

Two Belles in Love: Staging a 'Tradition' of Sexual Diversity in a Grand Scape Contemporary Chinese Opera

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A Romance: Two Belles in Love is a lesbian-themed Chinese opera based on a 350-year-old play by Li Yu. The 2010 production was headed by Stanley Kwan, the first openly gay film director in the Chinese cinema scene. The premiere marked a shift in representations of homosexuality in contemporary China which did not remove homosexuality from the list of official mental illnesses until 2001. Publicity for the production plastered the city with imagistic challenges to the heteronormative visual landscape. The premier coincided a wider trend reviving the practice of male performers portraying female roles, discouraged since Communist victory in 1949. I analyse the production and its reception as examples of *xiqu* (Chinese opera) receiving comparatively more official and cultural leeway than other modes of cultural production to portray sexual diversity on the post-Mao Chinese stage.

Keywords: Chinese Opera, *Two Belles in Love*, Homosexuality

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The May 2010 Beijing premiere of *A Romance: Two Belles in Love*, a lesbian-themed Chinese opera headed by openly gay film director Stanley Kwan, marked a profound shift in representation of homosexuality in contemporary Chinese culture. The production drew on a 350-year old play by Li Yu (c 1610-1680), famous for his erotically charged comedies, to challenge China's heteronormative contemporary cultural scene. Billed as the earliest play in the traditional Chinese opera repertoire to present lesbian themes, the production was framed by Li Yinhe, the productions 'cultural consultant' and noted gender and sexuality critic and activist. Her comment on the first page of the program was repeated in various formulations in pre-show press: "*Two Belles in Love* reveals an interesting cultural phenomenon three hundred years ago—the Christian culture in the West banned homosexuality while the Confucian culture in China adopted a more lenient attitude."¹

Only four months earlier, actions of Beijing officials would have garnered an opposite assessment of relative acceptance when they cancelled the highly anticipated 'Mister Gay China' pageant less than an hour before it was to start.² Recent decades have witnessed China's extraordinary economic advances, but societal shifts relating to gender and sexuality have been less consistent. Homosexuality was not removed from China's official list of mental illnesses until 2001 and both official and popular stigma continues.³

The *Two Belles* premier occurred within a wider trend reviving the traditional practice of male performers portraying female roles, which had been discouraged since Communist victory in 1949.⁴ The production highlighted pre-Communist Chinese opera traditions in which gender of performer and role frequently diverged,⁵ with several male actors playing female roles and one female actor playing a leading male role. These contrasting events suggest that *xiqu* is given more official and cultural leeway than popular modes of cultural production, such as Mister Gay China, to portray sexual diversity on the post-Mao Chinese stage. But even if this is true, is *Two Belles*' positive portrayal of a lesbian relationship merely a continuation of a trajectory on which fictional characters are allowed freedoms real Chinese people are denied—such as

traditional Chinese operas in which female characters perform heroic deeds when Confucian expectations of female obedience denied such public agency?⁶ Or does the production mirror substantive cultural change?

A Grand Scale Kunqu in Contemporary Context

Kunqu (kun opera), the Chinese opera form used in *Two Belles*, achieved national prominence during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) and strongly influenced the development of later forms, including *jingju* (Beijing/Peking opera). It is one of several hundred extant forms of *xiqu* (lit. theatre of song, the umbrella term for the 300+ forms of indigenous Chinese music-drama). *Xiqu* is distinguished from *huaju* (lit: spoken drama, referring to realistic/western style theatre introduced to China in the early 20th century). The meaning of the *Two Belles* premiere must be considered within this larger context of theatrical activity in China.

