in Japanese-occupied Shanghai. A current snapshot of Mei appeared in *Taipingyang zhoubao* 太平洋周报 (Pacific weekly), a Shanghai-based newspaper edited by Chinese collaborators, along with a report by a journalist who interviewed Mei at his residence in Shanghai (figure 15). Seemingly in reference to both his meeting with the actor and the photograph, the journalist noted: “after seeing Mei Lanfang, my immediate impression was that he has been aging fast. His face was rather drawn, his spirits were quite low, and a mustache that he retained above the lips added more years” (Wen Xiong 1942: 467).

The mustache, as it is alleged to be exclusive to a postpubescent male body, functions as both a marker of the male sex and a token of biological maturity. Perhaps because it is considered to be something granted by nature, the complicated interplay between theatricality, citationality, and the power of self-assertion through the stylization of the mustache often remains obscured by the disguise of naturalness. And precisely in line

⁷² According to Mei Shaowu, a son of Mei Lanfang, during Lanfang’s initial stay in Hong Kong, his father wore a mustache only on occasion. The mustache was firmly in place after the British-ruled city was taken over by the Japanese in December 1941, immediately following the attack on Pearl Harbor (Ozaki 2004: 298).

with this reductive consideration of the mustache, the complicit journalist viewed Mei's mustache to be a natural and thus inevitable product of decrepitude, insinuating that the middle-aged actor was physically incapable of maintaining his demanding acting



Figure 15. Snapshot of the mustached Mei Lanfang in the collaborator's report on Mei's return to Japanese-occupied Shanghai published in the *Pacific Weekly*. (From Wen Xiong 1942: 467; courtesy of National Library of China)

profession. While this failure to apprehend the theatrical power associated with facial hair is not uncommon, it is nonetheless undeniable that both on the theatrical stage and off the mustache remains perhaps the most compelling (and certainly the handiest) object to

foreground the masculine body of a cross-dressed performer, or to make a youthful male appear more mature.

Yet, given the fact that it belonged to (or appeared to belong to) the body of a male player of female roles during the war of resistance, Mei's mustache was more than a marker of masculinity and/or maturity. With its profound sense of self-expression, the mustache, at the empirical level, embodied a resolute departure from his onstage femininity and a performative dismissal of the glamorous androgyny for which Mei's body was best known. Because this disassociation from the feminine occurred at the pinnacle of the war of resistance, at the allegorical level, Mei's mustache further symbolized an unyielding, and now unmistakably male, Chinese body.

Beginning in the early years of the Republican era and continuing through his triumphant touring performances in Japan, the United States, and the Soviet Union, Mei Lanfang's personal body had been imagined as increasingly representative of China's national body (Yeh 2008: 205-39). After the outset of the war, the famous *nandan* seemed to be aware of a potential opportunity for his internationally known feminine body to be manipulated to reinforce the national metaphorical dichotomy between a masculine Japan and a feminine China. Mei's stunning decision to halt his stage career therefore circumvented the very prospect of projecting his Chinese body as an attractive feminine character before the Japanese militarists as well as their Chinese collaborators, especially when the onstage femininity could be read stereotypically as having "submissive" and "effeminate" attributes. Hence, his adoption of the mustache proved to be a particularly

astute move not only because the facial hair's startling presence rejected the possibility of bestowing the Japanese with a glimpse of a feminized Chinese male, but also because as a putative and inevitable product of nature it exculpated the wearer himself from being persecuted for his (surreptitious) resistance.

However, as a sign of resistance nonetheless, Mei's mustache was as emotionally stirring as any overt manifestos against the Japanese occupation. Feng Zikai 丰子恺 (1898-1975), a noted caricature painter who fled Southeast China upon its fall to the Japanese, was deeply heartened by likely the very same photographic portrayal of Mei. According to Feng, a photograph featuring the mustached Mei Lanfang, taken from a newspaper and sent by his friend from Shanghai as a gift, remained the only decoration in his rather empty room in Chongqing, the Nationalist regime's wartime capital in China's hinterland, until the end of the war (Feng 1961: 4). Unlike the collaborators, who viewed Mei Lanfang's mustache as a sign of aging and disheartenment, Feng contended strikingly that the mustache made Mei not only look more glamorous than his signature dramatic characters such as Xi Shi 西施 and Yang Yuhuan 杨玉环, but also resonate with Mencius's ideal of a "great man" (*dazhangfu*, 大丈夫), a moral exemplar who cannot be "deflected by power or force" (*weiwu buneng qu*, 威武不能屈) (Mencius 2009: 62). By reminding him of the hardship that Mei had to endure in Japanese-occupied Shanghai, the photographic image motivated the caricaturist to bear extreme adversity during the war (Feng 1961: 4).

