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WOMEN PLAYING MEN: SAME-SEX
RELATIONS IN REPUBLICAN SHANGHAI

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Same-Sex Relations in Republican Shanghai

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Abstract

Although we have fairly good knowledge about the homoerotic and homosocial world of Beijing opera of the late Qing, we know very little about the same-sex culture of women's Yue opera that flourished in Republican Shanghai. This paper looks at the homosexual aspects in women's Yue opera against the background of the general Republican reformation of sex and gender relations. By juxtaposing the opera's stage representations of heterosexual love by the same-sex cast with the off-stage homoerotic and homosocial relationships within women's opera circles, we will explore a spectrum of possibilities for women in Republican-era Shanghai.

Women's Yue opera was a popular theatrical form in which all roles were played by actresses for a largely female audience. The opera first started as an all-girls' theater in the countryside of Shengxian, Zhejiang, in the early 1920s. It became extremely popular in Shanghai in the 1930s and 1940s, and its influences spread throughout the Mainland, Hong Kong, and Taiwan in the 1950s and 1960s. In the course of half century, a traditional form was reshaped by modern conditions to become an important part of an emerging urban mass culture. One of the most important factors in this development was women's entrance into the cultural market. While women were avid readers of butterfly literature and authors of love stories, their entrance into the opera market, as actresses and spectators, was central to the transformation of the male-dominated opera culture of the

Qing dynasty to a female-centered one in the twentieth century, of which women's Yue opera was perhaps the most important manifestation.

Although we have pretty good knowledge about the homoerotic and homo-social world of Beijing opera of the late Qing, we know very little about the same-sex culture of women's Yue opera flourished in Republican Shanghai. This paper investigates the homosexual aspects in women's Yue opera against the background of the general Republican reformation of sex and gender relations. By juxtaposing the opera's stage representations of heterosexual love by the same-sex cast with the off-stage homoerotic and homo-social relationships within women's opera circles the paper explores a spectrum of possibilities for the Republican-era Shanghai women.

Same-Sex Performance as Modern Eroticism

Intimacy between opposite sexes had no place in traditional Confucian system of propriety. In Republican Shanghai, a city that absorbed a great deal of Western influence, Chinese youngsters began to openly pursue Western-style socialization, imitating foreigners they observed in the streets, at parties, or in Hollywood films. Their public display of intimacy was, however, an embarrassment for many others. Republican Shanghai was still a society where free expression of love and intimacy between heterosexual lovers was yet to become the norm. Ironically, the foreignness perceived in such free expression of love in the public domain enhanced the pleasure in viewing just such acts. It is not surprising, therefore, that Hollywood love dramas became big hits in Shanghai's entertainment market.

One salient feature of Republican Shanghai's popular culture was the obsession with heterosexual love, which replaced crude peasant pornography to become the main theme for minor operas striving to survive in the city. Feature films, and especially Hollywood love dramas, had much impact on minor operas, such as Yue opera, in search of their own acting styles different from Beijing opera's stiff masculine mode. Scenes common in these films—a handsome young man holding hands with, hugging, or kissing a pretty young woman, lovers exchanging affectionate looks with each other—exemplified “natural expressions” of passion and intimacy to minor opera performers, all the while instilling in the Chinese viewer a modern form of erotic sensibility.

Opera stage was, however, very different from the movie screen. It is one thing to perform before the camera, and it is another thing to perform passionate love before a live audience. It would indeed have been too embarrassingly “real” for both performers and audience members in a society where free expression of passion and intimacy between lovers was more an ideal than a reality for most people. Interestingly, the tension between the secret desire for viewing and the embarrassment over public display of sexual intimacy gave women's opera a tremendous advantage over competing both-gender theaters, as same-sex intimacy was much more acceptable. As an all-female theater, Yue opera could use a naturalistic acting mode and thereby be more expressive when performing intimacy and passion in love melodramas. The contemporary Yue opera critic Cai Yuying observed:

Normally there is nothing surprising about men and women performing together on stage. But men and women still do not socialize together openly in the countryside. As young girls in Shaoxing are shy when encountering [male] strangers, it is naturally impossible for them to perform with actors on stage. Even when they do, they merely perform their duty in a perfunctory manner.