Xiqu occupies a unique cultural position in contemporary China. It is both an iconic representative of traditional culture and an arena in which conventional practices of cross-gender performance legitimate activities deemed subversive in other fields. Though there exist important exceptions of cross-pollination and productive collaboration, a kind of schism continues between the worlds of *xiqu* and spoken drama. *Xiqu* was a frequent target of criticism by such leading scholars as Hu Shi for its failure to develop to a modern form of 'real' theatre in which music and dance have been stripped away and vernacular spoken language dominates.⁷ At the same time outside of China, however, *xiqu*, particularly through its iconic master performer Mei Lanfang, was having important if contested influence on the development of key anti-realistic western theories of performance including those of Brecht.⁸

Beyond the *xiqu*-spoken drama schism are complex layers of *xiqu*-specific categorization that frame composition and audience reception of a performance. Most *xiqu* forms are regionally based, drawing on local dialects and folk music structures and catering to regional audiences. There are two extant exceptions to this pattern. *Kunqu*'s elegant, refined, and complex performance structures made it increasingly inaccessible to popular audiences. It eventually lost its status as nationally prominent form to *jingju*, which then achieved a golden age in the Republican era (1911-1949)⁹ and became the focus of politically charged artistic experimentation during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976).¹⁰ With the death of Mao and opening to the West and concomitant increase in entertainment options, most *xiqu* forms have struggled to achieve economic self-sustainability and maintain cultural relevance. In 2001, *kunqu* along with Japanese *Noh*, Indian *Kutiyattam* and other traditional arts received the UNESCO designation 'Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity.' For each of the art forms receiving this designation, specific threats and countermeasures were identified. The major threat to *kunqu*'s survival was identified as being a lack of consistent performances. Countermeasures included increasing government support for the six existing *kunqu* companies and training of new performers.¹¹ Buoyed by China's economic boom, The Northern Kunqu Opera Theatre (Beifang Kunqu Juyuan) now works in combination with commercial arts publisher and producer, PoloArts International Entertainment Company to produce regular tourist *kunqu* dinner performances at an ancient Imperial granary-cum theatre in Beijing. Pre-premier press told of plans to take excerpts of *Two Belles* into the theatre's regular rotation of performances.¹²

Two Belles combined *kunqu*'s emerging internationally legible 'traditional' cache with important 'contemporary' elements. The backgrounds of three key members of the creative team suggest the intermedial landscape of the project. Seventy-year-old *kunqu* star performer Wang Shiyu served as artistic director, film director Stanley Kwan directed, and avant-garde high fashion designer Guo Pei designed the costumes. According to his program notes, Wang conceived his role as ensuring *kunqu* performance conventions were appropriately engaged so that their integration with the contemporary elements of the production still maintained *kunqu*'s 'ancient attractions.'

As the first major filmmaker in Chinese cinema to openly declare his homosexuality,¹³ Kwan's involvement in *Two Belles* contributed complex layers of cultural significance. The use of directors in *xiqu* is a comparatively recent phenomenon. The embodied complex of performance conventions carried by the performers produced coherent performances in traditional director-less modes of play staging.¹⁴ Kwan saw his role as assisting the actors to develop the emotional depth and complexity of the piece. In pre-show press, he takes a decidedly respectful position in relation to Wang's *kunqu* expertise: "The key to acting is to get under the skin of the character, but in Kunqu, there are many strict rules that have to be adhered to. As a film director I want to learn from Wang to make sure everything is right."¹⁵ Whatever may have happened in the rehearsal room, Kwan here deflects potential criticism common in the 1980s and 1990s that directors without *xiqu* training tend to marginalise performance conventions in service to the script.¹⁶ Instead, Kwan offers a productive balance in which *kunqu* expressive techniques are given equal status to the emotional content they have been designed to express. This integration of tradition and contemporary approaches was echoed in designer Guo Pei's costumes that enhanced the traditional silhouette of *kunqu* robes with luxurious layers of silk chiffon and brocade. Guo was one of the first fashion designers to emerge after the Cultural Revolution. Her extravagant haute couture designs on the theme of Arabian Nights created a sensation at 2009 China Fashion week.¹⁷ On this project, she claims influence of traditional *kunqu* costume structure as well as research into Japanese *kabuki* costumes.¹⁸

