Feminism and androgyny: Gender politics in contemporary classical Chinese opera

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ABSTRACT

This article explores gender politics in China through the intersection of feminism and androgyny in contemporary classical Chinese opera, focusing on how gender fluidity and feminist representation on the contemporary *xiqu* stage create the conditions of connection with new audiences today. The discussion focuses on two examples, firstly, feminism in Amy Ng's translation of *Rescuing one's sister in the wind and dust* (2021) and, secondly, the androgynous body in the all-female Yue Opera productions *New Dragon Gate Inn* (2023) and *Coriolanus and Du Liniang* (2016). It investigates how translation and performance as representational forms interrogate entrenched gender norms, and engage with themes of marked relevance today, such as domestic violence and the commodification of women's bodies. In particular, gendered representation in *xiqu* not only provides an aesthetic revival of the past, but also subtly contests the perceived binary of traditional gender constructions by establishing portals of relatedness between past and present, both of which are unfixed and destabilised by the way in which these performance traffic in simultaneity. By exploiting connections across different temporal layers, these forms can enable feminism and a queer sensibility to permeate contemporary performances of classical Chinese art, enriching the current discourse available for promoting gender politics within this particular socio-cultural framework in (but not limited to) China.

KEYWORDS

Doubleness, feminism, androgyny, fandom, queer sensibility, classical Chinese opera [*xiqu*].

1. Introduction: Doubleness

The notion of the contemporary classical is an interesting oxymoron, one that captures in a useful abbreviated form the ways in which translation and theatre-making devise and juxtapose the layering of multiple temporalities. Of course, this opens up what is potentially much more than a double perspective. The conditions of time and space, in all their broad sweep, both material and metaphorical, provide the translator and theatre-maker with the imaginative tools of their trade. But, at its best, translated performance brings the diachronic and the synchronic into sharp relief. This juxtaposition of how things are with a sense of how they once were, embodies a flow between then and now, there and here, that, at the very least, can serve to destabilise the fixed assumptions of our presentism. This is one of the key questions of this special issue: the ways in which contemporary stage practice is changing at a time of paradigm shift in response to our shifting relationships both with each other and with the assumptions and dynamics of our past.

One of the answers that we can immediately supply to this question is that of radical juxtaposition. As a complex representational form, performance enables a blended response to how past and present both coalesce and clash in the swirl of what we call the contemporary moment. It is this engineering of juxtaposition that allows us to refer to the functioning of a doubleness in practice. In that way translation for performance can embody a Saussurean model of language, where the creative use of deliberate text-based anachronism inflicts its own re-constructive disruption on our language world. The relevance of this, for example, to translations that militate for feminist

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language reform is immediately apparent. For instance, in Amy Ng's recent translation of Hanqing's (关汉卿 1225–1330) *Rescuing one's sister in the wind and dust*[1] (Guan, 2023), both of which stage their own contemporaneous account of the hidden connections between prostitution and marriage, there are constant verbal refractions between past and present — for instance, the old Chinese term in the original play for a man who frequents prostitutes is *子弟*, referring to those young men from rich or noble families who use women for fun, which Ng translates as 'lover', on the basis that, as one of the prostitutes declares "a good lover is a bullshitter. […] It's part of the job description. Like us — we trade in illusions" (Ng, 2021, 21'37''–21'57''). The discordancy is apparent, and it is the contention of this article that it is in such moments that the act of translation fully instantiates itself, as both hermeneutic challenge and insinuation of relatedness across time and space. At the heart of this playing with different moments in time is the principle of a contradictory simultaneity whose ulterior motive is to show how we are the products of the past, how the past lives within us, and how we are the vectors for pushing the past forwards. Performance, in that way, is a ligature across time, a reminder of why we have become the way we are, and of what we still need to do.

In terms of translation and performance, it is with language that we must necessarily start. But the sort of contrapuntal doubleness embodied in juxtaposition extends translational impact beyond the paradigm of interlingual transfer. The notion of the counterpoint is particularly relevant as this article is primarily concerned with contemporary performance of classical Chinese opera, but it is drawn from Edward Said's notion of contrapuntal reading, which he develops in *Culture and imperialism* (1993), where he sets out to develop ways of reading a text that both allows it to be itself but also to speak intimately to radically different contexts. Contrapuntal translation in that way is more than a negotiation, a common metaphor for characterising the task of the translator, but rather it assumes the bridging of dissonances (to resort to another musical term) in ways that are designed to embed the imagination of the spectator within flows of time and space. For it is these flows that enable perspective, that embody processes of change, and that establish the possibility of extended relatedness.

