



PROJECT MUSE®

Should Nandan Be Abolished?: The Debate over Female Impersonation in Early Republican China and Its Underlying Cultural Logic

Guanda Wu

Asian Theatre Journal, Volume 30, Number 1, Spring 2013, pp. 189-206
(Article)

Published by University of Hawai'i Press
DOI: [10.1353/atj.2013.0008](https://doi.org/10.1353/atj.2013.0008)



➔ For additional information about this article
<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/atj/summary/v030/30.1.wu.html>

Should *Nandan* Be Abolished? The Debate over Female Impersonation in Early Republican China and Its Underlying Cultural Logic

Guanda Wu

This essay examines the debate over female impersonation in theatre in early Republican China (1912–1937). The adversaries of nandan (female impersonators) saw the social equity between the sexes and the normalcy of gender, sex, and sexuality as integral parts of the process of building a modern nation and contended that theatre should contribute to this endeavor. Supporters of female impersonation saw female actors as hedonistic, underscored women’s inferiority in xiqu performance, and emphasized that female impersonation was essential to the artistry of xiqu’s distinct aesthetic.

Guanda Wu is a PhD student in Asian language, culture, and media at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities. He studies traditional Chinese theatre of the late eighteenth through the twentieth centuries with a particular interest in the modernization of traditional Chinese theatre in the late Qing and Republican era.

For *nandan* performers (male actors who specialize in portraying female characters in Chinese theatre), the early Republican era (1912–1937) was the best of times, but perhaps it was also the worst of times. On the one hand, the Republican stage witnessed the rise of *nandan* stars such as Mei Lanfang and Cheng Yanqiu, who surpassed the *sheng* (leading male role types) actors of the older generation and led *jingju* (or *jingxi*, Beijing/Peking “opera”) into “the epoch of *nandan*.” On the other hand, from the mid-1910s to the 1930s, the outraged calls

for abolishing female impersonation were also consistently announced within the Republican social discourse, especially by the intellectuals who saw the popularity of female impersonation as one blatant obstacle that prevented the Chinese from building a modern nation.

The Debate over *Xinju's Nannü heyán* (“Men and Women Acting Together”) in the 1910s

In 1912, with the collapse of the Qing empire, its ban on female actors in theatre was officially lifted. The early Qing emperors' repeated prohibitions banished women from the imperial stage (with a few notable exceptions), because the Manchu rulers were concerned about female performers' sexual appeal, which was said to threaten social morality.¹ In 1914, female performers appeared in *xinju* (lit. “new theatre,” the early Chinese form of Western-style drama, aka, *wen-mingxi*²) in Shanghai but were banned by the end of the same year by the Jiangsu Province Education Ministry, which accused the female actors of “offending our social morality” (Feng 1914: 11–12). The local government's prohibition on female performers immediately triggered a fierce debate over the employment of women in acting. A theatre critic whose pseudonym was Xiao Tian felt sympathetic to the female actors. He refuted the government's ban by arguing that “the female impersonation that we are using today is too artificial. It can create difficulty in the development of plot and weakens the audience's affective power. Therefore, when performing *zhengju* [“serious drama” or “straight drama”]³ in the West and Japan, *nannü heyán* [integrated-sex acting]⁴ has been exclusively employed” (Xiao 1914: 6).

Zhou Jianyun, a well-known *xinju* actor and critic, however, argued that there was no need to employ women to assume *dan* roles (female roles) since the number of qualified *nandan* actors was sufficient to serve the task (Zhou 1922: 749). In addition, Zhou found *xinju's* portrayals of love scenes “repulsive” when *nannü heyán* was employed (p. 749). Zhou argued that “*xinju* pursues frankness and verisimilitude in every aspect. It is not like old drama, which is confined by rhyming and restricted by conventions . . . when two parties [in *xinju*] flirt with their eyes, as if the flirtation were real, they unconsciously expose all kinds of obscene behaviors right before the audience” (p. 749). Zhou hinted that both *nannü heyán* and *xinju's* realistic style contributed to the discomfort arising in *xinju's* rendition of romantic themes. In this sense, Zhou's point was not different from Xiao Tian's on the female performer's superiority in embodying “the real” when impersonating female roles. In the same vein, Zhou and Xiao Tian both suggestively rejected the necessity of having both *nandan* and *nüdan* (male and female actors who play female roles) coexisting. In other words,

for both writers, one's legitimacy consequently denied the cause of employing the other. Their points diverged only on judging the value of having women assuming female roles: Xiao Tian saw *nannü heyuan* as an inevitable trend, while Zhou accused it of evoking obscenity. After gender-appropriate casting became a standard practice in *xinju* and its later form *huaju* (lit. "spoken drama," Western-style speech-based Chinese drama) in the 1920s, the debate related to gender casting in theatrical arts gradually moved away from the circle of *xinju* to the field of *xiqu* (lit. "play [of] sung-verse," indigenous Han Chinese theatre), in which female impersonation had dominated the stage since the early Qing era.