The Mustache:

Its Sources and Historicity

In addition to the strong sense of self-assertion Mei displayed through his mustache, his wartime performances of masculinity also bring to light the historicity and citationality of the mustache itself. During the Qing-Republic transition, the mustache appeared to function as a prominent point of signification in the (re-)fashioning of the codes of modernity, along with other culturally susceptible forms that decorated the exterior of a body, such as hairdos, spectacles, and clothing. Historically speaking, this phenomenon was unprecedented because the mustache, in China's pre-modern times, was rarely viewed to be an entity independent of, and certainly not more prominent than, other types of facial hair. Yet, owing to a series of complicated circulations of renewed notions of masculinity across the globe, the practice of mustache trimming proliferated among the upper- and middle-class ranks of the Republican male population.

Among the diverse sources of Republican gentlemen's mustache fashions, the Japanese, intriguingly, played a particularly critical role in introducing this masculine convention to its continental neighbor. Allegedly influenced by the Europeans, Japanese male subjects adopted stylized mustaches as part of their codes of civility after the Meiji Restoration in 1868. In 1899, when a cohort of Japanese gentlemen led by Gotō Shinpei 後藤新平 (1857-1929), then the civil administrator of the colonial government in Taiwan, toured the southern Chinese coastal city Xiamen, their mustaches, along with other noted differences in dress, tellingly distinguished the Japanese tourists from their local Chinese hosts (figure 16). In his 1924 essay "On the Mustache," the Japanese-

educated writer Lu Xun recalled that upon one of his homecoming trips from Japan in the first decade of the twentieth century, he was perceived by other Chinese nationals, mainly because of his mustache, to have a Japanese appearance (Lu Xun 1981: 177).

However, upon the advent of the Republic of China, neatly trimmed mustaches (often in contrast to cleanly shaved beards) gradually became less representative of a national distinction. By retaining impressive mustaches, Republican gentlemen, including some of the most prestigious of the time, collectively contributed to the circulation and proliferation of new codes of masculinity in China, despite their widely divergent cultural



Figure 16. A group of Japanese gentlemen, led by Gotō Shinpei, visited the Southern Chinese city Xiamen in 1899. Their mustaches distinguished the Japanese tourists from their Chinese hosts. (From *Shashin kurabu: ichimei Taiwan jinbutsu shashinchō* 1901: n.p.; courtesy of National Taiwan Library)

and political stances. The famous mustache wearers included, but were certainly not limited to, Sun Yat-sen 孫中山 (1866-1925), a bourgeois nationalist and the founding father of the Republic of China (figure 17); Duan Qirui 段祺瑞 (a.k.a. Tuan Chi-jui,

1835-1936), one of Sun's major rivals and a three-time premier of the Republic (figure 18); Li Dazhao 李大钊 (1889-1927), one of the founders of China's Communist Party (figure 19); and Zhang Zuolin 张作霖 (1875-1928), an anti-Communist warlord who hanged Li in 1927 (figure 20).

In addition to these notable mustaches of early Republican gentlemen, another critical source was also likely responsible for Mei Lanfang's wartime mustache. In the fall of 1941, upon the eve of the fall of Hong Kong to the Japanese, Mei and his two teenage sons watched the Hollywood political comedy *The Great Dictator* (1940), starring and directed by the very famous Charlie Chaplin. One of the Chinese maestro's closest counterparts in the West, Chaplin had befriended Mei during the *nandan*'s tour of the United States and was in return warmly received by him in Shanghai during the comedian's trip to Asia in 1936 (Mei Lanfang 1962: 50-54). Mei Shaowu, one of the sons attending the initial screening, identified the mustache of Chaplin's characters as a source that might well motivate his father to maintain his own (in Ozaki 2004: 297-98), given that the senior Mei was apparently moved by his acquaintance's satirical performance, elucidating its antifascist implications in depth to the youth and watching the film, astonishingly, "some seven times after it was first viewed" (Mei Shaowu 1984: 82-83).