The essence of drama lies in the convergence of the performers and the roles they play. The story is fictional, but the performance has to be like-life—that is what makes for an excellent show. The acting seems more earnest and real in all male or all female theaters. The plot almost always falls apart when men and women perform together. For the actress certainly wants to avoid getting too close to the actor she is performing with, and the actor is also too restrained by various considerations to guarantee a well-acted play. In the case of romantic love stories, the passion felt by the lovers is reflected in the story line through flirtation, elopement, or sexual intercourse, and has to be adequately performed in order to bring the play to a climactic ending. Look at the performance put on by gender-straight theaters: actors and actresses are indifferent, listless, and merely muddle through the show. That is why I always oppose gender-straight theaters. It is not that I am old fashioned, but rather that the final product does not encourage gender-straight performances.¹

Veteran Yue opera actresses who performed during that period, such as Xiao-Bai Yumei, Fu Quanxiang, and Xu Yulan supported Cai's remarks. When asked why all-female Yue opera became more popular than gender-straight theaters they all gave similar answers: In a women's theater they could more naturally act passionately without restraint, while it was awkward to do so with male actors.²

The advantage of women's opera was further manifested in its cross-dressing plays. Cross dressing, mistaken identity, and cross-gender acting are common to both Chinese and English theatrical traditions, the most notable in the English traditions being the Shakespeare plays that employed all three techniques. Women's Yue opera also used all three techniques, albeit with an all-female cast instead of the Shakespearean theater's all-male cast. Beijing opera, by contrast, featured female impersonators, but transvestite plays were few and a relatively insignificant part of its repertoire, as love drama was never a strength of Beijing opera. In Yue opera, transvestitism was not only a common device but also an essential part of the plot in several of its most popular plays, including two masterpieces, *The Butterfly Lovers* and *Meng Lijun*. The appearance and

performance of the transvestite suggested a foreign and modern eroticism that intensified the viewer's acute sense of pleasure. Here too, transvestitism created a fictional sphere where exotic sexuality was imagined as a sharp contrast to social convention.

Although set in the Yuan dynasty (1271-1368), *Meng Lijun* was a modern play put together and produced by Shengxian opera in Shanghai for a modern urban audience. Shengxian opera first staged this play in 1921, at the height of the May Fourth New Cultural Movement, when the discourse of women's liberation was still relatively new. Along with *The Butterfly Lovers* and *Emerald Hairpin*, *Meng Lijun* was instrumental in making Shengxian opera a presence in Shanghai's cultural market, and it became one of the most popular plays of women's Yue opera in the ensuing decades.³

Meng Lijun tells the story of a talented girl, Meng Lijun, who ventures into the man's world seeking justice and revenge for her father and fiancé, both high officials persecuted by bad elements in the court of the Cheng Emperor. Lijun disguises herself as a man, passes the civil examination, in which she takes first place, and becomes the Emperor's trusted prime minister. During her tenure she manages to rehabilitate her father and fiancée and punishes the bad elements. The Emperor, however, comes to realize that Lijun is a beautiful woman and desires to make her his imperial concubine. Lijun remains loyal to her fiancée, however, and at the end Lijun resumes her life as a woman and marries her fiancé with the Emperor's blessing.

In 1999 the Shanghai Yue Opera House staged a production with details comparable to a late 1930s audio recording of the play, employing an all-female cast. The double-natured sex play is intriguing: a heterosexual romance involving two men and a woman pretending to be a man is played out by three actresses; the performance therefore

can have double layers of sexual implication. The production culminated in the act “*Touring the Imperial Garden*” (You Shanglin Yuan),⁴ by which point the Emperor, who has become suspicious of his minister’s true gender, orders Lijun to accompany him on a tour of the imperial garden, where he tries to seduce her with both affection and coercion. As played by the actresses, Zheng Guofeng (as the Emperor) and Shan Yangping (as the transvestite minister), the Emperor has the upper hand, and the minister must rely only on her wit and moral courage to protect her chastity—the foundation of her dignity as a person. The young Emperor is affectionate and lustful, and he genteelly seeks his objective by means of teases, tricks, and a little coercion at times. As the Emperor is played by a woman, his (her?) desire for Lijun can be seen as a same-sex, as well as heterosexual staging. The minister, on the other hand, is shy and reserved by her “nature” as a woman, but at the same time brilliant and obedient by her adopted nature as a male subordinate. Significantly, while her obedience also strongly suggests her femininity, if under a masculine guise, her display of wit only highlights her desperate situation—she has no way out but to fall a sexual captive of the Emperor. Lijun is rescued at the last moment only when the Emperor’s mother puts a stop to her son’s mischievous behavior and returns everything to order. The performance not only comforts the audience by driving home the traditional virtues of loyalty and chastity, but also takes the audience on a ride in a fantasy world of dangerous pleasures, namely, seduction of and by ambiguously gendered characters carried out according to the rules of intricate and fluid sex games.