These moments of dissonance, designed to immerse the spectator in the actions of contrapuntal reading, can punctuate the performance with thrilling moments of recognition where we see ourselves mirrored, even through a glass darkly, in the lives and experiences of others remote from us. In a way this is the thrill of what Freud termed the *Unheimlich*, or the 'uncanny', where the experience of dissonance evokes once again "what is known of old and long familiar" (see Kearney, 2002). These productive anomalies — a fourteenth-century Chinese sex worker musing on the qualities of good lovers and husbands, for example — are geared to produce the sort of synaptic connection that Freud envisaged in his notion of the uncanny, or that the Spanish poet Federico García Lorca characterised as *duende* (García Lorca, 2007), the heightened state of emotional response to what becomes suddenly visible to us from the invisible world. This is all about connection, about re-orienting ourselves to where we have come from, what we have inherited from the past and what we have lost. John Berger (2003) saw disconnection as a spiritual and political malaise of our times:

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> People everywhere, under very different conditions, are asking themselves — where are we? The question is historical not geographical. What are we living through? Where are we being taken? What have we lost? How to continue without a plausible vision of the future? Why have we lost any view of what is beyond a lifetime?

Berger's question is particularly pressing in the context of China, where the ongoing politics of state modernisation of the last two decades has led to the sort of concentration on the present moment that, in broad terms, was no less a feature of the political and cultural project of European modernism as well. Within that similar Chinese presentism, classical literature, including of course classical opera, is increasingly commodified as a relic, a marker of pastness rather than a living tradition that speaks to and illuminates people's lives today. In terms of classical Chinese opera, with which this article is primarily concerned, this has in turn led to the paradoxical situation in which the form is both known and viewed as detached from the contemporary moment, irrelevant, out of touch. In that way, every performance of *xiqu* derives from a core decision to translate (in the sense of refracting it into the contemporary moment) or to not translate (in the sense of leaving the original untouched, untroubled by any evocation of the centuries in between). This boils down to a choice of reviving the form as a living tradition that speaks thrillingly to the present moment, or presenting it as a museum piece, an intricate glass-bead game that is wholly constrained within its own performance codes and range of meanings firmly anchored in a fascinating but dead past. That is why, returning to Amy Ng's translation of Guan Hanqing's classic, the new play opens with the actress who will eventually play the prostitute responding to the audience's request for a story from the past. In a manner reminiscent of Dale Wasserman's *Man of La Mancha*, the audience is lulled by a frame that seemingly requires only passive spectatorship, a viewing of the past that does not trouble the present. And so, the stage is set for the contrapuntal process of dissonance and recognition, the advancement of knowledge that comes in the wake of translation's presentation of disjunction and anachronism.

This is translation, both as a writing practice and a mode of performance, that manoeuvres within and responds to clearly defined constraints. The performance of classical Chinese opera in contemporary China is shaped by a double-layered stranglehold of 'political correctness', where both the portrayal of gender roles and the preservation of national cultural identity are brought to align with state expectations managed by a top-down system. *Xiqu* has long been regarded as 'national cultural heritage' — it is not only revered as a repository of traditional values but also as a vehicle for cultural diplomacy. This status quo brings the contemporary performance of classical opera in China into line with a double agenda: on one hand, it reinforces the state's expectations regarding women's roles, often promoting a narrative of familial loyalty and traditional gender roles; on the other, the country's top-down system emphasises showcasing the classical culture as a symbol of Chinese heritage and national pride in the past for the contemporary generation.

New translations abroad, such as Amy Ng's *Rescuing one's sister*… (Ng, 2021) and, for instance, home productions of Yue Opera's all female pieces, such as *New Dragon Gate Inn (新龙门客栈,* 2023*),* mount their own challenge to this complex landscape by embedding feminist and gender-inclusive themes within these traditional forms, resisting, if not subverting, official expectations in subtle ways. Such performances allow feminist and queering techniques to emerge in an accessible, culturally resonant

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form, offering possible ways for a more radical gender politics to be able to coexist with the state's ideals of national identity and intangible cultural heritage, subtly expanding what we might think of as permissible discourse within Chinese performance arts, where there is a readily perceptible crisis of utterance in terms of giving relatable voice to the experience of women, perhaps especially that of young women, today.