The large posters plastered through Beijing subway tunnels and across the city's billboards engaged an interesting strategy to validate the lesbian themes through foregrounding the production's link to ancient traditions and simultaneously to entice young audiences who might normally avoid traditional *xiqu*. The posters adopted a colour scheme and layout echoing similarly ubiquitous posters for the regular *kunqu* performances of *The Peony Pavilion* staged by the same producers at the Imperial Granary theatre. Appropriately elegant and restrained, the latter posters show an actor and an actress in intimate close-up on a white background. They wear full make-up (nearly white foundation, strong black outline of eyes and brows, fuchsia rouge blended around the eyes) and white undergarments, but the actor's headdress has been removed to create a more clearly heterosexual image. Black lettering links to the black headwrap and wig. The *Two Belles* posters used the same white on white scheme: performers are in full make-up with the foundation extending down to their visibly naked shoulders and collarbones, conveying a more heightened sensuality than the *Peony Pavilion* poster. Three versions of the poster existed to advertise the plan to present an all-male cast and an all-female cast on alternative nights, consistent with pre-twentieth century practice of gender segregation in *xiqu* troupes. In many phases of *xiqu*'s history, gender of performer and character has not coincided. As discussed below, however, since the Cultural Revolution, coincidence has been the norm. Major female and male role types are termed *dan* (the written character also means 'daybreak') and *sheng* (the written character also means 'to be born' among numerous other definitions) respectively. *Dan* is a broad category of role types including many subtypes distinguishing age and personality of the character in addition to highlighted performance skills demanded by the role. For example, the two leading roles are both *guimen dan*, a refined young aristocratic female character who rarely leaves the family compound. As discussed below, the abbess of the temple where they meet was played one night by a *lao* ('old') *dan*, another night by a *chou* ('comic') *dan*. Calling attention to the cross-gender performances, the performers' names on the posters are supplemented with the descriptive labels *nandan* (male *dan*) or *nuling* (female performer). Two versions showed pairings of actresses, one looking at another, the other looking bashfully down, both with a restrained but sensual smile. In one version, their lightly touching hands are visible, pink nail polish echoing pink lips and eye shadow. The version with the two male performers is decidedly less intimate. One actor gazing toward the camera, the other with torso and head tilting slightly away from the other, gazes down. Both exhibit a neutral expression that conveys a melancholic longing aptly capturing the segment of the plot in which the lovers are separated. But compared to the intimacy conveyed by the images used on the female versions, the male *dans*' image suggests longing delayed or denied in parallel to continuing homophobia and suspicion of the practice

of male *dan* performance. As a set, the *Two Belles* posters validate acceptance of sexual diversity by strong visual linking to the pre-established image branding of traditional *kunqu* in Beijing. Conversely, the display of sensual intimacy was more overt even than most heteronormative advertising imagery. The highlighted participation Kwan and Guo, together with city wide exhibition of homoerotic/lesbian desire added a strong contemporary edge to the marketing campaign assuring this would not be your great-great-grandmother's *kunqu*.

Short History of Gender "Trouble" in Xiqu

For many outside China, *xiqu* is so strongly associated with the most famous male *dan*, Mei Lanfang that the practice is perceived as always already followed.¹⁹ It is therefore useful to recount the extensive evidence of female performers' substantial participation in *xiqu*, primarily as performers through early phases of *xiqu* development. The Yuan Dynasty (1206-1368) *Green Bower Collection* of biographical notes on performers of the time lists 117 women and only 25 men, which some offer as evidence that actresses outnumbered actors in the period.²⁰ Of course, review of Samuel Pepys's diary of English Restoration play viewing would suggest a similar abundance of female performers, which we know to misrepresent historical circumstances.²¹ Nonetheless, the *Green Bower* collection certainly proves the existence of actresses, whatever their comparative number to men. Ming Dynasty records prove extensive cross-gender portrayal by both actors and actresses and a common practice of performers engaging in sexual relationships with troupe owners and patrons.²² The more rigid morality of the Manchus ruling in the Qing Dynasty (1616-1911) linked women performers with prostitution and sexually provocative performances and produced repeated banning of women from the stage such that they had all but disappeared by 1774 just as *jingju* was emerging from a cross-pollination of early regional *xiqu* forms.²³ Homosexual prostitution between theatre patrons and young actors became increasingly fashionable from 1790 onwards and carried into the general practice of the new urban public theatres from whose audiences women were banned.²⁴ Commercial draw of female performers led to their reintroduction in the last half of the 19th century but edicts banning mixed-gender troupes meant there were both actors and actresses skilled in cross-gender performance.²⁵