"Nature Is the Standard of All Arts": Rejecting Female Impersonation in Pursuit of "Real Art"

In 1918, Mei Lanfang, a famed *nandan*, was voted "King of Actors" (*lingjie dawang*) in a poll held by *Shuntian Shibao* (Peking Times), a Japanese-owned newspaper. The title King of Actors for years had been used to recognize Tan Xinpei, an acclaimed older *sheng* actor whose career predated Mei's. The incident thus marked the decline of the older *sheng*'s dominance on the *jingju* stage and reflected the *nandan*'s growing popularity in the early Republican era. By the end of the 1920s, Mei had visited and performed in Japan twice, in 1919 and 1924.⁵ In the late 1920s, under the direction of Qi Rushan, a Western-educated intellectual who had a strong ambition of promoting Chinese theatre on the international stage, Mei's agenda of performing in the United States was revealed to the public. This potential trip of Mei Lanfang's drew great attention from both sides of the debate over the *nandan* issue. Fearing that the *nandan* would embarrass China in front of Western audiences, eleven authors wrote essays opposing Mei Lanfang and female impersonation in general in the "Mei Lanfang issue" of *Literature Weekly* in July 1929. In this special issue, critics who called themselves Xi Yuan,⁶ Ying Yi, and Jiu Zhi condemned Mei Lanfang and female impersonation in general for contradicting the "principle of nature," to which, they argued, "real art" should conform. Along with other Republican writers and artists such as Hong Shen and Lu Xun, they emphasized naturalness within the category of sex and sexuality and found the *nandan*'s androgyny "repulsive," especially when a *nandan*'s body appeared to be sexually attractive to spectators of both genders.

In his essay titled "Down with the Representative *Dan* Actor Mei Lanfang,"⁷ Xi Yuan offered the most outraged call for abolishing female impersonation. His resentment can be best exemplified by his denial of the *nandan*'s falsetto technique, which he identified as "the

most unnatural, most brutal, most despicable, most artificial, and most absurd trick” (Xi 1929: 64). Xi Yuan regarded female impersonation as “artificial art” or “unreasonable art” in contrast to what he called “real art.” For the author, the *nandan*’s falsetto voice as well as his stage gait and posture, which constituted the performance of femininity, could arouse spectators’ “perverted” sexual desires. Moreover, the sexual appeal of the *nandan*’s performance was thought to be contradictory to the fundamental pursuit of “real” art (p. 64). The phrase “sexual perversion” was frequently used by the early Republican critics to describe the *nandan*’s androgyny. For example, Hong Shen,⁸ a leading playwright and filmmaker in modern China, once noted the reason why he attempted to avoid *nandan* and thus wrote a play featuring only male characters in his early career: “I feel extremely disgusted by female impersonation. Perhaps I have read too many of Prof. Freud’s books about sexual perversion. Once I see a man playing a woman, I immediately feel nauseated” (Hong 1988: 533). Hong’s understanding about sexuality had been shaped by Western essentialist theories of sexuality by Sigmund Freud. For Freud, “perversions result from a failure to complete the ‘normal’ sequence,” namely, adult male-female genital sex, “so that variations appear in what may be employed to produce sexual pleasure” (Soble 2006: 769). Variations such as homosexual sex and transvestism are considered aberrant substitutes for the ideal norm of sexuality.

In addition to “perversion,” “Nature” was another ethically charged concept that was introduced to discredit the artistry of *nandan*. In an essay titled “The Product of an Abnormal Society,” a critic who called himself Ying Yi contended that “Nature is the standard of all the arts [. . .] the first prerequisite of a real art is accordance with Nature” (Ying 1929: 71). However, *nandan* performers like Mei Lanfang were thought to act against this fundamental principle of art because of the use of “unnatural pretence” (p. 71). For Ying Yi, the unnaturalness could be perceived in Mei’s voice, in his costume, in his face, and through his body gestures (p. 71). The author’s argument suggests there is a kind of essential femaleness that is granted to female bodies by nature and could be by no means captured by male actors. “Nature,” as Judith Butler pinpoints in *Gender Trouble*, “has been used to legitimize heterosexuality and the seemingly coherent categories of sex and gender within regulative discourses” (Butler 1990: 7, 25–26). Under the disguise of nature, sex and sexuality appear as biologically determined. The stage used to be a legitimate territory, a “safe space” for cross-dressing in imperial China. Female impersonation was in fact employed to remove the Qing emperors’ anxiety over the women performers’ sexual accessibility. Such a cultural and political

practice suggested that, in the Qing, the sexual potentiality between male theatregoers and female performers was thought to be more morally threatening than the erotic relationship between boy actors and their male patrons. However, when some of these Republican intellectuals started to emphasize “naturalness” within the category of sex and consider female impersonation as “perverted,” we can identify an overt alteration in the perception of sex and sexuality within Chinese society in the early twentieth century. In his study of Western medical discourse’s impact on the Chinese perception of body and sex in early Republican China, Frank Dikötter well summarized this alteration: “In their use of medical science, new modes of writing about sexuality represented an epistemic shift away from Confucian discourse. . . . No longer were physical bodies thought to be linked to the cosmological foundations of the universe: bodies were produced by biological mechanisms inherent to ‘nature’” (Dikötter 1995: 8).