2. A feminist representation of the classics?

This analysis begins, therefore, with feminist interpretations, translational and performative, of the Chinese classics, in part because they bring their own context to the rising tide of Chinese feminism, and in part because *xiqu* productions that speak to the lived experience of contemporary Chinese women are one way of ensuring the relevance of a form that is already widely seen as art for art's sake, hopelessly out of touch. These interpretations through a feminist lens can bring their own contrapuntal texturing to the stage, prompting women to read their own lives in and through their reading of the lives of the women that have gone before them. There is 'duende' here in terms of the rush of the repressed real that is made immediate both in terms of translational language choices, and aesthetic choices that privilege emotional proximity. Once again, this is where translation and theatre-making coincide in terms of their ability to vivify the past, to respond to this double 'political correctness' in the guise of both a repressed gender politics and the nationalistic gatekeeping of the tradition, while at the same time offering powerful representations of what it means to be a woman, then and now. Paraphrasing Gabriel Marcel's own sense of the contrapuntal, his "language of intersubjectivity", David Johnston points to the "energies and forces that connect the stage powerfully with the spectator", arguing that "it is through sensation and the emotions that we become complicit with performance, through their powerful pull that we keep coming back to that world on stage' (Johnston, 2016).

These plays offer worlds that are both distant and, in the hands of skilful practitioners, disturbingly familiar. The lens of feminism presents one focus on a way of re-conceiving the perceived intangible 'classics' for contemporary audiences, rekindling our experience of the multitudinous sense of who we are, a sense that has been lost to the constantly reinforced assertions of singular conceptions of identity in times of identitarian certainty. But while the readily observable widespread and ingrained sense of 'this is how a Chinese woman should be' is brought into question, this denial of our multiple selves in the name of social cohesion is, of course, not solely an issue in Chinese culture and society; it is a key element of an unwritten social contract in many societies where women are defined through contribution (family, caring, male pleasure etc) rather than encouraged to be. If performance is "a river of feeling", as Eric Bentley memorably declared in *The life of the drama* (1964, p. 3), then women are all too often the canals, deeply dug by a society's narrative certainties, constructed to carry the products and detritus alike of whatever system it is that we think of as our modernity.

Guan Hanqing's *Rescuing one's sister…* (Guan, 2023) is a good example of this. His work is considered 'classical' because he is a prominent founding figure of the *Yuan zaju*, a performance form that developed in the late 13th century, an extraordinary precursor of the Gesamtkunstwerk in that it combines songs, dialogue, richly visual

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stagecraft and stylised costuming, as well as engaging spectator emotions through the intricate interrelatedness of characters embedded in powerful storylines. Guan was one of the form's pioneer playwrights, helping to transform it into a mature and distinctive genre that played a crucial role in shaping Chinese drama and literature, so that its "place in the history of Chinese drama and of Chinese literature in general, cannot be overemphasised" (Ma, 2005, 8); for that reason, it is considered a prime asset in the Chinese government's current harnessing of classical Chinese culture. It is this holistic quality of *zaju* that leads the form to be frequently pressganged into the service of national branding, with the result that Guan has become a cultural icon of such historical and cultural weight that Chinese audiences ascribe a ready-made identitarian solidity to his works (there is a ready parallel with Shakespeare here in terms of cultural commodification). For example, the state-initiated China Cultural Classical Text translation project, which is used as part of the National Master of Translation and Interpreting (MTI) Series Textbooks, inevitably includes Guan's well-known *The Injustice of Dou'E*, translated by Wang Rongpei (2009)[2]. But this is Guan through the looking glass.

