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NEW ACTRESSES AND URBAN PUBLICS OF EARLY REPUBLICAN BEIJING

by

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DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of the College of the Marianna Brown Dietrich College of
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Abstract

This dissertation is a study of the social and cultural history of the new actresses in early Republican Beijing. It shows that the female players, previously banned by the Qing dynasty, entered into a male-dominated profession and carved out a niche for themselves in the highly competitive entertainment business. As they stepped out of the inner quarters and became illustrious opera stars, actresses placed themselves at the center of multiple gazes and discourses. Displaying their physical charm and artistic talent on stage, they became agents of theatrical innovation and developed a distinctive repertoire and performance style. From stage to social life, the early actresses fashioned new femininities that deviated from both Confucian sentimentalism and the May Fourth notion of supreme love. They played a critical role in the formation of a variety of urban publics and animated a dynamic social process of negotiation between the traditional and the modern, the public and the private, the regional and the national, as well as between the personal and the communal.

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Introduction

In the 1930s, Peking opera, a composite dramatic form derived mainly from *pihuang* (皮黄) opera, became widely recognized as *the* national opera of China. It caught the imagination of both reformist intellectuals and pleasure-seeking consumers; on the international stage, Peking opera's idiom of male actors playing stylized female roles became a unique symbol of Chinese culture. But the cultural significance given to the operatic genre was not unchallenged. As Shen Zhengyuan wrote in 1939—

> *Bangzi* (梆子 clapper) opera rivaled *pihuang* opera in the late Qing and the early Republican era. It was not until 1920s that *bangzi* opera began to decline. In terms of distribution, the influence of *pihuang* can barely reach beyond the big cities, while *bangzi* is widely seen in all cities and villages. Therefore, the consideration of *pihuang* as the only representative of *guoju* (國劇 national opera) is very parochial.[1]

But such critiques by Shen and others were soon neglected. The cultural hegemony of Peking opera was enforced by a series of publications, and enshrined when it became a UNESCO intangible cultural heritage in 2010. Peking opera and its actors are generally assumed to have been dominant since the mid-nineteenth century.[2]

My study disputes this historiography and draws attention to the extraordinarily dynamic cultural scene of Beijing in the 1910s. Its focus is the arrival of actresses in Beijing who challenged the previously male-dominated urban theatrical world with their hybrid art forms arising from *pihuang* and *bangzi* operas, and their contribution to *xinju* (新劇 new drama). Actresses, together with female audiences, had been banned in 1723 by the Qing

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[1] Shen Zhengyuan, "Tan bangzi qiang," *Liyan huakan*, no.250 (1939), 7.
[2] A lot of works can be listed here. See, for example, Art Research Institute of Beijing and Shanghai ed., *Zhongguo jingju shi* (Beijing: Zhongguo xiqu chubanshe, 1990).

government, as the Manchu-dominated state inserted itself more deeply into local society and tried to regulate sexuality and suppress sexual deviance.[3] The theater profession developed into an all-male, quasi-familial trade based on patriarchal relationships.[4] The predominantly male spectatorship and patronage gave the Qing theater a male homosocial and homoerotic structure. Actors monopolized the art. Beginning in mid-Qing, the youthful male *dan* (旦 female roles) actors fascinated the audience and patrons with their cross-dressing skills and their hints of homoerotic desire.[5] In the second half of the nineteenth century, actors of male roles—particularly *laosheng* (老生 old male)—became prevalent under court patronage, representing exemplary heroic masculinity.[6]

From the late 19th century, the theater profession in Beijing went through rapid changes, which have been charted by recent scholarship. Shifts in theatrical arrangements and representation have been related to the development of nationalism, print capitalism, colonial modernity, and other key issues of the time. As players responded to a reformist discourse, which envisaged the theater as a critical medium for enlightenment and an emblem of Chinese cultural nationalism, the long-stigmatized profession gained respectability.[7] Propelled by the image making of the urban print media, individual players appeared as opera stars and, with enthusiasm and creativity, engaged in opera

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[3] Matthew Sommer, *Sex, Law and Society in Late Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).
[4] Jo Riley, *Chinese Theater and the Actor in Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 12-53.
[5] Andrea S. Goldman, *Opera and the City: The Politics of Culture in Beijing, 1770-1900* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012); Wu Cuncun, *Homoerotic Sensibilities in Late Imperial China* (New York: Routledge Publisher, 2004), 111-151.
[6] Joshua Goldstein, *Drama Kings: Players and Publics in the Re-creation of Peking Opera 1870-1937* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007), 17-54.
[7] Goldstein, *Drama Kings.*

reform, which involved paradoxically both modernization and traditionalization.[8] The emergence of actresses as public figures—first in foreign concessions and treaty ports in the late Qing and then everywhere after the collapse of the Qing in 1912—have also captured scholarly attention.[9] Nonetheless, most scholarship remains sketchy and focuses more on the limitations of actresses compared to actors rather than their agency. Some scholars highlight the various professional challenges that actresses struggled with, especially economic vulnerability, organizational weakness and social stigma.[10] Some treat the newly emerged actresses as victims of the globally universal "body problem," according to which actresses were commodified and exploited as sexual objects.[11]

My study of new actresses in early Republican Beijing reveals a much less gloomy world for these newly emerged public women. While admitting their difficulties and challenges, the research sheds light on a few actresses' quick ascendance to stardom. As opera stars, they commanded commercial success and obtained fame and fortune. Despite being stigmatized for taking the acting profession, actresses enjoyed the privilege of being elevated by fans and patrons to a feminine ideal or made into a celebrated personage.

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[8] Ibid. Catherine Yeh, "The Press and the Rise of Peking Opera Singer As National Star: The Case of *Theater Illustrated* (1912-17)", *East Asian History*, no. 28 (2004): 53-86; "Where is the Center of Cultural Production? –The Rise of the Actor to National Stardom and the Beijing / Shanghai challenge (1860s-1910s)," *Late Imperial China* 25, no. 2 (2004): 74-118.

[9] For Chinese scholarship, see for example, Dong Hong. "Chengshi, xiqu he xingbie: jindai jingjin diqu nüling qunti yanjiu (1900-1937)," PhD diss. Nankai University, 2012; Luo Jianqiu, "Kunjue ruhe zouhong: shehui wenhuashi shiye zhong de minchu jingju," *Hebei Xuekan* 31, no 2 (2011): 68-76; Liu Weidong. "Qingmo minchu de nüling jueqi jianlun". M.A. Thesis. Chinese National Academy of Arts, 2011; Zhang Yuan, *Jindai pingjinhu de chengshi jingju nüyanyuan, 1900-1937* (Taiyuan: Shanxi jiaoyu chubanshe, 2011).

[10] Weikun Cheng, "The Challenge of the Actresses: Female Performers and Cultural Alternatives in Early Twentieth Century Beijing and Tianjin," *Modern China* 22, no. 2 (1996): 197-233. Luo Suwen, "Gender on Stage: Actresses in an Actor's World, 1895-1930," in Goodman & Larson eds., *Gender in Motion, Divisions of Labor and Cultural Change in Late Imperial and Modern China* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005), 75-96.

[11] Weikun Cheng, "Women in Public Spaces: Theater, Modernity, and Actresses in Early Twentieth-Century Beijing," *Asian Journal of Women's Studies* 9, no. 3 (2003): 7; Goldstein, *Drama Kings*, 71 & 104-131.

Moreover, their bodies—actual or performative—cannot be subsumed under the "body problem." As star actresses titillated and attracted audiences with their physical charms, their bodies not only became theatrical property but also facilitated their negotiation, on and off stage, about what was possible and desirable for women. Whether they approved or disapproved of female players, contemporary theater critics unanimously observed the thriving of actresses in the early Republican Beijing and its challenge to the traditional male-dominated profession. For instance, Tsuji Chōka (辻聽花 1868~1931),[12] a Japanese sojourner in Beijing and editor of the Japanese-owned newspaper *Shuntian shibao* (順天時報) who claimed not to be fond of female performance, commented in 1915 on the appearance and prosperity of actresses as the most salient change in the Beijing theatrical world since the regime change in 1911—

> Since the establishment of the Republic and the lifting of the ban on female players, actresses have come to the capital from afar and near. The theater managers compete to recruit them…The theaters staging female performance thrive day by day and have impacted the theaters staging male performance, whose business seems rather slack. [This phenomenon] testifies to the change of sensibilities of the times!
>
> The trend of actresses has become even more marked recently. Despite the long-term fame of a minority of actors, their recent failure in terms of business prevents them from dominating the theatrical world. If anyone asks me about the most salient phenomenon happening in the theatrical world in the year of *yimao* [1915], I would answer loudly without a moment of hesitation: 'It is the popularity of female performance.'

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[12] Tsuji Chōka (1868-1931), aka, Tsuji Takeo. Chōka was the penname he used to publish theater criticism and other prose. After graduating from Keio University in Japan, Tsuji visited China in 1898 and watch several operas in cities including Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin, and Suzhou, etc. Later in 1905, Tsuji came to China and took the job as an editor for *Jiaoyu bao* in Shanghai. From then on he stayed in China. In 1912, he moved to Beijing and became one of the chief editors of *Shuntian shibao*. Over the next seventeen years, Tsuji constantly wrote for the theater column on *Shuntian shibao*. For research on Tsuji's theater criticism in *Shuntian shibao*, see Wan-yi Wu, "The Emergence of Modern Theater Critique: the *Shuntian* Daily and Tsuji Chōka," *Journal of Theater Studies*, no. 10 (2012): 69-108.

> Nowadays the actresses employed by the theater are more than two hundred. Each has her merits. Some actresses are known for their charms; some are known for their singing voices; others are known for their acting abilities. And a few are versatile in all these aspects. Truly there are so many talents, blossoming like flowers and rosy clouds. What an extravaganza and spectacle of the times! [13]

This study attempts to reconstruct this "golden age" of actresses in early Republican Beijing. It argues that actresses enjoyed great success, popularity, and opportunities for artistic innovation in the first decade of the Republican era. The end of imperial patronage undermined the previously dominant status of actors and led to their increased exodus from the capital; the social appetite for and ideological appeals to "*xin* (新 newness)" prompted actors and actresses alike to cooperate with theater reformers to experiment with new, hybrid plays and performance styles. In this era, when the dominance of actors was lost and the hegemony of *pihuang* opera as the national opera was not yet established, actresses shaped the opera repertoire and performance styles in a way no less profound than actors.

Besides highlighting actresses' contribution to theater history, this study also seeks to emphasize women's agency by demonstrating the active role that actresses played in the broader context of the formation of urban publics. It thus contributes to the ongoing discussion about urban public space in Republican China. In his influential *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Jürgen Habermas identifies in a variety of social and discursive arenas—such as Britain's coffee houses, France's salons and Germany's *Tischgesellschaften*—the formation of a bourgeois public sphere. Regardless of social status, various people came together to discuss issues of state and society that

[13] Tinghua, "Jiji duoshi zhi kunling jie," *Shuntian shibao*, Dec. 8, 1915.

concerned them. By way of rational debate and communication emerged a civic society critical of the absolutist states.[14] Habermas's theory of public sphere unleashed an intensive and lively debate among China historians, especially after the 1989 Tiananmen democratic movement.[15] Some scholars identify the expanding elite activities in society in the nineteenth century as an emerging public sphere. They argued that the local elites took initiative to establish a variety of institutions—merchant guilds, teahouses, poetry clubs, charity, militia, and religious organizations, etc.—that "were not neatly linked to hierarchies ending up in the capital but were shaped at home and joined to the localities and to government in looser and messier ways."[16]

Nonetheless, noticing that the public sphere most scholars have located in Chinese contexts include not only urban elite members who embraced the state-sanctioned Confucian ideology but also local officials who served in Chinese government, scholars have questioned the applicability of the Habermasian public sphere in Chinese contexts. They have suggested going beyond the binary of public sphere vs. pre-democratic state and instead assuming a less antagonistic, more fluid relationship between state and

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[14] Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans, Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989). For the criticism of Habermas in the West, see Craig Calhoun, ed., *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), 1-48; Andreas Gestrich, "The Public Sphere and the Habermas Debate," *German History* 24, no.3 (2006): 413-430.

[15] See Philip C. Huang, et al, Symposium "Public Sphere"/"Civil Society" in China? Paradigmatic Issues in Chinese Studies, III. A special issue of *Modern China* 19, no. 2 (1993).

[16] Joseph W. Esherick & Mary Rankin, *Chinese Local Elites and Patterns of Dominance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990). Also see Willliam Rowe's two books on Hankow, *Hankow: Commerce and Society in a Chinese City, 1796~1889* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1984) & *Hankow: Conflict and community in a Chinese city, 1796~1895* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1984); Mary Backus Rankin, *Elite Activism and Political Transformation in China: Zhejiang Province, 1865-1911* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986); Susan Naquin, *Peking: Temples and City Life, 1400-1900* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of Berkeley, 2000); Wang Di, *Street Culture in Chengdu: Public Space, Urban Commoners, and Local Politics, 1870-1930* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

society in the Chinese contexts.[17] Philip Huang even proposes the notion of "the third realm" between state and society in a tertiary structure for a better understanding of Chinese society.[18] Recently scholars have moved away from the use of public sphere as a conceptual tool to focus on what was actually going on in public spaces, especially in urban society. Their studies on a variety of public spaces reveal that the imperial state was persistently present in the public life of Chinese society.[19] In her work on opera in the Qing capital, Andrea Goldman identifies in the playhouses and theater commentaries of literati on *Kun* opera a vibrant space of social critique and temporary inversion of social norms; nonetheless, such a critical public space never substantially challenged state authority, and by the 19th century the Qing court had either co-opted or marginalized literati critique through their patronage of Peking opera.[20]

If the penetration of the state power in the late imperial Chinese society renders historians resistant to the concept of public sphere, scholars of twentieth-century China are more likely to embrace the notion, given the weakening state authority, disintegration of national structures, and the flourishing of voluntary organizations and public press in this period. While criticizing its insistence on the "liberatory" nature of the public sphere, its dichotomy of reason versus emotion, and its gender blindness, scholars argue for the analytical power of public sphere once these conceptual flaws are cleared away. In her study of the Butterfly fictions, Haiyan Lee argues that the popular press, writers and urban readers constituted a sentiment-bound "literary public sphere," where the

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[17] Frederick Wakeman, Jr. "The Civil Society and Public Sphere Debate: Western Reflection on Chinese Political Culture," *Modern China* 19, no.2 (1993): 108-138. Philip C. C. Huang, " 'Public Sphere'/ 'Civil Society' in China?: The Third Realm between State and Society," *Modern China* 19, no.2 (1993): 216-240.
[18] Huang, "'Public Sphere'/ 'Civil Society' in China?"
[19] For instance, see Susan Naquin, *Peking: Temples and City Life, 1400-1900* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).
[20] Goldman, *Opera and the City*, 17-60; 175-235.

interiority of modern self and emotion were routinely thrown up to the judgment of "public opinion."[21] In her investigation of the public reaction to the trial of Shi Jianqiao, a woman who murdered the notorious warlord Sun Chuanfang to avenge her father, Eugenia Lean has located in the 20th-century Republican urban society a pluralized public sphere, which was sentiment-based, constituted by low-brow media and ambiguous in terms of its 'liberatory' qualities. A new communal form of ethical sentiment—public sympathy (*tongqing* 同情) functioned as an alternative tribunal outside of the existing justice system, shaping judicial proceedings and influencing the GMD regime. By issuing a state pardon for the female assassin, the government asserted its supreme authority over both dissident politicians and the urban public.[22] Similarly, Bryna Goodman conceptualizes public discussion of the 1928 suicide of an educated woman as a site of adjudication of emotion in Republican urban society, where feminist groups, the GMD officials, and the participatory reading public of mass print contested and negotiated the meaning of modern love, sexuality, and Republican gender relations.[23]

This study applies the notion of urban publics to the early Republican Beijing. It confirms Goodman's view of the continuing influence of the state in the post-imperial capital. It

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[21] Haiyan Lee, "All the Feelings That Are Fit to Print: The Community of Sentiment and the Literary Public Sphere in China, 1900-1918," *Modern China* 27, no. 3 (2001): 291-327. Also see her *Revolution of the Heart: a Genealogy of Love in China, 1900~1950* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007).
[22] Eugenia Lean, *Public Passions: The Trial of Shi Jianqiao and the Rise of Popular Sympathy in Republican China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).
[23] Bryna Goodman, "Appealing to the Public: Newspaper Presentation and Adjudication of Emotions," *Twentieth-Century China* 31, no.2 (2006): 32-69; For similar issues, also see, another article of Goodman, "The New Women Commits Suicide: The Press, Cultural Memory and the New Republic," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 64, no. 1 (2005): 67-101; also see Peter J. Carroll, "Fate-Bound Mandarin Ducks: Newspaper Coverage of the 'Fashion' for Suicide in 1931 Suzhou," *Twentieth-Century China* 31, no.2 (2006): 70-95. But while both Lean and Goodman point out the centrality of emotion at the public discussion, Goodman was more concerned with the role of state censorship in the public media and thus disputes Lean's conceptualization of an "alternative" participatory politics of collective engagement in the 1930s civic society. See Bryna Goodman. Book Review of Public Passions: The Trial of Shi Jianqiao and the Rise of Popular Sympathy in Republican China by Eugenia Lea, *The Journal of Asian Studies*, no. 67 (2008), 1062-1065.

argues that despite the disintegration of central authority and national structure with the collapse of the Qing dynasty, Beijing as the capital of the new Republic was a highly regulated city, where individual and collective actions were subject to control by a variety of authorities. The state power was manifested in its enormous police force, strict censorship, and persecution of political dissidents.[24] Thus, unlike in Shanghai, the emergent civic society in the early Republican Beijing, as David Strand points out in his study of rickshaw pullers in the 1920s, turned out to be fragile in the face of warlord politics.[25] However, this is not to assume that the state was all-powerful: it was riven by factions and intensely volatile. The popular media indeed gave rise to critical public opinion, of which the government was pressured to take account. Moreover, in the first decade of the new Republic, Beijing was the center not only of national politics but also of intellectual ferment, which gave rise to a dynamic environment for public engagement. At first the experiment of parliamentary politics brought about unprecedented popular participation. A variety of social groups and individuals—such as politicians, journalists and women activists— flooded to the city seeking to attain their political or social objectives. Yuan Shikai (袁世凱 1859~1916), a former Qing governor and the first president of the Republic, moved to abolish the parliamentary elections in 1914 and restore monarchy in 1916 with himself as emperor. After Yuan's death in 1916, China was politically fragmented as commanders in Yuan's old army struggled for the control of the capital and central government and regional warlords built their power bases. Yuan

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[24] On police, see Alison Dray-Novey. "The Twilight of the Beijing Gendarmerie, 1900-1924". *Modern China* 33, no.3 (2007): 349-376; on censorship, see Terry Narramore, "Illusion of Autonomy? Journalism, Commerce and the State in Republican China," in Billy K. L. So, et al., eds. *Power and Identity in the Chinese World Order: Festschrift in Honour of Wang Gungwu* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2003), 177-200.

[25] David Strand, *Rickshaw Beijing: City People and Politics in the 1920s* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989).

Shikai and his successors adopted strict censorship, and as a result newspapers and periodicals that had proliferated before the foundation of the Republic either stopped publication or tended to steer clear of political controversy; but Beijing remained a vibrant intellectual and cultural center, where old ways of thinking rivaled new ideas. Literary societies thrived as old-style literati filled the newspaper columns with classical poems and prose to claim a nostalgic cultural identity and foster cultural reputation and networking; the newly reorganized Beijing University gathered the most radical thinkers to promote a "New Culture" based on Western ideas and vernacular language. When after WWI the Republican government failed to stand up to Japan and Western powers and to defend national interest at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, on May Fourth Beijing students marched to the streets and held spectacular demonstrations that spread across the nation and eventually swayed the government not to sign the Treaty of Versailles. This national movement for political and cultural awakening, known as May Fourth movement, marked the upsurge of Chinese nationalism.[26]

This study focuses on the theatrical world in the early Republican era and highlights the critical role that actresses played in the formation of what I call "urban theatrical publics." Specifically, I locate the formation of "urban theatrical publics" in three realms: (1) The physical urban spaces such as playhouses and streets where actresses appeared and aroused public attention; (2) The print media through which sensational details about the public and private life of actresses were circulated; (3) A variety of social groups—such as the police, the press, opera troupes, fan societies, as well as the viewing and reading

[26] For research on the New Culture-May Fourth movement, see Chow Ts'e-tsung, *The May Fourth Movement: Intellectual Revolution in Modern China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960); Vera Schwarcz, *The Chinese Enlightenment: Intellectuals and the Legacy of the May Fourth Movement of 1919* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986).

public—with whom actresses negotiated their identity, public persona, and position in society.

By mobilizing the notion of urban theatrical publics, this study joins the scholarship in theater history to question the anti-theatrical undertone of Habermas' theorization, which presumes in the process of democratic transformation the replacement of the *representative, (metaphorically) theatrical* public sphere of absolutist states with the *disembodied, discursive* bourgeois public sphere.[27] I reject the hypothesis that the more serious, reason-based print culture superseded theatrical culture; instead I argue that theater, print culture, and politics were intertwined in early Republican Beijing. Theater thrived as a form of popular entertainment and an arena for ideological debate. Theater news and commentary filled the newspapers columns and catered to an expanding urban readership with everything from performance schedule to sensational gossip. Despite the increasing tightening of political censorship and ideological regulation during this period, theatricality and sensationalism not merely shielded both the theater and the press from the government that imposed crackdown in the realms of party politics and political journalism; they also became a strategy for individuals and social groups to articulate critical public opinion about contemporary politics and discourses.

The theatrical publics that actresses animated integrated the discursive and the theatrical,

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[27] This transition from the "representative publicness" of ancien régime to the "reasoning publicness" of modern states has been further elaborated by a lot of scholars. Joan Landers follows this line of reasoning in her *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), though the book is a feminist critique of the masculine bourgeois public sphere. Sarah Maza has built on Landers' thesis in her study of law, arguing that the shift from a playhouse metaphor to a courtroom one is central for the transformation of French political culture at the end of the eighteenth century. See Sarah Maza, *Private Lives and Public Affairs: The Causes Célèbres of Prerevolutionary France* (Berkeley: California University Press, 1993). Roger Chartier in his *The Cultural Origins of the French Revolution* (trans. Lydia G. Cochrane, Durham: Duke University Press, 1991) points to the same direction. He argues that the emergence of the new political culture entailed the replacement of the passive spectators of the baroque theater by an active, participatory public of readers and thinkers.

the rational and the sentimental, as well as the individual and the communal. The variety of *xinju* plays created and staged by the all-female troupes captivated thousands of audience on a daily basis. Just like the popular Butterfly fiction, the *xinju* plays evoked the sentimental motifs of filial piety and chastity and moved audiences to tears. Their melodramatic plots also put the age-old moral values of filiality and chastity into conflict with the new discourse of marriage freedom. Audience members not merely immersed themselves in the feelings of sentimental heroes and heroines with whom they sympathized but also contemplated their moral conflicts, which were articulated in theater reviews. The debates mingling emotion and reason in theater and print media constituted a site of contention between radical and conservative ideologies.

The viewing public was mesmerized by the on- and off-stage personae of female opera stars. Among theater fans, the literati stood out. As an elite class reproduced by the civil service examination, literati had long been an integral part of the imperial bureaucracy.[28] They were not only educated in Confucian classics but also devoted to an elaborated literary tradition. In the late imperial era, the failure of the bureaucracy to expand to accommodate the expanding literati class made the examination highly competitive.[29] Many literati were only minimally involved in government; and a lot sought to earn a living in an expanding print industry and cultural market.[30] In the Qing capital, where literati concentrated to take exams held every three years to achieve their political ambition, theater became a popular form of entertainment among expectant officials in

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[28] Chung-li Chang, *The Chinese Gentry: Studies on Their Role in Nineteenth-Century Chinese Society* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1955).
[29] Benjamin Elman, *Civil Examinations and Meritocracy in Late Imperial China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), esp. 147-210.
[30] Cynthia J. Brokaw and Kai-Wing Chow, *Printing and Book Culture in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005).

search of diversion. Marginalized literati frequented theaters and socialized with actors. By aligning themselves with the stigmatized demimonde and by writing theater commentary, they carved out a cultural space for social critique and sentimental indulgence.[31]

In post-imperial Beijing, the literati patrons of opera became even more heterogenous. After the abolition of the civil service examination in 1905, literati further drifted away from Confucian scholarship and imperial service and begun to pursue new occupations. Still, many literati who had served the Qing government held important positions in the Republican government. Politically influential or marginalized, they were more or less bound to the literary and social identity of a traditional man of letters. Many theater-going literati attempted to assert their cultural authority by writing and publishing laudatory reviews to promote individual players. They also organized themselves into fan societies to admire particular opera stars. Gathering in the theater to shout "*hao*!" or writing laudatory reviews, these literati articulated a collective fan identity, despite their factional divisions, conducting intensive debates on such issues as the merit of an individual actress, the appropriateness of a theater review, and the legitimacy of the fan society. In these controversies, the literati theater fans can be seen to be negotiating their place in the new Republican society.

The urban theatrical publics were not necessarily bourgeois as in Habermas's 18th century cases. They were heterogeneous, including the literati, reformist intellectuals, journalists and other urban entertainment consumers. Despite their factional nature, theater-going literati shared a revulsion for both the imperial and Republican officialdom and

[31] Goldman, *Opera and the City*, esp. 17-60.

reservations about the radical ideological shifts of the times. In other words, the literati fandoms constituted what Nancy Fraser calls "counter-publics" as sites for debating and asserting identities and interests within the wider sphere of politics.[32] Moreover, the theatrical publics were generated not just discursively in print but also through the medium of theater. To borrow from Jean-Christophe Agnew, theater was also an epistemological framework for literati fans to express their anxiety and conduct oppositional politics.[33] By constantly juxtaposing the theatrical world and Republican politics, literati highlighted the theatricality of the early Republic's turbulent politics and the chaos of warlordism, as well as the bewildering World War.

By focusing on the role of actresses in the making of new urban publics, this study aims to shed light on the changing gendered occupational and spatial boundaries in the early Republican era. The previous scholarship on gender history in the late Imperial and Republican eras has intensively dealt with women's relationship with the normative differentiation between *nei* (內) and *wai* (外 outer). Scholars regard *nei*/*wai* distinction as analogous to the Western private/public distinction; Nonetheless, they also point out that the pre-modern Chinese categories of *nei* and *wai* were less clearly distinguished than their Western counterparts. The worlds of *nei* and *wai* were, in Francesca Bray's words, "not so much absolute as contextually defined, for they did not denote separate moral and conceptual worlds."[34] The domestic order was understood to be the very foundation for an orderly state: men's domestic roles in the household—as filial sons, benevolent fathers

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[32] Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," *Social Text*, no. 26 (1990): 56-80.
[33] Jean-Christophe Agnew, *Worlds Apart: The Market and the Theater in Anglo-American Thought, 1550-1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.)
[34] Francesca Bray, *Technology and Gender: Fabrics of Power in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 96.

and husbands—made them worthy of public service. Moreover, the normative categories of *nei* and *wai* were flexible, contingent on specifics of class status, ethnic identity, and regional differences.[35] Nonetheless, this distinction remained important and had been transformed into everyday experience of many men and women and reinforced through judicial legislation and administration.[36]

Historians studying women in the twentieth century have paid special attention to the transformation of normative gendered divisions of space and labor since the last years of the Qing dynasty. The early Republican era has been depicted as a historical moment of gender transformation. The discourse of women's emancipation was high on the nationalist and modernizing agenda of reform-minded elite. The changing ideology of gender and the social processes of commercialization and industrialization brought about the unprecedented incursion of women in a variety of public spaces and occupations. Nonetheless, gender segregation and classical notions of feminine virtue remained powerful in affecting the (re)definition of women and individual women's identity and lived experience. The educated elite women—who to a certain extent embraced the ideal of "the new woman"—asserted themselves in career paths shared by men, claimed new virtues and fought for their citizenship.[37] Other women took up public occupations of entertainment and service labor primarily out of economic necessity, and thereby shaped

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[35] Goodman & Larson, *Gender in Motion,* "Introduction," 1-28.
[36] See Barbara Entwisle & Gail Henderson ed., *Re-Drawing Boundaries: Work, Households, and Gender in China* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000); Janet M. Theiss in her *Disgraceful Matters: The Politics of Chastity in Eighteenth-Century China* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005) shows that the distinction of nei/wai sometimes greatly influenced a local magistrate's decision on issues such as whether to approve a claim of chaste martyrdom, who were responsible for a sexual violation, and so on.
[37] See, for example, Wang Zheng, *Women in the Chinese Enlightenment: Oral and Textual Histories* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999); Joan Judge, *The Precious Raft of History: the Past, the West and the Woman Question in China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008).

alternative public spaces.[38] Nonetheless, the state and the society—including the male feminists among May Fourth intellectuals—scrutinized their very public presence and suspected their moral integrity.[39] In short, the arrival of public women in the early Republican era brought a blurring of gender norms, disagreement about feminine virtue and contested boundaries between *nei* and *wai*, private and public.

With respect to actresses, the aforementioned scholarship has reconstructed their engagement in the public profession and in the larger society from several perspectives: actresses seen as objects of exploitation and sexualization in commercialized entertainment, as gendered bodies on stage and in nationalist discourses, and to a lesser degree as women of self-reliance. What is problematic about much of this scholarship is its victim perspective—its focus on the constraints imposed on actresses as public women rather than on their *negotiation* of boundaries. This study proposes a modest corrective. It starts with highlighting the diversity within the category of actress by demonstrating the different trajectories of actresses' entrance into the profession and rise to fame, the highly differentiated pay scales and working conditions and the fierce competition among star actresses. Moreover, by tracing the variety of actresses—especially a group of privileged actresses who were either opera stars or affiliated with large all-female troupes—as they navigated the shifting boundaries between *nei* and *wai*, private and public, and played with on- and off-stage personae, this study argues that the agency of actresses was contingent on the particular social, economic and cultural resources that an individual actress could draw and mobilize. As a result, the theatrical publics that actresses animated

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[38] Catherine Yeh, "Playing with the Public: Late Qing Courtesans and their Opera Singer Lovers," in *Gender in Motion*, 145-168; Angelina Chin, *Bound to Emancipate: Working Women and Urban Citizenship in Early Twentieth Century China and Hong Kong* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publisers, 2012).
[39] See, particularly, Bryna Goodman, "The New Woman Commits Suicide."

in the post-imperial capital were just as varied and contested as other women in the modern era uncovered by recent scholarship.

Finally, by focusing on actresses and their literati fans in early Republican Beijing—the center of the New Culture-May Fourth movement, this study also aim to contribute to the scholarship that challenges the so-called "May Fourth paradigm" and its approach to Chinese modernity.[40] Actresses were hardly the ideal "new woman" desired by the New Culture-May Fourth reformers and radicals. They received little education and engaged in a profession that subjected them to the male gaze. Literati theater fans were even regarded as the opposite of modernity due to their connection to the Confucian past. Nonetheless, by highlighting the active role that actresses and literati played in the formation of the modern star culture and fandom, this study conceptualizes modernization as a complex and multifaceted process, to which the allegedly "traditional" or "conservative" men and women also contributed to varying degrees.

The mutually constitutive star culture and fandom of the early Republican era were undoubtedly modern. Actresses not merely presented new forms of mass entertainment that further blurred traditionally segregated taste and groups. Becoming opera stars who displayed charm, wealth, and status in public, they developed personages that deviated greatly from traditional women. As they followed the actresses, literati articulated their personal desires and organized themselves into varied fan societies. They cultivated modes of feeling that transcended what Haiyan Lee characterizes as the "Confucian

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[40] Hung-yok Ip, & Chiu-chun Lee, "The Plurality of Chinese Modernity: A Review of Recent Scholarship on the May Fourth Movement," *Modern China* 29, no. 4 (2003): 490-509; Kai-wing Chow, Tze-ki Hon, Hung-yok Ip & Don C. Price eds., *Beyond the May Fourth Paradigm: In Search of Chinese Modernity* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2008).

structure of feeling."[41] Specifically, their public expression of affection for an actress, their attachment to the celebrated personages of entertainment, as well as their mutual recognition as fans all went beyond family-based relationships and constituted new modes of feeling that integrated the individual and the communal.

Highlighting the modern features of actresses and literati does not mean that this study envisages a dichotomy between tradition and modernity. Instead, it aims to emphasize that the earlier social order and discourse contributed to the formation of modern star culture and fandom. The long-term theater patronage of literati worked in tandem with, or intersected with, the commercial organization of theater to create opera stars. Writing on star actresses or articulating their fan identities, literati fans also drew upon an earlier tradition of connoisseurship literature, and worked to combine the classical and the vernacular languages, as well as old and new styles.

Thus, this study responds to the appeal of recent scholarship to situate both May Fourth and non-May Fourth historical actors in "a web of competing and interrelated visions of modernity."[42] On one hand, this study argues that the New Culture-May Fourth discourses helped to create space for actresses' artistic innovation and personal liberation. It shows that actresses not only tapped into the new vocabularies such as "nation," "gender equality," and "marriage freedom" in their repertoire and performance on stage. In real life, they also mobilized these concepts for pursuit of happiness and self-fulfillment, though their paths to some extent deviated from the New Culture-May Fourth ideal. On the other hand, this study conceptualizes theater as a field of cultural production

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[41] Haiyan Lee, *Revolution of the Heart,* 25-94.
[42] Kai-Wing Chow, et al., eds., *Beyond the May Fourth Paradigm*, 16.

in which various social groups interacted and competed with each other to carve out a place for themselves and accumulate various species of cultural capital. By writing theater commentary and participating in theater reform, literati fans and May Fourth intellectuals competed to assert their individual and group influence, pursuing specific political interests and ideological beliefs.

Drawing on a wide variety of archival sources including newspapers, drama periodicals, and the hitherto underutilized fan literature and police reports, this study is thematically structured into three parts: The Profession; The Stage; and The Society. Chapter 1, "The Emergence of Actresses and the Organization of All-Female Troupes," demonstrates that with the collapse of the Qing dynasty and the lifting of the imperial ban on actresses, female players entered the theater profession in Beijing and began a meteoric rise to fame and fortune. Their marketability not only enhanced the business of many theaters but also encouraged more investment in training young women as actresses. Banned from co-starring with actors, actresses were organized into all-female troupes. Playing both male and female roles, they became direct competitors of the actors. Up to the middle 1910s, the star actresses won great popularity and established their position in the Beijing theatrical world. Finally, this chapter rejects the notion that the incursion of young women into the public space of stage performance liberated them from family constraints. Instead, it shows that the career paths of actresses were enmeshed in complex family networks and their identity was connected to self-identification as a filial daughter.

Chapter 2, "Roles of Transgression: Female Heroines and Their Embodiment," the first of two chapters in Part II, "The Stage," reveals that the group of privileged actresses, who were either opera stars or affiliated with large all-female troupes, were active agents of

theatrical innovation. Competing with actors in a rapidly commercialized theater business, they developed a different repertoire and performing style of female roles by adapting preexisting regional opera traditions. As the characters they played onstage boldly sought the thrills of courtship and pursued their personal desires, these actresses fashioned a new flirtatious female subjectivity, different from that associated with heroines in the cult of *qing* in Ming literature, the sentimentalism of Butterfly fiction, and the May Fourth ideal of free love. However, as they assumed transgressive female roles and catered to a male-dominated audience and an unrestrained press, actresses found their own commodification as sexual objects was inevitable.

Chapter 3, "The New Drama in Actresses' Repertoire: Diversity, Hybridity, and the Proliferation of Female Roles," demonstrates that in addition to reinvigorating a variety of female characters from regional and burlesque operas, the group of privileged actresses also developed a distinctive repertoire of *xinju*, or new drama. Their various popular *xinju* plays came from diverse sources. First, star actresses transported a number of nationalist plays from the earliest spoken drama movement in the coastal cities and adapted them into an art form with opera singing conventions familiar to local audiences. Second, they obtained plays from local intellectuals and playwrights. Often reproducing stories from Chinese history, legend, and classical literature, these plays turned to domestic melodrama and ideological conservatism and created many female protagonists of traditional virtue, particularly filial daughters and faithful wives. Nonetheless, even the overtly conservative plays played a role in introducing new ideas of the era, albeit in ironic quotation marks, to the audience. As such, the on-stage remaking of the relationship between women and the nation-state was startlingly modern.

Part III, “The Society,” begins with Chapter 4, “Police, Press, Patrons and Women's Negotiation of Public and Private Life.” It traces the everyday life of the actresses as they commuted between homes and playhouses and dealt with voyeuristic patrons, inquisitive journalists, and the suspicious police. It shows that the public presence of actresses aroused scrutiny, suspicion and disapproval, with the result that actresses tried in various ways to reduce their public visibility. At home, some actresses tended to maintain the boundaries of the inner, private space, while other actresses indeed entertained clients at their residence. Nonetheless, being under the watchful eyes of their parents, *lingjia* (領家 adoptive parents), neighbors as well as the police, actresses were unable to turn their residences into a real “private” or “personal” space for socializing with a patron or an intimate partner. With the boundaries between public and private blurred, actresses were subject to tighter patriarchal control and surveillance. Nonetheless, by carefully manipulating boundaries and strategically engaging with publicity, many actresses achieved personal freedom and self-fulfillment in the early Republican society.

Chapter 5 turns to “Writing on Actresses and the Formation of Literati Fandom.” With the booming print media in early twentieth-century Beijing, a variety of theatrical writings appeared in newspapers, journals, and *zhuanji* (專集 special collections). Despite their borrowing of discourses and literary styles from the genre of *huapu* (花譜 flower registers) that prevailed in the Qing dynasty, these writings in the early Republican era were produced in a rapidly changing context and differed increasingly from their literary predecessors. Focusing on writings on the newly emerged actresses in 1910s Beijing, this chapter explores the intertwined relationship among politics, morality, theater, and the print media. It argues that literati fans and critics created a gendered

discursive space characterized by political disillusionment, factional competition, and the rush to be sensational. Their writings and debates contributed to the making of an early-Republican public space where the discursive and the theatrical, the rational and the sentimental, as well as the individual and the communal mingled, coexisted and competed.

Part I. The Profession

Chapter 1. The Emergence of Actresses and the Organization of All-Female Troupes in Beijing

> Last fall, actresses for the first time entered the capital city. Every novelty-seeking playhouse has rushed out to hire actresses for female performance. The Beijing theatrical world has suddenly assumed a new aspect. There was no playhouse with actresses that has not commanded full attendance. Actresses' performing with actors is most appealing to Beijing audiences. Performance by actors has been greatly devalued and will be unable to maintain its former standing.
>
> — Tsuji Chōka (1868~1931), "Bishang ouping," *Shuntian shibao*, November 14, 1913.

1912 was a momentous year both for China and Chinese theater. With the collapse of the Qing dynasty, the imperial restriction against women performing on the public stage—strictly maintained in the capital city—was lifted. Previously, female opera players were only allowed to perform in the foreign concessions of cities such as Tianjin, Shanghai, and Hankou. In the imperial capital, actresses appeared occasionally. In 1907, the Rihua teahouse located in the embassy area briefly presented several female players.[1] But such female performance was only sporadic and often aroused objection. It was remembered that when two actresses briefly appeared on a makeshift stage in the embassy district in the late Guangxu era (1871~1908), several officials were offended enough to memorialize urging their banishment. (The actresses quickly left Beijing for Fengtian.)[2] The experiment was not repeated until the fall of 1912, when a few actresses came from Tianjin, a port city about ninety miles south of Beijing, at the invitation of Yu Zhenting, a *wusheng* (武生 male roles of martial arts) actor and a theater manager, and performed, alongside actors, on a temporary stage set up near the Incense Factory, an area where a

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[1] "Rihua chayuan nüxi ji," *Shuntian shibao*, Oct. 15, 1907.
[2] Chuiyun gezhu, "Nüling jiuhua," *Xiju Yuekan* 3, no. 12 (1932): 10-11.

lot of commercial theaters were located. The debut was a sensation. The actresses' popularity encouraged Yu to move them to the Wenming playhouse, which produced a box office success.[3] Other playhouses soon followed suit, hiring troupes that recruited actresses. Thereafter, more and more actresses arrived in Beijing and initiated a golden age of actresses in the early Republican Beijing theatrical world.

The arrival of actresses in Beijing in the 1910s was not merely a transposition of theatrical practice from Tianjin and other cities. They found wider employment opportunities as well as more ferocious competition than in the foreign-concession cities. Inspired by the economic success of the actresses, local families and troupe managers sought to capitalize on market demand in Beijing; conversely, many actors departed, leaving space for actresses to thrive. Theatrical forms and venues were transformed. Troupe managers rushed to recruit more female players, and local *keban* (科班 training schools) were established to train actresses. Families of poverty or declining fortune hastened to turn their daughters into professional, salary-earning opera performers. A tremendously diverse audience included the declining but still influential literati and Manchu noblemen, the military officers and soldiers stationed in the city, the various politicians and civil servants brought from elsewhere by the newly-created Republican government as well as the growing number of petty bourgeoisie and "vocational youth." The influx of actresses led the new Beijing government to impose restrictions on the local theater rarely experienced by actresses in other cities, for instance, a ban on mixing of the sexes both on stage and in the audience, bringing closer scrutiny along with the large and diverse spectatorship.

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[3] Xingshi, "Kunling kaishi zhiping zhi lueli," *Xiju Yuekan* 3, no.1 (1930): 134-7.

What opportunities and limitations did the first-generation actresses confront in 1910s Beijing? How did they survive the highly competitive entertainment market? How did they carve out a niche for themselves in a deeply misogynist profession? Did stepping onto the public stages necessarily mean alienation from traditional womanhood and independence from patriarchal constraints? Did their segregation from actors lead to a sense of sisterhood and foster solidarity among actresses? This chapter seeks to answer these questions by exploring the socioeconomic organization of actresses. It gives a detailed description of their mobility, training and employment arrangement and highlights how the family connection and quasi-familial relationships structured their engagement in the theater profession. Moreover, by paying special attention to the gender and patronage politics within the profession, it emphasizes that the competition between actors and actresses as well as the fierce rivalry among actresses indelibly marked the theatrical world of early Republican Beijing.

The Migration of Actresses to Beijing

Beijing's actresses were at first largely an import from Shanghai, Tianjin, and other treaty ports. From the Tongzhi era (1862~1875), actresses emerged on the public stages in the foreign concessions and gradually developed into a well-established profession. At the beginning actress troupes were highly itinerant, performing at various venues rather than at permanent commercial playhouses. For instance, they might perform in open spaces on the streets or at the private parties hosted by elite officials and wealthy merchants, which were called *tanghui xi* (堂會戲 salon performance). The performance of actresses won increasing popularity and gained the specific appellation "*mao'er xi* (貓兒戲 or 髦兒戲),"

with *mao'er* (little cats) standing for adolescent or modern girls.[4] The profitability of *mao'er xi* encouraged troupe and theater managers to recruit actresses from a variety of backgrounds, including prostitutes and women from poor families. In the late nineteenth century, actresses entered the permanent playhouses in the treaty ports. Playing with actors on the same stage or exclusively as a female troupe, actresses achieved commercial success and a few of them became opera stars, enjoying luxury, fame, and wealth. Facilitated by seasonal contracts and the development of modern transportation networks, the actresses continued to be mobile, shifting from one troupe and one city to another for higher pay. As they traveled among the well-connected major cities, a few actresses like Jin Yuemei (金月梅 1882~1924), En Xiaofeng (恩曉峰 1887~1949), and Wang Keqin (王克琴 1894~1925), attained wide fame.

In 1912, a few actresses arrived in Beijing as opera stars. Their reputation as talented and successful actresses had already been established in other cities before their entrance into Beijing. For example, early in 1902 and at the age of 15, Jin Yuemei, originally from Tianjin, had performed in a theater in Shanghai with the *baoyin* (包銀 fixed salary) of 1200 yuan per month and was widely acknowledged as the most talented actress in Shanghai.[5] To invite such famous actresses, theater managers had to pay no less than what they received in the theaters they came from. Therefore, for those most popular and highest-paid actresses, such as Xiao Xiangshui (小香水 1894~1945) and Xiao Cuixi (小翠喜 dates unknown), the theater managers had to think twice before inviting them or renewing their seasonal contracts, since these actresses refused to lower their wages in

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[4] Xu Jianxiong, "Wanqing Shanghai nüling," *Shanghai Shifan Daxue Xuebao (Zhexue Shehui Kexue ban)*, no. 6 (2005): 114-118.
[5] "Jin Yuemei," *Sichuan gongbao zengban*, no. 18 (1915): 25-6.

proportion to the rate of attendance, a common practice initiated by Beijing theater managers to share business risks.[6] When managers found that their theater revenues were insufficient, they would not renew contracts with the best-paid actresses. This was probably why in the 1910s the most-renowned and best-paid actresses in Shanghai and Tianjin, such as En Xiaofeng, Wang Keqin, and Jin Yuemei, were either not invited to Beijing or did not stay there long.

Nonetheless, not all actresses were invited to Beijing as stars. The advantages of the star system were actually enjoyed by very few female players. The reality for the majority of actresses upon their entrance to the capital was a slender income, limited access to decent performing venues, and the constant threat of unemployment due to lack of drawing power. Only celebrated actresses could be invited to perform in the big playhouses in the Dashalar (大柵欄) district just outside the Front Gate (前門), which the well-off officials, businessmen, and sojourners frequented. Lesser-known actresses upon their arrival were more likely to perform in small, shabby playhouses in the Tianqiao (天橋) area. Theatrical performance in Tianqiao was considered vulgar and debased, catering to the taste of the lower-class theater-goers. Even the contemporary commercial enterprises such as the Tongrentang pharmacy and the Qianxiangyi silk store allegedly forbade their apprentices to go to see a performance in Tianqiao.[7] Some actresses had to perform in small theaters in the Inner City, where no playhouses were permitted in this Manchu occupied area by the Qing court. By the 1860s, several playhouses were established in within the Inner City, in defiance of the court prohibitions. The Qing court was unable to keep the infiltration of playhouses into the Inner City, but they imposed certain

[6] "Xiao Jufen you laijing le," *Shuntian shibao*, Nov. 4, 1913.
[7] Zhao Xing, "Shuoshuo beijing laojuchang er," *Shijie Wenhua*, no. 7 (2012): 38-39.

restrictions on their operation such as forbidding performance on ritual fast days and at night.[8] As a result, the theater business gradually thrived in the Inner City—particularly in the Dong'an market area starting in the 1890s—but still the playhouses were not comparable to those in the Outer City in terms of size and influence. The entrance for actresses to the decent playhouses in the Outer City was not easy, as a theater critic commented—

> Actresses are thriving in the era outside of Qianmen. They almost occupy all the teahouse theaters in the district of Dashalar. Now they even take up the *Diyi Wutai* (第一舞台 The First Stage),[9] enjoying fame and gaining wealth, which leads people to sigh that it's better to have daughters than sons. Nonetheless, it is never easy to enter the Qianmen theaters. Actresses have to go through all sorts of small theaters and can only enter the big ones after their talent is gradually recognized. While this might not apply to actresses of extraordinary talent such as Han Jinxi and Zhang Xiuqin, actresses of moderate talent must have experience and seniority.[10]

But a few actresses with impressive skills or social connections were able to achieve wide recognition in the crude theaters in Tianqiao and the Inner City and ascend to the decent playhouses in the Qianmen area. For example, the first time the *bangzi* actress Jin Gangzhuan (金剛鑽 1900~1948) arrived in Beijing in 1912, she had to perform in several theaters in the Inner City for a year before she could command enough recognition to be invited to perform at a *tanghui* hosted by a rich merchant in Fushou Tang (福壽堂). Performing in mixed cast operas, alongside famous actors such as Mei Lanfang (梅蘭芳 1894~1961) and Yang Xiaolou (楊小樓 1878~1938), greatly enhanced her reputation.

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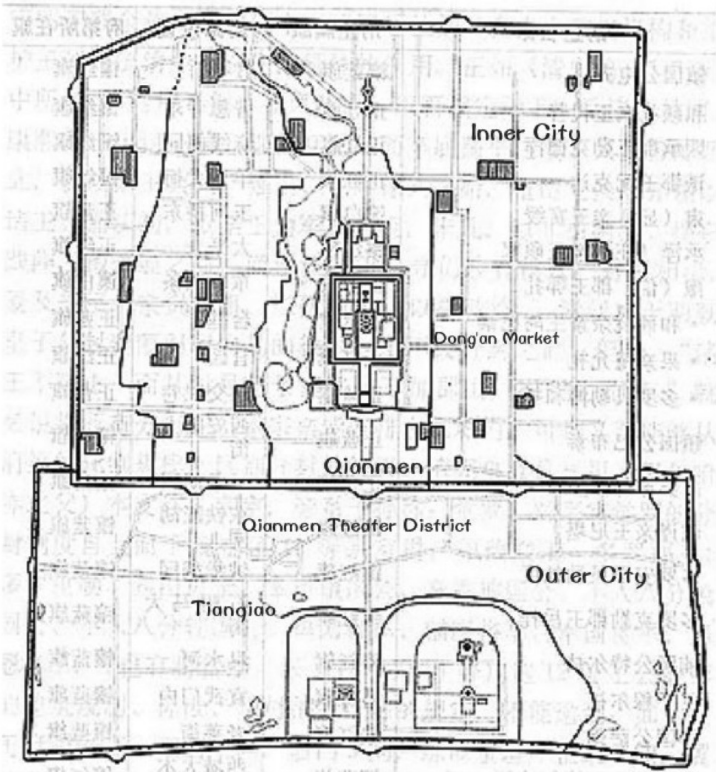
[8] Goldman, *Opera and the City*, 69-72.

[9] Constructed in 1914, The First Stage was the biggest theater and the first modern style theater in Beijing, modeled on The Wenming Stage in Shanghai, with a rotating semicircular, framed stage. It was distinctive from the old-style teahouse theaters. For an elaborate research on the difference between teahouse theater and modern-style playhouse, see Goldstein, *Drama Kings*, 55-88; also Liaozi, "Yi Diyi wutai," *Yaxiya ribao*, Sep. 8, 1913.

[10] Yanshi, *Beijing nüling baiyong* (Beijing: Dumen yinshu ju, 1917), 41.

Soon the prestigious *Sanqing* playhouse in the Qianmen district hired her as a leading actress.[11] The move to the playhouses in the Qianmen district meant not merely higher salary but also admission into a middle and upper class social sphere in which opera star-making was at the center. From the Qing, the Qianmen playhouses were known for their high admission rate designed to keep out the urban poor.[12] The tickets conspicuously inflated in the early Republican era. Even though the admission rate for actresses' performance was lower than that of their counterparts, the urban working class could not afford it.[13] The playhouses in the Qianmen area remained a distinctive sphere for wealthy and leisurely theater aficionados and patrons from the middle and upper classes.

Figure 1-1. Outline Sketch of the Inner City and the Outer City and the Playhouse Districts of Qianmen, Tianqiao & Dong'an Market



[11] Yinxia, "Jin Gangzhuan," *Shuntian shibao*, Dec. 6, 1913.
[12] Andrea S. Goldman, *Opera and the City*, 86-87.
[13] Wuwo, "Jingshi jujie zhi sese guan," *Shuntian shibao*, Feb. 2, 1917.

Figure 1-2. Major Playhouses in the Qianmen Theater District

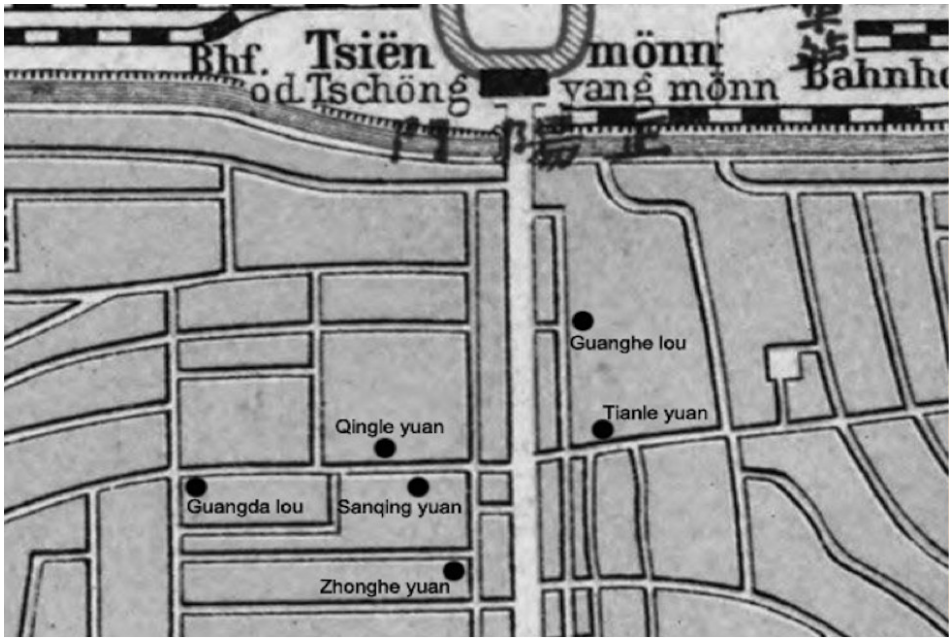
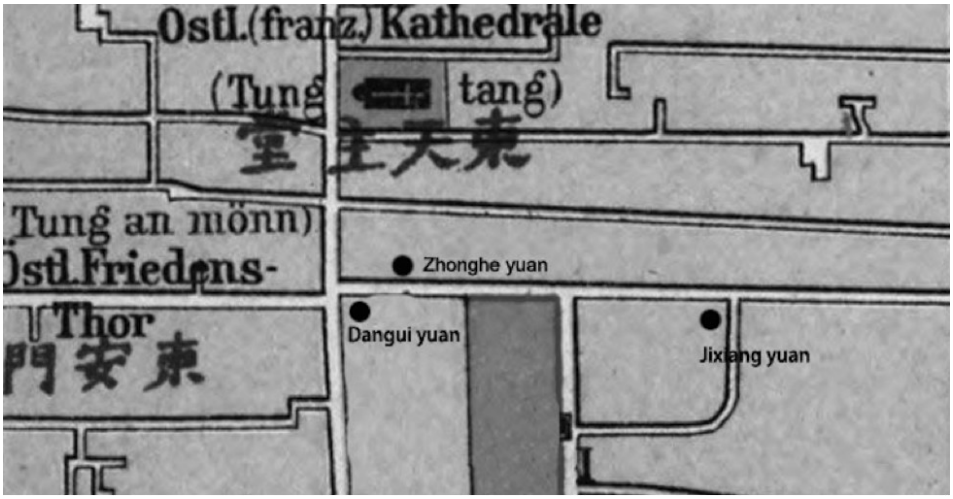


Figure 1-3. Major Playhouses in the Dong'an Market



Besides the limited employment opportunities in decent playhouses, lower-class actresses were often underpaid. In 1910s Beijing, the salary of opera players called *baoyin* (包銀 lit. packet of silver) was usually paid on a monthly basis. A fresh actress could be paid only a few copper coins per month, while a star actress could earn a monthly salary bigger than the income of the newly emerging urbanite class. For example, in the year of 1917 a

middle-ranked actress like Ming Yuezhen could earn up to ten yuan every day,[14] which was equivalent to the daily salary of a Bank of China clerk.[15] Star actresses at the very top could earn several times more than the middle-ranked actresses. But overall, actresses could not get equal pay with actors during the entire 1910s. Even the leading actresses were paid much less than actors of the top level. In the early Republican era, the fixed salary of Tan Xinpei was no less than 6,000 yuan per month,[16] a very substantial amount compared with 2,100 dollars per month that Liu Xikui (劉喜奎 1894~1964)—an actress whose popularity and drawing power were said to surpass Tan's—could earn in her heyday in 1915.[17] Xiao Cuixi, the most recognized actress of *laosheng* roles who performed the significant *yazhou* (壓軸 big set) plays at the prestigious Zhonghe playhouse, was only paid 20 dollars per day.[18] When offered 600 dollars a month in 1916, an acclaimed actress like Li Guifen (李桂芬 1901~1984) was willing to leave Beijing to perform in another city.[19] In 1917, the most talented *jing* (淨 male characters with a painted face) actress Wang Jinkui was paid less than 300 dollars a month at Tianle theater.[20]

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[14] "Nei you si qu biaosong nüling Wang Cun ji Ming Yuezhen yin shengfu nuedai zi tou jiliang suo qing tuozhi yi'an," ," [The case in the fourth district of The Inner City about the actress Wang Cun. aka. Ming Yuezhen, abused by her father, requesting to be placed in the House of Reformed Prostitutes] October 1917, file no. J181-019-17336, Beijing Municipal Archives, Beijing.
[15] "Jingshi jingcha ting nei zuo yi qu qu shu guanyu Wang Zhonglin shenye qianru Du Yunhong jia yi'an," [The report of the first left precinct of the Inner City of Capital Police Department on Wang Zhonglin's invasion into the house of the actress Du Yunhong at mid-night] January 1917, file no. J181-019-18052, Beijing Municipal Archives, Beijing.
[16] Yinfeng, "Tan lingren de baoyin wenti," in *Liyan huakan*, no. 263 (1943): 5. Also see Goldstein, *Drama Kings*, 48-9.
[17] Tinghua, "Liu Xian zhan guan," *Shuntian shibao*, Aug. 25, 1915.
[18] Yingxia, "Xiao Cuixi qu Zhonghe yuan san da yuanyin," *Shuntian shibao*, Dec. 10, 1913.
[19] Yinxia, "Li Guifen chu jing zhi gan," *Shuntian shibao*, Mar. 7, 1916.
[20] Yinxia, "Zhide she ni pin Wang Jinkui," *Shuntian shibao*, Feb. 21, 1917.