For a globalized Hollywood spectatorship, Chaplin's highly stylized mustache, featuring a thick and protruding center with completely shaved edges, known as the "toothbrush" style, was essential to the comedian's best remembered cinematic persona,



Figures 17–20. Famous mustache wearers (clockwise, from left): Sun Yat-sen, the Provisional President of the Republic of China (from *Zhongguo geming ji* 1912: n.p.); Duan Qirui, three-time premier of the Republic (from *Da zhonghua* 1916: n.p.); Li Dazhao, head of the Peking University Library (from *Beida shenghuo xiezhenji* 1921: 13); Zhang Zuolin, early Republican warlord (from *Shibaotuhua zhoukan* 1924: n.p.).

the Tramp. As a strategic mustache wearer, the British-born Hollywood tycoon might well have captivated his Chinese acquaintance with the mustache's magic power of transformation. Because Chaplin rarely sported a mustache offscreen, it became a site-specific token that reminded his fans of the distinction between the hilarious characters and Chaplin's various serious social roles (dedicated filmmaker, committed activist, affable gentleman, passionate if controversial husband, among others). As both a perceptive spectator and an astute emulator, Mei not only seemed to discern the mustache's potential use for alternating between personae, but also ascribed to the meager bodily apparatus an additional gendered implication by employing it only in the space exterior to the theatrical stage where he had performed female roles.

However, with *The Great Dictator*, Chaplin's mustache of course became more than a practical marker of an altered identity. In that film, the comedian's mustache clearly mimicked that of Adolf Hitler, the toothbrush mustache's most notorious bearer in modern times. In the West, due to his sardonic treatment of the fascist regime in 1940, Chaplin was lauded as a visionary, a prophet of history, once the horrors of the German dictator were finally revealed to the world. But in the fall of 1941, in the midst of a long-fought antifascist war on the Chinese side, Mei, as an expatriate spectator who had fled the war-torn mainland, must have already read the comedian's satirical critique of fascism in his onscreen appearance. For Mei, what Chaplin offered was not a warning of future calamity but rather a transient emotional remedy for the ongoing pain. And likely it was this kind of psychological impetus that prompted the *nandan* to visit the movie

theatre for repeated viewings.

In part owing to Chaplin's remarkable rendering of it, since WWII encounters with the toothbrush mustache have inevitably stirred mixed emotions and memories. As its postwar appearance results in either resentment or laughter, or sometimes oddly a bit of both, this style of mustache is simultaneously an emblem of an evildoer and a laughingstock. As a consequence, in the West, its adoption becomes a rare and highly regulated practice in which any seemingly serious attempts would immediately elicit suspicion. Not much different from its unfortunate fate in the West, the toothbrush mustache in contemporary Chinese representations (cinematic and televisual in



Figure 21. A contemporary Chinese cinematic portrait of a Japanese officer with his Chinese collaborator in *Didaozhan* (The tunnel warfare) 1965, directed by Ren Xudong. (From Wang Junyi, et al. 1998; screengrab by Guanda Wu)

particular) almost exclusively belong to the bodies of one peculiar role type, namely

officers of the imperial Japanese army during the Second Sino-Japanese War (figure 21),

despite the fact that this particular style of mustache was never really fashionable among them.

From Division to Affinity:

Photos of Mei's Dual Identities after the War

As the history of the toothbrush mustache in the post-WWII era suggests, variably styled mustaches, in addition to functioning as highly invested semiotic signs in modern times (markers of gender, maturity, civility, altered personae, among others), also make and participate in cultural and performance history as nodal points linking emotions and memories, not only to affective life but also to political history itself. (Although, as we have seen in the contemporary Chinese representations of the Japanese officers, memories often are distorted, as they always invite deflection in one way or another.) Mei Lanfang's mustache remains memorable to date, partly because, like Chaplin's, it functions effectively as both a marker of identity and an emotional and mnemonic nodal point.