In their critiques, both Xi Yuan and Ying Yi frequently used the term “art” (or “real art”) to challenge female impersonation. Other Republican writers also discovered the effectiveness of employing the word to attack *nandan*. For example, Lu Xun, who was arguably the most well-known modern Chinese writer, once denied the artistry of *nandan* in a cynical tone. In his 1933 essay titled “The Most Artistic Country,” Lu Xun started with a caustic mockery: “our country China’s greatest, most eternal and universal ‘art’ is man playing woman. The worthiness of this art lies in the fact that it is entrancing on both sides; or we call it ‘the middle path’! What men see is ‘playing woman’; what women see is ‘man playing’” (Lu 1973: 503; Li 2003: 15–16). A caustic tone also can be found in the critic Jiu Zhi’s analysis of what contributed to the cause of Mei’s popularity: “The husbands at first think ‘after all, he is a man, if I approach him, the wives would not blame me,’ then they immediately think in the other way and fantasize Mei Lanfang as a woman. The wives at first think ‘after all, he impersonates a woman, if I approach him, the husbands would not blame me,’ then they immediately think through the other perspective and imagine Mei Lanfang as a man” (Jiu 1929: 82).

It was true, as Lu Xun and Jiu Zhi witnessed, that the *nandan*’s body could be consumed in the erotic fantasies of both men and women. However, their oversights lay in the problematic assumption that the male spectators consumed *nandan* as only a woman and the female fans were entertained by seeing *nandan* as only a man. In this sense, the two critics’ analysis of the perception of *nandan* was trapped in a heterosexual discourse. A female impersonator, argues Lesley Ferris, “Can be read as a woman, or as a disguised male, as a man who longs for other men, or as a mixture of the three. Depending on the variety

of people in the audience, and depending on each individual's gender and sexual preference, each spectator will have their own personal response to such a performance" (Ferris 1998: 168). The critiques of Lu Xun and Jiu Zhi became less valid not because they provided their own heterosexual reading of the *nandan's* sexual appeal. The misfortune lay in the fact that they did not see there could be other readings of female impersonation from various spectators of different sexual preferences. As a result, the dynamics of the appreciation of female impersonation were constrained, and many possible interpretations of a *nandan's* body were left out, appearing as if there only could be one legitimate reading of it, namely, the heterosexual interpretation.

By putting the term "art" in quotation marks, Lu Xun emphasized the sexual and erotic allure within the appreciation of *nandan* and attempted to discredit the artistic quality within female impersonation. Cross-dressing used to be able to justify itself in the name of art, since the very term "art" suggested an essence of fictionality and aestheticization, which often allowed "art" to be immune from a direct association with daily reality. By denying female impersonation as "art," the opponents of *nandan* hinted that the authenticity of "art" lay in a kind of sublime attribute, which enabled an artistic work to be appreciated with little sexual enjoyment. In the moralists' minds, theatrical art could be, and the consumption of this art should be, not at all sexually driven. However, in practice, "appreciation of female impersonation," argued Tian Min, "was based just as much on the actor's sexual dynamics as on his artistic quality" (Tian 2000: 82). The female impersonator's body, therefore, was always a site of eroticism. The contest between the actor's sexual appeal and the anxiety over immorality marked the turbulent history of female impersonation on a transcultural scale. As Lesley Ferris noted in a review of Michelene Wandor's studies on female impersonation during the Elizabethan period (see Wandor 1986), the cross-dressed boy actors "themselves must seduce the audience to the degree to get them involved and focused on the performance. It is this very eroticism and seductive power that has elicited enormous criticism against theatre at various points in its history" (Ferris 1998: 168).

The West/Japan Authorizes, the Chinese Validates

In the early Republican debate over the *nandan* issue, Western and Japanese receptions of *nandan* also shaped Chinese intellectuals' own understanding about this indigenous convention. Both sides of the debate used foreign receptions of *nandan* to defend their own stance. In addition, each side of the debate found the effectiveness of using the Western practice of female impersonation to endorse their own claim:

the admirers of *nandan* attempted to establish female impersonation as a transcultural practice, while the adversaries of *nandan* argued that the Western convention of female impersonation was only associated with its “naïve past” and emphasized that gender-appropriate casting was the status quo.

In the Mei Lanfang issue of *Literature Weekly*, Ying Yi and another critic who called himself Qi Fan shared their own observations of the receptions of *nandan* in the West and Japan. According to Ying Yi, the author and two other Chinese nationals were once invited to a family dinner in a Western country. During the dinner, the other two Chinese guests were asked to perform a piece of Chinese “opera” after the hostess noted that they were well versed in the art. Observing two Chinese males impersonating a heterosexual couple, the Western host, Mr. N, was astonished by the Chinese male’s rendition of a female role. After learning that female impersonation was a convention on the Chinese stage, the host sighed, “How incredibly strange the society is” (Ying 1929: 69). For Ying Yi, the actual experience showed that female impersonation was not a source of “national pride” that exhibited distinct Chinese aesthetic values, but rather a source of “a national shame,” marking China as an “abnormal” country. Qi Fan’s essay entitled “Investigation on Mei Lanfang’s Fame Abroad” challenged Mei’s supporters by introducing his own observation of Mei’s first tour to Japan in 1919. Qi Fan argued that the Japanese reviews of Mei Lanfang’s performances were purposely chosen by Mei’s endorsers to substantiate his success in Japan. In order to discredit Mei’s reputation in Japan, the author cited a review appearing in *Asahi Shimbun*, in which the Japanese critic complained about the noisiness of the orchestra and claimed that Mei’s singing was just like the moaning of a female cat having sex (Qi Fan 1929: 72).