Moreover the ticket price for actresses' performance was less than that for actors' performance. For example, while a theater-goer in 1913 might pay 50 copper coins to sit in the "pond" on the first floor for a performance presented by the star actors Liu Hongsheng, Gong Yunfu and Wang Yaoqing in the Dawutai theater, he only needed to pay around 30 copper coins for performance in the Zhonghe theater, where the most famous actresses such as Jin Yulan (金玉蘭 ?~1916), Xiao Xiangshui (小香水 1894~1945), and Jin Gangzhuan gathered. In the year 1917, a "pond" ticket for performance by Li Jirui, an acclaimed but not top-billed actor, reached 85 copper coins, and an admission to a performance in Jixiang Playhouse featuring both Tan Xinpei and Mei Langfang as leading roles cost one and a half yuan (equivalent to 450 copper coins). In comparison, a ticket for a seat in the "pond" to watch the performance of Liu Xikui cost around 40 copper coins when she first debuted in the Zhonghe playhouse.[21] Noticing the lower ticket rates for female performance, some hostile theater critics pointed to the cheap ticket price as the key to their box office success.[22]

The Exodus of Male Actors and its Impact on the Actors' Business

Unlike their counterparts in England from the 17th century to the Victorian period, who played exclusively female roles on entering the public stages and thus rarely encroached on a male labor market, actresses in Republican Beijing played both female and male roles, and therefore immediately rivaled male actors, who also played both male and female roles.[23] Theater critics quickly discerned the sense of competition. Numerous

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[21] Wuwo, "Jingshi jujie zhi sese guan xu," *Shuntian shibao*, Feb. 2, 1917.
[22] Taohen, "Heiyin bingzou nannü heyan zhi feiyishuo," *Chunliu* 1, no. 2 (1919): 128.
[23] Tracy C. Davis, *Actresses as Working Women: Their Social Identity in Victorian Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 18.

contemporary articles pointed out that these actresses were not only popular but overshadowed actors in many respects. According to Tsuji Chōka, upon their emergence in 1912 on the commercial stages in Beijing, actresses attracted a full house, while "the reputation of actors' performance declined so significantly that they were unable to maintain their former status."[24] Critics even lamented that only the leading actors could compete with actresses in terms of salary and drawing power; other actors either lost the ability to attract an audience and suffered lower remuneration, or went south to Shanghai to seek decent employment in a new environment.[25]

Nonetheless, such remarks in the very early 1910s reflect more the social anxiety over the female intrusion into a traditionally male-dominated theatrical world than an actual decline of the actor's position in the theatrical world and the society. First, as was shown earlier, actresses were generally paid much less than actors. Actors' exodus to Shanghai theaters was caused not by the competition from actresses, but by the sharply increased mobility of the acting community between Beijing and other cities, especially Shanghai, in the new Republican era. Despite the long-existing tradition from the 1870s in which the leading actors in Beijing such as Yang Yuelou and Sun Juxian frequently performed as "*kechuan* (客串 invited guests)" in Shanghai playhouses, where new business arrangements provided them not only with higher *baoyin* but also with greater social respect, the mobility of top actors in Beijing in the late Qing was still limited as a result of the court commission institution.[26] In 1883, the Empress Dowager Cixi, a big fan of opera, lifted the ban for outside actors to perform in the Court, which had been in force

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[24] Tinghua, "Bishang ouping," *Shuntian shibao*, Nov. 14, 1913.
[25] Ibid; Tinghua, "Duiyu jinnian jujie zhi yuyan shang," *Shuntian shibao*, Jan. 9, 1916; Chubo, "Wo zhi jushi guan," Jan. 21, 1916.
[26] For details, see Yeh, "Where is the Center of Cultural Production?" 74-118.

from the Daoguang reign (1821-1851), and ordered eunuchs in the *Shengpingshu* (昇平署 The Bureau of Ascendant Peace), the institution in charge of the court's theatrical entertainment, to seek troupes in the Outer City to perform in the court on special occasions. In 1894, summoning outside troupes became an institutionalized practice. After 1900, the *Shengping shu* stopped calling entire troupes to perform in the court; instead they sought to commission individual actors. The selected actors were referred as *minji jiaoxi* (民籍教習 outside instructors), known in society as *gongfeng neiting* (供奉内廷 attendants of the inner court). They were expected to appear for court performance whenever summoned by *Shengping shu* and to instruct the eunuch singers by putting on performances as "demonstrations."[27] In return for their service, the court provided these actors with a considerable monthly salary plus a substantial gratuity for each performance.

These actors did not live within the court but were strictly limited by its rules. When performance in the court and instruction in *Shengping shu* ended, they went back to the Outer City and performed in commercial playhouses. Nonetheless, the court commission and patronage to some extent restricted the mobility of these leading actors. Those who failed to respond to the call from *Shengping shu* could be subject to serious punishment. In 1893, an actor named Mu Changshou left the capital and failed to show up upon the summons from *Shengping shu* without good excuse. The eunuch in charge petitioned the court to send runners to arrest him.[28] It was said that Mu was later captured in Shanghai and brought to Beijing where he was chained and paraded through the streets for three

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[27] Wang Zhizhang, *Qing shengpingshu zhilue* (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1937), 612.
[28] Zhou Mingtai, *Qing shengpingshu cundang shili manchao*, in Xueyuan chubanshe ed. *Minguo jing kun shiliao congshu* vol.3 (Beijing: Xueyuan chubanshe, 2008), 8.

months.[29] Even withdrawal from the court commission for health issues was impossible. In 1904, the eunuch in charge petitioned for the replacement of the actor (侯俊山 1853~1935), who suffered swelling and numbness in his legs. The Empress Dowager Cixi denied the petition and Hou had to remain in the Shengping shu to serve the court commission.[30] Due to the restriction from the Qing court, Sun Juxian, a favorite attendant of the Empress Dowager had to conceal his identity with the stage name of *Lao Xiangqin* (老鄉親) when he settled down and performed in Shanghai after his house was burnt down in the battle of Beijing in 1900. Sympathetic eunuchs in the Shengping shu listed Sun into the fatality list to help him escape the court punishment. Sun dared not go back to Beijing until the shift of regime in 1912.[31] Some famous actors were allegedly assigned extra service at the residences of the nobles and not allowed to go elsewhere.[32]

With the collapse of the Qing and the concomitant breakdown of the court commission institution, famous actors in Beijing lost security but gained freedom. Attracted by the much higher salary offered elsewhere, a lot of actors left Beijing and sought their fortune in the commercial theaters of Shanghai, Hankou, Tianjin, and elsewhere. There, actors could enjoy not only higher salaries but also a heightened social status thanks to the unique modern star culture developing in these cities. With their star-centered arrangement manifested in pay, advertisements, newspaper coverage, as well as staging, lighting, and make-up, theaters in cities like Shanghai offered actors more chances to

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[29] Yang Lianqi, *Qingmo gongting chengyingxi* (Beijing: Zhongguo xiju chubanshe, 2012), 150-151.
[30] Neiwufu guangxu sanshi niang ensang riji, January 26 entry, reprinted in Fu Jin ed. *Jingju lishi wenxian huibian*: *Di'san juan, Qinggong wenxian* (Nanjing: Fenghuang chubanshe, 2011), 345.
[31] Mu Chengong, *Ling shi*, in *Minguo jing kun shiliao congshu*, 26-27.
[32] Xie Xingshi, "Lihua pianpian," *Xiju Yuekan* 2, no.1 (1930): 5-6.

achieve national recognition and a much larger audience.[33] Therefore, even the most renowned and best-paid Beijing actors left for Shanghai. A theater critic in Shanghai noticed substantial migration of actors from Beijing and Tianjin to Shanghai:

> The competition among theaters in Shanghai reached the highest level last summer and fall [1912]. Almost all the well-known actors were recruited [by Shanghai theaters]. For instance, The Big Stage hired Yang Xiaolou and Jia Biyun, and The New Stage first hired Li Jirui and Shang Heyu, then invited Tan Xinpei, Jin Xiushan and De Junru. The First Stage hired Liu Hongsheng, Wu Caixia, Xiao Dazi, Gong Yunfu, Zhang Yuting, and Zhu Youfen…All the theaters spared no expense in their desperate competition [for invited guests].[34]

While the commercial tours taken by lead actors promoted a star-centered theater culture on the national level, and the guest stars benefited from this arrangement in terms of their income and expanding celebrity, the local business of most actors in Beijing suffered. Not only did the drawing power of the troupes decline, but the commute of star actors between Beijing and other cities made it difficult for latecomers to achieve equivalent fame and prestige. The leave taken by lead actors was usually temporary, lasting only a few months. When their contracts ended, they returned to Beijing with their reputation enhanced. By contrast, other actors found themselves at a disadvantage. In the 1910s, whether an actor got an invitation to perform and achieve success in other places became an important marker for his celebrity in Beijing.

The long training period of opera actors deferred the emergence of a new generation too slow to fill up the vacancies created by the episodic emigration of lead actors since 1912. The term of apprenticeship was usually a minimum of six years, and before its completion, the boy actors were perceived by the profession and society as immature

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[33] For details, see Yeh, "Where is the Center of Cultural Production?" 74-118.
[34] Xulang, "Ju tan," *Shen bao*, Feb. 26, 1913.

children and dependent minors in further need of behavioral supervision as well as technical refinement. Even though the boy actors usually started a performing career long before they acquired independence from their masters and training schools, and the more talented among them—such as Shang Xiaoyun and Wu Tie'an—were enthusiastically welcomed by audiences and very well paid, the apprentice player was never really considered as the equal of an adult actor. In the various polls conducted in the Republican era to select the most popular players, boy players were evaluated in an independent category of *tongling* (童伶 boy actors), distinct from both actors and actresses.

While other actors could not quickly fill the shoes of the famous actors, the first actresses arriving in Beijing quickly exploited the temporary absence of the latter from the local theater world. A few renowned actresses were invited to perform in Beijing as stars. Equipped with considerable stage experience and refreshing acting styles, they thrived on the fervent reception of the paying audience and media publicity. The success and sensation of actresses can be partially attributed to the fact that female players were a novel sight in the city. Theater critics pointed out that female performance in the early Republican Beijing was a curiosity and novelty for an audience "weary of male performance."[35] The success of actresses was soon acknowledged and considered a challenge to the business of actors. Even the status of star actors was said to be under threat. For example, Liu Xikui, an actress critically acclaimed for her *huadan* (花旦 beautiful and seductive female character) roles, became so popular that the ticket price for her performances sometimes quickly increased and exceeded those for the top-class actors including Tan Xinpei and Yang Xiaolou. It is remembered that seeing the great

[35] Tinghua, "Bishang ouping shi," *Shuntian shibao*, Nov. 14, 1913; Yin Xia, "Lu Xiubo," *Shuntian shibao*, May 24, 1913.

success of Liu Xikui, Tan Xinpei, known as the most acclaimed *laosheng* and the *liyuan dawang* (梨園大王 Drama King), had to admit that his heyday had gone, with Liu Xikui becoming a formidable rival.[36] It was also said that only Mei Lanfang could rival Liu Xikui, so a contemporary theater critics commented: "The future of actors might avoid being imperiled only if *keban* produce actors like Mei Lanfang."[37]

Separation of Male and Female Performers

The surge of a few actresses to the top level of stardom in the early 1910s did not mean that the status of actresses in the theater profession was fully established. Despite the gradual public acceptance of a new professional class of emancipated women, the public display of female bodies and the mingling of actresses and actors on stage remained morally problematic.[38] There were efforts to restrict actresses. Those actors who remained in the capital protested against their intrusion into what they regarded as a male profession. Their anxiety over actresses' competition, combined with the popular criticism of actresses' transgression of gender boundaries, was quickly transformed into moves to limit actresses' opportunities and limit their inroads into stardom. Various new voluntary organizations and the Beijing police joined in this conservative effort.

In March of 1912, the male-dominated Association of Rectifying Music and Moral Transformation (*Zhengye yuhua hui* 正樂育化會) chaired by Tan Xinpei, and the Association of Social and Political Progress (*Shezheng jinxing hui* 社政進行會 abbr. ASPP), petitioned the Police Department of Beijing to issue a decree to separate female

[36] Wenmei, "Liyuan tanwang," *Liyan huakan*, no. 311 (1944): 5.
[37] Chubo, "Wo zhi jushi guan," *Shuntian shibao*, Jan. 21, 1916.
[38] Bryna Goodman, "The Vocational Woman and the Elusiveness of 'Personhood' in Early Republican China." In *Gender in Motion*, 265-286.

performance from male performance, on the ground that the practice of *nannü heyan* (男女合演 actors and actresses performing together on stage) was harmful to social customs.[39] Interpreted by a theater critic as an effort by male actors to regain their position in the losing battle against actresses in the competitive market, this petition was soon approved by the Police Bureau and seemed to be effective in reducing actresses' employment opportunities.[40] After the ban on *nannü heyan,* many troupe and theater managers terminated their contracts with actresses, who left Beijing for business in other places. But the ban did not eradicate the presence of actresses. A few remained in the city and were organized into all-female troupes, known as *kunban* (坤班) or *nüban* (女班). The ban was lifted several months later to "revitalize the business," which had suffered a lot from the chaos in Beijing brought by the Second Revolution in July 1913. But in August of that year, under the pressure from the Chamber of Commerce in Beijing and the ASPP, the Police Bureau reinstituted the ban to "correct customs."[41] In October, the ASPP even communicated with the governor of Zhili province, asking for the prohibition of *nannü heyan* in the cities of Tianjin and Baoyang of Hubei province, where a lot of actresses originated.[42]

The practice of *nannü heyan* had appeared in the foreign concessions of the coasted cities like Tianjin and Shanghai after the 1900 Boxer Rebellion. The Qing officials and local governments requested the consulates in the settlements to prohibit *nannü heyan* in order

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[39] Zhao Yikuan, "Cheng Beipingshi tebieshi zhengfu: Chengwei chengqing yingfou jinzhi nanü heyang xiju you," *Beipingshi tebieshi gong'an juzhang gongbao*, no. 1 (1928): 68-69.
[40] Xingshi, "Kunling kaishi zhiping zhi lueli," *Xiju Yuekan* 3, no.1 (1930): 2.
[41] Zhao, "Cheng Beipingshi tebieshi zhengfu."
[42] "Qingjin nannü heyan xiban," *Shen bao*, Apr. 19, 1906.

to "maintain the morals and manners."[43] To respect Chinese opinion, the Shanghai Municipal Council ordered playhouses to stop *nannü heyan* in the foreign concessions. Soon the consulates in Hankou followed suit.[44] Nonetheless, the consulates in Tianjin seemed to have little enthusiasm for enforcing the ban; therefore *nannü heyan* became a unique practice in Tianjin and Dagu. During the entire Republican era (1912~1949), *nannü heyan* remained a tricky issue. The ban on *nannü heyan* was lifted temporarily and re-imposed repeatedly by Republican officials.

The ban on *nannü heyan* embraced a deep-rooted tradition, expressed in the Confucian notion of *nannü zhifang* (男女之防 the prevention of intimate public interactions between men and women), or *nannü youbie* (男女有别 the differentiation between men and women). Promoting the Confucian notion of gender differentiation, the Qing government forbade the presence of women in public theatrical activities, either on stage or in the audience. The rejection of female audiences in the public softened starting in the late Qing, but for many the mingling of the sexes remained disturbing. For a long time, the seat arrangement in playhouses was differentiated by gender. In order to accommodate the female audience, theaters had to set apart an independent section as *nüzuo* (女座 women's seats). Even the entrances and exits were separate. For example, in the year 1908, the entire second floor of Wenming playhouse, which included *baoxiang* (包廂 boxes) and *sanzuo* (散座 scattered seats), was reserved for female audiences. The male audience was denied access to the second floor as well as the east gate, which was

[43] "Jinzhi nannü heyan yin bengbeng xi-Tianjin," *Shen bao*, Sep. 16, 1905.
[44] "Gongbu ju jinzhi nannü heyan," *Shen bao*, Jan. 30, 1909.

used exclusively by women.[45] The separation of male and female audiences continued in the 1910s. In the year of 1916, the Renhe teahouse made its female audience use the "small gate," while the male audience went in and out through the "main gate." The "small gate" and "main gate" led to two different streets so that there was no risk of mingling.[46]

The sexual segregation on stage only aroused sporadic criticism in the 1910s. For example, under the influence of Western realism, some critics believed that it was natural for actresses to play female characters and actors male characters and thus that *nannü heyan* was inevitable.[47] Based on pragmatic concerns, theater managers petitioned the government to permit *nannü heyan* in order to "revitalize the market" or "support the business."[48] In an era when many people greeted the expansion of commerce as a mark of progress and national strength, this economic rationale seemed fairly valid. Thus, in Shanghai some such petitions were finally approved, and special licenses were given to certain theaters to stage performances of mixed casts.[49]

Despite the various arguments for *nannü heyan,* actresses performing together with actors on stage were generally disapproved. The opposition to *nannü heyan* tended to identify female performance as a debased theatrical form centering on sensual desire. For example, a theater critic published an article in the journal *Chunliu* in 1919 commenting on the impropriety of *nannü heyan* —

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[45] "Wenming chayuan tingxi ji," *Shuntian shibao*, May 13, 1908.
[46] "Diaocha Aiguo baihua bao zai Renhe chayuan yanchang yinxi dengqing," [Investigation on the report of *Aiguo baihua bao* that Renhe teahouse staged licentious plays] March 1916, file no. J181-018-06041, Beijing Municipal Archives, Beijing.
[47] "Da tingfengjun: nannü heyang wenti," *Shuntian shibao*, Aug. 23, 1917.
[48] "E sheng yihui dashi ji," *Shenbao*, Nov. 17, 1913; "Gongbu ju hezhun Tianchan wutai nannü heyan," Nov. 5, 1926.
[49] "Gongbuju gongbao zhailu: Zhongguo juchang *nannü heyang wenti,*" *Shenbao*, Nov. 5, 1926.

> In general, men and women should not perform together. Even if the differentiation is not made by artistry (技藝), it must be made by the tendency (趨向) [of the audience]. With only a few exceptions, the theater-goers of male performance usually leave the playhouse when the performance ends; and only when a theater-goer is a *zhiyin* (知音, literally "the one who understands the tunes"), might he patronize an actor…Once I queried a gentleman who loves to watch all-female troupes. He said: 'I love the all-female troupes because they are all female'…Such a psychology for theater-going is essentially different from those who study theater. If Tan Xinpei cooperated with an actress to play *Wulong yuan* (烏龍院, The Courtyard of Wulong), which could never have happened, the number of patrons for Xuejiao 雪嬌 [the female protagonist] must exceed those for Song Jiang 宋江 [the male protagonist]…This is because no matter how [good or bad the performance is], spectators would cry "*hao* (好 Bravo)!" whenever the actress speaks and moves…Moreover, if actors and actresses play together, neither would improve their artistic skills. This is because all-female troupes have only one or two leading actresses whose singing is audible. And they are bad in speaking and movement, not to mention those who play supporting roles. Therefore, it would be a shame if an actor performs in a supporting role with an actress. And it would be unnecessary to ask an actress to play a supporting role for a leading actor…Actresses are allowed to exist because they cater to the taste of the ordinary spectators. But I strongly oppose the idea of *nannü heyan.*[50]

In order to legitimate his opposition to *nannü heyan,* the author made a clear distinction between male and female performance, as well as their reception among audiences. Traditionalists regarded male performance as the true art and its spectators as those who truly understand and study theater; they denied female performance artistic value and considered its patrons to be ordinary or vulgar. Despite its lack of artistic value, however, female performance satisfied the needs of ordinary people, and this fact legitimated (while also trivializing) the stage presence of the female body. The author also reveals a very practical origin for the opposition to *nannü heyan*: the fear that actresses on stage would embarrass actors by winning more shouts of "*hao*!" from the audience.

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[50] Taohen, "Huiqin bizou nannü heyang zhi feiyi shuo," *Chunliu*, no.2 (1919): 41-42.

In practice, though, the ban on *nannü heyan* did not eradicate the presence of actresses or reduce their popularity; it limited what kinds of plays all-female troupes could present. For instance, coming from Tianjin, where actresses and actors performed together—the latter taking on martial roles—most actresses had not seriously learnt martial arts and could not play such roles. Therefore, the newly-formed all-female troupes could barely perform *wuju*, martial plays. In order to put on martial plays to satisfy their audience, in November 1913, Zhonghe playhouse invited several actresses from Tianjin to perform female martial-arts characters. While most of these *wudan* actresses were welcomed and recognized, the theater's performance of martial plays was highly criticized for the inferior martial skills of supporting actresses and their poor teamwork resulting from lack of rehearsal.[51] How did actresses overcome the difficulties caused by the ban on *nannü heyan* in the 1910s? To answer the question, I will examine in the following section the organization of actresses—their training, recruitment in the female troupes, and employment by the playhouses—to analyze the strategies of actresses and their alliances to survive in the profession.

The Training of Actresses: Private Schooling and *Keban*

In the 1910s, the large institutionalized *keban* became a principal way of training actors in Beijing. Their rise was assisted by the poor repute of *sifang* (私坊) private training schools often organized by a single master, in which the boy actors were trained as *xianggong* (相公 lit. "young man"), the male courtesans who served as expensive and amusing companions for Beijing's literati. The *sifang* became notorious for their male

[51] Yinxia, "nüling wuju," *Shuntian shibao*, Nov. 2, 1913.

homoerotic culture and brutal treatment of young boy players.[52] In 1912, the actor Tian Jiyun, the leader of the Association of Rectifying Music and Moral Transformation, who had allegedly been sympathetic to the late Qing reform and Republican Revolution, supported the Republican ideal of equality among all male citizens and advocated abolishing the humiliating practices of *sifang* and *xianggong*.[53] In these years, the public institution of *keban* was coming to be regarded by society as the "*zhengtu"* (正途 lit. "the normal path") to acquire performance skills, just as in the imperial examination system a student earned his title through the normal procedures rather than by purchasing a title. Even renowned actors tried to cover their involvement in creating the *sifang* of the late Qing. For example, Tan Xinpei used to be respectfully addressed as "Yingxiu 英秀," deriving from the name of the *sifang* he had hosted, but his son Tan Xiaopei (譚小培, 1883~1953) mentioned to friends that he felt uneasy with this appellation. Despite the continuing existence of the private *sifang* in Beijing during the Republican era, more and more boys—even those from families engaging in performance for generations—were put into *keban* for professional training, normally for six to seven years. For example, at the age of 12 *sui* in 1917, Tan Yusheng (譚豫升 1906~1977), the grandson of Tan Xinpei, was enrolled in Fuliancheng (富連成), the most famous *keban* in the theater history of Beijing. His father Tan Xiaopei, a famous *laosheng* actor, held a public ceremony to sign the contract and consign his son to the *keban* for six years.[54] The reduction of abuse in *keban* compared to *sifang* did not mean that the boy actors gained much autonomy. As

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[52] Goldstein, *Drama Kings*, 38.
[53] For the details of Tian's evolvement in the late Qing reform and revolution, see Sang Bing, "The Great Stage in the Field of Activity and the Life: Beijing Opera Actor Tian Jiyun and the Reform and Revolution in the Late Qing," in *Academic Monthly* 38, no.5 (2006): 113-119.
[54] Tinghua, "Tan Shengge ruke ganyan" *Shuntian shibao*, Mar. 8, 1917.

many actors' memoirs reveal, *keban* inflicted great restrictions on their freedom.[55] During schooling, students lived in the school and were ordered by their masters to perform in the playhouses with which the *keban* had contracts.

Most young actresses gained their skills in a way that granted them greater mobility, if not necessarily freedom, in the labor market of the theater. Actresses in the 1910s often learnt to perform through private schooling, partly because *keban* for actresses were rare during the 1910s. Most young girls in their early teens were trained at home by a single master hired by their parents, who saw theater as a profitable employment option for their daughters to subsidize the family. It was said that in the 1910s thousands of families in Tianjin and Beijing hired private masters to teach their daughters opera.[56] Given the fact that theater remained a morally ambiguous trade for women, these families were presumed to be from the poor or lower class. Nonetheless, as theater gradually became a viable and legitimate field of employment for women in the Republican era, more and more middle-class families, as well as those from the declining elite, allowed their daughters to enter into the profession, as I will elaborate in the next section.

Depending on how esteemed a master was and which role-type their daughters learned, these families paid teachers monthly salaries varying between several to a few dozen dollars.[57] This arrangement between individual families and private masters made the training period for actresses much shorter than that for actors in *keban* and *sifang*. Families could terminate a contract whenever they deemed necessary. Generally, families under financial pressures would like to make the training period short and put their

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[55] Goldstein, *Drama Kings*, 33-37.
[56] Zhiqing, "Shinian yilai kunling zazhi," *Shen bao*, Aug. 19, 1921.
[57] Ibid.

daughter on stage earlier to make money for the family. For example, several acclaimed actresses like Chen Yuntao (陳雲濤) were reported to have trained for only several months to one year. If a family was too poor to hire private masters, the parents would indenture or sell their daughter(s) to the so-called *lingjia*, who invested heavily and profited in the expanding entertainment industry. These investors included senior actors or actresses, who retired from performance career and taught the indentured girls opera on their own, as well as wealthy but despised individuals who usually indentured or purchased a group of girls and hired teachers to teach these girls all together. When these girls acquired certain skills, the investors made them sign short-term contracts with troupes and playhouses. To seek greater profit, they would push actresses to change their affiliation frequently to join a new troupe or playhouse that offered a higher salary. As a result, less subject to constraint imposed by *keban* or their affiliation to certain troupes, actresses in the 1910s tended to be more mobile than boy actors in *keban*. They migrated probably more frequently between playhouses in Beijing and through the commercial touring networks spanning the larger cities and market towns.

Figure 1-4 A Photograph of Actresses Xiao Yuxi, Shang Junqing, and Jin Fengkui. Reprint from Junping ed., *Nishang yanying* (Shanghai: Youzheng shuju, 1916).

Besides private schooling, some actresses were trained in female *keban* newly established in 1910s Beijing. Compared to the major male *keban*, which were financially supported by the top elite in Republican Beijing and equipped with the best teachers and facilities, female *keban* were few, short-lived, and limited in scale and influence. They were more market-oriented, being designed specifically to supply female troupes with underpaid or even unpaid actresses of supporting roles. Because actresses playing *dan* roles could be easily imported from other cities and were already numerous in Beijing, most female students in *keban* were trained in role-types other than *dan*, with the exception of a few

who showed enormous talent in performing *dan* roles, For example, *Chongyashe* (崇雅社), the first female *keban,* which was created by the actor Tian Jiyun in 1916, recruited no more than 20 students each year and lasted for only three years. In the year 1917, it recruited seventeen students, organizing them into a female troupe performing in Tianle playhouse. The majority—eleven out of seventeen-—was trained in non-female roles, of which seven were the less popular male role types such as *chou*, *jing,* and *xiaosheng*. Of the five students taught female roles, one was trained in *laodan* (aged female roles), a role type insignificant in performance and with little chance to win popularity; and the two originally taught either *huadan* or *huashan* (花衫 beautiful and virtuous female characters) roles were said to be often reassigned to play other supporting roles, though they were not good at them.[58] The fact that the majority of girl students in *Chongyashe* were trained as supporting players reflects the demand for male and other supporting roles in the female *keban* in Beijing as a result of the above-mentioned practice of importing only lead actresses from outside.

Because private training facilitated actress mobility, and female *keban* made up the shortage of male-role and other supporting performers, the all-female troupes survived, keeping actresses on stage despite the ban on *nannü heyan.* According to Tsuji Chōka, "actresses' reputations even increased" after the 1913 ban. Those playhouses featuring all-female performance attracted large audiences and their business prospered.[59] With their success, more theater managers hired all-female troupes, recruiting young women from a variety of backgrounds. More and more all-female troupes were established. In

[58] Yinxia, "An account of individual actresses in Chongyashe" *Shuntian shibao*, Mar. 6 & Mar. 29, 1917.
[59] Tinghua, "Bishang outan shi," *Shuntian shibao*, Nov. 14, 1913.

1914, for example, the actor Yu Zhenting organized *Shuangqingshe* (雙慶社). The next year the actress Xian Lingzhi (鮮靈芝 dates unknown), together with her husband Ding Jianyun and Li Rongkui, established *Kuideshe* (奎德社), one of the most influential and creative all-female troupes until the 1930s.[60]

By the middle 1910s, actresses had fully established their position in the Beijing theater enterprise, and all-female troupes in Beijing had overtaken all-male troupes in popularity. In the year 1915, the total number of actresses hired by the major playhouses in Beijing was reported to be over two hundred.[61] While in 1913 only three playhouses hired actresses to present female performance, in early 1917, the zenith of female theater, actresses occupied more commercial theaters than actors, and had entered the big playhouses in the Dashalar district. Their migration into the Outer City drove a lot of actors to the less popular playhouses in the Inner City. As we see from the following charts (Table 1-1 & Table 1-2), in January 1917, the playhouses dedicated to female theater in the Outer City significantly outnumbered the male variety, while only one of the five playhouses of the Inner City staged female theater.

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[60] Yunyun, "Xian Lingzhi duli chengban," *Shuntian shibao*, Aug. 5, 1915.
[61] Tinghua, "Jiji duo shi zhi kunling jie," *Shuntian shibao*, Dec. 8, 1915.

Table 1-1 Geographical Distribution of Male and Female Playhouses in January 1917

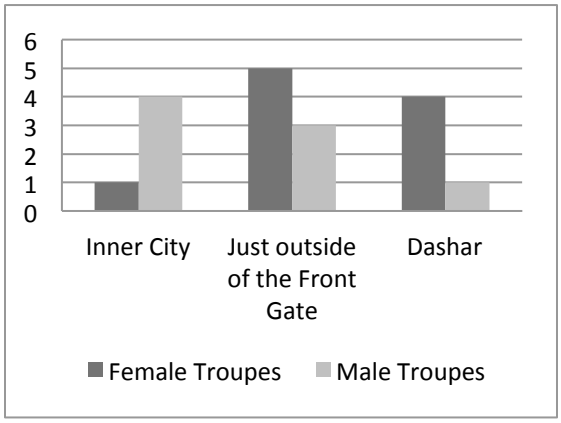
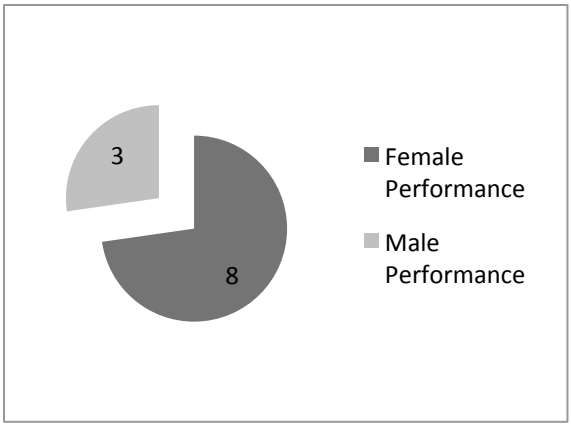


Table 1-2 Theaters in the Qianmen area in January 1917



❖ Source: Yin Xia, "Yinli xinzheng nei wai cheng ge xiyuan kaixue yilanbiao," *Shuntian shibao*, Jan. 28, 1917.

A theater critic in 1916 remarked on the popularity of female troupes and mourned the "miserable" situation of actors brought on by actresses' competition—

> The theatergoers cast their perceptive eyes on female troupes. As a result, actresses occupy all the playhouses in the Dashalar area. The actors seem to have no ground to exist. Though there are a few actors who can attract enough box office attention, they frequently move between playhouses like Wenming and Jixiang and thus suffer from scattered distribution. [62]

While such remarks correctly pointed out the popularity of actresses, they reflected more about the anxiety of the theater critic about the rise of actress than the actual situation of actors' business. Playhouses in the Inner City had been improving from the late Qing, and actors' migration helped to upgrade the playhouses. In 1913 and 1914, Mei Lanfang and a few other star actors rotated between Tianle playhouse in the Qianmen area and Jixiang Playhouse, which was located in the southeastern

[62] Chubo, "Wo zhi jushi guan."

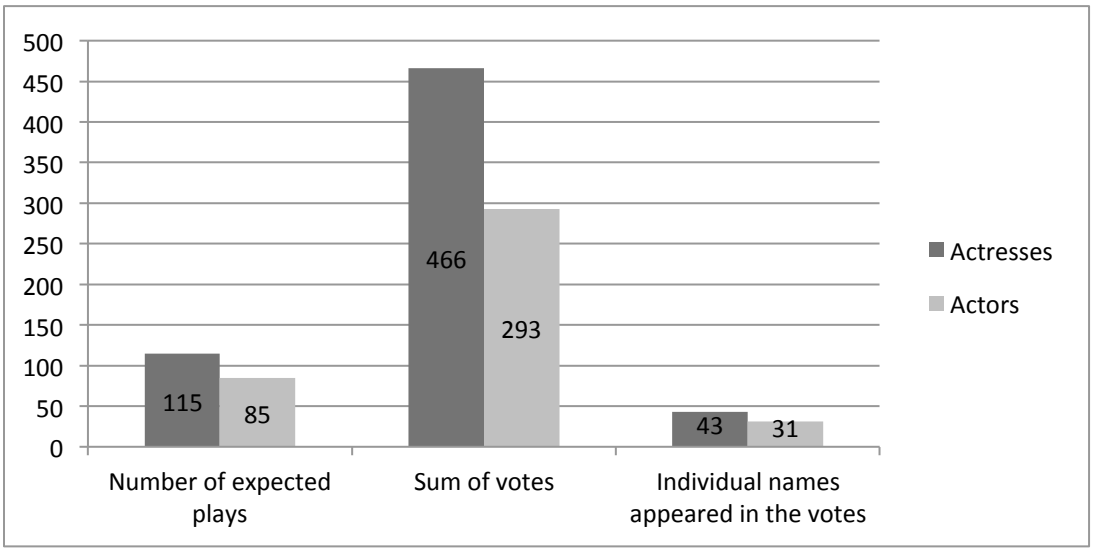
corner of the Inner City. Jixiang playhouse had been established by the chief eunuch for the Princess Heshuo in 1906 in the Dong'an market district, a commercial center in the Inner City that emerged after the Boxer Rebellion in 1900 and boomed in the Republican era.[63] Employing a lot of star actors and drawing a lot of Manchu audience in the Inner City, it became the most influential of the three major playhouses (the other two were Zhonghua and Dangui) in the Dong'an market area. In the year 1913, the actor Yang Xiaolou established the modern-style Diyi Wutai in the Qiangmen area. Diyi Wutai became a new center to draw the most illustrious actors, but occasionally it also staged female troupes. For example, once in 1914 it hired the actress Liu Xikui to present the new drama *Xin Chahua* (新茶花), a story adapted from Alexandre Dumas's *Camille*.

The popularity of actresses was also evidenced in a 1916 poll organized by the *Shuntian Shibao* newspaper to select the "most desired" plays and their players. Actresses beat actors in all three categories including desirable plays, total votes, and individual names, as shown in the following chart (Table 1-1). It was said that only actors who enjoyed long-standing reputation could rival these actresses in terms of fame and popularity. Still their business "often turned out a failure and they could no longer claim hegemony or lead the trend in the theatrical world."[64] For the new generation of actors, only Mei Lanfang could "stem the roaring tide

[63] Madeleine Yue Dong, *Republican Beijing: the City and its Histories* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 151-152.
[64] Tinghua, "Jiji duo shi zhi kunling jie," *Shuntian shibao*, Dec. 8, 1915.

and stand firm as a rock in the midst of the currents." Actors could be extricated from the predicament only if the *keban* would cultivate more actors just like Mei.[65]

Table 1-3 Result of Votes for the "Most Desired" Plays and Their Players in *Shuntian Shibao*, March 1916



- Source: "Xiwang yanju zhi pilu," *Shuntian Shibao*, March 5, 1916.
- Besides the categories of actors and actresses, the category *tongling*, comprised of exclusively boy actors, were still students in the large training schools known as *keban.*

The Various Family Backgrounds of Actresses

Actresses in early Republican Beijing were drawn from heterogeneous backgrounds. They included not merely seasoned performers from other places, but many new recruits to the profession from Beijing and the surrounding areas. Due to their extraordinary mobility and diverse training and recruitment, the community of actresses was constantly in flux, making it difficult to reconstruct their demographic profile in 1910s Beijing. Yet

[65] Chubo, "Wo zhi jushi guan."

despite the lack of systematic statistical data we can use scattered material to catch a glimpse of their diverse socioeconomic backgrounds.

While it is generally true that most actresses came from poor families and entered the profession—voluntarily or involuntarily—to make money for their family's survival, it is still worth noting the internal differences among those from so-called "poor families" that influenced the way they started their careers. Actually, a few actresses came from the elite Manchu families of the Qing dynasty, whose fortunes significantly declined due to the loss of the economic privileges concomitant with dynastic collapse. The involvement of a great number of Manchu women in the thriving female theater in the early Republican Beijing, as a contemporary observed, was usually driven by a reversal in family fortunes and forced by adverse circumstances.[66] For instance, the actress Bai Suchen (白素忱) was from a family that belonged to the Plain Red Banner.[67] In 1905 and 1906, her father had been a magistrate of the Yulin county of Shaanxi province. The entire family left Beijing and accompanied the father to the post. But the father proved to be an incompetent official. Three years later, Fang Zengxiang, then the Provincial Administration Commissioner of Shaanxi, removed him for malpractice. Later, he was assigned to many official posts but repeatedly was dismissed for neglecting his duties. Nonetheless, in Shaanxi the entire family lived a luxury life of a *shijia* (世家 prominent family), and Bai Suchen attended the Female Normal School of Shaanxi and was said to have done very well in her classes. But the family quickly squandered their fortune. The collapse of the Qing in 1911 aggravated their misfortune. The soldiers and bandits

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[66] "Ji Bai Suchen wangxi zhi shuaishi yu xianzai zhi e'yun," *Rizhi bao*, Jun. 21, 1918

[67] The banner system was the administrative and military organization of the Manchus in the Qing dynasty. See, Mark Elliott, *The Manchu Way: The Eight Banners and Ethnic Identity in Late Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002.)

embraced the chaos and seized the opportunity to kill the Manchus.[68] The secret society *Gelaohui* (哥老會 Elder Brothers Society) captured the entire family and Bai Suchen allegedly surrendered herself to a *Gelaohui* member with the surname of Zhang, in exchange for the protection of her father and younger brother, while the mother died of emotional distress. It was not until 1914 when the Beiyang army entered and occupied Shaanxi and Zhang fled that the family was set free.[69] Returning to Beijing with the mother's body, the entire family was destitute. In 1916, after hiring a well-known Manchu *piaoyou* (票友 amateur) for several months' instruction of the role of *qingyi*, the twenty-year-old woman turned to the stage to make money to support the family.[70]

The well-known three sisters of the Fu family in the 1910s Beijing theatrical world were also Manchu. Belonging to the Bordered Yellow Banner, their family had many members occupying important official posts in the Qing dynasty. Their grandfather used to be the administration commissioner of Gansu province, and their father was an official at the ministry of civil service affairs. The entire family lived in a very large mansion lavishly decorated with rare antiques and owned a vast farmland and a dozen houses for rental, which brought them a yearly income of thousands of dollars. And like many Manchu nobles, the father was very fond of opera and became heavily involved in amateur acting as a *piaoyou* well known for his *qingyi* roles. With the fall of the Qing dynasty, the family lost the economic privileges of the Manchu elite. Nonetheless, they evidently held onto their property and continued their luxurious lifestyle since it was observed that none

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[68] Dahuang, "Baigong jiahua xu," *Rizhi bao*, Aug. 20, 1918.
[69] Zhonghua, "Ji Bai Suchen wangxi zhi shuaishi yu xianzai zhi e'yun," *Rizhi bao*, Jun. 21, 1918
[70] Tinghua, "De si guniang chutai zhi xiansheng," *Shuntian shibao*, Apr. 2, 1916.

of the family members engaged in production.[71] Still they clearly felt economic pressure. In order to subsidize the family income, the 15-year-old eldest daughter Fu Zhuyou (富竹友) and the second eldest daughter 13-year-old Fu Juyou (富菊友)—after graduation from middle school in 1914—first enlisted in the Female Arts and Crafts School. They soon dropped out, realizing that the financial return would be unsatisfactory. Considering theater a more promising business, the family put the sisters in an amateur club from where they could learn acting from the club instructors. Then they hired several professional actors to teach them and the youngest daughter Fu Lanyou (富蘭友). The next year, the sisters made their debut and soon won great popularity.[72]

While involvement of young women from Manchu families into the theater profession was usually justified by the need to subsidize family economy, it also reflects the tradition of Manchu noble households' intensive involvement in opera performance as amateurs. In the 19th century, the upper class society had begun to break down the barrier imposed by the court that forbade the elite from engaging in theatrical acting. Manchu noblemen and Han literati organized a variety of *piaofang* (票房 amateur clubs) to make the acquaintance of famous actors and practice acting.[73] From the late Guangxu reign (1875~1908), when the prejudice toward the theater profession was further diminished by the Western-influenced idea that promoted opera performers as artists, as the poet Fan Zengxiang pointed out, the fashion of amateur acting began to involve girls from the

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[71] Xiyuan, "Yong zhu yaji shimo ji," *Rizhi bao*, Jun. 11, 1918.
[72] Ibid.
[73] Colin P. Mackerras, *The Rise of the Peking Opera 1770-1870: Social Aspects of the Theater in Manchu China* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 157.

inner quarters of elite families.[74] Therefore, for some Manchu girls who had been infatuated with opera and engaged in amateur acting, their choice to go on stage was at least as much a dramatic inclination as a financial imperative. A good example was the actress En Xiaofeng (恩曉峰 1887~1949), first known as a *piaoyou* who had enjoyed playing at amateur theatrical clubs and *tanghui* before she turned to a professional career. Born in a prominent Manchu family, En Xiaofeng grew up in an environment where she easily cultivated an interest in opera. Her father, like many Manchu noblemen at that time, was an opera enthusiast and a *piaoyou*. It was said that he frequently invited his *piaoyou* friends to practice amateur acting in his house. Observing performances from behind a screen, the gifted young girl quickly learned the tunes and rhythms and practiced on her own in the inner quarters.[75] It was also said that the father often took the daughter to the famous Nanyueya (南月牙) amateur club to watch the performance. After returning home, the girl imitated the melodies from memory.[76] Later she learned singing from an elderly, respected actor in the Zhengyici amateur (正乙祠) club. In the year of 1902 or 1903, the young woman joined a troupe in Tianjin and became a professional at the age of fifteen or sixteen, a decision driven either by the financial imperative or her passion for acting, or both.[77]

Belonging to an elite family—even a declining one—could be very helpful for an actress to succeed. First of all, the close connection that the elite families maintained with the

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[74] Fanshan, "Xiang yun qu wei Zhuyou nüshi zuo bing xu," *Shuntian shibao*, Apr. 16, 1916.
[75] "En Xiaofeng zhuan," in Jianyingke ed., *Tianjin Minglin Xiaozhuan* (1909). Reprint in Fu Jin ed., *Jingju lishi wenxian huibian*: *Di'er juan, Zhuangshu* (Nanjing: Fenghuang chubanshe, 2011), 442-443.
[76] Zhongguo xiqu zhi bianji weiyuan hui, eds., *Zhongguo xiqu zhi, Tianjin juan* (Beijing: Wenhua yishu chubanshe, 1990), 431.
[77] Exactly which year En Xiaofeng turned a professional actress was uncertain. According to Jianyingke, "En Xiaofeng zhuan," She went to perform on the commercial stages in Tianjin in 1902. According to *Zhongguo Xiqu zhi Tianjin juan*, En became a professional in the year of 1903.

theatrical world from the nineteenth century would greatly facilitate the young women's entry into the profession. Probably encouraged by the imperial family who enthusiastically patronized opera particularly from the 1860s, the Manchu elite enthusiastically invested in patronage networks and indulged themselves in the pleasure of amateur acting. The Manchu noblemen patronized the top-tier actors, especially the ones favored by the court, and socialized with them. Through the amateur institution of *piaofang* they also formed a unique theatrical community that greatly influenced performance aesthetics. This long established network of patronage and artistic exchange could be turned to the use of the emergent actresses at the end of the Qing. If a young girl from a Manchu family planned to go on stage, as we have seen in the case of En Xiaofeng, her family could easily find her a renowned actor or a venerable *piaoyou* as instructor.

The elite Manchu families were also well connected to Beijing literary circles, whose members were heavily involved in literary patronage of opera stars. For the literati theater aficionados and critics, patronizing these young girls from a prominent family was both an obligation and an opportunity. As Craig Clunas reveals in his study of the Ming literati painter Wen Zhengming, traditional Chinese literati were embedded in intricate social networks of obligation and exchange. Their literary or artistic production was often driven by a sense of indebtedness to their masters, friends, peers, patrons, and relatives or family acquaintances, etc.[78] Moreover, as I will further elaborate in chapter 5, engagement in the literary patronage of opera stars was also a critical strategy for literati to construct their identity in the emergent media-generated public space in the early

[78] Craig Clunas, *Elegant Debts: The Social Art of Wen Zhengming, 1470-1559* (London: Reaktion Books, 2004).

Republican era. So it was not surprising that Tsuji Chōka, who was well connected to both theatrical and literary circles in Beijing, helped to advertise the skills of the prospective actress Bai Suchen before her debut in 1916.[79] Similarly, when the Fu sisters took to the stage, literati friends of their father organized a fan association named *Yongzhu yaji* (詠竹雅集, lit. "The elegant gathering to appreciate bamboo") to support the novice actresses. A member of this association clearly indicated that their patronage of the three sisters was an obligation they owed to the actresses' father, a Manchu figure well respected by the literary community, but their obligation ended with his death.[80]

Not all literati patronage of actresses from elite families was so carefully calculated to maintain a particular social relationship. The sense of obligation that a few literati felt could also derive from a genuine sympathy for these young women. It was painful for the literati to see prominent families having to surrender their unmarried daughters of the inner quarters to the stigmatized acting profession following a reversal in family fortunes. For instance, Fang Zengxiang once commented—

> Since the change of regime, actresses have thrived. Women from the pure family and the inner quarters were so driven by poverty that they had to sell their skills to support their family. How pathetic it is![81]

For a few literati, even if these women from elite families achieved success on stage, it was still pitiful since they "sacrificed their appearance (犧牲色相)" by revealing themselves in the public. Moreover, the "fall" and "plight" of the elite women, as the literati perceived the matter, could easily remind them of their own political and life frustrations, a topic I will further elaborate in chapter 5.

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[79] Tinghua, "De si guniang chutai zhi xiansheng," *Shuntian shibao*, Apr. 2, 1916.
[80] Xiyuan, "Yong zhu yaji shimo ji," *Rizhi bao*, Jun. 11, 1918.
[81] Fanshan, "Xiang yun qu wei Zhuyou nüshi zuo bing xu," *Shuntian shibao*, Apr. 16, 1916.

With patronage from literati, the elite status of the young women more or less traveled with them into the theatrical sphere. In numerous writings, an actress's elite origin set her apart from other actresses. It was presumed that such new actresses, by virtue of their upbringing in an upper-class family, were more chaste and respectable. After their entry into the profession, as the literati patrons claimed, their superior family circumstances—though declining—would protect them. For instance, a literati patron labeled the actresses arising out of elite background as distinguished by "ease and gentleness (安順派), " living a harmonious and wealthy family life so that "their descending to worldly pleasures would not necessarily damage their pure reputation."[82] Literati patrons also assumed that the literacy and education of these well-born young women naturally made them better actresses who truly understood theatrical roles and lines.

Instead of having elite origins, the majority of actresses were recruited from the poor or destitute *liangjia* (良家 commoners' households). These young women's entrance into the theater profession was the most socially accepted and most officially approved, for it was understood that they took up an acting career to subsidize family income. The Police Department of Beijing publicly declared that they "specifically allowed women to sell their art for the purpose of assisting their poor families to earn a living."[83] For many theater patrons, such engagement of actresses in a stigmatized profession to earn a living for the entire family was worthy of sympathy and admiration, if to a lesser degree than actresses of elite origin. Their appearance on the public stage could be appreciated as a

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[82] Chunshen jiangshangke, "Kunling Gailun," *Rizhidao*, Nov. 29, 1917.
[83] "Benting nahuo kunling Jin Yubao deng mimi maiyin deng qing yi anjuan," [The case about the police department arrested acthress Jin Yubao, who secretly participated in secret prostitution] August 1918, file no. J181-019-21090, Beijing Municipal Archive, Beijing.

noble personal sacrifice. Actresses who handed over their salary to their parents were perceived as filial daughters worthy of praise. Actresses also internalized this common perception, and many young women voluntarily took up the profession as a way to repay the debts they owed to their parents (see chapter 4).

Not only did notions of family and filial piety justify the involvement of the young daughters of poor families in the theater profession, but familial relationships also decisively shaped their theatrical career. Usually, the young women started their training with the help of their families. A relatively well-off family would hire an instructor to teach their daughter(s) or enlist the young girl(s) in a *keban*. If a family were too poor to afford the tuition, they might apprentice the daughter(s) to an instructor or a troupe manager and negotiate the length of the apprenticeship and division of her salary. For instance, at the age of twelve, Li Guifen was apprenticed by her father to a troupe manager for a period of four years. It was agreed that the actress's father would take thirty percent of whatever the actress earned during the apprentice period while the theater manager retained the rest.[84] After her apprenticeship, an actress would continue to need family assistance. First of all, it was rare for an actress to negotiate her contract with a troupe manager on her own, partly because they were too young—generally in their teens or early twenties—and partly because of the separation of the sexes. A male family member was supposed to arrange her employment and represent her in other matters. If an actress was fatherless and brotherless, her mother would step into the role, very likely hiring an intermediary. For instance, the actress Liu Xikui lived with her mother. When

[84] "Zuo er qu biao song Qiu Zhao shi kong Li Ziyi ying jiang kunling Li Guifen jiezou yi'an," [The official communication of the second left district of the Outer City of Capital Police Department about Madam Qiu Zhao accusing Li Ziyi of taking away the actress Li Guifen] November 1914, file no. J181-019-04329. Beijing Municipal Archive, Beijing.

the newspaper *Xiju Xinwen* spread rumors about her, it was her mother who protested and sued the newspaper. But they entrusted a troupe manager Zhang Jiecheng to deal with contracts and performance arrangements.[85]

Actresses in the early Republican era were never treated as independent women who could directly negotiate their position in society. Instead, the general public and the government always expected their immediate family to protect the actresses from the "evil" society and act on their behalf to deal with professional arrangements and social connections. When an actress was deprived of her parents or brothers, the Republican government would step into a custodial role and place her to a welfare organizaton.[86] For instance, when the seventeen-year-old actress Shao Biyun (邵璧雲) became an orphan after her father died in January 1917, the police office considered it unsuitable for her to continue the acting career after losing her father's protection. They turned down the three petitions, from the actress' landlord, opera instructor, and cousin, to assist the actress to continue her acting career, even though all the three parties had secured a *pubao* (鋪保 shop guarantee), a type of document that facilitated transactions in the cities from the late

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[85] "Jingshi jingcha ting wai you er qu biaosong Liu Liu shi hangao xinwen baoguan zhubi Wang Yingtang zacai weisui huishun qinü Liu Xikui mingyu de song'an bia," [The official communication of the second right district of the Outer City of Capital Police Department about Mrs. Liu accusing the chief editor of *Xiju xinju* of blackmailing and defaming her daughter] March 1915, file no. J181-019-07756, Beijing Municipal Archive, Beijing; "Jingshi jingcha ting sifachu guanyu Liu Xikui bei ren nazou yinqian buhuai ji qita qingkuang de cheng (1)," January 1917, file no. J181-019-17628, Beijing Municipal Archive, Beijing; "Jingshi jingcha ting zhenji dui guanyu diaocha Liu Tongsheng jie Liu Xikui yinyuan de lü (2)," [The report of the investigation team of Capital Police Department about Liu Tongsheng borrowing money from Liu Xikui] January 1917, file no. J181-019-17628, Beijing Municipal Archive, Beijing.

[86] In her study of prostitution in twentieth century Shanghai, Gail Hershatter points out a very similar situation when the state dealt with prostitutes. When family members and relatives competed to claim certain prostitutes as "their" women, the court tended to send the women to a philanthropic organization rathe than returning them to the custody of their families. Gail Hershatter, *Dangerous Pleasures: Prostitution and Modernity in Twentieth-century Shanghai* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 192.

Qing.[87] Considering all three parties unreliable, the police chief denied the actress's wish to continue acting and ordered the girl placed in a factory of female workers until someone would come to *zepei* (擇配), that is, to choose her as a wife with her consent.[88]

Desperate or irresponsible parents might sell or pawn a daughter to so-called *lingjia*, "adoptive parents" who were usually portrayed by the print media as human traffickers who purchased or abducted young girls and trained them as prostitutes and actresses. The general public and media always regarded *lingjia* as evil and cruel. A theater critic remarked on the abuse by *lingjia* and compared the young girls under their control to slaves—

> Recently most actresses come from the *lingjia* system. At a very young age, they are treated as slaves. When they become popular and bankable stars after arduous and painful training, *lingjia* appropriate the huge income they earn and live like men of wealth. No people dare to intervene in such oppression, so that some actresses are not given enough food and clothing and others are beaten and tortured.[89]

Nonetheless, the media-promoted stereotype of abusive or exploitative *lingjia* involved in human trafficking did not always hold true. *Lingjia* functioned more like a labor brokerage system that facilitated the entry of girls from destitute families into the acting profession. Too poor to afford the cost of hiring a tutor, parents would pawn or sell their daughters to *lingjia*, who were introduced to them through relatives or acquaintances. *Lingjia* not only paid for the training of the girls as actresses but also assumed

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[87] Strand, *Rickshaw Beijing*, 46-47. The pubao system was very similar to the yinjie institution. According to Richard David Belsky, in the late Qing the government in Beijing would accept a petition only if it had the proper chopped-bond guarantee from a compatriot metropolitan official. Richard David Belsky, *Localities at the Center: Native Place, Space, and Power in Late Imperial Beijing* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 163-174.

[88] "Jingshi jingcha ting wai you er qu biao song nüling Shao Biyun wuqin keyi qing heban yi'an," [The official communication of the second right district of the Outer City of Capital Police Department asking for instructions to deal with the actress Shao Biyun who has no one to depend on] January 1917, file no. J181-019-17276, Beijing Municipal Archives, Beijing.

[89] Mengyi, "Fushi sanyou zhi yule guan," *Rizhi bao*, Dec. 22, 1917.

guardianship and exercised parental authority. The young actresses lived with *lingjia* and addressed them as father or mother. Living with *lingjia* could be an abusive experience for a young actress, as the print media often reported. But sometimes it could involve deep emotional commitment between *lingjia* and actresses. Moreover, more often than not, *lingjia* were not strangers who abducted women but "insiders" of the theater profession, who had various connection with theater tutors, managers, and troupes. For instance, it was very common for an aged opera player—male or female—to purchase or adopt several young girls and train them to be actresses.

Consigning their daughters to *lingjia*, parents did not necessarily cut off contact. Contracts with *lingjia* usually lasted several years and actresses were expected to return to their natal families after the contract ended. Depending on specific contracts, part of the earning of actresses consigned to *lingjia* might go to their natal families. When a girl was badly treated, her natal family would likely intervene. The parents or family member might resort to the police or the court, since the *lingjia* system—despite being wide practiced—was outlawed and condemned. Though actresses under the control of *lingjia* more or less retained connection to their natal families, they were usually portrayed a living a pattern of life that was truly abnormal: they severed family ties—though involuntarily—and adhered to the notorious *lingjia*. They were considered to lack the "clean" family background that lent respectability to other actresses. As a result, actresses affiliated with *lingjia* were more written about as victims of an exploitative economy than as opera stars who manifested the virtue of filial piety.

Another group of actresses were former prostitutes. They usually moved to a stage career when the profits of prostitution declined as they aged. The transition from prostitution to

theater could be quite manageable, since they were usually trained in operatic singing and acting to entertain clients in brothels. As these prostitutes-turned-actresses appeared on the public stages, their past as sex workers often came out. The newspapers and critics were relentless in gossiping about their "complicated history," which would contribute to their exclusion from stardom. Even though theater could be a viable profession for them, prostitutes-turned-actresses rarely won wide recognition in the Beijing theatrical world.

In summary, family was a central component in an actress's career. When a young woman walked out of the domestic sphere onto the public stage, family or quasi-family relationships continued to facilitate and control her professional life. Parents and brothers acted on her behalf to arrange training, employment contracts, and performance schedules. Family background could give her a start, and elite families could secure the literati patronage critical for ascendancy to stardom. A "good" family connection could give meaning to an actress's acting career, making her a filial daughter contributing to the family economy and fulfilling her filial obligations. Literati biographers of actresses tended to emphasize or fabricate the decent family background of their objects (chapter 5). Actresses who were not directly controlled by their parents but consigned to *lingjia* were less justified for their involvement in the theater profession. They were more likely to be portrayed as pure commodities on the entertainment market and representative of an abnormal, highly exploitative economic and social system, than filial daughters repaying their parents. Even the practice of *lingjia* functioned under the rubic of family. A theatrical profession without the involvement of the family or substitute-family was almost unthinkable, since the young actresses in early Republican Beijing were never viewed as independent women. If an actress were deprived of parents and close relatives,

the police would intervene to terminate her acting career and place her into government custody or welfare organizations until a marriage was arranged for her to create a new family.