In early Republican China, while Mei's body was viewed increasingly as emblematic of the Chinese state on the transnational stage, the actor's personal accomplishment delighted some who longed for international recognition of indigenous drama's aesthetic merits. At the same time many feared that the *nandan*'s androgynous body would embarrass the nation before foreign eyes. The latter camp included some of the most influential intellectuals of the age, including Lu Xun, who was remembered for, among other things, his poignant critique of female impersonation and Mei Lanfang in particular.

It was thus in the immediate aftermath of the war that the Chinese as a whole, for the first time, fully embraced the correlation between the *nandan* and the Chinese nation.

On October 10, 1945, the first National Day of the Republic of China after the war, Mei Lanfang's testimony about his life during the Japanese occupation appeared in the *Standard*, a Shanghai newspaper revived after years of suspension during the Sino-Japanese conflict. In addition to a textual reference to Mei's mustache, the publication also featured prominently two recent photographic portraits of Mei (figure 22). Whereas the text was mainly devoted to bitter memories of the past, the photos were wholly about the revitalized postwar present. While at the top of the page Mei emerges as a rejuvenated actor who shaved off his mustache in preparation for his formal return to the stage, inset midway through the text the *nandan* appears as the unyielding female loyalist of the Ming dynasty in the *kunqu* play *Ci hu* 刺虎 (Slaying the Tiger), a play presented by Mei in one of his initial reappearances onstage.

While in the early Republican era the *NCP*'s photographic representations of a *nandan* star's dual identities foregrounded the split between "artistic" femininity and "natural" masculinity, in the aftermath of the war, the display of the two contrasting illustrations of Mei Lanfang's personae in the *Standard* was no longer preoccupied with an epistemological distinction between reality and fiction—as the *nandan*'s remarkable use of his mustache confirmed the ostensible "truth" about his male sex, one would not need to redundantly point out that the beautiful woman onstage was plainly the outcome of his long-term dedication to the art. Hence, in the postwar era, the reading of Mei

Lanfang's dual persona was much different from the way it was previously perceived. In the *Standard*, the display of Mei's theatrical rendition of the Ming loyalist Fei Zhen'e is unlikely to be coincidental.



Figure 22. Mei's own writing on his life during the war, with Mei as a clean-shaven resurrected actor and Mei as Fei Zhen'e 費貞娥 in *Slaying the Tiger*. (From Mei Lanfang 1945: 2)

Belonging to what I call the “dramas of resistance,” *Slaying the Tiger* tells of a Ming woman's transformation from a lady-in-waiting at the imperial court into an assassin who aspires to retaliate against the rebels. If prior to the war the distance between his female characters and the handsome gentleman as he presented himself in everyday life was incommensurable, as displayed in the *Standard*, this distance has been bridged by the shared patriotism between the *nandan* and his character, as Mei's dramatic persona was

also politically invested in the ethos of postwar nationalism.

In line with the *Standard*, *Changfeng huabao* 长风画报 (The changfeng pictorial), another Shanghai-based late-Republican publication, also revealed how some kind of political affinity between Mei and his dramatic character transcends their conspicuous difference of gender in the postwar photographic representations of the *nandan*. In early 1946, a set of five photographs of the patriotic *nandan* was featured in the publication's opening issue (figure 23). The *Changfeng* photos *en masse* present readers with a sequence of images covering Mei Lanfang's biographic trajectory from the late Qing to late Republican periods. The *nandan* appears in the illustrations chronologically as a 15-year-old student actor (circa 1909), an 18-year-old grandson with his grandmother (circa 1912), a mustached gentlemen (early 1940s), an over-50-year-old artist who had shaved off his mustache to welcome the Chinese victory over the Japanese imperialists (mid-1940s, shortly after the war), and Mei's female character Yu Ji 虞姬 in the *jingju* play *Farewell, My Concubine* (date unspecified).⁷³

Although the representations of Mei, as his offstage persona and his thespian embodiment of Yu Ji, also seems to continue the aforementioned early Republican convention of dual display, the *Changfeng*, like the *Standard*, seemed to be more

