

Li Yugang and His Transgender Performance: Body Politics, Entertainment and Aesthetic Ambiguity

[Cai Shenshen](#)

I have never thought a transgender male character could be so beautiful; 'she' is pure and classical in style. 'Her' beauty has superseded the majority of females, 'she' walks majestically, 'her' smile and glimpse touches one's soul. 'She' elegantly waves 'her' sleeves. I know that I am a man but when I watch 'her' performing, I am absolutely captivated and can't control my feelings towards 'her', and this internal conflict has made me question my sexuality.[1]

His uncommon quality in arts vividly demonstrates the appeal of his femininity, elegantly rather than extravagantly, prettily rather than pretentiously. He is more feminine than woman.

This is a kind of beauty that encompasses female prettiness in the modern world. Not only is it a prettiness of appearance, but also a prettiness emitting from the heart, – one of temperament.

The expression and emotion showing in 'her' eyes is intoxicating.[2]

1. The above quotes are from some Chinese netizens who appreciate the delicacy, elegance, and uniqueness of the trans-gender performances of Li Yugang, who is widely appraised as the best female impersonator in present-day China. From these netizens' comments, a murkily complex gender boundary and a collapse of the polarised gender categorisation is apparent. This gender confusion raises the question about whether gender is a presupposed entity or a performative and constructed discourse.
2. Judith Butler has noted that when the fabricated prominence of gender is posited as fundamentally independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating ploy, with the outcome that '*man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a female one.' [3] As sexual difference is often invoked as an issue of material differences, sex therefore represents the 'materiality of the body' and acquires a nature of normative from the start. Moreover, this normative nature of sex is labelled by Michel Foucault as a regulatory ideal which is part of a monitoring practice that manufactures the bodies it rules.
3. This Foucauldian regulatory ideal is a kind of productive power that 'produces-demarcates, circulates, differentiates – the bodies it controls,' where, this productive power refers to the workings of a certain regulatory regime composed of norms and practices that are presupposed. Foucault describes this as the 'politics of truth,' [4] a politics that 'orders the world in certain regular and regulatable ways, and that we come to accept as the given field of knowledge.' [5] When gender identifies with the normative and regulative characteristics of sex, gender is the mechanism by which notions of masculine and feminine are shaped and enfranchised, but while gender is theorised as essentially self-regulating, it might serve as the apparatus by which masculine and feminine are deconstructed and denaturalised. [6]
4. Butler attributes the emergence of western feminist and queer politics, and the intersex and transgendered movements, to practices which underscore disidentification with those regulatory norms by which sexual difference is materialised. [7] 'Fantasy,' as used by Butler, is a concept to describe this disidentification trend that 'allows us to imagine ourselves and others otherwise.' [8] 'Fantasy' shows us how the norms that govern contemporary opinions of veracity can be adjusted and how new forms of

gender identity can become introduced through the scene of embodiment, where the body is not assumed as an inactive and consummate fact, but a mode of becoming otherwise.

5. Butler also points out that while accepting the fact that modifying these norms that decide normative human morphology, we consequently give variant 'reality' to different kinds of gender existences, such as transgendered identities.^[9] In a broader sense, transgendered identities under examination in this paper, echo Susan Stryker's thoughts about this concept, in that it encompasses a wide mixture of bodily effects that unsettle or denaturalise heteronormativity.^[10] Examples of such bodily effects are those demonstrated in the female impersonation performance mastered by a contemporary Chinese pop male *dan* actor, Li Yugang. In his pop-cum-traditional male *dan* role, Li reinterprets the normative and regulative gender norms through the propagation and deviation of corporeal presentations, such as drag, femme, transgender and transsexual.
6. An important feature about Li Yugang's fictional transgendered roles, is that they are unlike much of western non-heterosexual politics and transgendered movements (e.g. queer and gay), which have an intent and potential to subvert dominant gender norms and social and political order (e.g. the male-centred patriarchal social pattern). In Li's transient and artistic transgression of the gender limits, the transgendered images and personalities created by him, and which produce 'fantasy' and 'disidentification', gender misalignment and gender bending, fuel the substance of body and gender politics which mirror the social, cultural and political vicissitudes in contemporary China. Therefore, Li Yugang's case provides an alternative to the body politics evoked by the transgendered stories of the western world, and reflect the Chinese specificities and conditions of the discourse of transgender.

