

Crossdressing in Peking Opera: Sexism or Freedom?

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Abstract: Women characters are pivotal to Peking Opera. On a Peking Opera stage, these female characters are often played by men. Some argue that one could often see a miniature of the society during a point in history through its art. In Peking Opera, the changing ideals of gender are conveyed through its changing practices as the political and socio-economic ideas are altered throughout ancient China. In parallel to those practices in ancient China, feminist aestheticians today are more and more drawn to topics like cross-dressing, gender fluidity, and the empowerment of women in art. Although many scholars have examined the practice of cross-dressing in Ancient Rome, Shakespearean theatre, and other forms of cross-dressing performances in history, this practice in Peking Opera does not have enough attention from gender studies scholars. Through this paper, the author hopes to address the appeal towards feminist aesthetics within the cross-dressing of Peking Opera. Some of these ancient Chinese ideals are much more progressive in comparison to those observed in China today; this not only addresses the regressive changes in China but also suggests that many *traditional* gender ideals weren't traditional or natural at the beginning. This paper will provide more insight towards both feminist aesthetics and art which pushes progressive gender ideals. In addition, the author hopes this paper will draw more attention towards the implications of cross-dressing in other ancient cultures towards gender-fluidity and crossdressing today.

Keywords: Feminist Aesthetics, Crossdressing in Peking Opera, Gender Fluidity, May Fourth Movement

1. Introduction

Feminist aesthetics is a relatively novel and intersectional focus within aesthetics, but under the impact of fourth-wave feminism, feminist aesthetics has gained massive attention outside of philosophy. Not only were these ideals embodied through social media's embrace of all body types, but much of the focus is also directed at the representation of women, gender fluidity, cross-dressing, non-binary genders and transgender beauty within artworks [1]. Although not as traditionally philosophical as other focuses, feminist aesthetics explores the influence of gender within aesthetics, and this paper will center on the ideas of gender-fluidity, cross-dressing, and transgender's influence to art.

Peking Opera, although the most famous form of Chinese Opera, is a novel derivative of Canjun Opera, which originated from the Tang Dynasty. Throughout nearly a thousand years of Chinese traditional opera, cross-dressing has existed as a common practice. Within the groups where they

perform, gender is usually not the primary consideration of roles or lifestyles. Roles were assigned according to the actress or actor's abilities and voice range instead of their gender, and cross-dressing was common practice for both men and women [2]. Outside of Peking Opera, the destitute actors and actresses earned extra money through working in opera brothels. Actors often "remained" the gender of their roles in those brothels. After woman sex working was banned by the Qing government, brothels took advantage of the cross-dressing actors' feminine makeup and costume to continue to earn much money [3].

During the Qing Dynasty, Emperor Qian Long prohibited actresses from performing in Peking Opera, so even more cross-dressing male actors showed up on the Peking Opera stage. Cross-dressing male actors in Peking Opera are called *Nan Dan*, and these *Nan Dan* were so popular in late Qing that they were often celebrated separately from the rest of the Opera crew. For instance, *Shun Tian Times* published a paper during the early 1900s ranking famous *Nan Dan*, celebrating the four most famous *Nan Dan* actors of the time [4]. Other Peking Opera actors usually did not receive this much public attention. *Nan Dan* are also more celebrated by Chinese audiences today than other roles in Peking Opera, with prominent examples being Li Yu Gang and Mei Lan Fang. As a result, transgender and cross-dressing within the entertainment industry are not as often shamed as homosexual actors and actresses in China. However, gender fluidity and other non-conventional gender ideas terrify and estrange Chinese people. The author will analyze the underlying historical occurrences that caused this phenomenon in China and convey what and why cross-dressing in Peking Opera encourages gender-fluidity and transgender.

In the span of history, multiple similar examples which use drama to illustrate gender fluidity or cross-dressing could be observed across a variety of cultures. For instance, not only were all women roles played by actors, cross-dressing also occurred multiple times through Shakespearean plays like *The Twelfth Night*, *The Taming of the Sun*, and *Cymbeline* [5].

2. Cross-dressing during the May Fourth Movement and the Nationalist Government

During the early 1900s, Chinese intellectuals, often under the influence of Western education, rose against the corrupt and inadequate imperialist late Qing government. The protest is later known as the May Fourth movement, where Chinese intellectuals stormed Beijing for their own rights. For crossdressing, however, the rise of these Western ideals brought more Western stigma towards this common Chinese practice. The May Fourth movement promoted ideas that were vastly progressive for the ancient theocratic nation: women's equality, the scientific method, and democracy. These ideas helped the nationalist government overthrow the oppressive Qing government. However, cross-dressing began to be labeled as *Lou Xi*, as cross-dressing in Peking Opera was mainly a result of Qian Long's sexist laws. Many of the intellectuals also saw brothels as a promoting factor of homosexuality. Prominent social studies experts and intellectuals like Lu Xun immensely criticized the practice of cross-dressing in Peking Opera through their literature or social studies commentaries, influencing many of the May Fourth intellectuals, commonly known as *Xin Qing Nian*, to despise cross-dressing in the Peking Opera.