The peak of *jingju*'s mass popularity at the beginning of the twentieth century also saw vigorous opposition to the practice of male *dan* from progressive Chinese literati pushing to move Chinese culture toward western modes of modernity. *Jingju* and its iconic actor Mei Lanfang, a male performer who specialised in female roles, was a frequent target of attack. Leading historian and critic Zheng Zhenduo adopted a particularly scathing tone when he wrote in 1929 about the most 'disgusting' element of *jingju* performance conventions, the female role played by men, which he termed "a cruel, inhuman, artificial and most despicable trick."²⁶ Li Ruru argues that Christian missionaries were shocked by the practice of apprentice boy actors serving as homosexual companions and that their lobbying ultimately led to banning of the residential apprentice *xianggong* system soon after the beginning of the Republican era in 1911.²⁷ The practice of training all *xiqu* performers was "modernised" in this period through establishment of training conservatories and Male *dan* continued to be trained alongside a new generation of female *dan*.²⁸

Following Communist victory in 1949, Siu Leung Li observes a strong push by the new government to gradually eliminate cross-gender performance—allowing current masters of male *dan* and female *sheng* to continue performing, but not to train new performers in these skills.²⁹ Li notes that in traditional *kunqu* and *jingju* male *dan* performances, the aesthetic goal is for the male actor to transcend gender and convince the audience they perceive a 'real woman,' so that the performer "veils his masculine body."³⁰ The plays of the Cultural Revolution period (1966-1976) sought to reach mass audiences through 'modern' *jingju* plays using more realistic performance elements including fitted modern peasant tunics and modified make-up. When compared with the stylised make-up and costumes of traditional *jingju* that veil the body underneath, the

modern plays of the Cultural Revolution can be seen to unveil the corporeal genders of the performers thereby advancing Party policy to align genders of performer and character.³¹

Prior to 2006, probably the most prominent male *dan* in professional *jingju* was Mei Lanfang's son, Mei Baojiu who heads a professional troupe linked to the Beijing municipal *jingju* company. Mei Baojiu follows his father's example of presenting an elegant, restrained, slightly effeminate public persona. Unlike his father, whose heterosexuality is deeply embedded in the public psyche through his famous love affair with female performer of male roles, Meng Xiaodong, Mei Baojiu's personal relationships—whether heterosexual or otherwise—are not prominently recounted. Mei Baojiu's fame continues to be rooted firmly in the realm of traditional *xiqu*. Since 2006, however, the meteoric rise of male pop star Li Yugang has eclipsed Mei Baojiu and is surely a catalyst to resurging interest in male *dan*. Li performed traditional and modern female *jingju* roles on the China Central Television talent show 'Star Boulevard'. Since winning the 2006 competition he has developed lavish pop spectacles that integrate *dan* performance conventions with other traditional performing arts and have toured internationally.³²

Li Yugang's success was followed by the 2009 release of Chen Kaige's biopic on Mei Lanfang, *Forever Enthralled* (Chinese title is *Mei Lanfang*). The film emphasises Mei's offstage heterosexuality, including his love affair with famous female performer of male roles, Meng Xiaodong, played by Zhang Ziyi. The film luxuriates in the gender-bending heat produced by these international celebrities. The characters first meet in a scene in which they perform in their gender-revealing street clothes for a gathering of *jingju* fans. Cantonese pop star Leon Lai in a white western-style suit portrays Mei portraying the elegant *qingyi* female role type while Zhang Ziyi in body-hugging *qipao* dress portrays Meng portraying a dignified older male *sheng* role.