Cross-Dressing: Photographical Performance

The “couple” we see in this picture are actually two actresses and stage partners in women’s opera. Ma Zhanghua, who posed in the picture as the feminine, beautiful bride, was actually a male impersonator, famed for her roles as playful, passionate young men, while Yuan Xuefen, who posed as the handsome groom, specialized in virtuous young female roles. The picture was probably taken in the years between 1938 and 1940, when the two were performing together at the Dalai Theater in Shanghai’s foreign settlement. They maintained a cordial working relationship, but personality differences kept them distant in their personal lives. Shortly after, Ma retired from the Dalai upon her marriage to the son of one of her fans. One year later, Ma died of tuberculosis. Yuan Xuefen, still a teenager at the time when the picture was taken, went on with her performing career and later became the head of the prestigious Shanghai Yue Opera Company in the People’s Republic of China. She is still active today in her eighties, working for the betterment of the opera.



The picture is visually pleasing but its meaning is elusive. The picture presents a fictional event (two actresses made up as fictional wedding partners), but contains references to real wedding studio photography such as the subjects’ attire, flowers, and poses. This picture, probably first displayed in the window of the studio and later also

used in Yuan Xuefen's promotional publications, was obviously a form of performance. Obvious because the subjects were well-known actresses and stage partners, and no one living in the mass culture of the day would have mistaken it for a real wedding picture. Obvious also because homosexual marriage never existed in the public realm. The picture was, therefore, not meant to be a representation of the contemporary gender norm, but rather a presentation, or a gesture, suggesting an exotic, playful, and erotic world of boundless possibilities of gender/sex transgression.

As a parody of the gender roles played out on the stage of women's opera, the picture effectively highlighted the intriguing interchangeability of gender which was crucial to the success of Yue opera in Republican Shanghai. Like the cross-dressing in the picture, theatrical transvestitism was not meant to represent the current social norm, but rather to present a construct of fluid gender in a fictional world. The contrast between the two worlds was effective: The fictional construction of gender carved out an imaginary space for the viewer, liberating the viewer from the strict gender roles he/she had to play in everyday life. This contrast also offered the viewer further pleasure in the exotic erotica suggested by the playful transvestitism. The picture, by reversing the familiar on-stage gender assignments of the two actresses, further destabilized the already fluid gender device in theatrical performance, confusing the viewer yet escalating the pleasure of viewing to yet another level.

Patrons and Fans

Patronage of and consorting with actors were traditionally an upper-class men's prestige, which was challenged during the Republican period when women entered into

the practice. In Shanghai, with the rise of women's Yue opera, a new gendered division of upper-class patronage appeared. While upper-class men customarily attended Beijing opera and patronized famous Beijing opera actors, the women socialized with Yue opera actors and actresses. Thus, for example, while Huang Jinrong, the king of Shanghai's Green Gang, was a great patron of Beijing opera, his daughter-in-law was the adoptive mother of Xiao Danguai, the famous Yue opera star. Upper-class women's patronage of Yue opera began in the 1920s with the establishment of the all-male troupes in Shanghai and became a popular-culture phenomenon with women's Yue opera during the ensuing decades.

Women transgressing gender boundaries was a favorite topic in public gossip in modern Shanghai. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when women were not supposed to appear in public entertainment venues, courtesans attended Beijing opera plays in foreign settlements; many became romantically involved with famous actors while some caused scandals. Despite the fact that the male-centered public culture rendered them objects of male sexual desire, courtesans were able to turn the tables by making actors the targets of their own sexual desire, often at the expense of their male customers' benefit.⁵ During the early Republican period when opera going became a legitimate pastime for women, upper-class wives—mostly courtesan-turned concubines—also began to have sexual liaisons with actors. When all-male Shengxian opera became popular in Shanghai during the 1920s and 1930s, upper-class women from the Shaoxing-Ningbo area did indeed take advantage of the young naïve actors from the countryside.