Just as the challengers of *nandan* often used the West (or Japan) to reject the Chinese practice of cross-dressing, the endorsers of *nandan* also saw the effectiveness of employing foreigners to defend their stance. For example, in June 1930, an author in *Shanghai Daily* (*Shenbao*), who called himself Zhi, wrote enthusiastically to introduce the American reception of Mei Lanfang to domestic readers. The author argued that female impersonation was pervasive in Europe and therefore the U.S. audiences “found nothing strange” in Mei’s renditions of female roles (Zhi 1930: 17). For *nandan*’s endorsers, one of the common strategies to legitimate the cross-dressed Chinese males was to establish female impersonation as a transcultural practice. Thus, references to the Western practices of cross-dressing, particularly in ancient Greece and Renaissance Britain, were often cited to justify the artistry of *nandan*.⁹ For the adversaries of female impersonation, how-

ever, this transcultural parallel was invalid to authorize the present Chinese practice. Song Chunfang, a European-educated playwright and theatre critic, argued strikingly that it was “naïve” for artists to employ female impersonation as during Shakespeare’s time since modern Western theatre had surpassed the epoch of “naivety.” He asserted that, if female impersonation was maintained, “Chinese theatre would be no different from the theatre of Shakespeare in regards to its degree of naivety” (Song 1930: 283–284).

In the Chinese debate over the *nandan* issue, the West and Japan appeared to be the authoritative sites for sources of references. The Western/Japanese reception of *nandan* and the Western/Japanese theatre’s (un)employment of female impersonation were among the most effective references to validate the cause of either maintaining or rejecting Chinese theatrical convention. The logic that “the West/Japan authorizes, the Chinese validates” was highlighted in the arguments for and against *nandan*.

Chinese “Aestheticism” vis-à-vis Western “Realism”

Among the early Republican writings upholding female impersonation, literary critic and newspaper editor Wang Pingling’s 1934 essay titled “The Issue of Men Playing Women in National Drama” provided perhaps the most thorough endorsement of *nandan*. Strikingly, Wang contented that *nandan* did not impersonate “genuine women” but rather “women with a bit of male characteristics” (Wang 1934: 3). He explained that female impersonation had been “aestheticized” (*shenmeihua*), “made artistic” (*yishuhua*), and “theatricalized” (*xijuhua*) through *nandan*’s bodies. Therefore, “once women were really employed to assume female roles,” their embodiment of female characters “would be less ‘natural’ and ‘tasteful’ compared to that of their male counterparts” (p. 3). The author is notable for his recognition of the influential role of cultural convention (at least onstage) in authorizing what kind of gender performance could be allowed to appear as “natural.” However, by emphasizing the difference between the “women” onstage and women in everyday life, Wang, like many of his opponents, also seems to be trapped by biological determinism since it was an assumed biological essence that constituted what he called “genuine women.”

In Wang’s theorization of theatre and film, he identified *xiqu* as “abstract” while *huaju* and film were deemed as “realistic” (p. 4). Wang attempted to justify the worthiness of the female impersonation by showing its artistic uniqueness. It was in the early Republican era that a number of Chinese intellectuals and artists became aware of the need to theorize indigenous Chinese drama. The urgency of interpreting *xiqu* with theoretical depth lay in the fact that *xiqu* had to defend its

stance by showing that it was aesthetically equal to its Western-inspired counterpart. Therefore, a shared approach, namely of defining the Chinese theatre through its aesthetic characteristics, could be observed in the theorizations articulated by different Republican writers.

In the drama reform issue of *New Youth* magazine in 1918, Zhang Houzai, the only defender of indigenous Chinese theatre in that issue, used the phrase *jiaxianghuiyi* (“symbolic and suggestive”) to characterize the “old theatre” (Zhang Houzai 1918: 367). Zhang claimed that “the advantage of Chinese ‘old drama’ lies in the fact that it expresses everything through the means of abstraction” (p. 367). In the National Drama Movement (*guoju yundong*) in the mid-1920s, along with a number of promising junior artists, Yu Shangyuan, a U.S.-educated theatre artist and critic, identified Chinese aesthetic tradition as “non-realistic” (*feixieshi*) and “symbolic” (*xieyi*) (Yu 1927: 193–201) and sought to bridge (Chinese) “symbolism” and (Western) “realism” in a proposed national dramatic form (Goldstein 2007: 175). In the 1930s, Chinese intellectuals such as Qi Rushan and Xu Muyun also theorized the Chinese theatre by using similar aesthetic terms. For Qi Rushan, “the crucial difference between Chinese and Western drama was not that Chinese was musical and Western spoken, but that the latter one was ‘realistic’ while the former was ‘aesthetic’ (*meishuhua*, lit. aestheticized)” (Goldstein 2007: 153). Xu Muyun, a prominent Republican theatre historian and educator, echoed his predecessors by using the phrase *chuanshen xieyi* (lit. “conveying the spiritual and inscribing the meaning”) to identify the fundamental aesthetic characteristics of Chinese drama (Xu 1977: 300).