Rival Queens of Opera

In the film *Forever Enthralled*, which portrays the life and career of the most influential Peking opera actor Mei Lanfang, the director represents the early Republican theatrical world as a competitive arena, in which the 20-year-old actor began to establish a reputation for artistic superiority and aesthetic innovation. In a spectacular duel in 1913, Mei competed with the renowned actor of a previous generation, Shisan Yan (modeled on the actor Tan Xinpei) for the box office in the two playhouses in Dong'an market district. With the help of his reform-minded scholar-patrons, the young actor eventually wins the competition. He attracted a full audience in the Jixiang playhouse with his captivating female roles in the new plays, as well as the fabulous stage design illuminated by electric lights. In contrast, Shisan Yan, the once prominent actor greatly favored by the newly deceased Qing court, performed *laosheng* roles on an old-fashioned, lackluster stage in the Dangui playhouse. Despite showing great virtuosity, Tan could no longer charm the audience and, according to the film, finished singing in an empty theater.[90]

The duel is an impressive cinematic reconstruction of the early twentieth century theater world. It enables the contemporary audience to imagine a highly dynamic theater world that brought a group of younger actors and a new set of artistic trends and patronage networks into competition with the old. Nonetheless, as the theater historian Fu Jin points

[90] Chen Kaige, director. *Forever Enthralled*. DVD (Guangzhou: Guangdong yingxiang chubanshe, 2009).

out, in reality such a duel could never have happened. In the Beijing theatrical community of the early Republic, the senior generation of actors still presided over the actors' guild and commanded great authority. If Mei had actually dueled with Tan Xinpei and humiliated him, the entire community of actors would have cast him out and musicians would have refused to perform with him. The challenge of the young actors to their senior generation had to be more subtle and disguised.[91] In actuality, as I have already shown, the most public challenge to senior actors was believed to come from the star actresses. The overwhelming popularity of the star actress Liu Xikui was said to have greatly dismayed Tan Xinpei, who witnessed her extraordinary success.[92] No evidence exists, however, of any duel between a star actress and a renowned actor.

It was the spectacular rivalry among star actresses that enraptured spectators in early Republican Beijing. In other words, vigorous competition was more salient among actresses than actors. The demise of the court patronage certainly undermined the old elite in the community of actors and the thriving market-driven star system produced new stars, but the status hierarchy of the community of actors remained relatively stable in the 1910s. First of all, the old patronage networks greatly declined but did not disappear immediately. Moreover, the internal hierarchy in the community of actors was largely sustained by the master-disciple relationships institutionalized in *keban* and theater guild. The most public battle on Beijing stages happened within the emergent sphere of all-female opera.

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[91] Jin Fu, "Reflections on the Film Forever Enthralled (Mei Lanfang)," *The Opera Quarterly*, no. 26 (2010): 476-478.
[92] Wenmei, "Liyuan tanwang," *Liyan huakan*, no. 311 (1944): 5.

As the actresses took over the major playhouses in the Dashalar district in the Qianmen area in the middle 1910s, the theatrical world in the area was marked by the duels of several star actresses, particularly between Liu Xikui and Xian Lingzhi. The two actresses had belonged to the same troupe *Qinghecheng she* (慶和成社) managed by Wu Shaoqing (武少卿). But in August 1915, Xian withdrew and organized a new female troupe named *Kuideshe* together with her husband who had retired from performing female roles of *Bangzi* opera. It was reported that the ambitious Xian was not satisfied with playing the secondary roles for Liu, who had established her ascendancy in Beijing before the arrival of Xian. But it was more likely that Xian left *Qinghecheng she* as the result of the oppressiveness of troupe manager Wu. Wu was notorious for his disrespect and mistreatment of the actresses in his troupe. Once when he was penalized 500 dollars by the police for smoking opium, he forced the entire troupe to perform two extra days and kept the profits to pay the fine. Instead of showing gratitude, he declared that the actresses in his troupe had an obligation to help him. Moreover, Wu maintained unfair paying scales. While the very top actresses were well paid, others were paid the lowest wage possible and denied raises. Wu skimped actresses' pay in any way he could. When the actress Wang Shaoqing (王少卿) decided to withdraw from the troupe due to the miserable pay, he refused to let her go and sent thugs to prevent her from performing in Tianjin until "someone powerful" intervened. When Xian Lingzhi left the troupe, many other actresses in the troupe followed her to join the new troupe *Kuideshi*.[93] *Kuideshe* rented Guangdelou (廣德樓) playhouse, which was only one block away from Sanqing playhouse, where Liu and the troupe *Qinghecheng* performed.

[93] Mangzhen, "Qinghecheng jiuyou ziqu," *Shuntian shibao*, Aug. 8, 1915; "Qing hechang jiuyou ziqu xu," *Shuntian shibao*, Aug. 13, 1915.

Figure 1-5. A Photo of the Number One *Huashan* Liu Xikui in Beijing and Tianjin. Reprinted from *Xiaoshuo xinbao* 5 (1915), 1.

When *Kuideshe* started in Guangdelou playhouse, their performance featuring Xian Lingzhi as the leading actress was promoted as a challenge to the actress Liu Xikui. The respective literati-patrons welcomed such a competition with great enthusiasm and used military rhetoric to call it "the (great) battle between Liu and Xian" (Liu Xian zhan 劉鮮戰, or Liu Xian dazhan 劉鮮大戰) and compared it to the conquest of Qin in the warring states era, and the recent National Protection war led by Cai E (蔡鍔 1882~1916) and the Yunnan Army. The proximity of the two playhouses and the daily appearance of the two actresses involved a large audience and many critics in arguing their respective merits. The newspapers filled their theatrical columns with details of the competition. They kept track of attendance at the two playhouses, compared the repertoire offered by the two

actresses, and even solicited contributions to analyze and predict the outcome.[94] The so-called battle lasted three month from August to October 1915, ending with Liu's decision to stop performing temporarily, which was interpreted by many as a sign of surrender. Later several times in 1916 and 1917, whenever Liu came back to the stage, the newspapers in Beijing declared that the battle had resumed. Each time it lasted a few months, ending with the "defeat" of Liu, who stopped acting altogether because of illness, her mother's death, interruption of playhouse business by road repairs and other reasons.

Figure 1-6. A Photo of Xian Lingzhi, an Actress from Beijing.
Reproduced from *Xiaoshuo daguan*, 13 (1918): 1.

[94] "Zhengji Liu Xian zhan zhi yuyan," *Shuntian shibao*, Sep. 26, 1915; "Zhengji Liu Xian zhan zhi yuyan diyiqi pilu," *Shuntian shibao*, Sep. 30, 1915.

Star actresses were always pitted against each other. Their rivalry may have been largely the product of media hype, given the intensive involvement of newspaper editors and theatrical columnists, but the ambiance of fierce competition created and promoted by the print media had the effect of rupturing both the community of actresses and the community of theater fans. Theatrical life became organized along the animosity between star actresses and their respective fans. Playhouses, newspapers and spectators reveled not only in their contestation over popularity but also their personal animosity. Fan factions formed around the rival actresses and sought all possible means to secure an advantage. For instance, when the actress Liu Xikui came back to the stage in Beijing in July 1916, a fan of Xian Lingzhi wrote to petition Tsuji Chōka, the editor of theater column of *Shuntian shibao*, to organize a battalion of Xian (鮮團 *Xian tuan*) to prepare for the great battle between Liu and Xian. He admonished the theater editor—

> I have long heard that you are a great connoisseur of theater. If you are not a member in the camp of Liu, please don't take my words lightly. Please organize a battalion of Xian quickly so that everyone in favor of Xian could join in it.[95]

The words irritated the Japanese editor, who aspired and claimed to be a professional, unbiased theater critic. Nonetheless, despite Tsuji Chōka's reprimand, the fan society for Xian soon formed under the name of *Changxian tuan* (嘗鮮團 The battalion of savoring Xian). Fan factions and clubs did not merely seek to promote the reputation and popularity of their favorite actress by showing up in the playhouses shouting "*hao*!" when she appeared on the stage, or writing poems and prose to increase her publicity and advertise her skills. They would also shamelessly attack another actress merely because

[95] Tinghua, "Chi zuzhi Chan Xian tuan," *Shuntian shibao*, Jul. 4, 1916.

she posed a threat, potential or actual, to their idol's supremacy. The bitter, fractious rivalries among actresses and their fan clubs often led the literati patrons to engage in ferocious newspaper debates, which were called *bizhan* (筆戰 the battle of pens), a topic I will further elaborate in Chapter 5.

Situated in a highly competitive environment, the community of actresses—which was distinct from the community of actors due to the ban of *nannü heyan*—was increasingly fragmented by the conflicts among star actresses. Actresses were divided into several major camps. For instance, the actresses who performed with Liu Xikui would be labeled as belonging to "the army of Liu (劉軍 *Liujun*)," while the actresses who joined *Kuideshe* were considered "the army of Xian (鮮軍 *Xianjun*)."[96] Individual actresses might internalize the competition and see it as integral to their careers. Conflict between actresses, such as two actresses in the same troupe competing for a leading role, was not rare. Sometimes, such tension could jeopardize a performance. For example, due to offstage squabbles, the actresses Ma Suzhen and Xiao Hehua suddenly stopped acting in the middle of a play, both refusing to cooperate with each other. When their silence brought a roar from the audience, the police assigned to maintain order in the theater sent the two actresses and their troupe manager to the nearby police station. Eventually, each was penalized for 5 yuan and the two actresses were forbidden to perform in any playhouse in the police station's jurisdiction.[97] It was not unusual to hear that a certain actress left a troupe because she could not get along with another actress. Actresses could

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[96] For instance, see Rang, "Xianju zhi lü qibao" & "Liujun bude tianshi," *Shuntian shibao*, Jun. 3, 1917.
[97] "Nüling Ma Suzhen deng bin weizhang shoufa ken yu jinjin shouhui chengming bishi zixin," ," [Actresses Ma Suzhen and others appeal for the penalty for their violation of regulation to be rescinded and a chance to be given for self reform] June 1916, file no. J181-018-07068, Beijing Municipal Archives, Beijing.

form small sisterhoods inside a troupe: it was reported that the actress Jin Yulan, feeling marginalized in the troupe, formed an alliance with a few other actresses for mutual support. To secure advantage in a certain competition, actresses would turn to their patrons. For instance, once when the actress Li Fengyun (李鳳雲) received fewer acclamations of "*hao*!" from the audience than another actress Shang Junqing (尚俊卿) in the same play, she specifically reserved three boxes for her own patrons who could shout "*hao*!" during her performance to win the covert competition.[98]

Therefore, the career and community of actresses in the 1910s Beijing was imbricated in an environment in which individual actresses competed fiercely for fame and popularity and patron-critics struggled for cultural authority as true connoisseurs. Unlike actors who might experience competition in more subtle ways, the rivalry among star actresses was often publicly displayed, becoming an urban spectacle and an entertainment commodity through the concerted effort of the playhouses, troupes, patrons, and the print media. When recalling the history of actresses in 1917, a theater critic summarized it as a series of hostilities among star actresses—

> As time went on, factions arose including the Cult of Du, the Apricot Society, the Brigade of Ma (Suzhen), the Party of Han (Jinxi) and the School of Mei (Xiao Sumei)—too many to enumerate. Patrons spared no effort to promote their favorite in the battle between Liu and Xian, the confrontation between Jin and Ma parties (In the spring of 1916, rival parties arose around the two actresses Han Jinxi and Du Yunhong), the trouble between Han and Du. (Last summer when Jinxi arrived at the Tianle playhouse, the patrons of Du Yunqing urged her to join the Yanxi playhouse to develop a school of her own), and the friction between Su

[98] Wugong, "Quan zhong quan xiao zhi liang kunling," *Rizhi bao*, Sep. 21, 1917.

> and Liu (Last year Su Lanfang and Liu Jinhuan completed fiercely with each other in the Yanxi playhouse)…[99]

Despite all of the conflicts and hostilities, the contest among star actresses was not completely vicious. A few star actresses actually took it as an opportunity to explore new forms of performance, raise box office takings, and update their repertoire. Such creativity is best illustrated in the female troupe *Kuideshe*, newly founded by Xian Lingzhi and her husband in 1915. First of all, the troupe attempted to recruit the popular actresses from other troupes by initiating a new payment policy, which allowed several top actresses such as Xian Lingzhi and Xiao Rongfu (小榮富 1890~?) to become shareholders of the troupe.[100] The previous female troupes had one or two male managers fully in charge of their daily operation including recruiting the cast, hiring an instructor, renting a playhouse, as well as negotiating terms of contract with individual actress. In these troupes, each actress was given a fixed amount of *baoyin* according to her popularity. Once settled, the amount of *baoyin* was normally non-negotiable no matter how popular an actress's performance turned out in the future. A playhouse would hire an entire troupe after an agreement was reached on how to distribute the daily profit between the playhouse (also called *qiantai* 前台 front-stage) and the troupe (also called *houtai* 後台 backstage). For example, once when Qingle playhouse hired the *Qinghecheng* troupe, it was agreed that the playhouse would obtain 30% of the daily profit while the troupe was entitled to the remaining 70%.[101] In order to boost the fame and popularity of the troupe, a manager would offer the highest bid for a celebrated actress and at the same

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[99] Chujiang wuwo, "Lun kunling shuaitui zhi yuanyin," *Rizhi bao*, Sep. 21, 1917. The brackets in the text were used by the originate author, not added by the author of the dissertation.
[100] Tinghua, "Liu Xian zhan guan zhong," *Shuntian shibao*, Aug. 25, 1915.
[101] Mangzheng, "Qinghecheng jianli wangyi," *Shuntian shibao*, Sep. 21, 1915.

time attempt to reduce the salaries of other actresses. Not surprisingly, the highly polarized payment system angered actresses with weaker drawing power. Moreover, the demand of star actresses for more money placed pressure on the troupe and the playhouse. In order to meet the financial imperative, the troupe and the playhouse would agree to increase the price of tickets.

When *Kuideshe* was founded, it was designed to maintain a fairer and more workable payment system. The top-tier actresses were still promised a handsome salary, but much less than their counterparts in *Qinghecheng*. Second-rank actresses were also better paid. So it is not surprising that many actresses withdrew from *Qinghecheng* and followed Xian to join her new troupe. Another innovation was that some actresses became shareholders of the troupe and took a fixed percentage of the profits.[102] Such an arrangement eased financial pressures on both troupe and playhouse. With their own interest tied to the operation of the entire troupe, the top actresses were less likely to haggle for higher pay. As a result, the ticket price for their performance in Guangdelou playhouse could be lowered. During the battle between Liu and Xian, the admission fee for Guangdelou playhouse, where Xian performed, was approximately 30％ less than that at Sanqing playhouse where Liu was the prima donna (See Table 1-4).

[102] Given the limitation of the sources, it is unclear how much share actresses held in the 1910s. The troupe maintained its organization for more than two decades. In the year of 1934, according to the report of *Dagong bao*, the troupe was divided into ten shares, seven of which were held by a variety of actresses. Hehua, "Kuide she houtai sumiao," *Dagong bao*, Jan. 30, 1914.

Table 1-4 The Admission Rate for Sanqing and Guangdelou Playhouse on August 25, 1915

Admission fee (Copper coin)	*Louzuo* 樓座 Seats on the Balcony	*Chizuo* 池座 Seats in the Pit	*Bianzuo* 邊座 Seats in the Margins
Sanqing Playhouse	50	40	32
Guangdelou Playhouse	36	30	22

Source: Tinghua, "Liu Xian zhan guan xia," *Shuntian shibao*, August 25, 1915

As the actress Xian Lingzhi and her husband were shareholders of Guangdelou playhouse, they could make decisions about the running of the playhouse. To attract the audience and win the competition, Xian and her husband were willing to spend a proportion of the profits in updating the playhouse, stage design, and costumes. Guangdelou playhouse turned out to be more spacious and offered more comfortable seats and environment than other playhouses despite its cheaper admission rates.[103] So, as many contemporary theater critics pointed out, the more affordable and comfortable Guangdelou playhouse ensured the success of Xian and her troupe *Zhideshe* (志德社). In contrast, the expensive admission rate charged by Sanqing playhouse was said to discourage many potential audiences. With the decline in attendance, the playhouse manager(s) found the profit was unsatisfactory. A conflict between playhouse and the troupe broke out. It was reported that the playhouse manager(s) was agitated by the arbitrary decision of the *Qinghecheng* troupe manager to increase the ticket price and keep all the extra revenue without informing the playhouse. The playhouse manager(s) broke off the contract and evicted the troupe.[104] The troupe made a new contract with Qingle playhouse, equipped with relatively new costumes. Although the ticket price remained 50% higher than in

[103] Tinghua, "Liu Xian zhan guan zhong."
[104] Mangzheng, "Qinghecheng jianli wangyi."

Guangdelou playhouse, the news that Liu had rallied her forces and started a battlefront in a new playhouse excited the theatrical world, and soon attendance in Qingleyuan playhouse surpassed that in Guangdelou playhouse.[105]

Investing great interest and effort in the "battle between Liu and Xian," the theater critics and patron increasingly perceived it as a competition between two different models of troupe organization and playhouse management. *Zhideshe* proved to be a more sustainable model, one in which at least a few top actresses had access to the ranks of management. Allowing actresses to become the shareholders increased the coherence of troupes. The advantage of *Zhideshe* in terms of dealing with the top-bill actress was well summarized by a theater critic as he responded to the call of the newspapers to predict the outcome of the competition—

> In *Qinghecheng*, Liu Xikui is just a *daban* (搭班 actress for temporary hire). The ups and downs of the troupe business would be none of her concern. In Zhideshe, Xian Lingzhi is a master (主人) and has a stake in the prospect of the troupe.[106]

Moreover, the payment scale adopted by *Zhideshe* seemed fair, not arbitrarily determined by a single male troupe manager. It attracted recruitment even from the enemy camp. As a result, the cast of *Zhideshe* grew steadily, unlike in *Qinghecheng* where the miserable wage could never keep secondary actresses for long. The stable corps of actresses, as I will show in chapter 3, also enabled the troupe to rehearse new plays and become the most innovative force in the theatrical world in 1910s Beijing.

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[105] Tinghua, "Yanjiu juzhan zhi ziliao," *Shuntian shibao*, Sep. 30, 1915.
[106] Yuegong, "Liu Xian zhan zhi yuyang," *Shuntian shibao*, Oct. 2, 1915.

The competition unfolded on stage, as each actress strove to display her virtuosity and expand her repertoire to appeal to the audience. As Tsuji Chōka observed, Liu was known for staging a variety of *xinju* and *bangzi* opera and was not good at performing *erhuang* opera, while Xian was recognized for her *bangzi* and *erhuang* plays and she only occasionally played *xinju*.[107] The two actresses struggled to gain the advantage:

> Recently Liu is ardent in learning to play *erhuang* opera, and Xian is also diligent in studying *xinju*. Both are making effort to make up their deficiencies and hoping to use [the newly acquired skills] on the front line.[108]

By acquiring new skills and staging new plays in the course of their duels, the two actresses and their alliances become the most innovative agents in the theatrical world. From the middle 1910s, they engaged in creating new characters and inventing new acting styles and revolutionized the stage, as I will further elaborate in Part II.

Conclusion

The arrival of actresses onto the Beijing public stage in 1912 was a serious challenge to the male domination of the theater profession. Many actresses began a meteoric rise to fame and fortune. Their marketability not only enhanced the business of many theaters but also encouraged more investment in training young women as actresses. As troupe managers invited seasoned actresses from other places, parents sought theater instructors or *keban* for their daughters, and *lingjia* contracted or purchased girls for theatrical training, the number of actresses increased. Banned from co-starring with actors and playing both male and female roles, actresses constituted direct competitors with actors

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[107] Tinghua, "Liu Xian zhan guan zhong."
[108] Tinghua, "Liu Xian zhan guan xia," *Shuntian shibao*, Aug. 26, 1915.

vying to draw large audiences. The success and popularity of star actresses—most evident in their take-over of the decent playhouses in the Qianmen area—aroused much anxiety within the profession and in society. Theater critics often attributed the decline of actors' business to the encroachment of actresses on a previously male-dominated labor market.

Actresses in early Republican Beijing were not a unitary category as the previous scholarship suggests, though they shared certain characteristics.[109] Most actresses were young and unmarried, since they would normally retire from the stage after marriage. Only if an actress married into a theatrical or destitute family, might she continue the acting career. Nonetheless, these young women were from diverse family backgrounds and entered the theater profession by different paths. Actresses from a declining elite family could easily occupy a privileged position in the discourse as well as in the patronage networks. Actresses from commoner families were also widely accepted. Their economic contribution to the family and adherence to their parents largely justified their emergence from the inner quarters. For actresses who were apprenticed to *lingjia*, invented family ties, just like the quasi-familial relationships in the brothels, maintained their relations with lingjia.[110]

With the family and familial relations looming so large in the actresses' acting career, it would be misleading to understand these young women's incursion into the public space of stage performance as liberation from family constraints. As I have shown, the career

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[109] In his two pioneering articles studying actresses in the early 20th-century Beijing, Weikun Cheng analyzed actresses as a single category though he certainly noticed the internal difference. Cheng, "Women in Public Spaces," 7-45 & "The Challenge of the Actresses," 197-233.
[110] Hershatter, *Dangerous Pleasures*, 69-102.

life was enmeshed in complex family networks. Actresses' identity was closely connected to their role in the family as filial daughters; and their rise to stardom usually entailed a respectable family background as well as adherence to domesticity (see chapter 5). The concerted efforts by the government and patrons to categorize actresses—despite their public personas—within the domestic sphere testify to the lasting influence of the traditional gender ideology and family practice in early Republican Beijing. As I have suggested, on the basis of recent scholarship, the dichotomy of *nei* and *wai* spheres in the traditional Confucian ideology was a shifting continuum rather than two distinct and opposing spheres.[111] The identity of actresses in the early Republican era was still grounded in domestic female roles, and it was adherence to these roles that legitimized their incursion into the public sphere.

Finally, despite their separation from actors, actresses in the 1910s Beijing never constituted a community of solidarity. Structured by a star system, the theater profession for actresses was highly differentiated and hierarchical. Moreover, star actresses might be rivals who detested each other. Due to the efforts of troupe managers, theater patrons, as well as the print media, the theater business of actresses was organized along animosities among stars actresses and their respective fans. The bitter competition prevented the formation of a larger sense of community among actresses. A sense of sisterhood only developed within the factions, where actresses could find a degree of trust and support. Nonetheless, the fierce competition had the creative side effect of spurring innovation as actresses worked on reorganizing the troupes, enhancing the repertoire, and developing

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[111] For example, see Susan Mann, *Precious Records: Women in China's Long Eighteenth Century* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).

their signature plays to attract a variety of audiences and patrons, as I will explore further in Part II.

Part II. The Stage

Chapter 2. Roles of Transgression: Female Heroines and Their Embodiment in Traditional Drama

The performance of actresses in the theaters of early Republican Beijing was full of vigor and attraction. A popular theater staging female performance could attract a daily box office ranging from several hundreds to over one thousand spectators. In September 1917 when the *Kuideshe* female troupe staged the new drama *Er Lienü* (二烈女 Two virtuous women), adapted from a true story of the suicide of two girls to defend their chastity, it was reported "at eight o'clock there was no standing room in Guangde playhouse, crowded with one thousand and several hundred spectators."[1] The large audiences that actresses entertained were a mixed constituency. The middle and upper-ranked actresses who played in the prestigious Qianmen and Dong'an men theaters, where the admission rate exceeded the buying power of the working class, catered to the middle and upper strata of society. The actresses performing in the crude theaters in Tianqiao and other areas entertained a less well-off audience.

Generally, the audience membership expanded in the early Republican era. In the Qing, the audience was already diversified in its composition. The theaters not only catered to a local audience largely composed of Han, Banner, and Manchu residents but also attracted a trans-regional urban merchant audience produced by the domestic trade, as well as sojourning literati waiting for the metropolitan civil service examination or for an official assignment.[2] From the late Qing, theaters in Beijing began to admit a female audience. Nonetheless, as I have mentioned in the first chapter, throughout the early Republican era,

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[1] "Juxun yishu," *Shuntian shibao*, Sep. 13, 1917.
[2] For audience in the Qing theaters, see Goldman, *Opera and the City*, 17-114.

the female audience was segregated in designated areas such as the expensive boxes on the second floor. From the late Qing to the early Republican era, political reforms and regime change brought a massive influx of politicians, particularly from the south. The struggle for power in the central government among warlords entailed the presence of multitudes of soldiers.[3] The expanding commerce and industry produced a variety of professionals, including journalists, bank clerks, doctors, merchants, government functionaries, and university professors and students, etc.[4] All made appearance in the theaters and their diverse tastes engendered a corresponding transformation of the stage performance, as a theater critic remarked—

> In the past, the theater in Beijing merely catered to incumbent officials, and sojourning merchant who mostly came from Shanxi, Shaanxi, Henan and Shandong. So the scripts are mostly based on stories in the northern provinces. Now the transportation is so convenient that the five continents are unified, southerners traveling to the capital have increased ten fold.[5]

The audience in Beijing theaters was never a silent, well-disciplined presence. They shouted "*hao*!" whenever their favored players appeared on stage or a certain player delivered a satisfactory performance. They might also boo players for unsatisfying performances. Such sound making was integral to the spectatorship. It also became a criterion to measure the popularity and marketability of a player. In the early Republican theater, the shouting of "*hao*!" was increasingly regarded as problematic, under attack from many theater reformers who, probably inspired by the orderliness of Western

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[3] On warlord politics in Beijing, see Andrew J. Nathan, *Peking politics, 1918-1923: Factionalism and the Failure of Constitutionalism* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1976).
[4] For commerce development in early Republican Beijing, see Strand, *Rickshaw Beijing,* 98-166; for university professors and students, see Timothy Weston, *The Power of Position: Beijing University, Intellectuals, and Chinese Political Culture, 1898-1929* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).
[5] Yuefu, "Lun Beijing xiju qiyi gailiang yi baocun guocui," *Shuntian shibao*, Sep. 18, 1917.

theaters, expected the audiences to be still and silent.[6] The shouting of "*hao*!" during actresses' performance was seen as even more problematic, because driven by lascivious intentions. It was believed that the appearance of actresses on stage aroused more shouting of "*hao*!" than that of their male counterparts.[7] And such shouting of "*hao*!" was constantly attacked for its sensational purposes and disregard of artistic criteria.[8] In the late 1910s and early 1920s, the police repeatedly intervened to punish the noise-makers in the playhouses staging all-female troupes.[9]

Nonetheless, the "noisy" atmosphere in a theater where actresses performed could not be easily subdued. The shouting of "*hao*!" was not only an important way for spectators to articulate their appreciation but also a critical form of theater patronage that connected players and their patrons. Moreover, the excitement that actresses aroused in their audience, to anticipate my argument, was also brought about by the arrival of the female body on the public stage. By examining both the female roles and the dramaturgical techniques of a few privileged actresses—particularly opera stars and members of large all-female troupes—this chapter shows how actresses capitalized on their own commodification and highlighted the flirtatious female roles and their bodily allure in their presentation of the burlesque plays of *bangzi* and *pihuang* operas. It argues that actresses challenged the long-established transvestite theatrical convention of boy actors. As they established a relationship with audiences and integrated themselves into a rapidly

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[6] For the reformist effort to discipline the audience, see Goldstein, *Drama Kings*, 72-85.
[7] Guan Zhuoran, *Juhua*, manuscript, 1918. National Library of China, Beijing. "Xian zhai Xi Caifeng."
[8] "Juchang jianwen lu," *Shuntian shibao*, Dec. 10, 1918.
[9] "Jingshi jingcha ting guanyu gequ yu ge kunxichang zhangtie guaisheng jiaohao bugao bing zhencha weiling zhiren jiuban de kunling," [The order of Capital Police Department to ban the shouting of "*hao*!" in the playhouses of actresses and to investigate and punish the violators] January 1919, file no. J181-018-10174, Beijing Municipal Archives, Beijing.

commercialized theater business, commodification necessarily followed, but without dictating standard forms. Through their art, actresses resisted merely inhabiting traditional gender ideologies. By adapting preexisting regional opera traditions, they were able to fashion new models of female subjectivity. Thus the role of actresses in the early twentieth century was highly ambiguous. They were simultaneously commodities for sexual fantasies and agents of theatrical innovation and gender negotiation.

Female Impersonation: Roles and Embodiment in the Qing Dynasty

On the commercial stages of the Qing dynasty, male actors played the *dan* roles, while female players were forbidden by the court to perform in public. The exclusion of women from stage performance was imperative while the Qing court sought to enforce the confinement of women to the "inner quarters" and thereby completely separate the sexes.[10] Substituting actresses in commercial settings, actors in the Qing era seemed to be very successful at impersonating female roles. Onstage, they performed a wide range of female roles. Offstage, they became social companions to male clients among the literati and officialdom. After the Yongzheng emperor (reigned 1722–1735) banned the centuries-old institution of *guanji* (官妓), the registered courtesans who provided entertainment and sexual services to officials, *dan* actors stepped into the role of courtesans and helped to develop the homoerotic sensibility that became common among opera patrons in the mid-Qing.[11]

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[10] Patricia Buckley Ebrey, *The Inner Quarters: Marriage and the Lives of Chinese Women in the Sung Period* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

[11] On the homoerotic sensibilities created by literati and boy actors, see Wu, *Homoerotic Sensibilities in Late Imperial China,* 111-151; Goldman, *Opera and the City*, 17-60. On the replacement of courtesans by male *dan*, see Tong Xu, "The Making of a Star: Huapu and the Emerging Entertainment Industry in

Actors succeeded in the impersonation of female roles through intensive training for years and with the help of the sexual appeal of their youthfulness. Nonetheless, the high appreciation that male *dan* actors received in the Qing cannot be entirely attributed to the degree of verisimilitude with which they played female roles. In the Qing dynasty, Chinese theater had developed into a highly codified art, in which verisimilitude often gave way to symbolism. Every gesture and movement was separate from everyday behavior and strictly defined by convention. The task of performers was not imitation of real life, but transformation of their actual body into a signifying body to activate symbols that could be immediately understood by the audience.[12] For example, in the *pihuang* opera—which had been the most popular operatic genre in Beijing from the mid-nineteenth century—a *dan* actor often sang in a piercing, high-pitched voice, which was quite different from the natural voices of women. But the contemporary audience could easily appreciate the unnaturally shrill voice as a feminine voice. Therefore, due to the symbolism of Chinese theater, male actors, despite their male physicality, were capable of presenting idealized femininity to signify ideas about women, rather than to represent real women.[13]

In the second half of the nineteenth century, in the major dramatic forms prevailing in the capital, the various female roles were increasingly divided into two overarching categories: *qingyi* (青衣 blue-robed female roles) and *huadan* (young seductive female

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Eighteenth-Century China," accessed October 15, 2013, https://www.strose.edu/download.aspx?libitemid=8836&file=CWP_Final_Xu.pdf.

[12] Colin Mackerras, *The Chinese Theater in Modern Times: From 1840 to the Present Day* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1975), 23–26.

[13] Min Tan, "Male Dan: The Paradox of Sex, Acting, and Perception of Female Impersonation in Traditional Chinese Theatre," *Asian Theatre Journal* 17, no. 1 (2000): 78–97. For a semiotic reading of female impersonation in Asian theater, see Roland Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill & Wang, 1983), 49–98.

roles). The distinction was significant. *Qingyi,* whose origin can be traced back to *zhengdan* (正旦 leading female roles) in the dramas of the Yuan dynasty (1260-1368), represented orthodox young women, usually faithful wives or chaste maidens in distress from decent families. *Huadan* included a variety of less-than-ideal female roles: *guimendan* (閨門旦 young, unmarried, and sexually alluring women), *wanxiaodan* (玩笑旦 amusing and outrageous girls) and *wudan* (武旦 women excelling in martial arts), etc. This morally charged differentiation was also codified in bodily expression. *Qingyi* required an actor to assume gentle and subdued physicality on stage and use his singing—more than his body—to appeal to audience. Take the stage appearance and steps in *pihuang* opera for example: when a *qingyi* enters the stage, the gait is supposed to be smooth, continuous, and graceful, and the body should be upright, with one hand placed on the stomach and the other hanging naturally.[14] In contrast, the steps for *huadan* can be cheerful and energetic, like wiggling or dancing across the stage. Singing was important for a *huadan* actor, but it was not the primary category for his evaluation. He was expected to use his physical appearance, movement and acrobatics to impress the audience.

According to the Confucian gender ethics, the ideal female role on stage—and by extension in society—was a *qingyi*, the virtuous woman of chastity, passivity, and silent suffering. In contrast, the *huadan* characters were morally compromised and therefore considered as corrupting the moral fabric of society. The Qing court issued repeated

[14] Mei Lanfang, *Wutai shenghuo sishinian*, edited by Xu Jichuan (Beijing: Zhongguo xiju chubanshe, 1987), 28.

prohibitions of public performance of "illicit plays" which featured erotic female roles.[15] In the second half of nineteenth century, the court patronage of the *pihuang* opera—rather than *kunqu* opera (昆曲)—not only helped to reduce the scenes featuring lascivious women into negligible subplots, but also made the embodiment of heroic masculinity the center of theatrical aesthetics.[16] From the 1870s, *laosheng* performers of *pihuang* opera—the ideal embodiment of masculinity—had more or less replaced male *dan* in *kunqu* opera as the focal point of theatrical performance and appreciation.[17]

Nonetheless, the exaltation of *laosheng* does not necessarily mean that *dan* performers had become less favored; nor does the elevation of *qingyi* over *huadan* imply that *huadan* performance had lost its popularity in the second half of the nineteenth century. Many dan actors, such as Mei Qiaoling (梅巧玲 1842-1882), Yu Ziyun (余紫雲 1855-1910), and Tian Jiyun (田際雲 1864-1925), who exceled in both *qingyi* and *huadan* roles, were said to be strong rivals to the most influential *laosheng* actors Cheng Changgeng (程長庚 1811-1880) and Tan Xinpei (譚鑫培 1847-1917).[18] From the 1880s, when the *bangzi* (梆子 clapper) opera revived in the capital, its featured *huadan* performance captivated not only ordinary urban audiences, but also the Qing court. In 1892, the most popular *huadan* actor of *bangzi* opera Hou Junshan was selected as an "attendant of the inner court" and regularly appeared in court performance.[19] The popularity of *huadan* very likely came

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[15] Mackerras, *The Chinese Theater in Modern Times*, 29-31.
[16] Goldman, *Opera and the City*, 175-235.
[17] Goldstein, *Drama Kings,* 17-54.
[18] Zhu Shushen ed., *Tongguang chao mingling shisanjue zhuanlue*, reprinted in *Minguo jing kun shiliao congshu*, vol. 1 (Beijing: Xueyuan chubanshe, 2008), 325.
[19] Fu Jin ed., *Jingju lishi wenxian huibian: Di'san juan, Qinggong wenxian* (Nanjing: Fenghuang chubanshe, 2011), 310.

from the sexual attraction of the female characters and the entertainment value of the plays that male spectators could enjoy in a light-hearted manner.

The Codified Body in Question in the Twentieth Century

The traditional codification of Chinese theater encountered serious challenge in the twentieth century, as intellectuals and dramatists aspired to reform Chinese theater in order to remake the relation between the masses and the nation, and as players sought to cater to a new generation's tastes and sensibilities. Above all, the signified or ideological messages conveyed by theaters were called into question. Reform-minded intellectuals advocated politicization of Chinese theater with revolutionary ideas. Early in 1903, the literatus *laosheng* actor Wang Xiaonong (汪笑儂 1858-1918) in Shanghai created a new play *Guazhong lanyin* (瓜種蘭因), in which the partition of Poland was staged to invoke in the masses a sense of urgency for the fate of China falling prey to imperial powers.[20] As other actors joined Wang in the effort to inject theater stories with revolutionary messages, the first two decades of the twentieth century witnessed a remarkable burst of new plays.[21] Not only the signified message but the signifying techniques were under reform. Western technologies and ideas were introduced to improve the stage design, lighting, and props, all of which enhanced the visual splendor of theater.[22]

It was in the context of the politicization of theater that traditional female embodiment came under scrunity. The reserved and submissive *qingyi* had more or less lost its capability of standing for the ideal Chinese woman. Moreover, its dull expression in

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[20] For detailed research on the play, see Rebecca Karl, *Staging the World: Chinese Nationalism at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 3-52.
[21] Goldstein, *Drama Kings*, 89-133.
[22] Ibid.,128-29.

appearance and bodily movement lost attraction for audiences demanding representation of beautiful women. Therefore, influenced by the market and new ideologies, male *dan* actors like Feng Zihe (馮子和 1888-1942) in Shanghai made great efforts to fashion new femininities on stage. They created a variety of female roles whose femininity was either politically enlightened or visually attractive, or both.[23]

In the capital, the serious challenge to the traditional codification of femininity came relatively later than in Shanghai, largely due to the restrictions of the Qing court. It was not until 1913, after the fall of the Qing, that Mei Lanfang, already the most acclaimed *dan* actor in Beijing, began his ambitious, decade-long experiment in reforming female representation on stage, with help from a group of literati patrons and dramatists who believed in the transformative power of theatre. To reform the traditional theatrical codification that rendered *qingyi* characters inherently lacking in individuality, Mei's first step was to add sophisticated facial expression that, in his own words, "indicated the [emotions] of pleasure, anger, sorrow, joy of characters…and conveyed the unspeakable psychological complexity and internal conflicts of characters."[24] Moreover, he borrowed acrobatics from *daomadan* (刀馬旦 martial woman) and a variety of specific techniques from *kundan* (昆旦 female roles in the *kunqu* opera) to convey a compelling bodily representation. Mei particularly relied on *kundan* techniques, including virtuoso dancing to accompany singing, as well as shifts between movement and stillness.[25] Despite

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[23] On Feng Zihe's renovation of female roles in his new plays, see Goldstein, *Drama Kings*, 97-98, 103.
[24] Mei Lanfang, *Wutai shenghuo sishinian*, 150. For a detailed study of Mei Lanfang's exploration of the psychology of characters by way of "expression," see Zou Yuanjiang, "Mei Lanfang de biaoqing yu jingju jingshen (Mei Lanfang's "Expression" and "the Heart of Beijing Opera")", *Xiju yanjiu*, no. 2 (2008): 145-168.
[25] For a study of Mei's emphasis on dancing, see Chou Huei-ling, "Guoju, guojia zhuyi yu wenhua zhengce (National opera, nationalism and cultural policies)", *Contemporary Monthly*, no.107 (1995): 54.

declining popularity in the late Qing, the *kunqu* opera, and particularly *kundan*, were still highly admired as elegant, classical arts of the upper classes. The artistic emphasis of *kundan* on the perfect unity of physical beauty and emotional richness served Mei well in capturing the interior complexity and conflict of individual characters.

By integrating compelling facial and bodily expression into performance of *qingyi* in dozens of newly created ancient-custom plays, Mei Lanfang popularized the new category of female roles—*huashan* (花衫 flower gown)—to feature visually alluring and morally honorable upper-class women.[26] The category of *huashan* liberated female roles, particularly *qingyi*, from bodily confinement imposed by Confucian gender values. Yet Mei's *huashan* characters also contained a tacit ideological argument of their own. Visually seductive but morally unproblematic, the category of *huashan* was hardly sexually transgressive and can be more or less considered as a moderately sexualized version of *qingyi*.[27]

The All-Female Troupes and Stages

Separated from actors, actresses in all-female troupes in early Republican Beijing gradually developed a distinctive repertoire and different performance styles. On the all-female stage, actresses learnt from each other, honed their techniques, and found new ways of presenting roles. Learning from the stage was particularly important for actresses given the way that they were trained. Unlike actors who usually went through systematic

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[26] Mei's experiment of playing *huashan* was not completely innovative, for the boundary between *qingyi* and *huadan* had already become blurred since the attempts by Yu Ziyun and Wang Yaoqing (1881-1954) to play several *qingyi* roles with *huadan* attire in the late Qing. See Zhu Shushen, *Tongguanchao shisanjue zhuanlve*, vol.1. 325.
[27] Goldstein, *Drama Kings*, 128-130.

training in *keban* for six to seven years, young girls often learnt performing skills from a single, usually male, instructor hired by their parents, since formal institutions for training actresses were rare.[28] This private schooling for actresses was usually short, because the families of actresses were usually poor and unable to pay for long-term training. For instance, the acclaimed actress Chen Yuntao was reported to have been trained for less than one year.[29] Moreover, because actresses usually retired from the stage after marriage in their late teens or early twenties and thus had brief careers, their families tended to put the young girls on stage as early as possible to make money. Besides, the limited female *keban* founded from the mid-1910s were market-oriented. Their establishment was not so much to cultivate talented actresses as to supply underpaid or even unpaid actresses for female troupes. So the training in female *keban* tended to be equally short and preliminary. On all-female stages, actresses remedied their inadequate training by observing other actresses' performance and refining their skills through practice. Accounts in theatre columns of newspapers described how an actress improved her acting skills by learning from playing a supporting role for a star actress, who could act as a model for others to emulate.[30] For instance, as a theatre critic recalled, when the actress Zhang Xiaoxian (張小仙 1890~?) ascended the stage, she struck the audience as a pretty but immature player. But she quickly honed her acting skills by

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[28] Actors could also obtain training in *sifang*, private training schools often organized by a single master, in which the boy actors were trained as *xianggong* (young man), the male courtesans to serve as expensive and amusing companions for Beijing's literati. Nonetheless, in the twentieth century, *sifang* became notorious for male homoerotic culture and brutal treatment of young boy players. During the Republican era, the public institution of *keban* was increasingly regarded by society as the "zhengtu" (the normal path) to acquire performance skills, just as in the imperial examination system a student earned his title through the normal procedures rather than by purchasing a title. See, Goldstein, *Drama Kings*, 38.

[29] Liaodong tianbi, "Nüling houqi zhi you Chen Yuntao zhi Diao jingui," *Shuntian shibao*, Aug. 4, 1914.

[30] For example, the actress Liu Xikui in her early acting career was said to have learnt a lot from the renowned actress Jin Yuemei, in Yankan daoren ed., *Liu Xikui Jinji* (Unknown publisher, 1915), 31. It was also observed that the actress Zhang Xiaoxian had learnt new plays and greatly improved her acting skills as she played supporting roles for a few leading actresses, in *Shuntian shibao*, Dec. 8, 1917.

successfully imitating the star actress Xiao Xiangshui (小香水 1894~1945).[31] As thus viewed, the all-female stage in the 1910s became the most crucial space for actresses to explore their own art, which became increasingly independent from the conventions established by actors.

The flourishing star system in the twentieth-century Beijing theatre world, which centered on individual players, also granted a few leading actresses a certain autonomy to develop their distinctive repertoire and acting styles.[32] Before their arrival in Beijing, a lot of actresses had achieved celebrity in coastal cities and provincial capitals. Invited to perform in Beijing, they brought their signature plays with proven drawing power. As popular opera stars, they could to a great degree choose their favored roles, plays, and performance styles. A few literate, talented star actresses actually assumed the role of "director." The actress Jin Yuemei adapted many stories from vernacular literature to stage performance. She was said to "first draw up the outline, assemble all the players, analyze the roles for them, and coach them about the lines."[33] Moreover, as theatre celebrities, they got to know playwriting intellectuals and could obtain new scripts from them. Liu Xikui, for example, actively sought new scripts from her intellectual patrons, who were equally enthusiastic to supply her with scripts.[34]

In order to attract the novelty-seeking audience, the male managers and instructors of the all-female troupes also sought to create new plays and mobilize novel dramaturgical strategies. Actresses affiliated with relatively large, well-known and stable troupes were

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[31] Tongyin luzhu, "Ershi nian qian juren guan," *Xi*, no. 4 (1938): 6.
[32] See Yeh, "Where is the Center of Cultural Production," 74-118.
[33] Doushan shanren, "Ji nüling Jin Yuemei munü liangsan shi," in Zhang Jianping ed., *Jindaishi ziliao*, vol. 9, (Shanghai: Shanghai shudian chubanshe), 171-2.
[34] Shizhongshe, "Jintai shierxian xiaoshi," *Shuntian Shibao*, Dec. 5, 1917.

more likely to get parts in new dramas than those in small troupes. This was largely because, compared to productions of traditional opera, productions of new dramas usually required a larger cast, longer rehearsal periods, more coordination as well as more expenditure on scenery and costumes, which only a few well-managed female troupes could afford. As a result, in the second half of 1910s the majority of new dramas in Beijing were actually produced by a small number of leading actresses and several large troupes. Of the approximately two dozen all-female troupes founded from 1914 to 1919, only a few troupes such as *Zhideshe*, *Weideshe* (維德社) and *Chongyashe* were well-known for their frequent presentations of new dramas.[35]

All-female troupes and all-female stages produced a varied repertoire and style of performance, but their distinctiveness is best demonstrated in their portrayal of *dan* roles, which captivated their audiences the most. Contemporary theatre critics branded actresses' performance as *xin* (新 novel) or *yin* (淫 licentious) or both. For instance, Tsuji Chōka repeatedly attributed its popularity to narrative and stylistic novelty and the freshness of women's appearance on public stages.[36] Other theater critics taking a more moralistic point of view labeled actresses' performance as *yinxi* (淫戲 licentious theater) with no social value but seduction. Despite their popular usage in contemporary theater reviews, the terms *xin* and *yin* are too general to capture the subtleties and nuances of actresses' distinctive repertoire and performance. Only by carefully looking into the *dan* roles and the dramaturgical strategies that actresses adopted to present these roles can we gain a

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[35] This number of all-female troupes is estimated by Dai Yun, "Xiban huaming che de shiliao jiazhi," in Du Changsheng ed. *Jingju yu Zhongguo Wenhua Chuantong: Di'er jie Jingjuxue Guoji Xueshu Yantaohui Lunwen ji* (Beijing: Wenhua yishu chubanshe, 2009), 333-334.
[36] See, for example, Tinghua, "Bishang ouping shi," *Shuntian shibao*, Nov. 14, 1914.

nuanced understanding of the artistic trajectory of actresses in the 1910s and its implication for spectatorship in early Republican Beijing.

The Revival of Bangzi Opera and the Burlesque Plays

A glance at the repertoire of the most popular actresses in 1910s Beijing suggests that a great deal of the newness came from plays of *bangzi* opera. *Bangzi* opera was a variant of clapper theatre, which was commonly assumed to originate in western Shaanxi province and is thus also called *qinqiang* (秦腔 the tunes of Qin).[37] Catering to both urban and rural underclasses, it was at first regarded as a cruder dramatic form than *pihuang* opera. In the 1880s, *bangzi* opera—particularly the variant prevailing in Hebei province—entered Beijing and gained popularity. Many *bangzi* actors joined *pihuang* companies and initiated an era of "*bangzi* and *pihuang* in the same pot (梆子與皮黃兩下鍋)" in Beijing and Tianjin.[38] When actresses emerged on public stages in the coastal cities and treaty ports in the late Qing, most of them chose to perform *bangzi* rather than *pihuang*, a choice believed by some scholars to be based on practical considerations.[39] Since the theatre guild in Shanghai opposed the acceptance of women as disciples, most actresses gained their training in northern coastal cities, particularly Tianjin, where *bangzi* opera

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[37] The relationship between *qinqiang* and *bangzi* is complex and still a matter of debate among scholars. The term "bangzi" refers to the rhythmic accompaniment. Some scholars have pointed out that while the various styles of bangzi circulating across the country can be traced back to the qinqiang in west Shaanxi, qinqiang should be distinguished from Shaanxi bangzi. For work on the relationship between qinqiang and bangzi, see among others, Tseng Yong-yih, "Bangzi qiang xintan," *Zhongguo wenshizhe yanjiu jikan*, no. 30 (2007): 143-178; Jiao Haimin, "Qinqiang bangzi xiang gaodi: bangzi qiang qinqiang yanbian lujing chutan," *Xiqu yanjiu*, no. 82 (2011): 335-358.

[38] *Zhongguo xiju zhi, Tianjian juan* (Beijing: Wenhua yishu chubanshe, 1990), 16. Xia Gong, "Xiban liangxiaguo shizi yuchengban", *Liyan huakan*, no. 260 (1943): 6.

[39] According to a contemporary register of the 194 known actresses in 1910s Beijing, 102 actresses sang bangzi tunes, 68 actresses sang pihuang tunes, and 7 actresses sang both bangzi and pihuang tunes. Xingshi, "Shinian qian pingshi kunling timinglu", *Xiju yuekan* 2, no.11 (1930): 149-163.

prevailed.[40] Nevertheless, while the training opportunities in Tianjin might have encouraged many young girls to travel from the south and learn theatrical techniques there, this does not explain why actresses chose *bangzi* over *pihuang*, since both dramatic forms were popular in Tianjin.[41] Moreover, it also ignores the fact that the *bangzi* performance presented by actresses in the 1910s Beijing, as a lot of contemporary spectators observed, was quite different from the earlier *bangzi* opera portrayed by male actors. One theatre critic even characterized the *bangzi* actor Cui Lingzhi's singing style as old-fashioned, noting that actresses interested in new tunes avoided it.[42] Some audiences obtained a sense of freshness and pleasure in the new melodies; while others, if not fond of the change in tunes, might disparage them as *yinsheng* (淫聲 licentious sound), a term usually used by officials and literati to describe musical forms that were unconventional and sensually stimulating.

By embracing *bangzi* opera, actresses capitalized on a performance tradition that emphasized a variety of *huadan* roles and their vivid embodiment. It was widely acknowledged that *bangzi* opera, when compared with *pihuang* opera, was particularly successful in presenting the seductive *huadan* roles. In addition, it inserted more nuance and subtlety into bodily expression, including costuming, gesturing, and movement, as well as facial expression.[43] Such a comparison is illustrated in the different approach of *pihuang* and *bangzi* in portraying the adulteress Yan Poxi in the play *Zuolou Shaxi* (坐樓

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[40] Luo, "Kunjue ruhe zouhong," 68.
[41] According to research by Liu Weidong, since the Guangxu era, even many prostitutes from Shanghai, Hangzhou, and Suzhou traveled to Tianjin to learn bangzi opera. Liu Weidong, "Qingmo minchu de nüling jueqi jianlun" (M.A. Thesis, Chinese National Academy of Arts, 2011), 12.
[42] Yinxia, "Chen Xiubo yu Xiao xiangshui," *Shuntian shibao*, August 8, 1913.
[43] Xiao, "Lun bangzi," *Huaji shibao*, no.1 (1915): 121; Wu Runqing, "Duiyu pihuang bangzi zhi biaojiao guan", *Liyan huakan*, no.298 (1944): 4-5.

殺惜). In a *pihuang* performance, according to a contemporary observer, when the male protagonist Song Jiang—who later becomes the leader of the Liangshan bandits in the legend *Water Margin*—first sees the young Yan Poxi at the Wulong residence, she is dressed in a black vest with a handkerchief around her forehead, an attire which easily reminded audiences of the visually monotonous *qingyi*, even though Yan was clearly a *huadan* role. In comparison, Yan in a *bangzi* performance was often dressed in vivid colors. Meanwhile, the *bangzi* opera emphasized the use of bodily expression to drive the plot or portray emotions. For example, the dull, underplayed sleep scene in *pihuang* opera was suffused with action in *bangzi* opera. While in *pihuang* the married couple napped on a couch and nothing happened, in *bangzi* Yan intentionally passed by Song when she went to bed, an act interpreted by a contemporary theater critic as showing her discontent with her prudish, insensitive husband.[44] Therefore, by choosing *bangzi* over *pihuang,* actresses actually embraced a performance tradition of compelling bodily expressivity, just as their male counterpart Mei Lanfang was trying to insert more facial expression and dance into his *pihuang* characters.

A lot of the *huadan* roles taken up by actresses derived from the burlesque plays—"*wanxiao xi* (玩笑戲)" or "*shuashua xi* (耍耍戲)"—which featured the *chou* (丑 clown) characters, the only role-type in traditional Chinese theatre that could reference current or local events and speak in colloquialisms.[45] The *huadan* characters in the burlesque plays had been regarded as less important, supporting roles.[46] Nonetheless, beginning in the late

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[44] Wu, *Ibid.*
[45] For a discussion of the role-type of *chou*, see Ashley Thorpe, *The Role of the Chou ("Clown") in Traditional Chinese Drama: Comedy, Criticism, and Cosmology on the Chinese Stage*. (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2007).
[46] "Disanzhang lun danhang," *Jingxi zazhi*, no.12 (1936): 25-26.

nineteenth century, the enactment of *bangzi* actors like Hou Junshan actually gave such prominence to the *huadan* roles that the audience liked them better than the comic clown characters. A substantial number of the burlesque plays—such as *Ronghua ji* (絨花計), *Hongluan xi* (鴻鸞禧), and *Xiao shangfen* (小上墳)—were then given the label of *huadan xi* (花旦戲), plays featuring *huadan* roles.[47] In early Republican Beijing, the newly emerging actresses inherited and further popularized these various *huadan* roles from *pihuang* burlesque plays. Though a few boy actors like Xiao Cuihua (小翠花 1900~1967) also made a name for themselves by playing these *huadan* roles, they were far less popular than actresses in the 1910s. In a 1916 poll organized by the newspaper *Shuntian shibao* to select "the most desired performance (最希望之演劇 zui xiwang zhi yanju)", hundreds of votes were given to a few actresses and their *huadan* roles while only a few dozens were given to actors playing *huadan* roles. [48]

The *huadan* roles that actresses capitalized on deviated more or less from the popular female stereotypes in theatrical representation, such as the virtuous women who endured great suffering to preserve their chastity, the seductive women whose sexual transgression would be either punished or absolved in the end, and the chivalric women whose moral and behavioral attributes were essentially ambiguous. Placed in a burlesque setting, the *huadan* characters were best considered a parody of these womanly stereotypes, in other words, a deviation from the conventional womanly protocol in which deviation could only be understood by reference to the original stereotypes. For example, in the play *Hongluan xi* (紅鸞禧 The merry luan-bird), the heroine refuses to

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[47] Ibid.
[48] "Zui xiwang yanju zhi pilu", *Shuntian shibao*, Mar. 5, 1916.

stay home to fulfill her filial duties as a daughter while her newly wed husband goes to the capital for the civil service examinations. Instead, she insists on accompanying him.[49]

Another example is the play *Xiao shangwen* (A visit to the grave).[50] The heroine Xiao Suzhen is a wife who stays home for years while her husband goes off for the examinations and gains a government position. When the character first appears on stage, her lyrics remind the audience that she is similar to Zhao Wuniang, the heroine in the Ming drama *Pipa ji* (琵琶记 The Story of the Lute), a virtuous, suffering wife who devotes years to taking care of her parents-in-law while her husband is away seeking office. Nevertheless, in the play Xiao's fate turns out to be very different. As Xiao's lyrics recall, Zhao's life is tragic. After taking care of the burial of her parents-in-law who die in a famine, Zhao sets out for the capital to search for her husband. As she goes along the road, she earns her living by begging and by playing a lute, spilling her grief via the music. When she arrives in the capital, her husband refuses to recognize her; he is then struck by lightning as punishment from heaven.[51] In contrast, the life of Xiao Suzhen turns out to be a comic one in the play *Xiao shangwen*. She meets her husband at the graveside of her parents-in-law without recognizing him, and makes complaints against her parents-in-law, her uncle, and finally her husband. The scene of her accusation is intended to be humorous, sarcastic, and derisive of the husband, who is played by a

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[49] The script used here is from the Sokodo-Bunko collection at the University of Tokyo Institute of Oriental Culture, accessed October 15, 2013, http://hong.ioc.u-tokyo.ac.jp/main_p.php

[50] My analysis of the play is based on the scripts from the Sokodo-Bunko collection, accessed October 15, 2013, http://hong.ioc.u-tokyo.ac.jp/list.php?order=rn_no. This script is very similar to the two other scripts I have found in the Academia Sinica collection "Popular Songs Stored at the National Research Institute of History and Philology," *Zhongyang yanjiuyuan lishi yuyan yanjiusuo suocang suqu*: one is claimed to be "the authentic script" *zhenben* used by the earlier *bangzi* actor Hou Junshan (1853-1935); the other is claimed to be the script used by the *kunqu* and *bangzi* actor Zhou Fenglin (1849~?).

[51] This account is different from the classical version of *pipa ji* written by the Ming playwright Gao Ming, who portrays the husband in a positive light. At the end of the story, Gao has him reunited with Zhao, redeemed and rewarded.

clown role-type. The normal relationship between a husband and a wife is reversed. Not only is the status of the wife elevated in an absurd manner, but the meeting scene is often played in a licentious way. At the end of the play, when the couple happily reunites, the husband asks the wife who has taken care of her while he has been away, the heroine randomly points to someone in the auditorium and says "it's him!" A contemporary spectator interpreted the scene as an indication that Xiao had become a prostitute while her husband was away.[52] In a slightly different version of the script, the expression of the wife is more explicit "it's that *xiao bailian* [小白臉 "small white face" or pretty young man at the disposal of other men or women] sitting in the hall and wearing a Western-style suit and metal-rimmed glasses!"[53] Therefore, the chastity of the wife is not the subject of the play, but the object that the play makes fun of. The deviation of the heroine from the Confucian stereotype of the virtuous, suffering wife is conspicuous.