Body politics of the transgendered lives in contemporary Chinese cultural texts

7. In western societies, the challenges faced by heteronormativity caused by the corporeal varieties and disidentification created by the transgendered, demonstrate the competence and prospect of disidentification to engage with and influence socio-political changes and evolutions.^[11] Therefore, the discourse of transgender performs as a conduit through which macro- and micro-political registers connect and circulate, and 'the lives of bodies become enmeshed in the lives of nations, states, and capital-formations.'^[12]
8. Under Chinese circumstances, the rhetoric of gender, and the discourse of transgender and body politics, exhibit indigenous characteristics given the specific political and cultural intersections in which they are produced and maintained. This Chinese version of discourse on gender, in particular a transgender body politics that engages actively and creatively with the social and political agendas and concerns of the nation, displays the critical power of the non-normative corporeal identities through cultural and artistic media and experiments. Instead of being rebellious and radical, the individual Chinese cultural texts of transgender aim to objectively and retrospectively reflect the Chinese socio-political reality of the times during which they were produced.
9. For example, the famous Chinese fifth generation director Chen Kaige's feature film, *Farewell My Concubine* (Bawang bieji 1993), which won the Palme d'Or at the Cannes International Film Festival, follows the fate of a homosexual Peking Opera male *dan* performer from the early Republican eras to the Cultural Revolution. In the film, the life journey of the male *dan* actor is ruined by his desperate love for his performing partner, a *sheng* performer (male plays the male role in Peking Opera routines), who is a straight person in real life. The *sheng* actor's final exposé of the outrageous and anti-revolutionary history of the *dan* performer leads to the latter being persecuted during the Cultural Revolution. Although the *dan* actor survived the tumultuous and catastrophic Cultural Revolution, he killed himself in his last performance with the *sheng* performer. In the movie, the gay identity of the *dan* performer in his real life can only be realised during his stage performance since the socio-cultural environment of China at this

time did not allow him to pursue it openly.

10. The *dan* actor constantly struggles with his gender and sexual proclivity, both in real life and on stage, and his unconscious thoughts and desires disrupt his conscious actions. These events echo the understanding about gendered subjectivities that are unstable and precarious, as understood from a psychological perspective when analysed by H el ene Cixous, Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray.^[13] Consequently, although the *dan* actor survived the harassment during the Cultural Revolution, he was still unable to cope with the duplicity of the *sheng* performer whose behaviour was shaped and controlled by the political ideology of revolutionary China during the Mao eras. The *dan* performer's suicide is a metaphor for the outcry of the suppressed gender role, which in turn signifies the overall moral and political monopoly of the Maoist socialist regime that quelled individual voices and freedom for the sake of collective emancipation and progress.
11. Besides the popular cultural domain, the Chinese art circle also turns out transgendered figures that fulfill a function of negotiating the gender politics with established gender norms and social preferences. For example, Ma Liuming is a body artist who creates a character called Fen-Ma Liuming, ('Fen' meaning 'separate' in Chinese), who, in his body art performance, is a figure who has an effeminate face and a man's body. According to Ivanova Maranatha, Fen-Ma Liuming is neither homosexual, hermaphrodite, transvestite nor androgyne.^[14] This person's face and body display contradictory images of traditional gender types, obscuring the limits between 'male' and 'female.'^[15] Sheldon Lu describes Ma Liuming as being 'gender construction and gender-bending, sexuality, sexual ambiguity, and cross-dressing', and the peculiarity [of] 'Fen-Ma' recurrently confronts the biopolitics of the 'disciplinary regime,' in Foucault's words—namely, the control and censoring of desires, bodies, and sexuality in society, which is the heritage of morality that passed down from Maoist society.^[16]
12. Another film about homosexual love, *Behind the Forbidden City*, (Donggong xigong 2006), which is directed by the sixth generation director Zhang Yuan, was banned from release in Mainland China by the propaganda department. The storyline of *Behind the Forbidden City* revolves around two gay lovers: a policeman, and an unemployed youth. In their love relationship, the jobless young man plays the seducer's role where his deep femininity triggers the desire of the policeman. As a civil servant, (and this functions as a signifier of the prudish and official ideology), the policeman suppresses his craving for the attractive transgender image of the youth when he arrests him for having sex with another male in a park—a park which is a well-known gathering place for gay men in Beijing. However, he finally gives up emotional control and becomes the lover of the young man.
13. In their torrid love-making scenes, the once marginalised and victimised homosexual person becomes the winner of the battle in terms of successfully captivating and assimilating a straight person, although during their sexual intercourse the policeman demonstrates strong masculinity and a sadomasochistic manner. The film exposes the mutual compromises made by both ostracised transgendered people and conservative, conformist people whose behaviour is in line with conventional gender norms. This compromise hints at the evolving relationship between the individual (represented by the jobless youth) and the government (represented by the policeman), and provides an indication that the moral constraints of the regime may have begun to thaw.
14. In another example, the transsexual dancer (male-to-female) Jin Xing's emergence and popularity within the current Chinese cultural marketsphere reflects the dynamism of transgendered lives in their encounters with the orthodox gender paradigm. The mere existence of the Jin Xing phenomenon itself indicates a loosening of the moral standards once held by the CCP regime. As He Chengzhou points out, Jin Xing, once a leading ballet dancer who undertook sexual reassignment surgery and reappeared as a female dancer, has been equitably polemic, indicating that for some, transitory gender crossing is stimulating, but gender passing is not.^[17] According to Singer, non-normative bodies are capable of generating substantial social, political and material significances, as they are not simply mimetic, but