Marking the resurgence of interest in male *dan*, the February 2010 issue of the national magazine *Zhongguo jingju* (Chinese *jingju*) includes a lengthy tribute to pioneering male *dan*, Shen Fucun, whose career was buffeted by shifting political winds such that he specialised in female roles in the early Communist era and switched to male roles after the Cultural Revolution.³³ As a coda to the tribute, the following article is titled: "'Jingju male *dan*': No Lack of Successors' and introduces seven rising male *dan* performers.³⁴ Whereas foreign missionaries' disdain may have contributed to the original banning the practice, editor Jin Wentai's opening commentary deploys 'foreign' approval to support the practice, citing the fact that Mei Lanfang and his art were held in high regard by Chaplin, Stanislavsky and Brecht. Jin frames the debate: "Whether to train male *dan* is an artistic question, it is not a political or moral question. This is especially true in the current environment of national prosperity and social harmony and stability. Our attitude to male *dan* must be rational and scientific."³⁵ Jin squarely rejects the political and social pressures that lead to perceptions of male *dan* as a backward, morally suspect convention. His call for a rational, scientific attitude becomes a contemporary code for acceptance and redirects the impulses to 'modernise' that led to the decline of male *dan* in the early twentieth century in service to the opposite goal of fostering the practice. Importantly, Li Ruru reminds us that, though all four great *dan* were male and were performing at a time that female *dan* were increasingly common, no one qualified the term *dan* by the gender of the performer.³⁶ Indeed, early female *dan* Li Yuru describes gender-neutral training—techniques for female roles were not taught differently depending on the gender of the student.³⁷

Two Belles in Love: The Deployment of Tradition as a Contemporary Strategy to Mainstream Acceptance of Sexual Diversity

The above account of complex and ambivalent reception of the practice of male *dan* provided the social backdrop to the May 2010 premiere of *Two Belles in Love*. In the moral universe created by Li Yu 350 years ago, sexuality transcends gender and sexual orientation to link souls that exist beyond the boundaries of a single

lifetime. Li Yu's original script was edited down from 36 to 10 scenes but retained the core narrative arc remains intact: with the assistance of approving gods, two women fall in love and arrange to be married to the same man so they can spend the rest of their lives together. In both the script and the production, the initial attraction between the two women is intensely physical, sensual: love at first scent rather than sight. Recently married Cui Jianyun arrives at a temple to burn joss sticks in thanks for having been married to a 'satisfactory' husband. Cao Yuhua happens to be staying at the same temple, opens the window and sees the beautiful Cui. A 'Fragrance God' intercedes: "As far as I can see, Cao and Cui are a perfect match by fate. I'll wave my fan to give them a hand. After that, they'll follow their fate."³⁸

In the following scene, titled 'Harmonious Nuptial Life,' Cui's husband enters and describes his satisfaction with his wife: "Since my marriage with miss Jianyun, we have been writing poems and commenting on essays, more like a pair of scholars than a couple. As I am contented with my nuptial life, I am not yearning for an official career."³⁹ Fan describes a marriage in which both partners resist limitations and expectations assigned to their respective genders: Cui is an accomplished scholar and poet though women are not allowed to sit for the Imperial examination that was the gateway to an official career; Fan is content to share his learning only with his wife, having no career ambitions. The gender inversion was troubled further in the opening night version of the casting with an actress playing the passive husband Fan and a male performer playing the poetically gifted Cui. The husband discovers the poems written by the two belles and composes his own poem in response. His lines clearly imply accompanying movement: "This is the fragrance from your rouged lips; this is the fragrance from your long hair; this is the fragrance from your long fingers; this is the fragrance from your small feet."⁴⁰

The staging of this passage was a point of interesting comparison of the impact of different casting on the comedy. Min Tian notes the metatheatrical joke in the early *nanxi* play *Zhang xie xhuangyuan* (First scholar Zhang Xie; c. 1127-1279 CE) which clearly indicates a female role was being played by a man: a male character accuses a female character of being a 'fake woman' because she does not have bound feet. In response, the character urges him to look upward, where the costume can disguise the male body of the actor more effectively than the tell-tale large feet.⁴¹ I saw *Two Belles* twice: once with a male *dan* playing Cui Jianyun, once with a female performer in the role. Though many factors may have influenced the differing audience reaction, with a male actor displaying his large foot, Fan's line about smelling Cui's small foot got a big laugh. In the performance with an actress play Cui, not only was there no laugh but the notable hush suggested the ambivalence associated with purported sexual arousal from the smell of the decayed flesh resulting from foot binding.