Actresses' exploration of unorthodox female roles was not limited to the burlesque plays typical of *bangzi* opera. They also adopted other *huadan* characters from the *bangzi* repertoire that were less farcical but not less transgressive. A good example of such female protagonists who challenge sexual stereotypes is Li Huiniang (李慧娘) from the play *Hongmei ge* (紅梅閣 The Pavilion of Red Plum Blossoms). Li is a ghost who returns from the underworld to reunite with her scholar lover Pei Shunqing (裴舜卿) and protect him from murder, which could easily remind audiences of the ghost-heroine in the

[52] Bo Sheng, "Xiao shangwen," *Juxue Yuekan*, no. 2 (1933): 4.
[53] This script version is titled "*Mingjue Shisan dan zhenben: Xiao shangwen*" included in the Academia Sinica popular performance literature collection.

classical *kunqu* play *The Peony Pavilion.*[54] Nonetheless, unlike the innocent girl in the *The Peony Pavilion* who dies lovesick and unmarried and returns to find her predestined lover, the heroine in *Hongmei ge* is a concubine who is murdered by Jia Sidao (賈似道 1213-1275), a treacherous chancellor of the Southern Song dynasty, for being attracted to the young handsome scholar Pei at first sight.[55] The human-ghost reunion in the play puts little emphasis on the *qing*, or the sentimental romance, between the two characters. Instead, the male protagonist is very worried about being alone with a young woman at night, while the female protagonist complains about the ungratefulness of her lover. The plot highlights the divide between the ghost and the human in a comic way when the human-hero twice claims to be unable to see the ghost-heroine. Though the sentimental romance is underplayed, the sexual consummation sought by the ghost-heroine remains in the play. Eventually, the play highlights the martial arts of the ghost-heroine who protects her lover from murder by her husband.

The play *Hongmei ge* was adapted by the *bangzi* opera from the Ming *chuanqi* play *Hongmei ji* (紅梅記 The story of red plum blossoms). In the original 34-act play, which is believed to be written by the literatus Zhou Chaojun (周朝俊) during the Wanli era (1573~1620), the story involving Li Huiniang is just a sub-plot. The main story centers on the star-crossed romance between the same male protagonist and another female character, Lu Zhaorong (盧昭容). Portrayed in the *zhengdan* role-type, the lady Lu is a typical heroine of the Ming cult of *qing*, who gave a sprig of red plum blossom to the

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[54] For a study of the play "The Peony Pavilion" and its performance, see Catherine Crutchfield Swatek, *Peony Pavilion Onstage: Four Centuries in the Career of a Chinese Drama* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2002).

[55] My analysis of the play is based on a script of the bangzi opera from the the Sokodo-Bunko collection, accessed October 15, 2013, http://hong.ioc.u-tokyo.ac.jp/main_p.php

hero as a present when they first met.[56] When the powerful Jia Sidao proposed to marry her, she fled the capital city with her mother to Yangzhou, where they lived with the family of her mother's sister. Nonetheless, Zhaorong's cousin turned out to be covetous of her beauty and forced her to marry him. In desperation, Zhaorong changed into Daoist robes, claiming a conversion to religious ascetic. Finally, she reunites with the hero after he succeeds in the examinations.[57]

When the *jiaban* (家班 house troupes) of the late Ming and the commercial playhouses of the Qing dynasty adapted the story for stage performance, they favored the subplot of transgression in their *zhezi xi* (折子戲 scene-selection) production, while more or less retaining the plot involving Lady Lu.[58] The scene most frequently selected was *Gui bian* (鬼辯 the ghost's argument), in which the ghost-heroine Li Huiniang confronted Jia Sidao after rescuing her lover. She condemned Jia for his cruel murder, irritated him by recounting her earlier sexual intercourse with the scholar Pei, and terrified him with her super-power as a ghost.[59] In the adaptation of *bangzi* opera, the major plot of the "scholar-beauty" romance involving the chaste Lady Lu was completely deleted.[60] Also called *You Xihu* (遊西湖 Visit the West lake), the *bangzi* opera invested in Li Huiniang, the transgressive courtesan and the *huandan* character as the lead. Like many *kunqu* operas featuring transgressive female roles, the *bangzi* adaptation of the play was replete

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[56] For studies exploring the literary construction of the cult of *qing*, see among others, Martin W. Huang, "Sentiments of Desire: Thoughts on the Cult of Qing in Ming-Qing Literature," *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews* no. 20 (1998): 153-184; Lee, *Revolution of the Heart*, 25-59.
[57] For a summary of the *chuanqi* play, see Guo Yingde, *Mingqing chuanqi zonglu* (Hebei: Hebei jiaoyu chubanshe, 1997), 287-288; for the whole script, see Tang Xianzu, *Yumingtang piping Hongmei ji.* Reprinted in *xuxiu siku quanshu*, vol. 1774.
[58] Xu Qiang, "Hongmei ji kanyan zhezi hua xianxiang tanxi," *Sichuan xiju*, no.7 (2013), 50-52.
[59] Tang, *Yumingtang piping Hongmei ji,* 45-49.
[60] Li Yuanhao, "Cong Hongmei ge de jiuping kan Li Huiniang de xinjiu: xiqu biaoyan yu zhengzhi bianqian de ge'an yanjiu," *Minsu quyi*, no.164 (2009), 9-12.

with humor and flirtation but stripped of moral judgment. Nonetheless, unlike the *kunqu* tradition that emphasized female desire and sentimentality alongside sensual pleasure, the *bangzi* play showed little interest in establishing Li Huiniang as a ghost heroine of the cult of *qing*.[61] The scene of her reunion with her lover made their sexual desire and its corporeal consummation appear simple and straightforward. The *bangzi* play also removed the scene *Gui bian*, since it was interested neither in displaying Huiniang's wit nor her revenge on the cruel and corrupt chancellor. Highlighting intense actions and acrobatic stunts, the play emphasized the athleticism and supernatural power of the ghost-heroine rather than her emotion and moral stature.

The rendering of Li Huiniang in *bangzi* opera thus impressed spectators with its acrobatic and martial arts spectacle, in contrast to *kunqu* opera in which transgressive female roles entailed more display of emotional intensity. For example, in the scene in the underworld, the judge of Hell throws a *yinyang* fan, which is surrounded with strings of fire, and the *dan* character grabs the fan over her head and then immediately stands unmoving. In the scene in the garden, the *dan* character is expected to jump over the head of the hero and then bend backward onto a bridge with her hands holding the fan, which reaches to the ground.[62] Many *bangzi* actors who played Li Huiniang were praised by theater critics for their virtuoso display of acrobatic routines, which were described in a variety of terms such as *Wulong jiaozhu* (烏龍絞柱 lit. "The black dragon coils around the pillar"), *Henong douzhi* (和弄豆汁 lit. "Stirring up the soybean milk"), and *Ning xuanzi* (擰旋子 lit. "Spinning"), etc.[63] When actresses inherited the *bangzi* play of *Hongmei ge*, some of

[61] For analysis of *kunqu* opera staging social transgression, see Goldman, *Opera and the City*, 175-212.
[62] Jing Guxue, "Hongmei ge zashu", *Liyan Huakan*, no. 294 (1944): 5.
[63] Li, "Cong Hongmei ge de jiuping kan Li Huiniang de xinjiu," 17-19.

them rendered the role of Li Huiniang in a way that combined eroticism and athleticism. They capitalized on the erotic scene of ghost-human reunion, alongside the action-packed scene of rescuing the scholar Pei. Contemporary spectators embraced conflicting views of such eroticization of the female protagonist by actresses, considering it either licentious or sentimental.[64]

As illustrated above, the *huadan* roles that actresses inherited and appropriated from *bangzi*—and to a lesser degree from *pihuang*—often played on sexual transgression and mocked traditional gender stereotyping. Playful and frivolous, these characters were often stripped of moral implication and thus differed from *pihuang* opera *huadan*, whose deviation would be punished or whose character would at least be impugned in the end. The evaluation of these expressive *huadan* roles was a matter of contemporary debate. For spectators idolizing *qingyi* style femininity and its restricted physicality, they were disturbing and best characterized with the term *yin*, improper and licentious. From such a moralistic perspective, *huadan* roles undermined the traditional feminine ideal, and authorities even sought to prohibit plays in which they appeared. Yet, when placed in a burlesque context or portrayed in an overtly ridiculous manner, *huadan* roles did not necessarily subvert, and for a lot of spectators, their transgression was no more than a theatrical exercise that they could enjoy without worrying about ideological deviation. For example, a contemporary theatre critic characterized the actress Xi Caifeng's portrayal of Li Huinian in *Hongmei ge* as "humorous, playful, but not unorthodox 諧詠嬉戲, 不失與正."[65] While the message conveyed by actresses in their portrayal of *huadan*

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[64] Yinxia, "Sun Yiqing zhi Hongmei ge," *Shuntian shibao*, Jul. 9, 1913; Yelanfen shouke, "Yun Jinhong Xiao Rongfu zhi jueji," *Shuntian shibao*, Apr. 3, 1918.
[65] Guan, *Juhua*, manuscript, 1918. National Library of China, Beijing. "Kunling qiaochu zhi Xi Caifeng."

was highly ambiguous, then, for many observers its extreme theatricality disguised or excused its deviations from Confucian ideals of femininity.

Not only were actresses' *huadan* roles different from the heroines in the cult of *qing*, they also diverged from the heroines in the popular (i.e., Butterfly) fiction prevailing in the early twentieth century. While the fictional characters strongly identify with Confucian virtue and thus more or less suppress their feelings, the *huadan* characters boldly express their desire, exceeding the limits of moral propriety.[66] They resemble the female ideal of May Fourth romantic love in that they seek the thrills of courtship and heterosexuality and the uncompromising fulfillment of personal desire.[67] But the *huadan* roles don't emphasize commitment to love and conjugal family, which is crucial to the May Fourth love stories, but rather handle it playfully. Less ideologically bounded, actresses' *huadan* characters neither repress nor glorify their desire. By enacting the *huadan* roles, actresses suggested an alternative, flirtatious femininity, to which I now turn.

The Arrival of Actual, Flirtatious Female Bodies

> The cowherd and the young lady ran into each other at a joyful occasion;
> Young and innocent, they talked and laughed passionately.
> They walked away to the sound of the flute;
> As the setting sun was glowing behind Xinghua [apricot] village.
> 牧童少婦喜相逢，兩小無猜笑語濃。短笛一聲歸去也，杏花村外夕陽紅。[68]

In the poem above, the theatre fan and critic with the penname Huanong described the performance presented by Zhang Xiaoxian, an acclaimed actress in 1910s Beijing, in the *bangzi* play *Xiao fangniu* (小放牛 Herding the Cattle). This poem was published in a

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[66] Lee, *Revolution of the Heart*, 60-92; Link, *Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies*, 40-78.
[67] Lee, *Revolution of the Heart,* 95-139.
[68] Huanong, "Yong Zhang Xiaoxian siju," *Shuntian shibao*, Mar. 16, 1916.

newspaper with three other poems, all of which aimed to eulogize the actress by depicting her roles in various plays. This particular poem highlighted the mirthful and flirtatious encounter between the two characters: a cowherd played by the clown role-type and a young lady played by the *huadan* role type.

Xiao fangniu was one of the most popular *bangzi* plays rendered by actresses in the 1910s. In 1916, it was regarded by the voting public in Beijing as "the most desire" performance by the actress Zhang Xiaoxian. The structure of the play is quite simple. Without much dramatic plot, it concentrates on the flirtation between a socially marginalized cowherd and a transgressive young lady. The ways in which the flirtation was represented could vary with each performance. In an undated textual version, the cowherd is the one who initiates the flirtation with the lady, who is able to defend herself with firm eloquence.[69] In other versions, the lady enthusiastically participates in the flirtation or even initiates it. For example, in a *bangzi* performance text that can be dated between the 1910s and the 1920s, the young lady has just returned from her parents' home and is heading to her husband's family.[70] On the grassland dotted with spring flowers, the young lady meets the cowherd, who is riding a cow backwards and playing a flute. She asks him first where to buy the best wine. After telling her to go to the Xinghua [apricot] village, the cowherd stops the lady and asks her to sing a little song. The lady pretends to refuse for a little while, and then she asks the cowherd to join her in a duet. The performance evolves into a playful and highly suggestive dialogue between the two characters—

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[69] The script is from the Sokodo-Bunko collection, accessed October 15, 2013, http://hong.ioc.u-tokyo.ac.jp/list.php?order=rn_no

[70] The cover of the text is subtitled "the accurate lines of the bangzi tunes," and under the subtitle there are two lines: "Jin Gangzuan's Da dengdian" and "Yi qianhong's Zhan taiping." Yi qianhong was one of the artist names of the bangzi actor Wei Liansheng, who died in 1922. The text claims to be an accurate record of the *bangzi* play rendered by Wei, so it is safe to say it was printed no later than the late 1920s.

> **The *chou* [cowherd]:** [I] love your tiny feet.
> **The *dan* [young lady]:** If you elder brother like my tiny feet, you should marry me.
> **The *chou*:** I have no money, you see, what can I do?
> **The *dan*:** If you have no money, you should tell your mother.
> **The *chou*:** Tell my mother to betrothe you to me!
> **The *dan*:** That is fine. Elder brother, you hit the gong.
> …
> **The *chou*:** It is not impossible for me to see you back home. But I have four riddles; if you can answer them, I will keep you company on your way home. If you can't, I won't see you off.
> …
> **The *chou* (sings):** Who grows the Sala tree in heaven? Who opens up the Yellow River on earth? Who guards the Sanguang pass? Who becomes a monk and never comes back, who becomes a monk and never comes back?
> **The dan (sings):** The Queen of Heaven grows the Sala tree; the Dragon King opens up the Yellow river; Yang Liulang guards the Sanguang pass; Han Xiangzi becomes a monk and never comes back, Han Xiangzi becomes a monk and never comes back!
> …

No matter whether the heroine feels offended or amused by the teasing of the cowherd, the flirtatious banter between the two characters was the center of the performance and the spectators could scarcely miss its erotic message. In his review of the performance of *Xiao fangniu* rendered by Zhang Xiaoxian, the theatre fan and critic Chuke (楚客) summarized the theme of the play as follows—

> When it is spring in the countryside… the peach and plum blossoms are striving to present their beauty. The cowherd plays a flute, as the young lady returns from a walk on the grass. They meet at the end of a creek, and flirt with each other in an innocent manner (兩小調情 *liang xiao tiao qing*), which is common is the countryside. [71]

In her performance, the actress Zhang Xiaoxian consciously adopted dramatic techniques to enhance the flirtatious nature of her character. For example, her attempts to delay her first appearance on the stage and thus to stimulate the imagination and excitement of spectators were recorded by the theatre critic Chuke—

[71] Chuke, "Ji Zhang Xiaoxian zhi Xiao fangniu," *Shuntian shibao*, January 26, 1916.

> Just hearing the sound of 'Aha!' [made by the actress], the spectators cheered like thunder. Then the waves of cheering rose when [the spectators] heard 'I'm coming!' It was like thousands of troops applauding all together. Nonetheless, even then the spectators had not yet seen her in person…[72]

Hiding herself backstage and delaying her *liangxiang* (亮相 to reveal oneself) on stage, the actress kept her spectators waiting in suspense. But by partially exposing herself and making anticipatory noises, she intrigued the spectators who punctuated her performance with cheers or shouts of "*hao*!" As a result, this opening scenario created an essentially flirtatious relationship between the actress and her spectators: by alternately revealing and concealing herself, she prolonged the sense of anticipation and deferred the pleasure of seeing her.

When the actress finally showed herself on stage, further arousing her spectators, the actress started flirting with the male protagonist, a clown character who was played by another actress. She adopted sophisticated body language and facial expression to heighten her seductive attractiveness—

> During the two flirtations with the cowherd, [the actress] raised and revealed her *lianqiao* (蓮翹 tiny bound feet), gently waved the horsetail whisk, and threw pretty smiles, as well as sparkled with her witty remarks, all of which was extremely enthralling‥Most importantly, the shouts of "*hao*!" from the audience chimed in throughout the performance. When the actress said, "if you will excuse me" and left like a goddess for a while, [the audience] remained enchanted before they settled down again.[73]

The revealing of the actual bound feet was a common strategy that actresses adopted to highlight the sexual allure of their bodies in the early twentieth century, when women's foot-binding was ideologically regarded as a symbol of female oppression but remained

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[72] Ibid.
[73] Ibid.

an object of male literati appreciation for its moral, aesthetic, and sexual appeal.[74] In the *bangzi* tradition from the mid-eighteenth century, male *dan* actors used *qiao* (蹻), small wooden fake shoes, to create the illusion of having bound feet. Actors of the *pihuang* opera quickly adopted the techniques of wearing *qiao* in the late eighteenth century to perform *huadan* and *daomadan* roles.[75] In the early twentieth century, when female foot-binding became problematic, *dan* actors such as Wang Yaoqing began to advocate the abolition of *qiao* for its infliction of great pain on actors' feet. Echoing Wang, Mei Lanfang never adopted *qiao* when he attempted to invest bodily expressivity in his *huashan* roles. Nevertheless, the use of *qiao* to simulate women's tiny bound feet in *huadan* and *daomadan* performance still prevailed in the 1910s and its complete abolition did not come until the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s.[76]

Actresses entered the stage with their actual bound feet, and they intentionally revealed their "natural lotus feet" in performance to fascinate voyeuristic male audiences. The most celebrated actress in the 1910s, Liu Xikui, was said to pride herself on displaying her three-inch feet as a way to draw box office.[77] In her performance of the play *Xue Shouyin* (血手印 The Blood Tainted Handkerchief), Liu took off her shoes and unbound the long cloth strip so that her character could use it to rescue the male protagonist from a deep water dungeon. Liu's flaunting of her tiny feet made the spectators "frantic, and they stood up to take a close look at her lotus feet. The atmosphere in the theatre

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[74] Dorothy Ko, *Cinderella's Sisters: A Revisionist History of Footbinding* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 69-106.
[75] Huang Yufu, *Jing ju, qiao he Zhongguo di xing bie guan xi, 1902-1937* (Beijing: Shenghuo, dushu, xinzhi sanlian chubanshe, 1998), 25-28 &37.
[76] Actors who played *laodan* (old women), qingyi and caidan (ugly old women) never wore qiao.
[77] Qiu Gong, "Liu Xikui yu Xian Lingzhi: zhen jinlian dai jia qiaogong," *Tian. Di. Ren*, no. 2 (1947): 10.

immediately became excited and intense."[78] Actually, Liu put on flesh-colored stockings beneath her binding cloth and thus never really disclosed her bare feet to the audience, as if to defend her bodily integrity under the voyeuristic gaze of the male audience. Still, the presence of actual female feet on stage was enough to draw the attention of the male audience, for whom seeing the bound feet of women other than their wives was taboo in real life.

Xiao fangniu was not the only play in the repertoire of actresses that made frequent erotic reference to their bound feet. In the aforementioned 1916 poll, the most celebrated actresses, such as Liu Xikui, Jin Yulan, and Xian Lingzhi, were "most desired" by audiences to portray flirtatious roles in burlesque plays featuring women's bound feet. The most-welcomed plays of actresses, such as *Xiao shangfen, Da yingtao* (打櫻桃 Picking up the cherries), *Zhan wancheng* (戰宛城 The battle at Wancheng), *Xin'an yi* (辛安驛 The inn of Xin'an), *Fan wanggong* (梵王宮 The palace of the Duke Fan), and *Shuang heyin* (雙合印 The twin seals), all required the revealing of tiny feet.[79] The play *Fan wanggong* starts with the female protagonist stroking her feet while thinking of a man whom she had only met once and briefly. During the scene, the actress was expected to "tidy up her shoes with her hands and then clear the dust with a handkerchief."[80] The use of a handkerchief was accompanied by a drum that gave rhythm to the action of tapping the feet. Then the actress was expected to blow off the dust and straighten her legs and clap her feet at the front of the stage. In the play *Shuang heyin*, the actress Liang

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[78] Ibid.
[79] "Zui xiwang yanju zhi pilu," *Shuntian shibao*, Mar. 5, 1916.
[80] Lü Mengchen, "Lun danjue de jiao," *Baimei tu*, no. 7 (1939): 2-3.

Fengxi (梁鳳璽) played a servant girl who went to a water dungeon to rescue the male protagonist and was remembered for her audacious revelation of her tiny feet—

> When she was loosing the shoes laces, she sat on the front stage facing the audience. She lifted her feet high so that the audience in the last rows could see clearly. After that, she took off the pair of red tiny shoes and held them between her lips. When she was unbinding the cloth strip one layer after another, she frequent eye-flirted with the audience but at the same time smiled as if she was embarrassed. Viewing it, the audiences were so provoked that they felt overwhelmed.[81]

The eroticism was not limited to the direct revelation of the feet. Spectators could be equally aroused by the small, delicate steps executed by actresses' bound feet, or the exquisite shoes peeping under the hem of actresses' ankle- or floor-length skirts. In 1933, after Liu Xikui retired from the stage for one and a half decade, one of her literati fans still recollected the sensual pleasure aroused by the actress' feet in an old-style poem. The actress was remembered to tantalize her spectators by raising her feet or stroking her phoenix-head shoes on stage. But the poem lavished love and attention on the graceful gait of the actress, comparing it to a few erotic images including flying swallows, falling lotus petals, and gentle waves, etc. Its conclusion also highlighted the sensation aroused by semi-revelation and semi-concealment—

> The wind occasionally reveals [the tiny feet] under the skirt; they were thinner than the crescent of the third day of each month 迎風偶自裙邊出, 瘦比初三月更多.[82]

In most accounts actresses' transgressive revelation of their bound feet on stage was contrasted with their secluded private life offstage. The aforementioned actress Liang Fengxi, who revealed her tiny feet, was also respected for "proper behavior in her private

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[81] Ibid.
[82] Yuru, "Yong ming kunling Liu Xikui jiao," *Fengyue huakan*, no.14 (1933): 2.

life."[83] Liu Xikui was said to strictly insist on her confinement to private space off stage. Not only did she refuse to entertain clients at private occasions sponsored by wealthy officials, merchants, and literati, she also excluded male visitors from her residence. And her private quarters were said to be off limits to male servants in her house.[84] The contrast between onstage and offstage persona of actresses reveals that though actresses' transgression on stage was welcomed by audiences, conventional gender norms—the spatial distinction between *nei* and *wai*—still mattered in real life and largely defined a good woman.

As actresses played the flirtatious *huadan* roles and displayed their erotic bodies on stage, they indeed became the object of the gaze of the male-dominated audience in 1910s Beijing. Nevertheless, the sexual desire of the male audience provoked by actresses' erotic bodies was not completely fulfilled, as a result of the way a few actresses tantalized their spectators through semi-revelation and semi-concealment, as well as the distance at which actresses kept their patrons in real life. The alternate crossing of the gender boundaries on stage and insisting on a secluded private life off stage actually helped a few actresses to fashion a flirtatious femininity. Such a flirtatious femininity suspended between the theatrical and the real. Its attraction was rooted in neither the cult of *qing* nor the May Fourth notion of supreme love, but resided in the actual, erotic bodies of actresses, which were neither completely displayed nor fully concealed. Through semi-

[83] Lü, "Lun danjue de jiao."
[84] Feifei, "Liu Xikui yi shen tian pian lu," in *Liu Xikui Jinji*, 26.

revelation of their bound feet star actresses enjoyed freedom and power, however momentary or elusive these were.[85]

Conclusion

How, then did *dan* roles grow to be the most dominant role type in the early Republican theatrical world? Previous scholarship has pointed to the efforts of *dan* actors like Mei Lanfang, who by fashioning attractive female roles on stage captured the erotic gaze of an increasingly female audience.[86] While such a narrative correctly points to the important roles that *dan* actors and female audiences played in the popularization of the *dan* performance, it neglects two things. For one thing, the audience in the early Republican capital still consisted mostly of men, female spectators being segregated in small sections of theatres until 1931.[87] For another, a form of homoerotic spectatorship continued to tie *dan* actors to their male audience, who found Mei's *dan* roles no less attractive than did the female audience.[88] Most importantly, the narrative entirely overlooks actresses' contribution to the popularization of the *dan*. As I have shown, the various *dan* roles staged by a group of privileged actresses in 1910s Beijing—women who were either opera stars or affiliated with large all-female troupes—were

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[85] My interpretation of the flirtatious relationship between actresses and their male patrons is informed by the German sociologist Georg Simmel. In his essay "flirtation," Simmel suggests that a woman flirts with freedom and power. Though the exercising of power is momentary, by flirting with a man, she engages in a process of reimagining her own relationship to sexual and gender limitations. Georg Simmel, "Flirtation," in Georg Simmel: *On Women, Sexuality, and Love*, translated by Guy Oakes (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 132-52.

[86] Mei Lanfang himself often regarded his rise of fame and the rise of *dan* roles in Peking opera in the 1910s and 1920s as a direct result of the expansion of the female audience, whose sensibility was oriented toward visual splendor and ornate costuming of female roles. See Mei, *Wutai shenghuo sishi nian,* 114-115 & 556. His explanation has been widely accepted by later scholars of Peking opera.

[87] Female audiences were only seated in the boxes on the second floor, and until 1919 a few theatres like *Guanghe Lou* did not admit female audiences for daytime performances. See Xu Chengbei, *Zhongguo jingju* (Beijing: Wuzhou chuanbo chubanshe, 2003), 23.

[88] Goldstein, *Drama Kings*, 127.

extraordinarily popular and their enactment was no less mesmerizing for the audience than the male *dan* performance. The vigor and expressiveness of the *dan* performance, freed from former political restraints, captivated Beijing's public, which like the actresses they watched was navigating uncertainly, in public and private, between the traditional and the new.

Nonetheless, these actresses enacted *dan* roles that differed from those of their male counterparts. Unlike Mei Lanfang, who fashioned the sexually attractive but morally unproblematic *huashan* roles, actresses inherited the burlesque tradition in regional operas and highlighted a variety of transgressive *huadan* roles whose transgression was easily perceived by contemporary audiences as a parody of feminine ideals embedded in Confucianism. The female characters in actresses' *huadan* roles boldly seek the thrills of courtship and pursue the fulfillment of their personal desires, nonetheless, they diverge from the heroines in the cult of *qing* in Ming literature, the sentimentalism in the Butterfly fictions, and the May Fourth ideal of free love. Played in a burlesque manner, the personal desire of *huadan* roles seemed to be stripped of any serious moral connotation. As a result, despite the challenge that actresses' *huadan* roles posed to the barriers between sensuality and female virtue imposed by Confucian gender ideology, their subversiveness is toned down by their own theatricality. In early Republican society where the search for new femininity was often ideologically and morally inspired, the *huadan* roles actresses fashioned seemed to be of perpetual ambiguity.

While a few actors also played these *huadan* roles and attracted a fair proportion of the audience, playing transgressive *huadan* roles was generally considered improper for actors like Mei Lanfang, who were committed to reforming Peking opera into a decent

profession necessarily cleansed of male homoerotic sensibility. So it is not surprising that, when Mei Lanfang early in his career intended to learn the *huadan* role in the *bangzi* play *Da huagu*, his playwright-patrons stopped him.[89] While *dan* actors were expected to tone down the sexual explicitness of their roles both on stage and in society, actresses arrived on the stage playing transgressive female roles in a flirtatious manner, as exemplified in the revealing of their tiny feet. For the early twentieth century male-dominated audience, the arrival of actresses was above all the arrival of actual, seductive female bodies for public display. Taking advantage of the sexualized view of their bodies, actresses displayed their bodies by way of flirtatious roles and erotic references and gained popularity in a highly competitive entertainment market. Actresses' enactment of *huadan* roles in 1910s Beijing was a simultaneous liberalization and commodification of sexuality that defined the early Republican entertainment world.

[89] Xibaoqu, "Congqian liyuan zhong de danjue," *Ying yu xi* 1, no.4 (1936): 13.

Chapter 3. The New Drama Repertoire: Diversity, Hybridity and the Proliferation of Female Roles

> "The *xinju* 新劇, new drama in Beijing has hardly become popular. Last year, (actors) Lin Pinqing, Zhou Huifang and Wang Huifang, etc. successively came to perform *xinju* on Beijing stages but aroused little enthusiasm (from spectators). It is only the performance of *xinju* by actresses such as Liu Xikui and Xian Lingzhi that offers a lifeline for *xinju* in Beijing."
>
> —Tsuji Chōka, "Duiyu jinnian jujie zhi yuyan," *Shuntian shibao*, January 11, 1916.

Besides reinvigorating a variety of female characters from *bangzi* opera, actresses also developed a distinctive repertoire and performance style by presenting a variety of *xinju*. The birth of *xinju* can be traced back to 1907, when a group of Chinese overseas students in Tokyo headed by Zeng Xiaogu (曾孝谷 1873-1937) and Li Shutong (李叔同 1880-1942) founded the Spring Willow Society (春柳社) which aimed to introduce new-style theater into China. Dissatisfied with traditional theater's incapacity to depict social reality and mobilize a nation, the Spring Willow Society sought inspiration from Western realistic theater and Japanese *shinpa* (new school) theater and devoted itself to experimenting with new stories and performance styles.[1] Compared with what came to be known as traditional drama, the various new dramas put more emphasis on dialogue, which often included commentaries on contemporary politics and social problems. Moreover, with its realistic orientation, the new drama adopted less codified dramaturgical techniques. No face painting was used to suggest the personality of characters. Movements were less choreographed and more acted out in a manner resembling everyday life.

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[1] For a research on Japanese *Shinpa* and its impact on Chinese spoken drama, see Liu Siyuan, *Performing Hybridity in Colonial-Modern China* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 33-58.

With the return of members of the Spring Willow Society to China in the late 1900s, the new drama moved from Tokyo to Shanghai. A few theatrical societies were organized to promote enlightenment and nationalism through this avant-garde theatrical form widely known as *wenmingxi* (civilized drama) as well as *xinju*. To serve their ideological agenda, they produced a few dramas expressing strong nationalist sentiments. Soon commercial theaters and local actors joined to make *xinju* a popular genre. The engagement of the commercial theaters ensured not only the proliferation of domestic melodramas in *xinju* but also further hybridization of the theatrical form. Besides Western instruments such as cello, violin and piano, some theatrical conventions from the traditional Chinese theater, for instance singing, were also incorporated into *xinju*.[2]

While *xinju* flourished in Shanghai in the late Qing, it seldom achieved much political and cultural significance or commercial success in Beijing. Unlike Shanghai where reform-minded theater theorists and *xinju* practitioners concentrated in the foreign concessions, the Beijing theatrical world was still dominated by the court-sponsored traditional opera. The Qing court could not allow the proliferation of *xinju* with its subversive, sometimes apparently anti-Manchu message. Only a few new dramas that seemed inoffensive to the Qing appeared in Beijing before 1912. For example, the presentation of *Huixing nüshi* (惠興女士 Lady Huixing) and *Nüzi aiguo* (女子愛國 A patriotic woman), the two new dramas advocating female education in 1906 not only won wide social acceptance but also the approval of the court.[3] Nonetheless, presentation of *xinju* remained rare. The few new dramas appeared in the form of *yiwu xi* (義務戲 charity

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[2] Liu, *Performing Hybridity,* 150-151.

[3] For a study on the early *xinju* staged in 1900s Beijing, see Xia Xiaohong, "Jiu xitaishang de wenmingxi: Tian Jiyun yu Beijing Kuangxuehui," in Chen, Pingyuan & Dewei Wang, eds., *Beijing: du shi xiang xiang yu wen hua ji yi* (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2005), 94-120.

performance), staged to raise funds for charitable purposes and never entered the regular repertoire of commercial theaters. In 1909 the reform-mined actor/theater-manager Tian Jiyun invited Wang Zhongsheng (王鐘聲 1880-1911), one of the best-known of the *xinju* practitioners, who returned from overseas education and performed new dramas in his *Tianle yuan* theater. However, despite being welcomed by several reform-oriented newspapers, such presentations mostly failed to inspire imitation from other commercial theaters, probably due to the alleged disapproving attitude from the Qing court as well as general audience indifference.[4] After the collapse of the Qing in 1912, three *xinju* societies were successively founded in Beijing: *Yongmin she* (牖民社), *Guosheng she* (國聲社), and *Zhenyue she* (振樂社). Nevertheless, these societies dissolved soon since their performance apparently failed to draw much recognition from spectators. A contemporary critic attributed their failure to several reasons including tedious dialogues, unpleasant arias, monotonous expression, high admission fee as well as the old-fashioned playhouses that could not support modern-style scenery.[5]

It was not until the winter of 1914 that the successful presentation of a few new dramas by the acclaimed actress Liu Xikui inspired the imitation of other actresses and female troupes and made *xinju* a popular theatrical form in Beijing ever since. Migrating into the capital, Liu Xikui brought several *xinju* that had proved to be popular in other coastal

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[4] It was alleged in many sources that Tian Jiyun's invitation of Wang Zhongsheng to perform *xinju* in his theater in 1909 caused his arrest by the Qing court in 1911. But the two incidents were not directly related. Or at least, the staging of *xinju* and associating with *xinju* practitioners did not directly cause Tian's imprisonment, even though many contemporaries made the connection. In 1910, Wang once again performed in Beijing and then migrated to other northern cities to continue his *xinju* career. This means that the Qing court did not directly suppress *xinju* activities in Beijing. But Qing displeasure with such plays was evident to contemporaries. For a paper clarifying the two incidents and Tian's connection with revolutionary *xinju* practitioners, see Sang Bing, "Tiandi rensheng dawutai: Tian Jiyun yu Qingji de weixin geming," *Xueshu Yuekan*, no.5 (2006): 113-119.

[5] Hunlang, "Beijing xinju shibai zhi yuanyin," *Xiju congbao*, no.1 (1915): 7-10.

cities like Shanghai and particularly Tianjin. Other leading actresses and female troupes followed Liu and actively sought to expand their repertoire by rehearsing new plays. Therefore, these actresses became the most active and enthusiastic group experimenting with new drama in 1910s Beijing. By inserting arias of operatic tunes between the dialogues to accentuate the emotional resonance, or by adopting modern lighting and scenery on new style stages, they made *xinju* a theatrical curiosity and novelty welcomed by audiences. The Research Institute of Popular Education (通俗教育研究會), a government-sponsored organization set up in 1915 to promote public morality through popular education, acknowledged poignantly in its 1916 report that most of the recently staged new dramas were presented not by actors but by actresses, whose emergence on the public stage should not be considered a blessing to society.[6] Despite the suspicion and disapproval of the Research Institute, a few actresses thrived on staging *xinju*. This is clearly evident from Table 3-1 adapted from the repertoires supplied in the first half year of 1917 by Zhang Xiaoxian and Xian Lingzhi, the two leading actresses in *Zhideshe*. The table indicates that the two actresses put on as many new plays as old plays. Moreover, the new plays turned out to be even more popular than traditional plays, as is shown in the higher frequency of performance of new plays. The popularity of actresses' *xinju* certainly caught the attention of contemporary theater critics, who always attributed the amazing success of actresses to their capability to stage *xinju*.[7] Even the Research Institute in 1917 acknowledged the contribution of actresses in presenting *xinju* by awarding actress Song Fengyun (宋鳳雲 1889-1983) a commendation for her excellent

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[6] Tongsu jaoyu yanjiuhui eds., *Tongsu jiaoyu yanjiuhui dierci baogaoshu*, 1916. Capital Library of China, Beijing. "Jishi."
[7] Fengzi, "Guangdelou yi pin Gao Jinhong," *Shuntian Shibao*, Mar. 30, 1917.

performance in an award-winning *xinju* play, though not without reluctance and objection from some of its members.[8]

In this chapter, I will examine the various new dramas presented by a few privileged actresses in the second half of 1910s Beijing. First of all, I will explore the diverse sources from which these actresses and their troupes got their *xinju* scripts and incorporated them into their repertoire. By analyzing the different new dramas in terms of their playwrights, spectatorship, storylines, and motifs, I aim to emphasize on the one hand how the engagement of a few leading actresses into *xinju* production contributed to the further commercialization of *xinju* in Beijing, which was characterized by its ideological conservatism and an aesthetic revival of character-centered narrative, and on the other hand how their performance contributed to the circulation of new ideas and the popularization of nationalism. Moreover, the general tendency of these *xinju* to focus on female characters, as I will elaborate in detail below, not only contributed to the process of the *dan* (female roles) superseding *laosheng* (aged male) roles as the dominant role-type in theatrical production and appreciation in the early Republican era; it also spoke to an urban cultural sensitivity that fixated on woman in an age of great transformation and uncertainty.

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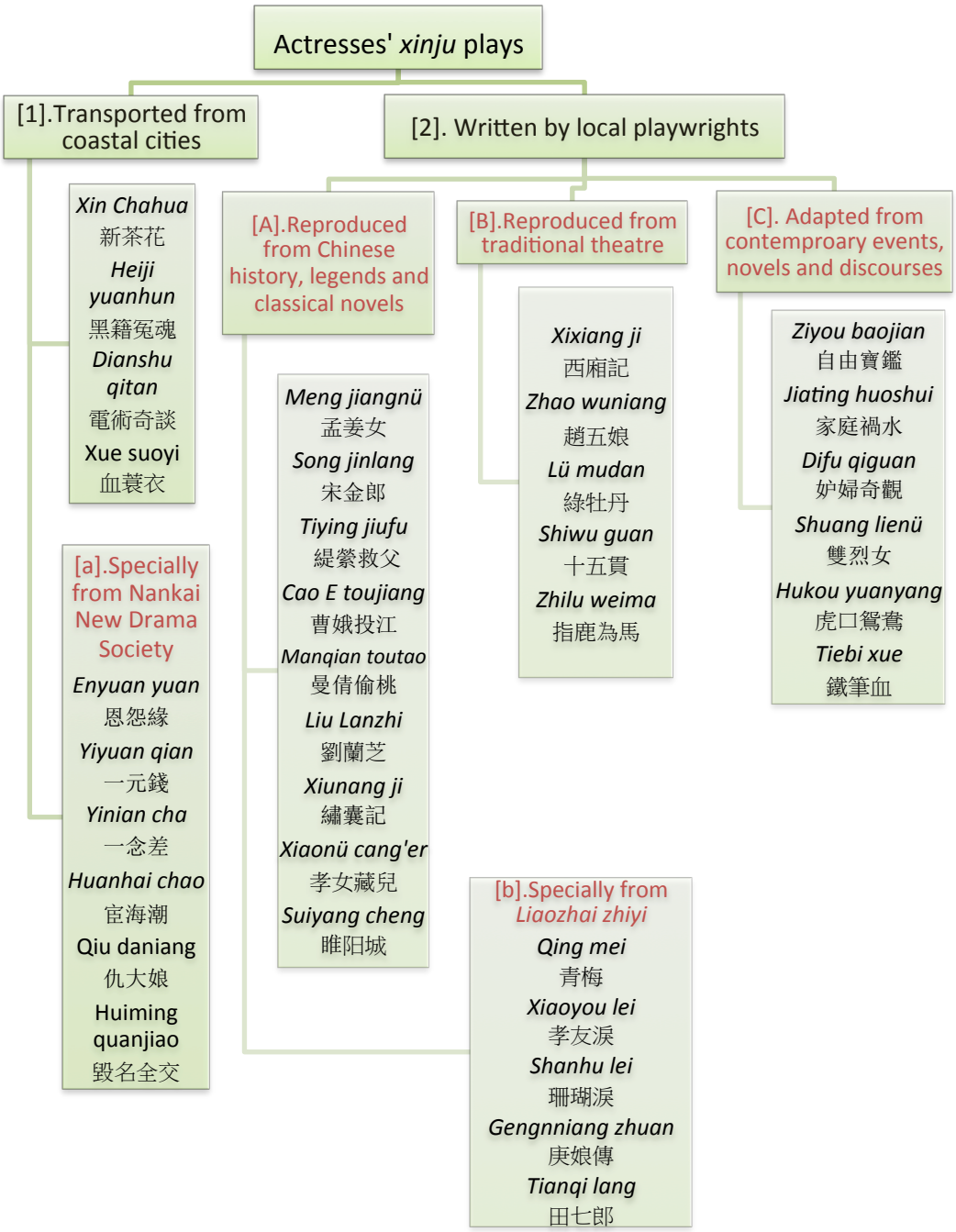
[8] Tongsu jaoyu yanjiuhui eds., *Tongsu jiaoyu yanjiuhui disici baogaoshu*, 1918. Capital Library of China, Beijing. "Jishilu."

Table 3-1. Plays Presented by Zhang Xiaoxian & Xian Lingzhi, January-June 1917

Zhang Xiaoxian 張小仙				Xian Lingzhi 鮮靈芝			
Xinju		Traditional Plays		Xinju		Traditional Plays	
Titles	Times	Titles	Times	Titles	Times	Titles	Times
Jiating Huoshui 家庭禍水	18	Xiao fangniu 小放牛	15	Dianshu Qitan 電術奇談	24	Fengyang Huagu 鳳陽花鼓	10
Ziyou Baojian 自由宝鑑	17	Yutang chun 玉堂春	13	Jiating Huoshui 家庭禍水	18	Yanzhi pan 胭脂判	9
Qing Mei 青梅	16	Hui Jingzhou 回荊州	9	Ziyou Baojian 自由宝鑑	17	Yuhu zhui 玉虎墜	9
Enyuan Yuan 恩怨緣	15	Baishou Suanliang 拜壽算糧	9	Qing Mei 青梅	16	Si jinshi 四進士	8
Dufu Qiguan 妬婦奇觀	14	Yuhu zhui 玉虎墜	9	Enyuan Yuan 恩怨緣	15	Wanhua chuan 萬花船	8
Shiwu guan 十五貫	14	Wanhua chuan 萬花船	8	Dufu Qiguan 妬婦奇觀	15	Shili Jindan 十粒金丹	7
Yiyuan qian 一圓錢	13	Xirong gui 喜榮歸	8	Shiwu guan 十五貫	14	Cuiping shan 翠屏山	6
Xixiang Ji 西廂記	13	Sangyuan hui 桑園會	7	Yiyuan qian 一圓錢	13	Wangxiao Guonian 王小過年	5
Qiu Daniang 仇大娘	12	Shili Jindan 十粒金丹	7	Xixiang Ji 西廂記	13	Hongluan xi 鴻鸞禧	5
Dianshu Qitan 電術奇談	11	Sanniang Jiaozi 三娘教子	6	Qiu Daniang 仇大娘	12	Tan Qingjia 探親家	4
Meiji Yuanhun 黑籍冤魂	9	Sanyi Ji 三疑計	5	Xiaoyou lei 孝友淚	10	Huatian cuo 花田錯	3
Xin Chahua 新茶花	8	Fenhe wan 汾河灣	4	Meiji Yuanhun 黑籍冤魂	9	Fomen dianyuan 佛門点元	3
Huanhai chao 宦海潮	4	Tan Qinjia 探親傢	4	Xin Chahua 新茶花	9	Luozhang Guilou 羅章跪樓	2
Dushi niang 杜十娘	2	Huatian cuo 花田錯	3	Tiebi Xue 鐵筆血	8	Xin'an yi 辛安驛	2
		Da Dengdian 大登殿	3	Huiming Quanjiao 毀名全交	7	Wenzhang hui 文章會	2
		Ronghua Ji 絨花計	3	Huanhai chao 宦海潮	5	Hudie bei 蝴蝶盃	1
		Fomen Dianyuan 佛門點元	3			Xia Henan 下河南	
		Xue shouyin 血手印 Nantian men 南天門 Tiegong yuan 鐵弓緣 Shuang Duanqiao 雙斷橋	2			Dayu cangzhou 打魚藏舟 Shanbao zhuang 善寶莊 Hui Jingzhou 回荊州	
		Nv Qijie 女起解 Jinshui Qiao 金水橋 Shiwan jin 十万金 Kuzhong ku 苦中苦 Shanbao zhuang 善寶莊	1			Meilong zhen 美龍鎮 Rong sangui 榮三貴 Yutang chun 玉堂春	

Source: Na'an,"Xianzhang yanju zhi chengji," *Shuntian Shibao*, Aug. 22, 1917.

Table 3-2. Literary and Theatrical Genealogy of Actresses' Popular *Xinju*, 1914-1919



Sources: These plays were repeatedly mentioned in the reviews in the theater columns of *Shuntian shibao* (March 1913-January 1918) & *Rizhi bao* (January 1917-January 1919); *The Resources of Nankai Spoken Drama Movement*, edited by Xia Jiashan, Cui Guoliang &Li Lizhong (Tianjin: Nankai University Press, 1984).

The Diversity of *Xinju* in Actresses' Repertoire

The various new dramas presented by actresses in the 1910s came from diverse sources. First of all, when a few actresses who had engaged in performing *xinju* in other cities migrated into Beijing, they brought a few *xinju* to audiences in the capital city (see in Strand [1] in Table 3-2 blow). In the winter of 1914, the actress Liu Xikui pioneered for Beijing audiences the new drama *Xin Chahua* at First Stage, the first Western-style theater in the capital to employ modern theatrical techniques such as stage lighting and scenery.[9] Originally a Chinese theatrical adaptation of Dumas' novel *The Lady of the Camellias*, the play *Xin Chahua* had first been staged in 1906 by the Spring Willow Society in Tokyo, Japan to promote modern spoken drama. In 1909 the politically-inspired theater New Stage in Shanghai made a spectacular 22-act performance out of the story set against the backdrop of the Russo-Japanese war in 1904 and 1905.[10] Featuring a wronged Japanese prostitute who uses her own wisdom and sexuality to win back the heart of her lover by helping him defeat the Russians, the play became a nation-wide sensation, as other commercial theaters in coastal cities hurried to stage the story. In 1913 Liu Xikui first learned to perform the play in Tianjin, when her instructor and male co-star Yang Yunpu (楊韻譜 1882-1957) simplified the plot and converted part of the dialogues into singing arias. While the play had won Liu Xikui remarkable recognition among Tianjin audiences, her reprising of the play on the Beijing stages proved to be equally if not more popular with Beijing audiences who had been known for their indifference to *xinju*. Her stage image as a prostitute in Western style dress playing the

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[9] Wang Dengshan, "xiagu bingxin de nü yishujia Liu Xikui," in *Jingju tanwanglu xubian*, edited by Zhongguo renmin zhengzhi xieshan huiyi Beijingshi wuyuanhui wenshi ziliao weiyuanhui (Beijing: Beijing Chubanshe, 1988), 92; also see, "Gechang xiaoxi," *Rizhi bao*, Dec. 6, 1917.

[10] For research on Shanghai New Stage's adaptation and presentation of *Camélias*, see Tsai Chu-ching, "Wutai de yinyu: shilun xin wutai ershi shiji xinchahua," in *Taipei Theater Journal*, no.9 (2009): 31-82.

accordion while singing operatic arias greatly impressed the spectators, so when she performed the play in First Stage, the 2600-seat theater was packed.[11] It was said that every time she presented the play, the theater demanded higher ticket prices even though her performance was already more expensive than most male performances.[12]

The smashing success of Liu Xikui's *xinju* performance inspired many other actresses and managers of all female troupes, who did not hesitate to experiment with staging *xinju* as a means to boost box office. The theater managers, who as we have seen were predominantly male in the 1910s, might hire playwrights to write new scripts and scenarios for their production. For instance, the female troupe *Zhideshe*—renamed *Kuideshe* in 1918—employed Yang Yunpu, the actor-turned *xinju* playwright/director and Liu Xikui's former instructor and co-star, to write and direct a variety of *xinju* for the troupe. Originally from Tianjin, Yang was well aware of all kinds of *xinju* staged in Tianjin, especially those presented by the Nankai School New Drama Society (南開新劇團), the earliest *xinju* association in Tianjin established in 1914 and renowned for its production of high-quality original and translated plays. On good terms with the association, Yang was able to borrow a few of their scripts and adapt them for actresses' performance (see in box [a] in Table 3-2). The original plays from Nankai were in the form of *huaju* (話劇 spoken drama), which heavily relied on natural dialogue rather than aria singing. This form, unfamiliar to Beijing audiences, had proved unpopular there, so Yang turned these exclusively dialogue-driven scripts into a hybrid form in which dialogues alternated with arias and musical accompaniment. Besides adapting the new

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[11] "Guan Liu Xikui ju zagan," *Shuntian shibao*, May 11, 1915; "Gechang xiaoxi," *Rizhi bao*, Dec. 6, 1917.
[12] Shoubi, "Gengchen she juhua," *Shen bao*, Ju. 9, 1916.

dramas from coastal cities, playwrights like Yang Yunpu also wrote original *xinju* scripts for the female troupes. After joining in *Zhideshe* in 1915, Yang wrote several new dramas for the troupe, among which the most well-known are *Ziyou baojian* (自由寶鑑 A treasured mirror for freedom) and the aforementioned *Er lienü*, which is also called *Shuang lienü*.

Nonetheless, unlike novel writing, which had flourished with a rapidly expanding print industry and urban readership from the late Qing, playwriting in the 1910s was still hardly a viable profession. The heavy reliance on traditional repertoire in the practice of most Beijing troupes substantially limited the demand for *xinju* playwrights. Moreover, theater journals in 1910s Beijing were scarce. And the multiplying newspaper columns were more likely to publish theatrical news and reviews rather than lengthy scripts, whose readership was far less than that of popular novels. Therefore, despite the fact that a few exceptional playwrights such as Yang Yunpu made a living and their reputations out of writing new plays, most *xinju* playwrights were amateurs, whose primary identity was often literati or intellectual. They took up composing *xinju* as part of their ideological agenda or for theatrical patronage or amusement.[13]

Given the amateur character of playwriting in 1910s Beijing, an important way to obtain *xinju* scripts was through personal connections that theater managers and individual actresses made with playwriting literati or intellectuals. Intellectual playwrights liked to supply *xinju* scripts to the actresses they patronized or to those troupes acclaimed for performing *xinju*. The shortage of *xinju* playwrights and scripts benefited a few star

[13] See Li Hsiao-ti, *Qingmo de xiaceng shehui qimeng yundong, 1900-1911* (Taipei: Zhongyang yanjiuyuan jindaishi yanjiusuo, 1992).

actresses with playwriting friends, who in some cases wrote new scripts for them. Actresses affiliated to relatively large, well-known and stable troupes were more likely to get parts in new dramas because productions of *xinju* required a relatively larger cast, longer rehearsal periods, more coordination efforts as well as more expenditure on scenery and costumes than old-style opera. As a result, few troupes could afford to produce new dramas in Beijing, and those that did starred leading actresses belonging to a few large troupes. Of the approximately two dozen all-female troupes founded from 1914 to 1919, only *Zhideshe/Kuideshe*, *Weideshe* and *Chongyashe* and a few others were well-known for presenting *xinju*.[14] When Liu Xikui joined the troupe *Qinghecheng she* in 1915, she also brought her well-received *xinju* plays to the stage. Even her troupe suffered from high turnover, which resulted in shortages of supporting roles for her stock-in-trade traditional plays.[15] Had she stayed with a less stable troupe, she would likely have limited her chances to present *xinju* plays, despite her success in soliciting *xinju* scripts from patrons.

The variety of new plays that these actresses obtained from local playwrights in Beijing (seen in Strand [2] in Table 3-2), and sometimes from individual playwrights in Tianjin, differed significantly from those imported from theater reform societies in coastal cities. First of all, unlike the playwrights in the coastal cities who were mostly returned students from overseas education and greatly influenced by modern Western and Japanese dramas, individual playwrights in 1910s Beijing and sometimes from Tianjin, such as such as Liang Ji (梁濟 1858-1918), Pan Zhirong (潘志蓉 date unkown) and Han Bu'an (韓補庵

[14] This number of all-female troupes is estimated by Dai Yun, in his "Xiban che de shiliao jiazhi," in Du Changsheng ed. *Jingju yu Zhongguo Wenhua Chuantong: Di'er jie Jingjuxue Guoji Xueshu Yantaohui Lunwen ji*, (Beijing: Wenhua yishu chubanshe, 2009), 333-334.
[15] Meng'er, "Guangde lou kunling duanping," *Shuntian shibao*, Nov. 7, 1917.

date unknown), were mostly educated in Confucian classics. Writing for commercial theaters and appealing to theater-goers who were accustomed to conventional theater and popular novels, the *xinju* playwrights in Beijing would not likely go so far as to look to Japan and the West for inspiration despite their attempts at theatrical novelty. Instead, as is indicated in Table 3-2, these playwrights preferred to reproduce stories from Chinese history, legends and classical literature for theatrical presentation (seen in Strand A in Table 3-2). For example, several plays were adapted from Ming vernacular literature. The new play *Song jinlang* (宋金郎) firstly presented by Liu Xikui in 1915 was adapted from a story of the same title in *Jingu qiguan* (今古奇觀 Wonderful tales of old and new times), a Ming dynasty anthology of famous short stories. Other new plays were drawn from various stories from *Liaozhai zhiyi* (聊齋志異 Strange stories from Liaozhai), an anthology of anecdotes and short stories compiled by the Qing writer Pu Songling. These amateur playwrights in 1910s Beijing also recycled classical plays from traditional theater (see in Strand (B) in Table 3-2)—such as *Xixiang ji* (西廂記 The western chamber), *Shiwu guan* (十五貫 Fifteen strings of cash), and *Lü mudan* (綠牡丹 Green peony) from the *kunqu* opera—by adapting their refined classical language to vernacular dialogue or arias.

These newly created plays by amateur playwrights in Beijing show common characteristics with *xinju* that were enjoying a spectacular commercial boom in other cities across the country in the 1910s. A lot of new plays turned to domestic melodrama, a topic familiar to audiences. Relying on remarkable reversals and coincidences, the new form of *xinju* recycled the stereotypes of filial daughter and chaste wife, promiscuous

concubine, and the "scholar and beauty (才子佳人)." These new plays seemed to serve well the majority of the urban audience, who, despite their wider range of class backgrounds, resembled the urban readership of Butterfly novels in the 1910s in terms of finding comfort in the ideological conservatism represented by familial domestic themes.[16]

Besides the new plays having ancient or legendary backdrops, several other plays written by local playwrights for actresses' performance listed in Strand [C] of Table 3-2 were drawn from contemporary events and discourse and, like other imported *xinju*, created for the purpose of social criticism and moral reflection. The play *Tiebi xue* (鐵筆血 The blood of an iron stylus) first staged by *Zhideshe* in 1917 tells a story concerning a patriotic journalist in the late Qing who struggled against censorship to expose political corruption and bureaucratic malfunctioning and whose execution by a government official was avenged by his similarly nationalist-minded younger sister.[17] But not all of these plays necessarily addressed contemporary nationalist concerns. And, as I will elaborate below, a few plays such as *Shuang lienü* and *Ziyou baojian* were generally ideologically conservative and usually domestic in subject matter. They tended to reaffirm the Confucian morality and ethics that had been under challenge from the early twentieth century, and subjected the new ideas and discourses to sarcastic query or direct criticism.

Another significant change brought by the new plays written by local playwrights was the revival of "character-centered" narrative in the theatrical form of *xinju*. Earlier

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[16] Link, *Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies,* 189-195.
[17] Tinghua, "Guangdelou zhi sanchuxi," *Shuntian shibao*, Sep. 13, 1917. It may have been premiered in 1916. The script of this play did not survive and who the playwright was is still undetermined.

playwrights in the coastal cities had consciously embraced a "plot-centered" narrative to distinguish their *xinju* from traditional theater with its dominant "character-centered" narrative. They attempted to adopt coherent and continuous storylines to replace lengthy plots with fragmentary details. Furthermore, the Nankai New Drama Society adopted an "issue-centered" narrative to address a variety of social issues including political corruption, opium addiction, prostitution, and concubinage. Characters in their dramas remained important but served plot development or ideological articulation. By contrast, the variety of new plays written by local playwrights in Beijing tended to put their characters at the center of their dramas. Most of these plays were biographical, usually focusing on individual heroines as protagonists whose personality and morality were explored in successive episodes in their lives. Since the plots were melodramatic and clichéd and audiences were very familiar with almost every twist and turn, audiences of this type of *xinju* would be less likely to invest in the storylines than to appreciate the characters.

In sum, the various plays in actresses' *xinju* repertoire were highly diverse and hybrid. Coming from multiple sources, they not only combined old and new, indigenous and Western theatrical conventions, but also carried mixed ideological messages, liberal and conservative. Despite their diversity, a majority of these plays—particularly those written by local playwrights in Beijing—share apparent similarity in that they focused on female figures, ancient or contemporary, as their protagonists. In the following sections of this chapter, I will analyze the various female characters to highlight the ambiguous, if not self-contradictory, gender politics conveyed by actresses' *xinju* and its connection to contemporary nationalism and feminism.