resound deeply with the social and material occurrences of life, which can arguably be found in the case of Fen-Ma, Jin Xing, and Li Yugang.^[18]

Li Yugang and his pop male *dan* transgender performance

15. Li Yugang was born in 1978 into a peasant household in Jilin province of northeast China. In 2006, Li got his show-business break in a China Central Television's (CCTV) talent show, *Starlight Broadway* (Xingguang dadao). *Starlight Broadway* is a performance-based show where competitors are assessed by judges and a live audience. As a cross-gender performer, Li Yugang won third place in the 2006 annual final. His unique routines started a new popular cross-gender performance genre which combines the singing and acting routines of Peking Opera with pop music and modern lyrics. Li Yugang's cross-gender performance is rich in classical material, and since ancient costumes and make-up cause males to appear more feminine, Li Yugang's transgender performances rely heavily on the legends of historical female figures.
16. His most favoured roles were those of well-known ancient Chinese beauties and their imaginary lives as depicted in stories of conquest and romance. Singing this pop-cum-traditional hybrid music form, dressed up in stylish traditional costumes, and performing male *dan* acting routines of Peking Opera with modern dance choreography, Li resurrects the legendary stories of the Four Beauties of ancient China (Xi Shi, Wang Zhaojun, Diaochan and Yang Yuhuan); of the female leading character Lin Daiyu in *Dream of the Red Chamber* (Hongloumeng); and of the concubine Yuji of Emperor Xiangyu in the West Han dynasty in the Peking Opera piece *Farewell My Concubine*.
17. Since Li Yugang's success at *Starlight Broadway*, his popular transgender performances have become a hit in China's highly competitive cultural market. Critics and audiences have placed him on par with the male *dan* Peking Opera master Mei Lanfang. In 2007, the internationally famed fifth generation director Chen Kaige met with Li and invited him to play the Mei Lanfang role in his art house blockbuster *Forever Enthralled* (Mei Lanfang 2009). Li Yugang was thrilled by this opportunity (although it was aborted for reasons that are as still unknown). In the same year, Li Yugang held his first solo concert, *Flowers without a Limit* (Fanhua wujie), in Beijing. In 2009, he performed another solo concert, *Scarborough Fair* (Shengshi nishang), at the Sydney Opera House in Australia.
18. In the same year, Li Yugang was recruited by the China Opera and Ballet Theatre Troupe (COBTT) as a State First-Class Artist, due to his artistic achievement and contribution to Chinese ethnic arts. In 2010, he held solo concerts, entitled *Flower in Mirror, Moon in Water* in Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen, Hong Kong and Japan, which further enhanced his success internationally. In the following year, in another ground-breaking solo concert which was produced with the help of COBTT, Li performed the *Painting of Four Beauties*. This was held originally in National Centre for the Performing Arts of China and later in the Great Hall of the People and was seen as the concert which elevated Li Yugang's transgender performances to a new peak of excellence. *Painting* captures the essence of Li Yugang's transgender performance, and symbolises the unique contribution he has made to this newly formed hybrid acting genre.