At their second meeting, a scene called 'Meng xue' (translated as 'The Belles Vow' but the Chinese implies a vow made in jest) the women at first accept existing sexual norms preventing them from being together in their present lifetime, they discuss what kind of pledge they can make that will carry into the next life. Cao Yuhua suggests being sisters, Cui counters they cannot predict what gender they will each be in future incarnations. Cao suggests a brotherhood for the next life, but Cui wants to be man and wife "who can sleep on the same pillow and stay together all their lives." Cao ponders this possibility in an aside, concluding: "If she becomes male, I'm willing to be her wife if only she is as pretty as now."⁴² The lines infuse the heteronormative flow of discussion with coded lesbian desire—a heterosexual relationship will be acceptable as long as the male future Cui is as beautiful as the female present Cui. Cui then suggests that they arrange for Cao also to marry Cui's husband. Cui sings:

We'll sleep together at night and
wake up together in the morning,
seeing our two faces in the same mirror.
We'll stay side by side in the same bower,

just like man and wife.
If you agree with me,
I'm even willing to be the concubine.⁴³

The scene was staged in a gorgeous, openly sensual movement sequence ending in an embrace, a rarity on the contemporary *xiqu* stage. Plans to offer a male *dan* in each of the leading roles were not realised. Opening night saw a male *dan* as Cui Jianyun and a female *dan* as Cao Yuhua, a mixed casting that diffused the homoerotic imagery somewhat. The other casting I viewed (the third in the four performance run), had two female *dan* in the leads. Doubtless due to the lengthy institutionalised support for training of female *dan*, their skill level was notably higher in addition to serving the thematic intent of both the script and the overall event more effectively.

The two belles next take a vow before Buddah to "live together from life to life and be man and wife by turns, always sharing the same bed."⁴⁴ Cui's maid suggests they have a wedding ceremony to seal the vow across future lifetimes. After deciding Cui will be the husband and Cao will be the wife in this life, the two hold the traditional red bow that signifies a wedding on the *xiqu* stage. In a staging of Li Yu's complete script, this action would be a reprise of Cui's marriage to her husband. Perhaps the second makeshift lesbian wedding would seem a pale or comic comparison to the preceding conventional ceremony. By deleting that earlier scene, the new production offers the lesbian marriage as the norm. Guo Pei's costuming suggested Cui's heterosexual marriage is the pale comparison: in the 'Harmonious Nuptial Life' scene, both Cui and her husband wore robes of such pale hues that they were washed out against the all white setting. In scenes between Cui and Cao, the costumes had notably more vibrant colour and contrast.

Cui convinces her husband to participate in the plan to wed Cao, and trick Cao's father into accepting the marriage. The final scene is a double wedding—two brides, one groom. Where Li Yu's script is essentially a bisexual romance, this production emphasised the pro-lesbian message: the two women exit lovingly holding each other's arms, leaving the husband trailing uselessly behind.

Conclusion

According to Jill Dolan:

Performance can describe, through the fulsome, hopeful, radically humanist gesture of the utopian performative, how social relationships might change. I go to see performances anticipating transformative experiences, ones that will let me see a sliver of a vision, let me feel for a moment in my body and my soul what the world might be like were some form of social justice or progressive social change or some consistent act of real, human love, even partially accomplished.⁴⁵

In many ways, this production achieved a level of utopia. Internationally acclaimed contemporary artists from film and high fashion in collaboration with traditional *kunqu* artists created a sumptuous production on a grand scale that packed the theatre and plastered the city of Beijing with images of sexual diversity. Prior to the Mr. Gay China event, pageant organisers attempted to maintain a low media profile yet still failed to evade official sanction. In contrast, *Two Belles in Love* announced its presence and socially progressive purpose boldly. The production received extensive and surprisingly positive coverage in state operated media. By foregrounding the 'classic' status of Li Yu's playscript, the UNESCO-honoured Ming Dynasty performance conventions of *kunqu*, and the international reputation of its collaborators, the production ignored contemporary social stigmas to reframe lesbian and gay sexuality as a positive Chinese tradition. The successful linking of this tradition with director Stanley Kwan's openly declared homosexuality suggests the sexual freedoms

experienced by the two belles in Li Yu's drama *is* beginning to coincide with a broader societal shift toward acceptance of sexual diversity, marking *A Romance: Two Belles in Love* as an aesthetically worthy, socially progressive, perhaps even momentous work in both *xiqu* development and Chinese societal change.