The Revival of Ancient Heroines in the *Xinju* with Nationalist Themes

Given their turn to domestic melodrama, the new dramas in the 1910s across the country were believed by many scholars to have relinquished their patriotic origins in the pursuit of commercial success. Such an emphasis on the diminishing patriotic themes in *xinju* in the 1910s is quite misleading.[18] In the case of Beijing in the 1910s, the actresses and female troupes keen on *xinju* productions never abandoned the variety of earlier plays imported from coastal cities with their strong nationalist sentiments. Moreover, at the same time, reform-minded local playwrights in Beijing also wrote a few new plays that carried nationalist messages, as we have seen in the play *Tiebi xue*. In 1916, Liu Xikui was said to invite a *xinju* playwright Ren Tianmin (任天民) to write several plays, paying for his housing and expenditure during his stay in Beijing. Placed in the contemporary backdrop, these plays were alleged to convey strong criticism of Yuan Shikai and revolutionary sentiments.[19] For instance, set in a foreign backdrop, the play *Hukou Yuanyang* (虎口鴛鴦 Mandarin ducks in the tiger's mouth) portrayed how two young people in love commit to each other exclusively and fight outside obstruction. In a scene the two protagonists elaborated on the notion of love, a concept that would be given supreme importance for national rejuvenation by May Fourth intellectuals.[20]

Unlike plays written by Ren Tianzhi and Nankai, which often directly addressed the contemporary national or transnational events, most of the plays written by local playwright-intellectuals in Beijing tended to articulate nationalist sentiment by reference

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[18] In his *Performing Hybridity* Siyuan Liu argues against this view by discussing how a few new plays responded to the two most critical crises in 1910s: the territorial calamity of Japan's Twenty-One Demands and President Yuan Shikai's imperial restoration. Liu, *Performing Hybridity*, 83-94.
[19] Wang Dengshan, "Xaigu bingxin de nü yishujia Liu Xikui," in *Jingju tanwang lu*, 98.
[20] Mumu, "Liu Xikui de Hukou yuanyang," *Shuntian shibao*, Mar. 11, 1917.

to ancient heroes and heroines. Moreover, they put female characters at the center of their newly created dramas, either as symbols of China's backwardness or as metaphors for Chinese modernity. Such a focus on woman in theatrical representation, as Ching-kiu Stephen Chan suggests in his study of May Fourth writers on the New Woman, originated from these male intellectuals' unconscious anxiety over their own identity crisis in an age of great transformation. In this view, it was through the literary representation of women as the Other that male intellectuals articulated their own anxiety and desire and reaffirmed their own superior status in society, which had been seriously challenged by foreign domination.[21]

Among these playwrights with nationalist concerns who patronized actresses, probably the best-known was the literatus-playwright Liang Ji, who was reported to have given the all-female troupe *Kuideshe* several *xinju* scripts, such as *Haoqiu jinjian* (好逑金鑑 A precious lesson for courtship), *Anshi Qingtian* (暗室青天 The blue sky lights up the dark room) as well as *Gengniang zhuan* (庚娘傳 A biography of Gengniang). When Liang committed suicide on the eve of his sixtieth birthday in 1918 in an effort to wake up the failed Chinese republic, the mournful poems in newspapers were mostly written by theater critics on the behalf of actresses to express admiration for his moral rectitude and gratitude for his patronage.[22]

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[21] Ching-kiu Stephen Chan, "The Language of Despair: Ideological Representations of the 'New Women' by May Fourth writers," *Modern Chinese Literature* 4, no. 2 (1988): 19-38.

[22] For a few examples of the memorial poems written on behalf of actresses, see Qiuliu, "Dai Han Jinxi wan Liang Juchuan xiansheng cheng Pianshi," *Rizhi bao*, Nov. 16, 1918; Pianshi, "Dai Han Jinxi wan Liang Juchuan xiansheng," *Shuntian shibao*, Nov. 17, 1918; Nanchong, "Manjianghong: Ku Liang Juchuan xiansheng jianshi Jinxi ge'er," *Shuntian shibao*, Nov. 28, 1918. For public response for Liang Ji's suicide, see Luo Zhitian, "Disappointment with the Republican System: The Death of Liang Ji," in *Jindaishi yanjiu*, no.5 (2006): 1-10.

Female characters in *xinju* created by intellectual-playwrights like Liang Ji were often representatives of compelling talent and virtue, which was still defined in the Confucian discourse of filial piety and female chastity. For instance, the female protagonist in *Gegnniang zhuan* was a faithful wife who avenged her husband's murder and then killed herself in an act of loyalty to him.[23] The leading female role in *Tiying jiufu* (緹縈救父, Tiying rescues her father), first played by the actress Jin Gangzhuan in 1918, was an ancient figure in the Han dynasty who convinced the emperor to absolve her father from official punishment.[24] Despite upholding the Confucian notion of female virtue, these female characters in *xinju* were quite different from the *qingyi* stereotype. Portrayed by playwright-intellectuals and harboring contemporary national concerns, they embodied female virtue that often assumed new gender meanings. Rather than being submissive and silently suffering, the female characters often take actions to fulfill their desire to be a virtuous woman. Their determination and resourcefulness in pursuing virtue often overshadow those of male protagonists, who are trapped in difficulties whose resolution often requires the intervention of female characters. This demonstration of self-assertive virtuous femininity in contrast to troubled masculinity reversed the traditional gender hierarchy. With male characters in predicament and masculinity in crisis, it is female virtue that represents a way out. By pursuing virtue these female characters not only realize their personal will but also stand for hope for the nation in crisis.

These characters' concept of traditional female virtue is far from ideologically conservative. The woman of filial piety and chastity in *xinju* can be at the same time

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[23] For plot summary, see *Zhongguo xiqu zhi: Tianjin juan*, 118; the script written by Liang Ji is reserved in National Library of China, Beijing.
[24] Dian pusheng, "Ping Jin Gangzuan zhi Tiying jiufu," *Rizhi bao*, Feb. 4, 1918.

open-minded, acquainted with new knowledge and concerned with contemporary issues and national crisis. The female protagonist Xu Ruiyun (徐瑞雲) in Liang Ji's play *Haoqiu jinjian*, for example, displays great talent and patriotic dedication. Brought up in a decent family in the state of Zheng during the Spring and Autumn period, Ruiyun is a nubile young woman whose beauty has attracted the desire of two young men from notable families: Gongsun Chu (公孫楚) and Gongsun Hei (公孫黑). Probably at a very young age when her father was still alive, Ruiyun has been engaged to Gongsun Chu. But Gongsun Hei also covets this beautiful woman and plans to marry her by force. Realizing that the conflict between the two families of enormous influence would incur disastrous consequence for the state and her own family, Ruiyun first attempts to end her own life in the hope that the death would avoid the fateful conflict and maintain her own reputation. Fortunately, her brother asked the prime minister for help to solve the problem. The prime minister reports the situation to the king, who issues a decree that Ruiyun should choose between the two young men by giving them a test at her own house. According to the king, the task of national strengthening in the era of fierce interstate competition stipulated that "women be able to tell the wise men from the foolish ones."[25]

With the royal decree, the traditional gender roles are reversed in the play. First of all, the space for testing male talent and virtue is set in *chungui* (春閨), the inner quarter where women are confined with their desires. Moreover, the female protagonist Ruiyun assumes the role of examiner and becomes the judge of the virtue and talent of her two suitors. This is an even more conspicuous contrast with normal gender relations in traditional arranged marriage, in which nubile young women were usually judged and chosen by

[25] Liang Ji, "Haoqiu jinjian juwen," in *Biji xiaoshuo daguan*, Vol.9 (Taiwan: Xinxing shuju, 1960), 6598.

men and their families. So in the play when Ruiyun is given the unusual power to choose her spouse, her servant girl enthusiastically welcomes the chance to get back at men who judge women by their appearance in traditional arranged marriage—

> Every time men are about to arrange a marriage, they are always picky. A man always asks the matchmaker, if he hires one, whether the girl's head and face are good-looking, and whether her feet are small enough. They focus on women's appearance rather than their virtue, which is too denigrating to us women…Your ladyship has become the examiner today and should really test them hard, whether they have talent or not. Consider it a chance for us women to vent our anger [on the unequal gender hierarchy].[26]

The theme of a talented woman capable of choosing an equally talented man as her husband is not new in conventional Chinese literature and folklore. For example, the legendary figure Su Xiaomei 蘇小妹, the alleged younger sister of the famous Song dynasty poet Su Shi (蘇軾 1037~1101) , is well known for her intelligence and her ability to evaluate the literary talent of men. She reads the literary writings from her numerous suitors and chooses the best writer, the poet Qin Guan (秦觀 1049-1100) as her husband. Even on their wedding night, she gives three challenging tests for the groom before letting him enter the bridal chamber.[27] What distinguished Ruiyun from other talented women choosing their own husband are her attempts to politicize the tests. Rather than testing the literary talent of her suitors, her first question was above all a test of statecraft capabilities—

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[26] Liang, "Haoqiu jinjian juwen," 6606-7.

[27] The best-known story is written by the Ming writer Feng Menglong in "Three Times Su Xiaomei Tests Her Groom." For an English translation of the story, see Feng Menglong's *Xingshi hengyan* (Stories to Awaken the World), trans. Shuhui Yang & Yungin Yang, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009).

> The State of Zheng is a small state located between two great powers, the State of Jin and the State of Chu. Should it serve Jin? Should it serve Chu? 鄭小國也，間於晉楚。事晉乎？事楚乎？[28]

Both suitors find the question difficult but each figures out a potential solution. Gongsun Chu sticks to the idea of national self-strengthening and independence and decides to yield to neither state, while Gongsun Hei proposes a diplomatic solution by suggesting temporarily bending to whichever state approaches first to avoid the demise of the state. Nonetheless, neither satisfies Ruiyun. Comparing herself to the State of Zheng, she asks Gongsun Chu rhetorically: "If I am like the State of Zheng avoiding association with both Jin and Chu, I will marry neither of you, so you can go home." Similarly she disputes Gongsong Hei: "If I am like the State of Zheng, then according to your proposal to serve whomever approaches, how could I marry you both?"[29] The two suitors are dismayed and struck silent. But soon Ruiyun sets out the second test, which is a military one. Regarding the military spirit as more essential to national survival than civil administration, she decides to test the archery of the two suitors: whoever can shoot two birds with one arrow wins her heart. Gongsun Chu, the young man with military prowess, wins the competition and finally marries Ruiyun.

Originally created in 1915 by Yisushe (易俗社), the Custom Renewal Society in Xi'an, the play was called *Chungui kaoshi* (春閨考試 A test in the inner quarters of desire).[30] Written in a period when the memory of a weakened Qing exploited by the great powers was still fresh and the national rejuvenation through a Republican system was proving to

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[28] Liang, "Haoqiu jinjian juwen," 6609.
[29] Liang, "Haoqiu jinjian juwen," 6611.
[30] For the script, see *Fan Zidong Qinqiang juben xuan*, edited by Xi'an yisushe qishi zhounian jinian bangongshi, (Xi'an: Shaan xi renmin chubanshe, 1982), 461-478. The script is also seen online, http://bbs.qinqiang.org/thread-2979897-1-1.html, accessed June 18, 2014

be a distant dream for intellectuals, the play clearly draws an analogy between the marriage of Ruiyun and the contemporary dilemma of the Chinese nation. In 1916 Liang Ji obtained the script and attempted to adapt it. Considering the original play "too vague despite its noble conception," he kept the original story and structure with "meanings added and words changed."[31] The subtle changes Liang made gave more political consciousness to the female protagonist and more voices to other female characters. In *Chungui kaoshi*, Ruiyun first appeares on the stage as a "talented woman," reading a book and singing "I could not help but have a new dream in my chamber; it is better for me to wait under the lantern for my wedding day 無奈閨中添新夢, 好從燈下待佳期."[32] In Liang's adaptation, Ruiyun becomes conspicuously political. She steps onto the stage singing "While everyone is speaking of the pleasure of getting married, I am worried about the welfare of the country 人言男女婚姻樂, 我為邦家大局憂."[33] Moreover, she tries to find a position for women in national politics by commenting on the connection between the family and the state—

> If a woman marries an outstanding man, she may make great contribution to the world of nations. If she marries a profligate, she may waste the rest of her life in fine clothes and cosmetics.[34]

Therefore, if in *Chungui kaoshi* Ruiyun largely remains a traditional talented woman and her marriage merely serves as a trope for illuminating the national crisis of China, in Liang's adaptation, Ruiyun assumes certain "modern" characteristics by strongly identifying with the nation and clearly articulating her political consciousness. Her image as a patriotic woman taps into a long tradition of the patriotic courtesans, *mingji*—the

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[31] Liang, "Haoqiu jinjian juwen," 6586.
[32] Ibid.
[33] Liang, "Haoqiu jinjian juwen," 6590.
[34] Ibid.

most famous of them being the late Ming courtesan Li Xiangjun of the play *Taohua shan* (桃花扇, The peach blossom fan). Nonetheless, Ruiyun in Liang Ji's portrayal is not of a courtesan of marginal status but a talented woman from a decent family, and rather than being exceptional, Ruiyun is a female model whose behavior can be emulated. This is best illustrated by Ruiyun's self-imposed role of "an awakener" at the end of the play, when she declares that her choice to marry a military man rather than a literary man is based on an idea "to awaken the populace."[35] According to her, marrying a literary man and living a carefree life of domestic felicity is desirable, but women in times of national crisis should be prepared to lay aside their own interest for the greater good of the nation. Moreover, unlike the late Ming courtesans, who are often associated with literati estranged from the court and whose patriotic dedication poignantly serves as a contrast to corrupt Ming officials, the self-identification of Ruiyun with the nation is reaffirmed by the state, which endows to women the role of arbiter on the virtue and talent of men on the grounds that it is essential for national strengthening. In other words, in Liang's play, the relationship between women and the nation state is remade. Enlightened, patriotic women like Ruiyun are given a position in the imagined community of the nation.

Nevertheless, the position of women in the nation is still ambiguous. It is above all achieved by marriage that requires confinement of women within households and sacrifice of wives to support their husbands' involvement into the national politics. Wifely chastity was still cherished in the play. Ruiyun even instructs fiancées to keep their chastity even if their men die in battles for the nation. The patriarchal family remains intact, and the state as family writ large thus maintains its patriarchal order.

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[35] Liang, "Haoqiu jinjian juwen," 6616.

Rather than emancipating themselves from patriarchal restrictions, women in Liang Ji's adaptation identify strongly with Confucian patriarchal order and its prescribed feminine virtue under the name of nationalism. It is the double identification with family and the nation that makes the female protagonists in intellectual-playwrights' *xinju* figures of betwixt and between, a juxtaposition of the traditional femininity and the new elements that redefine a woman in a rapidly changing society.

In creating and performing the various female characters in *xinju* that were progressive in self-fulfillment and national consciousness yet conservative in their traditional female virtue, the playwright-intellectuals and actresses who played these roles, I argue, took part in the formation of popular nationalism in May Fourth years in which women were implicated in nationalist struggles but remained confined within the patriarchal household. This version of nationalism was not produced in theater by direct reference to the experiences of defeated and colonized nations like Poland in the contemporary world, as Rebecca Karl points out in her study of the actor Wang Xiaonong's performance of the opera *Guazhong lanyin* in the early 1900s Shanghai.[36] Instead, its theatrical articulation by actresses in the 1910s often alluded to heroines in Chinese history, legend, and classical literature, which were more likely to create emotional resonance in a wide range of audiences.

The Virtuous Female Roles and the Conservative Social Commentary in Actresses' *Xinju*

If these female characters created by playwright-intellectuals like Liang Ji are mostly ambivalent, simultaneously disrupting and maintaining traditional gender ideology, a few

[36] Rebecca E Karl, *Staging the World*, 27-51.

other female roles in the *xinju* repertoire were conspicuously conservative. Playwrights who created these roles seemed not too interested in the elite discourse of nationalism and feminism. Some of them wrote new plays primarily to patronize their favored actresses or a particular all-female troupe. And they were fond of putting on stage figures of traditional womanhood to attract sympathetic audiences. Other playwrights might be self-consciously conservative, and in their scripts evoked traditional womanhood as a stabilizing force in an age of great transformation and uncertainty.

Under Yuan Shikai and his successors, warlord governments encouraged the creation of female characters representative of Confucian womanhood, including filial daughters and chaste wives in the Beijing theatrical world. In 1915, Yuan Shikai's Ministry of Education founded the Research Institute of Popular Education to cultivate public morality by studying and promoting methods of popular education. Taking theater as one of the most important means for popular education, the Research Institute issued a dozen measures to reform theater and advocate *xinju*. Responding to Yuan's reintroduction of Confucianism as ideological foundation for his imperial restoration, the Research Institute proclaimed in its 1915 proposal to reform theater: "Theater is crucial to social morals by teaching people loyalty and filiality."[37] In 1916, it required all the theaters in Beijing to submit their *xinju* scripts for censorship purposes. Even after Yuan's failed restoration of monarchy and his death in June 1916, the institute continued to maintain its ideological conservatism. To enforce the Confucian stereotype of virtuous women, the institute in 1918 awarded prizes to two plays featuring suffering chaste women: *Liu*

[37] Tongsu jiaoyu yanjiu hui, *Tongsu jiaoyu yanjiuhui diyici baogaoshu*, 1915. "Yi'an,"

Lanzhi (劉蘭芝 Liu Lanzhi) and *Shanhu lei* (珊瑚淚 Tears of Shanhu).[38] Meanwhile, the institute criticized several *xinju* for featuring unorthodox women as the female protagonists. For instance, they faulted the popular *Xin Chahua* for its portrayal of a prostitute despite her patriotism and disparaged the *xinju* play *Sanxia tu* (三俠圖 Three heroes) for its focus on the legendary courtesan Hong Fu Nü and her elopement with Li Jing, with whom she helped to overthrow the Sui dynasty and establish the Tang dynasty, for fear that plays like this would mislead people to pursue indecent relationships between the sexes.[39]

Besides the Research Institute, other conservative political forces in Beijing could have also affected which plays all-female actresses chose to stage. For instance, the *Zhideshe* manager and director Yang Yunpu insisted on staging *Tiexue bi,* the above mentioned play that depicted the execution of a nationalist journalist by a late Qing government official, despite the opposition from some conservative theater critics. But in July 1917 when Zhang Xun, a Qing-loyalist general entered Beijing attempting to restore the monarchy, the troupe immediately took the conspicuously anti-Qing play off its program.[40]

Among the conservative forces in Beijing, the Research Institute most influenced the troupes in Beijing, particularly by employing playwrights to write *xinju* featuring filial daughters and chaste wives. For instance, the playwright and theater critic Pan Zhirong was hired by the institute to write for the all-female troupes two plays centering around filial daughters from ancient legend and history: *Tiying jiufu* and *Cao E toujiang* (曹娥投

[38] Tongsu jiaoyu yanjiu hui, *Tongsu jiaoyu yanjiuhui disici baogaoshu*, 1918. "Wendu."
[39] Tongsu jiaoyu yanjiu hui, *Tongsu jiaoyu yanjiuhui disici baogaoshu*, 1918. "Jishilu er."
[40] "Juxun yishu," *Shuntian shibao*, Jul. 5, 1917.

江 Cao E throws herself into the river).[41] The latter play retells the well-known story of the 14-year-old Cao E in Eastern Han dynasty (25–220), who was honored as one of the ten filial daughters of China. As a shaman, Cao E's father drowned himself when performing a ritual to welcome the God of Tides in a river and his body could not be found for days. Cao E cried day and night by the river and finally jumped into it to retrieve her father's body. Besides filial daughters, the images of chaste wives, who were often filial daughters-in-law, also appeared frequently in plays such as *Mengjiangnü* (孟姜女 The lady Mengjiang"), *Shanhu lei* and *Er lienü*, in which the suffering of the female protagonist recurred.[42] Even in the various *xinju* plays adapted from *Liaozhai zhiyi*, the elements of "strangeness" and "transgression" in the original stories were greatly toned down and replaced by emphasis on portrayal of female characters abiding by the values of traditional womanhood.[43] In other words, such adaptation often tended to borrow the remarkable plot reversals from the *liaozhai* stories but got rid of their unorthodox message.

These plays featuring suffering filial daughters and chaste wives were commercial successes, appealing both to male audiences and the emergent female audiences, who were usually leisured women of wealthy households, a small but growing presence. The new plays were reported to have moved both to tears.[44] They also attracted conservative male spectators and theater critics who wrote about the benefits of these female roles for

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[41] *Tongsu jiaoyu yanjiuhui dierci baogaoshu*, 1916. "guyuan yishi lu."
[42] Xia Jinting, "Ci yizhong biyi shehui zhi jiaju," *Rizhi bao*, Nov. 20, 1917; Chujiang wuwo, "Zhi Guangde jingsu fengshi zhi jiaju," *Rizhi bao*, Jan. 26, 1918; Dian Pusheng, "Lun Zhonghe yuan zhi Mengjiang nü ku changcheng," *Rizhi bao*, Feb. 27, 1918.
[43] For study on the "strangeness" and "transgression" of the *Liaozhi* stories, see Judith Zeitlin, *Historian of the Strange: Pu Songling and the Chinese Classical Tale* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993).
[44] "Juxun yishu," *Shuntian shibao*, Sep. 13, 1917.

social morality. Besides applauding female characters representing traditional feminine virtue they approved female characters whose transgressions were mild and temporary and finally committed themselves to traditional values. For example, a contemporary theater critic of the *Liaozhai* play *Qing mei* spent most of his review article praising the female character Lady A Xi for her faithfulness and behaving like a *guixiu*, a gentlewoman from a decent family. Similarly a spectator of another *Liaozhai* play *Shanhu lei* appreciated the daughter-in-law as the protagonist for her "bearing injustice, and [expressing] submissiveness, and persistent filiality."[45]

Not only did these *xinju* female characters support the traditional womanhood of filial piety and chastity, but some of the plays also induced audiences to stand back from participation in the women's movement, or even criticize and satirize it. A good example is the play *Ziyou baojian* written in 1917 by Yang Yunpu for the all-female troupe *Zhideshe*. Set against a contemporary backdrop, the play centers on a young couple that defies parental authority and pursues the freedom of love. The female protagonist Xing Zijuan (邢紫娟) is a new-style female student who encountered the idea of freedom of marriage at school. After she falls in love with a male student, Mr. Wang, she decides to act out the notion of free love in her real life. Confronting the opposition of her parents as well as her brother, she denounces the restrictions imposed on women and arranged marriage and finally elopes with Mr. Wang to Beijing. Unfortunately, the young couple is swindled out of all their money and belongings during the trip. They have to write to their families asking for help but get no response. The desperate Zijuan sells herself to a brothel hoping to return to Mr. Wang when enough money is accumulated. Separated

[45] Xia Jinting, "Ci yizhong biyi shehui zhi jiaju."

from his lover, the sorrow-stricken Mr. Wang becomes so lost that he frequently seeks prostitutes for company and finally contracts a sexual disease. In the last act, the star-crossed couple reunites at the bed of Mr. Wang who is dying. After her lover passes away, Zijuan speaks of her regrets: "I used to know the three obediences and four virtues of women. Once I went to school I learned about the idea of freedom, which put me into such a situation! Now I would rather die and be buried in one grave with Mr. Wang." She commits suicide by taking poison.[46]

At a time when the New Culture intellectuals were already advocating the concept of "free love" and "freedom of marriage" against Confucian morality and the traditional patterns of arranged marriage, the play *Ziyou baojian*, which premiered in 1917 and maintained its popularity for several years, was strikingly conservative and apparently a counter-discourse.[47] While in May Fourth discourse "free love" was promoted as a liberating and exalted concept inspiring Chinese youth to rebel against patriarchal authority and fulfill themselves, the romantic relationship pursued outside the family structure is condemned in the play. Opposing the freely sought conjugal bond to patriarchy, the play presents the idea of "freedom" as problematic and supports the absolute authority of parents. Without family support and parental supervision, the male protagonist falls from moral rectitude in an unbelievably easy manner. The young couple just cannot make a viable life but resorts to prostitution. Their tragic demise reaffirms the

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[46] The original script does not survive. This synopsis is summarized from several contemporary theater reviews in newspapers: Renren & Jizi, "*Ziyou baojian* zhi quedian," *Rizhi bao*, Mar. 10, 1917 & Chujiang wuwo, "Chanfa *Ziyou baojian* zhi yiyi"*Rizhi bao*, Dec. 5, 1917; "Ji weideshe zhi *Ziyou baojian,*" *Shun-tien shibao*, Dec. 20 & 22, 1917.

[47] For research on the May Fourth idea of free love, see Lee, *Revolution of the Heart,* 95-139.

disastrous consequence supposedly brought by defiance and transgression of parental authority.

The play reached a wide audience. As Table 3-1 indicates, it was the second most performed *xinju* by *Zhideshe*—played at 17 shows—in the first half of 1917, and became a staple in its repertoire of classical *xinju* plays. Nevertheless, the popularity of the play does not mean that it was accepted without controversy and criticism. In an era when female education had been widely accepted as crucial for national rejuvenation, the play's attribution of the female protagonist's destruction to the education she had received at school seemed anachronistic and ridiculous even for those claiming to be in favor of traditional morality. Despite the generally approving tone of theater critics, more than one pointed out that the play would likely impede the project of women's education and the liberation of *nüjie* (女界), women's world/sphere.[48] Moreover, its outright attack on the idea of freedom seemed to some critics to go too far. Though the notion of freedom misled young men and women to rebel against their parents and family, they believed the concept *per se* should not be faulted. It was the misunderstanding of freedom, the new idea imported from the West, that drove young people into inappropriate behaviors including breaking off family ties and adventuring into a dangerous modern world. Such critics faulted the play for its failure to illuminate the true meaning of freedom.[49]

In order to enlighten the general audience on the principle of freedom, two theater critics suggested revising the play with the addition of a subplot concerning the younger sister of

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[48] Renren & Jizi, "*Ziyou baojian* zhi quedian." And also, Jiu Gong, "Juyu zhi Guangdelou zhi Xian Lingzhi shu," *Rizhi bao*, May 8, 1917.
[49] Ibid. Chujiang wuwo, "Chanfa Ziyou baojian zhi yiyi," *Rizhi bao*, Dec. 5, 1917.

Zijuan. In their version, several years after Zijuan's death, the sister graduated successfully from school. With the approval of her parents, who regretted being too authoritarian with Zijuan, the sister carefully chose her own marriage partner and found happiness. The conjugal relationship, these critics suggested, should be portrayed in the mode of the "scholar-beauty" romance.[50] Rising to popularity during the Tang dynasty (618~907) and culminating in the cult of *qing* in the Ming dynasty, this ideal companionate relationship between people of youth and talent, had long been exalted in Chinese literature. It permitted a degree of free choice in the conjugal partnership but within the ethical universe of Confucian orthodoxy. Another critic, dissatisfied with the play's failure to portray Zijuan as a chaste woman, suggested that the troupe add a sub-plot to show Zijuan refusing to sell her body in a brothel and convincing a sympathetic client to give her substantial money without sexual engagement.[51]

As we deduce from the above criticism of the play, though many of these *xinju* were marked by apparent ideological conservatism, even conservative plays introduced audiences to novel Western and reformist ideas. Despite their effort to place new ideas like freedom into ironic quotes and defend traditional ethics, these plays initiated a discursive arena in which new ideas and discourses of the era were contested and definitions of womanhood were negotiated. By presenting on stage a variety of *xinju* and reaching a wide audience, these *xinju*-playing actresses and their patron playwrights created a theatrical sphere in which emerging ideas were juxtaposed with traditional ideas and sometimes directly criticized. Given the popularity of these *xinju* and the centrality of

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[50] Renren & Jizi, "*Ziyou baojian* zhi quedian."
[51] Jiu Gong, "Juyu zhi Guangdelou zhi Xian Lingzhi shu."

female characters in them, I argue, these actresses—together with the playwrights and their audiences—engineered a dialogue between the general public and the May Fourth intellectuals in the contested arena of the women's movement in the early Republican era.

Conclusion

In the winter of 1914, the actresses Liu Xikui brought *Xin Chahua,* one of the most widely circulated *xinju* among coastal cities, onto Beijing stages. Unlike the earlier male practitioners of *xinju*, who more or less failed to win popular acknowledgement despite the advocacy of reform-minded journalists and critics, Liu's performance fascinated audiences with her stage image, operatic singing as well as the Western-style scenery. Her smashing success inspired emulation by other privileged actresses who were either on good terms with *xinju*-writing intellectuals or affiliated with large and stable troupes to stage new plays. Soliciting scripts from diverse sources, these actresses and their troupes found in *xinju* an important way to establish their distinctive repertoire and artistic styles and survive in the entertainment market, in which intense competition not only took place between actresses and actors, but also amongst different groups of actresses, a topic I will elaborate upon in the next chapter.

Of the various popular *xinju* plays presented by actresses in the second half of 1910s Beijing, a few were from the earliest spoken drama movement in coastal cities including Shanghai and particularly, Tianjin. Marked by strong nationalist sentiments, these plays were adapted by actresses and their all-female troupes into an art form with operatic singing conventions familiar to local audiences. With the participation of local intellectuals and theater managers, the *xinju* repertoire of actresses went through a

process of diversification and hybridization. Reproducing stories from Chinese history, legends, and classical literature, these plays tended to place ancient heroines and traditional womanhood at the center of theatrical presentation and embraced the revival of "character-centered" narrative in *xinju* playwriting which, under the influence of Western drama and Japanese *Shinpa*, had greatly emphasized plot development and the exposure of social problems. These new old-style plays turned to domestic melodrama and ideological conservatism and created many female protagonists of traditional virtue, particularly filial daughters and chaste wives.

It would be misleading to consider actress *xinju* as simply conservative. Not only did actresses like Liu Xikui and Xian Lingzhi never relinquish the nationalist plays they imported from coastal cities, they also acquired new plays written by reform-oriented playwrights like Liang Ji who included women in the imagined community of the Chinese nation. Female characters established by playwrights with nationalist concerns appeared to be conservative, since their virtue was still largely defined by Confucian gender ethics; nevertheless, there is something startlingly modern in the onstage remaking of the relationship between women and the nation-state. Furthermore, even their overtly conservative plays like *Ziyou baojian* played a role in introducing new ideas of the era, albeit in ironic quotation marks, to general audiences. The controversy aroused by these popular *xinju* plays and their actresses concerned the most debated ideas and discourses of the time, a dialogue in which nationalism and feminism were closely intertwined.

Part III. The Society

Chapter 4. Police, Press, Patrons, and Actresses' Negotiation of Public and Private Life

As actresses stepped out of the inner quarters and became opera stars, they lived a life different from traditional gentry women. No matter how hard they tried to retreat into a domestic life when performance was over, actresses could not overcome the fact that they assumed a more visible role in society and in the press. Every day, they commuted between playhouses and their homes and their presence on the streets could become a spectacle. Fanatic fans could follow them home and solicit their company. News and commentaries about their performance and private life circulated in a variety of newspapers. Actresses were at the center of the urban entertainment life.

If the entrance of actresses into the theater profession was not necessarily a process of liberating them from family constraints, and earning a considerable salary did not make actresses independent and self-reliant individuals, as is shown in chapter one, what kind of publicity did actresses get? How were they publicly received? How did publicity affect their private lives? Did their engagement with the public space allow any personal freedom? This chapter seeks to answer these questions by focusing on the social encounters of actresses with patrons, the police, and the press in public or private spaces. It demonstrates that the visibility and notoriety of actresses in the public realm led to persistent suspicions and prejudices with respect to their sexual morality and behavioral propriety. The voyeuristic patrons, the suspicious police , and inquisitive journalists constantly intruded into or scrutinized actresses' private lives. The boundaries between the public and the private were permanently blurred for the actresses.

All these social forces—family, police and the press—functioned as instruments of discipline, imposing rules and controlling the behavior of actresses. They rendered the public realm of actresses rather limited and problematic. This public realm was not merely spatially confined to public stages but also gender segregated. Actresses were set apart from men—be they actors or male audiences—and expected to not take part in public life other than performance. Nevertheless, actresses resisted such confinement and dramatically increased their public presence. They commuted daily to the playhouses and their appearance on the street always attracted attention of the crowds. Star actresses showed in various public venues, enjoying the goods and pleasures offered by the city with their newly acquired wealth. As actresses explored the public spaces, they became eroticized objects of multiple gazes.

Because of competing contemporary views of feminine virtue and women's proper place, the various social encounters of actresses in public and private space were imbued with tension and conflict. Nonetheless, actresses found room to pursue their self-interest. By tracing the everyday life of the early actresses as they commuted between homes and playhouses and dealt with patrons, journalists, and the police, this chapter will show that they struggled for their own personal freedom and sel-fulfillment by constantly navigating the shifting boundaries of the public and the private and negotiating between the old and the new discourses about women. I emphasize that the public and private spaces carved out by actresses differed from those occupied respectively by courtesans of the time and by the New Woman idealized in the New Culture-May Fourth discourse.

On the Streets

Every day, actresses commuted between playhouses and their residences. While a few actresses, especially young girls apprenticed by the same instructors or in the same *keban*, walked to theaters in groups, other actresses traveled on their own, often accompanied by a family member or a bodyguard.[1] Depending on where actresses lived, the commute could be long and exhausting, especially under bad weather conditions. When the actress Zhang Xiaoxian started her career and her income was meager, she walked estimatedly three miles every day between her home in Doufu Lane in the Dongcheng district and the playhouse in the Qianmen area, accompanied by her mother. When heavy rains turned many of the poorly paved roads into mud, the commute could be an ordeal: not only did these young women need to tread carefully to avoid pools of muddy water, they had to make sure the cloth-wrapped bundle of costumes in their hands did not get wet.[2]

The most common way for a better-paid actress to commute daily was riding a rickshaw, the most popular mode of transportation in early Republican Beijing.[3] Rickshaws could be quite affordable given how much even an ordinary actress could earn. An average ride might cost several copper coins, while a player of cameo roles in a decent troupe in the early 1910s could earn up to one hundred copper coins a day.[4] Actresses in supporting roles could earn a monthly income comparable to that of the newly emerging urban professionals like policemen or bank clerks. Nonetheless, these actresses might still think twice before they hailed a rickshaw puller, since their incomes were usually meant to be used in other ways such as supporting family or paying for tutors or labor contractors.

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[1] "Gechang xiaoxi," *Rizhi bao*, Mar. 2, 1918.
[2] Zhang Qicai, *Zhang Xiaoxian Waishi* (Beijing & Tianjin: Jingjin chubanshe, 1921), 24 & 26~27.
[3] For a study of rickshaw as a popular mode of transportation, see Strand, *Rickshaw Beijing*, 20-64.
[4] Zhang, *Zhang Xiaoxian Waishi*, 25.

Star actresses, however, might be able to afford riding a horse-drawn carriage. Horse carriage in early Republican Beijing was no longer an entirely new mode of transportation, but on the streets it was still an expensive luxury and fabulous spectacle. Only the wealthy elite could afford to purchase a wagon and hire a driver. Moreover, riding a horse carriage was also a public menace, for its fast speed frequently resulted in accidents and caused injuries to pedestrians, rickshaw pullers and riders, street peddlers and vendors, etc. The public discontent with the horse carriage was best illustrated in a contemporary cartoon titled "It is the Horse Carriage's Turn Today," depicting a scene where a horse carriage is disciplined by a patrol officer.[5]

An actress riding a horse carriage was always interpreted as ostentatious, with a hint of dissolution. While courtesans and actresses in Shanghai and other coastal cities had long adopted carriages as a means of transportation and made themselves a street spectacle from the late Qing, actresses in Beijing seemed very cautious about riding a carriage. It was not until 1915 when the actress Liu Xikui, newly arrived in Beijing, first used a carriage for her daily commute; many actresses soon followed suit so that riding a carriage became a fashion among star actresses and a spectacle on the streets in Beijing.[6] When Liu Xikui rode a horse carriage from the playhouse to her home, it was reported that the pedestrians on the streets all fixed their eyes on the carriage and whispered to each other: "Liu Xikui! Liu Xikui!"[7] Sometimes, opera fans tried to add to the spectacle with their fanatic behaviors. For example, a young man, dressed in a very Western fashion with metal-rimmed glasses, was observed to frequently ride a rickshaw to chase

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[5] "Mache ye you jinri," *Qianshuo huabao*, no.802 (1911), 4-5.
[6] Tinghua, "Liu Xian zhan guan," *Shuntian shibao*, Aug. 25, 1915.
[7] Tinghua, "Liu Xikui zhi yu li," *Shuntian shibao*, May 25, 1916.

actresses' horse carriages.[8] Newspapers were equally keen to pay special attention to which actresses rode a carriage, what kind of carriage an actress rode, and how much they paid for hiring a carriage, etc.[9] For example, *Shuntian shibao* reported that the three actresses from the Fu family spent 40 dollars per month in hiring a horse carriage.

For actresses, riding a horse carriage was first of all a reaffirmation of their newly acquired celebrity status. With the capability to afford a carriage, star actresses distinguished themselves from ordinary actresses in the troupe, who might ride a rickshaw or walk between playhouses and their residences. An ordinary, worse-paid actress also understood well how her status as an actress was linked to her mode of transportation. Therefore, in the earlier years before the wide use of horse carriages among actresses, a low-ranking actress, who was aware of herself in the public eye, could suddenly change her mind and refuse to ride with another star actress in her private rickshaw. Instead, she insisted on hiring a public rickshaw with her own money.[10] In the middle 1910s, as more star actresses rode horse carriages that matched their wealth and celebrity status, the actresses at the very top began to upgrade their vehicles by using fashionable and expensive horses. The actress Du Yunhong used a carriage drawn by two horses.[11] When Liu Xikui once replaced her old carriage with a new one, a gift from one of her patrons, her fans immediately noticed that the horses were not only stronger, but they had beautiful white hair.[12] Many of the actress' literati patrons interpreted her riding

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[8] "Juchang jianwen lu," *Shuntian shibao*, Dec. 10, 1918.
[9] "Juxun yishu," *Shuntian shibao,* Dec. 19, 1917.
[10] "Dujiao jiaocong congtan," *Shuntian shibao*, May 19, 1914.
[11] "Jingshi jingcha ting nei zuo yi qu qu shu guanyu Wang Zhonglin shenye qianru Du Yunhong jia yi'an."
[12] Feifei, "Xu Liu Xikui yishen tanpian lu," in Yankan daoren ed. *Liu Xikui jinji*, 30.

a luxury carriage as embodiment of the splendor of "the powerful and the rich" families, though she was originally from a poor background.[13]

However, for star actresses, riding a horse carriage was more than conspicuous consumption. It was also a strategy to shield themselves from the inappropriate gaze from the street, since carriages in Beijing were usually covered (see Figure 4-1). Even though actresses became stars and public figures, the general public still considered their appearance in public spaces other than the stage to be inappropriate. Moreover, being famous, actresses could not walk on the streets without risk of unsolicited attention and harassment. Once in the Spring Festival of 1917, Liu Xikui took a stroll in the temple fair at Changdian market; it was reported that she was surrounded by a mob of playboys who spoke to her in a lascivious manner. Frightened and humiliated, the actress canceled the next day's performance.[14] Therefore, sitting inside a carriage, actresses protected themselves from harassment from fanatic patrons and unwanted looks from the streets. They differed from the top courtesans, who would make carriage riding a spectacular self-staging. From the late Qing in the foreign settlements of coastal cities, courtesans initiated the fashion of riding an open carriage to display themselves, parade their new fashions and even show off a love relationship before the curious eyes of the public (see Figure 4-2).[15] But for star actresses in the early Republican capital, such ostentatious self-display was rarely seen on the streets. Despite the frequent newspaper reports on actresses' horse carriages, few accounts depicted behaviors of actresses in carriages that might expose them to the gaze of the crowd. Therefore, for those who desired to see star

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[13] Yankan daoren, "Guang Liu Xikui yishen tanpian lu," in Yankan daoren ed. *Liu Xikui jinji*, 33.
[14] "Liu Xikui chuliu shi tingyan yuanyin," *Rizhi bao*, Feb. 9, 1917.
[15] Yeh, "Play with the Public," 145-168. Also see Hershatter, *Dangerous Pleasures*, 43 & 92.

actresses off stage, the most likely chance was the moment when the actresses walked out of the playhouses to step into a carriage. For instance, as the Japanese journalist and theater critic Tsuji Chōka observed, the actress Liu Xikui's exit from the Zhonghe playhouse attracted huge crowds—

> People gathered outside the playhouse, mixed and crowded in an incredible manner. Judging from their appearance, there were officials, students, journalists, merchants and even servants and rickshaw pullers. The number is beyond count. All are standing on their tiptoes and looking at the gate of the back stage, like those awaiting the imperial carriage expecting the grand favor. I know they all want to see the true appearance of Liu Xikui so that they can brag about it. Soon the actress walked out gracefully, the crowd was animated, casting their covetous eyes and becoming ecstatic. After the actress left in her carriage, the crowd kept staring after it.[16]

Sometimes even walking from the exit of a playhouse to the carriage could cause actresses trouble. It was reported that one day when Liu Xikui walked out of the Zhonghe playhouse to step into her carriage, a young man approached and forced a kiss on her lips. Soon words spread in multiple newspapers that a patrol officer had punished the young man for 50 dollars and thus set a standard fare for soliciting a kiss from the actress![17] The first newspaper coverage in *Rizhi bao* came to the attention of the superintendent of the Police Department, who ordered an investigation into the case. After talking with the theater manager, Liu Xikui's bodyguard, and the policemen assigned to keep the order in the playhouse, the district police concluded that the kiss was totally made up and ordered *Rizhi bao* to make a corrective announcement.[18] Despite the sheer fabrication, the

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[16] Tinghua, "Liu Xikui zhi yuli," *Shuntian shibao*, May 25, 1916.
[17] "Jingshi jingchating guanyu ling jingshi jingchating wai you yiqu fenqu chafu Rizhi bao zai jise'er zai sanqing yuan menqian qiang yu Liu Xikui jiewen deng de chi," [The official comminucation of Capital Police Department to the first right precinct of the Outer City about investigation on the report of *Rizhi bao* that a libertine forced a kiss on Liu Xikui at the front gate of Sanqing playhouse] March 1915, file J181-018-04019, Beijing Municipal Archives, Beijing.
[18] Ibid.

sensationalism aroused by the reports and rumors reflects how the public appearance of star actresses on the streets was imagined and perceived by the general public: the streets were a dangerous and inappropriate place for these young and beautiful women.

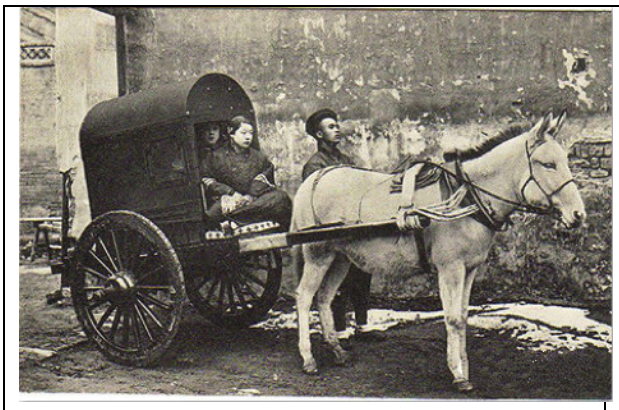

Figure 4-1 Women on a Carriage in Early Republican Beijing. The picture shows that the carriage is covered, a woman sitting outside while the other woman sitting inside, both looking at the streets. Reproduced from http://odazui.com/op10/ accessed March 23, 2015

Figure 4-2 Courtesans' Carriage in Late Qing Shanghai. The picture shows that prostitutes in two separate open carriages arguing with each other, which aroused the gaze of the crowd on the street. Reproduced from "Che zhong dou kou," in Wu Youru and Zhang Qiming eds. *Dian shi zhai hua bao: Da ke tang ban di'er juan* (Shanghai: Shanghai huabao chubanshe, 2001), 91.

Despite actresses' positions at the center of the spectacle and the gaze, it is misleading to assume that their presence on the streets—either walking or riding a carriage—made them merely passive objects of multiple gazes of the crowds. They were probably no less capable of exploiting the public space of streets than the courtesans, though in more nuanced and hidden ways. Riding a covered carriage to simultaneously display wealth and celebrity status and evade voyeuristic gazes *per se* was a strategy for star actresses to fashion a public persona that was less transgressive than that of courtesans. Whereas courtesans in Shanghai enjoyed moving about and being seen in public without being subject to traditional restrictions, actresses preferred to be looked at without being seen.

In other words, while actresses enjoyed the pleasure of being looked at by riding spectacular carriages, they resisted the direct gaze and did not exploit and intensify their position and allure as sexual objects as courtesans did. Therefore, the incursion of actresses into the streets was more like the elite women's traveling in the late imperial era, which did not completely reject the traditional gender norms but destabilized the boundary between *nei* and *wai* and confirmed its permeability to varying degrees.[19] But actresses also differed from the elite women—who stepped into the outside world occasionally and would eventually return to the domestic sphere—in that actresses moved daily outside the domestic sphere. In other words, the boundary for actresses between *nei* and *wai* was regularly destabilized. Moreover, unlike the elite women whose long journeys and short excursions normally brought them to transcendental scenic and historical sites, actresses—like courtesans—moved in a local urban space, confined and restricted by the quotidian contexts of their daily lives.

Moreover, the mobility that actresses enjoyed provided them a chance to explore the urban world and position themselves accordingly. Looking around on foot or peering through the carriage window, actresses—like "the walkers" in Michel de Certeau's account—assumed the subjective position of seeing and knowing the city.[20] When actresses passed on the streets to perform in a playhouse, or to visit entertainment venues and the houses of "sisters" in the same troupe, they developed in their minds a map of the city, or a sense of a community larger than their immediate families. Equipped with such

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[19] For research on gentry women traveling in late imperial China, see Grace Fong, *Herself an Author: Gender, Agency, and Writing in Late Imperial China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008), 85~120; Yanning Wang, *Reverie and Reality: Poetry on Travel by Late Imperial Chinese Women* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2014).

[20] Michel de Certeau, "Walking in the City," *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California, 1988), 91~110.

knowledge, actresses were able to imagine themselves as social and cultural beings outside their familial ties and *appropriate* the urban public spaces that were considered a privilege for men. For instance, one day in October 1917 when the actress Ming Yuezhen felt wronged by her abusive father, she left her house on the excuse of visiting a fellow actress and hired a rickshaw to the Wudao Temple (五道廟), a place approximately one mile away from her residence in Changxiang toutiao lane but very close to the *Sanqing* playhouse where she performed. She was looking for the *jiliang suo* (濟良所 House of Reformed Prostitutes), an institute in the Wudao temple area founded by the urban gentry in 1906 and managed by the Police Department of the Capital for taking in and educating prostitutes and homeless women.[21] After learning that the *jiliang suo* was relocated to the Shibei hutong lane in the Inner City, the actress made another approximately one mile and a half trip—either by walking or riding a rickshaw—to her destination and petitioned the institute to take her in.[22]

The police were not always in favor of such attempts by actresses to flee family and seek help from the outside world for help. One day in October 1917, the actress Wang Yuxian ran to the Department of the Capital and asked to be admitted to the *jiliang suo* to get away from the woman who claimed to be her mother and forced her to participate in clandestine prostitution. Being informed of the case, the superintendent was unsympathetic and suspicious. What concerned him most was how the actress got to know about *jiliang suo* only ten days after arriving in Beijing. So he authorized an investigation to find out who had abetted the actress. The actress explained that she had

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[21] Dingrui, "Jindai jinü jiuzhu jigou 'Jingshi jiliang suo' kaocha," in *Lishi Dang'an*, no. 4 (2001): 96~103.
[22] "Nei you si qu biaosong nüling Wang Cun ji Ming Yuezhen yin shengfu nuedai zi tou jiliang suo qing tuozhi yi'an."

performed in the *Sanqing* playhouse four years ago and once attempted to enter the nearby *jiliang suo* to get away from the abusive woman.[23] As is shown in the case, in the eyes of the Republican authorities, the city and places like the *jiliang suo* were not supposed to be known by actresses. Even though they were allowed certain mobility on the streets, the streets were defined no more than a space of transition en route to functional purposes, particularly their residences and playhouses. They were not expected to walk the streets freely and experience the city on their own; nor were they presumed to really *know* the city. Nonetheless, actresses could not be completely confined to the family or prescribed public spaces. In their everyday encounters, actresses looked into the surrounding world to learn how it worked. During moments of crisis, they were capable of exploiting the streets that they were not familiar with to get access to the places where they could possibly get help.

At Home

Once performance was over, actresses usually went home. Young, usually unmarried and living with their parents, actresses were more or less expected by the general public to live like a traditional *guinü*—unmarried daughters who confined themselves in the inner quarters and attended to the wishes of their parents. So in the numerous biographies of actresses penned by literati fans, as will be shown in detail in Chapter 5, the star actress was usually portrayed as a filial daughter and a secluded woman.

Some actresses would live up to such an ideal. As the first chapter has shown, a lot of actresses more or less accepted the Confucian notion to consider their performing career

[23] Ibid.

as a way of paying back the debts that they owned to their parents. And evidence shows that star actresses like Liu Xikui were able to retreat to a private life at home and shield themselves from unwanted solicitation. Nonetheless, the family life of actresses could also be far from harmony and seclusion. First of all, there was tension between actresses and their family heads. Those few actresses who were indentured as apprentices lived with *lingjia*, who could be abusive. Economic exploitation and physical abuse could dominate their everyday life. Besides, even though most actresses took up the acting career with no intention of challenging patriarchal structures or women's subordinate position in the family, they might discover the critical role they played in the family economy and sometimes use it to bargain for their own interests or even rebel against parental will. While actresses handed over their salaries to their parents to support the whole family, they might dispute the way the money was spent. For example, the actress Ming Yuezhen once went to the police bureau to accuse her father of spending her salary on his alcoholic addiction and other unreasonable expenses. After verifying via investigation that the father had been an irresponsible drunk, the Peking police adjudicated that the actress and her stepmother should manage the salary together without her father's interference.[24]

Probably the most constant confrontation between an actress and her parents or *lingjia* at home concerned the marriage of the young woman. Getting married often meant the end of the theatrical career unless she married into a family with theatrical connections, since no families of good social standing would allow a married woman to engage in the entertainment industry. Sometimes, if an actress married a very poor man, she might

[24] "Nei you si qu biaosong nüling Wang Cun ji Ming Yuezhen yin shengfu nuedai zi tou jiliang suo qing tuozhi yi'an."

remain in the acting profession with her husband's approval to subsidize her family, though childbirth, child rearing, and household management were great obstacles to a theatrical career. Either ending or continuing the acting profession after the marriage, actresses cut their ties with *lingjia* and usually stopped contributing substantially to their native families. Consequently not only did *lingjia* often seek to thwart marriage proposals for actresses; parents relying on the income of their actresses-daughters were also reluctant to give their daughter(s) away to another family.

For the majority of actresses, retiring from the stage for married life was desirable in a society where marriage was the most important social marker of womanhood. The acting profession entailed all sorts of hardships: years of training and months of rehearsing were physically demanding, and the sexual harassment and social stigma could be emotionally overwhelming and even unbearable. So even the top actresses, who indeed received significant economic rewards and enjoyed the glamour of being opera stars, might give up their profession without much hesitation if a private, happily married life was promised. How much an actress would value marriage can be illustrated in the suicide attempt of the actress Jin Xiangyu (金香玉). After becoming engaged to Ma Xiaojin (馬小進 1887~?), an influential congressman in early Republican politics, the actress moved with her family to a new residence with her family rented by Mr. Ma awaiting the wedding. Several days later, the actress heard that the marriage proposal had been called off. The matchmaker suggested she go back to the stage, but she swallowed three gold rings to end her life. Her family, with help from Mr. Ma, rushed her to the hospital and in the end she survived. The suicide attempt aroused police suspicion and investigators were sent to the actress' house. According to her mother's statement, the actress felt humiliated

by the breaking off of the engagement and "too ashamed to face people" by returning to the stage after everybody had been told that she was going to be a *taitai* (太太), a title for wives and concubines for men of social standing.[25]

To marry well, most actresses needed to count on their parents or *lingjia* to arrange a marriage. The age-old institution of arranged marriage had already been identified as problematic in late imperial times, as is embodied in the literati criticism of the cult of faithful maidens. Were an arranged marriage to go wrong it could cause severe emotional distress for both the parents who were benevolent and loving and the daughters who might violate their parents' wishes that they maintain lifelong fidelity to their first betrothed.[26] From the late Qing, the parental authority in arranged marriage was for the first time called into question by reformists like Kang Youwei (康有為 1858~1927) and Qiu Jin (秋瑾 1875~1907). In the early Republican era, a modified form of arranged marriage, in which the marital expectations of the marrying individuals were considered and the couple could meet before marriage, emerged. The "freedom" of the marrying individuals in vetoing a proposal and choosing a spouse along with their family was recognized by the court and the police department. Parents or family members were often

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[25] "Xingshi suo xunzhang Enpu guanyu diaocha nüling Jin Xiangyu tunjin qingxingde baogao," [The report of the patrol officer Pu En about the suicide attempt of the actress Jin Xiangyu by swallowing gold] September 1916, file no. J181-018-07239, Beijing Municipal Archives, Beijing. According to the police report based on the interview with the actress' mother, Ma wanted to break off the engagement after seeing a newspaper report that the actress had an affair with another man. But according to another anecdote, the actress' father tried to extort more money from Ma as betrothal gifts. It was also likely that Ma refused the actress' father and even threatened to break off the engagement. "Ma yiyuan zhi yanshi," in Li Diyi, *Minguo qushi*, 1917. Reprint (Yangzhou: Jiangsu guangling guji chubanshe, 1988). What actually happened is more complicated than the police report indicates, but it is broadly true to say that an actress was very likely to value her marriage more than the performing career and she might kill herself to express her wish for a proper arranged marriage.

[26] Lu Weijing, *True to Her Word: The Faithful Maiden Cult in Late Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 129-166 & 213~246. Susan Mann, *Gender and Sexuality in Modern Chinese History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 47.

required to sign a *jujie* (具結) bond to guarantee that marrying individuals had given their assent. Still, the parental sanction was highly honored. Marriage entirely based on individual choice without matchmaking and family approval was normally considered inappropriate.

Greatly to their frustration, many young actresses found that their parents, upon whom they counted for their own marital happiness, sought all means to postpone matchmaking to ensure their continuing contribution to the family economy. For example, the actress Ming Yuezhen's father made her engage in the theatrical profession for over ten years without considering finding her a spouse. The police considered the father to be "inhuman" for keeping his 23-year-old daughter unmarried.[27] Not all actresses needed their parents or family to search for a match. Taking the opportunity provided by the acting profession to meet and socialize with men, an actress might establish a relationship with a lover, whether secret or open. Nonetheless, they still needed their parents or family to approve the relationship and facilitate the marital procedure—a matchmaker or go-between was still needed to exchange the couple's horoscopes, negotiate the amount of the betrothal gifts, and arrange the wedding ceremony. Selfish parents insisted on the greatest number of betrothal gifts, even at the risk of breaking off an engagement. For instance, the actress Su Caixia's parents refused to marry her to her long-term lover, who could only pay half of the required betrothal gifts at once. Even though the potential son-in-law promised to pay the other half after the marriage, the parents still refused and tried to bring the actress away from Beijing to perform in Tianjin. The actresses pretended to agree to go, but on the way to the train station she seized an opportunity to escape and

[27] "Nei you si qu biaosong nüling Wang Cun ji Ming Yuezhen yin shengfu nuedai zi tou jiliang suo qing tuozhi yi'an."

took a rickshaw to the police department to accuse her parents of obstructing her marriage. The police admonished the parents for their attempt to make their daughter leave Beijing as completely driven by consideration of their own interest rather their daughter's happiness and thus "failed to uphold the way of motherly love 殊失慈愛之道." Moreover, they summoned Mr. Wang to sign a bond promising to marry the actress first and give the remaining half of the agreed-upon betrothal gift to her parents within one year after the marriage.[28]

Moreover, family life for actresses was also far from the quiet seclusion designed for a traditional elite woman. Domestic seclusion was at most a privilege for the top actresses like Liu Xikui whose reputation had been well established. For a lot of low-ranking actresses, socializing or cultivating ties with patrons was necessary to assure their career success. They knew very well that patronage relations influenced critical appreciation of theatrical talent. Some patrons brought a group of friends to frequent the playhouse and shout "*hao*!" when they appeared on stage. Other patrons would mobilize their pens to write poems and articles expressing favorable or laudatory opinion of their performances (Chapter 5). Moreover, actresses might get some donation from their wealthy patrons to upgrade their costumes and carriages. When patrons of wealth and social influence came to actresses' residences to solicit their acquaintance, their company and even an intimate relationship, these young women would not find it easy to refuse. Offending potential influential patrons would seriously undermine their careers.

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[28] "Beijing shi jingcha ju wai zuo yi qu qu shu guanyu nüling Su Caixia kong Su Zhang shi zurao huijia yi'an de cheng," [The report of the first left precinct of the Outer City of Capital Police Department about the actress Su Caixia's accusation of her mother Su Zhang shi for obstruction of marriage] March 1920, file no. J181-031-00253, Beijing Municipal Archives, Beijing.

While such private entertainment at actresses' residences could be highly eroticized, it was hardly rampant promiscuity and illicit prostitution. Actresses' parents or *lingjia* often watched over such meetings. On one hand, they wanted the generous gifts from the male patrons, and on the other hand they tended to safeguard the actress' chastity in order to marry her off in the future in return for handsome betrothal gifts. Even when some patrons won the permission of the parents or *lingjia* with lavish gifts or a substantial stipend, the residences of actresses were hardly ideal places for sexual engagement. The crowded residence areas in early Republican Beijing often enabled neighbors to spy on the actresses' houses. An ordinary actress who moved with her family to Beijing would likely shre a *siheyuan* (quadrangle courtyard 四合院 Figure 4-3), the standard form of dwelling in the capital, with other sojourning families. After the *baojia* system of neighborhood watch and mutual responsibility was abolished in the early Republic, neighbors continued to keep a careful eye on each other, either for security considerations or out of curiosity.[29] Even the well-paid top actresses who could afford an entire *siheyuan* could not be assured of privacy and seclusion.

[29] For a study of the architecture of Siheyuan, see Ronald Knapp, *China's Old Dwellings* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2000), 167-220.