Unlike rich courtesans who had more autonomous power over their own sexuality, concubines, and principal wives as well, owed their status and financial well being to their husbands, who in turn possessed prerogatives with respect to their sexuality. It was thus always questionable how far the women could or would go in defiance. Thus, when women's opera and its actresses became publicly accessible, both concubines and principal wives turned openly to these sources of legitimate involvement. Concerned primarily with the well being of the familial and social structure, the Chinese patriarchal system was largely silent on intimate relationships between women, an area seemingly of little consequence to patriarchal authority. Xiao-Bai Yumei explained to me the mentality of husbands: husbands were not worried when their wives became passionate about women's Yue opera and close to the actresses, because this was "just a women's thing." Nothing serious could happen between women—and by this she meant there could not be scandal resulting from misbehavior in public or from a pregnancy. How about homosexual relations? Did the husband need to worry about them? I asked. "That's very rare," she said. In fact, husbands were at ease when their wives and daughters were attending women's opera and consorting with opera actresses, Xiao-Bai added.⁶

Women's opera attracted upper-class wives also because of the absence of male actors within the opera companies. In most other performing groups, such as other local operas, cinema, and spoken drama, actors and actresses worked and in some cases lived together day and night, a professional imperative, often compounded with financial necessity, that provoked both titillation regarding modern lifestyles and suspicion of promiscuity in the public eye. Stories about sexual relationships between male and

female stars were a never-ending topic of tabloids and social gossip, invoking centuries-old stereotype of actors as promiscuous. In contrast to the perceived promiscuity of other performing troupes, women's Yue opera companies appeared to be pure and clean, with a hint of virtue and chastity. Actresses, mostly unmarried young girls around twenty years of age from the countryside, looked as though they were begging for protection from potential patrons, if not waiting to be claimed.⁷ Furthermore, the very absence of male actors backstage was convenient for women patrons, permitting them to move in and out freely and appropriating it as a women's space.⁸

As housewives who did not have independent social status apart from that of their husbands, these women did not have any formal role to play in the public domain. For them, thus, more than for their men, theater going and patronizing actors were not merely entertaining, but also a practice of socializing, boundary crossing, and empowerment.

Patronage in Yue opera also had an erotic aspect to it. Yue opera stars all had rich patrons who provided them with much needed financial, social, and emotional support. Patrons, of course, were not altruists. Some were suspected of being involved in activities deemed indecent or deviant. An interesting commentary in the *Yueju Daily* (Yueju bao) had this to say:

Patrons all aim to satisfy their own desires. Their explicit purpose is to boost the actresses' popularity, but their implicit purpose, however, is to appropriate the actresses. What patrons do is merely flatter the actresses, to win their favor. The great patrons flatter the great stars, and small patrons flatter small stars. To flatter an actress, a patron has to give costumes and paraphernalia as gifts, manage theaters, organize opera companies, publish special issues, and everything else necessary to gratify the star. There are also some people who join the claques as a favor to their friends.

As for female patrons, they also have their purposes. Some want to be respectable senior adoptive mothers, others want to find concubines for their husbands, still others are interested in homosexual relations with the

actresses. For homosexuality in Yue opera circles, we find no concrete evidence, but we know it certainly exists.

The formulae are as follows: male patrons (*yang*) flatter young female characters (*yin*), and *yang* plus *yin* equals neutrality. Female patrons (*yin*) flatter young male impersonators (*yang*—though fake *yang*, better than nothing).⁹

The author was certainly critical, but actresses generally condoned the practice of patronage and acknowledged that they benefited from it. Xiao-Bai Yumei and most other actresses whom I interviewed did not have many complaints about adoptive mothers, even though the adoptive mother system has received much criticism and negative portrayal in the official history and discourse on Yue opera after 1949. During the Republican and early PRC period all popular stars had their loyal patrons, many in the role of adoptive mothers. A star usually had more than one adoptive mother and many more special patrons. Xu Yulan, for example, had at least two adoptive mothers, Zhao Naixue and the wife of Xu Datong, known as the “king of paper manufacture.” Xiao-Bai Yumei had three adoptive mothers; one was the wife of a comprador and the other two were wives of Ning-Shao bankers. When asked why women’s opera had such success in Shanghai, Xiao-Bai Yumei responded with one sentence: “That’s because of the adoptive mothers.”¹⁰ Xiao-Bai might have her personal success in mind with that answer, but indeed the success of many top actresses like Xiao-Bai ensured the success of women’s Yue opera as a whole.