In Lu Xun's commentary "The Artistic Nation", he criticizes the democracy of the nationalist government by using cross-dressing in Peking Opera as an analogy. He compared the fake gender identity of *Nan Dan* to the fake democratic name of the failing nationalist government. The commentary attributed a negative connotation towards crossdressers, as the failed democracy brought only negative effects to the country. Not only does the commentary compare cross-dressing to a fake democracy, but it also shames the appearance of *Nan Dan's* makeup, comparing "their makeup peeling off to an old white wall" [6].

Other early 20th-century Chinese scholars or intellectuals like Lu Xun similarly criticized cross-dressing in Peking Opera because they saw the practice as either sexist, unscientific, homosexual, or

sexualizing. Some scholars viewed cross-dressing as a conveyance of sexism, since the practice occurred in the Qing Dynasty only because of sexist barriers to female actresses [7]. However, these scholars neglected the fact that the presence of cross-dressing has long existed before the sexist barriers of the Qing Dynasty. Instead, this practice empowered many Chinese Opera actresses who weren't suited for the *Dan Jue*, or female protagonist, to shine in their own way. Other intellectuals of the time discouraged cross-dressing because it contradicted the scientific biological sex. Since the May Fourth movement mainly promoted Western intellectual ideals like those of the Enlightenment, the scientific method was encouraged instead of traditional practices. Nevertheless, many Chinese intellectuals focused the advancement on the wrong direction, viewing all gender-mimicking accessories in cross-dressing as contradictory to the scientific biological sex [7]. *Xin Qing Nian* also disproved the cross-dressing brothels because of homophobic emotions. Many of them feared not only the homosexual inclinations of these brothels but also all forms of sex working. Although cross-dressing in Peking Opera involved many controversial ideals like sex work, most intellectuals argued against cross-dressing because of wrong reasons. Yet, the century roamed on to witness perhaps the most progressive era of gender fluidity and equality in the Chinese theatre.

As the establishment of the nationalist government and intellectual movement advanced on, *Xin Qing Nian* were free to create their own form of Chinese Opera called *Xin Ju*. In this art form, playwrights used the voice of the performers to express their socio-political ideas. *Xin Ju* performers conveyed cross-dressing via non-conforming gender appearances. In *Xin Ju*, male and female characters did not have to wear certain gender-conforming clothes, accessories, or makeup like crossdressers in Peking Opera, and crossdressers were free to not wear accessories that revealed their biological sex off stage.

The creators of *Xin Ju* often utilized homoeroticism on stage to engage the audience. Many of the same-sex actors and actresses made romantic gestures on stage toward each other. Although many crossdressers held traditional gender ideals off stage, *Xin Ju* actors and actresses were never permitted to express them on stage [7]. However, *Xin Ju* undermined the practice's value to some crossdressers. Some of the Peking Opera *Nan Dan* aspired to crossdress as traditionally feminine characters, but the public shaming from *Xin Qing Nian* towards this traditional practice would have been too hard to bear. These forms of cross-dressing had no fault in themselves, but they were prohibited by *Xin Ju* because of certain nuances within the practice that they disagreed with.

This progressive, supportive art form that enabled socio-political voices to be expressed, however, did not last long. Not only were most audiences more accustomed to seeing conservative ideas similar to their own expressed on stage, they also needed a form of entertainment more than another platform for Chinese intellectuals to persuade the public, which was of abundance during this time. *Xin Ju* shone in a short amount of time during the rule of the nationalist government, and became nothing more than an unforgettable mark in history soon after.

Throughout the May Fourth movement, these *Xin Qing Nian* brought Western ideals, many vastly progressive for China at the time, into Peking Opera. However, these Western ideals were also flawed, and many of the new ideas were misused by the intellectuals to prohibit harmless traditional practices. In the end, nonetheless, these *Xin Qing Nian* created a gender-fluid form of Chinese Opera. Despite *Xin Ju*'s unpopularity, its presence proves to historians today that a gender-fluid, gender-neutral, and progressive art form is achievable and has been achieved in a vastly traditional society over a short period.

3. Gender Fluidity in Art and Feminist Aesthetics Today (“Feminist Aesthetics”)

Feminist aesthetics of today has immensely changed in comparison to the 20th century; the desexualization of the female body and crossdressing and the increasing acceptance of gender fluidity has enabled artists of today more freedom and a broader spectrum for creating art. Along with the

extraordinary progress in the feminist movement, feminist aesthetics has liberally evolved in China and around the world. Those male and female artists who had been previously sexualized by *Xin Qing Nian* or the owners of the brothels could now be seen with a much more embracing eye. With more and more acknowledgment of the value of the human body outside of sex, crossdressers of today would be more easily embraced by society. Some of these crossdressers who are also sex workers in Peking Opera would find themselves in a much more supportive environment towards sex workers.