⁷³ A closer reading of this late Republican publication's images would lead to some riveting findings. As a matter of fact, the 1907 photo that depicts the teenage actor challenges Mei's coherent pattern by having Mei's male body trespass onto the domain of the theatrical stage. While details about this particular play remain unknown, in the image, the female role specialist appears to play, astonishingly, a young male character. The braided queue, perhaps the most explicit marker of a male body of the Qing dynasty, in addition to the posture and costuming, defies any ambiguous reading of the character's gender.

interested in conveying the political message shared by Mei Lanfang and his female character rather than suggesting an essential distinction between reality and fiction. Also replete with sentiments of resistance, the *jingju* play *Farewell, My Concubine* relates the story of a despondent warlord in the final moments of his military regime. In the culminating scene of the drama, Yu Ji, the warlord's favorite mate, after entertaining her



Figure 23. Mei Lanfang's various personae in the inaugural issue of the late-Republican *Changfeng Pictorial*. (From *Changfeng huabao* 1946: 15)

lord with a sword dance, kills herself with the blade to preserve her faithfulness to the

unblessed man on the brink of military defeat. On the one hand, as a heroine known for her excellence in martial arts, Yu Ji does not neatly fit the description of the typical Confucian woman: vulnerable, effeminate, and deficient in physical strength. And because of her combative appearance, like the Ming loyalist Fei Zhen'e, Yu Ji could be conversely perceived as displaying certain masculine traits. On the other hand, by committing suicide in the wake of the ultimate fall of her lord's troops, Yu Ji in fact maintains her loyalty to her lord/state and embraces the Confucian patriarchal codes. Hence, the masculine and patriotic female character onstage intriguingly coincides with the mustached gentleman offstage, and they work in tandem to signify a shared unyielding body of Mei that trespasses the boundary of the theatrical stage and transcends the distinction between the fictional and the real.

The Dramas of Resistance:

The Cosmic Blade and the Like

On the early Republican stage, it was generally thought that Mei Lanfang did not surpass other *dan* players in some of the traditionally esteemed areas of expertise such as singing technique, acrobatics, and movement (Goldstein 2007: 146). Instead, his highly refined "stage appearance (*banxiang* [扮相]), carriage, and beauty" (Goldstein 2007: 146) were thought to be the key to Mei Lanfang's preeminence. Scholars of Chinese visual culture have thus described *jingju*'s burgeoning emphasis on visual allure during the early years of the Republican era as a "visual turn" (Dong 2010: 201-03), a transition "from listening to watching" (Pang 2007: 133-63). Mei Lanfang, as both a proponent and

beneficiary of this altered expectation, attained his ascendancy among the *dan* players by refashioning *jingju*'s rendition of female roles with his superiority in sexual appeal.

In the mid-1920s, when the *nandan*'s seductive power was perhaps at its pinnacle, the triumph of the plays featuring the alluring beauties was partly evidenced by Mei's reluctantly stated preference for performing these plays. On October 27, 1924, during his second formal visit to Japan, Mei was invited to speak to a group of noted Japanese writers and theatre critics in a colloquium sponsored by the journal *Engeki shinchō* 演劇新潮 (New currents of theatre). When asked to address the question, "What are Mr. Mei's most satisfying performances?" by the playwright Kume Masao 久米正雄 (1891-1952), the *nandan* at first tackled the inquiry with his usual humility by asserting that none of his works were satisfying and that the histrionics all looked unsightly to him (*Engeki shinchō* 1924:10). But when Kume insisted on an answer, Mei eventually confessed that while in his preexisting program, *Yutang chun* 玉堂春 (The story of Su San) and *The Flower's Funeral* were the plays that he "enjoyed performing" and "found interesting"; among the later scripts, *Luoshen* 洛神 (Goddess of the river Luo) was preferred (*Engeki shinchō* 1924:10).

Pertaining to *jingju*'s Qing repertoire but refashioned by Mei with new stagecraft, *The Story of Su San* introduces a romance between a promising Confucian scholar and a faithful courtesan, perhaps the most prevailing scenario in classical Chinese drama. As Republican theatrical rewrites of premodern literary canons, *The Flower's Funeral* and *Goddess of the River Luo*, however, were first staged in 1916 and 1923 respectively, and

were exclusive to Mei's repertory. Regardless of the generic difference, what all three productions shared was the nubile beauty role, whose essential allure rests on a synthesis of physical delicacy, behavioral submissiveness, and moral innocence.