The 'notorious' male *dan* performing genre and the *xianggong* system

19. Cross-gender performance is a theatrical norm and a tradition in Peking Opera and other ballad singing shows such as Shaoxiang Opera, and in these shows, a male performer will, for example, play a young female role. These performers are labelled by Liu as being female impersonators—called *nandan* (male *dan*) in Chinese.^[19] Examples of these include the four famous male *dan* actors in Peking Opera: Mei Lanfang, Shang Xiaoyue, Xun Huisheng and Cheng Yanqiu. It is also applies vice versa when a female

actor plays an old male role (such as Xiao Lanying and Meng Xiaodong). In the transgender performance, the actors imitate the gestures, body movements, speaking manners and voices of their opposite sex through cross-dressing and make-up, ultimately highlighting gender bending and construction.

20. Over the long history of Peking Opera, the male *dan* genre went through ups and downs and evoked controversial criticisms about its obscure nature and derogatory social and political implications, despite its outstanding artistic accomplishments. Mei Lanfang and his Mei school male *dan* performances were, during the early decades of the twentieth century, an exemplar of this high artistic achievement. One of Mei's contemporaries, Lu Xun (1881–1936), widely recognised as the father of modern Chinese literature, was one of those who disapproved and condemned male *dan* in Peking Opera, targeting Mei Lanfang in particular.^[20] Lu Xun made a satirical parallel between male *dan* and the duplicitous officials in the Republican government. He felt that both occupations put on their enthralling sides; when watching a male *dan*, what men see is 'playing woman' while what women see is 'man playing.'^[21] Lu Xun furthers his critique of the male *dan* through drawing a metaphoric association between the act of female impersonation and the abnormality of Chinese culture. Here, Lu Xun shares with some other contemporary intelligentsia a yearning for a virile and strong Chinese national character, as opposed to China's old emaciated, feminine image embodied by the male *dan* role in Peking Opera performance.^[22]
21. With similar views to Lu Xun, progressive Chinese literati Zheng Zhenduo also expressed his vigorous opposition to the practice of the male *dan*, notwithstanding its mass popularity at the start of the twentieth century. When he wrote in 1929 about the most revolting component in the conventions of Peking Opera, he termed the male *dan* as a brutal, inhumane, artificial, and most despicable trick.^[23] For radical writers like Zheng Zhenfu, the male *dan* was the quintessence of artificiality and the archetype of the disgraced aboriginal culture, and the theatre should indubitably abandon it.^[24]
22. The male *dan* phenomenon is further repudiated when the *xianggong* system that is derived from it was publicly banned and slated. The *xianggong* system trains male *dan* actors for Peking Opera performance, and the *siyu* (private dwelling), turns the apprentice boy actors into courtesans and homosexual companions of their masters. In 1912, the year following the founding of the Republic of China, the *xianggong* system was officially prohibited due to its implicit relationship with homosexuality and prostitution. The official document that announced the proscription of the *xianggong* system described it as a 'laughing stock of foreigners,' which had tainted the image of the Chinese nation and exposed the feeling of shame that the *xianggong* system had produced in China.^[25]
23. After the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC), the use of cross-gender roles was considered to be feudal remnants and dregs of the past by the new government, and something which was subverting and disparaging, and which should be deserted by its practitioners.^[26] During the Cultural Revolution era (1966–76), cross-gender performance was further demonised and its presentation virtually vanished.^[27] Under these circumstances, the male *dan* performers experienced harsh criticism and emotional distress and were seen as an immoral gender ambiguity and as a symbol of political backwardness.
24. However, cross-gender roles were resurrected and became fashionable again in the new post-socialist and post-revolutionary era. Li Yugang is the most successful figure in this field in terms of skillfully and adventurously integrating the traditional Peking Opera male *dan* performances with contemporary popular singing and dancing routines. In doing so, Li has rehabilitated the name of cross-gender casting and restored its popularity among the contemporary audience within China and on the international stage, which not only has a significant impact on gender and theatrical practices, but also has social, cultural, and political significance.