NOTES

- ¹ In addition to entries on the play, playwright and creative team, the program contained the full libretto in both English and Chinese.
- ² Andrew Jacobs, 'Despite Low Profile, Chinese Gay Pageant Is Shut Down', *New York Times*, 15 January 2010, A6.
- ³ Jenny X. Liu and Kyung Choi, 'Experiences of Social Discrimination Among Men Who Have Sex with Men in Shanghai', *AIDS Behavior*, 10 (published on-line May 2006), S25-S33; Pizza Ka Yee Chow and Sheung-Tak Cheng, 'Shame, Internalized Heterosexism, Lesbian Identity, and Coming out to Others: A Comparative Study of Lesbians in Mainland China and Hong Kong', *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 57.1: 92-104; Junling Cui, 'China's Cracked Closet', *Foreign Policy* 154 (2006): 90-91.
- ⁴ Li Ruru, *The Soul of Beijing Opera: Theatrical Creativity and Continuity in the Changing World* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010) 91-92.
- ⁵ Siu Leung Li, *Cross-Dressing in Chinese Opera* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2003); Jin Jiang, *Women Playing Men: Yue Opera and Social Change in Twentieth-century Shanghai* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009).
- ⁶ Qian Ma, *Women in Traditional Chinese Theatre: The Heroine's Play* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2005) 31-39.
- ⁷ Hu Shi, 'Mei Lan-fang and the Chinese Drama', in *China's Greatest Operatic Male Actor of Female Roles* ed. and trans. Min Tian (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2010) 61-63 & note.
- ⁸ Min Tian, *The Poetics of Difference and Displacement* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2008) 39-59.
- ⁹ Colin Mackerras, ed., *Chinese Theater: From Its Origins to the Present Day* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1988) 92-106.
- ¹⁰ Paul Clark, *The Chinese Cultural Revolution: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008) 10-54.
- ¹¹ 'UNESCO Proclamation of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity'.. http://www.unesco.org/bpi/intangible_heritage/china.htm Viewed 11 February 2011
- ¹² 'Revival of Ancient Elegance – Kunqu Opera wins Modern Audience', *Beijing Today*, Online: <http://www.beijingtoday.com.cn/center-stage/revival-of-ancient-elegance-kunqu-opera-wins-modern-audience/3> Viewed 2 April 2012.
- ¹³ Kwan came out in his 1996 documentary *Yin ± Yang: Gender in Chinese Cinema*. Song Hwee Lim analyzes this "newsworthy" event and Kwan's "ambivalent" attitude in *Celluloid Comrades: Representations of Male Homosexuality in Contemporary Chinese Cinemas* (Honolulu: Hawai'i University Press, 2006) 153-59.
- ¹⁴ Megan Evans, 'The Emerging Role of the Director in Chinese *Xiqu*', *Asian Theatre Journal* 24. 2 (2007) 470-478.
- ¹⁵ Liu Wei, 'Women in Love', *China Daily e clips* http://www.cdeclips.com/en/arts_n_life/fullstory.html?id=42758 Viewed 21 January 2011,
- ¹⁶ Elizabeth Wichmann, 'Tradition and Innovation in Contemporary Beijing Opera Performance', *The Drama Review* 34. 4 (1990): 158-60.
- ¹⁷ 'China Fashion Week: Designs by Guo Pei', *China Daily* (slide show), last updated November 7, 2009, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/life/2009-11/07/content_8927917.htm.
- ¹⁸ Liu, 'Women in Love'.
- ¹⁹ Joshua Goldstein's otherwise excellent historical analysis of *jingju*'s golden era is troublingly dismissive of the artistic contribution of *jingju* actresses. Joshua Goldstein, *Drama Kings: Players and Publics in the Recreation of Peking Opera 1870-1937* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007) 241-42.
- ²⁰ Li Ruru, *The Soul of Beijing Opera: Theatrical Creativity and Continuity in the Changing World* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010) 137-38.
- ²¹ Helen McAfee, *Pepys on the Restoration Stage* (New York: Benjamin Bloom, Inc., 1916).
- ²² Grant Guangren Shen, *Elite Theatre in Ming China, 1368-1644* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005) 58-63.
- ²³ Jiang, 'Women Playing Men', 28.
- ²⁴ Wu Cuncun and Mark Stevenson, 'Speaking of Flowers: Theatre, Public Culture, and Homoerotic Writing in Nineteenth-Century Beijing', *Asian Theatre Journal* 27.1 (2010) 102-03.
- ²⁵ Joshua Goldstein, *Drama Kings*, 110; Min Tian, 'Male *Dan*: the Paradox of Sex, Acting, and Perception of Female Impersonation in Traditional Chinese Theatre', *Asian Theatre Journal* 17.1 (2000), 91; Li, *Soul of Jingju*, 137-38; Wu and Stevenson, 'Speaking of Flowers', 102 & n.3.
- ²⁶ Zheng Zhenduo, 'Down with the *Dan* (female role) Actors in Women's Clothes; down with the Representative *Dan* Actor Mei Lanfang' in *China's Greatest Operatic Male Actor of Female Roles*, ed. and trans. Min Tian (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2010) 76.
- ²⁷ Li, *The Soul of Beijing Opera*, 88-89; Goldstein, *Drama Kings*, 106-07.
- ²⁸ Li, *The Soul of Beijing Opera*, 98; Evans, 'Role of *Xiqu* Director', 478-79.
- ²⁹ Siu Leung Li, *Cross-Dressing in Chinese Opera* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2003) 192.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, 196.