I would argue that a strong tendency of distinguishing Chinese drama from its Western counterpart could be found in the Republican intellectuals’ theorizations of Chinese drama. While essentializing Western-style drama as a “realistic”/“naturalistic” form, the Chinese theoreticians also perceived an essence of “anti-realism,” “aestheticism,” “abstractionism,” or “symbolism” in *xiqu*. The distinction between “realism” and “aestheticism” encouraged both Chinese and Western audiences to perceive *xiqu* as an antithesis of Western drama. In the process of othering, the intellectuals legitimated *xiqu* in the new cultural context by demonstrating its aesthetic distinctness. It is beyond the scope of this essay to detail the formation of this binary of (Chinese) “aestheticism” vis-à-vis (Western) “realism” in early Republican China and its substantial impact on artistic practice. What needs to be pointed out is that the theoretical abstractions of the aesthetic differences between Western and Chinese theatres probably failed to take the specificities and diversities of both theatrical forms into consideration. At least, this distinction was not always successfully confirmed by the reception of

xiqu's audience. For example, in Mei's tour in the United States, Stark Young, an American critic, provided a striking interpretation of Mei's performance. For Young, Mei's art was rooted in the domain of realism, since an "essential quality" could be observed at "the precision of its realistic notations and renderings" (Young 1930: 75; Xiaomei Chen 1995: 130). Young offered an intriguing interpretation of the *nandan*'s performance, which challenged many of his contemporary Chinese counterparts' theorization of *xiqu* and revealed the actual fluidity within the appreciation of indigenous Chinese theatre.

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

For Wang Pingling, women were incapable of efficiently performing female characters, not only because the art itself had been "aestheticized" through male bodies but also because other social and physiological factors contributed to their lack of competence in acting in *xiqu*. On the physiological aspect, he contended that *xiqu* actors, who were different from their counterparts in *huaju*, had to obtain strict physical training in singing, dancing, and martial arts from the time they were very young, but women cannot bear the burden of *nandan*'s physical training. "Women," in the eyes of Wang Pingling, "often experience physiological changes such as obstetric delivery, menstruation, easy sentimentality, and excessive sexuality," but acting as a profession does not allow these physiological changes to negatively affect a performer's career (Wang 1934: 3). First, for Wang, women are both physically and mentally inferior to men by nature, which disqualified females from the *xiqu* stage. Simply ignoring the physical changes (such as the prominent vocal alteration during puberty) that may limit a male's acting potential, Wang justified the popularity of *nandan* by suggesting an essential superiority rooted in male bodies and their mental qualities. Wang's point precisely echoed the physiological knowledge about women, which emerged and was unequivocally publicized in the early Republican texts of medical education (many of which were aimed at general readers). For example, menstruation was claimed as a source of women's mental instability. "The bleeding female," as testified by the physiological treatises in that period of time, "Quickly became tired and irritable, was easily excited and might withdraw into a state of depression" (Dikötter 1995: 41).

Second, when contending that women were not competent in performing female roles, Wang seemed to forget the historical contributions of female actors on the Chinese stage. Prior to the Qing dynasty's ban on women's participation in acting, women not only impersonated *dan* roles but also demonstrated their excellence in performing a

variety of male role types. Chinese female performers' competence in acting is exemplified in Xia Tingzhi's *Qinglouji* (The Green Bower Collection), a fourteenth-century text that documented the artistic activities of a total of 117 female actors. Xia noted that not a few of these Yuan women were competent in impersonating both female and male characters onstage and some of them were even specialists of portraying male gangsters in *lulinxi*, a genre of plays featuring stories about rebels and outlaws (Xia 1959). Wang's point thus appears to be invalid if these female performers are brought back into a larger picture of Chinese theatre history.

In fact, the notion that women were less efficient at artistically representing women in theatrical performances was not peculiar to the Chinese critic Wang Pingling. In early twentieth-century Japan, what was parallel to the Chinese controversy of the *nandan* issue was a fierce debate over whether women should be introduced to take up the roles of *onnagata* in kabuki theatre. For the adversaries of female performers, women were less capable of performing female roles onstage due to not only their physical but also their psychological inferiority. Theatre critic Kojima Koshū argued that women's psychological activities were restricted by what he called "simple brain operations" and "monotonous functioning." Therefore, if a woman was employed to perform a role with a complicated personality, she "with her simple brain operations and monotonous psychological functioning could never do justice" (Kojima 1912: 148; Kano 2001: 22). The prejudice toward women's capability of theatre acting was not unique to the East Asian context. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, in his essay "Women's Parts Played by Men in the Roman Theater," also unreservedly recognized male superiority in imitating female roles onstage. In the eyes of Goethe, only males could competently play the part of the female roles in Goldoni's play *La Locandiera*, and women's engagement would make the scenes appear "offensive" (Goethe 1993: 47–51). For Goethe, "In theatrical performance," argued Lesley Ferris, "male actors portray female characters more artistically and more effectively than real women" and "women had no access to mimesis" (Ferris 1998: 167). Female performers' inferiority to their male counterparts, as Goethe hinted in his essay, not only lay in their physical or mental limitations (as the two East Asian critics suggested) but rather resulted from women's natural lack of creativity in theatrical presentation. Hence, "women," as we can see in the critiques of the three critics above, had been transculturally depicted, ridiculed, and dismissed as lower beings whose "nature" could be arbitrarily associated with any inferior attributes.