Guan's theatre is safeguarded by institutional and cultural gatekeeping forces, particularly when it comes to acts of translation focussed on new audiences. His status as a classical icon is in itself an affordance of the current resurgence of classical culture within the country through TV and theatre productions that target national audiences with exemplifications of the China story in what is tantamount to a backwards-gazing cultural utopianism. For instance, there has been a marked renaissance of classical Chinese culture within the country evident in an aesthetic now identified as *国风* or *国潮* ['national chic'], that is, national classical style. In the 2022 Chinese TV adaptation of Guan's *Rescuing one's sister…* (Guan, 2023)*,* televised as *梦华录* ('A dream of splendour'), the author's classical status is romanticised into an affordance of *宋代美学风潮* ['The tide of song dynasty aesthetics'], a manufactured trend concerned to familiarise new audiences with the perceived glories of the Song past (Xu, forthcoming). It is an act of political and cultural confidence-building, geared towards immersing new audiences in the folk culture of the Dynasty, with its exquisite costumes, decoration and architecture, culinary richness, and dynamic and multifaceted performing arts that encompass a whole panoply of theatrical, musical and acrobatic styles, so that the totalising impact of this evocation of the total work of art brings a sense of reassuring completion, of formal perfection, to its audience. On the other hand, the gender politics inherent to the storyline itself, involving sisterhood, domestic violence, and the lives of sex workers, are overshadowed by an aesthetic agenda that plays to the wider commodification of the classics as the inherited beauty of the past. Ng's translation, however, recontextualises historical gender dynamics in the script, addressing these gender issues in ways that align with contemporary feminist movements like #MeToo. In doing so, it eschews the looking glass of the official narratives, the filter through which these plays are perceived as familiar but marooned in a fixed past.

Domestic violence is more than a theme. It is the everyday reality of women across the globe, very often subsumed into overriding narratives of family harmony. In the case of contemporary China, a recent report has found that "gendered violence is rife […] in both public and private spaces" (Wong, 2022). But while such violence is seen as tempering, indeed corrective, in gender-morality plays like *The taming of the shrew*

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(Shakespeare, 2002), Guan casts a much more jaundiced eye on the roots of legitimised male violence on women. In his original, Song Yizhang, the former courtesan who marries one of her wealthy customers, complains bitterly: "I did not listen to my sister Zhao; now that I am married to him, he beat me with a killing cudgel 50 times" [*当初赵家姐姐劝我不听，果然进的门来，打了我五十杀威棒。*] Guan, 2023). In Ng's translation (2021), this violence is now voiced directly by the man himself, thereby communicating more directly to the audience the sense of ownership, of ingrained right, that is a key factor in inciting domestic violence today. Zhou She's own words speak of a tension between male control and female sexuality:

> ZHOU: We were on the way home when her sedan chair started bopping up and down. I lifted up the curtain with my whip, and there she was, somersaulting in the nude! I mean, on the streets of Zhengzhou! What was she thinking? That this was some pole-dancing orgy? […] Soon as she crossed my threshold, I whipped her 50 times to break her in (Ng, 2021, 34'36''–35'06'').

This shift in narrative perspective, reinforced by graphically anachronistic turns of phrase — "break her in", amongst others — leaves the perpetrator directly exposed to the audience's gaze on the stage. Now, instead of placing female victims of domestic violence in a constant position of weakness rooted in a cruelly impoverished set of women's expectations, and by focusing directly on the perpetrator's violent crimes, brutality, and cruelty, the audience can more effectively reflect on the unequal status of men and women in the social and legal contracts that govern their relationships. The looking glass is removed and instead the audience is brought to feel both the sting of injustice and a sense of how much of an undead past is still with us.

Guan's gaze is one of compassion but Ng, because she maintains the setting of the original, turns timeless compassion into what is at core a contemporary women's rights-based agenda. Translation connects. Here she extends this underpinning emotion, Guan's act of attention to the plight of women who in this patriarchy have no alternative but to sell sex to survive. In this regard, Guan's original is extraordinary in the way in which it acknowledges the traumatic experiences that lie behind the often glamourised trade of the courtesan. In this short excerpt from the translation (Ng, 2021), the sex worker Pan'er is talking to the young man An, one of Yinzhang's Suitors, whose rose-tinted view of the world of commercialised sex is offset by the three female Ghosts who, like *Macbeth*'s witches, function as chorus and warning, both leading the audience into the world of the original, and bringing them to reflect on the portals of connection between that world and theirs:

> PAN'ER: […] It's hard work, let me tell you, other people's pleasure —
> AN: You make it sound so sordid!
> PAN'ER: We're sordid, we sell illusions, but what about the buyers?
> GHOST 1: Crazed, brutish, they don't see us as human.
> GHOST 2: They call us leeches, parasites, even when we don't ask for money.
> GHOST 3: But we never learn. We just become more and more infatuated.
> PAN'ER: […] Homemakers work hard for ephemeral reputations, but sellers of illusions fleece idiots to get rich (Ng, 2021, 18'18''–18'37'').