Li Yugang's reconfiguration and repackaging of the male *dan* casting

25. The female impersonator in Peking Opera demonstrates an abstruse or even obscene transgendered image when it is related to erotic femininity, remnant feudalism, and homosexual prostitution, which led to it being censured and eliminated in the socialist heydays of contemporary China. Since the end of the Cultural Revolution, male *dan* roles have been gradually resurrected. Even before Li Yugang's efforts, some actors attempted to modernise the cross-gender roles in terms of remodelling Peking Opera and performing female impersonation in innovative ways, however, none of them achieved the level of success accorded to Li Yugang and his new pop-cum-traditional transgender genre.
26. Through reconfiguring and repackaging the male *dan* recitals in Peking Opera routines such as arias and acting with the contemporary popular music and modern dancing choreography, Li Yugang makes the transgender performance of male *dan* even more ambiguous. The outcome of Li's effort is that it blurs the boundaries between femininity and masculinity, between popular and elegant aesthetics, between traditional and stylistic, and between entertainment and cultural signification. Consequently, Li Yugang stimulates social, cultural and political conditions via his transgendered performance. Li's stage image, as a symbolic non-normative gender identity, not only dismissed the notorious image of the traditional Peking Opera male *dan*, an image disapproved of by official CCP ideology, but also, due to the positive repercussions generated by the body and gender politics embedded in his performance, Li Yugang was accepted and welcomed by the mainstream audience.
27. There has been a long tradition of combining male *dan* performance with popular culture elements. For example, Mei Lanfang presented operas in both modern and conventional costume and adapted theatrical works in the 1910s.^[28] During the first two decades of the twentieth century, Mei, in cooperation with his scriptwriter, Qi Rushan, invented a popular genre of male *dan* performance which became known as 'ancient-costume song-dance drama.' According to Li:

[This new genre drew] inspiration from the beautifully dressed female figures in classical scroll-paintings based on Chinese mythology or folk talks. Both plots and stage presentation reflected the influences of these paintings, including costumes, props, postures, movements and facial expressions (especially the use of eyes).^[29]

28. Mei Lanfang and Qi Rushan's modernising innovations of the male *dan* presentation in traditional Peking Opera pieces inspired Li Yugang in his own popular renovation of the female impersonated. This is why Li Yugang's performance is recognised by Peking Opera experts as being based on the Mei school male *dan* traditions. For example, the creation of Li Yugang's musical drama, *Painting of Four Beauties*, is based on the legends and folklore stories of ancient China which depict the astounding beauty and the mesmerising tales of the four beauties.
29. In the Xi Shi episode of *Painting*, Li Yugang sings a pop song based upon the legendary depiction of a young Xi Shi washing silk clothes on the riverbank. By applying the skills and practices used in female impersonation in the Peking Opera (in particular orchid finger, in the likeness of a hand gesture of a lady), and by using stylish make-up and chic ancient costumes, Li Yugang restores the lively and yet innocent temperament of a beautiful girl from antiquity through his lifelike imitation of the naïve and shy expressions of Xi Shi. In an effort to make his appearance congruous, vibrant, and appealing with a 'beauty' of ancient China, Li Yugang learned much from well-known film and television makeup artists and fashion designers. He also modernised the ancient costumes worn by male *dan* in Peking Opera performance by highlighting the female body contours and curves.^[30] By combining, traditional images with Peking Opera acting techniques and contemporary fashion components, Xi Shi, becomes both popular and stylish, and elegant and traditional, and is feminine and flamboyant enough to intoxicate the audience.
30. Li Yugang also made another innovative change to the traditional Peking Opera when he mixed pop music with Peking Opera arias. This newly formed hybrid music genre, consisting of the rhyme schemes

of the Peking Opera and the melody of pop songs, became popular, in part, due to its unique nature. Not only does Li's style eliminate the slow melody embedded in arias of Peking Opera, a feature which can be unbearable to the contemporary Chinese audience who are now more comfortable with quicker tempos, but he also manages to retain the elegance and the appeal of Peking Opera. One example of this new hybrid music genre can be found in Li Yugang's adaptation of the traditional Peking Opera piece, *Drunken Concubine* (Guifei zuijiu), which tells an anecdotal story about one of the four ancient beauties, Yang Yuhuan, or Yang Guifei as she is widely known—the highest ranking in the Imperial Concubine of the Tang Dynasty.