For Wang Pingling, not only would women's physical and mental inferiority prevent them from efficiently impersonating female roles

in *xiqu*, but also women's lack of self-determination would disturbingly affect their careers. Wang went on: "There is a fact that would prevent actresses from being famous. In this male-centered time, every actress with potential would be purchased and locked in a golden house as a plaything before she reaches stardom. There are so many examples of this in the past and at present. If this trend does not alter, how could the national drama as a profession abolish the system of men playing women!" (Wang 1934: 3).

While contending that female performers would be more likely to prostitute themselves, Wang seemed to forget that female impersonators too could prostitute themselves, and in fact male patrons' sexual exploitation of *nandan* actors was pervasive in imperial China. Although the "male-centered" society was condemned for its oppression of women, female actors, in the depiction of Wang Pingling, also appeared to be self-indulgent and hedonistic and were seen as likely to cross over the boundary between theatre performers and the socially disrespectable roles (such as mistresses, concubines, and sex workers) that were often associated with sexually desirable women. By so doing, Wang negated women's rights to acting by reaffirming the misogynist conceptions of woman as self-indulgent, hedonistic, deficient in self-determination, and consequently destined to serve as a sexual object for men.

Conclusion

In the newly founded republic, the controversy over the *nandan* issue was sparked not only by concerns about female impersonation related to the placement of women in theatrical art, but also by the anxiety over whether China could succeed in its transformation into a modern and "civilized" nation. The debating points actually showed that each side of the debate was preoccupied with uplifting theatre as a public moral and educational institution. The adversaries of *nandan* saw the social equity between genders and the normalcy of gender, sex, and sexuality as integral parts of the process of building a modern nation and contended that theatre should contribute to this endeavor. The endorsers of *nandan* emphasized that female impersonation was an essential part in the artistry of a newly conceived "national drama" (*guojù*), which exemplified the distinct pursuit of Chinese "aestheticism." In the defense of the status quo, women's inferiority in theatre, particularly in *xiqu*, was underscored to justify the notion that males and only males could best impersonate women onstage.

In investigating the debate, we witness a number of paradoxes within the perspective of each side. Appearing as "liberals," the adver-

saries of *nandan* advocated uplifting the social status of women and condemned their counterparts as “provincial patriots” (Xi 1929: 62). However, within their agenda of liberation, the perceptions of female impersonation were filtered through lenses of heterosexuality, and any sexual impulse other than the heterosexual norm was labeled “perverted.” The supporters of *nandan* appeared as both aesthetes and pragmatists. On the one hand, they essentialized *xiqu* as “aesthetic”/“symbolic” and Western-style drama as “realistic.” By so doing, they could justify female impersonation as part of the Chinese symbolic tradition and argue that the Western practice of gender-appropriate casting should not be transculturally applied to the Chinese case. On the other hand, when they sought references to uphold their own point, they cited the West and argued that the phenomenon of men playing women in ancient Greece and Elizabethan England could substantiate female impersonation as a transcultural practice. In this sense, ironically, the artistry of *nandan* appeared to be culturally unique but also somehow transcultural and universal.

In the early Republican era, what was parallel to the popularity of the *nandan* stars was the reemergence of female actors who were performing both female and male roles on the Chinese stage. With *huaju*'s adoption of gender-appropriate casting and the advent of a new style of theatre schools that admitted both male and female students,¹⁰ *nannü heyán* appeared to be an unavoidable trend in *xiqu* after 1930. What seemed to be bracketed by the visible transformations onstage was the fierce intellectual debate on female impersonation throughout the early Republican era. The importance of investigating the controversy lies in the necessity of understanding the sociocultural logic employed in each side of the debate, because it was the very same logic that underlined various aspects of intellectual negotiations within China's nation-building project in the early twentieth century.

NOTES

The author would like to thank Kathy Foley, Maki Isaka, Jason McGrath, Aleksander Sedzielarz, and the two anonymous reviewers for their precious comments and suggestions. Any errors or omissions are mine alone. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from Chinese are my own.

1. Under the reign of the emperor Kangxi, women were banned from performing theatrical arts initially in 1671 and again in 1709 (Wu and Stevenson 2010: 123). According to Joshua Goldstein, the Yongzheng emperor also promulgated a prohibition of actresses at court in 1723. This court's prohibi-

tion “led to a customary ban on actresses performing in commercial theaters as well” (Goldstein 2007: 21). What needs to be added to Goldstein’s note is that the Qing’s ban on actresses was less effective in rural regions, where amateur actresses often performed in *xiaoxi* (minor drama) (see Fan Pen Chen 2005: 50–62). In addition, in China’s foreign concessions, where the Qing’s ban had no legal impact, actresses did exist in commercial theatres (see Chou 1997: 138–141).

2. *Wenmingxi* literally means “civilized drama.” The Chinese term *wenming* was a popular expression referring to anything modern (Western style) or new at the turn of the twentieth century in China, “including modern-style wedding (*wenming jiehun*) and women’s unbound feet (*wenmingjiao*)” (Zhen Zhang 2005: 99). The project of building a “civilized” (*wenming*) nation necessarily entailed a departure from what was defined as “traditional,” “Confucian,” or “feudal” in the historical context.