The erotic aspect of patronage is an unspeakable open secret. Zhao Naixue, an excellent tailor and the adoptive mother of Xu Yulan, not only took care of Xu’s life but moreover was responsible for many of Xu’s specially-designed stage costumes. Xu Yulan moved in with Zhao in 1946 and lived with her for many years, until Xu got married in 1954. During Xu’s sickness in 1946, Zhao acted as Xu’s parent, not only caring for her

on the side of her sickbed, but also defending her against her boss Zhang Chunfan's demands that she perform.¹¹ Xu's own mother later also came to Shanghai and lived with her. But as a rural woman her mother could not provide the kind of social support for Xu as Zhao did. Xu's alleged homosexual relationship with Zhao, however, could perhaps never find proofs.

Almost every Yue opera star had a sizable group of female patrons and fans, especially the leading young female roles and male impersonators, or *nü xiaosheng*. The young male impersonator was a crucial figure in the homoerotic and homo-social world of women's Yue opera; for she alone determined a special female sexual sensibility unique in modern Chinese theaters. The opera theorist Gong Hede suggested:

Yue opera is a soft and beautiful feminine opera . . . that is performed by women and is good at telling women's stories. It is women's favorite opera. The key to the establishment of this feminine opera is the young male impersonator (*nü xiaosheng*). The standard male impersonator should be handsome, delicate, bookish, and have a natural grace and elegant bearings. . . . The fact that the young male role is played by women determines that the main theme of Yue opera is the love story and soft beauty is its main style.¹²

Although it was, as a matter of fact, the love drama that facilitated the rise of women's Yue opera, Gong is right in that the young male impersonator has shaped the distinctive feminine aesthetics that made Yue opera the master theater of love drama. More specifically, the young male impersonator embodies women's ideal men—elegant, graceful, capable, and more important perhaps, erotically desiring but also caring and loyal.

The male impersonator began to take leading roles in women's Yue opera in the late 1940s and soon thereafter became the biggest attractions for Yue opera fans. Li Huikang, a retired Yue opera playwright and researcher at the Shanghai Institute for

Research in Arts, considered that the rise of the young male character indicated the maturity of women's Yue opera;¹³ but Lu Xun's comments on the gendered spectatorship of Mei Lanfang's performances are perhaps more useful for our understanding of the Yue opera case. Men and women, Lu Xun observed, saw different things in Mei's performance: men observing the women created by men, while women observing men playing women. Similarly, one can say that, in Yue opera, women observed the men created by actresses, while men watched women performing men. The theory remains simple: just as Mei Lanfang and his cohorts created women more or less from a male perspective and on the male body, so Yue opera's male impersonators created men more or less from a female perspective and on the female body.

Yin Guifang was perhaps the first performer to establish the young male role as a lead in Yue opera toward the end of 1946. Yin was an excellent actress who successfully created many ideal women's men on Yue opera's stage, including Prince Luolan in *Desert Prince* and Jia Baoyu in various theatrical adaptations of *Dream of the Red Chamber*. During the same period, Xu Yulan and Fan Ruijuan also emerged as superstars specialized in young male's role. In their long careers as young male impersonators these actresses created numerous "women's men" on the stage and attracted thousands of female fans. Fans developed crushes on their favorite actresses and sometimes confused their love for the actresses with their love for the characters their favorite actresses created. They wrote hundreds of letters to their idols; some of these letters found their way to the tabloid newspapers, while others appeared in company promotion prints and fan publications. A letter published in *Yueju bao* addressed to another popular male impersonator, Fan Ruijuan, read:

When the curtain rose for the show *Coral* (Shanhu yin) at the Great Shanghai Theater, Miss Fan Ruijuan, who had stolen my heart, appeared before my eyes. My heart boiled with excitement. I forgot about everything and anything. All my heart and mind was concentrated on her. I could stop eating or sleeping, but I had to see her performance. For she alone occupied my whole heart. I didn't know anything else besides her.

In this state of mind I have passed a short few months.

The Butterfly Lovers is such a sad drama. But who could make a clear line between life and drama?

Her farewell show was *The Tragic Story of the Butterfly Lovers*. I felt too sad to attend. But I had to go to see it. After today there would be no tomorrow. When I walked into the theater the play had already proceeded to the scene *Meeting at Yingtai's Chamber*. This seemed to give me a warning that after this meeting more tragic moments were to come.