31. In the *New Drunken Concubine* (Xin guifei zuijiu), Li Yugang's transgender performances evoke further obscurity of gender categorisation and construction, when female voice (femininity) and male voice (masculinity) are juxtaposed and regularly interchanged. The female voice represents Yang Yuhuan, who is a signifier of beauty, gentleness and femininity, and the male voice signifies the authority, solemnity and masculinity of Emperor Xuanzong. In this performance, Li plays these two roles alternately, and the constant inter-change between characters of opposite gender and personality further complicates gender bending and identity construction. The sharp differences in the changes in voice and roles create an impact with the audience, many of whom are apparently impressed by Li's capability and confidence in his craft. Moreover, the love story between Yang Guifei and Emperor Xuanzong is adapted into a popular love song with Peking Opera arias, a step which closes the gap between popular and elegant appeal. In the *Painting*, only the Peking Opera piece *Drunken Concubine* was performed, however, when the *New Drunken Concubine* was presented at the 2012 CCTV Spring Festival Gala it was ranked as one of the top performances by the TV audience.
32. Another ancient beauty tale is Diao Chan's story about a famous episode in the classic historical novel, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (Sanguo yanyi). This was also uniquely adapted by Li Yugang in the *Painting*. In the story, Diao Chan's beauty causes rivalry among the military chiefs and generals of the three Kingdoms as she is much desired by many of them. In this part of *The Painting*, Li Yugang performs a traditional Chinese dance to modern choreography. The defining feature of this dance is the interaction between the dancer and two drums and the difficulty this causes the performer as the dancer must balance 'her' body and must be extremely accurate in 'her' movements. In this dance, Li Yugang begins by standing on the two drums, and continues by jumping and moving on the drums while gesticulating with 'her' arms. The routines of this traditional Chinese dance require immense flexibility and core strength, and are difficult for female dancers, due to the immense physical strength required. Despite the degree of difficulty involved, Li Yugang not only successfully completes these sequences but also creates an impression of female beauty and elegance. His transgender performance of the dance highlights both femininity and masculinity.
33. Another feature of Li Yugang's transgender pop male *dan* performance is that it exemplifies both entertainment value and cultural signification. Sarah Kile argues that the Qing dynasty author Li Yu's novel depicting transgendered characters serves as pure entertainment material for the elite male to consume.^[31] In other words, the transgender presentations were a primary practice of amusement. However, Mei Lanfang's 'ancient-costume song-dance drama,' and the ancient elegant beauty images created by it, have won acclaim for him from international audiences who regarded Mei as 'a heroine who expresses the beauty and poetry of his native land.'^[32] Carrying on the Mei school tradition, Li Yugang successfully made his transgender roles the signature events of contemporary Chinese culture and national identity through his worldwide solo concerts.
34. In Li Yugang's transgender performances on the international stage, the image of contemporary China is no longer the feminine and emaciated one that was despised by Lu Xun and his fellow radical intellectuals. Alternatively, the national identity and character of China as represented by Li Yugang and his performance is full of cultural, social, and political implications that embellish the image of China. Li's performance emits oriental cultural quintessence when he appears in traditional costume and sings

Peking Opera arias. In addition, Li's transgender performances illustrate traditional Chinese philosophical ideas such as male and female as complementary parts that are shown by the cohabitation of masculinity and femininity in his performance. Thus, Li Yugang's shows entertain the global audience and also exemplify the cultural soft power of China.