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

4. The term *nannü heyuan* literally means “men and women playing together.” However, in the early Republican context, the call for *nannü heyuan* went beyond a general wish of allowing women to perform with male actors and aimed for the ultimate adoption of the casting of men playing male roles and women playing female roles.

5. For a detailed study of Mei’s visits to Japan in the Republican era, see Tian (2012: 15–56).

6. In *Literature Weekly*’s 1929 special issue on Mei Lanfang, all of the essays attacking the *nandan* were signed by the authors under pseudonyms. As far as the author of this essay knows, among all of these pseudonyms, only Xi Yuan is identifiable, which is known as a pen name used by the prominent Republican writer, scholar, and literary critic Zheng Zhenduo.

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

8. Hong studied dramatic arts in the United States from 1916 to 1922, and his credits included attendance at George Pierce Baker’s English 47 workshop on playwriting at Harvard University.

9. For example, in the 1920s, in a debate on which role type of *xiqu* could best represent Chinese theatre in the West, Qi Rushan emphasized the similarities between *nandan* and the cross-dressed boys in Shakespeare’s time and argued that *dan* rather than *sheng* could be transculturally appreciated by Western spectators (Qi Rushan 1998: 137–139). Also see Wang (1934: 1).

10. In 1930, the Chinese Institute of *Xiqu* Actors (*Zhonghua xiqu zhuanke xuexiao*), a *xiqu* school emphasizing both literary education and acting training, was founded in Beijing, under the directorship of Jiao Juyin, a French-educated theatre artist.

REFERENCES

- Butler, Judith. 1990.
Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity. New York: Routledge.
- Chen, Fan Pen. 2005.
“Forbidden *Fruits*: Prohibitions on the Performance of Female and Han Ethnic Identities.” *CHINOPEAL Papers* 25: 35–86.
- Chen, Xiaomei. 1995.
Occidentalism: A Theory of Counter-Discourse in Post-Mao China. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Chou Huiling. 1997.
“Striking Their Own Poses: The History of Cross-Dressing on the Chinese Stage.” *TDR* 41, no. 2: 130–152.
- Dikötter, Frank. 1995.
Sex, Culture, and Modernity in China: Medical Science and the Construction of Sexual Identities in the Early Republican Period. Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press.
- Feng Xizui. 1914.
“Jiesan nuzi xinju *ganyan*” (About Disbanding Women’s New Theatre Troupe). *Fanhua zazhi* (Prosperity Magazine) 1: 11–12.
- Ferris, Lesley. 1998.
“Introduction to Part Five: Cross-dressing and Women’s Theatre.” In *Routledge Reader in Gender and Performance*, ed. Elizabeth Goodman and Jane De Gay, 165–169. London: Routledge.
- Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von. 1993 [1788].
“Women’s Parts Played by Men in the Roman Theater.” Trans. Isa Ragusa. In *Crossing the Stage: Controversies on Cross-Dressing*, ed. Lesley Ferris, 48–51. London: Routledge.
- Goldstein, Joshua. 2007.
Drama Kings: Players and Publics in the Re-creation of Peking Opera, 1870–1937. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Hong Shen. 1988 [1935].
“Wode dagu shiqi yijing guolema?” (Has My Time of Beating Drum Already Passed?) In *Hong Shen wenji* (Collected Writings of Hong Shen), vol. 4, 532–538. Beijing: Zhongguo xiju chubanshe.
- Jiu Zhi [pseud.]. 1929.
“Churi youhuai Mei Lanfang” (Memorizing Mei Lanfang on New Year’s Eve). *Wenxue zhoubao* (Literature Weekly) 8, no. 3: 80–82.
- Kano, Ayako. 2001.
Acting Like a Woman in Modern Japan: Theater, Gender, and Nationalism. New York: Palgrave.
- Kojima Koshū. 1912.
“Geki no ikan ni yoru” (Depends on the Kind of Play). *Engei gaho* (Entertainment Pictorial) January: 147–151.