Shanbo's Last Days, *Yingtai Mourning at Shanbo's Bier*—one act follows another. The show was now over. The viewers all left with smiles of satisfaction. Everything was over. Dragging my heavy legs, depressed, I returned home, bringing back a broken heart. So long, Ruijuan! Lying in bed restlessly, I could not fall asleep. From that night on, I have become an absolute insomniac.¹⁴

And as another reader wrote: "Ruijuan is a handsome man. It is a pity that she is only a cross dresser."¹⁵

This kind of cults of male impersonators continued into the early PRC period. In the mid-1950s, the Fanghua Company staged *Baoyu and Daiyu*, starring Yin Guifang. The play created a sensation wherever it went, and Yin Guifang's Jia Baoyu was a big hit. In 1959, when Yin Guifang and the Fanghua Company were leaving Shanghai to relocate in Fuzhou, Fujian, thousands of female fans packed the Shanghai railway station to see her off. Many were in tears. As the train was about to depart, people jumped onto the tracks to form human barriers and blocked the train for some time.¹⁶ Some fans missed her (or perhaps the Jia Baoyu she created) so much that they took the train to Fuzhou just to see her and her performance in *Baoyu and Daiyu*.¹⁷

During the opening run, in 1958, of the Shanghai Yue Opera House's *Dream of the Red Chamber*, in which Xu Yulan played the affectionate Jia Baoyu, female fans

called out for her every night from outside her house: “Jia Baoyu, Xu Yulan, come out. Please let us see you please.”¹⁸

The Yin-Zhu Story: Homoerotic or Sisterly Love?

The same-sex culture of women’s Yue opera may be understood along two lines: *tongxing lian*, homoerotic or lesbian relationships, and *jiemei qing*, sisterhood or sisterly love. Homoerotic relationship in the Yue opera circle existed at least at the level of words of mouth and the so-called mosquito tabloids (*wenzi xiaobao*), cheap irregular prints featuring scandalous rumors and chitchats. In my conversations with numerous informants allegations about so and so had homosexual relations with so and so came up often, and I was also told that homosexual love were quite common among such new professional women as nurses, doctors, school teachers in Shanghai in the 1930s and 1940s. But it is next to impossible to verify any of these allegations by reliable documentation, as I have come across nothing in this nature in fan magazines or established tabloids such as *Shaoxing Opera Daily* (*Shaoxingxi bao*) and *Yue Opera Daily* (*Yueju bao*), not to mention mainstream newspapers and official documents. Most actresses I interviewed were unwilling to go into details about their love affairs and marriages in the past, and it was out of the question to get them to talk about their homosexual relations. The impression I gathered from these conversations is that homosexual relations certainly existed, not necessarily among actresses but rather between actresses and unmarried independent professional women from the audience. It is also my impression that there is an uncertainty in the general attitude toward such relationship. Most people who told me such tales about others were vague on the details

and did not want me to write about it, and no one seemed to have either strong moral support or opposition to such practice. It seems that these homosexual tales have been a curious item with a hint of scandal for the consumption of the inner circle chitchat.

While homosexual love existed in the twilight zone between rumor and actuality, same-sex non-sexual relationship or sisterly love was a main form in the same-sex culture of women's opera. Sisterhood was first developed through the days of all-girls opera schools when teenage girls slept under the same roof, ate from the same wok, trained and suffered disciplinary beating together, and traveled and performed together. Sharing the same native place origin, training background, and aspiration to have a better life, these young actresses had a strong sense of bonding after entering the metropolis of Shanghai. They addressed one another as older or younger sisters (*jie mei*), and sworn sisterhood was common among Yue opera actresses. Besides the most famous Yue opera "ten sisters" formed in 1947, there were many sets of "ten sisters" or "seven sisters" in the Yue opera circle, and adoptive sisters were also common between actresses and young women in the audience. The closest relationship between actresses may be formed between pairs of long-standing stage partners, most well known among them were Yin Guifang and Zhu Shuizhao in the 1940s and Xu Yulan and Wang Wenjuan in the late 1940s through 1960s. Xu and Wang were perceived very close to each other, even though they both were married and had children.