Despite their popularity in the first two decades of the Republic, Mei's performances of these submissive beauties became less frequent by the mid-1930s and the fates of Mei's signature characters from the preceding decades turned out to be rather mixed after Mei returned to the stage in 1945. Indeed, one could attribute the modification within Mei's later-career repertory to his fading sexual appeal as the *nandan* reached middle age. But as Mei ascended from a popular local star to a nationally and internationally esteemed patriotic artist, his political concerns perhaps steadily took priority over his interest in monetary gain. This would become particularly true after the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 when Mei performed under the aegis of the state, appearing at a variety of sites that were of political significance for the young Communist regime, including not only the makeshift stages by the side of rural fields and industrial facilities in China, but also the improvised underground studios in North Korea and the grandiose kabuki houses in Japan (Mei Lanfang [1955] 2001: 9; Mei Lanfang 1957; Mei Baochen 1994: 66-69). As Mei's body was privileged as one of a very limited number of Chinese bodies that could move between the two widely divided ideological camps at the peak of the Cold War, his theatrical enactment was configured to appear compatible with the altered cultural and political milieu.

However, it is noteworthy that Mei's later-career repertory was composed not of

predominantly new works but rather by reshuffling his preexisting plays. It was perhaps not only because the creation of traditional dramas became an increasingly treacherous endeavor under the new regime's state censorship (Liu 2009: 387-406), but also because the considerable size and breadth of his pre-existing repertoire provided Mei with numerous opportunities to use these malleable texts to negotiate with the new aesthetic rationales and political stipulations. This phenomenon is perhaps best exemplified by the growing prominence of dramas like *Yuzhou feng* from Mei's late-life career.

In contrast to the tales with tender, romantic sentiments, in which the youthful Mei Lanfang excelled, the *Cosmic Blade* tells of a married, solemn woman who rebels against her biological father. Set during the Qin dynasty, the play relates a fictional character named Zhao Yanrong 赵艳荣 to two genuine historical figures, the Qin's last emperor and his corrupt minister Zhao Gao 赵高 (Yanrong's father), via a series of quasi-historical episodes. Intriguingly, perhaps due to its dull and protracted storyline, the *Cosmic Blade* held a comparatively marginal role in *jingju*'s classical program during the Qing dynasty and unfortunately remained peripheral even after it was polished by Mei's theatrical genius in the 1910s. Regarding the undesirable reception of the play at the time, Mei candidly noted: "Whenever it was played, the box office performance was always not as good as I wished. When I toured to Shanghai for the first time [in 1913], during a stay of a total of forty-five days, I performed the *Cosmic Blade* only twice. To learn about whether audiences are fond of a play or not, one could only count its frequency of being staged" (Mei and Xu 1957: 146).

Despite its mediocre reception in Mei's early career, in *Forty-Year Life Onstage*, the *Cosmic Blade* is strikingly lauded as Mei's "favorite" by Xu Jichuan, Mei's secretary and the coauthor of *Forty-Year Life Onstage* (Mei and Xu 1957: 148). When asked to comment on this particular play circa 1950, Mei himself also spoke of it repeatedly in laudatory terms. The *Cosmic Blade* was hailed by Mei as, successively, a play to which he "was addicted," a production into which he "put the most effort in life," and a dramatic piece that had constantly won his "exceptional fondness" since it was initially imparted to him by his master [in the Qing dynasty] (Mei and Xu 1957: 146-48).

But one critical question now arises: how should we understand the noticeable discord between Mei's claim that his "exceptional fondness" for the *Cosmic Blade* dated all the way back to the last days of the Qing and his choice of three entirely different plays as his favorites in conversation with the Japanese in 1924? This question perhaps needs to be understood as not only a historical question about Mei's own artistic preferences, but also, more importantly, a historiographical inquiry regarding biographical self-making. To answer it, I call for a keen awareness of a canonizing inclination and political interests that might color Mei's recollections of his early artistic inspirations and practices in the 1950s. Hence, the inconsistency within Mei's own accounts perhaps suggests not only a historical turn, an altered interest in and a renewed assessment of his pre-existing repertoire, but also a historiographical tendency to recount the great patriot's artistic trajectory with an emphasis on the interests and pursuits that were deemed to be politically meaningful in his postwar life.