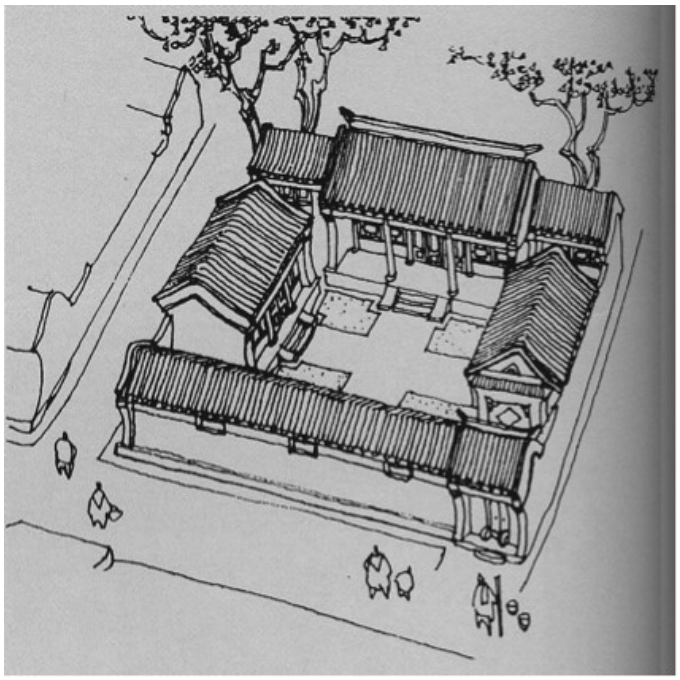

Figure 4-3. The Basic *Siheyuan* Style. Reproduced from http://www.wenwuchina.com/news/zhuanti/detail/201307/11/5152.shtml, accessed March 23, 2015.

If lacking the approval of parents or *lingjia*, obtaining courtship and intimacy with actresses would become a highly sophisticated and costly undertaking for patrons. First of all, they need to win the heart of the actress and convince her to take the risk of violating the will of her parents. Moreover, they had to bribe the actress' servants, gatekeeper, and *genbao* (跟包 lit. "followers") who accompanied the actress to the playhouse everyday.[30] Thus only a few patrons with enough financial means could manage a clandestine courtship. Nonetheless, the entertainment literature was filled with stories about frustrated attempts of patrons at courtship. Such patrons were laughed at for spending the money and effort but achieving nothing in the end.

[30] See the stories told in Zhang, *Zhang Xiaoxian waishi*, 1921.

That a lot of actresses entertained patrons at their residences did not mean they were willing to accept any approaching stranger. Fans who wanted to meet an actress in person usually needed to approach her networks of patrons and acquaintances but might find it difficult wihout introduction. If they lacked the skills to write and compose poetry, they might be denied access to the actress' literati fan society. If short of money, they might be rejected upon approaching the actress' manager or family members. To circumvent these obstacles, some fans attempted to visit actresses' residences directly. For most actresses, whose private life was closely watched by their parents, neighbors, and police, such sudden visits could be embarrassing and troubling. Refusal to accept the visitor risked offending a patron who might turn out to be powerful. Admitting them into the house would risk their reputation and arouse gossip. Such visits often led to conflicts between a visitor, who stubbornly insisted on meeting his sought-after actress, and the family members, who were irritated by the recklessness of the visitor.

Sometimes, the peace of an actress' residence could be disrupted even at night. For example, almost at midnight on 13 July 1919, an unknown young man in his twenties came to knock at the door of the actress Su Caixia's residence. The actress' brother answered the door and asked his intentions. The man claimed that his surname was Cui and he worked for the headquarters of the Fengtian army, a provincial military force that rivaled the Beiyang government in controlling Beijing. Then he pushed himself into the courtyard despite the refusal of the brother. This intrusion terrified the whole family. While the actress' mother rushed to hide her sleeping daughter, the brother immediately called the policeman patrolling the area. When questioned by the policeman about his intentions, the man replied: "The actress is making a living as a performer, so it is all

right for me to come to her residence."[31] While the policeman was calling his superior to ask for instructions to deal with the situation, the man walked away unnoticed.

The response of Cui to the inquisition of the patrol officer is quite revealing. Claiming that it was natural for him to solicit entertainment from an actress at her residence even at midnight, the man seemed to believe that actresses were no more than the low-rank prostitutes who entertained clients at the places where they lived. Actually, such conflation of actresses and courtesans/prostitutes into the same category of entertainment women was not unusual. The popular discourse emphasized the parallel between actresses and courtesans/prostitutes: they were both sexual objects of male desire and made a living or maintained a line of business out of their physical attractiveness. Cultivating private ties with actresses resembled very much courtship with elite courtesans, both of which required a period of emotional cultivation and economic investment before sexual consummation.[32] Nonetheless, the identification of actresses as lower-class prostitutes, who readily exchanged sex for financial return, was often erroneous. Actresses' meetings with patrons at their own residence was a highly regulated form of socialization rather than an exchange of money or gifts for sex.

The Police

The police was integral to the theatrical world in early Republican Beijing. In the late Qing period, according to Alison Dray-Novey, Beijing was the most policed city in the

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[31] "Jingshi jingcha ting wai zuo yi qu qu shu guanyu Cui Zhaofeng ji Cui Ziheng jiamao fengjun silingbu mingyi wang nüling Su Caixia jia nei zinao deng qing de cheng," [The report of the first left precinct of the Outer City of Capital Police Department about the matter that Cui Zhaofeng, aka, Cui Ziheng impersonated a official at headquarter of the Feng army and made trouble in the actress Su Caixia's house] July 1919, file no. J181-019-26244, Beijing Municipal Archives, Beijing.

[32] For a study on gradations of prostitution, see Hershatter, *Dangerous Pleasures*, 41-53.

world, maintaining a large gendarmerie system and an extremely high ratio of police to population (approximately one policeman for every thirty inhabitants).[33] The police force kept growing in the early Republican era as the government not only took over the gendarmerie structure but also recruited new police forces for the task of maintaining social order and civilizing the urban community.[34] The large number of policemen exercised their power in almost every aspect of urban life, from street disputes to family and workplace issues, charitable activities, public services and census registration.[35] Actresses often encountered policemen in everyday life. In the playhouses, the so-call *tanya* (彈壓), a type of policemen specifically assigned to maintain order in the theater, monitored carefully not only performance on the stage but also behavior backstage. They were also tasked to enforce the separation of the sexes within the playhouses. If a *tanya* policeman noticed that an actress somehow flirted with male staff backstage, he would ban the actress from acting and punish the theater manager.[36] Outside the playhouses, a large number of policemen were deployed on the streets and in the neighborhoods to mediate conflicts and repress disorder day and night. The patrol policemen could protect actresses from unsolicited harassment, but at the same time keep a watchful eye on them.

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[33] Alison Dray-Novey, "Spatial Order and Police in Imperial Beijing," *The Journal of Asian Studies*, no.4 (1993): 905.
[34] Dray-Novey, "The Twilight of the Beijing Gendarmerie, 1900-1924."
[35] Ibid. Also see, Strand, *Rickshaw Beijing*, 66-73, 91, 95; Michael H. K. Ng, *Legal Transplantation in Early Twentieth-century China: Practicing Law in Republican Beijing (1912-1937)* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2014), 30-52.
[36] "Jingshi jingcha ting xingzheng chu guanyu Yanxi tang xiyuan nüling yu nanzi tiaoxiao youci chufa xiyuan zhishi ren de han," [The official communication of the administrative agency of Capital Police Department about the punishment of the manager of Yanxi tang playhouse for its actress' flirtation with men] June 1918, file no. J181-019-21117, Beijing Municipal Archives, Beijing.

The second time the young man with the surname of Cui showed up at the door of the actress Su Caixia's residence, the whole family managed to put him into police custody. The police severely punished Cui by parading him in the streets before confining him for five months in the *jiaoyang ju* (教養局 the Bureau of Education), an agency set up by the police department for poor and jobless men and women. The severe punishment was probably less due to Cui's intrusion of the actress' residence than the fact that Cui passed himself as an officer in the Fengtian army, led by the northern warlord Zhang Zuolin who had his base in Manchuria and participated in several conflicts with the Zhili clique for control of Beijing. Seeing this man as an imposter, the police section chief instructed—

> Cui Ziheng passed himself off [as an officer in the headquarters of] the Fengtian army, which people most fear, and intruded into the actress Su Caixia's residence at midnight…This was too bold and outrageous![37]

In most cases of harassment at actresses' residences, the police were not satisfied with simply punishing the intruders. Assuming a moralistic role in governing the society, the policemen tended to suspect actresses of entertaining patrons, or worse, of being engaged in secret prostitution at their homes. For example, after his attempt to go inside the actress Du Yuhong's house at midnight failed, Yu Yulin, a young man working as a clerk at the Bank of China, immediately went to the police station to take revenge on the actress' family. Pretending to be a police superintendent, he ordered the station chief to raid the Du residence where a group of people had gathered to gamble. To dispel the policemen's hesitation to act quickly, he further added that there was nothing to worry about since none of the gambling people were from military or political circles. The section chief then led two other policemen to eavesdrop at the door of the Du residence.

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[37] "Beijing shi jingcha ju wai zuo yi qu qu shu guanyu nüling Su Caixia kong Su Zhang shi zurao huijia yi'an."

Everything being quiet, the chief ordered one of his subordinates to climb onto the wall to inspect. To their disappointment, nothing seemed unusual inside the house.

The next day late at night, Yu Yulin showed up again at the door of the house, and again the actress' family turned him away. Therefore, several days later, at midnight, he sneaked into the house. The brother heard the noise and caught him in the courtyard. Yu was sent to the police station where he was only reprimanded. Instead of punishing the intruder, the police department began to question the propriety of the actress' behaviors. Two patrol officers were sent to investigate whether Du Yunhong had "acted ostentatiously" or seduced patrons to her residence. The investigators first went to interview the neighbors of the Du residence. They were told that they had not seen anything ostentatious or suspicious since the Du family moved in more than a month before. The Du family was always careful to keep the doors tightly shut once the actress came back home from the theater. Then the investigators went to talk with the neighborhood chief inspector, who had been told by his superior to pay special attention to the actress' house since the day she moved in. Probably to the disappointment of the investigators, the inspector informed them that nothing inappropriate had happened. Without giving up, the investigators went to talk with the two managers of the Zhonghe theater, where the actress performed. The managers told them that the actress had not done anything immoral backstage. Once the performance was over, she just went home without lingering. The only ostentatious thing the actress might have done was riding a two-horse carriage to commute between the theater and her residence.

Despite all the interviewees giving similar statements, the investigators were not entirely persuaded that the actress acted properly both at home and at work. They tried to dig into

her past by talking to the chief inspector of another neighborhood where she had lived. The inspector stated that there had been a lot of newspaper reports on her seductive behavior; but time and again when patrol officers paid sudden visits to the house they had found nothing unusual or improper. The actress, he added, could not bear the repetitive police investigation and finally decided to move out of the neighborhood. However, the inspector's words still failed to completely dispel their suspicion. They indicated that in their report that there had been occasions such as *tanghui*, private parties that could give the actress the opportunity to seduce patrons.[38]

The case shows how closely the police watched actresses and how obsessed they were with regulating their behaviors. Unlike the fanatic fans who attempted to treat actresses no differently from lower-class prostitutes, the police took great pains to maintain the line between actresses and prostitutes. They allowed prostitutes to entertain clients at their own places, but considered any private contact of actresses with their patrons as secret promiscuity. However, as with patrons, police activity had the effect of stimulating the popular imagination of actresses as sexual objects and their residences as places for promiscuity. And police surveillance was no less invasive than patrons' intrusions.

Prejudiced to view actresses as pathetic sexual objects and regard the acting profession as inherently disreputable for women, the police always attempted to dissuade young actresses from acting if they encountered any problem in their life or profession. For example, on 16 December 1915, the thirteen-year-old actress, Bai Yanyun (白燕雲), made her stage debut at Guangdelou playhouse in Beijing. Playing a male role with

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[38] "Zhao Wenhai Accuses Wang Zhonglin, aka, Yu Yulin of sneaking into the actress Du Yunhong's residence."

martial arts, she attempted to impress her audience with several special techniques such as "ning xuanzi 擰旋子," that is, repeatedly taking a flying leap into the air and spinning her body before falling to the stage. Nonetheless, it turned out a failure. After two or three spins she lost her balance and fell. Without much sympathy, the audience shouted and booed her. To make up for the mistake, she took an audacious move to turn a somersault from three tables stacked on top of each other. This time she barely made it. The landing was not steady so that two assistants came over to hold her body. Without quitting, she continued to do "ning xuanzi," but again she fell over after three spins. After humiliating shouts from the audience, the embarrassed actress made a quick exit from the stage.

This unsuccessful debut might have been quite ordinary for a young, nervous actress making her first appearance on the stage. But an indignant spectator turned this incident into a commentary and published it in the newspaper *Jinghua Daily*, accusing the actress' master of abusing the young, inexperienced actress. In his account, the master scolded the actress from the wings of the stage, showing no sympathy for her failure and forcing her to raise the difficulty of her jumps. The cruel treatment in public, he deduced, meant that the master treated his disciple in an even harsher manner in training.[39]

The newspaper coverage drew the attention of the police department, who sent the chief patrol officer to investigate whether the abuse had occurred. After interviews with the

[39] This piece of newspaper article was included in the police report, "Jingshi jingcha ting guanyu chuan nüling Bai Yanyun de cheng," [The official communication of Capital Police Department about summoning the actress Bai Yanyun] January 1916, file no. J181-019-13611, Beijing Municipal Archives, Beijing.

father and uncle of the actress, the neighbors of the actress, the theater manager and her master, the officer concluded that the abuse was pure imagination. According to the report to his superior, the actress was from a once wealthy Manchu family, who hired the instructor to teach their daughter at their residence, which made abuse almost impossible. The instructor, Cui Yulou, felt angry about the newspaper report and immediately asked to stop teaching the girl to avoid further trouble. The family, convinced by the good job the teacher had done, refused the request and insisted that Cui continued to teach their daughter.

The officer in charge was convinced by the report, concluding that the abuse was sheer fabrication. Nonetheless, he did not end the case here. Instead, he wrote a few comments as follows:

> The family of the actress Bai Yanyun is wealthy. But her father and uncle let the daughter learn theatrical performance, which is especially destructive to morals. Bai Yanyun and her father and uncle should be summoned to the police department for questioning. The family should be stopped from involvement in theatrical occupation. After this, a clear and reasonable verdict should be written and sent for newspaper publication.[40]

Under police pressure, the father promised to dissuade Yanyun from acting within three days. Nonetheless, the determined actress, who proclaimed that acting was her own choice for self-independence and repaying her parents, resisted the decision by refusing to eat.[41] So the father went to the police department asking permission for his daughter to learn *wenxi*, civilized plays without using martial arts. The officer in charge declined the request and allowed the father five days to dissuade his daughter from acting. Suspicious of the father's statement, he sent an investigator to find out what really prevented the girl

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[40] "Jingshi jingcha ting guanyu chuan nüling Bai Yanyun de cheng."
[41] Ibid.

from quitting her theatrical career. With more interviews, the investigator confirmed that Yanyun had been enthusiastic about acting from a very young age. In the past two years she had made great efforts to master theatrical techniques. At the same time, the investigator added that the family had invested substantially in making Yanyun an actress by hiring teachers and purchasing costumes; they wanted to keep the girl in her career to make up the declining fortune of the family. The officer in charge was disappointed with this report, but resigned himself to its conclusions:

> Father and daughter are both strong-willed. So just let them be. But the disreputable social custom is frustrating![42]

Actresses' resistance to police pressure to quit the acting profession did not always work. The police department often ignored their enthusiasm for the art and their own will to continue the acting career despite all obstacles. The officers believed that they had the responsibility to rescue vulnerable girls from the cruel acting profession. Therefore, when the seventeen-year-old actress Shao Biyun (邵璧雲) became an orphan after her father died in January 1917, the police department turned down the proposals for adoption by her landlord and her acting teacher who each promised to let her continue her acting career until she got married. Biyun also insisted upon staying in the theatrical profession. Her strong will and persistence convinced the investigators abut was disregarded by the officer in charge. He ordered the actress placed in a female factory managed by the *jiaoyang yuan*, for the purpose of protecting her from being "led astray."[43]

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[42] Ibid.

[43] "Jingshi jingcha ting wai you er qu biao song nüling Shao Biyun wuqin keyi qing heban yi'an." For a study on the salvage institutions in early Republican Beijing, see Ding Rui, "Beiyang zhengfu shiqi jingshi jingcha ting de funü jiuzhu," *Beijing shehui kexue*, no.1 (2011): 45-50.

The Newspapers

The entrance of actresses into the theater profession coincided with the rapid development of urban commercial newspapers in early Republican Beijing. Like the entertainment newspaper in Hollywood, as Catherine Yeh has discussed, these newspapers were a common medium for advertising theatrical performance and exchanging information about individual performers. To make performers into stars, the newspaper often dipped into details of their private life to create star image and personality.[44] While the newspaper publicity could make performers famous, they could also disturb them by intruding into their privacy and even potentially ruin them by releasing or fabricating disgraceful information. Moreover, as I will elaborate in Chapter 5, these newspapers in the early Republican era were heavily involved in the theatrical patronage system in which many editors were well-known patrons who helped like-minded fans to promote their favored players. In the highly competitive entertainment market, newspaper editors and patrons tended to use newspapers to spread personal, scandalous information about other performers.[45]

While both actors and actresses in Beijing faced the threat of invasion of privacy and defamation, the violation of an actress' privacy and honor was often much more intense. Hyperbolic stories about actresses' private lives always had sexual implication that could easily lead readers to imagine these actresses as promiscuous women. Theatrical critics and newspapers editors might directly accuse actresses of sexual impropriety. Despite the

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[44] For recent research on the role of newspapers in making opera performers into stars, see Catherine Yeh, "The Press and the Rise of Peking Opera Singer as National Star."

[45] For an analysis of this issue, see Catherine Yeh, "A Public Love affair or a Nasty Game?—The Chinese Tabloid Newspaper and the Rise of the Opera Singer as Star." *European Journal of Asian Studies*, no.3 (2006): 13-51.

serious challenge from the reformist discourse, the early Republican capital was still a society that highly valued female chastity. Gossip and rumors about an actress' sexual behavior could not only cause her emotional suffering but also jeopardize her theatrical career and, as was shown earlier, even incur unrelenting police harrassment. Moreover, a lot of malicious slander in newspapers was actually the result of revenge for frustrated blackmail attempts and propositions made by patrons and editors. For instance, when the editor of *Theater News*, Chang Yueqiao was denied entrance into the house of the actress Du Yunhong, he published a series of defamatory articles in several newspapers in Beijing in revenge. The rumors and concomitant police surveillance caused the actress such great trauma that she attempted suicide.[46]

While the actress Du Yunhong responded to the rumors by trying to prove her moral integrity and condemn the wrongdoers with her suicide, the actress Liu Xikui, with the help of her mother, confronted similarly vitriolic attacks in a more strategic manner.[47] On 29 Feburary 1915, the editor of the newspaper *Theatrical News* published an article under the pen name of Liao Yusheng to expose the *zhenxiang* (真相 true face) of the actress. He described the actress as an ugly and immoral woman who had engaged in clandestine prostitution in Tianjin. The malicious remarks outraged a lot of Liu's patrons who took up their pens to fight back. After that Liu's patrons and opponents engaged in intensive debate, which contemporaries sarcastically called "the battle of pens" comparable to the

[46] "Jingshi jingcha ting wai you er qu qu shu guanyu nüling Du Yunhong tun jin jiezhi xian you yiyuan zhiyu de baogao." & "Jingshi jingcha ting nei zuo yi qu qu shu guanyu Wang Zhonglin shenye qianru Du Yunhong jia yi'an."

[47] According to Margery Wolf, suicide was the most powerful accusation that a traditional woman could make. See Margery Wolf, "Women and Suicide in China," in *Women in Chinese Society*, ed. Margery Wolf and Roxane Witke. (Stanford: Stanford University Press), 112.

World War in Europe (further discussed in Chapter 5).[48] The debate lasted more than a month in February and March 1915. Then a newspaper article under Liu Xikui's byline was published to ask both sides to stop arguing. The article of four thousand words was very probably ghostwritten by one of Liu's patrons; nevertheless, it was likely that the actress asked him to write the article, or that it was written with the actress' consent. The tone of the article was quite similar to that of the poems the actress had submitted to newspapers, so the voice of the actress can more or less be heard. [49]

Like her previous poems, in which the actress established herself as a young, vulnerable and chaste woman and a filial daughter taking care of her widowed mother, the newspaper article started with a self-portrayal of an innocent actress living alone with her mother and making a living out of acting.[50] Then it went further to question the rationality of both her opponents and defenders—

> I don't want to bear the presumptuous defamatory remarks regardless of propriety, nor do I want to hear frivolous compliments judging my appearance. You can stop now! Xikui is unlucky to be an actress on whom you can comment at will. If I was born in a noble family, can you imagine defaming or praising me so casually? Would you allow the women in your own family to be defamed or praised so casually?[51]

Comparing the actress to women not employed outside the household, the article not only highlighted the predicament of a woman in the theater profession and the public space but also criticized the newspaper editors and writers for aggravating the predicament. But the

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[48] A writer adapted this incident into a short story for the magazine *Saturday*, Hen Wo, "Nüling Liu Xikui zhi zhanshi," *Libai Liu*, no.55 (1915): 25-34.
[49] It was questioned whether the poems were ghostwritten. The newspaper editors clarified that Xikui indeed sent poems to the press and they had someone polish her words. See FeiFei, "Xu Liu Xikui yishen tanpian lu," 30.
[50] All the eight poems were included in Yankan daoren, ed., *Liu Xikui jinji*, 12~13; two of the poems were reprinted in the newspaper article "Ji Liu Xikui," *Shen bao*, Oct. 14, 1939.
[51] The article is included in Yankan daoren, ed., *Liu Xikui jinji*, 13-16.

newspaper *Theatrical News* ignored the request and printed more stories damaging to the actress' image. A series of accounts attacked her sexual reputation, portraying her as a kept woman or a prostitute, and elaborated the story that a playboy forced a kiss on her in public. When the newspaper reported that the actress had an obnoxious body odor, the actress and her mother reacted with outrage. The mother, with the actress' bodyguard, went to the office of the editor, Wang Yintang, to complain. The disturbance at the press alarmed the patrol officers who brought both parties to the police station.

At the police station, the mother accused the editor of slander. She also told a story to convince the policemen that the editor had motives for destroying her daughter's reputation. According to her account, Wang had knocked at their door and asked for 500 dollars if they wanted the newspaper to publish laudatory words about the actress. The actress' mother turned down the proposition. The frustrated editor took his revenge by publishing defamatory news about the actress ever since. The story was believable, given the profitable involvement of the journalists and editors of early Republican newspapers in the theatrical patronage system. Possessing a lot of information about the theatrical world and being able to manipulate public opinion, they could obtain substantial material gains from actresses desiring to make their name and from wealthy patrons seeking to court them and promote their public image. [52]

Nonetheless, it is unclear if Liu's mother was telling the truth, since no evidence was given to support her statement. If a man indeed went to the actress' residence to extort

[52] See, for example, Zhang, *Zhang Xiaoxian Waishi*, 51-57. It shows how a young man named Wu Qiu sought help from the editors of *Theatrical News* to get close to the actress Zhang Xiaoxian. He paid the dinners and theater tickets for the journalist and editors of newspapers—whom he considered to be *neihang,* insiders of the theatrical world—in order to get advice to break into the patronage system.

money from them, it might have been someone else, simply because at the press office the mother failed to identity the extortioner. The charge of exortion was more likely the mother's strategy to convict the editor of slander. Given the fact that the editor was a well-known fan of the actress Jin Yulan, defamatory press comment was probably just his response to the rocketing popularity of Liu, whose arrival in Beijing seriously challenged the established status of other prominent actresses.

The police finally submitted the case to the local court for adjudication, but the actress was dissatisfied with its decision and appealed to the Supreme Court. The court ordered the newspaper to post a correction notice acknowledging their earlier untrue stories.[53] But it did not require the editor or his newspaper to apologize to the actress, let alone pay compensation. Without seriously punishing the newspaper for defamation, the case could barely serve as a caution to other editors and newspapers. It is not surprising that right after Liu sued *Xiju xinwen*, another newspaper, *Shuntian shibao,* published an article calling the actress a heinous villain for infringing on the freedom of theater commentary and journalism by her suit.[54] Thus the attentions of the press could be as difficult for actresses to deal with as those of the police.

The Elopement of Zhang Xiaoxian

Actresses' stepping outside of the inner quarters to perform on the public stage, as was shown earlier, was not as liberating as one might expect. The family or quasi-family relationships not only facilitated and controlled their involvement in the theatrical business but further intervened in their marital situation. Moreover, actresses confronted

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[53] Yankan daoren,"Shu Liu," in *Liu Xikui Jinji*, 7.
[54] Taotao, "Liu Xikui e guan man ying," *Shuntian shibao*, Mar. 19, 1915.

the blurred boundaries between the public and the private. Their appearance on stage was accepted in practice but morally suspect. They were not really public women: their public presence outside the stage was eye-catching but limited in many ways. However, withdrawal to a private life was also impossible. For lower-ranking actresses, entertaining patrons at their residences was a necessary strategy for career survival and advancement. Even for actresses who wanted to preserve their privacy, not only did patrons and fans attempt to intrude into their home, but also the newspapers dug into their private lives and the police placed them under surveillance at all times and in all places. All these old and new difficulties that actresses faced more or less justify many scholars' pessimistic view of the engagement of women with theatrical performance in the early twentieth century. For example, Cheng Weikun regarded these actresses "as 'public' women and agents of mass media, they were *utilized* by men for different purposes." [55] Nonetheless, overemphasis on the multiple forms of power exercised on actresses neglects the agency of these women. As is shown in the above cases, a few actresses were capable of appropriating public spaces and navigating the blurred boundaries between private and public to achieve their personal objectives.

[55] Cheng, "The Use of 'Public' Women."

Figure 4-4. A Photography of Zhang Xiaoxian Reading. Reproduced from Zhang Qicai ed. *Zhang Xiaoxian waishi* (Beijing & Tianjin: Jingjin chubanshe, 1921).

Figure 4-5. A Photograph of Zhang Xiaoxian on Stage. Reproduced from Zhang Qicai ed. *Zhang Xiaoxian waishi* (Beijing & Tianjin: Jingjin chubanshe, 1921)

Another good example of actresses seeking self-fulfillment by way of manipulating their own publicity and the newspapers-generated public opinion was the story of the star actress Zhang Xiaoxian, who ran away from home one day in late May 1921. The disappearance of the actress terrified her parents, who relied on their daughter to

financially support the whole family of six. They immediately called the police in the French concession in Tianjin to which they had moved from Beijing several months earlier. The policeman taking charge of the case suggested the parents place an announcement in the newspaper *News of Beijing and Tianjin* looking for their daughter. Upon the pleadings of the illiterate parents, the policeman finally drafted the announcement. In the heartbroken tone of the helpless, repentant parents, the announcement emphasized how desperately the whole family, including the parents, her brother and sister-in-law, her niece and even the pet dog, missed Xiaoxian. It ended with the parents' promise that they would stop intervening in Xiaoxian's freedom of marriage as long as the actress communicated with them.[1]

Several days later, the actress responded. She sent a letter to the newspaper signed with the name Yunshang (雲裳), an esteemed name that a literatus-patron had once given her. Given the actress' modest literacy, her lover or someone else could have written the letter for her. Compared with the announcement of her parents, Xiaoxian's letter was written in a much more dispassionate tone—

> My blessed parents:
>
> This time Xiaoxian is really sad, as you are having a hard time. Brought up by you for over ten years, Xiaoxian has not repaid you. Xiaoxian has sung opera for several years. With all the hardships, I somehow helped the whole family. Now Xiaoxian is growing older day by day, but you have not considered my future. You have been hypercritical of every marriage proposal made for me in the past. On the one hand, you crave considerable betrothal gifts, on the other hand, you want Xiaoxian to marry a man from a wealthy noble family to live a comfortable life. You have no idea that upper-class families will not welcome Xiaoxian. Even if they accept Xiaoxian at this moment, it is highly possible that they would ditch me in the future. I much prefer to enjoy the harmonious home life in a middle-

[1] The original text in *News of Beijing and Tianjin* is not seen. It was quoted in *Zhang Xiaoxian*, 112.

> class family rather than be the wife of a high-ranking man. Xiaoxian had bitterly told you these thoughts, but you insisted on getting sizable betrothal gifts and [sending me to] a family of rank and fortune, which was wrong…When the train reached Tangshan, it occurred to me that I had not taken anything with me when leaving. You must have taken my departure as an attempt to commit suicide and you would be overwhelmed by Xiaoxian's death and by the thought that the whole family would have no way to make a living…So on May 10th, I went to Tangshan Bank of Communication to send 2,000 dollars to father with the name of Yunshang…Sending the 2,000 dollars home proves that Xiaoxian is not seduced by someone and that Xiaoxian is not an ungrateful person and does not owe much to parents and brother, as well as the Heaven and the Gods…If you receive the 2,000 dollars, please make an announcement in the newspaper to assure me. If you would like to communicate with me, just ask the newspaper to send the message. This is also the responsibility and value of newspapers, as well as the utility of newspaper announcements. If you change your mind and you are responsibly and convincingly persuaded that your daughter is not iron-hearted, there will be a chance we will meet in the future and a possibility that I may want to repay you more besides the 2,000 dollars. With best wishes.[2]

Seeing the letter from Xiaoxian, the parents quickly placed another announcement. It started with an expression of their relief to hear from Xiaoxian and their appreciation of her filial piety and contribution to the family. Nonetheless, perhaps encouraged by Xiaoxian's responsiveness, the parents expressed their reservations about Xiaoxian's exercise of marriage freedom. They insisted on a certain degree of parental authority over the marriage of daughters——

> The family needs to investigate more [your proposed future-husband], completely for your life-long happiness and out of the concern that you might make an emotional mistake at the moment. There is a good old saying: 'Even free marriage, more or less requires parental instruction!'…[3]

This communication between Xiaoxian and her parents in a newspaper created a sensation. The fandom was said to be excited, bewildered, or bothered. Literati-patrons

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[2] The original text is not seen. It was reprinted in *Beijing wanbao*, June 4, 1921 and also quoted in *Zhang Xiaoxian Waishi*, 116-117.
[3] Quoted in *Zhang Xiaoxian Waishi*, 120.

took up their pens to explain or comment on the incident. Newspapers in Beijing and Tianjin reprinted the letter and concocted all sort of stories about the "erotic history" of the actress Zhang Xiaoxian eloping with her lover. She was linked with Li Yuanhong (黎元洪 1864~1928), a retired president of the Republic of China, who was known to be fond of Xiaoxian.[4] He had been frequently seen in Xiaoxian's theater loudly applauding her and had publicly denied in the press the rumor he was offering 7,000 dollars as a betrothal gift to marry Xiaoxian.[5] Beijing Evening News asserted that the actress had run away to escape his marriage proposal and contrasted the relationship between Li Yuanhong and Zhang Xiaoxian to the love affair between Sun Yat-sen and Song Qingling—which had culminated in marriage in 1915, lamenting Li's misfortune was in being unable to win the heart of his beloved actress.[6]

Most of the accounts by the patrons and the newspapers were based on speculation, since neither the parents' announcement nor Xiaoxian's letter revealed that she ran away with a lover. Nonetheless, it turned out later that the speculation was reasonable and in fact correct. In another announcement placed by Xiaoxian's parents in the newspaper several days later, the parents not only confirmed that the 2,000 dollars had been received andrequested that their beloved daughter stop eloping and return home—

> …The intention of the whole family is that we want to see you frequently and we will put the money issue aside. Millions of dollars are nothing compared to your willingness to maintain close contact with us, which would console Mother and the whole family and cure the illness of Father, and *which would turn your secret marriage into an open and decent one*. Everyone would agree with the idea that we will find you a marriage

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[4] "Zhang Xiaoxian, Li Huangpi, Sun Zhongshan," *Beijing wanbao*, Jun. 4, 1921; "Zhang Xiaoxian, Li Huangpi, Sun Zhongshan sanxu," *Beijing wanbao*, Jun. 6, 1921.
[5] Zhang, *Zhang Xiaoxian waishi*, 115.
[6] "Zhang Xiaoxian, Li Huangpi, Sun Zhongshan sanxu."

> witness, let you decide and allow your marriage freedom. Can this not be sincere enough? The whole family expects your equally sincere response. The mutual affection of you two is no doubt important, but the love your parents have for you is equally important…Also your husband ought to accept your native family and your parents, which would make him your true husband and attest his respect for your *renge* (人格 personhood)…[7]

The announcement indicated that Xiaoxian's parents had already figured out that the daughter did not run away from home alone but went with one of her lovers, though they were not sure with whom Xiaoxian had eloped. However, the promises that they made did not convince Xiaoxian. In her public response, the actress expressed her concern that the whole family would go back on their words once she returned home. Moreover, she refuted her parents' questioning about her secret marriage—

> Again, you mentioned that returning home could turn the secret marriage into an open and decent one. I have deliberated on the issue. Everything I have done since my departure is right and can be told to others in the future. I would also like to declare to the society to make people know the hardships [that I endured], understand my rushed tactics, and forgive what I have done. If you still believe that your daughter has taken a wrong path, I will stick to my mistakes and never change my mind, otherwise I would be a shameless person.[8]

She further questioned her parents' sincerity about allowing her freedom of marriage and facilitating an official wedding for her and her husband—

> If we do not figure out a way to do it with great discrejtion, [I am afraid that] you two would ask again for second thoughts on the marriage. It is best for you to keep in mind both the years of hardship that your daughter endured in the theatrical profession and my reputation, as well as the filial piety that your daughter has showed since leaving. Please do not prevaricate; openly and frankly figure out an effective way to instruct your daughter, and then your daughter will propose a way for our meeting.[9]

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[7] "Xinghua xianzi zhi huanxun," *Beijing wanbao*, Jun. 12, 1921.
[8] "Xiaoxian yifengshu, jiashu san guanggao," *Beijing wanbao*, Jun. 20, 1921.
[9] Ibid.

The letter ended in a tone of a filial daughter aware of her mistakes and craving her parents' forgiveness. But her determination was undiminished. So, getting the message, the parents placed a final announcement in the newspaper swearing that they would not intervene in Xiaoxian's marriage freedom at all. The oath-like statement finally worked. Several days later, the secretive lover emerged, sending a letter to Xiaoxian's mother begging for her understanding and forgiveness. It was a man named Yang Dongsheng, who was a patron of Xiaoxian's from when she had performed in Beijing (before moving to Tianjin several months earlier).

Yang Dongsheng was actually from an eminent family. His father was said to have been a magistrate, and his mother was also from a family of high rank. After the death of his father, Yang relied on his maternal uncle, a former high-ranking official who bought him a minor position in the Finance Department. Later on, the uncle even helped Yang get a decent job in the Civil Service Office, which paid him enough money to attend theatrical performances and patronize actresses. Yang was an enthusiastic patron of Xiaoxian. He reorganized the "*Xing she* (杏社)" fan club dedicated to patronize Xiaoxian and promote her reputation. Perhaps moved by Yang's persistence and sincerity, Xiaoxian fell in love with the man, who was in his thirties, despite his having a wife and a concubine already. They dated secretly for three or four years—most often at the residence of Xiaoxian's colleague, another star actress Yu Zixia (于紫霞)—and finally became secretly engaged.[10]

[10] Zhang, *Zhang Xiaoxian waishi*, 69-73.

Earlier when Yang had gone to Xiaoxian's parents to propose marriage to their daughter, the old couple had indirectly rejected him, telling Yang that they needed Xiaoxian to stay in the theater profession for two more years. Yang, unwilling to wait for two years, had argued with them, resulting in an unpleasant conflict. In order to separate Xiaoxian from Yang, the parents decided to move the whole family to Tianjin. Xiaoxian continued performing in Tianjin where she gained no less popularity and patronage than she had enjoyed in Beijing. Among all her patrons, the former president Li Yuanhong was best known. The general public took enormous delight in talking about the relationship between the once-great man and the actress. When it was known that Yang was the one who seduced Xiaoxian, people concluded that Li was still responsible for Xiaoxian's running away, as it was imagined that Li's overture to court the actress threatened Yang and pressured him to act quickly.[11]

Despite all the attempts of other patrons to please her, Xiaoxian was committed to her relationship with Yang Dongsheng, who helped to plot her elopement. Her efforts turned out a success. She finally met her parents in Beijing. With the parents' agreement, Yang's family held a wedding to welcome the actress as the *san taitai* [third mistress] of Yang. After the wedding, Xiaoxian returned to visit her native family in Tianjin, as was required by the standard marriage ritual. The Yang family managed a pageant procession to escort Xiaoxian home. And the Zhang family also sent a car to welcome their daughter. Later in the day, Xiaoxian—dressed in extreme extravagance—went to the theater where she had performed. She was warmly greeted and congratulated by the "sisters" from her previous theater life. When she returned to Beijing, Yang asked her to join him alone in a remote

[11] "Xinghua xianzi zhi huanxun," *Beijing wanbao,* Jun. 22, 1921.

city where he had been offered a job as the county magistrate. In the new place, it was said, Yang introduced Xiaoxian as his *taitai* [the first wife].[12]

If the marriage was not so worthy of celebration for the native family of the actress, it was equally disappointing for the editor of the *Beijing and Tianjin News*, who wrote a dozen announcements for the parents and involved himself in the months-long incident with great enthusiasm. Before the parents met Xiaoxian in Tianjin, the editor had gone to Yang's residence in Beijing and proposed that a public wedding be held in the Daxin Theater in Tianjin or the Central Park in Beijing, the most conspicuous public spaces in the two cities. He also offered to serve as the wedding witness who would comment on Xiaoxian's elopement and encourage every actress to "aspire to defend her rights of marriage freedom and struggle against the control of parents and *lingjia*."[13] But his proposal was rejected by Yang. It was understood that Yang did not want to invite public judgment on his seduction of Xiaoxian and his marrying her as a mistress (*san taitai*) rather than a wife (*taitai*). The real intention of the editor, Liao Yusheng, who had earlier wielded his pen to damage the reputation of the actress Liu Xikui with malicious, sensational remarks in *Theatrical News*, was also dubious. His newspaper *Beijing and Tianjin News* was very likely no different from other contemporary newspapers, which padded their pages with eroticized imagination and fantasy about Xiaoxian's elopement. The promise that the editor made to portray Xiaoxian as an actress capable of struggling

[12] Zhang, *Zhang Xiaoxian waishi*, 133-136.
[13] Zhang, *Zhang Xiaoxian waishi*, 133.

for her own marriage freedom at the wedding was probably an attempt to publicize himself as a journalist by playing up the May Fourth discourse on the "New Woman."[14]

While most patrons and the journalists interpreted Xiaoxian's elopement in a ridiculously eroticized manner, the parents and the public opinion regarded the incident with a requisite disapproving attitude. It was the actress herself who gave meaning to her own actions. Not only did she violate parental authority and seek marital happiness through her actions, she also justified them in the media-generated public. Claiming to be a filial daughter who contributed substantially to the family economy with her salary from theatrical performance, Xiaoxian sought to live up to the social expectation of being a Confucian daughter. By asserting her right of freedom to choose a spouse, she also challenged and moved beyond the limitations of a Confucian daughter. Mobilizing the economic independence and the publicity she enjoyed as a notable actress, Xiaoxian succeeded in achieving her own purposes. Her ending up as a concubine, as well as her engagement in the inherently scandalous theater profession, made her remote from the May Fourth ideal of the "New Woman," who was imagined by the (mostly male) feminist intellectuals to be educated, involved in a meaningful vocation, and desiring monogamy. Nonetheless, through her words and actions and by manipulating boundaries between public and private, the actress Xiaoxian eventually sought her own path to self-fulfillment as a woman of independence and personal happiness.

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[14] For research on the "New Woman," see, for example, Sarah E. Stevens: "Figuring Modernity: The New Woman and the Modern Girl in Republican China," *NWSA Journal* 15, no.3 (2003): 82-103.

Conclusion

Actresses in the early Republican Beijing occupied a liminal space in discourse, belonging to neither public nor private, neither traditional nor modern. Stepping outside of the inner quarters to perform on public stages, actresses were no longer traditional women. In a society that was in search of the "new woman," actresses as vocational women earning a salary were tolerated. Nonetheless, they were hardly the "new woman" ideal: they received little modern education and engaged in a profession that turned them into oppressed laborers and sexual objects.

Though reformist intellectuals advocated women's liberation from familial constraint and the Republican ideology legitimized women's participation in public vocations, the police still defined women's virtue in the domestic sphere. Assuming a disciplining role, the police were highly suspicious of women's involvement in the theater business and eager to enforce the domestic seclusion of actresses offstage. They even sought to dissuade young girls from the acting profession and return them into the private sphere. However, private seclusion hardly existed for actresses. Parents or *lingjia* regulated their domestic life. Patrons sought courtship at their residence. If they refused such overtures, fanatic patrons attempted to intrude into their houses or spread rumors to damage their reputations. The newspapers dug into actresses' privacy and even fabricated hyperbolic scandals questioning their private virtues and behavioral propriety.

In her study of courtesans in late Qing Shanghai international settlement, Catherine Yeh describes top-ranking courtesans audaciously turning public venues into spaces to display their private love affairs. By showing themselves and their lovers in horse carriages on

the streets or in public parks, they could enhance their standing and attractiveness.[15] For actresses in early Republican Beijing, such transgressive behaviors in public spaces were unlikely. This was partly because the state apparatus in the capital city had tighter rules and better enforcement than foreign concessions. More important, despite some resemblance to elite courtesans, actresses occupied a different discursive space. From the late Qing, a diverse group of actors and theater reformists had worked to distinguish their profession from the demimonde and make its participants respectable social beings. In this discourse, actresses were not considered an estranged, unorthodox social group like courtesans and prostitutes. They were expected to behave like normal, respectable women. It was no doubt because of the influence of this discourse that the press was able to make so much of actresses' private lives.

The limitations of actresses in contrast with courtesans did not mean that actresses failed to appropriate the urban public spaces. This chapter has showed that actresses made use of various public spaces for personal purposes. They commuted on the streets with a spectacular horse carriages to display their status and wealth; they delighted themselves in public entertainment venues, and they also ran to public institutions to solve individual problems. Unlike courtesans, whose appropriation of the public space was outrageous transgression, actresses' resistance of the limited access to the public sphere seemed more subtle. It was not direct violation of the norms that defined a good woman but a strategic negotiation among the different views of feminine virtue and the shifting boundaries of women's place in society that were peculiar to early Republican urban society. Riding a covered horse carriage on the streets, actresses were gazed at though not seen. They did

[15] Yeh, "Playing with the Public."

not completely dismiss the gender norms but destabilized the boundary between *nei* and *wai* and confirmed its permeability.

It was noteworthy that such negotiation was also between the old and the new. In the case of Zhang Xiaoxian's elopement, first of all, the actress simultaneously appealed to the Confucian notion of filial piety and the New Culture notion of marriage freedom, which the contemporary New Culture discourse set as inherently contradictory. It was by repeatedly invoking the Confucian virtue of filial piety that the actress justified herself as a decent human being and her pursuit of marriage freedom. Yet by mobilizing the New Culture notion of marriage freedom, she challenged and moved beyond the limitations of a Confucian daughter. In the end, the path of the actress was neither a Confucian nor a New Culture one. She rejected her parents' intervention in her marital decision yet chose a married life deviating from the New Culture insistence on monogamy.

It is not surprising that an actress like Zhang Xianxian was capable of publicly mobilizing the New Culture concept of marriage freedom. As I have discussed in Chapter 3, actresses were pioneers in staging the varied new dramas, which introduced new ideas of the era, whether as advocacy or as cautionary tale. But it is worth noting that on stage Xiaoxian actually played a variety of conservative roles in the new dramas. For example, in the new drama *Ziyou Baojian*, she played the role of a young male student whose violation of parental authority to pursue free love was severely punished by his later destitution and eventual death. As thus viewed, in the social drama, the actress—no matter how her lines were informed by her stage performance—wrote her own script.

Chapter 5. Writing on Star Actresses: Politics, Morality, and Literati Fandom in Early Republican Beijing

In a wintry morning of 1918, Liang Ji, a literatus educated in Confucian classics and a former Qing official who had wrote a few *xinju* plays, threw himself in an icy pond in Beijing.[1] Like many suicides in the early Republican era, Liang's carefully premeditated suicide garnered a lot of publicity in the press and society.[2] Newspapers and journals not only covered Liang's death but also provided a variety of interpretations of his self-destruction. Liang's life-long friends Peng Yizhong (彭翼仲 1864~1921) and Li Zhongyu (李鐘豫 dates unknown) petitioned the district police department, where Liang had worked, to construct a shrine and a stone stele to remember his meritorious deeds and moral influence.[3] Half a year later, in their journal *New Youth*, the May Fourth intellectuals, together with Liang Ji's son Liang Shuming (梁漱冥 1893~1989), issued a special issue discussing the political and moral implication of Liang's self-imposed death. On the first anniversary of Liang's death, the residents of the neighborhood where Liang had lived spontaneously organized a memorial ceremony for him in a temple near the Jishui tan lake.[4]

Of all the interpretation and appropriation of the meaning of Liang's self-destruction, a type of comment—which came from the theater community—has been long overlooked

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[1] For a detailed account and interpretation of Liang Ji's suicide, see Guy S. Alitto, *The Last Confucian: Liang Shu-ming and the Chinese Dilemma of Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 17~69.
[2] For research on public controversy on several female suicides generated by the expanding print media in early Republican era, see Goodman, "The New Woman Commits Suicide," 68-101; and "Appealing to the Public," 32-69.
[3] "Shengshi yi jian Liang ci," *Shuntian shibao*, Dec. 4, 1918.
[4] "Liang Juchuan zhounina zhuidao," *Shuntian shibao*, Nov. 27, 1919; "Po tian huang zhi zhuidao hui," *Shuntian shibao*, Nov. 28, 1919.

by scholars. The response of theater critics to Liang's death, as the scholar Luo Zhitian observes, was instantaneous, while public reaction of other sorts was belated. Immediately after the suicide, a few memorial poems and prose essays dedicated to Liang appeared in the theater columns of various newspapers. On *Shuntian shibao*, the theater critic with the penname "Pianshi (片石)" published several eulogies written in the form of couplets and parallel prose. It is noteworthy that these eulogies were actually written on behalf of the actress Han Jinxi (韓金喜) or *Hanshe* (韓社), the fan society organized for the actress. While Luo notices such appearance of multiple eulogies in the theater columns, he tends to understate its significance. Instead, he argues that the confinement of eulogies and memorial essays to the drama section of newspapers testifies to the lukewarm public reaction to the suicide, or the failure of the society to immediately grasp Liang's motivations.[5]

In contrast, I argue, the eulogies for Liang's suicide in the form of theater commentary are quite revealing of the politics and morality in early Republican Beijing that Liang meticulously negotiated. They reflected a critical aspect of public life in early Republican Beijing, in which politics, morality, theater, and the print media were inextricably intertwined. Theater reform was so morally loaded and so connected to national rejuvenation that theater had become the most influential site for political criticism and moral adjudication. If Liang's suicide was articulation of his deep disappointment with the Republican politics and social morality, such an attitude was widely shared in the theater community and circulated through the press-driven "public opinion." The writing of theater connoisseurs and critics upon Liang's suicide had the effect that Liang intended,

[5] Luo, "Dui gonghe tizhi de shiwang: Liang Ji zhi si."

and at the same time inserted the theater community into the public negotiation over moral order that marked the early Republican era.

By examining a variety of theater comments in 1910s Beijing, this chapter attempts to unravel the intricate relationship among politics, morality, theater criticism, and patronage, as well as entertainment journalism. These theater comments appeared in various forms including poems, essays, news reports, theater reviews and biographies, and proliferated in all forms of print media, particularly newspapers, journals and *zhuanji* (專集 lit. "special collections"). The diverse and hybrid theater criticism resembled its late imperial precursor *huapu* (花譜 lit. "flower registers") in creating a public space for social critique, sentimental indulgence, and identity negotiation.[6] Nonetheless, produced in a dramatically changed political and social environment, these theater texts can only be understood in reference to the particular historical context of 1910s Beijing. The political transition from the Qing dynasty to the early Republic was filled with devastation and failure.[7] There was no longer a cohesive value system, and members of a diverse public sought to fashion a new moral community, particularly via the new print media.[8] The accelerating development of the theater business and patronage brought about not only the rise of star culture but also the formation of modern literati fandom. By focusing on theater comments regarding the new actresses, this chapter also aims to highlight how the

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[6] Goldman, *Opera and the City*, 17-60; Wu Cuncun and Mark Stevenson, "Speaking of Flowers: Theater, Public Culture, and Homoerotic Writing in Nineteenth-Century Beijing," *Asian Theater Journal* 27, no.1 (2010): 100-129; Wu Cuncun, "An Introductory Analysis of the Popularity of Qing Dynasty Theater Flower Guides," *Hanxue Yanjiu* 26, no.2 (2008): 163-184.
[7] For research on early Republican Beijing politics, see David Strand, *An Unfinished Republic: Leading by Word and Deed in Modern China* (Berkeley: University of Califronia, 2011); Nathan, *Peking Politics*.
[8] Goodman, "The New Woman Commits Suicide," 67-101.

moral community imagined by theater fans was closely connected to the issues of sexuality and femininity.

The Proliferation of Theatrical Writing and the Rise of Modern Fan Culture

Theatrical writing in the late imperial era, particularly from the last quarter of the eighteenth century mainly took the form of *huapu*. Consisting of short biographies, poems, and anecdotes, *huapu* as a popular genre was written by literati, particularly those frustrated exam candidates sojourning in Beijing. By evaluating the appearance and talent of *dan* actors in the *huapu* texts, the literati of middle stratum attempted to reassert their elitist position, which they regarded as being threatened by wealthy merchants. Publicly printed and well circulated, the *huapu* was what Andrea Goldman calls a semi-public text, since the authors not only tried to conceal their identity with pseudonyms but also laid claim to a certain exclusive readership in order to establish their superior connoisseurship.[9] Still, the proliferation and circulation of *huapu* in the 18th and 19th centuries helped to create a public space for social critique, sentimental indulgence, and homoerotic socialization among literati.[10]

In the late 19th century, theatrical writing went through significant changes, becoming even more popular, varied, and public with the expanding print media. While *huapu* texts continued to be published, other genres emerged and proliferated. A whole host of newspapers and periodicals sprang up in the cities and allocated space to theater news, either to attract a wide readership or to respond to the appeal from the reformist Liang

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[9] Goldman, *Opera and the City*, 17~60.
[10] Ibid; Wu and Stevenson, "Speaking of Flowers," 100-129.

Qichao (梁啓超 1873~1929) to "renovate the people" through popular novels and operas. What appeared in the theater columns and journals were mixed forms of the old and the new. Classic poetry and prose coexisted with modern vernacular commentaries. News reporting was associated with anecdotes and gossip. In addition to the newspapers and periodicals, a new genre that appeared and quickly became popular was *zhuanji*, collected writings dedicated to individual opera stars in the Republican era. The proliferation of theatrical writing amazed Liu Huogong (劉豁公 1890~?), a contemporary theater critic and theorist who commented "theater criticism had become an imperative part for the publishing industry as if books and newspapers could not be called books and newspapers if they failed to incorporate theater criticism, and a writer could not be called a writer if he hadn't written anything on theater criticism."[11]

The authors of the various theatrical writings were diverse. Most were literati who, though educated in Confucian classics, had already begun to drift away from their Confucian mission with the abolition of the imperial examination in 1905. Resembling the writers of Butterfly fiction, these literati might have found theatrical writing not merely a viable occupation but also a space to build their authority in the field of cultural production.[12] A few of the authors also received modern-style education and engaged in the new modern professions of industry, commerce, and publication. Liu Shaoshao (劉少少 1870~1929) in his early years received a traditional education in the Yuelu Academy and then studied in Japan between 1905 and 1909. Returning to China, he made his name by publishing bold political criticism and became one of "the three outstanding

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[11] Huogong, "Wo de pingju guan," *Xi zazhi*, no.2 (1922): 1.
[12] Link, *Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies*, 156-195.

journalists" of the early Republic. While he served as the editor of *Yaxiya ribao* (亞細亞日報 Asian Daily), he wrote numerous poems and essays extolling the actress Liu Xikui's talents and charms. These theatrical authors embraced different political views. Due to their various ties to the imperial or Confucian past, a lot of authors were often considered to be conservatives. While a few authors such as Fan Zengxiang (樊增祥 1846~1931) and Yi Shunding (易順鼎 1858~1920) were indeed former Qing officials and could be categorized as *yilao* (遺老 loyalist) by their refusal to serve the new government; as Shengqing Wu points out in her research on early Republican poetry clubs, "the label *yilao* has more to do with cultural identification than actual political affiliation."[13] Indulging in the theater and adopting the classical language did not necessarily mean that an author was politically stubborn. Han Zhizheng (韓志正 1868~1936), who used the pseudonym *Yanshi* (燕石) and wrote *Beijing nüling baiyong* (北京女伶百詠), a *huapu*-style text published in 1917 to comment on the talents and charms of a hundred actresses in early Republican Beijing, had studied in Japan and joined the revolutionary *Tongmenghui*.[14] Many authors such as Wu Jiarui (吳嘉瑞 dates unknown), Guan Genglin (關賡麟 1880~1962) and Gao Buying (高步瀛 1873~1940), though having earned a degree of *jinshi* or *juren* in the Qing dynasty, actually served in the administrative offices of the Republican government.

Despite their diverse backgrounds and political views, the authors all shared a passion for theater. By writing laudatory reviews and commentaries, they brought publicity and fame

[13] Shengqing Wu, "Contested Fengya: Classical-Style Poetry Clubs in Early Republican China," in Michel Hockx, and Kirk Denton eds, *Literary Societies of Republican China.* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2008), 29.
[14] Ming Qi, "Beijing nüling baiyong de zuozhe shi shui," *Jiangsu shifan daxue xuebao*, no.1 (1985): 90.

to individual players and made them stars. Their engagement with newspapers brought about a new form of patronage—*wenzi pengjue* (文字捧角 literary patronage).[15] After the imperial patronage of theater ceased, these authors assumed the most conspicuous public role in promoting star players and gained the appellation of *pengjue jia* (捧角家 star promoters). The term *pengjue jia* gradually acquired a negative connotation, especially after the May Fourth era when theater reformers such as Chen Dabei (陳大悲 1887~1944) called *pengjue jia* traitors of the theater art who imposed their own wicked ideas upon the ordinary audience.[16] But in the early 1910s, the term, or sometimes *pingju jia* (評劇家 theater critics), was mostly applied to literati writers in a complimentary sense, referring to their considerable power to affect the public reception of individual opera performers. While the general public used the concept very loosely to label anyone writing about theater, throughout the Republican era theater reformers and journalists engaged in continuous debate on whether a theater critic must have expert knowledge and maintain moral standards, and how a theater critic differed from traditional theater commentators.[17]

As more and more literati simultaneously pursued journalistic endeavors and sought to publicize their theater connoisseurship, the theatrical publication in the early Republic became intricately connected to theatrical patronage. First of all, the editors of newspapers and journals, especially those of theatrical columns and supplements, were mostly well-known theater fans, who would explicitly state their preference for particular

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[15] Zhou Chouchang, "Peixiang lou jutan," *Rizhi bao*, Jan. 12, 1919.
[16] Chen Dabei, "Pengjue jia shi xiju yishi zhi zei," *Chenbao fukan*, August 31, 1922.
[17] See for example, Qian Xuantong and Liu Bannong, "Jin zhi suo wei pingju jia," *Xin Qingnian*, no.5 (1918): 105-107; Yao Min'ai even divided "theater critics" into six types in his "Pingju jia zhi pai bie," *Hong Zazhi*, no.44 (1923): 41-48 & no.45 (1923): 41-45.

players without reservation. Moreover, they tended to invite their friends and acquaintances to write for their columns. So during the tenure of certain editors, the same contributors usually dominated the columns with their preferences. For instance, when Tsuji Chōka heard that the newly inaugurated newspaper *Qiming ribao* (啟明日報 Morning star daily) would hire Liu Shaoshao and Zhang Liaozi (張繆子 1895-1955) as the chief editors of the theater column, he deduced that Liu and Zhang were both fans of Liu Xikui so that Liu Xikui would gain considerable support from the newspaper.[18] Given the influence of editors of theater columns, it was not surprising that when the actress Li Fengyun (李鳳雲) first came to Beijing to join *Weideshe* in 1917, the troupe manager arranged a carriage for her to visit a lot of influential patrons including Lu Shenzhai (陸慎齋), who was then one of the chief editors of *Qunqiang bao* (群強報 Collective Strength News), a newspaper pioneering in theatrical coverage and criticism and commanding a large readership in early Republican Beijing.[19]

Moreover, many writers mobilized theater columns as a platform to organize fan associations for individual star players and articulate their identity as fans. The organization usually started with one or several patrons who published a proposal in a theater column. For instance, on March 6, 1914 the patron with the penname Huanchan first proposed in *Guohua bao* (國華報 Chinese National News) and *Guoquan bao* (國權報 National Sovereignty News) to "admire [Du] Yunhong (杜雲紅 1889~?) like a religious leader and collect funds to build a magnificent church to worship her."[20] Over a

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[18] "Jujie xiaoxi," *Shuntian shibao*, Jun. 20, 1917.
[19] "Juxun yishu," *Shuntian shibao*, Mar. 18, 1917.
[20] This newspaper piece "Huanchan tiyi jianjiao" was reprinted in *Yunhong ji*. "fulu."

couple of weeks, a few similarly minded patrons responded via statements in a variety of newspapers, including *Guohua bao*, *Guoquan bao*, *Yaxiya ribao* and *Shuntian shibao*. Thus the fan association called *Du jiao* (杜教 the cult of Du) was proclaimed as established. Though many of its members emphasized their ultimate motivation was a religious-like fascination with the actress, this fan association had little to do with religion and did little to realize the proposal to collect donations to build the actress a "church." In practice, it concentrated on publishing laudatory articles for Du.[21] So the literati fandom in the early Republican era was first of all a print media-based phenomenon. Besides writing to promote the reputation of certain star players, the literati fans also gathered in the theaters to shout "*hao*!" when their beloved players appeared on stage. Off stage, they might assemble in public or private venues to exchange their connoisseurship. For instance, the *Yeshi lou* teahouse (也是樓) located in the Dashalar theater district was one of the special venues for the gathering of theater critics, journalists and promoters. Very familiar with each other, the fans crowded in the teahouse on a daily basis, exchanging theater news and gossip about the factional conflict within the fandom.[22]

The newly emerged fan organizations like *Du jiao* were given different appellations including *she* (社 society), *dang* (黨 faction or party), and *jiao* (教 cult), etc. For instance, the group organized to support the actor Mei Lanfang called themselves *Mei dang* (梅黨 the faction of Mei). Similarly, the patrons who idolized the actress Liu Juxian (劉菊仙)

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[21] In a newspaper statement, the fan association assigned its members different tasks of theatrical writing. Some patrons took charge of praising the actress's singing, while others were responsible for advertising her appearance or performing activities, etc. "Huiyi gongju renwuyuan," reprinted in *Yunhong ji*. "fulu."
[22] Zhang, *Zhang Xiaoxian Waishi*, 41.

called themselves *Ju she* (菊社 the society of Ju). Though both *Mei* and *Ju* seem to come directly from the players' names, the naming of fan associations was not straightforward. Mei (plum blossom) and Ju (chrysanthemum), together with Lan (蘭 orchid) and Zhu (竹 bamboo), are the four plants endowed with the highest qualities of mankind in Chinese traditions such as self-reliance, withdrawal from worldly life, and never bowing before power. So naming the fan association *Ju she* not only implied the allegedly noble character of the actress but also reflected her patrons' sentiments as honorable men of letters. For the same reason, as I have mentioned in the first chapter, the fan club organized for the actress Fu Zhuyou was called *Yong zhu yaji*, or the "refined gathering to eulogize the bamboo." Not all players' names could be easily related to symbolic objects in Chinese tradition. So patrons might name their fan clubs creatively. The group patronizing the actress Bai Suchen called themselves *Bai gong* (白宮), which normally referred to the White House in Washington D.C., to claim distinction for both the actress and her patrons. And patrons of the actress Xian Lingzhi named their fan group *Changxian tuan* (嘗鮮團, lit. "the group for a fresh taste") by playing on the actress's surname Xian (鮮 fresh). Other names like *Liu jiao* (the cult of Liu) were less idiosyncratic, but as with the more literary versions, the naming articulated a new mode of emotional expression and a new kind of collective enthusiasm for a single star player, both essential elements in the literati fandom of the early Republic. By using the character *jiao* (教 cult or teaching), literati patrons drew an analogy between public adoration for a player and veneration for religious figures.