In this way, by extending compassion into a feminist gaze, Ng, of course, creates a conversation between this classical Chinese play and the more gender-aware affordances provided by the audience of a theatre such as London's Almeida. But this

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is more than preaching to the already converted. Ng's translation is also an artistic and political act of resistance against cultural appropriation, creating new conditions for dialogue between Eastern and Western performance traditions, and in doing so setting out the case for a classical Chinese performance tradition that in some ways is more open in its early willingness to address issues in a way that foreshadows contemporary concerns and responses. In that way, by highlighting gender issues that are both relevant to the original text and resonate with contemporary audiences—such as the oppression of women, domestic violence, and the realities of sex work—the translated play's overt feminism dismantles and then re-animates an essentialised past by challenging identity certainties and by unfixing assumptions about who women are. As Stuart Hall once noted, identity, whether cultural or gendered, "is a matter of 'becoming' as well as 'being' [...] subject to the continuous play of history, culture, and power" (1994, p. 394). It is this dynamic, this interplay of time and shifting states of being controlled by largely unchanging sources of power, that the representational force of translation and theatre alike are capable of conjuring within the performance space. In the particular case of Ng's translation, the feminist lens re-creates Hall's "continuous play of history", allowing the performance to be relevant and engaging while resisting the simplification or exoticisation of classical Chinese culture, and at the same time responding to our increasing demand for gender equity in the arts by means of a gender sensitive yet artistically valid interpretation of classical theatre for the contemporary stage.

3. The androgynous body in classical Chinese opera

All of this is much more than simply pressganging classical Chinese theatre into the service of a contemporary cause, no matter how worthy that cause be may. It is not activism in that most direct of senses. But activism it still is, in the Benjaminian sense of what he thought of as the infinite task of creating connections across the fabric of time and space (1996, pp. 100–110).

This infinite task, which Johnston calls that of "apprehending the bases for a new reality by more fully understanding our subjective experience of the interstices of time and space—now re-created as theatre practice" (2024, p. 19), is to re-connect with a past that is not linear but rather re-constitutes itself through performance in terms of a subjective 'interlinearity'. It is interesting how Ng reinforces her dismantling of the linear distance between past and present by juxtaposing the living and the dead, another key ligature. What is at play in both Ng's translation and these opera productions is the capacity of translation and performance alike to re-imagine time, to telescope historical distance from the perspective of gendered identity, to deploy translation and theatre as representational modes that orchestrate and showcase the impact of these interstitial moments across time and space — for example, in the case of this play, when a spark of authorial empathy with a violated female character prefigures feminism as one of the key movements of modern times. In this way, practitioners can offer their audiences the sort of complex understanding that surges from emotional identification rather than elucidated from the long backward gaze to the past. It is an understanding of relatedness that is deduced more from the metaphoricity of a narrative shape that brings time and space together rather than enshrined in the reductionist certainty of fixed assumptions about who and what we are.

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It would be interesting to see Ng's translation translated back into Chinese for performance there. It would certainly fit within a growing trend in the re-presentation of classical Chinese opera, which is to interrogate the whole notion of who and what we are by questioning the parameters not just of gendered roles but of the fluid contours of sexual identity itself. It is important to emphasise here that this is not the result of the importation of what is all too easily seen from other perspectives as largely Western concerns with gender fluidity. Just as Ng's feminism is not simply grafted onto Guan's play but rather emerges from her own contrapuntal reading of it, so the stirrings of an interest in exploring the limits of sexual identity, both in terms of how it is experienced and how it is performed, are evident right from the earliest forms of classical Chinese opera. We can think of this as the marked presence of androgyny on the early Chinese stage, and this presence provides another possible interstitial moment where past and present seep together in the contemporary moment.