It is precisely this kind of political orientation that illuminates the reason for initiating and expanding Mei's stated passion for the *Cosmic Blade*. In *Forty-Year Life Onstage*, Mei Lanfang attributes his obsession with the play to the inspiration of Feng Gengguang. According to Mei, the *Cosmic Blade* was "the most praiseworthy" play for Mr. Feng, mainly because it was rare for a woman in fiction to take bold action against tyranny and injustice (Mei and Xu 1957: 146). Feng Gengguang was said to once liken Yanrong to the "great man" imagery conceived by Mencius, the masculine icon who cannot be "moved by poverty or privation, or deflected by power or force" (*fugui buneng yin, weiwu buneng qu* 富贵不能淫，威武不能屈)⁷⁴ (Mencius 2009: 62).

Through the ancient sage's eulogy of the "great man," Mei's rendering of the resistant woman was strikingly reminiscent of the caricaturist Feng Zikai's reading of the mustached gentleman during the war. Given the Confucian ideal's misogynist formation⁷⁵ and males' exclusive privilege of embodying the epitome of gentlemanly virtue, the rebellious daughter seemed particularly commendable because she was perceived to embody some rather masculine traits by overcoming the alleged female inferiority, as Feng Gengguang's account tellingly suggests.

Represented by the *Cosmic Blade*, Mei's highly ossified postwar repertoire foregrounded a number of what I call "dramas of resistance," in which female

⁷⁴ For Mencius, three fundamental principles are essential to the character of one who shall be eulogized as a "great man": "he cannot be led astray by riches and honor, moved by poverty or privation, or deflected by power or force" (Mencius 2009: 62).

⁷⁵ Mencius views the way of the "great men" and that of women as mutually exclusive and the moral merit of the latter lies in compliance with patriarchal rules (Mencius 2009: 62).

protagonists are known for their extraordinary bravery in struggles against external assaults or internal despotism—at times even in the absence of their male counterparts. In addition to plays such as the *Cosmic Blade*, *Slaying the Tiger*, and *Farewell, My Concubine*, the prevailing “dramas of resistance” include but are not limited to: *Mulan congjun* 木兰从军 (Mulan joins the army), a play concerning a cross-dressed female warrior recently popularized in the West by the Disney animated movie; *Kang Jin bing* 抗金兵 (Against the Jurchen army), a production first staged by Mei in 1933 in response to the Japanese attack on Shanghai the preceding year (figure 24); *Shengsi hen* 生死恨 (Eternal regret), another play with anti-Japanese sentiments and known to the wider



Figure 24. Cinematic portrait of Mei Lanfang’s *Against the Jurchen Army* in a 1955 documentary entitled *Mei Lanfang de wutai yishu* 梅兰芳的舞台艺术 (Mei Lanfang’s stagecraft), directed by Wu Zuguang. (From Mei Lanfang, et al. 1997 [1955]; screengrab by Guanda Wu)

public through a 1948 cinematic adaptation; *Mukezhai* 穆柯寨 (Muke village), a classical fighting-intensive piece featuring a heroine named Mu Guiying, who is gifted in both tactics and martial arts; and *Mu Guiying guashuai* 穆桂英挂帅 (Mu Guiying takes

command), Mei's own interpretation of the Mu Guiying story, which premiered in 1959 and was remembered as Mei's first full-length dramatic creation during the PRC era and the last of the actor's legendary life.

Coda

During the early Republican era, the accelerated circulation of photographic representations of *nandan*'s personae both on- and offstage encouraged the reader to comprehend a *nandan*'s gender duality by referring to the site-specific division between "artistic" femininity and "natural" masculinity. As the study of the *NCP* suggests, the pictorial's spatial juxtaposition of a *nandan*'s *JZZ* and *BZZ* photographs encouraged its readers to understand the *nandan*'s feminine persona as an aesthetic effect, while apprehending his gentleman persona as something "natural." In addition, the *NCP*'s representations of *nandan* with other Republican gentlemen not only highlighted the shared masculine codes that were circulated between the male player of female roles and other male members of the community but also implied the leadership role that the charismatic *nandan* stars played in facilitating the fashionable codes of masculinity and civility. Furthermore, the pictorial's representations of *nandan*'s family portrayals further helped the public confirm the *nandan*'s societal roles as fathers and husbands.