Conclusion

35. Li Yugang's transgender performance as a pop male *dan* invites reconsideration of gender differences and classification. Gender, as a performative and constructed discourse has been acting within the border of regulatory practices, practices which have been labelled by Foucault as the 'politics of truth,' and which order the world in certain regulatable ways. Based on Butler's gender theories, 'disidentification' with those governing rules produces 'fantasy,' which in turn provides the possibility for us to conceive of ourselves and others in alternative ways. The non-normative transgendered identities and issues that incorporate an eclectic concoction of corporeal effects that disturb or denaturalise heteronormativity have a potential and authentic impact on socio-political evolutions.
36. Throughout the Republican and socialist eras of contemporary China, and within the transgender discourse, female impersonation in traditional Peking Opera has been castigated as the embodiment of erogenous femininity, as a relic of feudalism, and as being connected to homosexual prostitution, because it displays vague and indecent transgendered images during its performance. However, Li Yugang's reinterpretation and repackaging of this once banished traditional performing arts genre in his stylish pop male *dan* performances resurrect the essence of transgender performance, By infusing the male *dan* singing and acting routines in Peking Opera works with elements of popular music and modern dance, Li Yugang advances the transgender performances of male *dan* to a more complex state which hazes the borderlines between femininity and masculinity, between popular and elegant aesthetics, between traditional and stylish, and between entertainment and cultural signification.
37. As a result of his innovative transformation on cross-gender casting, Li Yugang's performance causes social, cultural and political ramifications. Through employing both oriental cultural quintessence and universal pop cultural features, Li's performances epitomise a globalising trend of the world cultural market, which are more multicultural and pluralistic than China's. Li Yugang's male *dan* roles reveal a central element of ancient Chinese philosophy where male/masculinity and female/femininity are complementary parts of a harmonious world (*yinyang hexie*). Li's works have achieved enormous popularity at home and in the international market where they enhance the cultural soft power of China.
38. Finally, it may be appropriate here to introduce and apply Anthony Giddens' concept of 'life politics' to the Li Yugang phenomenon.^[33] Chris Rojek succinctly explains Giddens' arguments when he writes that:

Life politics is a complex concept. At its heart is the proposition that the old emancipator politics that focused on general, collective change and the ethics of universal equality, justice and participation has given way to a new politics predicated in the quest for self-actualization in the context of global interdependence.^[34]
39. Life politics focuses on a post-emancipatory idea built on worldwide existential queries about reverence of nature, approval of difference, and the sacrosanctity of autonomy of choice.^[35] This idea is a departure from twentieth-century democracy, which learned to obliterate the exceptional and unique potentials of the individual through bureaucracy and mass party organisation. Thus, in the contemporary Chinese socio-political environment, the Li Yugang phenomenon can be seen as the symbolic decline of the socialist meta-narrative and its underlying ideology, and an emerging paradigm of individual rights and freedom. It reflects a more liberal and pluralistic inclination of the socialist arts norm in contemporary China and in this way, Li Yugang's transgender performances may be regarded signifiers which point to a more liberal Chinese society in our time.