Both non-sexual sisterly love and homosexual relations in the same-sex culture of women's Yue opera were marginal in society at large and subject to the intervention of the dominant heterosexual relationship. Yue opera actresses all wanted to get married and to marry well in order to have a good standing in society, and some did so at the expense

of sisterly love, as depicted in both the film and the Yue opera *Stage Sisters*. The relationship between Yin Guifang, a popular male impersonator, and Zhu Shuizhao, specializing in young female roles, tells much about sisterly love intersected with and destroyed by heterosexual relations.

According to Yin Guifang's recollections, she and Zhu Shuizhao first met and became friends when they performed together in Shenzhaimen, Zhejiang, in 1934. They performed together once again in 1937, after the outbreak of War of Resistance against Japan. In Huangyan County, they were persecuted by the police and stayed in county jail for fifty-three days.¹⁹ After being released from the jail and before bit farewell to each other the two became sworn sisters. Separately, they both went to Shanghai and became once again stage partners in 1940. During the ensuing years, the two were close friends in life and well-established partners on stage. Together, they joined the "New Yue Opera" reform, performed numerous popular love romances on stage, and participated in the "ten sisters" fundraising performance in 1947. The following passage Yin Guifang wrote in 1947 attests to Yin's complex feelings toward Zhu Shuizhao:

The director ordered me to be intimate with my lover—who, needless to say, is my only long-term stage partner Zhu Shuizhao. We are lovers on stage, and our feelings toward each other increase everyday; as nine out of ten plays we perform are [love] "trite," we have come to forget that we are actually love sisters. This practice has been very helpful for our acting on the stage. ... But, because of this, naturally we grow affectionate toward each other. Zhu Shuizhao, my dear stage partner and lover, I am deeply in love with you. I forgive any possible shortcoming of my only stage partner and lover, so the sweet ambiance on the stage would not be disturbed—for the body of the actress is in the arm of the stage! Looking back, the masses appreciated Yue opera because private feelings between men and women are always dominant in every [Yue opera] play.

Many people, oh no, only those gossipers often intentionally create ridiculous rumors as if to tease me. Am I angry? No—because I have decided to take these gossipers as characters in a play. Those who cannot tell the difference between on and off stage are just too nervous.²⁰

In this seemingly quite confusing passage, Yin made it clear, to the people who speculated homosexual relations between herself and Zhu, that their relationship was non-sexual sisterly love. She also provided an explanation to the reader that it was the director who demanded her and Zhu to enter their roles and deliver performance of authentic heterosexual love on stage, and that the performance of love dramas with Zhu on stage resulted to the growing affections between them. Obviously, the intense love dramas the two actresses performed on stage compounded with their intimate relationship off stage gave rise to a public imagination of a homoerotic relationship between the two actresses. Ironically, while Yin tried to clarify the non-sexual nature of her relationship with Zhu, she confessed to her deep love for Zhu, a same-sex love enhanced by the heterosexual love they performed on stage everyday, and her words betrays a strong erotic composition in this love.

In 1947, Yin was engaged with a male patron who, however, decided later that he really wanted to marry Zhu Shuizhao. Subsequently, Zhu got married with the man, and Yin remained single all her life. The two sworn sisters never performed together again: Zhu organized her own troupe and shifted to specialize in young male roles because it was easier to find a stage partner in young female roles, while Yin Guifang's career also suffered from the lack of a stable stage partners in young female roles.²¹ In 1954 Zhu and her company moved to Nanjing, and she committed suicide when she was persecuted during the Cultural Revolution. Yin and her company moved to Fuzhou in 1958, and Yin suffered torture and became partially paralyzed during the Cultural Revolution. She was rehabilitated and moved back to Shanghai in the 1980s. She passed away in 2000 at the

age of eighty. Like the story in *Stage Sisters*, an intense sisterly love in real life was enhanced by heterosexual love they played on stage, only to be crashed by heterosexual relations. Unlike the story in *Stage Sisters*, there seems to have had no obvious reconciliation and reunion between the two actresses, and what in the public domain was Yin's fond memory of Zhu in her recollections published after the Cultural Revolution.²² Zhu Shuizhao, however, did not leave any words in print about her relationship with Yin.

Conclusion

Elsewhere I have argued that the rise of women's Yue opera in Republican Shanghai was not merely a cultural phenomenon, but an important social event that highlighted women's entrance into society and their influence in fashioning the city's public culture. The foregoing investigation, however, reveals how homoerotic desires, unspeakable in the public and most time concealed, were also an important driving force behind women's Yue opera as a public event.