³¹As an example, male performer Li Yugang, discussed below, performed a scene from the modern dance drama *White Haired Girl* in the 2006 China Central Television national talent show 'Star Boulevard'. On-line video posting, accessed February 15, 2010, http://v.youku.com/v_show/id_XMjAwNjM1MDI4.html. Li's performance is technically impressive, he even uses pointe shoes. But the realistic costume and make-up reveal his gender more clearly than his performances in traditional costume.

³²Li Yugang: A Charming Woman on Stage, A Real Man in Life," *China Radio International*

<http://english.cri.cn/4406/2007/11/05/47@291237.htm>. Viewed February 14 2001,

³³Jin Wentai, ed., 'Nan dan de tuohuang ren' (Groundbreaking male performer of female roles', *Zhongguo jingju* (Chinese Jingju), February 2010, 4-11.

³⁴Jin Wentai, ed., "'Jingju nandan': houjiyouren", (Jingju male *dan*: No Lack of Successors), *Zhongguo jingju* (Chinese Jingju), February 2010, 12-13.

³⁵Jin Wentai, 'Jingju nandan', 12, trans. by author.

³⁶Li, *The Soul of Jingju*, 87-88.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 94.

³⁸The program from the performance contained the complete script in both Chinese and English, with translations by Wang Rongpei. The quote is from page 6 of the script, hereafter *Two Belles*. The program is bound so that with its spine on the right, information about the creative team and framing notes run pages 1-23. Flipping the volume so that the spine is on the right, a list of dramatis personae appears on the "first" page, with Chinese script printed in traditional top-to-bottom, right-to-left format, English translations appearing in the side margins.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 13.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 15.

⁴¹Min Tian, 'Male *Dan*: the Paradox of Sex, Acting, and Perception of Female Impersonation in Traditional Chinese Theatre', *Asian Theatre Journal* 17. 1 (2000): 80.

⁴²*Two Belles*, 18.

⁴³*Ibid.*, 19.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 20.

⁴⁵Jill Dolan, *Utopia in Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005) 141.