Androgyny is embodied in classical Chinese opera through specific role-types, where performers cross traditional gender boundaries by adopting both masculine and feminine characteristics within a single character or performance. For example, male actors frequently perform female roles 旦 [*dan*], and female actors perform male roles 生 [*sheng*], emphasising stylised and idealised gender qualities that blend masculinity and femininity in their characters. This tradition of androgynous embodiment in classical Chinese opera, represented through cross-dressing as well as cross-casting (Ho, Li and Kam, 2021, p.129), through the cultivation of stylised movement and voice — particularly of falsetto singing and recitative - is both deeply rooted in the historical and cultural contexts from which the performance codes of the form have developed, and in the concerns of a society which is still at the very least ambivalent towards the rights of what is effectively, according to a recent report, the world's largest lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) population. It is too early yet to speak of a community (Wang, Hu & Peng et al., 2020, pp. 1–10).

Of course, while the root of these codes lies in a complex of shifting attitudes over time to same-sex relationships, the whole notion of gender fluidity in Chinese theatre today is largely considered merely an accepted performance device, an 'aestheticised' quirk from the past. Whatever covert appeal cross-dressing and cross-casting might have exerted in the times when *xiqu* played to popular audiences, today gender fluidity is considered a sensitive topic, carefully monitored by the current strict censorship system. But the fact remains that performance, like translation, is an embodied transaction, not an abstracted cypher of the past, and the physical presence of performers embedded in emotive stories opens up the door to the attractiveness of the androgynous body. It is a presence that extends beyond simple gender mimicry and moves into an artistic representation that combines both genders to evoke specific emotional or symbolic qualities, thus challenging strict binary notions of gender. This androgynous embodiment allows classical Chinese opera to create complex, layered narratives that continue to influence contemporary interpretations of gender in China, appealing to audiences both aesthetically and emotionally.

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4. Cross-dressing, androgyny and prostitution

An example of this burgeoning concern of looking at gender politics through the performance of the "classics" are the newly adapted plays from contemporary *越剧* ['Yue opera'] troupe Zhejiang Xiaobaihua, who pioneer the deployment of all-female casting as a stage embodiment of gender fluidity. On one hand, they take full advantage of the sense of a political correctness in reviving classical theatre as cultural heritage, claiming tradition as a canopy objective to circumvent the long-standing wider gatekeeping context in which culture is performed in China, where a queer sensibility is regarded as "abnormal sexual relationship and behaviour", banned by official policy (Xinhuanet, 2017; National Radio and Television Administration, 2021). This circumvention is achieved mainly through the convention of cross-dressing, a device rooted in the ludic core of much classical Chinese opera. Women inhabit men's bodies on stage now in a style of performance that owes nearly as much to a queering sensibility that undermines the ongoing certainties of heteronormativity as it does to the performance codes inherited from the past (Tse, 2021, p. 139).

Xiaobaihua's recent all-female production *New Dragon Gate Inn* (2023), adapted from the 1992 classic film, prompted a surge of interest in this classical operatic form from the young Chinese audience through its empowering depiction of an androgynous character Jade-faced Jia Ting, performed in cross-dress by Chen Lijun. This new opera adaptation characteristically situated itself within the 'National chic' movement, but its courageous depiction of non-binary sexual identities caused its cast to be catapulted to stardom, amassing millions of followers on social media platforms (Chu & Fan, 2024). Fans' interest concentrated on one particular scene, where Jia Ting teases the protagonist, the owner of the *Dragon Gate Inn,* Jin Xiangyu, performed by Li Xiaoyun, by holding her closely in her arms, and lifting her up so that she makes intimate eye contact with her. This may not well be a stock scene of traditional *xiqu*, but in this production fans are particularly attracted by the queer overtones of the scene: social media was inundated with comments whose apparent playfulness is underpinned by a more serious commitment to difference: "I am dying for such a lovely couple like these two!" (Shen, 2024), and the physical sinuosity of Chen Lijun's androgynous sexuality on stage evokes posts that state "She shows us that the best husbands should be females; she is more handsome than most of the Chinese male stars in the 90s generation" (Shen, 2024). "She is my husband girl" (Shen, 2024). It seems that a population is beginning to become a community.