Much of the negative connotation of sex work has been alleviated today in comparison to the beginning of the 21st century. Even in scholarly sources of the late 20th century and those at the beginning of the 21st century have failed to acknowledge the possible voluntary and permissible form of sex work. These scholarly sources not only considered all forms of sex work prostitution, many of them saw sex work as the worst end of cross-dressing in Peking Opera. Although some of these sources saw cross-dressing with an accepting and embracing eye, most of the articles criticized sex work. Multiple times in Hui-Ling's article published in 2000, she condemned cross-dressing in Peking Opera because it led to prostitution [8]. In an article published similarly in 2000, the author censured *Nan Dan's* "sexually appealing techniques" in Peking Opera [9]. Later in the article, the author qualified the value of crossdressers in Peking Opera to their ability to be sexually appealing, a view that was ignorant of the presence of *Dao Ma Dan*, or women generals in Peking Opera. This ignorance does not only characterize the generalization of these two articles' opinions to each individual who were in the Peking Opera industry, but many other intellectuals of China during the 1900s and early 2000s. Thus, many of the previous scholarly sources view sex work in Peking Opera as the evil ends, but these sources fail to acknowledge the possible complexities, that perhaps some crossdressing sex workers voluntarily participated in this occupation because of its great pay, or that some crossdressers enjoyed crossdressing and sex work.

Similarly, other *Xin Qing Nian* would decide for these cross-dressing actors in Peking Opera that they were cross-dressing in a gender-conforming way against their will. As mentioned previously, cross-dressing was used as an analogy for Lu Xun to degrade the democracy of the Chinese Nationalist Government, attributing negative connotations towards cross-dressing, but the book which includes this article is still among the most recommended readings for middle school students in Chinese public schools. These examples of institutionalized discrimination—like the assumptions made by the *Xin Qing Nian* towards cross-dressing actors in Peking Opera—and other forms of microaggressions towards crossdressing last even until today. The acceptance and celebration of certain crossdressers in Peking Opera like Mei Lan Fang and Li Yu Gang raises an inquiry about the nature of this art form in China. Could the Chinese audience have favored crossdressing because of Burke's definition of Sublimity? Did the popularity of crossdressers only originate from the eerie feeling of seeing one dressed in a way these audiences think they should not? Do these audiences see *grotesque form* from the crossdressers and feel pleasure from the release of it instead of enjoying a form of pleasure? The outstanding popularity of crossdressers among other Peking Opera performers seem to confirm this point, since Burke maintained that sublimity aroused more than beauty could [10]. However, similar questions about the nature of the praise in ancient China surrounding cross-dressing must be inquired in future inspections.

Nonetheless, throughout Chinese art, crossdressing never seemed to evoke negative descriptions from the authors, poets, musicians, and playwrights. Instead, many Chinese artworks praised the practice. The third-century poem, *Mu Lan Poem*, did not condemn the cross-dressing of Mu Lan as grotesque, ugly, or fearful in any way. Thus, the distinction between sublimity and beauty becomes especially nuanced and difficult in Peking Opera crossdressing. Yet, one condition is to be established in this paper. If Peking Opera cross-dressing was not considered sublime, but beautiful, then it follows that none of the Chinese traditional ideals are intrinsically against cross-dressing.

In the third-century poem, *MuLan Poem*, the author ends with such an analogy: “A pair of male and female rabbits walk by each other, and one cannot part them from each other. Similarly, no one can identify [Mu Lan] differently from other men!” [11]. Although the author analyzes the successful cross-dressing of Mu Lan through the eyes of the spectator, in that the spectator could not part *MuLan* from other men, the celebration of Mu Lan’s successful cross-dressing might suggest a positive connotation towards the practice and even gender fluidity. In ancient China, the most masculine act one could accomplish would be fighting in a battle, and since Mu Lan not only joined the army the action might suggest that there were less perceived barriers between men and women in ancient China as commonly perceived. Furthermore, if Mu Lan was capable of performing such a masculine act easily through disguise, the author might have intended for her gender to be much more fluid than those *Xin Qing Nian* would have claimed possible, or scientific.

4. Conclusion

Just like *MuLan*, people of today are capable of changing between genders and biological sexes to attain identities that align with their hearts. Although many crossdressing performers only did such practices to sustain themselves, their counterparts who were passionate for this were capable of crossdressing without persecution, discrimination, or despise of others for centuries. Examining the practice with the lenses of feminist aesthetics today enables us to acknowledge that feminist progress is often non-linear. The *Xin Qing Nian*’s misinterpretation of gender equality promoted regressive gender ideals that prohibited crossdressing, and we could prevent this mistake in the future by studying the historical occurrence. The presence of such a free, expressive, and gender-fluid practice helps us understand that there are no natural causal relations between our biological sex at birth and the gender or sex we become and display.

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