While in the early Republican pictorial *nandan* stars compellingly presented themselves as "civilized" modern gentlemen, the Resistance War against the Japanese provided the *nandan* stars such as Cheng Yanqiu and Mei Lanfang with the rare opportunity to perform a different type of masculinity, the quality of which mainly lay in

their unyielding stance toward the Japanese. By growing a mustache and suspending his stage career in Japanese-occupied Shanghai, Mei Lanfang's masculine persona was perceived to exemplify Mencius's ideal of the "great man," who cannot be moved by tyranny. In the concluding years of Mei Lanfang's career after the Sino-Japanese conflict, an increasing number of his dramatic characters were viewed as sharing the same uncompromising soul that was attributed to his patriotic gentleman persona in life. The burgeoning affinity between the "women" onstage and the gentleman offstage reveals that the body of Mei Lanfang—whether it took the form of a mundane person or a theatrical character—was a committed participant in postwar politics.

Epilogue

In his celebrated study of the artistic transformation of *jingju* during the Qing-Republic transition from 1870 to 1937, Joshua Goldstein employs what he calls “the split between the real and representation” to describe the essence of the Republican understanding of a *nandan*’s gender alteration between on- and offstage (Goldstein 2007: 250). For Goldstein, this epistemological split encouraged the spectator to apprehend a *nandan*’s femininity “as an aesthetic illusion, a performance contradicting the real fact of his biologically (and socially) male body” (Goldstein 2007: 251). While this epistemological split is fundamental to how we understand a *nandan*’s theatrical acting today, this dissertation has contended that “the [epistemological] split between the real and representation” was a historically new phenomenon in China’s Republican era, and the *nandan*’s presentation of his so-called “real” male identity was in essence also a performance.

As this study has shown, the advent of the epistemological division between “artistic” femininity onstage and “natural” masculinity offstage in the aftermath of the *siyu* prohibition was aided by the introduction of science-backed gender normalcy, the aestheticization of female impersonation (Chapter Two), and the circulation of visual representations of *nandan*’s masculine bodies (Chapter Three). And the continued effectiveness of this epistemological split has also been safeguarded by repeatedly suppressing aberrant interpretations of noted *nandan* players’ sexuality such as Mu Rugai’s contentious novel *MLF* (Chapter One) and by negatively representing those

nandan whose offstage gender performances did not neatly fit into their prescribed male gender roles (Chapter Two).

By the concluding years of the Republican era, outspoken criticism of the artistry of *nandan* had been extremely rare, if not entirely non-existent—as the *nandan* star Mei Lanfang’s astonishing adoption of his mustache not only confirmed the ostensible “truth” about his male sex but also defied anyone who was anxious about the association between the practice of cross-dressing and the Chinese state. In the closing years of Mei Lanfang’s career when he performed under the support of the state, his body transcended the boundary between the two widely divided ideological blocs at the pinnacle of the Cold War to represent the nascent Communist state.

Most intriguingly, this political affinity between the *nandan*’s body and that of the Chinese nation continued to burgeon even after the *nandan*’s body was deceased. On August 8, 1961, when the *nandan* par excellence died of heart failure, by order of the premier Zhou Enlai 周恩来 (1898-1976),⁷⁶ Mei Lanfang’s deceased body was placed in a grand, exquisite coffin. Built of rare timber in the early Republican years yet preserved in a pristine condition, the luxurious coffin was originally reserved for the 1925 funeral of Sun Yat-sen, the mustached Republican statesman who made the modern Chinese nation a reality. At last and in perpetuity, Mei’s body and the body politic of China—like the *nandan*’s dual identities themselves—have become one.

⁷⁶ Interestingly, among other things, the eminent statesman Zhou Enlai is remembered for his acclaimed performances of female roles in amateur *xinju* productions in the 1910s at Nankai School in Tianjin, a secondary school known for its pioneering role in introducing *xinju* to China.

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