In the previous film version, the role of Jia Ting was performed by a male actor, so that whatever physical action is encoded into the performance, it is encased within a traditional male-female binary. This Yue opera adaptation subverts these expectations by creating a contrapuntal relationship between the production and a contemporary sensibility that pushes the boundaries of gender representation. Chen Lijun's androgynous embodiment challenges binary gender archetypes often reinforced in the feudal past (Loo & Deng, 2024, pp.1–19), while the unspoken love of the women on stage automatically brings the audience into the act of completing and enabling the flow of non-binary relatedness. To some extent, this is all carried out by subterfuge, by the sort of creative transpositioning that censorship sometimes demands of artists, but many spectators also come to these productions in search of encoded meanings. In any event, the implied meanings it offers these spectators still stands in stark contrast

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to governmental efforts to regulate and control the portrayal of sexuality and gender in the media. The popularity of this sort of performance points to a wider cultural need for narratives that go beyond conventional gender expectations. Despite government policies that stigmatise non-heteronormative relationships, the success of this opera suggests that such restrictions cannot fully suppress the audience's interest in diverse gender expressions and relationships, and while the opera may not overtly present a romantic relationship between two women, the androgynous aesthetic implicitly disrupts heteronormative narratives, offering room for interpretation and emotional resonance, particularly for audiences that are becoming increasingly familiar with and looking for queer subtexts in performance art.

Perhaps the floodgates, if not opening, are being slowly prised apart. Another typical example of blurring the borders of gender, sex, time and space and engaging the contemporary audience through the agency of emotions is the same company's *Coriolanus and Du Liniang* (2016) in London. This play is an interweaving production of Shakespeare's play *Coriolanus* and Tang Xianzu's *The peony pavilion* adapted by Shen Lin and Hu Xiaohai. In this production, *Coriolanus* and *The peony pavilion* are set in contrapuntal relation with each other, so that their leading characters Coriolanus, a heroic and brave military man, and a young beautiful girl Du Liniang, who died for a lover in her dream, meet while Coriolanus is in the spatially liminal state of exile and Du Liniang inhabits the temporal liminal state between life and death. Within this liminal connection, the two have an unexpected encounter on stage discussing their life philosophies, and while Coriolanus dies for hatred, the spirit of Du Liniang is reborn for love, crossing the borders between the two stories and breaking the restrictions of time and space. The patriarchy of violence in Shakespeare's world and the world of female desires, emotions, and marked sense of sexuality in Tang Xianzu, spark dialogues that in the hands of all-female cross-dressing cast not only contest gender stereotypes, but in their place offers new interpretations of sexual identity from queering the perceived untouchable classics. The implication is clear: a queer sensibility has always been with us, always a part of our heritage.

In this way, the history of cross-dressing in classical Chinese Opera is a history of the female body, moving from being objectified and owned by the patriarchy to a site that enables women to voice the politics of their own body. Cross-dressing on stage has its origins in China's long-standing legal restrictions that allowed only single-sex groups to perform, in that acting has long been associated with prostitution — selling one's body for the pleasure of others. Originating in the early 1900s from local folk singing traditions in southeastern China's Yangtze River Delta, especially around Shanghai, Yue Opera for that reasoned initially featured all-male performances. From the Tang Dynasty to the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644), female performers were frequently associated with prostitution, drawing parallels with the perception of female entertainers in Elizabethan England and Golden Age Spain. In 1646, during the Qing Dynasty (1644–1912), Emperor Shunzhi banned women from performing on stage — a prohibition further strengthened in 1719, when a law was passed stating that "if a singing woman entered the city in a cart singing, even if she is merely a performer, she may be considered a criminal prostitute" (Sun, 1981, p. 26). At this time, men and women performing together in one performance was still considered as "harmful to society's morals" in that the inviolability of family has traditionally been perceived as the stabilising building block of society (Xu, 2003, p. 44). Accordingly, no publicly visible opera actresses, including in Yue Opera, were allowed. Even so,

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notwithstanding this strictly enforced law, some female performers still exhibited their work in the context of private performances for rich families, although the law made court performances impossible for women, with the inevitable consequence that the companies performing opera became increasingly all male. This male-imposed conflation of female performers, private entertainer and prostitute is explored in Ng's translation of *Rescuing one's sister…* (Ng, 2021). This is a history of gender denigration, cultural marginalisation, sexual abuse and male violence that stretches across the centuries:

> Pan'er examines her bruised neck in the mirror and rubs some ointment on the bruise.
> GHOST 1: What happened?
> PAN'ER: I sang at the Duchess's birthday banquet. The Duke caught me afterwards.
> GHOST 3: But you've retired!
> PAN'ER: Yes, it was even in the contract. I sell smiles, I sell songs, I do not sell 'love'.
> GHOST 2: I'm sure the Duke wasn't interested in love. Just sex.
> GHOST 3: Entertainers, prostitutes...it's all the same to them.
> PAN'ER: I am an artist (Ng, 2021, 41'46–42'17'').