As they promoted their favorite actresses, literati-patrons and fan societies turned theater columns and supplements into a critical arena where endless factional struggles took place. The factional nature of fandom and theater commentaries can be best illustrated in the remarks of a contemporary observer: "[The fan associations] fly their own colors and seek their separate paths. If someone indicates even the slightest disagreement, everyone in the group points an accusing finger and spares no effort to attack him. Thus, outsiders dare not say a single word."[23] If outsiders still published something not in favor of a particular star player, it was very likely to arouse intensive debate involving multiple newspapers, a phenomenon sarcastically labeled by contemporary literati as "*bizhan*," or the battle of pens. This first *bizhan* is widely believed to have occurred in the Shanghai print media soon after the Revolution. When the actor Jia Biyun migrated from Beijing to Shanghai and became a rival of the local actor Feng Chunhang in 1912, their respective literati patrons debated for three years in newspapers and journals about which of the two actors was superior.

In 1910s Beijing, the fiercest *bizhan* involved the actress Liu Xikui. The seemingly endless controversy over her appearance and performing skills filled theater columns of several major newspapers in Beijing for more than one month in February and March 1915 and involved the majority of Beijing theater critics. And according to Tsuji Chōka, it was "almost impossible for any theater critic in Beijing to take a neutral position as an outsider."[24] Widely called *Liuzhan* (劉戰 the battle of Liu), the controversy started with a statement published in *Guohua bao* on February 27, 1915 by Lu Shenzhai, the aforementioned chief editor for *Qunqiang bao* with the penname Shoulang 瘦郎,

[23] Baiyun, "Wu dao wu liangxin," *Yunhong ji*. "wensou."
[24] Tinghua, "Yu zhi Liuzhan guan," *Shuntian shibao*, Mar. 24, 1915.

proposing to establish a fan association—*Liu jiao*, the cult of Liu—for the actress Liu Xikui. Lu's peers responded enthusiastically but their collective praise of this actress as the best and most beautiful offended many patrons of rival actresses. Liao Yusheng 聊娱生, the chief-editor of *Xiju xinwen* (Theater News), quickly rallied the opposition. In his article "On the true appearance of Liu Xikui," Liao went to the extreme of comparing the actress with a few exceptionally ugly women in history and fabricating a scandalous history of the actress being a prostitute before entering Beijing.[25] Infuriated by Liao's remarks, Liu's patrons quickly turned *Guohua bao* into a camp for fighting back against such malicious denigration. A couple of days later, in March 1915, *Guoshi bao* (國是報 National Affairs News) joined the war of words against her opponents.

While the arguments—primarily about the actress' looks and less on her behavior and morals— intensified, patrons of the actress Jin Yulan (金玉蘭 ?~1916) surrounding *Shuntian shibao* opened up a new front in the battle of words by introducing the subject of acting. Led by Yihu, probably the best-known patron of Jin Yulan's, they argued that Liu was inferior in her acting skills to Jin's and did not deserve to have a fan society. They questioned the emphasis on Liu's looks, on the basis that the merit of an actress should be attributed to her singing and acting abilities rather than her appearance.[26] Liu's patrons mounted their response in various newspapers, discrediting Jin's acting as ostentatious and licentious. An article in *Qunqiang bao* even insulted Yihu as "the

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[25] I have not seen the original article. The summary is based on Henwo's article "Nü ling Liu Xikui zhi zhanshi," in *Libai liu*, no.55 (1915): 20.

[26] Yihu, "Dapo Liu Xikui zhi guhuoli," *Shuntian shibao*, Mar. 3, 1915; Quxie, "Guanju zapping," *Shuntian shibao*, Mar. 7, 1915; "Pingju yi fenzi bifa kouzhu zhi tiantao," *Shuntian shibao*, Mar. 13, 1915; Renhen, "Bo xiyu pinglun yi wen Dianjing," *Shuntian shibao*, Mar. 14, 1915; and Yihu's a serialized article "Guanyu Liu Xikui buru Jin Yulan zhi wenda," successively on *Shuntian shibao*, Mar. 16, 17, 18, 1915.

adoptive son of Jin Yulan, so it is only natural that he promotes Jin Yulan."[27] Extremely agitated, Liu's opponents used the newspaper *Xinju xinwen* to spread rumors about Liu Xikui being greedy and arrogant, having unpleasant body odor and engaging in sexual liaisons with her patrons. It was at this point that the actress could no longer stand the defamatory remarks against her and sued the newspaper chief editor Liao Yusheng. *Xinju xinwen* lost the lawsuit and had to announce that the newspaper would not print anything more about the actress. With the intervention of the court, the battle of words finally came to an end and Liu's patrons publicly declared triumph.[28]

Some critics stayed out of the debate while others appealed for it to stop, since the arguments deviated from what they considered to be proper theater commentary. Nonetheless, their attempts to settle the dispute failed repeatedly. This was because, above all, the legitimate range of theater commentary was vaguely defined in the 1910s and the controversy was ultimately about its boundaries. They disagreed most about the relevance of looks and charm. One of Liu's opponents criticized that such emphasis on the *se* (色 prettiness-eroticism) of the actress was no different from the discredited practice of *pinghua* (評花 evaluating flowers), the evaluation of female courtesans or male actors who served as amusing companions for Beijing's literati in the Qing dynasty.[29] This allusion to *pinghua* was a telling point, because theater reformers and practitioners from the late Qing had made great efforts to distinguish theater players from courtesans in order to establish the profession's respectability.[30] Nonetheless, for Liu's

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[27] "Pingju yi fenzi bifa kouzhu zhi tiantao," *Shuntian shibao*, Mar. 13, 1915.
[28] "Jingshi jinchan ting wai you er qu qu shu guanyu Liu Liu Shi han gao xin wen bao guan zhubi ren Wang Yingtang zacai weisui huisun qi nü Liu Xikui mingyu de song an biao."
[29] Yihu, "Guanyu Liu Xikui buru Jin Yulan zhi diyi wenda," *Shuntian shibao*, Mar. 16, 1915.
[30] Goldstein, *Drama Kings*, 17-54.

literati patrons, *se*, a notion that spans a range of meanings from "colors" to "appearance" to "prettiness" and "eroticism," had long been a critical category in theatrical connoisseurship. It assumed no less importance than the category of *yi* (藝 the art of singing and acting), the other basic notion for traditional Chinese performance aesthetics.[31] Therefore, appreciation of Liu's looks and charms, they argued, was not only legitimate but also demonstrative of their superior taste, especially given the fact that Liu was an actress performing *huadan,* young female roles of erotic desire and seduction. Thus, even Tsuji Chōka, after his strong criticism of the debates for exceeding proper bounds, still defined theater commentary as the practice of "appreciating *se*, evaluating *yi,* and commenting on music 品色評藝兼論絲竹" in calling for theater critics to remain within limits.[32] The tradition of *pin* (品 evaluative classification)—which had culminated in *huapu* writing—still held sway in modern theater criticism; literati-critics were still keen to rank a series of actors and actresses and comment on their appearances and talents in a descriptive, anecdotal, and highly aestheticized style.

Tsuji Chōka disliked most the personal attacks involved in the controversy. But the call from Tsuji's peers for ending verbal abuse seemed in vain, as waves of acrimonious personal attacks on the character and reputation of the actress as well as her patrons and critics flooded the theater reviews and commentaries as the controversy intensified. The attack on a particular patron either pointed to his overt obsession with an unworthy actress or hinted at his improper relationship with a favorite actress. The personal attacks on Liu Xikui and the damaging rumors were more outrageous, though the actress had

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[31] For a discussion on the term of *se*, see Siu Leung Li, *Cross-Dressing in Chinese Opera* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2003), 173-174.
[32] Tinghua, "Yu zhi Liu zhan guan: xia," *Shuntian shibao*, Mar. 25, 1915.

stayed away from the arguments until the slanders in *Xiju xinwen* became unbearable. The verbal abuse not only reflects the competitive, argumentative and factional nature of the literati fandom but also indicates how closely the newspapers in early Republican Beijing were connected to the theatrical patronage network. Such deep engagement made it almost impossible for its practitioners to maintain impartiality and objectivity, despite the occasional appeals made by some critics. This partiality and irrationality of theater commentary grew even worse, for accountability in the print media was poorly established and rarely enforced in the 1910s. For example, after losing the lawsuit, as noted, *Xiju xinwen* was not required by the court to apologize to Liu Xikui, let alone pay compensation. An opponent even published an article in *Shuntian shibao* calling the actress a heinous villain for infringing on the freedom of theater commentary and journalism by suing the newspaper.[33] Thus the public sphere generated by the theatrical writings in the early Republican era was far from a public space for rational criticism. Instead, literati turned the print media into a tool for theatrical patronage and contributed to an expanding yet increasingly factionalized literati fandom. Inevitably their writings smacked of partisanship and sensationalism.

Poetics of Political Satire in Theatrical Writing

In June 1917, Zhang Xun (張勳 1854~1923), a firm Qing loyalist and influential warlord in Xuzhou, led his "pigtailed army" into Beijing and on July 1st restored the last Manchu emperor Puyi to the throne. The restoration was short-lived; twelve days later Zhang was defeated and driven out of Beijing by a coalition of Beiyang warlords. While Zhang was widely condemned and his restoration attempt was considered as a political farce, the

[33] Taotao, "Liu Xikui e guan man ying," *Shuntian shibao*, Mar. 19, 1915.

theatrical community gossiped about Zhang's private life, particularly his relationship with Wang Keqin, a former star actress who had retired from performing after becoming Zhang's concubine in 1914. First, the Japanese journalist and theater critic of *Shuntian shibao* Tsuji Chōka, who had hoped that the reinstated monarchy would revive the imperial patronage of theater, raised the question how Wang Keqin would react, given that Zhang was defeated and had fled to the Dutch embassy for protection.[34] Then word came that Wang had seized the opportunity of Zhang's military engagement to elope with her secret lover. Stories of the elopement, filled with colorful detail, circulated in the press, and literati fans elaborated on them. For example, a theater critic Danlu (胆廬) published a farewell letter to Zhang Xun written on Wang's behalf in a playful mocking tone. He adopted a doggerel style and used the titles of *qupai* (曲牌 melodic styles used in Chinese traditional drama) as puns throughout the letter. At the outset Wang is established as a dissatisfied concubine mocking Zhang's political ambition—

> The fragrant willow girl (Xiangniu niang 香柳娘) Wang Keqin respectfully writes a letter (Yi feng shu 一封書) to Shaoxuan (紹軒, Zhang Xun's courtesy name):
>
> Your ugly concubine (Chou nu'er 丑奴兒) at your side. You had an audience with the emperor (*Chao tianzi* 朝天子) and have been grateful for the imperial favor (*Gan huang'en* 感皇恩). Surrounded by the imperial army (*Yu linjun* 御林軍), you restored the esteemed throne (*Baoding'er* 寶鼎兒). You want to be the emperor's teacher (*Taishi yin* 太師引); you want to wear the grand red robe (*Da hongpao* 大紅袍); you want to be awarded the fief Lord of Lanling (*Lanling wang* 蘭陵王); you want to be called the Long-lived (*Qianqiu sui* 千秋歲). Who expected you would stir up the anti-barbarian armies (*Zheng hubing* 征胡兵) flying the colorful

[34] Tinghua, "Fupi yu xiju: xu huifu gongfeng zhi," *Shuntian shibao*, Jul. 3, 1917 and "E'di chongji zai deng wutai," *Shuntian shibao*, Jul. 19, 1917.

> flags (*Caiqi'er* 采旗兒) to smash the formations (*Qi Pozhen* 齊破陣) and subdue the yellow dragon (*Xiang huanglong* 降黃龍)?[35]
>
> - Note: The underlined parts of the translation in the original Chinese text are *qupai* titles, which I put in italicized form in the brackets.

Then Wang is made to comment how old, foolish and emotionally deficient he was and thus how unlucky, lonely and depressed she was. The frivolous tone continued as the concubine recounted how she sought to fulfill her desire by either flirting or having sex with various young men—

> Your ugly concubine (*Chou nu'er* 丑奴兒), ugly concubine (*Chou nu'er* 丑奴兒). You are aged as Shuai baolao (耍鮑老),[36] near-sighted as a young man (*Xiao ge'er* 小哥兒). Knowing that this is no way (*Bushi lu* 不是路), you dream of overturning the barge (*Dao tuo chuan* 倒拖船).[37] [You] rushed to quickly fire three guns (*Ji sanqiang* 急三槍) and your soul traveled to the ancient Luntai (*Gu Luntai* 古輪台). Since you failed me (*Boxing* 薄倖), and missed our rendezvous (*Wu jiaqi* 誤佳期), don't think about returning home (*Sigui yin* 思歸引), just leave me furious in the empty inner quarters (*Konggui yuan* 空閨怨). I have seen the nightingales (*Huang ying'er* 黃鶯兒) paired off and butterflies (*Fen die'er* 粉蝶兒) in couples. I long for love (*Huangxin dong* 花心動) and desire to meet another in the full moon (*Ren yue yuan* 人月圓). So I go around hoping to find a match (*Yuan chengshuang* 願成雙) and travel with young men (*Shaonian you* 少年遊) including flâneurs (*Fengliu zi* 風流子), prim dandies (*Xiuyi lang* 繡衣郎), and pretty boys (*Fen hai'er* 粉孩兒). All day long [I] meet [them] under the silk canopy (*Luozhang li hui* 羅帳裏會) and dream of Wushan clouds (*Wushan yiduan yun* 巫山一段雲).[38] I have pieces of gold (*Didi jin* 滴滴金), threads of gold (*Lülü jin* 縷縷金), strings of pearl (*Zhu luo suo* 珠落索) and rings of jade (*Yu lianhuan* 玉連環) to welcome the wonderful men (*Ying xianke* 迎仙客), and may as well congratulate the groom (*He xinlang* 賀新郎). Since then the magnolia bloom on the moon (*Yueshang haitang* 月上海棠) and fishes swim in the Spring water (*Yuyou chunshui* 魚游春水). [We] flirt in mirth (*Tiaoxiao*

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[35] Danlu, "Wang Keqin liubie Zhang Xun shu," *Shuntian shibao*, Jul. 27, 1917.
[36] Baolao is a clown role in ancient Chinese drama. See Wang, *Guju juese kao*, 1911.
[37] Here it satirizing Zhang's restoration attempt as reactionary.
[38] "Wushan clouds" is a metaphor for sexual intercourse.

> *ling* 調笑令) and enjoy a leisurely happiness (*Xiaoyao le* 逍遙樂). Is this called satisfying my heart's desire (*Chen renxin* 稱人心)?[39]

Finally, she admonished Zhang not to fall prey to lovesickness for her by weeping at night in the empty palace—

> Your ugly concubine (Chou nu'er 丑奴兒), ugly concubine (Chou nu'er 丑奴兒). You are going to become a gasp of wind rising from the ground (Gua di feng 刮地風), circling around the earth (Rao di you 繞地遊), and three ghosts (*gui san tai* 鬼三台).[40] Do please don't pine for Qin E (*Yi Qin E* 憶秦娥), think of Nujiao (*Nian nu jiao* 念奴嬌), and grump endlessly (*Daodao ling* 叨叨令), circling the night palace (*Ye you gong* 夜遊宮) and weeping for lovesickness (*Ku xiangsi* 哭相思).[41]

Saturated with an explicitly dissolute tone and embedded in an arcane and allusive language, the letter might offend many contemporary critics, particularly May Fourth intellectuals who were vehemently attacking the classical language and eagerly promoting a drastically Westernized form of vernacular language to enlighten the general populace.[42] Moreover, many would identify the letter in the category of *yanti shi* (豔體詩 erotic poetry), which they believed had long been morally corrupted the old-style literati and should be eradicated in a modern era. Nonetheless, the literati theater fans for whom the letter was intended, I argue, would read more in it than an empty erotic expression. For them, the underlying political satire of the letter was inescapable; and it was the deliberately degenerate tone and the use of allegory that gave the letter its satirical power. Moreover, this form of political criticism—conveyed by the medium of theater

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[39] Danlu, "Wang Keqin liubie Zhang Xun shu."
[40] All the three *qupai* are frequently used in the Ming drama *The Peony Pavilion* written by Tang Xianzu and usually performed as *Kunqu* opera.
[41] Danlu, "Wang Keqin liubie Zhang Xun shu."
[42] See, for example, Xueqing Xu, "The Mandarin Duck and Butterfly School," in Kirk A. Denton and Michel Hockx, *Literary Societies of Republican China* (New York: Rowman and Litterfield Publishers, 2008), 68~72.

commentary and heavily veiled by traditional allusions—was anything but outdated. Instead, it was in vogue. The early Republican newspaper theater columns were filled with such styles of theatrical writing. Literati in various literary societies and in the theater fandom mobilized a variety of poetic forms of theater commentary—parallel couplets, pentasyllabic or heptasyllabic verses, as well as the *fu* (賦), *ci* (詞), *qu* (曲) styles and ancient-style prose to express their appreciation of particular players, or rank the talent and appearance of a group of players.

Despite their stylistic resemblance to *huapu* connoisseurship, these theatrical writings in the form of ancient-style poems and prose were hardly arcane and obsolete. The classical language and the use of historical allusions, as Jon Kowallis in his research on the poets of the "old schools" during late Qing and Early Republican China convincingly suggests, could serve the writers very well in responding to the challenges of the age, literary or political; and the masterful application of satire and allegory could convey vigorous political commentary and criticism.[43] In order to perceive the modernity of the early Republican old-style poetry written by Yi Shunding, Kowallis appeals to his reader to focus on the poet's "more representative works" rather than the lustful "poems in praise of actors and actresses" that occupy only a small portion of his entire oeuvre.[44] Nonetheless, as I argue, even though Yi's poems of theater connoisseurship did not win him an initial reputation as a poet and aroused the scorn of contemporary critics, they were widely circulated in print and feverishly emulated by Yi's peers, thereby sustaining Yi's fame and influence in the literary community. These seemingly lascivious poems

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[43] Jon Kowallis, *The Subtle Revolution: Poets of the "Old Schools" during Late Qing and Early Republican China*. (Berkeley: University of California, 2006).
[44] Kowallis, *The Subtle Revolution*, 130~131.

commenting on theater carry hidden or blatant political satire, which Kowallis regards as the most salient characteristic of literary modernity in the early Republican era.

These poems and prose—written by Yi and his peers and published in the theater columns of newspapers—were increasingly associated with the political events in the early Republic. For example, when Yuan Shikai restored the monarchy in 1916, a prose essay written in classical language appeared in *Shuntian shibao* fantasizing a revival of monarchical aura and order in the *juguo* (菊國 lit. "the state of chrysanthemum"), an allegorical appellation for the theatrical world. The author, assuming the title of state secretary of the *juguo*, sarcastically commented that the previous dynasties like the Zhou and the Tang established the long tradition of rewarding theater players; now that the monarchy was reinstated, it was time to confer the imperial aura upon star players. First he awarded the actress Xian Lingzhi the title of *Ningyan qinwang* (凝豔親王 lit. "Her Royal Highness of elegance and gorgeousness") for "being elegant and gorgeous, known for her charm and beauty, getting along with her co-performers as well as receiving unanimous public recognition."[45] The author continued by awarding an array of actresses with the five categories of nobility—duke, marquis, count, viscount, baron. This essay made an impact on the community of literati fans, who picked up these titles in their writing, and discussed whether the awards were fairly conferred and assigned imperial titles to other actresses.[46] The political criticism embedded in such activities was apparent to the literati fandom. When recalling the assignment of the title *Wuyan qinwang* (武豔親

[45] Aixiong, "Juguo fengjue zhi pilu," *Shuntian shibao*, Jan. 1, 1916.
[46] See, for instance, Lishan gengzhe, "Xini juguo zhi xuedian," *Shuntian shibao*, Mar. 23, 1916; "Yong Liu Xian Jin san kunling," *Shuntian shibao*, Jun. 21, 1917; Shijiu, "Ji Li Guifen chuyan yu minguo jingguo shilue," *Shuntian shibao*, Sep. 1, 1917.

王 lit. "Her Royal Highness of martial arts and gorgeousness") to the actress Liu Xikui in 1916, the theater critic pointed out that this literary vogue was essentially intended to mock Yuan Shikai, who after restoring imperial rule assigned the title of Wuyi qinwang (武義親王 lit. "His Royal Highness of martial arts and righteousness") to his former vice president Li Yuanhong.[47]

Not only were the attempts of Yuan Shikai and Zhang Xun to restore the monarchy mocked in the literati fans' theatrical writing, but the turbulent parliamentary politics of the early Republic was also satirized, especially in the form of *huapu*-style ranking of theater players. In various writings, literati amusingly compared the theater community to a Republican government in which each star actress, according to her talent, persona or signature plays, was assigned an important position. For example, the smashingly popular actress Liu Xikui was frequently given the post of president. The literati fans of the actress Li Guifen (李桂芬 1901~1984) called their fan club *Gui neige* 桂內閣, literally the cabinet presided over by Li Guifen. To choose several actresses to staff the cabinet, Zhou Dahuang (周大荒 1886~1951), a newspaper chief editor who came from Hunan and had received both classic and modern education, proposed the actress Bai Suchen as Chief of the General Staff. When questioned about his rationale by another literati fan Liu Shilin (劉石林), Zhou explained: "Now the (real) Chief of the General Staff is Yin Wulou (廕午樓, aka Yin Chang 廕昌 1859~1928), who is a Manchu. Suchen is also a Manchu. Wulou studied in Germany, while Suchen is called 'De si guniang (德四姑娘)' in Manchu (here Zhou puns the Chinese character *de* in the word "Germany" with the

[47] Chunshui, "Liu Xikui ji," *Jingang zhuan yuekan*, no.2 (1933): 3.

actress' Manchu name). Just as Wulou is composed and resourceful, Suchen was able to survive the dangerous situations in the battlefield even though she is a delicate woman. As thus viewed, the actress is really quite qualified for the position." Impressed by Zhou's witty remarks, Liu jokingly responded: "You belong to the *qin de* (pro-Germany) side," a word play clearly drawn from the ongoing World War.[48]

Such analogies between the theater world and contemporary politics seem at first sight intended to be merely witty, playful, and unserious. Nonetheless, underlying the ridiculous juxtaposition between actresses and political figures was a subtle political satire, which critics tended to miss but its intended readership could easily spot and savor. For many literati fans, the early Republic's turbulent politics and the chaos of warlordism, as well as the bewildering World War, were like an array of staged burlesque plays, the frivolity and absurdity of which could only be expressed by the wildest writing.[49] The contrast between the ancient allusions and the contemporary politics, between elegant style and trivial content, helped to accentuate the absurdity of the political intrigues and factional struggles that they witnessed. And, the wilder the analogy and tone appeared to be, the more powerful their political satire. Probably for the community of literati fans no other literary genres than the prose cited above could offer a stronger critique of Zhang Xun: the masterly employment of *qupai* titles in the prose evoked a wide range of imperial images that intrepidly mocked Zhang's obsession with the imperial system and his political ambition.

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[48] Dahuang, "Baigong jiahua," *Rizhi bao*, Aug. 5, 1918.
[49] For a study on the awareness of social theatricality in Britain and America and theater as a reflective discourse on social reality, see Jean-Chistophe Agnew, *Worlds Apart: The Market and the Theater in Anglo-American Thought, 1550-1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

Besides the classical literary style, political sarcasm in the form of theatrical writing is also marked by a fascination with the private relationship between actresses and the influential political figures of the early Republic. The connection of Zhang Xun to a few prostitutes and actresses was not the only gossip circulated in newspapers. The literati fans also enthusiastically commented on similar relationships like those between the actress Sun Yiqing (孫一清 dates unknown), and Yuan Kewen (袁克文 1889~1931), the second son of Yuan Shikai, and (as noted) between the actress Zhang Xiaoxian and Li Yuanhong, who was three times president of the Republic of China. Such preoccupation with the private life of others was not new; it had flourished in the vernacular literature, particularly the erotic fiction in the late Ming dynasty.[50] Media sensationalism about the private details of celebrities also seems universal in the modern entertainment industry as we see in Hollywood. Nonetheless, the gossip of literati fans in the early Republic differed in being heavy in morality and political satire. The moral implication and political innuendo rendered them more than a gesture of voyeurism or a commodity of leisure and desire. Just as we have seen in the prose mocking Zhang Xun, the writings of literati fans about the relationships between actresses and high officials were frequently intended to make fun of the high officials. In their narratives, the political figures always assumed a clown-like role while the actresses were mostly immune to criticism. The officials were old, morally corrupt, and sexually needy but impotent to satisfy their concubines' and their own desires.

Another example of mocking high officials in writing about actresses is seen in the sensational rumors about how the actress Liu Xikui rejected the solicitation of Zhang

[50] Martin Huang, *Desire and Fictional Narrative in Late Imperial China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 57-85.

Xun in 1915. In a dozen versions, Zhang fell in love with the actress and invited her—together with other star actors and actresses in Beijing—to perform in his house in Xuzhou to celebrate his mother's birthday. After the party, Zhang refused to let the actress go and made several proposals to marry her as a concubine. But the resourceful actress convinced Zhang that she needed to go back to Beijing to fetch her belongings before she could marry him. Once she left Xuzhou, the actress never returned. The story fascinated literati fans, who repeatedly recounted the anecdote to praise the actress' moral integrity and skill in dealing with sexual harassment by a notorious warlord.[51] In contrast with the elevated image of the actress, who stood for society's rejection of the warlords, the persona of Zhang Xun was an object of sarcasm. For example, a literati fan portrayed Zhang as a pathetic and foolish figure who was toyed with by the actress. In a highly embellished and allusive piece, he fantasized that the actress upon her arrival in Beijing sent Zhang a telegram, in which she called the warlord "old and ugly, nearly approaching death." Insulted by the letter, the warlord replied in a telegram recounting how he was enthralled by the actress' charms, how happy he had been in her company, and how sentimental their farewell at the train station had been. He tried to defend his honor by analogy to a series of legendary figures who had enjoyed extraordinary life spans. He compared himself to Dong Zhuo (董卓 138~192), a politician and warlord in the late Eastern Han dynasty whose tragic downfall was brought by his fascination with a beautiful woman. He also drew a parallel between his frustrated courtship with Liu and the sensational affair in the late Qing that involved the actress Yang Cuixi (楊翠喜

[51] See, for instance, "Liu Xikui ge xu," in Yankan daoren ed. *Liu Xikui jinji*, 49~50.

1886~?) and the Manchu prince Zaizhen (載振 1876~1947).[52] In that affair, the actress Yang was presented by the official Duan Zhigui (段芝貴 1869~1925) to the prince as a bribe for his political advancement, and when in 1906 Tianjin newspapers exposed the affair, memorials were submitted accusing Duan and Zaizhen of corruption and bribery. The Yang Cuixi case had become a sensation in the print media and throughout officialdom.[53]

Not all the gossiping about actresses' private lives was related to political satire; some peeping into intimate details could be a straightforward attack on actresses' personal reputation. Still, as the above examples show, literati writing on actresses' relationship with political figures could be an important literary form for political satire in early Republican Beijing. The narrative of the perverted relationship between officials and actresses contrasts sharply with literati accounts of socializing with actresses. Literati usually represented their contact with actresses as something respectful, refined and motivated by the notion of *qing*, a noble passion. Therefore, while such theater commentaries were essentially moral condemnation of the warlords, politicians, and officials, at the same time they were—borrowing Haiyan Lee's words—"narratives of community of the virtuous 'us' versus the depraved 'them'."[54] Similar to the sentimental Butterfly fiction, theatrical writing was a literary device in the early Republic to denounce corrupt officialdom and to identify a virtuous community of literati theater fans to itself. Such a community was not defined by political affiliation, for its members showed no faith in either the Imperial or the Republican polity. Instead, the mutual

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[52] Songchan, "Ni fu nüling Liu Xikui dianwen," in *Yuxing*, no.11 (1915): 106-107.
[53] Cheng, "The Challenge of the Actresses," 208-9.
[54] Lee, "All the Feelings That Are Fit to Print," 305.

recognition of its members lay in their cultivation of theatrical and moral sensitivities to realize the theatricality of politics and in their mastery of sophisticated literary techniques to satirize morally corrupt politicians.

Zhuanji and the Reassertion of the Nei/wai Distinction

Besides newspaper theater commentary, another new type of theatrical writing and publication emerging in 1910s Beijing was *zhuanji* (專集), collected writings dedicated to individual opera stars in the Republican era. The first *zhuanji* appeared in Shanghai in June 1913, when patrons of the actor Jia Biyun (賈璧雲 1890~1941) published a twelve-page pamphlet *Biyun ji* (璧雲集) to boost the actor's publicity and popularity. One month later, another group of patrons published the two-volume *Chunhang ji* (春航集) to support the actor Feng Chunhang (馮春航 1888~1941), whose dominant status on the local theater market had been challenged by Jia Biyun from the latter's arrival in Shanghai in 1912. In terms of organization, the pamphlet *Biyun ji* very much resembled the eighteenth century *huapu* genre in that both consist of two major parts: a short biography of the actor(s) and a collection of poems dedicated to the actor(s). *Chunhang ji* also inherited a lot from *huapu*, including the emotive tones, literary tropes as well as the mixing of forms and genres, but besides a biography and laudatory poems, it added more sections including *juping* (菊評 theater commentaries), *zazu* (雜俎 miscellanies) and *buyi* (補遺 supplements). The essays in the new sections adopted non-poetic, theater-specific

language to comment on the performance skills of the actor and thus diverged somewhat from the *huapu* style.[55]

Following their counterparts in Shanghai, literati patrons in Beijing in the 1910s quickly adopted *zhuanji* as an important strategy of theater patronage. In November 1913, a *zhuanji* pamphlet was published for the actor Mei Lanfang. In August 1914, the first *zhuanji* for an actress—*Yunhong ji*—appeared, acknowledging a few actors' *zhuanji* as its generic precursor. It was followed by quite a few *zhuanji* dedicated to other actresses: *Liu Xikui ji* 劉喜奎集 (1915), *Liu Xikui jinji* 劉喜奎近記 (1915), *Liu Juxian ji* 劉菊仙集 (1916), *Xinghua xianzi ji* 杏花仙子集(1916), *Zhang Xiaoxian ji* 張小仙集 (1917), *Xin Cuiyu ji* 鑫翠玉集 (1917), *Yumei baiyong* 玉梅百詠 (1918), *Baigong jiahua* 白宮嘉話 (1918), and *Erqing ji* 二青集 (1918), etc. For the most popular actresses, patrons would publish more than one *zhuanji*. For instance, the actress Liu Xikui had at least three *zhuanji* published in 1915. The first one was published by the Xinxin xiaoshuo press and called *Liu Xikui ji*. The best-known *Liu Xikui jinji* was a carefully edited two-volume collection. Another small pamphlet simply titled *Liu Xikui* collected a few poems and theater reviews that had been published in *Guohua bao*. It seemed to be a pirated, cheaply printed edition, for it lacked any information about the editor and the press, so one of Liu's patrons dismissed the anonymous editor as a pathetic, profit-driven man.[56] Cheapn, mass-printed copies like *Liu Xikui* also testify how popular these *zhuanji* could be at that time.

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[55] For comparison between *Biyun ji* and *Chunhang ji*, see Liu Ruiyu, "Liyuan neiwai de zhanzheng: 20 shiji dierge shinian shanghai jingjujie zhi Feng Jia dangzhen," *Wenyi yanjiu,* no.7 (2013): 101-110.
[56] Feifei, "Xu Liu Xikui yishen tanpian lu."

Unlike most *huapu*, which catalogued, described and ranked a group of actors, *zhuanji* is usually devoted to a particular opera star.[57] It also differs from most *huapu* in that it is a collection of a variety of theatrical writings from a wide range of literati fans, while a *huapu* text is usually an anthology by a single author. Indeed, collective authorship appears in a few *huapu* texts, but the number of authors is often limited compared to the number of contributors in *zhuanji*. This collective nature of *zhuanji* and its focus on a single object typify the modern star system and particularly, as I argue, the literati fandom in the theatrical world. It was the modern literati fandom—rapidly expanding yet becoming increasingly factionalized as shown above—that prompted a particular group of literati fans to write for a star they admired in common and thus made opera stars of the focus of their theatrical connoisseurship.

In this section, I will analyze three *zhuanji* dedicated to different actresses: *Yunhong ji*, *Liu Xikui jinji* and *Liu Juxian ji*. The writing of literati on female entertainers was not new. The tradition could at least be traced back to the records of famous courtesans that began to thrive in the Tang dynasty and fully blossomed in the Song dynasty.[58] During the late Ming, elite courtesans occupied the center of a literati high culture, particularly in the Jiangnan area. As a pastime, literati—particularly the rejected exam candidates—enthusiastically ranked and commented on their beauty and talent. Together with these "flower registers," their accounts of romantic encounters with courtesans flourished in the expanded market for print culture in Jiangnan. In their writings, particularly the popular fiction and biographies, literati were preoccupied with depiction of what Hsu Pi-ching

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[57] Wu and Stevenson, "Speaking of Flowers," 106.
[58] For a discussion of the courtesan culture in the Tang and Song dynasties and its relations with the literati class, see Daniel Hsieh, *Love and Women in Early Chinese Fiction* (Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 2008), esp. 15-19.

terms "courtesan-scholar romances." The socially marginalized and stigmatized courtesans appeared to be not only the ideal companions but also "the invented Other, the mirror image of the idealized Self" of the literati authors.[59]

By looking at the structure, tone, and discourses of the three *zhuanji*, I would like to argue that the proliferation of the genre of *zhuanji* in the early Republic was more than a revival of the late Ming courtesan literature that was trivialized in the Qing when the Manchu rulers sought to reinstate Confucian orthodoxy.[60] Though the literati authors of *zhuanji* borrowed a lot of tropes and discourses, as well as a fanciful, nostalgic tone, from the late Ming courtesan literature, they dealt with a subject—that is, star actresses—that differed from the courtesans and with whom their connection was reconfigured in a changed social and cultural landscape. Despite the continuing social stigma, actresses in the Republican era were no longer denigrated by an explicit legal code as the Ming courtesans had been.[61] They emerged in an era when the theater acquired new respectability and players were remade to be decent artists for the purpose of national rejuvenation.[62] Moreover, a few actresses rose to the status of celebrity by quickly mustering great fortunes and winning recognition far beyond the confines of the literati sphere. Therefore, though the literati authors still frequently referenced the mean status of actresses as female entertainers, the theme of social marginality was not their central focus. Neither was the theme of companionate relationship. Though a few literati authors still portrayed their subjects as their alter egos in the theatrical world, actresses emerged

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[59] Hsu Pi-ching. "Courtesans and Scholars in the Writings of Feng Menglong: Transcending Status and Gender." *NAN NÜ* 2, no.1 (2000): 44 & 47.
[60] Susan Mann, *Precious Records*, 121-142.
[61] Harriet T. Zurndorfer, "Prostitutes and Courtesans in the Confucian Moral Universe of Late Ming China (1550~1644)," *International Review of Social History*, no. 56 (2011): 197-216.
[62] Goldstein, *Drama Kings*, 55-88.

in their writing more as the Other. They were not only the objects of the literati's individualistic obsession, but also *the star* of public fascination. Literati writing on star actresses repositioned themselves as fans more than companions.

By analyzing the three *zhuanji* as fannish products of literati in the following section, I attempt to explore on one hand how a particular form of patronage or fandom would make a difference in the compilation of a specific collection and the presentation of a specific actress, and on the other hand how literati in early Republican Beijing repositioned themselves in relation to the newly emerged public actresses. At the center of the writing was the literati's paradox: while they were fascinated by the public presence of star actresses and devoted to seeking out like-minded fans and expressing their admiration in a collective manner, they still valued sexual segregation and located female virtue within the private realm. So the *zhuanji* evoked and reasserted the *nei-wai* distinction that was being eroded by actresses' incursion in public spaces.

Keeping a Safe Distance: Yunhong ji

The *zhuanji* dedicated to the actress Du Yunhong—*Yunhong ji*—was commissioned by two of the actress's patrons Zhuang Zhegong and Murata Ribāshiti, the latter probably a Japanese sojourner in Beijing, judging by his name. Probably due to the two patrons' connection with the Japanese-owned *Shuntian shibao*, the newspaper press published the *zhuanji* as a theater supplement. It was also in *Shuntian shibao* that announcements were made to solicit poems and essays for the *zhuanji*'s compilation. The editors of the

newspaper along with Tsuji Chōka also wrote articles to advertise its publication.[63] Zhuang and Murata entrusted editorship to their literary friend Xu Xugong (徐吁公), a writer of vernacular novels in newspapers who had just moved to Beijing. Although Xu heard about the actress upon his arrival in the capital, he had not gone to see her performance before he was given the task. But Xu's lack of familiarity with the actress did not discredit him in the least as the editor. Instead, his willingness to compile a special collection for an unfamiliar actress was believed to be an honorable deed reflecting the depth of sympathy that Xu felt for her. So in his own essay in the special collection, Xu emphasized that after accepting the task he went to see Yunhong's performance but never met the actress in person. In order to write a biography of the actress, he sought help from Wang Yinxia, the editor of the literary supplements of *Shuntian shibao* who knew Yunhong well and told him all about the actress.[64] In another commentary, Xu claimed that though he had affection for Yunhong, he refused to join the fan association *Du jiao* and deliberately maintained his distance from her.[65]

The various contributors of *Yunhong ji* were literati of the middle stratum and most of them—unlike the editor Xu—belonged to *Du jiao*. They very much resembled the literati authors of the Ming courtesan literature and the Qing *huapu* connoisseurship in terms of frustrated personal ambitions. The turbulent political circumstances from the late Qing to the early Republic made their lives very difficult. Their writings expressed anxiety and discontent amid a violently changing world and repeatedly evoked the images of frustrated scholars and depressed sojourners. Luo Huanchan, the founder of *Dujiao*, was

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[63] Tianhui, "*Yunhong ji* chuban xiaoyan," *Shuntian shibao*, Aug. 20, 1914; Tinghua, "*Yunhong ji* chuban yi," *Shuntian shibao*, Aug. 21, 1914.
[64] "Du Yunhong xiaoshi," in *Yunhong ji*, "xiaoshi."
[65] Yaxian, "Bu Guize de jutan" in *Yunhong ji*, "zazu."

a graduate from the modern-style Beiyang Normal School in Beijing around 1907. As he revealed in his autobiographical note, he had an irregular career path—working as a chief editor in a newspaper owned by the Qing government for three years, "passing the time for two years" in Dagu as an employee in an administrative office, and serving half a year as a secretary for an army in Manchuria—but in the end felt that he achieved nothing.[66] Despite the sense of failure and underachievement, these contributors were still much attached to the label of literati. Writing traditional-style poems and prose and participating in the publishing industry, several of them became eminent in the "circles of modern-day *shi* 近世士林."[67] For instance, Sun Guren (孫谷紉) was known for his poetry and Zheng Tianzhang (鄭天章) became the chief editor of *Guohua bao*. Nonetheless, they were clearly aware of their marginality. They acknowledged that they did not belong to the *mingshi* (名士 renowned literati) or *mingliu* (名流 distinguished notables) and that their promotion of Yunhong was ridiculed (unfairly) by such famous theater critics as Zhang Liaozi and the *miaotang zhushi* (廟堂柱石 pillars of the imperial court) Fan Zengxiang and Yi Shunding, all of whom were members of the fan society of Mei Lanfang.[68]

The *Yunhong ji* consists of a biography and several photographs of the actress, a group of prefaces and epigraphs, as well as a considerable number of poems and essays that were organized into five sections: *wensou* (文藪 lit. "the lake of the literary"), *yiyuan* (藝苑 lit. "the garden of art"), *pinglin* (評林 lit. "the forest of the reviews"), *zazu* (雜俎 lit.

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[66] Huanchan, "Du jiao jiaotu fangge yi ba *Yunhong ji*," in *Yunhong ji*, "zazu."
[67] Xiaosu, "Gao Liaozi" in *Yunhong ji*, "wensou."
[68] Ibid. Also Bingfu, "Gao mouzi" in *Yunhong ji*, "wensou."

"miscellanies"), *fulu* (附錄 lit. "addendum"). The *wensou* section comprised a few essays explaining the motivations for anthologizing *Yunhong ji*. These essays easily remind readers of the courtesan metaphors and the *huapu*-style sentimentalism. Such resemblance could also be perceived in the *yiyuan* section, which includes many ornate, sentimental poems dedicated to Yunhong, as well as in the *zazu* section, which consists of anecdotes concerning the actress and her patrons. The *pinglin* section is a collection of theater reviews of Yunhong's performances and the *fulu* section is a series of newspaper articles calling for the organization of the fan society *Du jiao* for the actress.

Figure 5-1. The Cover of *Yunhong ji.* Photo by author.

Figure 5-2. A Photo of Du Yunhong in *Yunhong ji.* Reproduced from Xu Xugong ed. *Duhong ji* (Beijing: Shuntian shibao chubanshe, 1914).

Yunhong ji was as much an assertion of fan identity, individual and collective, as it was theater connoisseurship. The dozen pieces in the *yiyuan* section mainly justified their personal fascination with the actress, which was generally considered improper and had been repudiated by critics like Zhang Liaozi. The contributors legitimized their fondness of the actress in evocative and creative ways. Some tapped into an age-old literary tradition of appreciating and evaluating beautiful things and people; some emphasized their authentic sympathy by paralleling their own frustrated ambitions with the uneasy life of the actress. Luo Huanchan appealed to the notion of equality between men and women. He argued that actresses deserved more sympathy because they suffered from the uncivilized state of a society that despised the theater profession.[1] Another contributor, Li Yaxian, admitted being driven by an indescribable "psychology (心理)," citing the Daoist phrase "The name that can be named is not an eternal name."[2] The personal infatuation with the actress was further highlighted in the *zazu* section, in which the contributors recounted their various fannish behaviors in the form of anecdotes. For instance, Luo Huanchan emphasized that his fondness of the actress was no less than his admiration for Zhang Taiyan (章太炎 aka, Zhang Binglin, 1868-1936), whose lectures at the Guoxue hui (國學會 Society of National Learning) he never missed even in stormy weather.[3] In the *fulu* section, the contributors went further to justify the foundation of their fan society and articulate a collective fan identity. In a prose piece, Luo Huanchan juxtaposed Zhang Taiyan's claim that "China had never had a state religion" with the joyfulness that Zhang Boling (張伯苓 1876-1951), the founder of Nankai University, had declared on his

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[1] Huanchan, "Wei shijie nüling qingming," in *Yunhong ji*, "wensou."
[2] Yaxian, "Yaxian xinli zhi pilu," in *Yunhong ji*, "wensou." See *Daode jing*, 1:1.
[3] Huanchan, "Zhe meng qi bu qi," "Wenzi yiding you yinyuan," and "Yi xiao," in *Yunhong ji*, "zazu."

conversion to Christianity. If a fan society for Yunhong were established, he argued, her individual fans could share their religious-like pleasure in her art with "people in political, military, intellectual and commercial circles."[4]

However, the contributors described their fascination with the actress as restrained. Throughout the *zhuanji*, they echoed their editor's detachment, declaring that they had never met Yunhong in person and had no intention of visiting her residence.[5] According to one anecdotal entry, Luo Huanchan once suddenly ran into the actress coming out of the Zhonghe playhouse. To everyone's amazement, Luo showed no excitement and looked away to avoid making eye contact. Moreover, it was said that Luo never attempted to visit Yunhong, though it was normal for patrons to do so.[6] The contributor with the penname "Bingfu (病夫 sick man)" claimed that he always asked for the seats in the last row or at the sides in order to avoid Yunhong's glance.[7]

In his illuminating article "Public Intimacy: The Prior History of 'It'," Joseph Roach points out that an illusory sexualized bond between actors and their fans—which is best embodied in the convention of allowing gentlemen into the actresses' dressing rooms—was critical for the emergent celebrity culture.[8] The editor and the contributors of *Yunhong ji* more or less created the "public intimacy" in their writing on the star actress, yet their fantasies of intimacy were constrained by the Confucian distinction between *nei* and *wai* and the separation of gender. As literati fans, they appreciated the emergence of

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[4] Huanchan, "Huanchan tiyi jianjiao," in *Yunhong ji*, "fulu."
[5] Baiyun, "Wu dao wu liangxin," in *Yunhong ji*, "wensou." & Bingfu, "Fu Li Yaxian," in *Yunhong ji*, "wensou."
[6] Xiaogui, "Zhiwen Huanchan," in *Yunhong ji*, "zazu."
[7] Bingfu, "Fu Li Yaxian," in *Yunhong ji*, "wensou."
[8] Joseph Roach, "Public Intimacy: The Prior History of 'It'," in Mary Luckhurst and Jane Moody eds., *Theater and Celebrity in Britain, 1660–2000* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 15-16.

actresses on the public stage but saw their presence in public places and mingling with male patrons as morally compromising. Therefore, the authors of *Yunhong ji* portrayed an actress who consciously confined herself to the private sphere after stage performance. Yunhong was said to "stay behind closed doors and attend upon her mother, burn incense and learn to read, and never socialize with strangers off stage."[9] Given Yunhong's regular entertainment of patrons at her residence, this seems no more than the reiteration of a literati ideal. In general, the discursive construction of actresses as private women can be seen as a rearguard assertion of the *nei*/*wai* distinction that was being eroded even among respectable urban families of the early Republic. But the scrupulous avoidance of intimacy was a distinctive feature of the self-denying literati fans of the actress Du Yunhong.

Expressing the Passion of Fans: Liu Xikui jinji

Published one year after *Yunhong ji*, the *zhuanji* dedicated to the actress Liu Xikui—*Liu Xikui jinji* (劉喜奎近紀 lit. "Recent Chronicle of Liu Xikui")—is a fan product less constrained by Confucian propriety. It was produced at a time when a few literati fans called for establishing the fan society *Liu jiao* for the actress and engaged in the controversy about the actress's looks and talents. Its editor Shen Yankan (沈孼戡 dates unknown) was among the enthusiastic advocates for *Liu jiao*. Unlike the editor of *Yunhong ji*, who deliberately distanced himself from *Du jiao* and kept his affection for Yunhong within the limits of Confucian propriety, Shen was deeply involved in organizing the fan society for Xikui and saw publication of *Liu Xikui jinji* (abbreviated as

[9] "Du Yunhong xiaoshi," in *Yunhong ji*, "xiaoshi."

Jinji below) as a critical effort to defend the actress's reputation and win the debate. So before its release, Shen was tempted to name the collection "*Liu jiao congkan* (劉教叢刊 book series of the cult of Liu)."[10] Openly identifying themselves as "followers" of *Liu jiao*, the editor and contributors of *Jinji* were much less concerned with keeping a safe distance from the actress or abstaining from the frenzy of fandom.

Identifying closely with the actress's fan society, *Jinji*'s structure and discourses seemed more in line than *Yunhong ji* with the explicit modern fan culture. It lacked a verse section and included only a few poems. While the contributors in *Yunhong ji* claimed to appreciate the actress' art rather than her appearance, contributors to *Jinji* lavished attention on the extraordinary physical charms of Liu Xikui. Moreover, whereas *Yunhong ji* provided a very brief three-page "short history" of Du, a great proportion of *Jinji* was devoted to biographies and life stories of Liu. The editor Shen wrote two biographies for the actress: "Shu Liu" (述劉 Account of Liu) and "Shu Liu bu" (述劉補 Account of Liu, supplement), which were together forty-eight pages in length. With vivid details, "Shu Liu" recounts the important segments of the actress's life and career: her family background, early training period, the blooming of her talent, her popularity with audiences, her courting by social notables, and her defamation lawsuit with the newspaper, as well as the intensive debates on her looks and talent.[11] Written after *Liu zhan,* "Shu Liu bu" was an effort to bolster this actress' respectability by reprinting from newspapers a long poem with four-thousand-word commentary that she had allegedly written herself. Nonetheless, the editor did not claim that Liu was worthy of traditional

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[10] "Chen Hancun xiansheng liuyan," in *Liu Xikui jinji*, "xu."
[11] Yankan daoren, "Shu Liu," in *Liu Xikui jinji*, 1-11.

cainü (才女 talented woman) status: given her moderate literacy, he wrote, she might have had literati ghostwriters.

The greater number of life stories and anecdotes in the *Jinji* indicated an intensified "biographical orientation" in early-twentieth-century theatrical writing. Zhou Dahuang, the chief editor of literary supplement of *Chenbao* (晨報 Morning News), wrote at least two biographies for actresses: *Jin Gangzuan waishi* (金鋼鑽外史 An unofficial history of Jin Gangzhuan, 1916) and *Baigong jiahua* (白宮佳話 An elegant account of White Palace, 1918). Judging from its name, the former is a complete biography of the actress Jin Gangzhuan (金鋼鑽 1900~1948) and probably a generic predecessor for *Zhang Xiaoxian waishi* (張小仙外史 An unofficial history of Zhang Xiaoxian), a vivid account published in 1921 that fictionalizes the life and career of the actress Zhang Xiaoxian.[12] The latter, *Baigong jiahua,* was a detailed account of the life and character of the actress Bai Suchen.

The biographical accounts in *zhuanji* diverge from the biographical tradition in *huapu*. The mini-biographies on actors in traditional *huapu* are what Wu Cuncun and Mark Stevenson call "performance of self." The self-representation of the author is equally, if not more important than the sketchy account of the actor. Even if a biography is rich in detail, it reveals as much about the authors' emotion and reflection on life as about the boy actors' charms and talents.[13] Andrea S. Goldman further complicates our understanding by highlighting *huapu* writing as the literati authors' three-dimensional

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[12] *Jin Gangzuan waishi*, though frequently mentioned by contemporaries in newspapers and *zhuanji*, probably has not survived.
[13] Wu and Stevenson, "Speaking of Flowers," 100-129.

perspective: the self-reflective "look inward" at themselves and their peers; the perceptive "look outward" at their biographical subjects and the performance world; and the nostalgic "look backward," drawing upon a literary tradition to legitimize their current indulgence.[14] Despite the persistence of the three-dimensional "looks" in the early Republican *zhuanji*, the "look outward" of the literati authors increasingly intensified and transformed into what I call "the fannish gaze." In the biographies of *Jinji*, the literati authors were immersed in the public and private life of Liu Xikui, rather than their own self-image. Though seen and heard now and then, they made the actress their absolute focus.

What emerged in the various biographical details was a personality instead of the female ideal that we found in *Yunhong ji*.[15] The "short history" in *Yunhong ji* presented a vague yet familiar female image that easily reminds readers of traditional women of virtue. It mentioned in passing her talent in acting and her career achievements but gave emphasis to her filial piety and female seclusion. By contrast, the image of Liu Xikui in the editor's two biographies was embellished with vivid details from the actress's life on and off stage, and other accounts in *Jinji* added information on her charity activities, her refusal of marriage proposals from powerful patrons, her negotiation with the troupe manager about performance arrangements, and her experiences of sexual harassment by libertine fans. According to more than one account, Liu lived a life of luxury, "wearing extravagant clothes and eating exquisite food, keeping numerous servants and bossing

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[14] Goldman, *Opera and the City*, Chapter 1, esp. 58-59.
[15] Actually, highlighting the subject's personality was a feature that Hu Shi identified as the critical characteristic of the modern, Western biography. See Shao Dongfang, "Transformation, Diversification, Ideology: Twentieth Century Chinese Biography," in Stanley Schab and George Simson, eds., *Life Writings from the Pacific Rim: Essays from Japan, China, Indonesia, India, and Siam, with a Psychological Overview* (Honolulu: East-West Center, 1997), 19-42.

them around, traveling in a spectacular carriage and living in a mansion equipped with all sorts of electric appliances."[16] The authors were not critical of the actress's luxurious lifestyle but saw it as matching her newly acquired fame and fortune.

With their fannish gaze, the literati authors of *Jinji* portrayed their subject as a star actress who "could stir society and transform customs more than an actor could."[17] Their sense of amazement at Liu's celebrity permeated the text, which repeatedly applied to her the term "*moli* (魔力 chrisma)." They appeared to be more interested in explaining this chrisma than in justifying their own fascination, the issue that preoccupied their counterparts in *Yunhong ji*. Some contributors attributed the actress' attraction to her extraordinary beauty.[18] Others highlighted the newspaper controversy on Liu's beauty, her libel cases, and the feverish passions she aroused, and traced Liu's magic power to her fans and the media. The more the *zhuanji* authors came to acknowledge the importance of fan communities and media publicity in establishing an actress's fame, the more their own self-image as the sole true connoisseurs faded from their writing. Put differently, by contributing to *Jinji*, the literati authors transformed themselves from *the* lonely, self-righteous true connoisseur to *an* articulate member of a fan community.