Notes

- [1] Zhi Qi, 'Fenghuajuedai Li Yugang,' (Peerless talent: Li Yugang) *Country 1* (2010): 46–49, 48–49.
- [2] Mang Mang, 'Li Yugang: zhongguo zuihou de nandan,' (Li Yugang: China's last *nandan*), *Memories and Archives* 8 (2009): 39–44, 42–43.
- [3] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, New York and London: Routledge, 1999, 10.
- [4] Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'*, New York and London: Routledge, 1993, 1.
- [5] Judith Butler, 'Doing justice to someone: Sex reassignment and allegories of transsexuality' *The Transgender Studies Reader*, ed. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle, New York and London: Routledge, 2006: 183–93, 183
- [6] Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender*, New York and London: Routledge, 2004, 42.
- [7] Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 4.
- [8] Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 29.
- [9] Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 28.
- [10] Susan Stryker, 'The transgender issue: An introduction,' *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 4(2) (1998): 145–58, cited in Li Siu Leung, *Cross-Dressing in Chinese Opera*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2003, 685–86.
- [11] Sally Hines, 'What's the difference? Bringing particularity to queer studies of trans- gender,' *Journal of Gender Studies* 15(1) (2006): 49–66, 63; Susan Stryker, Paisley Currah and Lisa Jean Moore, 'Trans-, trans, or transgender?' *Women's Studies Quarterly* 36(3–4) (2008): 11–22, 14; Chengzhou He, 'Trespassing, crisis, and renewal: Li Yugang and cross-dressing performance,' *difference: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 24(2) (2013): 150–71, 151.
- [12] Stryker, Praisley and Moore, 'Trans-, trans, or transgender?' 14, cited in He, 'Trespassing, crisis, and renewal,' 151.
- [13] Hélène Cixous, 'The laugh of Medusa,' *Signs* 1(4) (1976): 875–93, cited in Rachel Alsop, Annette Fitzsimons and Kathleen Lennon, *Theorizing Gender*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002, 8; Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, *Signs* 7(1) (1982): 13–15, cited in Rachel Alsop, Annette Fitzsimons and Kathleen Lennon, *Theorizing Gender*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002, 8; Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985, cited in Rachel Alsop, Annette Fitzsimons and Kathleen Lennon, *Theorizing Gender*. Cambridge UK: Polity Press, 2002, 8; Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which is not One*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985, cited in Rachel Alsop, Annette Fitzsimons and Kathleen Lennon, *Theorizing Gender*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002, 8.
- [14] Ivanova Maranatha, 'Ambiguity, absurdity, and self-creation in the art of Ma Liuming,' *Positions* 7(1) (1999): 201–23.
- [15] Sheldon Lu, *Chinese Modernity and Global Biopolitics: Studies in Literature and Visual Culture*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2007, 75.
- [16] Lu, *Chinese Modernity and Global Biopolitics*, 75–76.
- [17] He, 'Trespassing, crisis, and renewal,' 168; He Chengzhou, 'Performance and the politics of gender: Transgender performance in contemporary Chinese films,' in *Gender, Place & Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography* 21(5) (2014): 622–36, doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2013.810595
- [18] Benjamin Singer, 'From the medical gaze to sublime mutations: The ethics of (re) viewing non-normative body images,' in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, ed. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle, New York and London: Routledge, 2006, 601–31, 602.
- [19] Siyuan Liu, 'Performing gender at the beginning of Modern Chinese Theatre,' *TDR: The Drama Review* 53(2) (2009): 35–50, 41.
- [20] He, 'Trespassing, Crisis, and Renewal,' p. 158.

- [21] Ruru Li, *The Soul of Beijing Opera: Theatrical Creativity and Continuity in the Changing World*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010, 90.
- [22] David Der-wei Wang, 'Impersonating China,' *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews* 25 (2003): 133–63, 134, cited in He, 'Performance and the politics of gender,' 10.
- [23] Megan Evans, 'Two Belles in Love: Staging a "tradition" of sexual diversity in a grand scape contemporary Chinese opera,' in *Compass Points: The Locations, Landscapes and Coordinates of Identities in Contemporary Making*, Australasian Association for Drama, Theatre & Performance Studies (ADSA), 2012 Conference Proceedings, ed. Bree Hadley and Caroline Heim, Queensland: Queensland University of Technology, 2012, 4.
- [24] Li, *The Soul of Beijing Opera*, 91.
- [25] Li, *The Soul of Beijing Opera*, 88–90.
- [26] Colin Mackerras, *The Performing Arts in Contemporary China*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981, 181–84, cited in Li, *The Soul of Beijing Opera*, 92; He, 'Trespassing, crisis, and renewal,' 158; Li, *Cross-Dressing in Chinese Opera*, 92; Evans, 'Two Belles in Love,' 4.
- [27] He, 'Trespassing, crisis, and renewal,' 58.
- [28] He, 'Trespassing, crisis, and renewal,' 158.
- [29] Li, *The Soul of Beijing Opera*, 48.
- [30] Mei Yu, 'Dazhong wenhua yujing zhong de Li Yugang xianxiang jiedu' (Examining the Li Yugang Phenomenon in the Context of Popular Culture), *Modern Literary Magazine* 6 (2008): 109–11.
- [31] Sarah Kile, 'Transgender performance in Early Modern China,' *difference: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 24(2) (2013): 130–49, 130.
- [32] Li, *The Soul of Beijing Opera*, 51.
- [33] Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Cambridge: Polity, 1991.
- [34] Chris Rojek, *Celebrity*, London: Reaktion Books, 2001, 192.
- [35] Rojek, *Celebrity*, 192–93.

MAIN

Published with the support of Gender and Cultural Studies, School of Culture, History and Language, College of Asia and the Pacific, The Australian National University.

URL: <http://intersections.anu.edu.au/issue41/shenshen.html>

© Copyright

Page constructed by [Carolyn Brewer](#)

Last modified: 14 December 2017 0748