- Li, Siu Leung. 2003.
Cross-Dressing in Chinese Opera. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.
- Lu Xun. 1973 [1933].
 “Zuiyishu de guojia” (The Most Artistic Country). In *Lu Xun quanji* (The Complete Works of Lu Xun), vol. 4, 503–505. Beijing: Renmin wenxu chuabanshe.
- Qi Fan [pseud.]. 1929.
 “Mei Lanfang yangming haiwai zhi yi kaocha” (Investigation on Mei Lanfang’s Fame Abroad). *Wenxue zhoubao* (Literature Weekly) 8, no. 3: 72–76.
- Qi Rushan. 1998 [1964].
Qi Rushan huiyilu (Qi Rushan’s Recollections). Beijing: Zhongguo xiju chubanshe.
- Soble, Alan, ed. 2006.
Sex From Plato to Paglia: A Philosophical Encyclopedia. 2 vols. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Song Chunfang. 1930 [1920].
 “Gailiang zhongguo xiju” (On the Reform of Chinese Theatre). In *Song Chunfang lunju* (Song Chunfang on Theatre), vol. 1, 275–286. Shanghai: Zhonghua shuju.
- Tian, Min. 2000.
 “Male Dan: The Paradox of Sex, Acting, Perception of Female Impersonation in Traditional Chinese Theatre.” *Asian Theatre Journal* 17, no. 1: 78–97.
- , ed. 2010.
China’s Greatest Operatic Male Actor of Female Roles: Documenting the Life and Art of Mei Lanfang 1894–1961. Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press.
- . 2012.
Mei Lanfang and the Twentieth-Century International Stage. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Wandor, Michelene. 1986.
Carry on, Understudies: Theatre and Sexual Politics. London: Routledge.
- Wang Pingling. 1934.
 “Guoju zhong de nanbannü wenti” (The Issue of Men Playing Women in National Drama). *Juxue yuekan* (Theatre Studies Monthly) 3, no. 12: 1–4.
- Wu, Cuncun, and Mark Stevenson. 2010.
 “Speaking of *Flowers*: Theatre, Public Culture, and Homoerotic Writing in Nineteenth-Century Beijing.” *Asian Theatre Journal* 27, no. 1: 100–129.
- Xi Yuan (Zheng Zhenduo). 1929.
 “Dadao danjiao de daibiao ren Mei Lanfang” (Down with the Representative *Dan* Actor Mei Lanfang). *Wenxue zhoubao* (Literature Weekly) 8, no. 3: 62–65.

- Xia Tingzhi. 1959 [1355].
Qinglou ji (Green Bower Collection). In *Zhongguo gudian xiqu lunzhu jicheng* (Collection of China's Classic Works on *Xiqu*), ed. Zhongguo xiqu yanjiuyuan, vol. 2. Beijing: Zhongguo xiqu chubanshe.
- Xiao Tian [pseud.]. 1914.
 “Nüzi xinju tuan” (The All-Female Troupe of New Theatre). *Xinju zazhi* (New Theatre Magazine) 1: 5–6.
- Xu Muyun. 1977 [1938].
Zhongguo xiqu shi (History of Chinese Theatre). Taipei: Shijie shuju.
- Ying Yi [pseud.]. 1929.
 “Fanchang shehui de chanwu” (Product of an Abnormal Society). *Wenxue zhoubao* (Literature Weekly) 8, no. 3: 66–72.
- Young, Stark. 1930.
 “Mei Lanfang.” *The Republic*, March 5, 74–75.
- Yu Shangyuan. 1927.
 “Juxi pingjia” (An Evaluation of Old Drama). In *Guoju yundong* (National Drama Movement), ed. Yu Shangyuan, 193–201. Shanghai: Xinyue shudian.
- Zhang, Houzai. 1918.
 “Wode zhongguo juxi guan” (My Thoughts on Chinese Old Drama). *Xin qingnian* (New Youth) 5, no. 4: 343–348.
- Zhang, Zhen. 2005.
An Amorous History of the Silver Screen: Shanghai Cinema 1896–1937. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Zhi [pseud.]. 1930.
 “Guanyu piping Mei Lanfang zhi yihan (zhong)” (About the Criticism of Mei Lanfang [2]). *Shenbao* (Shanghai Daily), 21 June: 17.
- Zhou Jianyun. 1922 [1918].
 “Xiqu zahua (1)” (Talks on New Theatre [1]). In *Jubu congkan* (Collection of Essays on Theatre), vol. 2, ed. Zhou Jianyun, 748–51. Shanghai: Jiaotong tushuguan.

GLOSSARY

Asahi Shimbun 朝日新聞
 Cheng Yanqiu 程硯秋
 chuanshen 傳神
 dan 旦
 feixieshi 非寫實
 guocui 國粹
 guoju 國劇
 guoju yundong 國劇運動
 Hong Shen 洪深
 huaju 話劇
 Jiao Juyin 焦菊隱

jiaxianghuiyi 假象會意
 jingju 京劇
 jingxi 京戲
 Jiu Zhi 九芝
 Kojima Koshū 小島孤舟
 lingjie dawang 伶界大王
 Lu Xun 魯迅
 lulinxi 綠林戲
 Mei Lanfang 梅蘭芳
 meishuhua 美術化
 nandan 男旦

nannü heyan 男女合演
 nüdan 女旦
 onnagata 女形
 Qi Fan 豈凡
 Qi Rushan 齊如山
 Qinglou ji 青樓集
 seigeki 正劇
 Shenbao 申報
 sheng 生
 shenmeihua 審美化
 Shuntian shibao 順天時報
 Song Chunfang 宋春舫
 Tan Xinpei 譚鑫培
 Wang Pingling 王平陵
 wenming 文明
 wenming jiehun 文明結婚
 wenmingjiao 文明腳
 wenmingxi 文明戲

Xi Yuan 西源
 Xia Tingzhi 夏庭芝
 Xiao Tian 嘯天
 xieyi 寫意
 xijuhua 戲劇化
 xinju 新劇
 xiqu 戲曲
 Xu Muyun 徐慕雲
 Ying Yi 影憶
 yishuhua 藝術化
 Zhang Houzai 張厚載
 Zheng Zhenduo 鄭振鐸
 zhengju 正劇
 Zhi 知
 Zhonghua xiqu zhuanke xuexiao
 中華戲曲專科學校
 Zhou Jianyun 周劍雲