It was not until the New Culture Movement of the first decades of last century that a dedicated effort emerged to promote female participation in Yue Opera. Jin Jiang's book *Women Playing Men: Yue Opera and Social Change in Twentieth Century Shanghai* (2011) writes about the history of women's Yue Opera emerged from within the context of Shanghai's burgeoning urban culture, where a group of semi-literate female singers transformed the art form from rural folk entertainment to an urban theatrical tradition. By 1924, Yue Opera became to offer a legitimate alternative career for women, alongside opportunities in Shanghai's rapidly expanding textile industry. This led the art form to evolving into an exclusively female medium, characterised by its aesthetic innovation, dedication, and solidarity. These pioneering performers navigated the boundaries of gender performance, social class, and the transition from rural life to urban modernity, marking a significant chapter in the history of Chinese theatre, women's emancipation, and the nation's journey towards modernity. The all-female Yue Opera productions of this era, often focusing on love stories accompanied by gentle music, quickly captivated Shanghai audiences as a refreshing departure from traditional opera. The form became especially popular among the city's first female working class — textile workers — who flocked to the theatres to support their fellow female performers. This patronage fostered a sense of solidarity and empowerment, marking all-female Yue Opera's thriving throughout the 1930s and 1940s. Its popularity continued to grow, eventually branching out into popular cinema during the 1960s, cementing its place in China's cultural landscape (Jin, 2011). This brief history marks a trail of interstices between woman as prostitute to the female performer whose work in China and with Chinese classics is becoming an agent of community.

5. Conclusions

Gender representation in classical Chinese opera has a long and complex tradition, historically and culturally. This article has sought to highlight the contributions of these newly translated and performed plays while at the same time very briefly sketching out their origins and their struggle. These contributions take the form of new impact in our contemporary world, where the issue of gender and sex have acquired a new and more radical sensitivity. Yes, these are issues 'known of old and long familiar' but this

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intersection of tradition, censorship, and androgynous representation that these performances embody become a delicate yet daring form of resistance. Within China, despite media censorship, there are still spaces where gender and sexual identity can be explored, even if subtly or through indirect means.

And it is through translation and performance, which can enable audiences to experience the very flow of time itself in terms of material intersections, that we bring the past into the present. Both translation and performance make space available, both for new audiences to engage in exciting new contrapuntal readings with old texts, but as a way for our past to merge into a modernised narrative that aligns with more progressive, global discourses on gender and identity.

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Data availability statement

Data sharing is not applicable in this article.

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Notes

[1] The play is translated based on the classical Chinese opera *Zhao Pan'Er Feng Yue Jiu Feng Chen* (赵盼儿风月救风尘) by Guan Hanqing (Ng, 2021). The quotations below Ng's translation are derived from this video recording of the reading performance at Almeida Theatre in London (Guan,2023). The play was considered to have been written in the 13th century, but the earliest published version accessible was dated 1615. Rather than referencing page numbers, the specific timeline in the performance is provided so as to assist readers in locating the quoted excerpts. The pandemic has slowed the progress towards production of the translated text, so what is referenced here is a rehearsed reading rather than full production, with the result that there is limited scope in this article for fully envisioning the performance potentials of the target text. I am currently in contact with the translator's agent, Berlin Associates (https://www.berlinassociates.com/client-list/amy-ng), to ascertain her future intentions for the script.

[2] This play is widely translated as *The Injustice of Dou'E* in China, but it is better known as *Snow in Mid-Summer* in the UK, as this is the title translated by Frances Ya-Chu Cowhig and directed by Justin Audibert, as produced by the RSC in 2019 (RSC, 2019). This production was accused inside China of misrepresenting the Chinese classics. Michael Billington from the *Guardian* commented on the RSC's production as "perplexing" (Billington, 2017).

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