Their fascination with Liu's celebrated personage, however, did not imply a lack of concern with feminine virtue. Accounts in the *zhuanji* almost unanimously presented the actress as a virtuous woman upholding Confucian gender norms. Liu would decline

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[16] Chen Yuansun, "Liu Xikui," *Liu Xikui jinji*, 42-43.
[17] Guan Feifei, "Guan xu," *Liu Xikui jinji*, "xu" p.8.
[18] For an example, the second preface of *Jinji* used the most ornate words and metaphors to describe the actress' beauty, *Liu Xikui jinji*, 8.

requests from patrons to visit her residence and refuse to perform at private parties.[19] She observed Confucian filial piety by handing over all her income to her mother and acceding to all her demands.[20] According to the editor of "Shu Liu," she never spoke to male colleagues, refused to perform at private occasions, and forbade male servants to enter her bedroom at any time. Despite their prurient interest in the details of her private life, both the editor and his contributors emphasized the actress's virtue in the private sphere. Yet her ability to draw extraordinary publicity and popularity was disturbing, reminding them of the state-toppling woman of extraordinary beauty, the *hongyan huoshui* 紅顏禍水, a recurrent metaphor in *Jinji*. At the end of his "Shu Liu," the editor admitted his concern about literati obsession with the actress at a time of national hardship: "Is Liu a real *huoshui*, a beauty that causes disaster?"[21] He brought up the question again in his "Shu Liu bu," without finding a satisfying answer. This ambivalent advocate for the Cult of Liu finally found some relief in the actress's departure in the summer of 1915: "Liu's leaving the capital may not be good fortune for the actress but it is a blessing for the nation."[22]

Upholding the Distinction of Status: Liu Juxian ji

The *zhuanji* for Liu Juxian, an actress known for her tragic roles and martial arts, was published in 1916 with the title *Liu Juxian ji* (abbreviated below as *Juxian ji*). Its editor Guo Dieshi (郭渫史) seems to have been a leading figure in the literati fan community and a prolific editor in theatrical publication. He organized a poetry society to write

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[19] Feifei, "Liu Xikui yishen tanpian lu," in *Liu Xikui jinji*, 26; Chen Yuansun, "Liu Xikui," in *Liu Xikui jinji*, 43 & 48.
[20] Chen Yuansun, "Liu Xikui," in *Liu Xikui jinji*, 44.
[21] Yankan daoren, "Shu Liu," in *Liu Xikui jinji*, 11.
[22] Yankan daoren, "Shu Liu bu," in *Liu Xikui jinji*, 24-25

evaluative poems and comments for several actresses, and also made a name for himself by editing a series of *zhuanji* for actresses under the title of *lingshi* (伶史 history of theater players).[23] *Juxian ji* was the first *zhuanji* in the *lingshi* series. The second was published one year later for the actress Fu Zhuyou.[24] Most contributors to the *zhuanji* seem to have come from an elite stratum of literati. A few such as Fan Zengxiang, Yi Shunding and Luo Yinggong (羅瘿公 1880~1924) had once been high officials in the Qing dynasty and remained tremendously influential in the early Republican era, especially among the literary community in Beijing. Some contributors like Wu Jiarui, Guan Genglin, and Gao Buying held higher degrees, *jinshi* or *juren*, in the imperial examination under the Qing and still occupied important positions in the Republican government. Most of them joined certain poetry societies that sponsored gatherings to encourage the writing of patronage poetry. A few other contributors were editors or frequent contributors of theater columns in newspapers. The contributor with the penname Tao Chan, for instance, was a chief editor for *Jinghua Ribao*.

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[23] Yunfeng shizhongshe, "Jintai shier xian xiaoshi," *Shuntian shibao*, December 5, 1917.
[24] Lanjiang, "Yongzhu yaji faqi ci," *Shuntian shibao*, February 21, 1917.

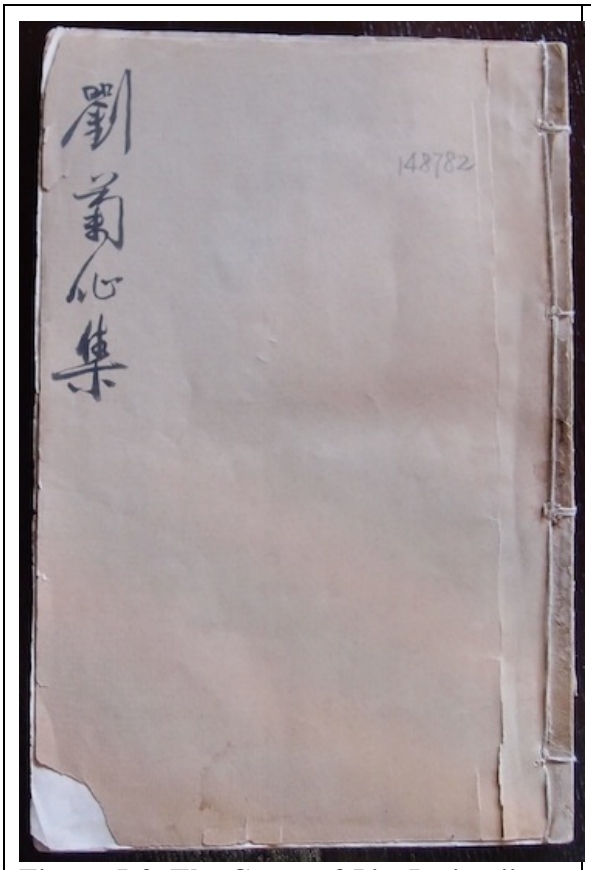

Figure 5-3. The Cover of *Liu Juxian ji.* Photo by author.

Figure 5-4. A Photo of Liu Juxian in *Liu Juxian ji.* Reprinted from Guo Dieshi ed., *Liu Juxian ji*. Manuscript. 1916.

The actress was a courtesan of General Li Zhun (李準 1871~1936), who had been commander of the Guangdong navy in the late Qing and after the Xinhai revolution mostly lived in retirement in Tianjin, spending his time in calligraphy and opera. Republican governments attempted to co-opt him and conferred upon him a number of honorable titles. But Li seemed to lose real interest in officialdom. Rejecting all the offers of important posts, he only agreed to serve occasionally as a senior military adviser for the Republican governments. Given the actresses' connection with the well known—though retired—general, it is not surprising that so many influential patrons were willing

to contribute to *Juxian ji*. Possessing considerable social influence, Li was able to solicit patronage poems from a number of social notables for his favorite actress-courtesan. It was likely that General Li commissioned or facilitated *Juxian ji*'s compilation and publication. Literati in Beijing felt honored by the general's request, as is indicated in one of Yi Shunding's poems: "One night, General Li, drinking beside the tomb of Emperor Wen of the Han, asked me to write a poem as a present for the courtesan Caichun (here refering to Liu Juxian); [I am delighted] to write for such a courageous and distinguished person about such a woman of unrivalled beauty 灞陵夜醉李將軍, 索我題詩贈采春. 替他猿臂封侯客, 來寫峨眉絕代人."[25]

Juxian ji resembles *Yunhong ji* in terms of structure. It consists of several pictures of the actress, a couple of prefaces and epigraphs, a very brief two-page biography, as well as four sections containing poems, essays, theater reviews, and miscellanies. But unlike *Yunhong ji* as well as *Jinji*, it lacks a section that specifically introduces the organization and members of *Ju she*, the actress's fan society, though its editor was a fan member. This implies that *Juxian ji* was the product not of a single fan association but of various patrons cultivated by the actress. The contributors, well aware that their subject was a courtesan favored by the influential general, toned down their own passion. They rendered *Ju she* less visible by emphasizing its informal organization and limited constituency as a fan society. According to their accounts, the name *Ju she* was originally given by outsiders to label literati writing poems about Liu Juxian, and subsequently a few literati patrons adopted it. In one of the few essays in *Juxian ji* referring to *Ju she,* the

[25] Yi'an "Juxian qu wei nüling Liu Juxian er zuo, " *Liu Juxian ji*, 7.

author Shen Yankan—the aforementioned editor of *Jinji*—acknowledged that *Ju she* was "a formless society 無形之集合" among notables, held together by shared spirit.[26]

As in *Yunhong ji*, poems constitute a critical section of *Juxian ji*, but they assume a less sentimental or melancholic tone. Their authors showed little interest in the actress's suffering past, and their flowery metaphors and courtesan rhetoric did not lead to reflection on their own life frustrations. Actually, as members of an eminent stratum of the literati class, these authors probably felt little need to do so. They saw their patronage as a romantic literary pursuit, "literary men versifying as they [play the game of] throw(ing) arrows at wine pots 雅歌投壺文人之韻事."[27] In their eyes, Liu Juxian was doing well in her career and could expect an illustrious future thanks to her relationship with General Li. They portray her extraordinary achievement on stage, praise her exceptional martial arts for invigorating the nation's military spirit, and call her "the king of tragedy" for her presentation of tragic roles.[28] By focusing on the actress's skills, the authors claimed that they restricted their theater comments within the "proper" limits, unlike those who "strayed into the path of *pinhua* [that is, evaluating courtesans or prostitutes]" as a result of sentimentalism and sensual indulgence.[29]

As in *Yunhong ji* and *Jinji*, the authors referred to the actress's character and virtue in terms of the *nei*/*wai* distinction. One noted that off-stage she confined herself behind closed doors and on stage never flashed glances to the male audience. He insisted that her fan society observed the separation of sexes, since *Ju she* members never tried to contact

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[26] Shan yin Yan kan dao ren, "Ju she zhi yuan," in *Liu Juxian ji*, 1916. "Wenyuan."
[27] "Xu'er," in *Liu Juxian ji*, "xu."
[28] For instance, Yingong, "Liu Juxian ge wei Li jiangjun zuo," in *Liu Juxian ji*, "yihai;" "Mifeng ji," in *Liu Juxian ji*, "pinglin;" Dieshi, "Liu Juxian xiaozhuan," in *Liu Juxian ji*, "xiaozhuan."
[29] "Pinglin," in *Liu Juxian ji*, "ping lin."

her.[30] In his brief biography, the editor added that patrons were offended by the actress's refusal of requests to meet them. Yet the authors do not disapprove of the actress's intimate ties with upper-class patrons. They felt that her ability to obtain the affection of General Li and attract more and more "*wuhou bin* (五侯賓 guests of distinguished status and honor)" deserved praise, while her noble nature shielded her from the unpleasant voyeurism of "*suke* (俗客 undiscerning people)."[31]

Conclusion

With the advent of the modern print media, the semi-public theatrical writing of literati in the eighteenth century—as embodied in *huapu* texts—was transformed into a conspicuous public endeavor. Like their counterparts in Shanghai writing popular Butterfly fiction, the literati authors in early Republican Beijing filled the expanding print media with their theater commentary. With the abolition of imperial theater patronage, the literati reviewers not merely became the most critical "star promoters" of theater plays, but also created a broader literary community comprising varied fandoms. Intermingled to a varying degree with other literary or intellectual societies such as the poetry clubs and the Society of National Learning, the literati fandoms were one of the most salient and vibrant of the groups that created the discursive public sphere of the early Republic.[32]

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[30] "Xuyi," in *Liu Juxian ji*, "xu."
[31] Ying gong, "Liu Juxian ge: wei Li jiangjun zuo," in *Liu Juxian ji*, "yihai;" Xiaojin, "Liu Juxian: wei nüling Liu Juxian zuo," in *Liu Juxian ji*, "yihai."
[32] For a recent study on the literary societies of Republican China, see Kirk A. Denton and Michel Hockx eds, *Literary Societies of Republican China* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2008).

Retrospectively, the theatrical writing of literati fans in the early Republic inherited a lot of generic and literary convention from the older theater connoisseurship literature. As my analysis of the varied writing on star actresses shows, the sympathetic identification with an actress, the use of sentimental poems and allusions to express affection, and the expression of class and status sensitivity all had their precedents in a long literary tradition, particularly the Ming courtesan literature and the *huapu* texts from the middle to late Qing dynasty. Looking forward, the discursive public sphere constituted by theater commentaries of literati fans in early Republican Beijing anticipated the urban public sphere in the 1930s that Eugenia Lean identifies in her investigation of the public reaction to the trial of Shi Jianqiao, which was sentiment-based, media constituted and ambiguous in terms of its 'liberatory' qualities.[33] Nonetheless, the public sphere emerging in the early Republic seems to be more heterogeneous and competitive than Lean reveals. It was not merely pluralized but also factionalized, as was best exemplified in the fierce controversy of *Liu zhan*. Nonetheless the personal allegiance and factional competition of literati fans did not exclude a sense of belonging to a moral community, along with a shared revulsion for the imperial and Republican officialdom and an enduring gender rhetoric differentiating *nei* and *wai*.

Relying on biographical style to capture the glamour of celebrated actresses in terms of their personality and social repute, the literati fans refashioned a collective fan identity that integrated individual desire with communal sensibility. Circulating the various details of actresses' lives and careers in their writings, they repositioned themselves in a dramatically changing world, particularly in relation to the newly emerged public women.

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[33] Lean, *Public Passions.*

They molded a special variety of "public intimacy" in which their fantasies of intimacy with actresses were constrained by an acute sense of propriety.

The literati fans of theater—together with their peers in the spheres of Butterfly fiction and poetry, as well as the relatively later May Fourth intellectuals—constituted the expanding public sphere in the early Republic. Such a public sphere was not without internal competition. The May Fourth radicals, who rallied their critical forces around universities and new journals such as *New Youth*, disparaged the literati generation as irreconcilable with modernity, which they defined in Western terms. They disliked its connection with Confucian tradition and the imperial past and its ideological conservatism, were offended by its indiscriminative mingling of classical with vernacular language, and found its seemingly dissolute tone offensive.[34] Mobilizing the print media, the May Fourth radicals imagined a new, politicized public of citizens. As the May Fourth literature and ideology were gradually canonized in the twentieth century, other literary forms—including the mixed theatrical writing that persisted well beyond the early Republican era—were labeled as outmoded or stagnant, and thus have been under-researched until recently. Hence the lack of serious scholarly attention to the reaction of the theater community to Liang Ji's suicide.

[34] Timothy B Weston, *The Power of Position*.

Conclusion

This study reconstructs the entrance of young women into the theatrical profession and a few actresses' quick rise to stardom in 1910s Beijing. It shows that the first-generation actresses in the post-imperial capital, either driven by family economic necessity or by a passion for acting, challenged the previously male-dominated profession. Their commercial success—as manifested in expanding recruitment, impressive box office, and ascendance to decent performance venues—caused great anxiety in the patriarchal society: actors felt threatened by actresses' competition; male patrons of actors feared the challenge of actresses to their favored art form; and the state was alarmed about the potential harm caused by the influx of women in public spaces. The actor-dominated theater guild, the agencies of the government, and the press all assumed a moral role to regulate actresses' behaviors and define their virtue. Their attempts to discipline actresses were forceful: the theater guild banned mixed casting and forced actresses to organize all-female troupes; the police were widely deployed in playhouses, streets and neighborhoods to monitor actresses' behavior; the print media also put actresses' public and private life under scrutiny.

The survival of actresses partly depended on a flourishing entertainment industry that drew on complex social networks. With the lifting of imperial restrictions, the theater business quickly expanded to accommodate an increasingly diversified audience comprising politicians, students, journalists, and other urban professionals. A set of practices facilitated women's entry into the profession. Parents made their young daughters into wage-earning actresses in order to subsidize the family economy. Despite

their oppressive nature, *lingjia* functioned as essential middlemen for young women of diverse backgrounds to gain access to training and employment.

The popularity of actresses mostly came from their distinctive art, which tantalized audiences with their actual, erotic body performing transgressive *huadan* role, and their hybrid repertoire, which catered to a diversified audience holding different ideological positions and cultural values. A few actresses quickly became stars who commanded extraordinary box office, enjoyed high salary, and lived a luxurious lifestyle. Accounts about their public and private life, together with their pictures, circulated in a variety of print media. Literati organized fan societies for individual star actresses. They gathered in playhouses to support their stars by shouting "*hao*!" They also wrote laudatory commentaries or published collected articles (*zhuanji*) to promote their reputation. Thus actresses in 1910s Beijing thrived on an expanding entertainment industry that commodified the female body, and on a patronage network of literati who dominated the entertainment print media.

The Decline of Female Performance

Nonetheless, the "golden age" of actresses in Beijing turned out to be ephemeral. The commercial success and social influence of actresses culminated in 1917 but began to decline thereafter. The turning point was the arrival on July 1st of the warlord Zhang Xun and his 3,000-strong "pigtailed" army to dismiss the Republican government and restore the Manchu monarchy. The restoration was only short-lived, but the situation in the capital continued to be turbulent. Residents were frightened by the "pigtailed" army. Twelve days later, the Beiyang warlord Duan Qirui (段祺瑞 1865~1936) gathered

expeditionary troops and stormed Beijing. The chaos in the capital paralyzed local business. Many theaters and newspapers suspended operation. Star players like Mei Lanfang and Liu Xikui moved to the legation district, and others left Beijing to avoid the war. In late July, when the situation gradually calmed down, the theaters reopened for business. Nonetheless, a few cautious actresses including Liu Xikui and Xian Lingzhi still hesitated. An anxious literati fan even penned a newspaper essay appealing for the two prominent actresses to return.[1]

It is not surprising that Liu Xikui had reservations about returning to the stage. Earlier in 1915, as mentioned in chapter 5, gossip widely circulated that Zhang Xun had become infatuated with the actress when he invited Liu and other Beijing opera stars to perform at the birthday party for his mother in Xuzhou. In various literati accounts of the rendezvous, Zhang proposed to marry Liu; nonetheless, though the actress dared not directly refuse the powerful warlord, she tricked him and managed to escape Xuzhou. No matter how implausible these stories were, avoiding Zhang Xun seemed imperative for Liu, who became a legendary symbol of resistance to the power of warlords.

In early August, as the situation stabilized, more actresses including Xian Lingzhi went back to the stage. The long-awaited return of Liu Xikui and a few other cautious actresses, as Tsuji Chōka observed, did not happen until a few days after Feng Guozhang (馮國璋 1859~1919) re-entered Beijing to assume the presidency and the city seemed entirely back to normal.[2] The successive return of the two star actresses excited many theater fans. The excitement was well captured by the words of Tsuji Chōka: "Recently business has

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[1] Da hongshan ren, "Quan Xian Lingzhi Liu Xikui shangtai shu," *Shuntian shibao*, Jul. 28, 1917.
[2] Tinghua, "Wutai qise," *Shuntian shibao*, Aug. 7, 1917.

resumed in peace, and the two actresses have come on stage one after the other. Residents in the capital were telling each other 'Lingzhi is back on stage!' 'Xikui is back on stage!' Indeed the atmosphere was like the officials celebrating at the court and merchants cheering at the market [after rain relieved a severe drought]."[3] Welcoming the return of the two actresses, theater fans anticipated the resumption of "the great battle between Liu and Xian."

The theater business of actresses to some extent recovered. Star actresses were reported to have regained their drawing power. *Kuideshe* created more sentimental *xinju* plays that fascinated audiences and moved them into tears. The popularity of actresses was further confirmed in the mock election held by *Shuntian shibao* in October 1917 (See Table 6-1). On average, actresses won more votes than male counterparts. Though Mei Lanfang was for the first time elected King of Actors with a stunning 232,865 votes, Liu Xikui, elected "No. 1 actress," slightly surpassed him with 238,606 votes.[4] While theater critics questioned whether naming the cross-dressing Mei as King of Actors was appropriate and whether his talents were superior to other actors, Liu's status seemed well established.[5]

But a full recovery of past glory never occurred. Overall, the business and influence of actresses started a gradual decline. The signs of decline became conspicuous in 1918. The playhouses successively stopped staging all-female performance. In the Qianmen theater district, where actresses used to dominate, only the Zhonghe playhouse continued to present all-female performance.[6] The all-female troupes faced a series of organizational

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[3] Tinghua, "Kunling weiren: Liu Xikui yu Xian Lingzhi," *Shuntian shibao*, Aug. 11, 1917.
[4] "Benci juxuan dangxuan zhe ji cidian zhe zhi pilu," *Shuntian shibao*, Nov. 2, 1917.
[5] Joshua Goldstein, *Drama Kings*, 128~129.
[6] "Kunban xiyuan zhi shuaitui," *Shuntian shibao*, Jul. 24, 1918.

and financial problems. Many all-female troupes including the Liu Xikui-led *Weideshe* fell apart and were eventually disbanded. Even the large *Kuideshe* could not prevent its star from leaving and failed to draw a satisfactory box office. Guangdelou playhouse, where *Kuideshe* had resided for four years and produced a variety of popular *xinju* plays, suffered from a sharp reduction in revenue and eventually ended its business partnership with the troupe. Theater fans and critics lamented *Kuideshe*'s disintegration. The actress troupe regrouped and made a successful return to the stage in Wenming playhouse one month later. It managed to attract audiences by reducing the ticket fare, recruiting star actresses from Tianjin and producing more *xinju* plays.[7] Thereafter, it managed to survive all sorts of difficulties and continue to be a flagship for artistic innovation for another two decades.[8]

Table 6-1 The Voting Results of the *Shuntian Shibao* Popular Election, October 1917

King of Actors		No.1 of Actresses		No.1 of Boy Actors[9]	
Mei Lanfang 梅蘭芳	232865	Liu Xikui 劉喜奎	238606	Shang Xiaoyun 尚小雲	152525
Yu Shuyanyushu 余叔岩	42552	Zhang Xiaoxian 張小仙	39227	Cheng Lianxi 程連喜	58780
Yang Xiaolou 楊小樓	29607	Yu Ziyun 于紫雲	14862	Fang Lianyuan 方連元	30493
Liu Hongsheng 劉鴻昇	7387	Du Yunhong 杜雲紅	11141	Ma Lianliang 馬連良	16554
Zhang Hei 張黑	2823	Fu Zhuyou 富竹友	9599	Wu Tie'an 吳鐵庵	7137
Wang Xiaonong 汪笑儂	1780	Zhao Ziyun 趙紫雲	6502	Ru Fulan 茹富蘭	4709

Source: "Benci juxuan dangxuan zhe ji cidian zhe zhi pilu," *Shuntian shibao*, Nov. 2, 1917.

[7] Yinxia, "Kede she fuzhen suowen zhi zhongzhong," *Shuntian shibao*, Aug. 1, 1918.
[8] Tianma, "Jijiang dao hu de Kuide she," *Shen bao*, Feb. 2, 1940.
[9] Boy actors, or *tongling* in Chinese is a unique category in the Republican theater, a topic I will pursue in the future research.

The reasons for the decline in the influence of all-female troupes and performances in the 1920s were complex and require further research. But a few issues seem obvious. The novelty of women on the stage, which appealed to a voyeuristic male audience in the first place, gradually wore off. As it became natural for women to appear in public, the presence of the female body on the stage lost its sense of being transgressive and risqué. The women's movement regained momentum in the late 1910s.[10] May Fourth intellectuals and youth particularly targeted footbinding as a sign of female suppression and China's backwardness. More anti-footbinding societies were organized to reform the heinous social custom. In the 1920s, a few local warlords and regional governments launched sustained anti-footbinding campaigns.[11] As women in coastal cities and provincial capitals stopped binding their feet, the allure of bound feet faded and audiences were no longer tantalized by glimpsing them. People had become accustomed to female players, and their performance styles were no longer novel.

To some extent, the decline of actresses' influence was also contingent on the life cycle of the first-generation star actresses. While *dan* actors in the 20th century began to perform female roles well beyond their youth and made the cross-dressing a lifetime career, most star actresses permanently forfeited their careers after getting married. In a society, which still defined the proper place of women in the domestic sphere despite the discourse of New Woman, retirement from the stage for a happy marriage was desirable

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[10] Women's movement, particular women's petition for suffrage, first gained momentum in the 1911 revolution. In 1912, a few women lobbied the National Assembly to include female suffrage in the constitution; their efforts were ignored. As the momentum of the 1911 revolution sibsided and the Yuan Shikai government engaged in restricting women's political activism and promoting Confucianism as a state religion, women's movement lost its strength. See, Ma Yuxin, *Women Journalists and Feminism in China, 1898-1937* (Amherst, N.Y: Cambria Press, 2010), 138-143.

[11] The new Republican government banned footbinding in 1912, but it was not effectively enforced. For details on the anti-footbinding campaigns, see Ko, *Cinderella's Sisters*, 38-68.

for most actresses. They often considered their acting career as a way to repay their parents when they were young and unmarried. Their oligation to support their native family usually ended when they married into another family. Also, the stage could serve as a springboard to marry someone of wealth and social standing, which would make continuation of acting both financially unnecessary and morally problematic.

From 1918, many of the superstar actresses got married and retired from the stage. By June 1918, Liu Juxian married the General Li Zhun as a concubine; Jin Xiangyu married Ma Xiaojin, a former congressman who played an important role in the early parliamentary politics and served in Yuan Shikai's government; Du Yunhong married a brigade commander and Jiu Yueju—the famous actress known for her clown roles—also married a military officer.[12] Fu Zhuyou, the actress from an elite Manchu family, also retired from the stage when one relative in the Fu lineage provided 700 Chinese dollars to facilitate her marriage.[13]

Liu Xikui repeatedly suspended acting due to a series of personal problems. After the death of the actress' mother in 1916, Liu's matrilineal and patrilineal relatives and her troupe managers, all covetous of the actress' fortune, struggled over the management of Liu's property, financial investment, and marriage proposals. In November 1917, an indignant patron, sympathetic with Liu as a helpless woman who was "parentless and brotherless, and being abused by outsiders," sent a letter to the district police chief, requesting police intervention.[14] The police conducted a thorough investigation for over a

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[12] "Kunling jiaren zhi diaocha," *Shuntian shibao*, Jun. 8, 1918.
[13] "Ju xun yishu," *Shuntian shibao*, Jun. 18, 1918.
[14] "Jingshi jingcha ting sifachu guanyu Liu Xikui bei ren nazou yinqian buhuai ji qita qingkuang de cheng," [The report of the judicial agency of Capital Police Department about someone taking Liu Xikui's money

month and in January 1918 ordered the troupe managers to stop intervening in the Liu family's affairs. The actress' relatives were also made to sign a bond guaranteeing the actress' freedom in managing her own property and marriage.[15] Nonetheless, this was not the actress' only problem. She also faced pressure from Lu Jin (陸錦 1879-1946), an influential military officer who held the office of military affairs in the Yuan Shikai government and supported Zhang Xun's restoration. It was said that Lu was very fond of the actress and aspired to marry her. When Liu stopped acting in Beijing and moved in Tianjin in June 1918, people speculated that she had left the capital to avoid harassment from Lu. Later that year, the 26-year-old actress married the low ranking officer, Cui Chengchi (崔承熾). Not long after the marriage Cui lost his job in the office of the general staff. Rumors circulated that Lu Jin, who had become his superior, had dismissed Cui out of resentment that he had married the woman he desired for himself.[16]

It is noteworthy that the decline of star actresses and all-female troupes in Beijing occurred as China entered upon the heightened warlord era starting from Yuan Shikai's death in 1916. It is not simply coincidence. The military structures and administration that had been centralized under Yuan's control disintegrated as Yuan's subordinates and rivals fought with each other to control the nominal government in Beijing.[17] Chinese politics became exceedingly complex, and the chaos affected the theatrical world and

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without returning and other matters] January 1917, file no. J181-019-17628, Beijing Municipal Archive, Beijing.

[15] "Guangyu Liu Tongsheng jie Liu Xikui yinyuan de lü."

[16] For the gossip, see Juan ling, "Liu Xikui ge xu," *Shuntian shibao*, Jun. 2, 1918; "Liu Xikui zhi jinkuang," *Xi zazhi*, no.1 (1922), 74-5; "Beijing dian canmou bu juzhang Cui Chengzhi yin yi liang wan yuan qu nüling Liu Xikui bei gongtong chaxi mingling sizhi," *Shen bao*, Jan. 1, 1921.

[17] See Donald Sutton's *Provincial Militarism and the Chinese Republic*, in which he analyzes the emergence of warlordism since the late 1910s as a process of "militarism in disintegration."

made the acting career more precarious for actresses.[18] Unruly soldiers had been a problematic presence in Beijing playhouses from the early 1910s. They were frequently reported to refuse to purchase tickets, fight for seats with other audience members, and disturb the order of the theater. The disturbing presence of soldiers became worse in the late 1910s as various warlord cliques entered the city vying for power. In the *Shuntian shibao*, Tsuji Chōka repeatedly petitioned the Beijing government to restrain the soldiers, but to his dismay, the effort of the government to deploy *junjing* (軍警 military police) in playhouses actually worsened the situation. The military police abused their authority by inviting friends to attend performances, and proved to be more interested in watching opera than keeping order among the soldiers.[19]

The politicians and officials in the warlord government could be even more threatening than ordinary soldiers since they used political influence to pursue the most desired actresses. Even though their courtship offered an opportunity for a few actresses to marry up, others experienced sexual harassment. The gossip about Liu Xikui's many trips to the foreign legation and consular quarters of Beijing and Tianjin to escape warlords and officials was not groundless. In the 1920s, under warlordism, as many scholars have pointed out, Beijing increasingly lost its status to Shanghai as an attractive cultural center.[20] Having been a popular destination for itinerant actresses seeking fame and fortune in the 1910s, it became less desirable in the growing political and military chaos.

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[18] For factional politics in early Republican Beijing, see Nathan, *Peking Politics*.
[19] Tinghua, "Jinggao junjing ducha zhang Ma Junlong," *Shuntian shibao*, Jun. 16, 1918 & "Junren guanju zhi diaocha," *Shuntian shibao*, Jun. 19, 1918.
[20] Timothy Weston, *The Power of Position.*

What hastened the decline of all-female performance in a more profound way was the emigration of actresses' literati patrons, as the perceptive Tsuji Chōka commented in July 1917—

> When the Republic was inaugurated and the new politics was in order, the southerners came up fast to the capital. They were particularly fond of female performance, so the playhouses staging all-female troupes boomed. Now the political scene has changed, [the influence of] southerners are declining. They left Beijing in successive groups. The attendance at the playhouses of actresses is greatly affected.[21]

The fan base of actresses was greatly undermined. Many literati who had sought political and professional opportunities in Beijing left the capital out of fear of warfare or political disillusion. Some literati, nostalgic for star actresses, would continue to send letters to newspaper editors to publish their sentimental poems and laudatory prose. For instance, when the fan with the penname Lianhua Shibalang (蓮花十八郎) returned to his native place in a southern province to mourn his father's death in December 1917, he was still concerned with his beloved actress Liu Xikui. Reading the news that Liu had quit acting, he sent sentimental poems to *Rizhi bao* and *Shuntian shibao* for publication. His many literary and theater friends, who also returned to their places of origins, read his poem in the newspapers and responded with poems in the same rhyme.[22] The theater fan with the penname Liumang (流氓) sent a poem to the newspaper, which was written on the behalf of Liu Xikui to reply to Lianhua shibalang. It recounts poignantly how lonely the actress and Lianghua shibalang felt in their separate homes and how much they cherished the memory of their past intimacy—

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[21] Tinghua, "Fupi yu kunling," *Shuntian shibao*, Jul. 4, 1917.
[22] See Hesheng, "Bu Lianghua shibalang zeng Liu Xikui yuanyun" & "You xini Liu Xikui da Shibalang yuanyun" *Shuntian shibao*, Mar. 6, 1918.

For no good reason, I humbly returned to my hometown;
The star-crossed Luo Fu swore not to marry.
You returned home with a broken heart,
I came back to my place of origin, a lost soul.
My lonely sleep is disturbed by nightmares.
The tunes of the Lishan Mountain sound tearfully.
Please send me letters about [our] elegant affair,
Don't recount them to others.
無端韜晦守家園，薄命羅敷誓不婚。
君扮返鄉因落魄，我旋梓裏已亡魂。
鴛床夜夜來魔夢，驪曲聲聲帶淚痕。
聊寄魚書傳韻話，休將韻事對人言。[23]

For literati who stayed in Beijing and survived all the chaos, things were equally depressing. Their sympathy as fans, combined with the belief that femininity was located in the domestic sphere, made them hope that the actresses would enjoy happy marriages. Thus a literati fan of Zhang Xiaoxian's interpreted the tears the actress shed on stage as expressions of personal grief for being old yet unmarried.[24] Nonetheless, it felt to them like a betrayal when a few star actresses married powerful warlords and officials. They had long feared that these powerful and morally corrupt men would take away the actresses they admired and cherished. They derided them as *shazhali* (沙咤利), a barbarian general in the Tang dynasty who stole the beautiful concubine Liu Ji from the scholar Han Yi) or as *judu* (菊蠹 lit. "chrysanthemum worms"), and vehemently disparaged them for "robbing actresses—who were objects of public enjoyment (公共娛樂品)—from others for their own purposes."[25]

With the departure of Southern literati fans, along with the increasing social insignificance of literati, it was natural for the fan societies to fade away. Of course, new

[23] Liu mang, "Xi ni Liu Xikui he Shibalang yuanyun," *Rizhi bao,* Feb. 2, 1918.
[24] "Zhe xuduo xinshi dai xiang shui shuo," *Rizhi bao*, Jan. 29, 1919.
[25] Yin Xia, "Wen Cheng Lianxi wei chujing ganzhi," *Shuntian shibao*, Jul. 14, 1917.

star actresses emerged and new fan societies were organized. But their influence could not be compared to the heyday of the early Republic. In the 1920s and 1930s, literary patronage was no longer in vogue. Literati continued to publish poetic commentaries and *zhuanji*; nonetheless, other forms of theater writing led the fashion, particularly "modern" theater criticism and theater historiography, both of which appealed to the principles of objectivity and rationality. Theater commentary was still related to patronage, but it was also driven by scholarly interest. Theater theorists and historians engaged more deeply in competition with foreigners over researching Chinese culture.[26]

The *pingju jia* and *pengjue jia*, appellations positively referring to the influential literati "star promoters" in the early 1910s, was increasingly under attack after the May Fourth era. In their journal *New Youth*, Qian Xuantong (錢玄同 1887-1939) and Liu Bannong (劉半農 1891-1934), two leading figures among the May Fourth intellectuals, bracketed writers of theater commentary and popular fiction together, ridiculing them as "scholars of the parrot school (鸚鵡派讀書人)" who "must preserve the barbarian [tradition of] classification of objects and refuse to evolve to be civilized 必須保存野蠻人之品物，斷不肯進化為文明人. "[27] Other May Fourth intellectuals, who—unlike Qian and Liu—acknowledged the value of traditional Chinese theater, appealed for a new style of theater criticism. For instance, Xu Lingxiao criticized the old-style theater criticism for its connection to patronage and insisted that his own theater criticism was neither adulatory

[26] Patricia Sieber, *Theaters of Desire: Authors, Readers, and the Reproduction of Early Chinese Song-Drama, 1300-2000* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); and Hsiao-chun Wu, unpublished dissertation "Ascending the Hall of Great Elegance: the Emergence of Drama Research in Modern China."
[27] Qian Xuantong & Liu Bannong, "Tongxin: Jin zhi suowei pingju jia," *Xin qingnina* 5, no.2 (1918): 105-107.

nor self-opinionated.[28] Liu Huogong (劉豁公) also rejected the old-style theater commentary for its sentimentality, irrationality, and arcane and fanciful styles.[29] After 1915, as the efflorescence we know as the New Culture movement spread into new intellectual areas, journals devoted to "modern" theater criticism proliferated. In 1918, Zhou Jianyun issued *Jubu congkan* (鞠部叢刊 Theater Series) and Liu Huogong inaugurated *Xiju daguan* (戲劇大觀 Theater Overview) in Shanghai. Both appealed to objectivity and were oriented to scholarly research and reform.

The historiography of Chinese theater gradually became a critical site of cultural nationalism in the twentieth century. Early in 1912, Wang Guowei (王國維 1877~1927), a well-known literary scholar and historian, published *A History of Song and Yuan Drama* (宋元戲曲考). Even though retracing the golden age of Chinese drama to the period under the Jurchen and Yuan rule, Wang insisted that it was Han Chinese who brought the immature drama to its literary fruition. Underlying this Han nationalist claim was Wang's aim to offer a cultural solution to the contemporary threat of foreign occupation. The presence of imperial powers, he hinted, could not impede the Chinese civilization.[30] Other scholars also engaged in writing and publishing theater history. And their vision was much less traditionalist than Wang for they focused on the Qing and contemporary theater in Beijing. Mu Chengong (穆辰公), a very active journalist in the world of theater publication who had studied in Japan, published *History of Actors* (Ling

[28] Lingxiao hange zhuren, "Zhen pingju jia," *Yuxing*, no.24 (1917): 82-83.
[29] Huogong, "Wo de pingju guan," *Xi zazhi*, no.1 (1922): 6-8 & no.3 (1922): 36.
[30] Sieber, *Theaters of Desire*, "Introduciton," 1-44.

shi 伶史) in 1917, the style of which was modeled on Sima Qian's *Shiji* (史記 Historical records).[31] Its genealogy of famous actors set a precedent for succeeding historiography.

The debate on drama by the New Culture-May Fourth intellectuals in 1919 further elaborated on the correlation between theater and national identity made by Wang Guowei in 1912. It was by arguing against the May Fourth realism that Qi Rushan (齊如山 1877~1962), a fervent patron and collaborator of Mei Lanfang starting from the 1910s, managed to construct an evolutionary history of Chinese theater as a process of aesthetic—rather than mimetic—refinement in his numerous theater writings throughout the 1920s and 1930s. In this line of argument, Qi did not merely defend the cross-dressing performance of Mei and other actors but also related it to what he called the "national essence" of Chinese theater.[32] The debate on the essence of Chinese theater did not evolve only along a Chinese-Western dyad. Japanese critics and writers on Chinese theater also played a critical role. In 1920, Tsuji Chōka published *Chinese Theater* (Zhongguo Ju 中國劇), a comprehensive work on Chinese theater that was divided into six parts of "*Jushi* (劇史 history)," "*Xiju* (戲劇 theater)," "*Youling* (優伶 players)," "*Juchang* (劇場 playhouses)," "*Yingye* (營業 business)," "*Kailuo* (開鑼 the scene)."[33] This book made an impact on the theater community. It was widely read and in 1923, a fifth edition was published to meet the market demand, arousing a lot of discussion and debate. In the year of 1926, Hatano Kenichi's *The History of Peking Opera in the Last Two Hundred Years* (Jingju erbainian zhi lishi 京劇二百年之歷史) was translated into

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[31] Mu Chengong, *Ling shi*, in *Minguo jing kun shiliao congshu*, vol.1 (Beijing: Wenyuan chubanshe, 2008).
[32] Goldstein, *Drama Kings*, 134-174; Also see Hsiao-chun Wu, unpublished dissertation.
[33] Tsuji Chōka, *Zhongguo ju*, fourth edition, http://wagang.econ.hc.keio.ac.jp/~chengyan/index.php?中國劇, accessed May 23, 2015.

Chinese and published in Shanghai. This book set an early example of recounting the history of Peking opera as a succession of *liupai* (流派 stylistic schools) represented by famous actors from the Qing to the early Republic.

What converged in the two genres of theater writing—the "modern" theater criticism and theater historiography—was an actor-centered paradigm. While it was obvious in the 1910s that the literary patronage made both actors and actresses stars, from the 1920s the *pengjue wenzi* (捧角文字 promotional writing) was increasingly regarded as problematic and particularly reprehensible with actresses, while writing on star actors claimed to be research-oriented rather than patronage-driven. These new theater critics claimed that their research interest in theater was not personalistic but driven by a deep concern for national culture and identity. In their construction of Chinese theater history as a succession of actor-dominated *liupai*, and of the present Peking opera as a cultural symbol of the Chinese nation, prominent actors loomed large.

Starting from the 1920s, Mei Lanfang, the leading *dan* actor who was said to be the only one who could rival actresses in term of popularity in the 1910s, entered upon an international stage where he further enhanced his celebrity status and the Peking opera that he represented. In the year of 1920, Mei accepted the Imperial Theater of Japan's invitation and made his first trip to Japan.[34] This trip and his successive tours to Japan (1924), the United States (1930) and the Soviet Union (1935), as many scholars have pointed out, were a series of spectacles both internationally and domestically. The recognition and respect that Mei won on the international stage were also transferred to

[34] For Mei Lanfang's first tour in Japan, see Min Tian, *Mei Lanfang and the Twentieth-Century International Stage: Chinese Theater Placed and Displaced* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 15-56.

his domestic fame and celebrity.[35] By the 1930s, the status of Mei as the greatest (*dan*) actor and Peking opera as the national drama was fully established. As other actors followed Mei onto the international stage, their celebrity as opera stars was increasingly constituted transnationally.

The glamour of Mei and other star actors in the 1920s and 1930s overshadowed actresses. From the late 1920s, famous actors began to recruit female students who were required to imitate the acting styles of their male masters. In the 1930s, even the star actresses needed to apprentice themselves to one of the four famous *dan* actors so that they could claim to belong to a *liupai*. When nationalistic theater criticism and historiography replaced the personalistic "old-style" theater commentary as the new fashion in the 1920s and 1930s, a new theatrical public sphere emerged. Subsumed under nationalistic claims, the new public sphere seemed more consensual, though not lacking in arguments and disputes. With its actor-centered narrative, the nationalistic public sphere was also re-masculinized. Ironically, then, the theatrical public sphere initiated by the iconoclastic May Fourth intellectuals, despite their feminist claims, involved the marginalization of women, though not their exclusion. Many scholars of theater have accepted actors' hegemony and the May Fourth definition of modernity uncritically, therefore, the artistic innovation of actresses and their embodied modernity have been ignored.

Nonetheless, as this study shows, the hegemony of actors and that of Peking opera was not established at the outset; and in 1910s Beijing, star actresses rivaled them in the marketplace and challenged them in terms of artistry. They developed their popularity

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[35] Goldstein, *Drama Kings*, 264-289; and also Tian, *Mei Lanfang and the Twentieth-Century International Stage.*

and celebrity by strategically manipulating the marketability of their performing body and by tapping into the intricate patronage networks of literati fans. Moreover, actresses and their literati fans embodied, to borrow a term from Alison Light, "conservative modernity." In contrast to the hegemonic modernity of the New Culture-May Fourth movement, which asserted a complete break from traditional forms, the conservative modernity, according to Light, "looked simultaneously backwards and forwards and accommodated the past in the new forms of the present."[36] Moreover, the conservatism of actresses and their literati fans lay in their deferral of the hegemonic modernity rather than a stubborn adherence to the past. The plays of actresses were often a critique of the New Culture values; and the writing of literati fans deliberately adopted arcane allusions and parallelism. In contrast to the New Culture-May Fourth conception of theater as a means of mass political mobilization, literati fans claimed that their involvement in theater was a withdrawal from politics, or personal critique of politics. Thus, they consumed the art forms of actresses in an individualistic way, immersing themselves in personal sentiments and desires. The frequent reference of literati to the traditional notion of theater as a didactic tool to transmit moral teachings to the people was mostly justification of their self-indulgence in theater. They engaged in theater as a form of entertainment as well as a social space. Founding fan clubs and engaging in numerous debates, literati fans brought personal emotions into public display and scrutiny. Such a public space originated from the personal realm and thrived on the constant negotiation between the personal and the public. It thus differed from the notion of "public"

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[36] Alison Light, *Forever England: Literature, Femininity and Conservatism between the Wars?* (New York: Routledge, 1911), 10-11.

envisaged by the mainstream May Fourth intellectuals that privileged the nation over the individual.

The Legacy of Actresses in 1910s Beijing

Though star actresses like Liu Xikui retired from the stage and no succeeding star actresses could rival the most influential actors in terms of art and fame, more women followed the steps of the early actresses and relied on their performing talent to make a living. Engaging in a lucrative public profession, the early actresses participated in a silent gender revolution that differed from the radical gender reform advocated by May-Fourth-inspired feminism. These women did not have the advantage of a literary education. Nor did they have to renounce family ties, for they maintained the identity of filial daughters, acknowledged the contribution of family to their careers, and repaid their parents from their incomes. Yet actresses were empowered by their earning capability. As I have shown in the case of Zhang Xiaoxian's elopement in 1921, actresses used their wages and public influence as leverage to negotiate for personal freedom against patriarchal restraints..

The silent gender revolution was not confined to family dynamics. Actresses developed a strong presence in society by commuting between their residences and playhouses and performing daily on the stage. They were the center of multiple objectifying gazes. Nonetheless, by no means they were passive victims. Actresses turned various public spaces into places to display their charm, wealth, and status, and a few transformed themselves into vocal subjects: more than one ran to the police and the newspapers accusing their parents of infringing on their marriage freedom. Finally, the early actresses

strategically navigated between public and private space. Claiming private virtue in public or mobilizing public discourses in their pursuit of personal happiness, they charted a viable space for public women to claim virtue. Thereby they fashioned new, alternative femininities to be emulated by other women of the early Chinese Republic.

Appendices

Glossary of Opera Genres and Performance Role Types

Opera Genres

bangzi 梆子: Rhythmic wooden-block opera; it was prevalent in northern in the sixteenth century; by the eighteenth century it spread to the sourthern area.

kunqu 昆曲: A genre of opera originating from the musical style in the Kunshan region in the sixteenth century. In the seventeenth century, it became a high art favored by the elite.

pihuang 皮黄: the musical traditions from which Peking opera derived. The two major musical styles of this genre include *xipi* 西皮 and *erhuang* 二簧.

qinqiang 秦腔: A genre of opera associated with the musical and dialectal characteristics of the Shaanxi-Shanxi-Sichuan region; its musical structure is within the bangzi musical system; the term of *qinqiang* was often used exchangeably with *bangzi* in 1910s Beijing

xinju 新劇: A new form of drama absorbing elements of Western and Japanese modern theatre and flourishing in China in the 1910s.

Performance Role Types

dan 旦: The female role type.

- *daomadan* 刀馬旦: Female roles excelling in horsemanship and sword.
- *guimen dan* 閨門旦: Roles of unmarried, romantic lady.
- *huadan* 花旦: Young, seductive, female roles.
- *huashan* 花衫: Beautiful, elegant, and virtuous female roles.
- *kundan* 昆旦: Female role in *kunqu* opera.
- *qingyi* 青衣: Blue-robed female roles of virtue.
- *wanxiaodan* 玩笑旦: Amusing and outrageous female roles.
- *wudan* 武旦: Female roles excelling in martial arts.
- *zhengdan* 正旦: Lead female role.

sheng 生: The male role type.

- laosheng 老生: senior male lead.
- wusheng 武生: male roles excelling in martial arts.
- xiaosheng 小生: young male lead.

chou 醜: Clown role type.

jing 淨: The male role type of courage and resourcefulness.

The Original Text of "Wang Keqin liubie Zhang Xun shu"

王克琴留別張勛書

作者: 膽廬

克琴著名坤角且工昆腔，因集曲牌名為作留別書（曲牌名以括弧為符號）

（香柳娘）王克琴謹致（一封書）於紹軒（醜奴兒）左右自汝（朝天子）（感皇恩）簇擁著（禦林軍）恢復那（寶鼎兒）想做那（太師引）想穿（大紅袍）想封（蘭陵王）想稱（千秋歲）那知激動（征胡兵）招展（采旗兒）一（齊破陣）來（降黃龍）（醜奴兒）（醜奴兒）你年紀如（耍鮑老）知識同（小哥兒）明知（不是路）妄思（倒拖船）轟轟的（急三槍）會見汝魂遊（古輪臺）也，汝既（薄倖）自（誤佳期）不作（思歸引）使妾（空閨怨）妾見（黃鶯兒）作對（粉蝶兒）成雙不覺（花心動）而思（人月圓）於是倒處（願成雙）逢人（訴衷情）與（風流子）（繡衣郎）（粉孩兒）諸（少年遊）鎮日（羅帳裏會）夢作（巫山一段雲）矣妾有（滴滴金）（縷縷金）（珠落索）（玉連環）盡可（迎仙客）不妨（賀新郎）從此（月上海棠）（魚遊春水）作（調笑令）享（逍遙樂）不亦（稱人心）乎（醜奴兒）（醜奴兒）汝將化做（刮地風）（繞地遊）（鬼三臺）幸毋（憶秦娥）（念奴嬌）（叨叨令）在（夜遊宮）（哭相思）也

來源: 順天時報, 民国六年七月二十七

English translation:

The Farewell Letter to Zhang Xun by Wang Keqin

Author: Danlu

Wang Keqin is famouse actress excelling in kunqu, so [I collect] the *qupai* titles to write a farewell letter [on her behalf]. (The *qutai* tiles are bracketed).

The fragrant willow girl (Xiangniu niang) Wang Keqin respectfully writes a letter (Yi feng shu) to Shaoxuan: Your ugly concubine (Chou nu'er) at your side. You had an audience with the emperor (*Chao tianzi*) and have been grateful for the imperial favor (*Gan huang'en*). Surrounded by the imperial army (*Yu linjun*), you restored the esteemed throne (*Baoding'er*). You want to be the emperor's teacher (*Taishi yin*); you want to wear the grand red robe (*Da hongpao*); you want to be awarded the fief Lord of Lanling (*Lanling wang*); you want to be called the Long-lived (*Qianqiu sui*). Who expected you would stir up the anti-barbarian armies

(*Zheng hubing*) flying the colorful flags (*Caiqi'er*) to smash the formations (*Qi Pozhen*) and subdue the yellow dragon (*Xiang huanglong*)?

Your ugly concubine (*Chou nu'er*), ugly concubine (*Chou nu'er*). You are aged as Shua baolao (Shua baolao), near-sighted as a young man (*Xiao ge'er*). Knowing that this is no way (*Bushi lu*), you dream of overturning the barge (*Dao tuo chuan*). [You] rushed to quickly fire three guns (*Ji sanqiang*) and your soul traveled to the ancient Luntai (*Gu Luntai*). Since you failed me (*Boxing*), and missed our rendezvous (*Wu jiaqi*), don't think about returning home (*Sigui yin*), just leave me furious in the empty inner quarters (*Konggui yuan*). I have seen the nightingales (*Huang ying'er*) paired off and butterflies (*Fen die'er*) in couples. I long for love (*Huangxin dong*) and desire to meet another in the full moon (*Ren yue yuan*). So I go around hoping to find a match (*Yuan chengshuang*) and travel with young men (*Shaonian you*) including flâneurs (*Fengliu zi*), prim dandies (*Xiuyi lang*), and pretty boys (*Fen hai'er*). All day long [I] meet [them] under the silk canopy (*Luozhang li hui*) and dream of Wushan clouds (*Wushan yiduan yun*). I have pieces of gold (*Didi jin*), threads of gold (*Lülü jin*), strings of pearl (*Zhu luo suo*) and rings of jade (*Yu lianhuan*) to welcome the wonderful men (*Ying xianke*), and may as well congratulate the groom (*He xinlang*). Since then the magnolia bloom on the moon (*Yueshang haitang*) and fishes swim in the Spring water (*Yuyou chunshui*). [We] flirt in mirth (*Tiaoxiao ling*) and enjoy a leisurely happiness (*Xiaoyao le*). Is this called satisfying my heart's desire (*Chen renxin*)?

Your ugly concubine (Chou nu'er), ugly concubine (Chou nu'er). You are going to become a gasp of wind rising from the ground (Gua di feng), circling around the earth (Rao di you), and three ghosts (*gui san tai*). Do please don't pine for Qin E (*Yi Qin E*), think of Nujiao (*Nian nu jiao*), and grump endlessly (*Daodao ling*), circling the night palace (*Ye you gong*) and weeping for lovesickness (*Ku xiangsi*).

Source: *Shuntian shibao*, Jul. 27, 1917.

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Shuntian shibao 順天時報 [Shuntian news], Beijing.
Yaxiya ribao 亞細亞日報 [Aisa daily], Beijing.

Chun liu 春柳 [Spring], Tianjin.
Liyan huakan 立言畫刊 [Speech pictorial], Beijing.
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Xiangyan zazhi 香豔雜誌 [Erotic journal], Shanghai.
Xiao duo 小鐸 [Small bell], Shaoxing.
Xiju ban yuekan 戲劇半月刊 [Theater bi-monthly], Beijing.
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"Jingshi jingchating guanyu Wenming chayuan weifan zhangcheng chengqing chengban de gonghan 京師警察廳行政處關於文明茶園違犯章程請懲辦的公函," [The official communitcation of the administration office of The Capital Police Department about Wenming Playhouse' violation of regulation and punishenment] April 1914, file no. J181-019-06945, Beijing Municipal Archives, Beijing.

"Jingshi jingcha ting wai you er qu biaosong Liu Liu shi hangao xinwen baoguan zhubi Wang Yingtang zacai weisui huishun qinü Liu Xikui mingyu de song'an bia 京師警察廳外右二區區署關於劉劉氏喊告新聞報館主筆人王蔭堂詐財未遂毀損其女劉喜奎名譽的送案表," [The official communication of the second right district of the Outer City of Capital Police Department about Mrs. Liu accusing the chief editor of *Xiju xinju* of blackmailing and defaming her daughter] March 1915, file no. J181-019-07756, Beijing Municipal Archive, Beijing.

"Jingshi jingcha ting sifachu guanyu Liu Xikui bei ren nazou yinqian buhuai ji qita qingkuang de cheng (1) 京師警察廳司法處關於劉喜奎被人拿走銀錢不還及其他情況的呈(一)," [The report of the judicial agency of Capital Police Department about someone taking Liu Xikui's money without returning and other matters] January 1917, file no. J181-019-17628, Beijing Municipal Archive, Beijing.

"Jingshi jingcha ting zhenji dui guanyu diaocha Liu Tongsheng jie Liu Xikui yinyuan de lü (2) 京師警察廳偵緝隊關於調查劉桐生借劉喜奎銀元的履(二)," [The report of the investigation team of Capital Police Department about Liu Tongsheng borrowing money from Liu Xikui] January 1917, file no. J181-019-17628, Beijing Municipal Archive, Beijing.

"Jingshi jingcha ting wai you er qu biao song nüling Shao Biyun wuqin keyi qing heban yi'an 京師警察廳外右二區區署關於女伶邵壁雲無親可依請核辦一案," [The official communication of the second right precinct of the Outer City of Capital Police Department asking for instructions to deal with the actress Shao Biyun who has no one to depend on] January 1917, file no. J181-019-17276, Beijing Municipal Archives, Beijing.

"Jingshi jingcha ting wai you er qu qu shu guanyu nüling Du Yunhong tun jin jiezhi xian you yiyuan zhiyu de baogao 京師警察廳外右二區區署關於女伶杜雲紅吞金戒指現由醫院治愈的報告," [The report of the second right precinct of the Outer City of Capital Police Department about the actress Du Yunhong, who attempted suicide by swallowing golden rings and was rescued through hospitalization] January 1916, file no. J181-018-06617, Beijing Municipal Archives, Beijing.

"Jingshi jingchating guanyu ling jingshi jingchating wai you yiqu fenqu chafu Rizhi bao zai jise'er zai sanqing yuan menqian qiang yu Liu Xikui jiewen deng de chi 京師警察廳關於令京師警察廳外右一區分區查覆日知日報載急色兒在三慶園門前強與劉喜奎接吻等的飭," [The official comminucation of Capital Police Department to the first right precinct of the Outer City about investigation on the report of *Rizhi bao* that a libertine forced a kiss on Liu Xikui at the front gate of Sanqing playhouse] March 1915, file J181-018-04019, Beijing Municipal Archives, Beijing.

"Jingshi jingcha ting nei zuo yi qu qu shu guanyu Wang Zhonglin shenye qianru Du Yunhong jia yi'an 京師警察廳內左一區區署關於王仲林深夜潛入杜雲紅家中一案," [The report of the first left precinct of the Inner City of Capital Police Department on Wang Zhonglin's invasion into the house of the actress Du Yunhong at mid-night] January 1917, file no. J181-019-18052, Beijing Municipal Archives, Beijing.

"Jingshi jingcha ting guanyu chuan nüling Bai Yanyun de cheng 京師警察廳關於傳女伶白燕雲的呈," [The official communication of Capital Police Department about summoning the actress Bai Yanyun] January 1916, file no. J181-019-13611, Beijing Municipal Archives, Beijing.

"Jingshi jingcha ting xingzheng chu guanyu Yanxi tang xiyuan nüling yu nanzi tiaoxiao youci chufa xiyuan zhishi ren de han 京師警察廳行政處關於燕喜堂戲園女伶與男子調笑由此處罰戲園執事人的函," [The official communication of the administrative agency of Capital Police Department about the punishment of the manager of Yanxi tang playhouse for its actress' flirtation with men] June 1918, file no. J181-019-21117, Beijing Municipal Archives, Beijing.

"Jingshi jingcha ting wai zuo yi qu qu shu guanyu Cui Zhaofeng ji Cui Ziheng jiamao fengjun silingbu mingyi wang nüling Su Caixia jia nei zinao deng qing de cheng 京師警察廳外左一區區署關於崔兆豐即子衡假冒奉軍司令部名義往女伶蘇彩霞家內滋鬧等情的呈," [The report of the first left precinct of the Outer City of Capital Police Department about the matter that Cui Zhaofeng, aka, Cui Ziheng impersonated a official at headquarter of the Feng army and made trouble in the actress Su Caixia's house] July 1919, file no. J181-019-26244, Beijing Municipal Archives, Beijing.

"Jingshi jingcha ting guanyu gequ yu ge kunxichang zhangtie guaisheng jiaohao bugao bing zhencha weiling zhiren jiuban de kunling 京師警察廳關於各區於各坤戲場張貼禁止怪聲叫好布告並偵查違令之人究辦的訓令," [The order of Capital Police Department to ban the shouting of "*hao*!" in the playhouses of actresses and to investigate and punish the violators] January 1919, file no. J181-018-10174, Beijing Municipal Archives, Beijing.

"Jingshi jingcha ting guanyu Wenming chayuan yanjin guaisheng jiaohao ji jiduan piancai de bugao 京師警察廳關於文明茶園嚴禁怪聲叫好及藉端騙財的布告," [The notice of Capital Police Department about prohibition of the shouting of "hao!" and scam in Wenming teahouse] March 1920, file no. J181-018-11828, Beijing Municipal Archives, Beijing.

"Jingshi jingcha ting wai you wu qu qushu guanyu Zhang Jixiang deng shichang zai xinshijie jiaohao jiaorao dengqing 京師警察廳外右五區區署關於張驥祥等時常在新世界叫好攪擾等情," [The report of the fifth right precinct of the Outer City of Capital Police Department about Zhang Jixiang, who frequently makes disturbance in the New World playhouse by shouting "*hao*!"] March 1921, file no. J181-019-33030, Beijing Municipal Archives, Beijing.

"Jingshi jingcha ting wai you yi qu qushu guanyu Chen Ciyin zai Zhonghe xiyuan guaisheng jiaohao qing heban 京師警察廳外右一區區署關於陳次瀛在中和戲園怪聲叫好請核辦," [The request of the first right precinct of the Outer City of Capital Police Department for instruction on dealing with Chen Ciying who shouted "*hao*!" in Zhonghe playhouse] May 1922, file no. J181-019-35963, Beijing Municipal Archives, Beijing.

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