¹ *Shaoxingxi bao* March 14, 1941.

² Interviews with Xiao-Bai Yumei, Fu Quanxiang, and Xu Yulan, 1995 and 1996.

³ Yue Jia 1992. "Yueju Meng Lijun bianyan shimo" (How Yue opera Meng Lijun was produced). Yueju suyuan (Tracing the origins of Yue opera). Shengxian Zhengxie Wenshi Ziliao Weiyuanhui, ed. Hangzhou: Zhejiang wenyi chubanshe.

⁴ The details of this act seem not very different from the audio recording from the 1930s. While the singing by two male actors in the earlier recording sounds a bit faster and coarse, the lyrics, dramatic turns, and scenes seem rather similar. Another recording in the late 1930s by two actresses shows similar situation. *Shengxianxi jijing* (Collection of lyrics from Shengxian opera) with 17 audiocassettes. 1996. Qiu Yawei, Zhang Jishun, and Qiu Wenguang, eds. *Shengxun*, series no. 2. Taipei: Shengxun zazhi she: 58-59 and 99-100.

⁵ Hershatter has an extensive description of courtesans' involvement with actors in early twentieth-century Shanghai. Gail Hershatter, 1997. *Dangerous Pleasures: Prostitution and Modernity in Twentieth-Century Shanghai*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

⁶ Interviews with Xiao-Bai Yumei 1995-1996.

⁷ Actresses certainly did engage in sexual relations, with theater bosses, adoptive fathers, or audience members, and some got married. The public and potential patrons usually lost interest in married actresses, as if they were already "taken." For reasons I have discussed here and in greater detail in Chapter One, married actresses inevitably lost their popularity. Many popular actresses thus chose to remain single until in their early thirtieth, very late given the contemporary marriage convention.

⁸ Wei Shaochang, whose parents were patrons of Yao Shuijuan, attributed partly the rise of Yao to this fact: "The fact that there were only actresses in backstage facilitated the development of adoptive mother and sworn sister relationships between actresses and rich patrons." Wei Shaochang 1982. "Yueju manhua" (Informal talks about Yue opera). Hangzhou: *Xiwen*. Vol. 3 (June): 95.

⁹ *Yueju bao* August 4, 1946.

¹⁰ Interviews with Xiao-Bai Yumei 1995-1996.

¹¹ Zhao Xiaosi 1994, *Xu Yulan zhuan* (Biography of Xu Yulan). Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1995: 155, 161-164, and 198-199.

¹² Gong Hede 1994. "Xuanzexing de chongxin jian'gou—tan Yueju de xingcheng jiqi yiyi" (Selective reconstruction—on the significance of the formation of Yue opera). Gao Yilong and Lu Shijun, eds. *Chongxin zouxiang huihuang: Yueju gaige wushi zhounian lunwen ji* (Resume the past glory: a collection of essays dedicated to the fifth anniversary of Yue opera reform). Beijing: Zhongguo xiju chubanshe: 544.

¹³ Li Huikang, ed. 1995. *Yidai fengliu Yin Guifang* (The great actress Yin Guifang). Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe: 31.

¹⁴ *Yueju bao* December 12, 1948.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Jiang Zhikang 1995. "Guanzhong yanli de Yin Guifang" (Yin Guifang in the eyes of the audience). Li Huikang, ed. *Yidai fengliu Yin Guifang* (The great actress Yin Guifang). Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe: 85.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 84.

¹⁸ Interview with Xu Yulan December 1995.

¹⁹ Yin is not specific about the reason for this persecution. They could have been charged for performing "obscene plays," one of the most common charges against women's opera performances in the countryside at the time. Yin Guifang 1982, "Wo zougou de yishu daolu" (My career as an artist). *Yueju yishujia huiyi lu* (Memoirs by Yue opera artists), 8-18. 1982. The editorial division, *Wenhua yule* (Culture and entertainment), ed. Hangzhou: Zhejiang renmin chubanshe: 12.

²⁰ *Fanghua jukan: Yin Guifang zhuanji* (Fanghua company home magazine: a special issue dedicated to Yin Guifang). June 1947. Shanghai: Fanghua jutuan chubanshe: 70-71.

²¹ Interviews with Han Yi 2002.

²² The break-up between Yin and Zhu in 1948-1949 was well known in the Yue opera circle. But, Yin herself never mentioned this incident in her published recollections.

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